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# **An Investigation into the Effects of the Quality of Assignments on Performance among Third Year Students at Masvingo Teachers' College**

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## **Abstract**

*The study sought to investigate the effects of the quantity of assignments on quality of performance among third year students at Masvingo Teachers' College. The research employed the survey method and data was collected through the use of the questionnaire. The student population was 454. One hundred (100) 3<sup>rd</sup> year students and fifty-four (54) lecturers participated in the study. All the students were required to produce assignments in the 11 Applied Education areas and in Curriculum Depth Study. In total each student was expected to produce a minimum of 18 assignments per term. The assignments were supposed to be returned before the next assignment is given. The study revealed that students at Masvingo Teachers' College are not provided with adequate guidance on assignment writing.*

## **Background to the Study**

All modern systems of formal education deliver some form of writing instruction and require students to produce original texts (Husein & Postlethwaite, 1995). Masvingo

Teachers' College, being one of the formal learning institutions in Zimbabwe, is no exception in giving students essay assignments to write during their course programme.

The term 'essay' refers to a sample of original writing which is to be produced by a student or examinee in response to a given task or assignment (Husein & Postlethwaite, 1995). In other words, the student has to produce his/her own piece of work which should meet the expectations of the examiner. In teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe, assignments are used to assess the extent to which students display an understanding of a taught concept. Display of ability to make critical analysis and application of concepts is also expected in most course programmes. It is through assignment writing and presentation that a student satisfies part of the Diploma course requirements in teachers' colleges in Zimbabwe.

Linn (1989) views assignments as a way of measuring quality of instructional methods or summative attainment to enable instructors to make decisions. These decisions constitute assessment of curriculum coverage by both the instructor and the learners. The assessment is categorised into; distinction; merit; pass; fail but can supplement and fail. (Chakanyuka, 1998). These categories show the quality of the assessed work. As Masvingo Teachers' College, assessment is through assignments, tests and examinations. Students are assessed in areas indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Assignments for 3<sup>rd</sup> Year Students at Masvingo Teachers' College**

Subject	Applied Education Assignments	Main Study Assignment & Exams		Total No. of Tests & Exam
Agriculture		4	1	5
Aids education				1 file
Art	4	6	2	12
English	3	4	1	8
Maths	7	6	2	15
Home Economics	3	12	5	20
Environmental Science	4			4
Science		18	2	20
Music	7	5	2	14
Physical Education	5	8	1	4
R. M. E	4	3	1	8
Shona	5	4	1	10
T. O. E		3	1	4
P. S. A		3	1	4
C. D. S				1 project

An analysis of Table 1 shows that students are expected to do a minimum of 42 assignments in the applied area, six assignments in main study and sit a minimum of three examination papers. The student is also expected to do three Theory of Education assignments, three Professional Studies assignments and produce a Curriculum Depth Study research project. This total does not include learning exercises which also call for the student's time in terms of preparation. The exercises take place during the course of the third year. All the activities on Table 1 are undertaken by the students in their third

year. The items are used for students' final assessment. The college timetable as shown on Table 2 below shows that there are very few free periods for assignment writing and researching in the library.

**Table 2**  
**Time-Table For Third Year Students**

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8-10 a.m.	Main study	Applied Education	Main Study	T.O.E	T.O.E
<b>TEA BREAK</b>					
10.30 - 12.30p.m.	Infant Education & C.D.S	T.O.E	P.S.A	Applied Education	Applied Education
<b>LUNCH BREAK</b>					
2-4 p.m.	Applied Education	Health Education and Principal's Hour	Applied Education	C.D.S	FREE

The timetable for third years (Table 2) clearly indicates that students are usually with lectures. There is no free time for them to do their own reading. The library closes at 9:00 p.m. on weekdays. On Saturday the library opens at 9 a.m. and closes at 1 p.m. On Sunday the library is closed. Deadlines for assignment submission are set in different areas without co-ordination in these subject areas. One finds some dates clashing thereby putting students under a lot of pressure. Assignments assist lecturers in determining the quality of performance. 'The most important challenge for educational assessment and measurement is to make measurement a better job of facilitating

learning for all individuals.' (Linn, 1989:9) Table 1 shows the number of assignments per subject, time allocation, library times and congestion of the timetable.

