

[DOI: 10.21506/j.ponte.2019.07.28](https://doi.org/10.21506/j.ponte.2019.07.28)

## **FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE AT A RURAL BASED UNIVERSITY IN EASTERN CAPE OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**Marongwe Newlin<sup>1</sup>, Mavenyengwa Taruvinga<sup>2</sup>**  
Walter Sisulu University, Queenstown Campus, **SOUTH AFRICA**

<sup>1</sup>Division of Academic Affairs & Research Development

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Finance & Management

[nmarongwe@wsu.ac.za/](mailto:nmarongwe@wsu.ac.za)

### **ABSTRACT**

The paper investigated factors affecting students' academic performance against the backdrop of underperformance. The paper focused on one campus in one university in South Africa with the aim of informing management about strategies that can be implemented to address the high failure rate. The paper was informed by Archer's social realist theory. Both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies with descriptive survey design were used. A stratified random sample of 800 students and purposively selected 30 lecturers participated in the study. Data was gathered through questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, focus group interviews and observations. The validity of the instruments was ensured by a pilot study. Quantitative data were analysed and presented using descriptive statistics and qualitative data used content analysis method and verbatim quotations. Thick descriptions and descriptive statistics were used for qualitative and quantitative data respectively. The paper showed that students lacked proper writing and study skills and that course outlines and study guides were not made available. The paper recommends that the Learning and Teaching Development offers a series of lectures on writing and study skills to all students.

**KEYWORDS:** Underperforming, education, graduate, professional development, challenges.

### **BACKGROUND**

Most rural universities are dealing with some students whose secondary education is poor because of the nature of teachers, infrastructure, resources and other factors (Gareth, Porter and Yoon 2001). They further argued that there is a strong correlation between student achievement and the level of knowledge of teachers. In other studies, teachers themselves report that professional development focusing on content knowledge contributes to changes in instructional practice. This would therefore result in teachers being challenged thus leading to poor learner performance and have a bearing on student performance at tertiary level that normally leads to poor academic performance. Such an observation is a cause of concern as the government invests a lot of money in higher education and expects better throughput and graduation rates. It is incumbent upon the higher education sector to understand the nature and extent of student's academic challenges in universities.

Teacher empowerment and support, that are the major challenges for rural teachers presently, have been a big problem ever since the apartheid period. Before apartheid better mission schools offered an academic type of curricula that emphasised Christian values to all South

African schools, including rural schools (Venter and Vester 1997). During this period there were teacher training colleges for different levels of schooling. It is after 1994 that there was a dramatic change undergone by governance of teacher education that resulted in teacher education being incorporated into higher education and closure of colleges of education (Chisholm 2004). Rural based universities are, therefore, dealing with students whose teachers did not get Teacher College Training. According to Garet, Porter, Desimore, Birman and Yoon (2001), there is a strong correlation between student achievement and the level of knowledge of teachers. Subsequently, Smith and Gillespie (2007) posit that teachers themselves report that professional development focusing on content knowledge contributes to changes in instructional practice.

Furthermore, the realisation of the educational aims expressed in the White Paper on Education and training (2013 and 1998) was prejudiced by the lack of appropriate curriculum. It was also clear that teachers that were faced with the task of building a new system of education were still firmly located in terms of curriculum content and pedagogic style in the undemocratic, teacher-centred apartheid serving system of the past (Chisholm 2004). This would, therefore, result in teachers being challenged when it gets to classroom practice, resulting in poor learner performance which later had a bearing on tertiary education.

The university under study is a rural based university, situated in the Northern Region of the Eastern Cape that used to have a number of teacher training colleges to accommodate learners that had passed Matric. This campus is now the only institution of higher learning in this region that has to take care of continuing professional teacher development for the vast area of the Northern Region. After the introduction of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) to teaching and learning and there was an urgent requirement for Continuous Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) so as to improve school and learner performance (Chisholm 2004).

Most rural schools are very far from the university, which makes it difficult for teachers to get professional development and exposure to current resources. This translates to the fact that students coming from rural schools will have little or no knowledge of current teaching and learning resources as compared to students coming from urban schools. Students that are mostly coming from rural schools, whose conditions are not that conducive to teaching and learning, therefore, might find it difficult for them to cope with the university standards, hence the investigation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A number of researches have been carried out to identify and examine the myriad factors that account for the decline in the performance of students in public universities in South Africa. This has become imperative because students' performance has far reaching implications for their personal lives as well as their academic self-esteem and perseverance in the university system (Ogbogu 2014). Students' performance plays an important role in the country's economic performance (Durden and Ellis 1995). It also determines the degree and nature of their participation in community life. Hence it is imperative to look at some of the factors affecting students' performance at this rural university and inform the management accordingly for strategies to improve student performance.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The high failure rate across the departments in the year 2014 and 2015 triggered this paper. This paper examined the fact that some students graduate with very low grade levels, some do

not complete their studies, some are in the “remain” category, others in the “supplementary” category, some in the “special” category, others in the “excluded” and yet still others “drop out” of the programmes ( a cause of concern). A Department of Education paper on the graduation rates at South African Higher Education Institutions indicated that only thirty percent (30%) of the students in universities graduate (Nel-Troskie -de Bruin and Bitzer 2009). This provoked researchers to establish the factors contributing to poor academic performance at this particular rural university.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The paper is underpinned by Archer’s social realism theory. The theory argues that the causal mechanisms (in this case poor academic performance) can only be looked at by using the concepts structure, culture and agency. The theory argues further that the social world is comprised of those three parts that should be understood to explain society. Archer believes that social reality constitutes human components (race) and society is inseparable from it because the very existence of society depends in some way on human activities (Little 2012). According to this theory, structure relates to material resources and to recurring patterns of social behaviour or to the interrelationship between different elements of society around the distribution of these material resources and patterns of behaviour (Archer cited in Masehela, Sikhwari, Ndebele and Maphosa 2013)

