
Are there Common Excuses for the Deferral of Semester Examinations by Students at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Tavonga Njaya

Department of Accounting and Banking and Finance,
Faculty of Commerce and Law,
Zimbabwe Open University, Harare, Zimbabwe
tavonganjaya@gmail.com (or) njayat@zou.ac.zw

Zvinaiye Chimbadzwa

Department of Management and Business Studies,
Faculty of Commerce and Law,
Zimbabwe Open University, Harare, Zimbabwe

Abstract: *The study investigated the association between students' excuses for deferral of semester examinations and the regional centres in which they studied at the Zimbabwe Open University. Both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques were used. The study used archival data as the data contained the information relevant to the research area and were sufficient to meet the requirements of the original research. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews with key informants within the university, direct observations and document reviews. Quantitative data were analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Although there were common excuses for deferral by the students in the different study centres (Regional Centres), the data showed that there was a relationship between the Region of study and students' excuses. The study also revealed that there had been an increasing number of students who sought to defer their semester examinations. The rising number of deferral applications had negative effects on the University's overall cash flows. Zimbabwe Open University should consider introducing a deferral administrative fee to discourage abuse by those students seeking unfair advantage through deferred assessment.*

Keywords: *chi-square statistic; deferral; archival data; Region; semester; Zimbabwe Open University; contingency table*

1. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Zimbabwe Open University is the sole open university in Zimbabwe. Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) offers a range of qualifications and courses including degrees, diplomas to postgraduate diplomas and certificates. Students can earn bachelor's, master's or doctoral degrees in the fields of arts, media, natural sciences, humanities and social sciences. All the degree programmes are available worldwide directly from ZOU. In Zimbabwe, the academic programmes are offered through ten regional centres that are located in provincial capitals. ZOU's creation of regional and district centres enabled it to expand its scope, enhance appeal and improve service delivery to individual learners, communities and neighbouring countries.

Generally, universities including Zimbabwe Open University operate a policy of allowing candidates to defer examinations from one semester to the next when there is a compelling reason for doing so. Deferment is act of putting off to a future time. The policy is designed to accommodate candidates who are prevented at the last minute from taking semester examinations by (for example,) sudden illness, injury or family emergency. It does not allow candidates to defer examinations on demand or with insufficient reason. A student applying for deferral must substantiate his/her claim with relevant supporting evidence. For example, a medical certificate would be an appropriate form of evidence for sudden illness or injury and in the case of a candidate having to deal with a family emergency, confirmation from the employer that compassionate leave was granted for this purpose would be appropriate in that eventuality.

Students will be notified of their application status within a specified period say one to two weeks from application. If an application is approved, the student will be allowed to sit for supplementary examination or sit for the main examination in the next examinations period available for the course concerned and his or her results will be graded. For deferred examination students, the overall continuous assessment mark (or coursework mark) obtained at the end of the course and the overall examination mark achieved in the deferred examination will be used in the calculation of the student's overall course result. Also, where an application for deferral is successful the student will pay the difference in fees between those paid and the fees due the following semester. However, a deferred student who cannot sit for the supplementary examination or main examination will be treated like a repeat student.

In most universities including the ZOU, a student must pass the overall continuous assessment (or coursework) when he or she submits the application for deferment. If a student does not attend the examination without a good reason, his or her examination result will be a zero and the student will be treated as a re-entry (repeating) candidate at the next occasion (for which a fee will be payable).

In cases of extenuating circumstances, deferral requests must be received in writing together with supporting documentary evidence at least one week in advance of the examination. What are the most common deferral excuses? Is there any association between deferral excuses and the student's study centre (or Region)? These were the overarching issues investigated in this study.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Zimbabwe Open University operates a policy that allows candidates to defer examinations from one semester to the next when there is a compelling reason for doing so. There has been an upsurge in the number of deferral requests from students. Such applications have overwhelmed the Senate Examinations Sub-Committee at a time it will also be considering semester examination results. Are the excuses genuine? What are the implications of increasing deferral requests?