## **Objectives**

This study therefore set to examine the effects of the quantity of assignments on performance in those assignments. The areas investigated include students' views on availability of resources which include: time, teaching materials and other related resources during assignment research and writing. The study intends to establish how many assignments each third year student does in order to fulfill the course requirements for the award of a Diploma by the University of Zimbabwe. The study suggests ways of improving quality performance by the third year students.

## **Methodology**

### **Sample**

The population consisted of 454 third year students and 54 lecturers. Of the 454 third year students, 100 were selected as a sample for this study. The one hundred students comprised 50 males and 50 females. Fifty-four (54) lecturers participated in the study. Students were randomly selected. The one hundred students completed and returned the questionnaires which were given to them when they came for their Theory of

Education lectures. Of the 54 (100%) lecturers who were given questionnaires only 29 (53.7%) completed and returned the questionnaires. Ten (10) (18.5%) lecturers returned uncompleted questionnaires. Sixteen (16) (29.6%) lecturers did not return the questionnaires.

### **Instruments**

The questionnaire instruments was designed to collect data. Two questionnaires were used, one questionnaire was for the students and the other for lecturers. Peil (1982) and Gay (1980) views a questionnaire as effective because it is not time consuming. The following advantages were realised:

- 1 There was an opportunity to establish interaction with respondents;
- 2 The purpose of the study was explained;
- 3 Individual items were clarified;
- 4 On the part of students the respondents did not take too much time to complete questionnaires.

### **Procedure**

The selection of students was done from the third year group list. Every fourth students on the list of male and females respectively was chosen to complete the questionnaire. The selected students were called by their registration numbers. The lecturers' questionnaires were distributed to heads of sections who in turn distributed to their staff. The questionnaires given to lectures and students were similar and required information on effects of quantity of assignments on performance. (Students' questionnaires were



administered and returned in our presence. (The researchers took an afternoon to administer the questionnaires.)

The lecturers' questionnaire consisted of 18 closed and open ended questions. The open-ended questions required lecturers to express their views of the quality of assignments from students. On closed-ended questions lecturers were asked to tick the phrases which best described their views on the quality of assignments written or produced by students. The main objective of these question items was to get the impression on effects of quantity of assignments on quality performance. Item 19 of this questionnaire required the lecturers to cite major problems they thought students faced in an attempt to produce quality assignments while item 20 required the lecturers to give solution to the problems cited in item 19. Both items 19 and 20 were open-ended.

The students' questionnaire consisted of 25 items. Twenty-three (23) of them were closed-ended and demanded students' opinions on the quantity of assignments. Item 24 required students to give major problems that affect quality performance. Item 25 required students to suggest possible solutions to the problems.

Respondents ticked using (✓) as strongly agree; agree; undecided; disagree or strongly disagree. The closed-ended items were testing quantity of assignments; time spent on assignments, comments written by lecturers and availability of reading materials. To ensure that the survey items were reliable, the questionnaire was pilot tested among eight students and four lecturers.

## **Data Analysis**

Two sets of statistical analysis were performed with the data regarding perceptions of students and lecturers on the effects of quantity on quality performance. One compared the causal perceptions of quantity performance among third year students as viewed by the lecturers and the other as viewed by the third year students themselves. The statistical analyses comparing the perceptions of the two groups were performed only with those cases in which an agreement was common. The descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret data for items 1- 23 in the students' questionnaire and 1-18 in the lecturers' questionnaire. The other items of each questionnaire were qualitatively analysed.

