

Factors that influence learners' decisions to drop out of subjects at the Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL): Distance learning mode

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ABSTRACT

The Namibian College of Open Learning (NAMCOL) conducted a dropout survey in order to determine why distance students studying with the College, drop out of the subjects they enrolled for. Information was collected from learners who dropped out of subjects they enrolled for, tutors and Head of Centres. Online and telephonic interviews were used for learners, while questionnaires in hard copies were distributed to the tutors and Head of Centres. The majority of the learners who responded to the questionnaire indicated that the learner support from the College was good and that the study materials were useful. Even so, most learners indicated that job commitments, financial issues and sickness were the main reasons why they dropped out of the subjects they enrolled for. The subject that had the highest dropout rate for both grade 10 and 12, were English. Other reasons given by tutors and head of centres as to why they think learners drop out of subjects include lack of motivation from learners, lack of competency in English and some learners find employment or register at private institutions, centres are far from the learners. Some of the recommendations given by tutors and head of centres to reduce dropouts the College should decentralise the centres, clear, persistent and continuous information regarding examination dates, collecting timetables and venues should be given.

Keywords: Dropout.

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INTRODUCTION

NAMCOL is a state-supported educational institution, established by an Act of Parliament (Act No. 01 of 1997), which provides study opportunities for adults and out-of-school youth. NAMCOL's core activity has traditionally been its Secondary Education (SE) programme, which enables those who cannot or do not wish to attend formal school to enrol for either the Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC or Grade 10) or the Namibia Senior Secondary Certificate (Namibian College of Open Learning, 2016/217).

Dropping out is a serious problem because it denies individual students their fundamental human right to education (Street, 2010). A UNESCO report (2005), on the state of the world's children, points out that about 130 million children in the developing world are denied their right to education because of dropping out. According to Street (2010), the problem of dropping out should be the

concern of every member of society since it has negative consequences at both the individual and social level.

Thus, this study examines the College's school related social factors and circumstances that lead to students dropping out. By knowing the reasons that cause students not to complete their subjects, the College can implement strategies to anticipate and reduce the number of subject dropouts. This study will assist NAMCOL to improve its Learners Support Services (LSS) and develop a learner's retention policy for the College. This study will also help to build a foundation for future research in this area.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to determine why students

drop out of the specific subjects they enrolled for, while studying with NAMCOL on the distance mode. In particular, this study will focus on both contact and non-contact learners (Grade 10 and Grade 12).

A *dropout* is defined as learners who enrolled for specific subjects at NAMCOL, and at the same time registered with the Directorate National Examinations and Assessment (DNEA), but did not sit for the examination.

Research objectives

- To identify reasons and factors that lead to learners dropping out at NAMCOL; and
- To develop recommendations to reduce this dropout rate.

Research question

- How does the College's academic and social environment influence students' decision to drop out of related subjects?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Ofaha (2011), dropping out denies individual students their fundamental human right to education and as pointed out by a UNESCO report (2005), about 130 million children in the developing world are denied their right to education because of dropping out. Open and Distance Learning (ODL) offers numerous benefits and has expanded over the years. With this growth, has come the problem of exceedingly high attrition rates and challenges facing ODL students (Ojo, 2011).

Individual related challenges relate to lack of sufficient time for study, financial constraints and the distance from home to the regional centre. Unfavourable home learning environments are also amongst the challenges faced by individuals (Street, 2010). According to Simpson (2013), lack of support from family, employer as well as lack of experience and/ or training with instructional technologies may also lead to individuals dropping out.

Instructional related challenges include delayed or ineffective feedback from the instructors, inadequate academic support and difficulty in attending face-to-face sessions (Cardoso and Verner, 2007). Ofaha (2011) reported that students experience confusion, anxiety and frustration due to lack of prompt or clear feedback from their lecturers. Thus, delayed and ineffective feedback can add burden to learners who are struggling with the isolation and the remoteness nature of distance learning.

According to Reuben (2011), institutional related challenges faced by ODL institutions that lead to learners dropping out include difficulty in administrative services and delayed study materials at regional centres. When students do not receive material on time, they are

affected academically, psychologically and financially. Lack of study materials may force students to submit assignments that are not properly written and they are likely to get to examinations without enough preparation resulting in poor performance, which may not be a true reflection of their academic abilities.

The rate of drop-out of open and distance learning system is generally higher than drop-out of a usual in-campus learning environment. To decrease the rate of drop-out of the system, it is imperative to learn the reasons for drop-out in order for the institution to take appropriate measures (Okopi, 2011).