2.1. Objectives of the Study

The study's primary aim was to determine if there were common excuses for the deferral of semester examinations by students in the regional centres of study at the Zimbabwe Open University. The specific objectives of the study included;

1. To identify the common reasons for deferral requests by students at Zimbabwe Open University.
2. To test if there is association between region of study and semester examination deferral excuse.
3. To proffer suggestions on how to improve the handling of semester examination deferral requests.

2.2. Research Questions

1. What are the major reasons for deferral requests by students at Zimbabwe Open University?
2. Is there any association between region of study and semester examination deferral excuse?
3. What recommendations can be made on the handling of semester examination deferral requests?

2.3. Hypothesis of the Study

H₀: There is no association between excuse for deferral of semester examinations and the region of study.

H₁: There is association between excuse for deferral of semester examinations and the region of study.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The research was cross sectional in nature and had both qualitative and quantitative aspects [1]. It was carried out at the Zimbabwe Open University. All students who fell within the inclusion criteria without any characteristics excluding them from the study were chosen for the quantitative study. Members of staff working at ZOU were purposively chosen for the qualitative study. In the qualitative arm, key informants were Faculty Deans; Director, Academic Registry, Chairpersons of Departments; Examinations Officers and Regional Programme Coordinators. The key informants were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. The sources of quantitative data were existing records (archival

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data) in the form of students' hand written notes (applications) from six regional centres, minutes of Senate Sub-Committee on Examinations and students' recall. The six Regions in the sample were Harare, Bulawayo, Manicaland, Midlands, Masvingo and Mashonaland West. Snowball sampling was used to select the students in the study. The archival data contained the information relevant to the research area and were sufficient to meet the requirements of the original research.

4. PRESENTATION OF DATA

Archival data were recorded in a two-way table (or contingency table) consisting of frequencies of observations split up by two categorical variables of deferral excuses and region of study. Each combination of values for the two variables defines a cell. The question of interest is: "Is there a relationship between the two variables?" Large values of χ^2 provide evidence against the null hypothesis and a small p -value provides evidence against the null hypothesis.

5. PRESENTATION OF STATISTICAL RESULTS

Absolute applications for deferral of semester examinations showed a downward trend during the study period. That is, absolute applications for deferrals were 133 in 2009 during the first semester, slumped to 85 in 2010 first semester before picking up to an all time maximum of 150 in 2011 first semester. There was general downward trend of deferral requests from 2012 up to 2013, but that was reversed in 2014. Using absolute applications of the candidates who sought to defer semester examinations could be misleading because of variations in student enrollment over time. In fact, Zimbabwe Open University experienced a nosedive in student enrollment due to unfavourable macroeconomic environment in the country and stiff competition from conventional universities that introduced parallel and block release programmes. In order to carter for changes in student enrollment overtime, the researchers computed deferrals as a percentage of the total enrollment for the years under study. The percentage is a neutral unit of comparison. In this study the percentage was used to compare deferral applications over time. Figure 5.1 shows that applications for deferral of semester examinations as a percentage of total enrollments were actually increasing during the period, 2009-2014.

