

An Evaluation of Student Engagement in the Odl Higher Education Context in Zimbabwe

Daniel Ndudzo

Registrar, Zimbabwe Open University, Zimbabwe

Abstract: *This study assesses student engagement in the ODL Higher education sector in Zimbabwe. Student engagement has become an important indicator of the probability of a higher level of student retention through satisfaction. The study employed the qualitative research methodology but also used some quantitative research techniques. The case study research design was used with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) being the case in point. Respondents were chosen using the stratified random sampling technique. The study revealed that there was a relatively high level of student engagement among the ZOU student population. Student engagement in ODL is driven by communication between the University and students, interactions and relationships among students and other in class factors which motivate students such as class presentations and group work. The study revealed considerable interest among the student community to have an in-depth relationship with the ODL University and among students themselves for mutual beneficitation. To enhance student engagement at the University and take advantage of the already highly motivated student community, the study recommends that the ODL University facilitate more student-student interactions through University-facilitated study groups per programme. There is also need to improve the frequency of communication between the University and students, the communication should be upgraded from mass media to personal communication through technologies such as emails and other IT- driven technologies.*

Key words: *Open and Distance education, Student engagement, Relationships*

I. Introduction

Student engagement has become almost a buzz word not only in traditional conventional systems of high schools and tertiary education but in Open and Distance Learning as well. The importance of student engagement is portrayed by the emphasis placed on it by leading scholars such as Krause (2005); who argued that student engagement has become a pivotal focus of attention as institutions locate themselves in an increasingly marketised, student oriented and competitive higher education environment.

The concept of student engagement as a competitive tool is therefore in sync with the Zimbabwean ODL sector's growth and development phase. The ODL sector in Zimbabwe is still at its infancy and is facing stiff competition from conventional Universities. It is believed that young Higher Education students prefer learning environments with high engagement. It is from this premise that student engagement becomes an important competitive tool for the ODL sector.

The benefits and significance of student engagement across the board has been well documented, Ryan (2005) argues that engagement reduces costs. Markwell (2007) identifies a more significant argument for student engagement. He indicated that "student engagement is becoming more widely recognised as universities and colleges are increasingly focused on the importance of outreach to alumni and other potential friends of the institution for the purpose of greatly increasing philanthropic support for higher education".

Student engagement varies according to the culture and context of the learner and other environmental variables which determine the student's needs and expectations. There is therefore a need to study the engagement of different groups of students considering their circumstances, culture, technology and other factors affecting their expectations.

Problem statement

There has been a notable reduction in student recruitment and increased dropouts in some programmes at the Zimbabwe Open University. There has been no study carried out to investigate the level of student engagement and involvement in their studies. It is possible that the dropouts could be a consequence of reduced interest on the part of the students.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate student engagement at the Zimbabwe Open University. It is hoped that the findings of this study will assist the University and other ODL institutions with the same circumstances in developing strategies to improve learner engagement and interest in the ODL product.

Objectives of the study

The study is guided by the following objectives;

- 1 To assess the level of student engagement
- 2 To ascertain the factors that impact positively on student engagement
- 3 To identify the factors that lead to student disengagement
- 4 To recommend strategies to enhance student engagement

Research questions

The study sought to answer the following questions;

- 1 What is the level of student engagement in the Zimbabwean ODL context?
- 2 What factors lead to increased student engagement?
- 3 What factors cause student disengagement in the Zimbabwean ODL context?
- 4 What strategies should ZOU implement to enhance student engagement?

Justification of the study

The importance of student engagement cannot be overemphasized. This study is set to contribute important data on the factors that impact on student engagement in the Zimbabwean ODL sector. It is hoped that the findings of this study will enhance the ability of ODL institutions to improve student satisfaction in their experiences with ODL products.