Dropout rates vary depending on the educational system adopted by an institution. It should be noted that there are different reasons affecting persistence of students including study habits, age, educational goals, ethnicity; finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, and outside encouragement. These variables can challenge students and push them out of the educational institution by putting too much pressure on their time, resources and sense of well-being (Simpson, 2013).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This is a cross-sectional study that employed descriptive survey methods. This study adopted a mixed methods approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to allow for triangulation.

Population and sample

The population of this study included those learners who dropped out of the subjects they enrolled for (Grade 10 and Grade 12) after registering for examination with the DNEA during the specified period (2016). The study used simple random sampling methods by using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample determination to obtain the sample size for both Grade 10 and Grade 12. Purposeful sampling methods were used to select the participants. Focus group discussions were held in these regions with the selected tutors and Head of Centres.

Research instrument and data collection procedures

Information was collected primarily from the learners who dropped out of subjects, although additional information was collected from the tutors and HOCs. Overall, the study used telephonic interviews for learners and a questionnaire in hard copies for the tutors and HOCs. An open-ended questionnaire was used for the tutors and HOCs, and structured and semi-structured questions for the learners, who were also interviewed.

Online and telephonic interviews were useful because of the relatively high mobility of the dropout population, especially when trying to contact dropouts who left the programme/subjects more than a year ago. In order to attract as many former learners as possible, the College placed an advert in selected popular national newspapers. Radio slots were developed and aired on different radio stations nationally in the different languages being spoken in Namibia. These also served to ease any doubt and put former learners at ease when contacted.

Data analysis

The study used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to analyse the data. The collected data was sorted, edited, coded, classified and then tabulated. Descriptive analysis was performed, including frequency tables, cross tabulation and interpretation of 'statistical' measures of precision such as standard errors for inference. Inferential statistical procedures were used to guide generalisations from the sample to the population. Chi-square tests were performed examining association

in two-way tables. A logistic regression analysis was used to determine which variables predict dropout. Multivariate statistical techniques, such as factor analysis and correspondence analysis, have been applied to provide an insight on the associations between variables.

Validity and reliability

The study used Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) random sampling size determination for sampling. The questionnaire was tested by conducting a pilot survey with eight respondents to ascertain its content validity. These respondents were not included in the actual sample.

Limitations

Some respondents refused to take part in the survey, e.g. by saying that they were busy or should be phoned later. It was a bit difficult to fully engage with the individual respondents as they were on the phone and had little interest in really understanding or even caring about the survey.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Former learners

Grades (*What grade did you do at NAMCOL in the period under review?*)

Table 1. Grades.

Grade	Frequency	Valid Percent
10	231	47.4
12	256	52.6
Total	487	100.0

As shown in Table 1, the majority of respondents attended grade 12 (52%).

Employment status (*Were you employed while studying at NAMCOL?*)

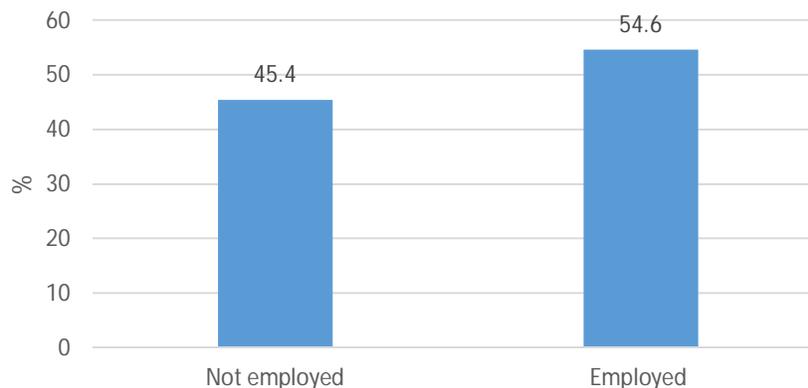


Figure 1. Employment status.

As shown in Figure 1, more (54.6%) respondents were employed while studying at NAMCOL.

Gender (*What is your gender?*)

Table 2. Gender.

Gender	Frequency	Valid percent
	1	.2
Female	348	71.5
Male	138	28.3
Total	487	100.0

As shown in Table 2, females were in the majority (71.5%).