## **Results**

Evidence in Table 3 (Appendix 1) reveals that students had too many assignments to write every term in order to meet the requirements for the award of a Diploma in Education. Response to items of the students' questionnaire which required the students to state three major problems they faced during assignment writing were grouped into categories (Table 5) resulting in rank order as shown in Table 5. The ranking is a result of how frequent the problem was raised by the students.

Table 5

Major Problems Faced by Students in Assignment Writing (N = 78) (in Rank Order Starting with the Most Common Problem)

Problem	Rank	Frequency	%
There are too many assignments	1	78	100
Lack of time	2	77	98.7
Lack of resources	3	75	96.2
Clashing due dates	4	74	94.9
Lack of assignment feedback	5	70	89.7
No assignment guidelines	6	69	88.5
Common errors are not discussed	7	67	85.9
Mark and comments de-motivate students	8	66	84.6
Lack of essay writing skills	9	65	83.3
Lecturers do not offer assistance	10	63	80.8
Unnecessary demand for pages	11	60	76.9
Lecturer do not consider the number of assignments	12	59	75.6
Lecturers give contradictory ideas on essay writing	13	56	71.8

**Table 6**  
**Major Raised by Lecturers about Quality of Assignments (N = 29)**

Major Problem	Rank	Frequency	%
Lack of resources	1	29	100
Student write too many assignments	2	27	93.1
Student-lecturer ratio is too large	2	27	93.1
No reflection of critical thinking	3	25	86.2
Lack of enough time	4	24	82.8
Students do not read adequately	5	22	75.9
Inadequate consultation during assignment writing	6	16	55.2
Inability to present facts logically	7	13	44.8
Plagiarism among students	8	10	34.5
Poor language expression	9	8	27.5

Table 3 shows that too many assignments are given to third years at the expense of analytic thinking which should bring about quality work. This is indicated by 75 (96.1%) item 7 of the respondents who indicated that too many assignments are given to students. This situation forces students to do their work hurriedly because they have to meet deadlines. Item 3 of Table 3 indicates that students do not give enough time for assignment writing. Table 4 item 15 of lecturers responses indicate that 19 (65.5%) of lecturers suggest that there is need to cut down on the number of assignments given to students. This is in agreement with item 21 in Table 3 of students' response. Thus it therefore can be concluded that both lecturers and students are aware that the quantity of assignments affect performance negatively. Findings from lecturers and students responses reveal that resource materials do not match the student ratios. (Table 3 item 15 and Table 4 item 11). The resource materials range from the library opening time to

reading materials. The timetable does not give the students room to utilise the library except when all teaching is over.

Table 3 item 22 reveals that assignments are not returned in good time. This tallies with the major problem ranked 1 in Table 5. If assignments are too many and the lecturer student ratio is high, it becomes very difficult for lecturers to mark and return assignments on time. The assignments are needed for a mark (Table 3 item 12) and it is quite important that students satisfy the requirements of the syllabuses. The situation compromises quality.

Tables 5 and 6 relate to major problems that are faced by students in an attempt to realise quality assignments. The problems have been ranked in order of recurrence. These problems augment the responses in Tables 3 and 4. Latiff (1998) is of the view that if more time is engaged in academic work the result is higher academic performance. It is not possible to achieve this given a situation where students have to produce a minimum of 18 assignments a term. The time they spend on each assignment is very little, which does not allow the students any meaningful content analysis.

## **Discussions and Findings**

Findings in this study reveal that the quality of assignments produced by third year students of Masvingo Teachers' College is greatly affected by the quantity of assignments. The fact that students are required to produce a minimum of 18 written assignments a term reveals that there is very little time for students to search for

information before writing assignments. This goes against (1988)'s views that higher academic performance calls for time.

Resources such as reading materials were also found to be inadequate. Students at Masvingo Teachers' College are given assignments in every subject. Latiff (1988) acknowledges that in many of our learning institutions we find critical shortages of textbooks and reading materials. The problem of limited resources is further compounded by the fact that the college timetable does not have library reading time. Maybe if study and consultation time was available, students could consult lecturers, but then this is not available. This implies that the limited resources will not be able to circulate among the students before writing the assignments.