This theory is suitable for this paper since it argues that what society is like at any time depends upon human doings and their consequences and what we are and do as social beings are also affected by the society in which we live (Little 2012). The university under study is a mini society within a larger society so the researchers would want to find out how this mini society was affected by the larger society. Archer (1996) states that agents and structures are distinct and neither is primary over the other, this according to our study means that structure (like university policies) has an effect on agents (like students and lecturers). Likewise agents have an impact on the structure. Archer also argues that, that society has culture and culture involves how and what individuals think about issues like ideas, beliefs, attitudes, ideologies, theories, perceptions and expectations (Quim 2012). In a university, lecturers, students, management and other stakeholders may perceive things that impact on them differently like holding different views on factors affecting students’ performance at this particular university. Masehela, et al. (2013) postulate that in an institution of higher learning, structure includes things such as departmental policies on recruitment, lecturing and assessment, teaching and learning facilities and materials, abstract phenomena (knowledge structures in the disciplines). According to Danermark (2002), these structures show constrain and enable the actions of the agents and in turn agents reproduce and transform structures. So the actions of people affect social structures by modifying them. Little (2012) posits that the structures themselves change as a result of the activities and choices of the historically situated individuals who make them up. The paper intended to bring about change for the better which does not come easy as said by Archer (1996) that morphogenesis is that process of change that occurs for agents and social structures in interlocking and temporally complex ways.

## **OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this paper were:

- To examine factors affecting student performance at a rural based university.

- To propose possible mechanisms to mitigate (address) the issue of poor performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Different research work has been done to identify and examine the myriad of factors that account for the decline in the performance of students in Public Universities in South Africa. This has become imperative because students' performance has far-reaching implications for their personal and professional lives as well as their academic self-esteem and perseverance in the University system (Ogbogu 2014). Students' performance plays an important role in the country's economic and social development. It also determines the degree and nature of their participation in community life (Durden and Ellis 1995). This literature review therefore provides some explanation of some of the factors that influence students' academic performance as elaborated below.

### **Physical resources and staff competence**

The availability of physical resources and staff competence can have an impact on students' performance. According to Abbasi and Mir (2012) physical resources and staff competence are important in determining the performance of students. For instance, Trigwell, Prosser and Waterhouse (1999) emphasize the fact that effective teaching results in better learning outcomes and increases students' quantitative academic outcomes.

Benware and Deci cited in Ogbogu (2014) suggest the need for universities to provide some of the following physical facilities within its environment to enhance performance: conducive hostel facilities with inbuilt paper rooms, special facilities for the physically challenged who encounter greater academic challenges, career centre designed to provide career counseling activities, equipped libraries and provision of computer and internet facilities. Thus improving teacher competence can be used as weapon to improve students' performance. Hence Korir and Kipkemboi (2014) further affirmed that if the teacher is ineffective, students under the teacher's tutelage will achieve inadequate progress academically. However, according to Rivkin, Hanushek and Kain as cited in Korir and Kimpkemboi (2014), there has never been consensus on the specific teacher factors that influence student's academic achievement. Researchers have examined the influence of teacher characteristics such as gender, educational qualifications and teaching experience on students' academic achievement with varied findings. Teachers must use appropriate and effective instructional methods so that students can easily transfer what is taught in schools and apply it to solve problems in real life Korir and Kipkemboi (2014). On the contrary, Kara and Russell cited in Korir and Kipkemboi (2014) comment that there has been no consensus on the importance of specific teacher factors, leading to the common conclusion that the existing empirical evidence does not find a strong role for teachers in the determination of academic achievement.

Heinesen in Ogbogu (2014) further affirmed that teachers' ability and competence are pivotal in improving students' performance and that the facilitator's teaching style improves the understanding of concepts though. These can promote educational growth according to Lan (2003). Engin-Dermir (2009) opined that lecturers play crucial roles in promoting educational growth and performance. He affirmed that teacher's qualification, knowledge of the subject matter, enthusiasm, interaction with students, method of lecture delivery and encouraging participation in discussions have positive and significant impact on students' achievements. Engin-Demir hence suggested the need for the use of appropriate teaching methods, appropriate

facilities and basic electronic components by teachers to facilitate learning. They put an emphasis on the rampant consequences this will have on the students' performance. In the same latitude, James and Gainen in Ogbogu (2014) recommended the need for inclusive teaching and learning approaches responsive to the varying levels of academic needs. These according to them provide sites for interactions between staff, students and institutional structures. It can be noted that the institutional facilities have a tremendous impact on students' performance.

### **Demographic characteristics**

Research studies indicate that some demographic characteristics such as gender differences and age can affect academic achievement at different levels. Pinyorpornpanish (2004) found out that more male students had low academic achievement than females in every year. This is similar to Nasir (2012) in his paper of the demographic characteristics as correlates of academic achievement of university students found out that the difference in academic achievement regarding gender was significant, revealing higher academic performance of female students than that of the male counterpart. However, female students had higher number of problems in the first year of paper, especially in physics (Pinyorpornpanish 2004). Wudie and Philipos (2014) assert that teachers play significant role in student learning. They further went on to say that if teachers have positive attitudes towards female students and are gender sensitive in the classroom, female students will be encouraged to learn.