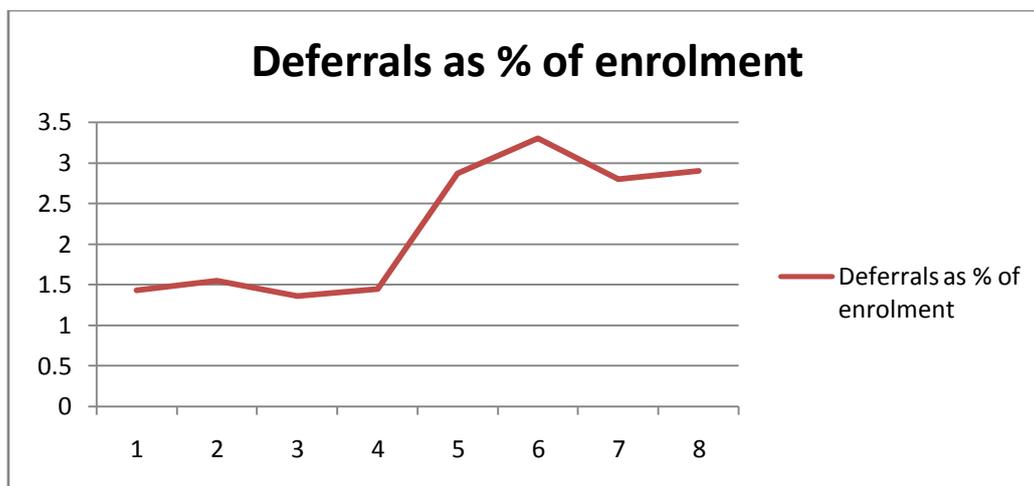


Figure 5.1. Deferral applications as a percentage of total enrollment, 2009-2014

Source: Authors

But, are there common excuses for the students in the different Regions? Why do students seek deferment?

Figure 5.2 show that Harare Region recorded the highest number (39.5 percent) of deferral requests during the study period, 2009-2014. Deferral requests for Harare Region were above the University average throughout the study period. This was expected since the Harare Region has the highest number of students (in terms of enrollment) in the University.

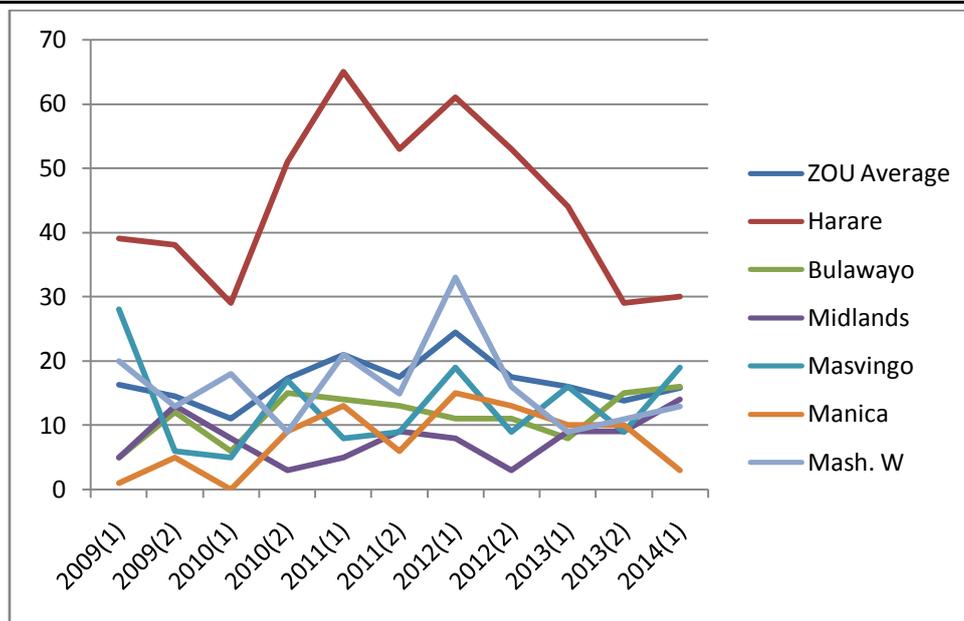


Figure 5.2. Deferral requests by Region of study

Source. Authors, 2014

Figure 5.3 shows deferral requests by category. From the archival data, the most common excuses for deferral requests were ill-health, work commitment and module unavailability.