There has been a lower enrollment of A-level graduates into ODL higher education programmes. It is mainly assumed that young A-level graduates prefer highly engaging modes of delivery on tertiary education which makes them choose conventional universities. This study will enhance the competitiveness of ODL universities versus conventional institutions as they compete for the young adults' market segment.

II. Review of related literature

Defining engagement

Stovall (2003) suggests that engagement is defined by a combination of students' time on task and their willingness to participate in classroom and other extracurricular activities. Gonyea and Kuh (2008) defined engagement as the degree to which learners are engaged with their educational activities and that engagement is positively linked to a host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and perseverance.

Other important elements of engagement include active and collaborative learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities (Coates, 2007), interest, effort and motivation (Bulger, et al., 2008).

The definitions above suggest that student engagement relates to the active participation, passion and involvement of the student, the relationship between the student and other students and lastly the relationship between the student and the institution.

The student-engagement theory was originally put across by Astin (1984), Pace (1984) and Kuh, et al., (1991). These scholars defined student engagement in various ways but their contributions agreed on the premise that students learn from what they do in college.

A second important premise of the frameworks of Astin, Kuh, and Pace is that, even though the focus is on student engagement, institutional policies and practices influence levels of engagement on campus. It is from this argument that ODL institution administrators become responsible for enhancing student engagement.

In line with the above argument, research by Endo and Harpel, (1982); Hu and Kuh, (2002) did not produce consistent relationships between students' pre-college characteristics such as gender, age, social status and engagement during college which implies that institutions bear the greater responsibility in encouraging student engagement.

Studies by Chickering, (1975) have shown that conventional Universities and living on campus, as opposed to distance learning and commuting to college, is positively related to engagement. Studies by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research, (2002), and Pike, et.al, (2006) also revealed that student engagement is enhanced by the gains associated with on-campus activities such as participating in learning communities.

Dimensions of engagement

Fredricks, et al., (2004) improving on the work of Bloom (1956), identified three dimensions to student engagement, which are Behavioral, Emotional and Cognitive engagement.

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement is shown in students through typical behavioral norms such as consistent attendance to classes and tutorials, involvement in other non academic activities such as sports and a positive work ethic.

Emotional engagement

Emotional engagement is shown through affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging to the institution and other groups within the institutions. Students who are emotionally engaged are effective customer advocates for the university and have the highest probability of pursuing higher qualifications with the same institution.

Cognitive engagement

Cognitively engaged students would be interested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the basic requirements, and would relish challenge.

III. Methodology

This study employed the qualitative research methodology but also used elements of quantitative research. The case study research design was used with the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) being the ODL case study organisation. The research population was the ZOU student population. A sample of 50 students was chosen using the stratified random sampling technique. Data collection was conducted using the questionnaire instrument. The questionnaire was designed to cover the dimensions of student engagement alluded to in the literature above.

IV. Results of the study

1.1 Background of respondents

The findings of this study are based on a gender balanced research. 48% of respondents were male while 52% were female. The research revealed that ODL in Zimbabwe is dominated by adults who have family commitments. The majority of respondents (56%) were married, while 24% were single, 10% were either divorced or widowed.

The research indicated that 88% of respondents were highly motivated to learn through ODL. Only 4% of respondents indicated that they were not motivated while 8% were not sure about the ODL mode of delivery. The majority of respondents were convinced that there was a strong focus in the University to enhance student success. This is backed by the 56% of respondents who observed that the University was doing enough to enhance student success. The other 44% however indicated that there was need for improvement. The research revealed that the majority of ODL students were confident about their ability to pass all their courses with 84% of respondents expressing that they were confident of passing. Only 16% of respondents were not sure whether they would succeed in their ODL studies.

Though ODL students are highly motivated to learn and responsible in their undertaking, they all admitted to facing frequent interruptions when studying. The research found out that 92% of respondents faced frequent interruptions from family and professional duties. The other 8% however indicated that though they faced interruptions during studies, they were less frequent.