Aremu, Tella and Tella as quoted in Nasir (2012) found positive correlation between academic achievement and parental involvement. They contend that the degree of children's academic achievement is determined by the degree of their parent's involvement in their education. Thus it can be argued that more educated parents may improve their children's performance by taking part in their educational interests and by providing them with help and support on issues concerning their education. Hixson (2006), as cited in George and Mansah (2011), explore that the involvement of parents in the education of a child has a great impact on the students' attitude towards his/her academic achievement for it allows the parents and teachers to combine efforts to help the child succeed in school. George and Mansah (2011) have established that parental involvement has a positive influence on school-related outcomes for children.

### **Socio-economic background**

Socio-economic background of students may also have an effect on the academic achievement of students. Wudie and Philipos (2014) found out that economic constraints seriously affect female students' academic performance, which spans from the very limitation of purchasing educational materials to those affecting their health. Failure by students from poor families to fulfil necessities such as educational materials resulted in them engaging in immoral and risky engagements such as sexual affairs and exposed themselves to irreversible problems including HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies and consequently they dropped out of the university and have extended consequences in their future (Wudie and Philipos (2014). They further pointed out that some unethical and immoral men who have better economic income such as older men "Sugar Daddy" for trans-generational sexual malpractices outside the university has become a major negative factor that impacted the performance of female young students.

Underfunding of Nigerian Universities has limited their ability to effectively and efficiently perform their traditional duties of teaching and research and has also affected their capacity to improve the state of their physical facilities which are crucial to teaching and research (Bamiro and Adedeji 2010). Thus, students' performance has dropped because the factors that previously enhanced the performance of universities have been negated. Apart from

underfunding, a combination of factors influencing academic performance could vary from one academic environment to another and from one cultural setting to another. For instance, students' characteristics such as their age, entry qualifications, self-motivation and work ethics could impact on their performance (Abbasi and Mir 2012). Other studies identified students' efforts (Siegfried and Fels 1979; Anderson and Benjamin 1994), parents' education, family income, learning preferences (Aripin, Mahmood, Rohaizad, Yeop and Anuar 2008), class attendance (Romer 1993) and entry qualifications as factors that significantly affect students' academic performance in various settings. However, Wambugu and Emeke (2013) found out that there was almost no linear relationship between entry qualification and academic performance in physics though there was a significant positive correlation between entry requirements and academic performance in Chemistry and Biology. Kraft and Singhapakdi (1991) confirmed that students with strong work ethics are strongly committed to their work, more dedicated, focused and tend to perform better than their peers. Thus the role of individual students' efforts towards enhanced performance cannot be overemphasized. In view of this, Abbasi and Mir (2012) found that students themselves play significant roles in achieving good grades and thereby must utilize the available opportunities surrounding the academic environments. Romer (1993) recognized that there is a positive correlation between class attendance and student performance. He found that the highest grades in economics were made by students who attended his classes regularly. Durden and Ellis (1995) however, noted that assessment pressures, poor method of delivering lectures, web-based learning approaches and timing of lectures led to the decline in class attendances, while Newman-ford, Lloyd and Thomas (2009) argued that students' class attendances is influenced by financial pressures. Their argument was that if students were to work to support their education, they will become tired such that they will miss classes.

Although Borde (2010) found that age and gender had an impact on students' performance in differing contexts and pinned that mature students performed better than the younger ones, he however, coined that this comparison is dependent upon the matter being examined and the assessment criteria. His point on gender was supported by Saheli, Zogheib and Zogheib (2015) who found that although male students outnumbered their female students in mathematic classes, female students outperformed their male colleagues. In this regard, female students were regarded as more conscientious and less likely to miss their classes. Other factors affecting student performance as promulgated by Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons (1992) include: students' academic background, changing academic goal, inability to manage normal schoolwork and lack of basic and fundamental skills. Thus these factors are contextual than universal.

Despite the traditional variables of students' efforts, Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002) noted that institutional environment and facilities have significant impact on students' performance. In support of this, Darling-Hammond and Synder (2001) claimed that a reduction in class-size could enhance learning, while availability of adequate research equipment and teaching materials could significantly improve students' performance. Adeyemi and Adeyemi (2014) also found out that student-teacher ratio, lecturers' interest, and school calendar stability and to a lesser extent teaching methods were significant predictors of academic achievement in the Colleges of Education. In the same armpit, Devadoss and Foltz in Ogbogu (2014) opined that a physical environment with improved facilities provide comfort, security, better understanding of courses and can be dramatic in terms of increased learning and performance. They further emphasized that a social interactive environment encourages participation and enhances students' creative skills. According to them an interactive environment in which

students are given the freedom to choose tasks, supported for unusual ideas, taught to learn from failures and encouraged to participate in decision making enhance their skills and achievement.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Research approach:* The paper was rooted in both quantitative and qualitative approaches since it intended to establish both students' and lecturers' views on factors affecting students' academic performance at this particular rural institution. Tashakkari and Teddlie (2008:22) in support of use of mixed approaches describe them as:

*Studies that are products of the pragmatist and that combine qualitative and quantitative approaches within different phases of the research process.*

Furthermore a pragmatic approach made the researchers of this paper to achieve a thorough understanding of the topic under discussion because we took a middle course and used a variety of methods as suggested by Enchelberger (1989) and Cohen and Manion (1980).

*Research design:* A descriptive survey design was adopted for this paper since it allows use of mixed approaches to collect data from a large population. Babbie and Mouton (2013) argues that survey research design is the best method available to social scientists who are interested in collecting original data for population that is too large to observe directly. In support of the above Borg and Gall (1989) observe that descriptive studies are aimed at finding "what is". The paper aimed at finding out what were the factors affecting students to fail. So survey methods are used to collect descriptive data and have individuals as the unit of analysis and assessment. This design was best suited for this paper since views were solicited from a number of participants to enable generalisation of results (Babbie and Motoun 2013).

