

Combating Absenteeism and Truancy through Interventions: A Case of Higher Education Students at Botho University

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Abstract

This paper provides a systemic remedial approach to the issues of truancy and absenteeism in tertiary institutions by means of action research (AR). Using Botho University in Botswana as a model for the study, the authors highlight the pivotal role student attendance and positive engagement in classroom activities have in a given student's academic progression and intellectual prowess. A review of negative implications associated with absenteeism and truancy is conducted and a consensus reached on the adoption of check & connect and other multimodal approaches in effectively reducing truancy and absenteeism. The evidence presented in the paper motivates the effectiveness of multimodal approaches coupled with an incentive-based reward system in gauging, controlling, and reducing the issue of truancy and absenteeism.

Keywords: Action research, absenteeism, truancy, student attendance and positive engagement

Introduction

This paper provides a systemic remedial approach to the issues of truancy¹ and absenteeism² in a tertiary institution setting. The researchers have designed the experiment using full-time registered students at Botho University's main campus located in Gaborone. The study provides a repeatable approach aimed at providing insight into factors contributing to truancy and absenteeism as well as devising ways of improving student attendance in a given learning experience.

Background

In the past decade, the topic of mandatory attendance in tertiary learning institutions has come under debate. With the widespread adoption of e-Learning technologies by institutions seeking more effective deployment of distance learning ventures, the debate has intensified. While some researchers argue that attendance in school is a crucial component of a given student's success rate (Pascopella, 2007; Kirby, 2003; Durden, 1995), others, such as Ms. Karen L. St. Clair (1999), are of the opinion that the focus shouldn't be placed on attendance alone, but rather on student motivation together with a number of additional salient factors. "Classroom environments that engage students, emphasize the importance of students' contributions... will undoubtedly provide encouragement to students to attend regularly"(p. 178-179). St. Clair (1999) is cautious, however, noting that there are exceptions when attendance becomes a requisite in order to demonstrate an adequate level of proficiency – when, in her own words - "... attendance is compulsory because it is part of the grading structure" (p. 179).

There are other researchers (Gomis-Porqueras, 2011) that argue that the increasing use of technology in teaching and learning processes motivates absenteeism. Some argue that the introduction of electronic lecture notes is a major deterrent to good attendance as it does not stimulate learners to attend lectures, thus promoting absenteeism (Magen, 2013).

Contextual Framework

In view of this attendance policy debacle, Botswana has chosen to adopt a policy of academic freedom of attendance in its tertiary education institutions (Ajiboye, 2006). This has effectively left the choice of class-room session attendance to students. While this might sound like a powerful concept that encourages a culture where students are treated as "adults," it has effectively brought about a number of variations where a high number of truancy and absenteeism cases in Botswana are based on reasons such as attendance to relatives' burial funerals and chronic ill-health (Ajiboye, 2006). In order to best study the dimensions brought forth by this "academic freedom of attendance" and the "anecdotal reasons," the researchers focus on full-time registered students as key participants in the action research.

¹ In this text truancy – is chronic unexcused absence (Lauren N, 2014).

² In this text absenteeism – is chronic excused absence.

Statement of the Problem

This research is framed under the assumption that absenteeism and truancy can be detrimental to a student's success in a given learning experience (Nyamapfene, 2010). Through participatory sessions, the researchers examined the merits of the assumption by creating a safe, conducive, and nurturing atmosphere for the study participants³ to enable them to make the transition to good attendance records. The researchers also hope that the study provides empirical data that can be used to define the correlation between students' attendance and good academic performance.