The library does not have enough text books for different disciplines (External Assessors' Report 1997). If students are given an assignment to be submitted in three weeks, there are high chances that some students would write assignments basing mainly on lecture notes and in the end they are likely to come up with similar pieces of work. This point is enhanced by the following lecturer's comments on the assignments:

"The discussion does not reflect any reading at all. You have not shown an understanding of the topic demands". [60%] "Wide reading is not reflected in the discussion." Apart from the fact that the mark does not tally with the comments, the comments show that assignments are only done to meet requirements of the syllabus. The student does not develop so as to produce quality work. Comments from most lecturers confirm that students are not given guidelines for producing quality assignments. Some of the common ones were:

- 1 This is not the way to write an essay.

- 2 We are not interested in composition work.
- 3 Very little reading if any was done. and:
- 4 You have not given examples in your discussion.
- 5 Your reference list is too small. Your discussion must have an academic focus.
- 6 Satisfactory. Fairly Satisfactory.”

Wolf (1978:86) says “To some, grades are merely a harassment, to others they are a mind of incentives.” While these comments were given, a mark was also given. The focus for this study was not the comments given. The comments above were not an attempt to evaluate the quality of assignment. A student’s performance should be guided. Siyakwazi (1984) is of the view that marking should provide feedback and guidelines for future performance. In this case quality performance could be achieved if lecturers communicated with the students in their marking.

## **Conclusions**

Giving assignments is not co-ordinated in the college and as a result due dates for different assignments usually clash. This being the case it puts students under a lot of pressure so as to produce required the assignments. In any case such a situation does not

afford students an opportunity to research enough for the given assignments. From the findings, it was evident that students are not given adequate lectures or guidance on assignment writing, thus affecting the quality of work they produced. The study also revealed that students were given too many assignments in different subject areas. Assignments are necessary for assessment purposes. The study further revealed that resources in the library do not match the student ratio. Given this situation, it leaves no doubt why students end up producing poor quality assignments because there are very few books to use when writing assignments.

## **Recommendations**

The research findings reveal that the production of quality assignments by student teachers at Masvingo Teachers' College was hindered by factors such as limited resources (reading material) lack of writing skills and too many assignments given at the same time and having more or less the same deadlines. In view of these factors, the researchers came up with the following recommendations to improve the quality of written work in the college.

- 1 Giving of assignments should be rationalised bearing in mind all the subject students take in their course programme.
- 2 Students should be given some lectures on assignment writing at the beginning of each year.
- 3 College based workshops on meaningful marking should be held to assist new lecturers with the skills in assisting students, and,



- 4 Subject clusters should be pursued to further reduce the number of assessed assignments for third years.

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## Appendix 1

**Table 3**  
**Student's Response to the Questionnaire (N=78)**

Item	Agreed		Undecided		Disagreed		Totals	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Every term I write an assignment in each subject	69	88.5	-	-	9	11.5	78	100
I give an assignment 3 weeks preparation	33	42.4	8	10.2	37	47.4	78	100
Lecturers give enough time for assignment writing	33	42.3	2	2.6	44	55.1	78	100
I discuss all assignments with fellow students	54	69.2	1	1.3	23	29.5	78	100
Assignments demand extensive reading	64	82.1	3	3.8	11	14.1	78	100
Assignments given each term are well spread	23	29.5	3	3.8	52	66.7	78	100
Assignments are too few for the Diploma Course	1	1.3	2	2.6	75	96.1	78	100
There is adequate time to search for information	32	41.1	3	3.8	43	55.1	78	100
I got assistance from lecturers for each assignment	17	21.8	3	3.8	58	74.4	78	100
All subjects have tests every term	11	14.1	2	2.6	65	83.3	78	100
There is no time to reflect reading in assignments	24	30.8	14	17.9	40	51.3	78	100
Assignments are produced because there is a mark needed	52	66.7	6	7.7	20	25.6	78	100
Lecturer comments tally with assignment mark	13	16.7	6	7.7	59	75.6	78	100
Lecturers are aware of the number of assignments	44	56.4	13	16.7	21	26.9	78	100
There is a lot of reading material for each assignment	17	21.8	6	7.7	55	70.5	78	100