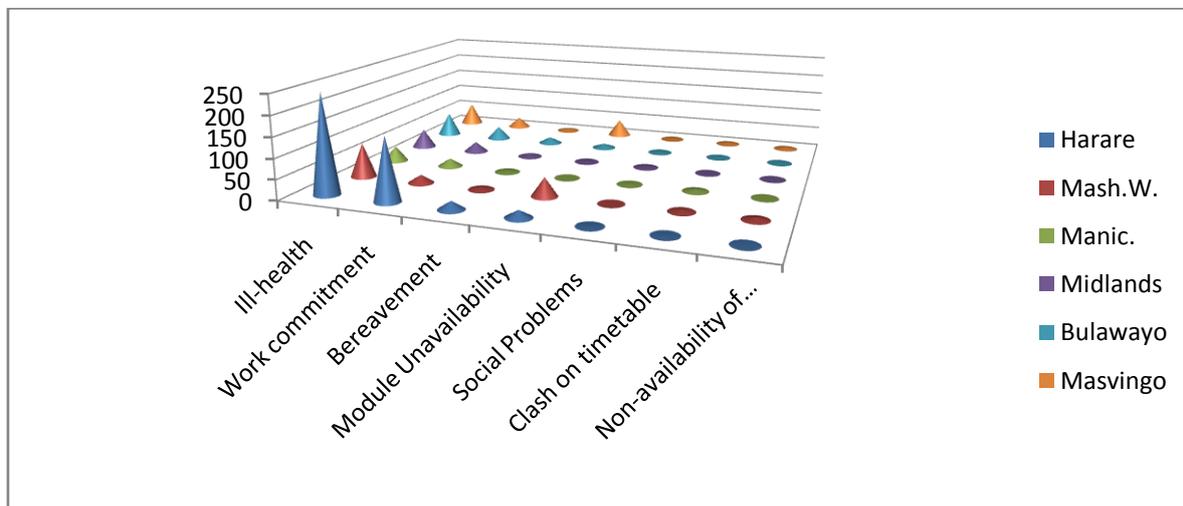


Figure 5.3. Deferral requests by category, 2009-2014

Source: Authors, 2014

The hypothesis stated in section 2.3 was operationalised using a chi-square test of independence between deferral excuses and region of study [2]. A chi-square statistic is used to investigate whether distribution of categorical variables differ from one another. In this study, deferral excuse (for example, ill-health) is a categorical variable. A chi-square calculator for The College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University (www.physics.csbsju.edu/.../contingency_NROW_NCOLUMN_form.html, Retrieved on 19 September 2014) was then used to calculate the chi-square statistic. Archival data on deferral excuses were entered into a 7x6 contingency table. Table 5.1 shows the results of the chi-square test performed on deferral excuses for six Regional Centres at the Zimbabwe Open University during the period 2009-2014.

The results of the chi-square test show the degrees of freedom, expected count or frequencies, the test statistic, χ^2 and the p-value associated with the test statistic. The degrees of freedom are the number of values that are free to vary after restriction has been placed on the data [3]. For the chi-square test, the degrees of freedom (df) is given by:

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$$df = (r - 1)(c - 1) \quad (5.1)$$

where r is the number of rows for variable *Deferral Excuse* and c is the number of columns for variable *Region of Study*. The test-statistic is a chi-square random variable, χ^2 defined by the following formula:

$$\chi^2 = \sum \sum \frac{[O_{rc} - E_{rc}]^2}{E_{rc}} \quad (5.2)$$

where O_{rc} is the observed frequency count at level r of variable *Deferral Excuse* and level c of variable *Region of Study* and E_{rc} is the expected frequency count at level r of variable *Deferral Excuse* and level c of variable *Region of Study*. The summation sign, \sum is written twice in equation 5.2 to indicate that we sum over the whole contingency table (r rows and c columns). The p-value is the probability that the deviation of the observed from the expected is due to chance alone (no other factor acting) (Landau and Everitt, 2004).

Table: 5.1. *Expected: contingency table*

| Deferral Excuse | Region of Study | | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|---------|--------|----------|----------|----------|
| | Harare | Mash.W. | Manic. | Midlands | Bulawayo | Masvingo |
| Ill-health | 230 | 87.3 | 34.9 | 44.7 | 66.7 | 75.5 |
| Work commitment | 121 | 46.0 | 18.4 | 23.5 | 35.2 | 39.8 |
| Bereavement | 25.6 | 9.71 | 3.89 | 4.97 | 7.43 | 8.40 |
| Module Unavailability | 52.5 | 19.9 | 7.97 | 10.2 | 15.2 | 17.2 |
| Social Problems | 5.12 | 1.94 | 0.777 | 0.994 | 1.49 | 1.68 |
| Clash on timetable | 7.68 | 2.91 | 1.17 | 1.49 | 2.23 | 2.52 |
| Non-availability of timetable | 5.97 | 2.27 | 0.907 | 1.16 | 1.73 | 1.96 |