Research Questions

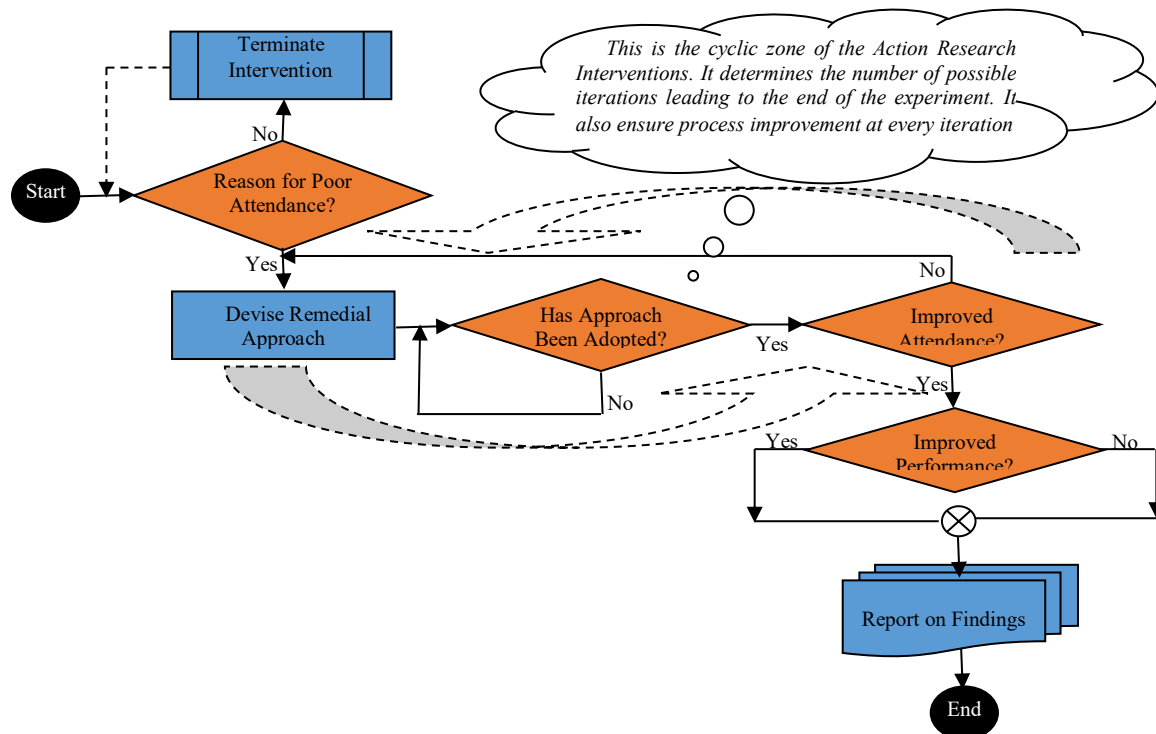


Figure 1: Attendance Remedial Flow – the diagram illustrates the causation between various research questions as they lead to the end of the experiment.

This study is scoped around the following action research questions:

- If we set up students' intervention sessions to listen to students describe reasons for their poor attendance, in what ways, if any, will the information about their reasons for poor attendance be used to determine a remedial approach?
- If a remedial approach is adopted in order to combat truancy and absenteeism, in what ways, if any, can the approach reduce truancy and absenteeism?
- If absenteeism and truancy is reduced, in what ways, if any, will the reduced level of absenteeism and truancy impact student performance?

³ Comprising of absentee students and truants

Research Objectives

The overall purpose of the study is to conduct an analysis of factors leading to truancy and absenteeism and determine a possible remedial approach. The study is aimed at achieving the following specific objectives:

- To investigate the factors leading to truancy and absenteeism in full time registered students at Botho University.
- To devise possible multimodal⁴ intervention action coupled with an incentive-based reward system to combat truancy and absenteeism.
- To determine if the adopted remedial approach has indeed had an impact on the level of truancy and absenteeism at Botho University.
- To determine the causal relationship between a given student's attendance and his/her performance.

Material and Methods

A praxis paradigm was found relevant due to the fact that the 'action' component of each cycles as illustrated in figure 1 is executed depending on the conditions faced when planning the next action using action research (Lather, 1986; Morley, 1991).

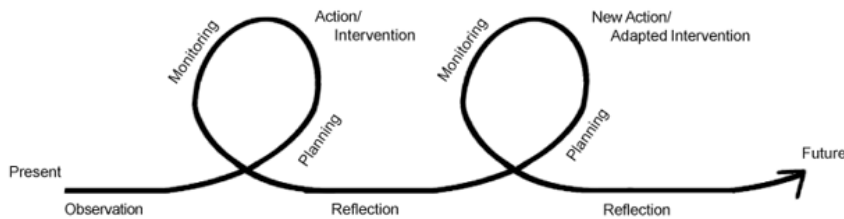


Figure 2: Action Research as a Process – Adapted from Yuliani, L. 2003.

⁴ Depending on the student's reasons for absenteeism and truancy this can be categorized as individual, school-based, family, or neighborhood and community intervention (Teasley. M. L., 2004).