There is a high sense of belonging within the ZOU student community as reflected by the findings of this study. 100% of respondents acknowledged that they were proud to be associated with ZOU and would tell people that they study with the ODL University.

1.2 Communication between the University and students

The communication between the University and learners has been inadequate, as signaled by the 78% of respondents who indicated that they do not receive emails from ZOU, neither do they visit the University's website or facebook page. Only 22% of respondents indicated that they communicated with the University through the above mentioned platforms as shown on the figure below.

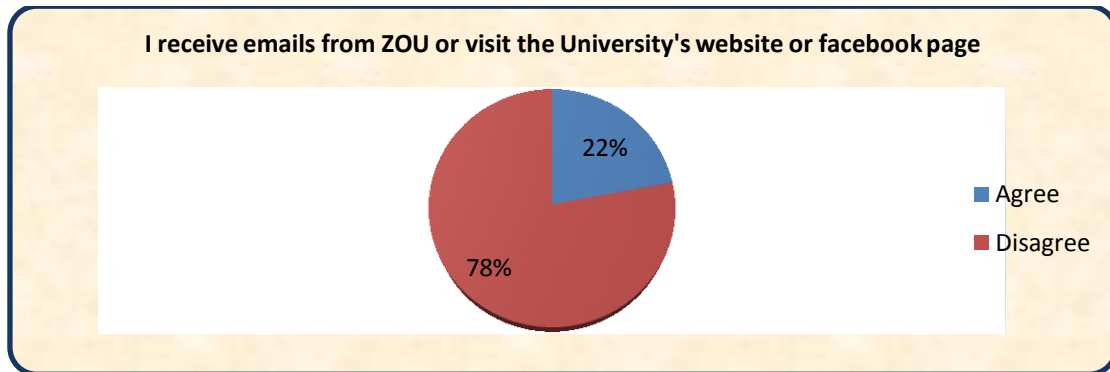


Figure 1: Communication between University and Students

1.3 Importance of study groups to students

It is the view of the majority of respondents that study groups are important for success in ODL. 76% of respondents agreed that study groups were an important element in ODL education. The remainder (24%) of respondents were however not sure of the importance of study groups as indicated below.

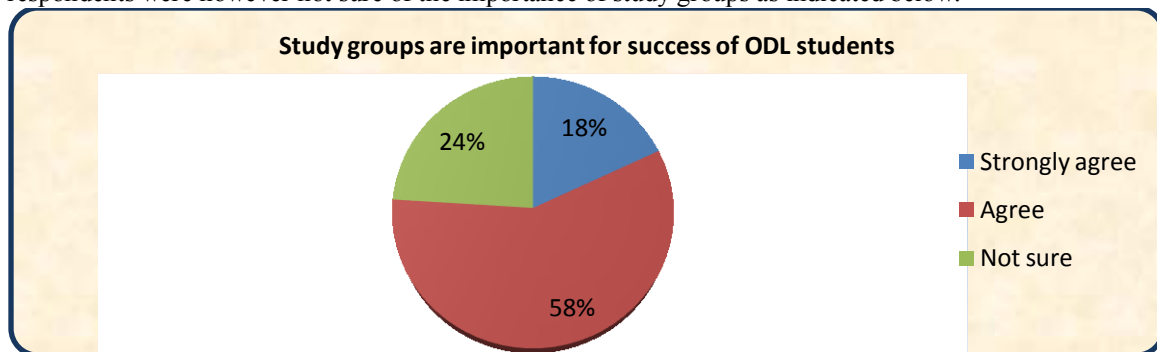


Figure 2: Importance of study groups to students

Though 76% of respondents as shown on the graph above were of the view that study groups are important for ODL students, attendance of study groups remained low.

When asked whether they attended study groups, only 32% of respondents indicated that they attended study groups and had personally benefitted from the groups. 28% indicated that they had not benefitted though they attended while 40% were not sure of the impact that study groups has had on their personal development.