Chi-square = 214

Degrees of freedom = 30

Probability = 0.000

The results of chi-square tests in Table 5.1 show a statistically significant association between variables, deferral excuse and region of study. The chi-square test statistic is 214 with 30 degrees of freedom and p-value of 0.000. Since the p-value is less than the level of significance ($p < 0.05$), we rejected the null hypothesis that there was no association between region of study and students' deferral excuses. Instead our data showed that there was a relationship between region of study and deferral excuses, but that's all it says. This takes us to the discussion of research findings.

6. DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

6.1. Process of Applying for Deferment

All applications for deferment were subject to individual review by the University Senate and students applying for deferment were required to produce evidence of the reason(s) for the request. Senate's decision was final and there was no appeal process. Application for deferment could be rejected if there was reason to the belief that a student was seeking to achieve an unfair advantage through deferred assessment. The judgment was based on the particular circumstances of the application. Candidates can defer examinations for one semester only. Ideally, the application for deferment of written paper(s) must be made prior to the commencement of the first written paper. However, in most cases applications were done in retrospect. There were no guidelines on application for deferment of the research project and dissertation. Instead, research projects and dissertations were submitted to respective faculties in accordance with University calendar of academic activities.

Students complete and submit deferral application forms at their respective study centres. The deferral form cannot be downloaded from the ZOU website. The deferral application should be accompanied

by supporting documentation. Unfortunately, there were no guidelines on how students should complete the deferral application form. Instead, verbal guidelines were given by the Regional Administrator. The Regional Director would recommend or not recommend the request for the deferment. All the deferral applications would be submitted to the respective faculties through the Academic Registry. The faculty would then present the deferral applications to the Senate Sub-Committee on Examinations. At the Open Universities Australia, the deferral application form must be received no later than three working days after the date of the examination and the form and its supporting documentation could be lodged by mail, fax or e-mail. Meanwhile, at James Cook University, Singapore, deferral application must be submitted within five working days after the date of the examination and can also be lodged by e-mail. At the Open University UK and Harvard Extension School, deferral requests are subject to £15.00 and US\$25.00 administration fee per course respectively. On the contrary, students at the Zimbabwe Open University did not pay any administration fees when seeking deferral of semester examination(s). The students were notified of their deferral application status upon request at the regional centres after semester examinations results were released. It would appear the regional centres did not communicate deferral decisions to the students. If approved, the deferred examinations were rescheduled to the following examination period. Meanwhile, students were notified by e-mail only of the outcome of their application for deferred examination at the Open Universities of Australia and James Cook University, Singapore.

6.2. Acceptable and Non-acceptable Reasons for Deferment

From the archival data, the acceptable reasons for deferment included the following:

- Bereavement of close relative. Evidence to be supplied would be a death certificate.
- Serious illness or major non-cosmetic medical operation, either of the student or a close family member. Close family members are defined as partners or spouses, children, siblings, parents or grandparents only. Evidence to be supplied would normally be a medical doctor's letter.
- Financial constraints. The Senate's judgement on this excuse was inconsistent as some students were granted while others were denied deferral of semester examinations.
- Military service
- Jury service
- Work and travel commitments on business.
- Childcare
- Relocation or moving home
- Any other grounds will require the approval of the University authorities.