The process begins with the inclusion of the participants, who are full-time registered university students that attained at least 33%⁵ or less attendance records. The participants are then invited for the first intervention session

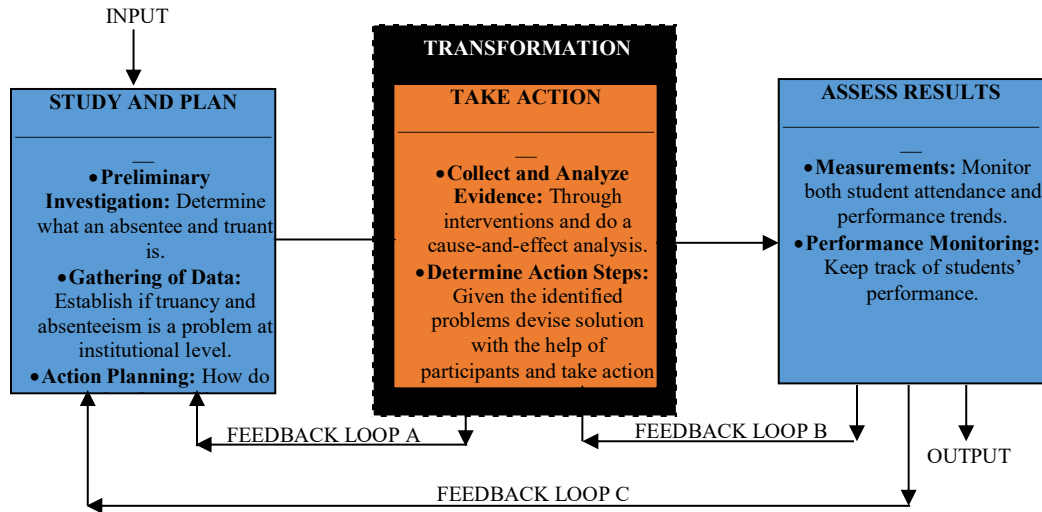


Figure 3: Action Research as a Methodology – The diagram illustrates the main transitions as well as the cycles here illustrated as feedback loops.

The intervention session enables the participants⁶ to assess the reason behind the low attendance. Depending on the nature of the problem, an individual, school-based, family, neighborhood, or community intervention approach is adopted (Teasley, 2004).

Population, Sample, and Sampling

In order to best study the dimensions brought forth by the previously discussed⁷ national concept of *academic freedom of attendance* and the *anecdotal reasons* presented by students, participants were drawn from full-time registered students currently enrolled at Botho University's Gaborone campus. . Using 33% or less attendance records as the participants' sampling inclusion criteria; the following sampling calculations were made:

Let N be the total number of full time registered students at the Gaborone campus and n be the sample drawn from $N \cong 3759$ using the 33% inclusion criteria. It was then found that

$$n = \sum_{i=1}^4 n_i = n_{FBA} + n_{FEAS} + n_{FOC} + n_{FEDL} \quad \text{Equation 1}$$

$$n \cong 124 + 26 + 181 + 225 \cong 556$$

From figure 4, we report that the majority of the participants came from the Faculty of Education and Distance Learning's (FEDL) at $\approx 41\%$ all centered at level 1; this was followed by the Faculty of Computing⁸ (FOC) at $\approx 34\%$ spread across the three levels⁹; and the Faculty of

⁵ In this study, researchers chose the inclusion criteria at 33% or less attendance records but this may depend with the particular policy specification. Overall good attendance is believed to be around 80% or more.

⁶ Over a guided discussion between the researchers and students

⁷ See section 2 and 3 above.

⁸ The largest of the four housed faculties

⁹ A level indicates the particular year of undergraduate or graduate study a given participant belongs to.

Engineering and Applied Science reports the smallest number of participants at $\approx 5\%$. More details on the other¹⁰ Faculties can be found in figure 4.

A Google questionnaire was used to collect the initial data and face-to-face interviews were used during the intervention sessions.