1.4 Attendance of tutorials

All respondents attended tutorials consistently. When asked about tutorial attendance, 14% of respondents strongly agreed that they attended while the other 86% agreed that they attended tutorials. The study therefore revealed that tutorials were highly valued by ODL students.

1.5 Use of ZOU learner support services

Though ODL learners do not frequently consult academic staff, they take time investigating and understanding concepts through literature review. The research revealed a significantly higher use of academic support services such as the libraries. 86% of respondents indicated that they often or very often use such services.

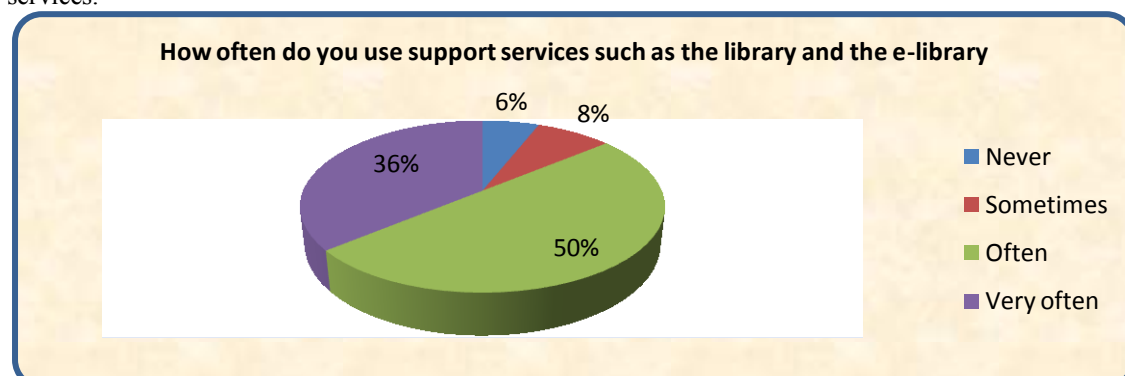


Figure 3: Use of ZOU learner support services

1.6 Involvement in other non academic activities

There is a lower involvement of students in other social and extracurricular activities and groups facilitated by the University. When asked whether they were part of any social group or participated in other extracurricular activities, only 12% of students responded positively while 88% were not participating in other social activities.

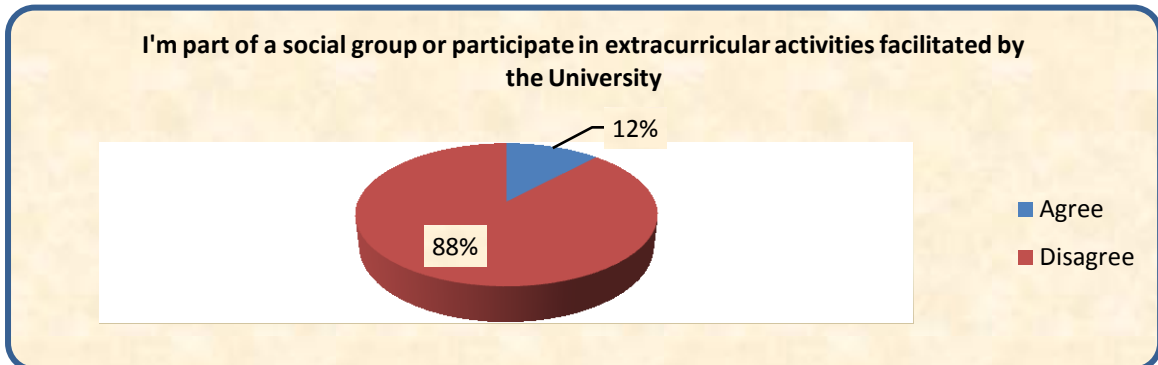


Figure 4: Involvement in non academic activities

1.7 Availability of platforms of student engagement

It was the general view of most students that the ODL institution was not providing a platform for students to engage effectively with others. Only 18% of respondents agreed that the University provided an enabling platform for students to engage effectively with others while 48% disagreed, 34% of respondents were however not sure.