*Sampling procedures:* The population for this paper was drawn from students studying at this particular rural university, lecturers and management. A stratified random sample of 800 students out of a population of 2300 students participated in the paper by responding to the questionnaire. The sample was about thirty-five percent (35%) of the targeted student population hence regarded as representative for the generalization of results to the whole student population. Also 50 students participated in group interviews and were conveniently sampled as researchers targeted students who could be easily accessed for interviews on behalf of their different departments. A total of 5 lecturers, 2 Heads of Departments (HODs), 1 Dean and 1 Campus Rector were conveniently selected for interviews. According to Trochim and Danelly (2006), a convenient sample is a non-probability sampling technique in which units are selected based on easy access and availability.

*Data collection techniques:* The paper used a number of methods to collect data but the questionnaire was employed as the main source of data gathering. The questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data and gathered data on demographic characteristics, factors affecting students' academic performance, problems encountered by students and initiatives/suggestions to alleviate the problems and improve performance. The two main researchers engaged trained research assistants to administer the questionnaires to ensure a hundred percent (100%) feedback. The questionnaires were hand delivered by the research assistants to 800 student respondents.

Face-to-face interviews were used as the main data collection tool in the qualitative paradigm. Interviews targeted factors affecting students' performance, problems and interventions that

could be implemented. These interviews were done with the university authorities 5 lecturers, 2 Heads of Departments (HODs), 1 Dean and 1 Campus Rector. It was necessary to have such individuals involved to get their perceptions, suggestions and contributions that may be very crucial to improve the academic performance of students. Also the responses were not biased towards one group since both lecturers and students were interviewed.

Focus group interviews were conducted discussing ideas, issues, and concerns on factors affecting students' performance at this rural university. This was done at departmental level to provide a forum for the affected groups to discuss in more detail what affected them and explored ideas for strategies or interventions that could be made by different stakeholders to change the face of the university. Fifty students were interviewed in groups of ten.

Personal observations were made by both the two researchers to record less obvious but essential information on how things were administered at the university like how lectures were conducted. The researchers became participant observers by going to some lecture rooms and observed what took place on the university grounds, to share concerns and experiences with participants in order to understand them from their own frames of references (Bodgan and Biklen 1992). By doing this critical and vital information was recorded to verify some issues that were raised in questionnaires, interviews and focus group interviews. It is argued that observing and listening are effective ways of getting information about problems that may be troubling these students and blocking them from performing positively at the university. All these four research techniques were employed for triangulation and crystallisation of results in order to come up with an unbiased comprehensive report.

### ***Reliability and validity***

A pilot paper was used to ensure the validity of the questionnaire and the interview schedule. The paper used the Cronbach's alpha coefficient as the main statistical measure to determine the reliability of the questionnaire.

### ***Data analysis***

Data was coded and analysed through a mixture of both descriptive and inferential statistics. Quantitative data was analysed and presented using descriptive statistics. For qualitative data, researchers used content analysis method and presented through verbatim quotations of the participants without alterations.

### ***Ethical considerations***

The participants/respondents were informed about the purpose of the research which was to establish factors that hindered students to perform well at the university. They participated voluntarily and were informed that they could withdraw their participation at any point if they so wished and no one would be victimised or coerced. The two researchers assured confidentiality to the participants. The permission to carry out the research was sought from the University Research Ethics Committee and was granted. The researchers assured to follow the research ethics code of conduct as they were dealing with human participants. Consent forms were signed by participants.

### ***Results***

Thick descriptions and descriptive statistics were used for qualitative and quantitative data respectively. Results were presented from the point of view of students, lecturers and management who participated in the study. The findings were confined to this particular



university as the aim was to inform management on ways to mitigate and improve on the academic performance of students.

## FINDINGS

### Table 1: Biographical Variables for Learners (N=755)

It is evident from the biographical variables for students that student respondents to the questionnaire were drawn from differing backgrounds. The majority of the respondents 455 (60.26%) were female whereas 300 (39.74%) were male. There was nothing unusual about this distribution as female students outnumbered their male counterparts in most of the university's enrolment figures. However, this could be attributed to the fact that most of the programmes offered are female-oriented. The majority of the respondents 321 (42.52%) were in the 25–28 years age group. However, all age groups were fairly represented. It is also clear that some over aged students were still in school as evidenced by 103 (13.64%) of the respondents being over 29 years. This can be caused by various factors including that some join the university at a later stage after improving their matric, others because of pregnancy and the university's academic exclusion policy for students who fail to meet progression criteria known as 'Rule G7'. The respondents to the questionnaire were also drawn from different levels of study ranging from level 1 to final year. The majority, however, 320 (42.38%) were from level 2. The fewer numbers of participants in final year and level 3 suggest that they are fewer students progressing from level 2 of study to level 3 and final year probably because of the bottleneck which is caused by poor performance. It is clear that respondents to the questionnaire were drawn from varying genders, age groups and study levels in an attempt to obtain representative views on the issues under investigation