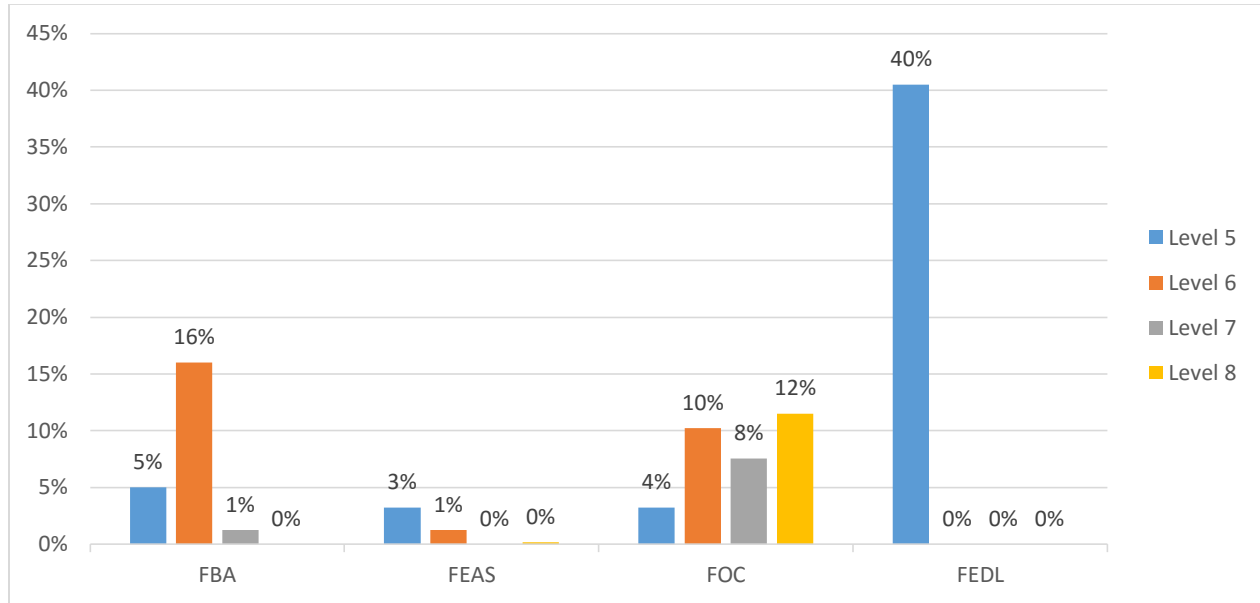


Figure 4: Intervention Participants Distribution

Factors Leading to Truancy and Absenteeism

The findings of the Google form survey indicate three prevailing factors as leading causes for truancy and absenteeism. Most of the participants reported *late allowance*¹¹ as their biggest issue at 22%. Surprisingly, 12% of the participants actually claimed not to have been aware of the *module*¹² registrations; and finally 10% of the respondents cited time-tabling issues as the root of their problem. Figure 5 presents a summary of the prevailing factors identified during the initial intervention sessions.

¹⁰ i.e. Faculty of Business Administration (FBA)

¹¹ Botswana government issued amount of money allotted on a monthly basis to students for miscellaneous personal spending.

¹² a unit subject taken as part of a given student's enrolment to a programme of study.