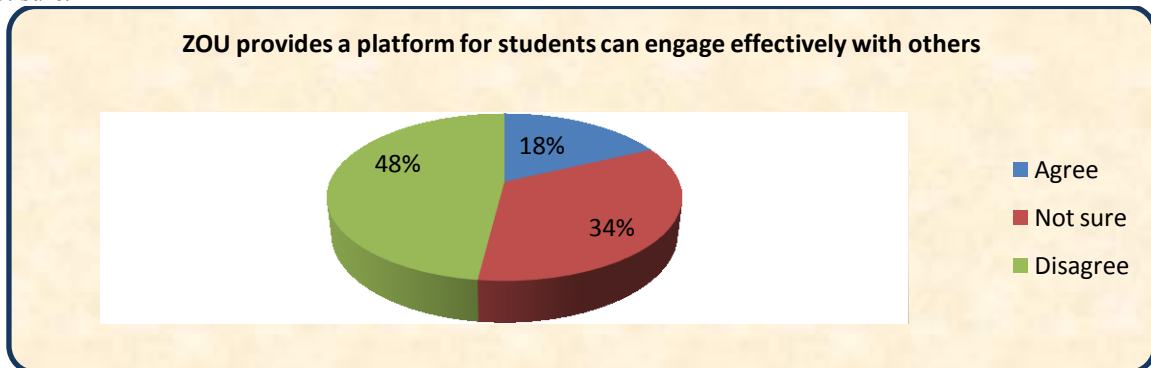


Figure 5: Availability of platforms for student engagement

1.8 Is the ODL mode of learning participatory and interactive?

Only 20% of respondents consented that the ODL mode of learning was participatory and active. Respondents cited the lack of discussion forums due to limited time during tutorials and the limited tutor-student contact time.

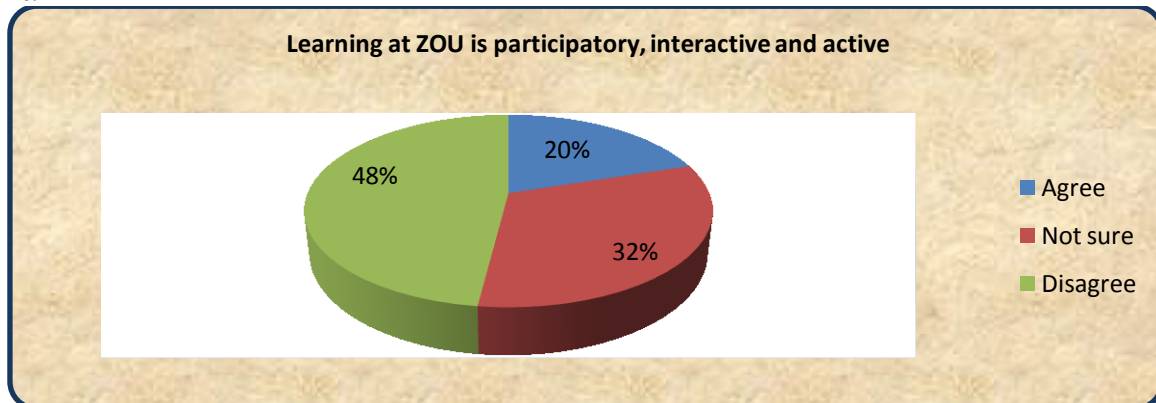


Figure 6: Is learning at ZOU interactive and participatory

When asked how often they prepared for class, discussed concepts or socialized with other ODL students, only 16% of respondents indicated that they did so often; the other 84% indicated that they cooperated with other students less often due to time constraints and other commitments such as work and family responsibilities.

The lack of adequate participation and active interaction in the ODL sector was also reflected in the study as only 54% of respondents agreed that they frequently asked questions and contributed to discussions in class. The other 46% represent a passive character in the ODL student community as they indicated that they don't contribute during tutorials.