### Table 2: Factors affecting student performance

As depicted in Table 2, 317 (41.99%) of the respondents disagreed that students are lazy and misbehave while 297 (39.34%) agreed. This showed an insignificant difference between those who agreed and those who did not agree. On whether the university does not have a culture of learning, it can be drawn from table 2 above that the majority of the respondents 491 (65.03%) strongly agreed that the university does not have a culture of learning followed by 165 (21.85%) who agreed. This can be attributed to various internal and external factors emanating from both management and students themselves. The majority 666 (88.21%) of the respondents strongly agreed that lecturers were not sure about their work, it can be seen that very few respondents disagree, agree, strongly disagree or were not sure. This could be as a result of students' perceived idea of blaming lecturers whenever their performance is at stake. Of the 755 respondents, 486 (64.37%) strongly agreed that lecturers communicate poorly. This could be contributed by improper communication channels within the university community. What can be gleaned from the above table is that 510 (67.55%) participants strongly disagreed that lecturers had study guides and course outlines as shown on table 2 above while 182 (24.11%) disagreed. The results are supportive of the fact the respondents (88.21%) agreed that lecturers were not sure about the work which at this juncture can be attributed to the fact that most lecturers and students do not have study guides and course material. On the question of whether students were proficient and competent in English which is the medium of communication, the results show that 471 (62.38%) disagreed that students were proficient and competent in English. This could be attributed to the fact that English is not a mother tongue for most of the students at this university. However, a sizeable number 181 (23.97%) strongly disagreed, with the minority (8.87%). The question of lecturers having adequate resources to perform their responsibilities, the results above show that 541 (71.66%) strongly disagree that lecturers have

adequate resource to perform their responsibilities. Poor planning and implementation on the part of management could be the cause of this resulting in lecturers being unable to execute their responsibilities due to inadequate resources. 534 (70.73%) of the respondents strongly disagreed that the university provides adequate infrastructure. This could be attributed to the fact that the campus does not have student residences on campus and the lecture rooms are inadequate for the growing numbers.

## Qualitative data

Qualitative data obtained from students through focus group discussions and interviews with staff is presented below thematically. The following themes emanated: resources, students' socio-economic background and behaviour, students' transport and accommodation, staff competence, lack of visionary leadership and these themes are explained below.

Coding: Lecturer-L1-L5, Librarian-LIB, Head of Department- HOD1-HOD2, Dean-D, Campus Rector-CR and Focus Group-FG1-FG10

### Theme 1: Lack of resources (barriers to academic performance)

The participants who participated in the interviews and focus group discussions indicated lack of resources as the major barrier to learning as also reflected in the questionnaire. Some of the barriers they raised were lack of study material, lack of student support, inadequate physical and ICT infrastructure, shortage of furniture, shortage of staff and other issues. The above views were pointed out by **L3** when she said that:

*Our student enrolment has more than doubled this year and there was no change in terms of resources, classrooms are overcrowded, shortage of furniture, even myself I don't have photocopying material and I am expected to go to class and expected to be accountable for the student results. It's so frustrating.*

From the above, it can be picked that the participant was so concerned about the shortage of resources and its possible impact on student performance. The lack of resources was further supported by **FG7** who pointed out the shortage of staff as the main barrier to academic performance when they said that:

*We are second year students, we don't have lecturers in two modules and last year most of our lecturers were part-time lecturers who were being paid on an hourly basis and now they are nowhere to be found. The university management has promised to make them permanent but nothing has happened.*

The results of these interviews and focus groups correlate with the results from the questionnaire which showed that 541 (71.66%) strongly disagreed that lecturers have adequate resources to carry out their responsibilities. The shortage of resources was also echoed by **HOD1** who indicated that:

*The shortage of lecturers has been a stumbling block in my department as I struggle to get qualified and competent lecturers due to the terms and conditions that are not conducive for their longer stay with the university. Furthermore, the human resources department has not replaced some of the lecturers who have resigned.*

Over and above what the other participants said regarding resources, **LIB** also reiterated that:  
*The library facilities are not adequate enough to cater for the growing demand for these facilities. The problems range from inadequate space, shortage of current reading*

*material, shortage of manpower, erratic internet connectivity and malfunctioning 16<sup>th</sup> century computers which are old and without antivirus.*

Although the participants came out with different views on the barriers to students' performance, it can be seen that the shortage of resources was the main barrier to students' performance as most participants echoed the same sentiments. The researchers also observed students scrambling for resources such as venues, chairs and some could be seen standing outside the lecture rooms as they could not fit in.

### **Theme 2: Students' socio-economic background and behaviour**

In interviews, the following among others were identified as contributory factors to student performance; namely, socio-economic background, poor study culture, laziness, negative attitude, lack of guidance. One focus group discussion, **FG3** expressed that:

*We are Xhosa speaking and expected to study in English which is not our mother language and still expected to perform like the whites who are taught in their mother language. These subjects must be taught in our mother language.*

It can be picked from the FG3 quote that the participants' view cited past historical imbalances as a factor to academic performance specifically on the use of English as a medium of communication. This is also supported by the results of the questionnaire in table 2 above when the respondents were asked about their proficiency in English and 471 (62.38%) disagreed that they were proficient and competent in the use of English as a medium of communication.

**L5's** sentiments did not focus on English as the medium of instruction but centred on the calibre of students the campus enrolls. **L5** explains that:

*These students' performance is mainly affected by poor socio-economic background, poor study culture and in some cases, it is absolute laziness and lack of proper guidance. Some students, even those in higher levels of study can hardly express themselves in English which is pathetic. The calibre of students who are enrolled at this university leaves a lot to be desired. I think the whole education system is in Intensive Care Unit (ICU).*

**LIB** expressed similar views as stated above by L5 that the students lacked a study culture and do not want to think or work on their own. **LIB** echoes that:

*I think students have no culture of study and lack proper guidance from early childhood until they reach university. Their communication and mathematical skills are invariably absent in them. They want to be spoon fed.*

Despite the interviewees and the Focus groups having varied conceptions, it can be seen that students' socio economic background and behaviour play a pivotal role in determining student performance. It is clear from the above responses that students blamed the system for poor academic performance while on the other hand the lecturers shoulder the blame on students.