Age groups (*How old are you now?*)

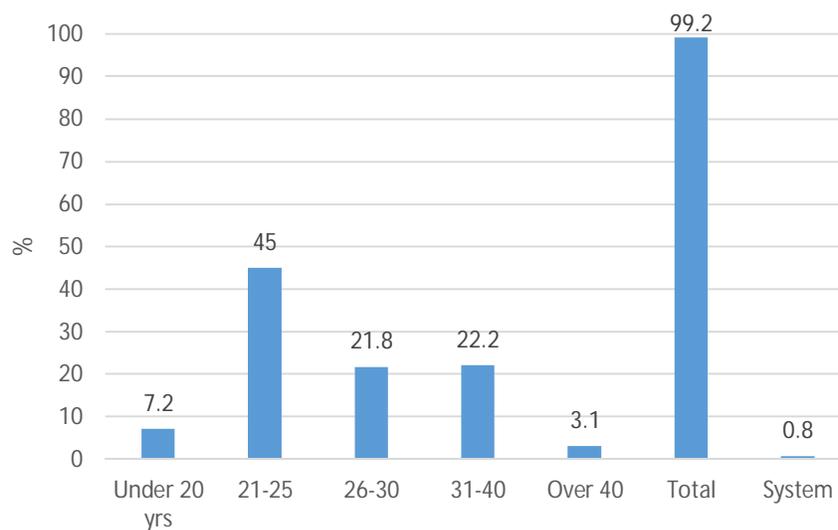


Figure 2. Age groups.

As shown in Figure 2, the majority (45%) of respondents were in the age group between 21-25 years, followed by the age group between 31-40 years.

Regions (*Please state the region where you were registered for examination*)

Table 3. Regions.

Regions	Frequency	Valid Percent
Erongo	38	7.8
Hardap	10	2.1
Karas	22	4.5
Kavango	21	4.3
Khomas	159	32.6
Kunene	24	4.9
Ohangwena	17	3.5

Table 3. Continues.

Omaheke	30	6.2
Omusati	27	5.5
Oshana	54	11.1
Oshikoto	23	4.7
Otjozondjupa	45	9.2
Zambezi	17	3.5
Total	487	100.0

As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents came from Khomas (32.6%), followed by Oshana (11.1%). The least came from Hardap (2.1%), followed by Zambezi and Ohangwena (3.5%).

Subject enrolments (Grades 10 and 12)

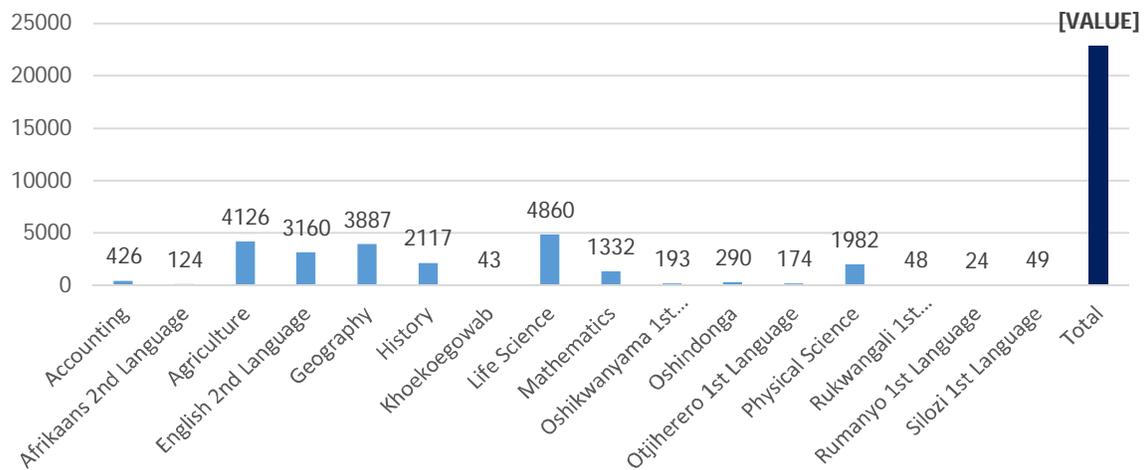


Figure 3. JSC (Grade 10) subject enrolment – 2016.

As shown in Figure 3, the subject with the highest enrolment was Life Science, followed by Agriculture.