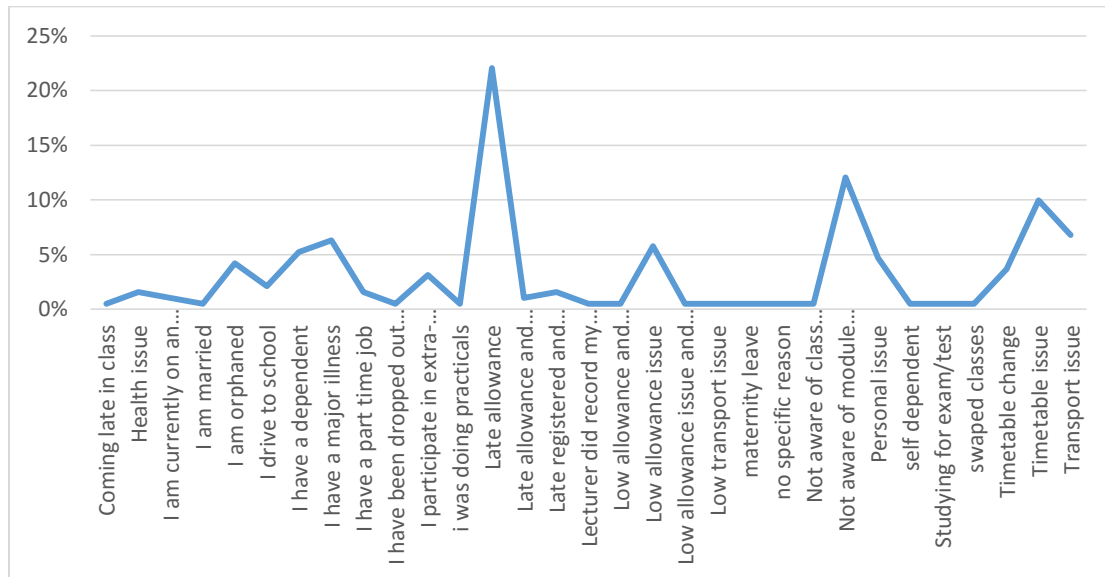


Figure 5: Factors Leading to Truancy and Absenteeism

One may also argue that a student's age may be a factor, as 85% (i.e. the majority) of the participants were less than 25 years old. The reported proportion of female versus male was 52% and 48% respectively; therefore it is fair to conclude that gender has not been of significant deterrent in the study. This is, however, contrary to Pathammavong's (2011) study that reported that females were more likely to be absent due to health related problems (Pathammavong, 2011). Also notable was the fact that only 1% of the participants were self-sponsored, so one may also argue the fact that student sponsorship may be a factor in attaining good attendance. Research shows that external influences also result in absenteeism. According to Gomis-Porqueras (2011) "outside options" contribute to absenteeism. I.e. attractive outside options such as work, leisure, social activities, which are not under control of the University mechanisms, make students opt out of attending lectures. However, Holbrook (2011) articulates the impersonal relationship between teachers and students in large classes as a factor that may also cause absenteeism.

Multimodal Interventions and Incentive Based Reward Systems

Following the initial intervention session, participants were grouped into cohorts and a range of intervention approaches were suggested and adopted, with their consent, to help improve their levels of attendance. Eighteen percent (18%) of the cases were referred to the school counselor for special consideration; of these cases, 6% were tied to major illnesses, 2% were family or marital disputes, 1% were self-dependent, 5% had dependents, and there was one case of 'no specific reason' for chronic truancy that was also referred to the counselor. Thirty-seven (37%) of the reported cases were tied to financial management issues and these were referred to a budgeting skills workshop. About twenty-eight (28%) of the cases were tied to time management and scheduling skills and these were referred to the career service center for consultation. These multimodal approaches have indeed proven to be useful mechanisms in combating the presented issue of absenteeism and truancy.

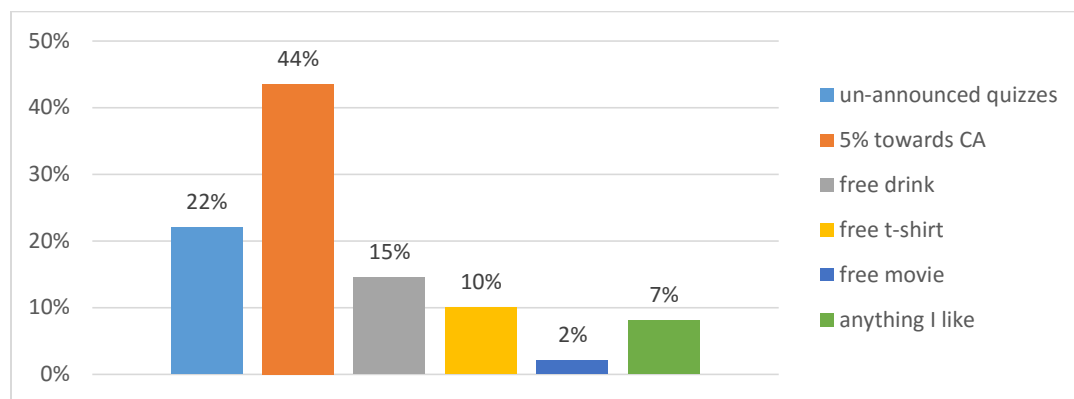


Figure 6: Proposed Incentives

Figure 6 reports on some of the proposed incentives. It was found that the majority of the respondents (i.e. 44%) preferred marks towards their continuous assessment as a reward towards good attendance. Such a reward system has already proven to be key in motivating students to attend classes at Botho University.

Impact of Remedial Approach to Level of Absenteeism and Truancy

Following the intervention sessions, a sharp decline of about 26% from the previous count (i.e. from 556 to 147 absentees and/or truant students) is observed. This is a good indication that both the ‘check and connect’ technique and multimodal approaches were effective in reducing the levels of absenteeism and truancy. The FBA reported a drop from 23% to 17% spread across levels 5 to 7 students (i.e. no record for level 7). The Faculty of Engineering and Applied Sciences (FEAS) reported a drop to 3% across level 5 and 6 students, the Faculty of Computing reported a drop from 33% to about 24% across all levels, and finally the Faculty of Education and Distance Learning (FEDL) reported a drop from 41% to 30% for level 5 students. We can therefore confidently conclude that there is a clear and noticeable improvement in student attendance following these intervention sessions.