### **Theme 3: Students protests and lecturers' work load.**

Contributors to high failure rate which culminated from the Focus Group and interviews were among others: poor communications by lecturers, student protests, not enough time to study,

prolonged registration, large student numbers, heavy loads and the campus being regarded as the campus of last choice.

To get an insight of what some of the participants view as factors affecting the academic performance of students at this particular university, **L1** came up with the following:

*This university is now being known for student protests, we can hardly finish a semester without student protests and less time is left for studying and finishing the syllabus. Senior management take their time to resolve such impasses. Another factor is that lecturers are extremely overloaded. I am lecturing four different modules. I am expected to prepare, mark and set exam papers for the four modules and as if that is not enough I am also expected to be involved in research, community engagement and do administrative work. So our hands are tight, it's unbearable.*

In agreement to some of the issues raised by **L1**, **D** and **CR** concur that students were becoming more involved in students protests than before probably because of increase in the number of students enrolled at this campus. **D** highlights that:

*This Campus is increasingly experiencing student protests which we never experienced before, may be students are being influenced by some other sister campuses I don't know. Also some lecturers are partly to blame because some do not attend their classes, some just leave without giving students work to do.*

From the students' point of view it can be depicted that the management is also partly to blame. The researchers observed that the three set of participants had a tendency of blaming each other. Above **L1** blamed the students and the management while **D** blamed the students and lectures and **FG 2**, **FG5**, **FG10** had this to say (blaming the management):

*The management of this institution is the problem. They do not care about us. Student welfare is their last priority. If we do not strike they don't listen to our demands. Look now we do not have transport to go to the other site because management has not paid the service provider. Management is selective in providing resources and our campus is regarded as the one which should be given the left overs when the other campuses have taken the large chunks of resources.*

The above sentiments from **L1** and **FG2**, **FG5** and **FG10** suggest that both lecturers and students are not afforded enough to engage themselves in the core business of teaching and learning because of problems identified above of which student protests and workloads were the most salient features. This would lead to the university not having a culture of learning. This was augmented by the results of the questionnaire in table 2 which showed that 491 (65.03%) strongly agreed that the university does not have a culture of learning.

#### **Theme 4: Shortage of qualified and competent staff.**

On what could be done to improve students' academic performance, the interviewees and the Focus Groups suggested among other things; recruiting of suitably qualified and competent staff, provision of suitable infrastructure, procurement of adequate resources, proper planning and implementation and change in management style and philosophy (management to be proactive). **CR** suggests that:

*Student performance can be enhanced if there is proper planning, collaboration and implementation by the various stakeholders. We need to provide suitable and conducive infrastructure, procure adequate resources to meet our responsibilities. The recruiting of qualified and competent staff should be our number one priority so that we can reduce the lecturer's workloads*

**FG3 FG6, FG9** suggested a proposal similar to the one proposed by **L4** and **HOD2** that:

*The recruiting of academic staff that are competent and qualified should be done as a matter of urgency. Most of our lecturers do not give us consulting time outside the normal lectures as they purport to be fully loaded up to their neck with work. Management must act on our demands on time to avoid unnecessary delays which usually shorten our already shortened academic calendar*

**L1B** in the same line also commented that:

*The library should be equipped with state of the art equipment, new and current study material, very fast internet facilities, more staff should be hired with library information system. Books ordered must be delivered before each semester starts and not at the end of the semester when exams have already been written.*

Despite varying perceptions from the above quotations, it can be picked that most of these interviewees and Focus Group zeroed at recruiting of qualified and competent staff, improved procurement and proper planning and implementation. Their views are also supported by the findings from the questionnaire on whether lecturers had adequate resources to perform their responsibilities in Table 2. The respondents to the questionnaire strongly disagreed 541 (71.6%).

## **SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

It emerged from the study that students lacked proper writing skills and study skills that impacted negatively on their academic work. Course outlines, paper guides and other learning material were not made available in time to both students and lecturers and this made them fumble. Some lecturers even said that they taught some modules without student guides and also some students said that they did not receive student guides in some modules. It was also found out that some lecturers had heavy loads, in some cases lecturing more than four modules and some having very large classes which made them fail to thoroughly prepare for their classes and give adequate quality assessments and feedback to students hence correlating positively to the poor students' performance. Late admissions and registration was also a factor which contributed to poor performance. The calibre of students enrolled proved to be a contributory factor to poor student performance. Lecturers are assigned the courses that they cannot adequately teach. The paper also revealed the presence of improper and inadequate accommodation for students which made them victims of rape, theft, etc. The paper revealed that students did not have a culture of reading since they were used to spoon feeding in high schools. The library was found to be too small to accommodate all students and shortage of teaching space posed problems and threatened performance.

## **DISCUSSION**

Lack of resources, staff, demographic characteristics, socio-economic background and student protest were identified as the main factors affecting students' academic performance. The

availability of physical resources, staff competences and student background as identified by (Ogbogu 2014) plays an important role in the performance of students. The availability of physical resources and material should be complemented by staff competence as Mekonnen (2014) found out that no matter how a professionally qualified science teacher was trained, he would be unable to put his ideas into practice if the school setting lacks the equipment and materials necessary for him or her to translate his competence to reality. Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002) also supported the idea that institutional environment and facilities have a significant impact on student performance. In order to develop and mould students into performing well in different courses, there was the need to consolidate resources – key being the right human resources (Agyepong, Spio, Dzanie and Salihu 2016). Library and computer information services were inadequate and inaccessible to both some students and lecturers and this affected negatively on the students' academic performance.