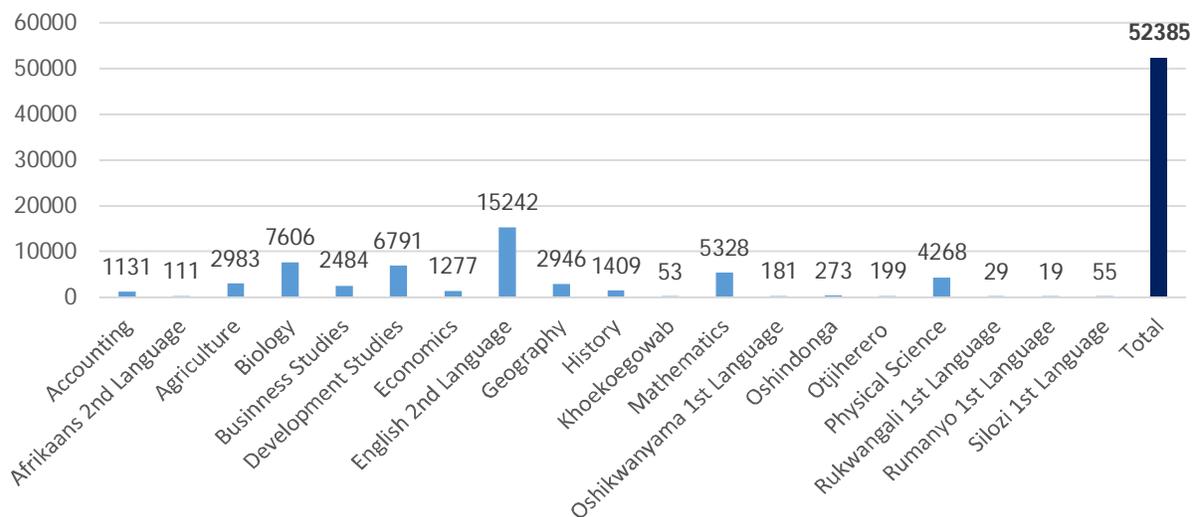


Figure 4. NSSCO (Grade 12) subject enrolment – 2016.

As shown in Figure 4, the subject with the highest enrolment was English, followed by Biology.

The total subject enrolment for Grade 10 for 2016 was 22,835 and for Grade 12, it was 52,385.

Subject dropout rate (each subject) for both Grade 10 and 12

Not sit for examination – Grade 10

Table 4. Not sit for examination – Grade 10.

Not sit for examination – Grade 10	Frequency	Valid percent
Accounting	22	3.2
Afrikaans	7	1.0
Agriculture	67	9.7
Business Management	1	.1
English	70	10.1
Entrepreneurship	53	7.7
Geography	60	8.7
History	18	2.6
Khoekhoegowab	3	.4
Life Science	66	9.6
Mathematics	47	6.7
Oshikwanyama	6	.9
Oshindonga	10	1.4
Otjiherero	4	.5
Physical Science	48	6.9
Total	691	100.0

As shown in Table 4, the subject with the highest dropout was English (10.1%), followed by Agriculture (9.7%) and Life Science (9.6%). The subjects with the least dropouts were Business Management (.1%), Khoekhoegowab (.4%), and Otjiherero (.5%).

Not sit for examination – Grade 12

Table 5. Not sit for examination – Grade 12.

Not sit for examination – Grade 12	Frequency	Valid Percent
Accounting	11	1.4
Afrikaans	5	.7
Agriculture	37	4.8
Biology	53	6.9
Business Studies	31	4.0
Development Studies	60	7.8
Economics	30	3.9
English Oral	6	.8
English	87	11.3
Geography	21	2.8
History	15	2.0
Khoekhoegowab	2	.3
Kwanyama	1	.1
Mathematics	47	6.2
Oshikwanyama	3	.4

Table 5. Continues.

Oshindonga	5	.7
Otjiherero	11	1.4
Physical Science	30	3.9
Rukwangali	1	.1
Silozi	1	.1
Total	763	100.0

As shown in Table 5, the subject with the highest dropout was English (11.3%) followed by Development studies (7.8%) and Biology (6.9%). The subjects with the least dropouts were Kwanyama, Rukwangali and Silozi (.1%).

Grade 10 and 12 combined

Not sit for examination combined – Grade 10 and 12

Table 6. Not sit for examination combined – Grade 10 and 12.