I always ask for due date extensions	62	79.5	-	-	12	15.4	78	100
The comments written by lecturers are useful	41	52.6	5	6.4	32	41.0	78	100
Lecturers allow for assignment extensions	13	16.7	7	9.0	58	74.3	78	100
I am given enough time to prepare for tests	16	20.5	3	3.9	59	75.6	78	100
I like writing of assignments	57	73.1	6	7.7	15	19.2	78	100
There is need to cut down on the number of assignments	57	73.1	6	7.7	15	19.2	78	100
Assignments are marked and returned in time	7	9.0	1	1.3	70	89.7	78	100
I write assignments in a hurry	30	38.4	1	1.3	47	60.3	78	100

## Appendix 2

Table 4  
Lecturers' Responses

Item	Agreed		Undecided		Disagreed		Totals	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Assignments are well spread	15	51.8	1	3.4	13	44.8	29	100
I give enough time for assignment writing	25	86.3	1	3.4	3	10.3	29	100
Assignments are too few for the Diploma Course	5	17.3	3	10.3	21	72.4	29	100
I give each assignment three preparation	15	51.8	3	10.3	11	37.9	19	100
Students research for assignments	14	48.4	4	13.6	11	38	29	100
I give an assignment each term	21	72.4	0	0	8	27.6	29	100
Students demonstrate reflective thinking	8	27.6	2	6.8	19	65.6	29	100
Assignments are produced for a mark	19	65.6	0	0	10	34.4	29	100
I am not aware of assignments from in other areas	15	51.8	3	10.3	11	37.9	29	100
I am worried about assignments in our area	9	31	3	10.3	17	58.7	29	100
There are enough reading materials	4	14	0	0	25	86	29	100
Students ask for due date extensions	22	75.9	0	0	7	24.1	29	100
I allow for date extensions when requested	5	17.2	2	6.8	22	75.9	29	100
I mark and return assignments in time	17	58.6	0	0	12	41.4	29	100
There is need to cut down on a number of assignments	19	65.5	2	6.9	8	27.6	29	100
There is need for observation of due date	19	65.5	3	10.3	7	24.2	29	100
There is need for consultation before writing of assignments by students	15	51.8	2	6.8	12	41.4	29	100
Students reflect thoroughly in assignment writing	5	17.3	2	6.8	22	75.9	29	100

## **From ZJER Editorial Board**

To ZJER valued subscribers, readers and the academic community at large. ZJER wishes to make a proclamation that in 1997, ZJER Volume 9, No. 1, pp. 65-91, an article entitled, *Research on School Effectiveness on Pupils Achievement in Developing Countries With Special Reference to Malawi: Some Methodological Issues* was published under the co-authorship of Munhuweyi Peresuh and Chipo Kadzamira. In March 2001 a complaint was lodged with ZJER by Chipo Kadzamira against Munhuweyi Peresuh that he had misrepresented himself as co and principal author of the paper. ZJER's subsequent investigations established that Chipo Kadzamira's complaint was credible and correct. Subsequent to this finding ZJER wishes to advise that:

- This proclamation officially deletes that article from that specific issue.
- Readers should not give credit to Munhuweyi Peresuh as co-author, but delete his name from the article.
- That Chipo Kadzamira has now authorised ZJER to republish this article under her name.
- That it sincerely apologises to the academic community for this error

ZJER will continue to uphold and respect international academic and professional standards and procedures for academic publications.



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