It also emerged from the study that students lacked proper academic writing, reading, communicating and studying skills. The lack of proper writing and paper skills impacted negatively on student performance and this was compounded by the students' inability to link different modules, for example, a student in accountancy, given a question which requires him or her to draft a memorandum would not be able to get full marks because of her inability to have a proper memorandum format which was learnt in their Communication Skills module in their first year. This state was also worsened by the fact that the students in the study could not learn independently, all they needed was a lecturer in front of them for learning to take place. Such an attitude is detrimental to good academic performance. This is in line with the findings by Masehela, Sikhwari, Ndebele and Maphosa (2013) that revealed students' unwillingness to work as independent students that leads to a high failure rate. The researchers observed that the campus still has a long way to go in terms of changing the campus tone, face and the culture of studying.

From the study observation, interviews and questionnaires, it arose that student accommodation was a burning issue which hit hard on the student performance. The study revealed that the presence of improper and inadequate accommodation for students and economic constraints made them victims of rape, theft, murder, etc. It is known that poor accommodation normally leads to sleepless nights and affect the intellectual and psychological behaviour of some learners. Our findings agree in part with Wudie and Philipos (2014) who pointed out that lack of decent physical infrastructure like accommodation resulted in some students engaging in immoral and risky engagements such as sexual affairs and exposed themselves to irreversible problems including HIV/AIDS and unwanted pregnancies and consequently they dropping out of the university and have extended consequences in their future. Such students be it male or female may be taken advantage of by the so called 'Sugar Moms' or 'Sugar Daddies' respectively as also observed by Wudie and Philipos (2016) that some unethical and immoral men who have better economic income such as older men "Sugar Daddy" for trans-generational sexual malpractices outside the university has become a major negative factor that impacted the performance of female young students. Some students may fail to do their assignments, homework and prepare thoroughly for examinations due to unsafe and insecure accommodation and this leads to failure.

The non-availability of course outlines, study guides and other material on time to both students and lecturers also affected student performance as some lecturers which also had a ripple effect on student performance and hence failure by students to work independently. This was

supported by Abbasi and Mir (2012) when they asserted that students themselves play critical roles in getting good grades and must therefore explore all opportunities available within their academic environment. The paper also found out that the university is lenient in its late registration policies which stem in part from the open access philosophy and in part from the funding formula that rewards universities financially for higher enrolments (Davies, Froggie and Reid 2013). Students who registered early performed better than students who registered late as they could not catch up with the work which would have been covered in their absence. This is also supported by TincherLadners (2006) who found out that students who registered on time had on average 27% high GPA than students who registered late. In addition to the above, it emerged from the study that the hired lecturers were not inducted and orientated into the university systems. This according to the lecturers interviewed in the study impacted negatively on how they were supposed to execute their duties. Some lecturers ended up lecturing wrong modules and realised later only towards examinations time that students were given incorrect information.

Due to the big workloads and student numbers, lecturers were left with very little or no time to adequately prepare themselves for the lectures and hence in most cases monitoring of student's academic performance was not done timeously and feedback was also delayed. However, Sibanda (2014) found out that student's academic performance should be timeously monitored and constructive feedback given. The big classes and loads affect the quality of work given to students by the lecturers, hence students in the study complained that they were not getting consultation time with their lecturers other than lecturing time. Lecturers did not have time to address individual academic problems due to heavy loads. Some students in the study argued that quite a number of their modules were handled by part-time lecturers. Students were not getting the feedback of their work timeously and this demotivated some of the students (Bruner 1971). The paper argues that sometimes part-time lecturers do not have time for students and this makes some of them not to understand the student realities, hence the failure to bond with students and to use pedagogies that best cater for individual-student uniqueness. This calls for the management to rethink about their lecturer recruitment policy. The literature reviewed affirmed this when Heinesen in Ogbogu (2014) noted that teachers' ability and competence are pivotal in improving students' performance and that the facilitator's teaching style improves the understanding of concepts though. Lecturers' teaching styles can promote educational growth according to Lan (2003).

The paper also established that some lecturers were assigned to teach modules or courses they never trained in. This lowers the lecturer's competence and destroys his/her self-confidence, hence students expressed that some lecturers were not sure of their work and lacked confidence. This finding is supported by Abdulla (2013) who observed the same when he said that some unspecialised lecturers were incorporated and assigned the courses that they cannot adequately teach. This obviously translates into poor performance by the students since they would be handled by someone who has content gap. This implies that the campus had a challenge when it came to recruit the lecturers. This was also observed by Agyepong, Spio, Dzanie and Salihu (2016) when they stated that one major and challenging task was recruiting the right teaching team. It was essential to find the right people, who could work together as well as deliver the content. The researchers of this paper observed that some lecturers gave excuses each time we wanted to go and observe their classes instead they would just give the work to be done to the class representatives. The issue of having some lecturers assigned courses that they could not adequately teach was a result of the university's formula of allocating loads which was depended upon the number of students, course duration and the module credit. This implied

that the lesser of any one of the elements, the more the modules the lecturer is required to take. It was also found out that the same formula was used to calculate the number of lecturing posts available. In line with the same idea raised above, Engin-Dermir in Ogbogu (2014) opined that lecturers play crucial roles in promoting educational growth and performance. He affirmed that teacher's qualification, knowledge of the subject matter, enthusiasm, interaction with students, method of lecture delivery and encouraging participation in discussions have positive and significant impact on students' achievements.