Not sit for examination – Grade 10 and 12	Frequency	Valid Percent
Accounting	33	2.3
Afrikaans	12	.8
Agriculture	104	7.1
Biology	53	3.6
Business Management	1	.1
Business Studies	31	2.1
Development Studies	60	4.2
Economics	30	2.1
English	157	11.3
English Oral	6	.4
Entrepreneurship	53	3.6
Geography	82	5.6
Herero	2	.1
History	33	2.3
Khoekhoegowab	5	.3
Kwanyama	1	.1
Life Science	66	4.5
Mathematics	94	6.5
Oshikwanyama	9	.6
Oshindonga	15	1.0
Otjiherero	13	.9
Physical Science	78	5.4
Rukwangali	1	.1
Silozi	1	.1
Total	1457	100.0

As shown in Table 6, the subject with the highest dropout rate was English (11.3%), followed by Agriculture (7.1%) and Mathematics (6.5%). The subjects with the least dropouts were Business Management (.1%), Otjiherero, Kwanyama, Rukwangali and Silozi (.1%).

Space of study (*What space/place did you use to study, e.g. library, NAMCOL facilities/space, certain schools' classrooms*)

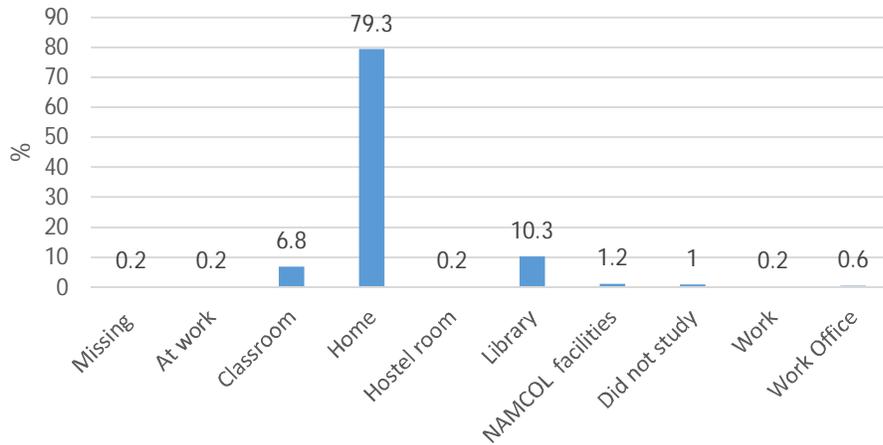


Figure 5. Space of study.

As shown in Figure 5, the majority (79.3%) of respondents studied at home, followed by library (10.3%).

Room occupation (*If at home, did you have your own room?*)

Table 7. Room occupation.

Room occupation	Frequency	Valid percent
No	102	20.9
Yes	288	59.1
Total	487	100.0

As shown in Table 7, the majority (59.1%) of respondents did have their own room.

Family wealth status (*How well off do you think your family was, while enrolled with NAMCOL?*)

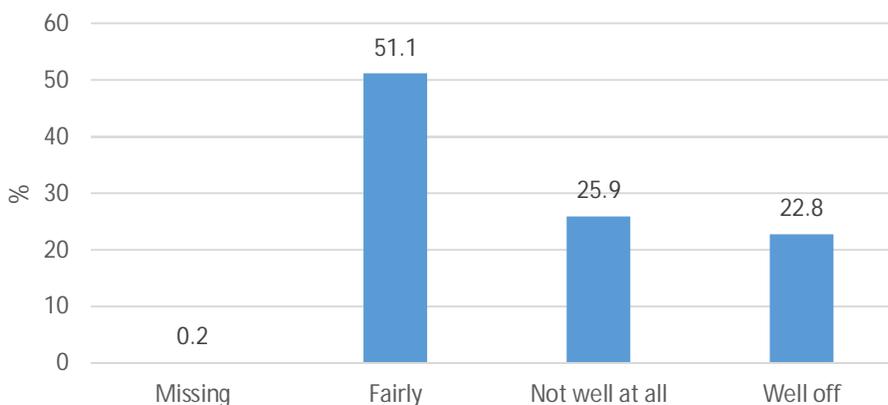


Figure 6. Family wealth status.

As shown in Figure 6, the majority (51.1%) stated that their family were 'fairly well off'.

Emotional support (*Did you get any emotional support, e.g. motivation, encouragement from this/these family member(s) you stayed with?*)

Table 8. Emotional support.

Emotional support offered	Frequency	Valid percent
	3	.6
No	200	41.1
Yes	284	58.3
Total	487	100.0

As shown in Table 8, the majority (58.3%) did get emotional support from family members.