1.9 Frequency of class presentations

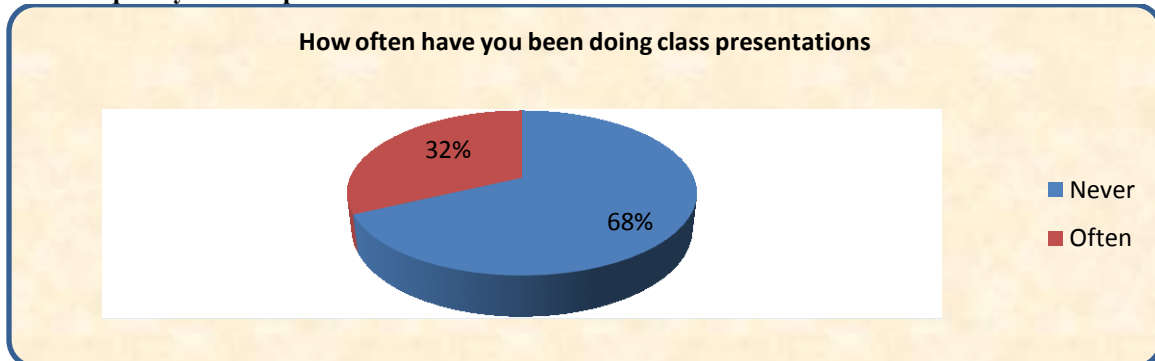


Figure 7: Frequency of class presentations

The study revealed a general lack of formal encouragement of discussion and interaction as 68% of respondents indicated that they have never made a class presentation while 32% indicated that they “sometimes” do class presentations.

It also emerged from the study that a significant portion of ODL learners do not frequently consult their academic staff and tutors after tutorials therefore relied on the module. When asked about their frequency of consulting academic staff and tutors, 56% of respondents indicated that they had never consulted academic staff outside tutorial hours. The other 44% indicated that they ‘sometimes’ consulted academic staff.

1.10 Relationships with other students

ODL students have good relations among themselves as reflected on the graph below. When asked about relationships with other students, 68% of respondents indicated that they were ‘friendly’ relationships while 32% revealed that the relationships were ‘supportive’.

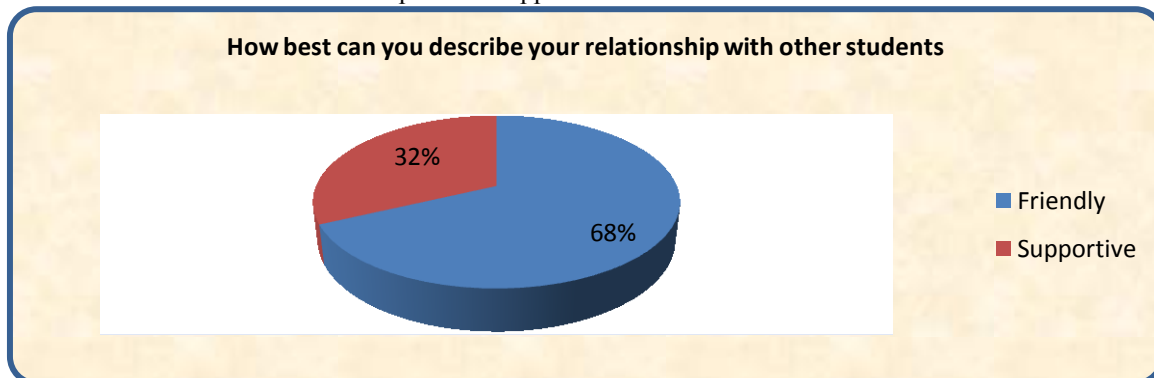


Figure 8: Relationships with other students

1.11 Relationships with teaching staff

Generally the study revealed that there was a good relationship between students and teaching staff though there is room for improvement. The majority of respondents (70%) consented that teaching staff were available and supportive. The other respondents however perceived teaching staff as ‘unhelpful’ (12%) and unsympathetic (18%). The research therefore revealed a good relationship between teaching staff and students which could also be further improved.