## CONCLUSION

The paper concludes that the challenges currently faced by the students and lecturers lead to low academic performance and urgent intervention measures are needed to mitigate and help these students to perform better. The paper notes with great concern that the culture of reading was minimal. Students should be socialised into the culture of reading and move away from spoon feeding so the university should work very hard through its structures to undo the wrongs that were adopted by the students. It is in the interest of this paper that the higher the provision of infrastructure the higher the performance of students. The paper calls for all the university structures and stakeholders to work together and change the current failure situation. Together we can make a difference and give birth to the campus that we would want to see.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the paper, the following recommendations were made:

- The Learning, Teaching and Development Department should offer a series of lectures on writing and study skills to all students and this should be closely monitored.
- Modules, study guides and other learning materials should be made available to students before the lectures start.
- The leniency in late registration policies which stem in part from the open access philosophy and in part from the funding formula that rewards universities financially for higher enrolments should be revisited.
- Monitoring of students' academic performance should be timeously done and constructive feedback given.
- All lecturers should be inducted and developed.
- The university should provide descent accommodation for students.
- Students should be given work which they can do either independently or in groups and lecturers are discouraged from spoon feeding students and be facilitators of learning.
- Computer and library information skills should be fostered.

## REFERENCES

- Archer MS 1996. *Culture and Agency. The place of culture in social theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Abbasi AR., Mir GM 2012. Impact of teacher's ability, students' work ethics and institutional environment on student performance at university of Gujrat. *Middle-East Journal of scientific Research*. 2 (4), 572-579.
- Ademeyi AM, Ademeyi SB 2014. Institutional factors as predictors of student academic achievements in colleges of education in Western Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies*. 6 (8), 141-153.



- Agyepong SA, Spio AE, Dzanie TD, Salihu O 2016. Can Africa Innovate Education? Developing an Innovative Course in Design and Entrepreneurship for an African University. *Proceedings of INCEDI 2016 Conference/ August 29-31, 2016, Accra-Ghana*.
- Aremu OA 2000. Impact of home school and government on primary school pupils' performance. *The exception child*. 5 (1), 106-110.
- Babbie E, Mouton J 2010. *The Practice of Social Research South African edition*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- Bamiro OA, Adedeji OS 2010. *Sustainable financing of higher education in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Borde SF 2010. Predictors of Student academic performance in the introductory marketing course. *Journal of Education for Business*. 73 (5), 302-307.
- Bruner JS 1971. *The relevance of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Darling-Hammond L, Berry B, Thoreson A 2002. Does teacher certification matter? Evaluating the evidence. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. 23(91), 57-77.
- Devadoss S, Foltz J 1996. Evaluation of factors influencing students' attendance and performance. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. 78 (3), 499-507.
- Durder GC, Ellis RV 1995. The effects of attendance on student are learning in principles of Economics: *American Economic Review*. 85 (2), 343-346.
- Engin-Demir C 2009. Factors influencing the academic achievements of the Turkish urban poor. *International Journal of Educational Development*. 29 (1), 17-29
- Harris T, Hartell CG, Steyn MG 2014. Institutional factors that affect black South African students' perception of early childhood education. *South African Journal of Education* vol. 34 (3), 1-7.
- Kraft KL, Singhapakdi A 1991. The role of ethics and Social responsibility in achieving organizational effectiveness: Students versus managers. *Journal of Business ethics*. 10 (9), 679-686. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00705874>
- Lizzio A, Wilson K, Simons R 2002. University students' perception of learning environment and academic outcomes: Implications for theory and practice. *Studies in Higher Education*. 27 (1), 27-52.
- Mlambo V 2011. An analysis of some factors affecting students' academic performance in an introductory biochemistry course at the University of the West Indies. *Caribbean Teaching Scholar*. 1 (2), 79-92.
- Nasir M 2012. Demographic characteristics as correlates of academic achievement of university students. *Academic Research International*. 2 (2), 400-405.
- Newman – Ford L, Lloyd S, Thomas S 2009. An investigation in the effects of gender, prior academic achievement, place of residence, age and attendance on first year undergraduate attainment. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*. (1), 13-28.
- Ogbogu OC 2014. Institutional factors affecting academic performance of public administration students in a Nigerian University. *Canadian Centre of Science and Education*. 3 (2) 171-177.
- Oluwaseyi OB 2015. The effects of students' Housing on Academic Performance at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. *International Journal of Scientific and Engineering Research*. 6 (3), 1118-1132.
- Quinn L 2012. Enabling and constraining conditions for academic staff development 27-50. In 'Quinn, L ed. (2012) Re-imagining Academic Staff Development: Spaces for Disruption Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA Stellenbosch.
- Romer P 1993. Do students go to class? Should they go? *Journal of economic perspectives*, 7 (3), 167-174.

- Saheli AE, Zogheib B, Zogheib B 2015. University Students' Achievement in in Mathematics: The Role of Student's Gender, Instructor's Gender, Educational level and Experience. *The Mathematics Educator*. 16 (1), 77- 92.
- Sibanda J 2015. Efficacy of written corrective feedback on university students' writing. *Journal of Social Sciences*. 737-065-15. in Print.
- Trigwell K, Prosser M, Waterhouse F 1999. Relations between Teachers' approaches to teaching and students' approaches to learning. *Higher Education*. 37 (1), 57-70. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/A:1003548313194>
- Wudie A, Philipos P 2014. Factors affecting female students' academic performance at higher education: The Case of Bahir Dar University. *Ethiopia African Educational Research Journal*. 2 (4), 161-166.
- Zimmerman BJ, Bandura A, Martinez-Pons M 1992. Self- motivation for academic attainment: The role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. *American Educational Research Journal*. 29 (3), 663-676. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00028312029003663>