From the archival data and key informants within the University, non-acceptable reasons for deferment included the following:

- Inadequate preparation of examination(s)
- Failure to read the timetable
- Holidays
- Weddings

The most common excuses for deferral applications included ill-health of the candidates (or their close relatives such as spouse, children or parents), work commitment, module unavailability, bereavement, non-availability of the examination timetable, clash of courses on the timetable and social problems (for example, marital problems). Among these seven, ill-health of the candidates or their close relatives was the most prominent. Why should an increasing number of candidates get sick during examinations? This should be a source of worry by the University. This had become an area of abuse by some unscrupulous students who faked illness if they were not prepared for a particular paper. For example, one student has been applying for deferral of semester examinations since 2011 and has not sat a single examination from the time they enrolled. Another example of suspected abuse was where a student applied for deferral of semester examination for the same course four times citing the same reason. Curiously, the course turned out to be a quantitative one. This raises the question of

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how many times a student should apply for deferral. At Open Universities Australia, examinations can be deferred once only. Related to that, should repeating students apply for deferral? Repeating candidates should not be permitted to defer part of their examined elements as deferral would only prolong their completion of the degree programme.

The other excuses cited by the candidates were wrong question papers or assignments or modules; failure to attend tutorials; late registration; withdrawal of course(s) by the faculty; non-availability of assignments or question paper(s); course(s) not on offer; denied study leave by the employer; financial constraints; change of course code(s) without due notice; inadequate preparation for the examination(s); writing examinations at other institutions; judicial matters; failure to secure industrial attachment and failure to use English as a medium of communication. The excuse of financial constraints was most prevalent in 2009 and was never recorded again. This was expected as the government had adopted multicurrency system and there was liquidity crunch in the country. The non-availability of assignments or question paper(s) and course(s) not being offered in a given semester were also recorded in 2009 only and thereafter did not appear as excuses for deferral of semester examinations. The failure to secure industrial attachment as an excuse for deferral of semester examinations only started in 2014 when the Faculties of Arts and Education and Applied Social Sciences introduced industrial attachment. In this regard, the University should consider assisting students with securing places for industrial attachment. The failure to use English as a medium of communication during examinations only came up in 2013 when the University recruited students from non-English speaking countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique and Angola. Probably, there is need for the University to allow students to learn in a language they are proficient in.

6.3. Implications of a Rise in Deferral Applications, 2009-2014

An upsurge in deferral applications had implications on the University's resources, financial, material and time. An increased number of deferral applications meant that the Senate had to sit for extended hours to deliberate and make individual reviews of the applications. In addition, the University used more bond paper to make more copies for members of the Senate. Financially, the University was disadvantaged too. For students whose deferral applications were successful meant that the institution had fees tied up to "non-paying students" in the following semester. Although the students would have deferred their examinations and hence prolonged their study time, ZOU would have been prejudiced of its regular semester income stream and corresponding interest income.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study revealed that there had been an increasing number of students who sought to defer their semester examinations during the period 2009-2014. A chi-square test on archival data on the six study centres at ZOU showed that there was a relationship between region of study and deferral excuses, but that's all it said. The most common excuses for deferral of semester examinations included ill-health, bereavement, work commitment and module unavailability.

Specific recommendations emanating from the study included the following:

- ZOU should introduce a policy on deferral of semester examinations. The policy should clearly outline the procedures and regulations that guide management of applications for deferment of semester examinations.
- ZOU should introduce an administration fee per course deferred to discourage abuse by those students seeking unfair advantage through deferred assessment.
- There should be a cap or limit on the number of deferral requests per course.
- Faculties should maintain a database of all applications for deferment of semester examinations. This would be used to do background checks when considering deferral applications.
- Deferral application forms (and any other forms required by students) should be put on ZOU website so that students can download them from wherever they are instead of coming to the Region to collect the forms.

- ZOU should create individual student electronic profiles where important announcements and information (such as assignment submission dates and examination timetable) could be posted.
- ZOU should allow students to use languages they are proficient in for examination purposes. The University would have to contend with increase in costs of translation.
- The University, through the Human Resource Department should assist students with securing places for industrial attachment.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Tavonga Njaya is a Senior Lecturer and Chairperson for the Department of Accounting and Banking and Finance in the Faculty of Commerce and Law at the Zimbabwe Open University. Dr. Njaya teaches economics and business research methods.



Miss Zvinaiye Chimbadzwa is a part-time tutor in the Department of Management and Business Studies in the Faculty of Commerce and Law at the Zimbabwe Open University. Miss Chimbadzwa teaches human resources management.