1.12 Relationships with administrative personnel

There were varied responses regarding the relationship between students and administrative personnel at the regional centres and at the national centre as shown on the pie chart below. The majority of them (52%) however thought that administrative staff was helpful, 12% perceived administrative staff as considerate while 8% of respondents indicated that administrative staff were flexible. The conduct of staff could however be improved as 26% and 2% of respondents indicated that administrative staff were rigid and inconsiderate respectively.

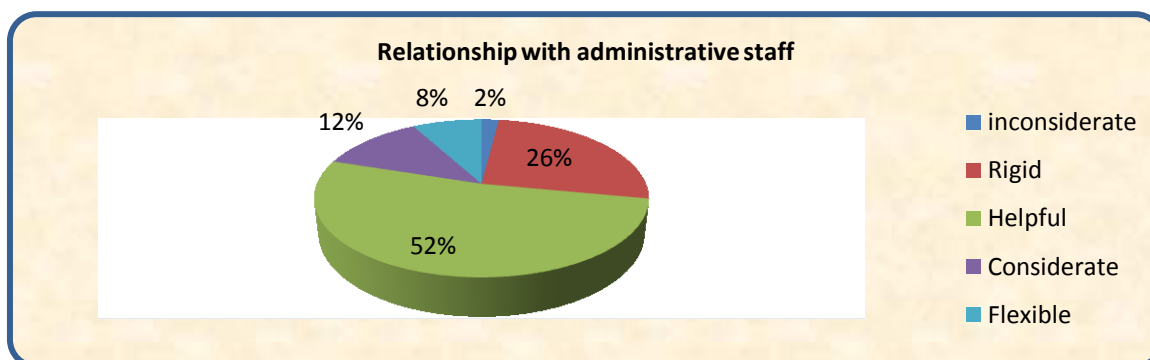


Figure 9: Relationship with administrative staff

V. Conclusion

Overall the study revealed that the ODL student is highly focused and engaged on their studies regardless of the several detractions such as family life and work. The ODL student takes the initiative in reading, researching and relating their academic findings with their day to day situations such as at work as most of them are employed.

From the study, it can be conclusively argued that student engagement is influenced by several factors which include platforms for engagement such as study groups facilitated by the University or students themselves. There is also the importance of innovativeness and initiatives of teaching staff to enhance student engagement such as facilitating group presentations and research, open discussions in class during tutorials and other initiatives that arouse student interest in their academic work. Good relationships among students, between students and academic staff and administrative staff build trust and a friendly atmosphere which increases student interest in academic life thereby improving student engagement.

Factors that result in student disengagement include student frustration with administration staff during the initial stages of academic life such as during registration. There is also the general lack of platforms for student engagement. ODL student are not always on campus thus there is limited time to build relationships between students, an innovative ODL institution would thus facilitate these relationships using several communication technologies at the disposal of students.

Recommendations

This study has revealed a burning desire of ODL students to be more involved and engaged in their learning. There are, however, barriers to engagement which include unavailability of platforms for engagement and time constraints on the part of students. This study recommends that the ODL University could improve student engagement by implementing the following solutions;

- Creating University facilitated study groups based on programmes per semester such that students would have a platform to discuss and share academic material.
- Enrich the learning process during tutorial hours by making compulsory group presentations
- Take advantage of technology so as to improve the frequency of student-tutor communication as well as creating portals which facilitate student-student interaction
- Consistent communication is integral to the relationship between the ODL University and its students. The University therefore needs to address the inadequate communication revealed in the study, this could be addressed through student news bulletins delivered via emails and also other direct media which help build close relationships with students.

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