This finding is tied with a similar study conducted by Brandy (2012) where multimodal interventions were also found to be ideal in improving student attendance. According to Brandy R Maynard (2012) interventions improve attendance, especially for truant students. The results of their study showed a 4-5% improvement in attendance through interventions.

The Effect of Student’s Attendance on Performance

The study also reports a 16% increase in the pass-rates of the student participants from 22% as measured before¹³ the intervention session to 38% after the intervention session. The study also observed a 34% improvement in student marks, however 6% of these improved marks were still failures; thus the percentage of improved pass-marks was reported to be 28%.

¹³ Obtained from the institution’s mid assessment performance feedback

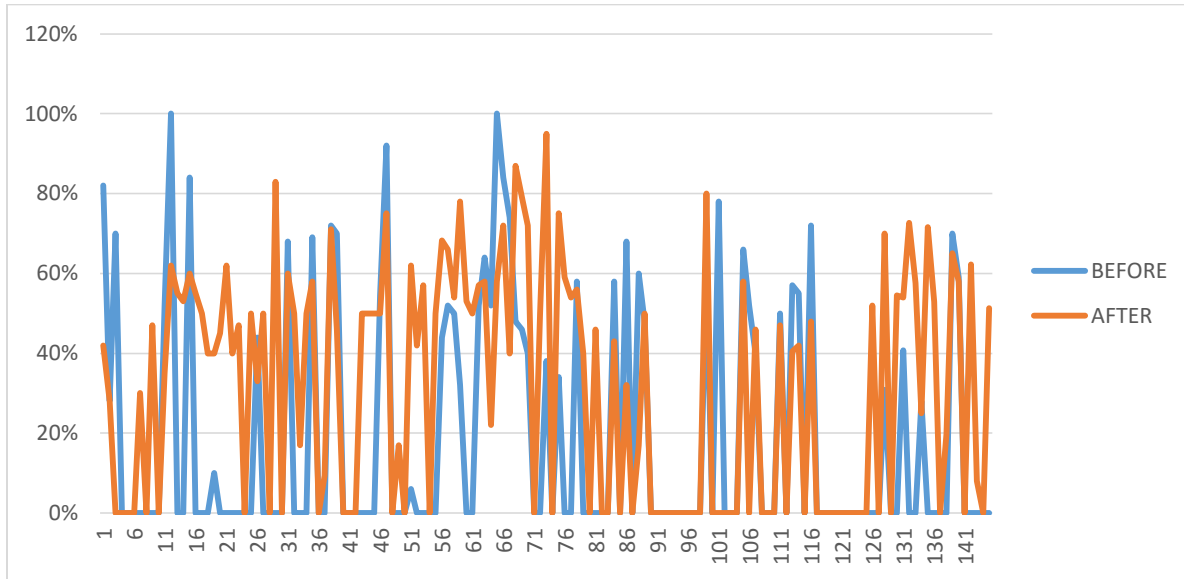


Figure 7: Variation in Student Marks Before and After Interventions

However, as illustrated in the above diagram, the collected student performance data does not indicate a significant improvement in student performance before and after the intervention. This finding can be said to be congruent to Ms. Karen L. St. Clair (1999) on the observation that focus should rather be placed on the level of motivation of a given learner¹⁴. This also ties with Brenda (2014) who states that interventions on truants must emphasize motivating them to become engaged in “educational and emotional experiences” at school that are academically supportive, interesting and relevant.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This is hoped to provide a systemic remedial approach to the prevailing issue of truancy and absenteeism in tertiary institutions (Tertiary Education council, 2009) by means of action research (AR). Using Botho University in Botswana as a model for the study, the authors highlighted the pivotal role student attendance and positive engagement in classroom activities has in a given student’s academic progression and intellectual prowess. In addition to this, the collected student performance data did not indicate a significant improvement in student performance before and after the intervention. The evidence presented in the paper is hoped to motivate the effectiveness of multimodal approaches as they are coupled with an incentive-based reward system in gauging, controlling, and reducing issues of truancy and absenteeism. The findings further highlight the need for devising appropriate mechanisms to help in combating issues of absenteeism and truancy in tertiary educational institutions in the region.

¹⁴ Together with the listed salient factors such as an engaging class-room environment, etc.. as mentioned in section 2.

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