Monitoring of studies (*Did someone who live with you monitor and regulate your studies?*)

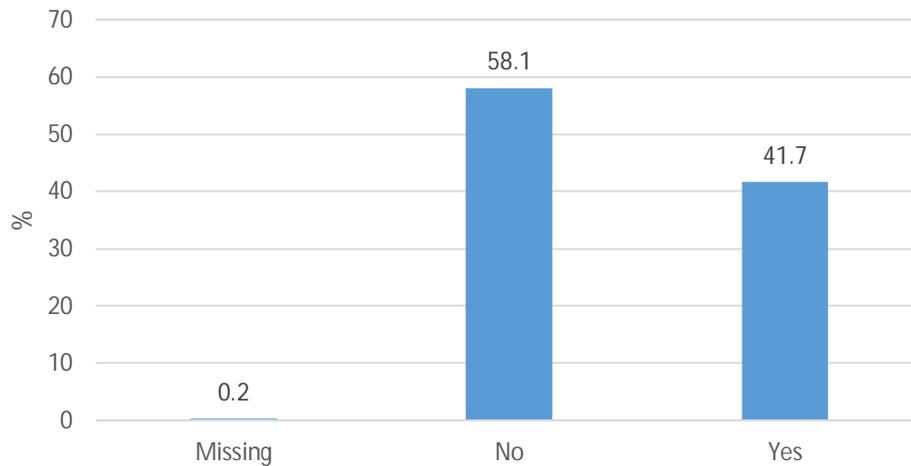


Figure 7. Monitoring of activities.

As shown in Figure 7, the majority (58.1%) of respondents were not monitored while studying.

Helpfulness of NAMCOL study materials (*Were the study materials you received from NAMCOL helpful to let you pass the subjects of your choice?*)

Table 9. Helpfulness of NAMCOL study materials.

Helpfulness of NAMCOL study materials	Frequency	Valid percent
	1	.2
No	55	11.3
Yes	431	88.5
Total	487	100.0

As shown in Table 9, the majority (88.5%) of respondents stated that NAMCOL study materials were useful.

Support by LSS and Regional offices (*How do you rate the support given by NAMCOL's Learner Support Services/Regional Offices in the subject you took?*)

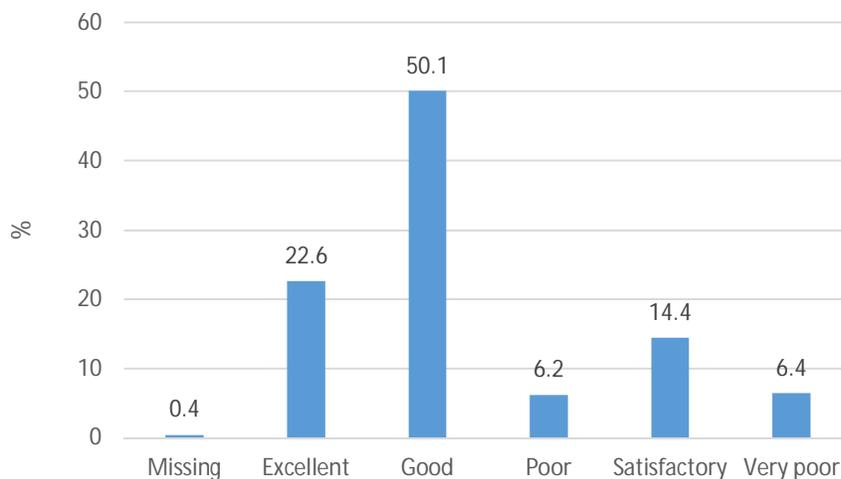


Figure 8. Support by Learners Support Services and Regional officers.

As shown in Figure 8, the majority (50.1%) of respondents stated that the support from the Learner Support Units and Regions were good.

Reasons for dropping out (*Please describe your main reason(s) for dropping out of the subject(s) you enrolled for at NAMCOL in the period under review.*)

Table 10. Reasons for dropping out.

Reasons for dropping out	Frequency	Valid percent
Assignment related	2	.4
Bereavement/Other family problems	13	2.7
Enrolled at another institution	39	8.0
Financial issues	55	11.3
Job commitments	112	23.0
Job relocation	29	6.0
Lack of time	8	1.6
Loss of interest	4	.8
Not well prepared	19	3.9
Others	64	13.1
Out of the country/town	39	8.0
Personal problems	6	1.2
Pregnancies/maternity	37	7.6
Sickness	52	10.7
Strike	8	1.6
Total	487	100.0

Table 10 depicts that most students (23%) drop out because of job commitments.

'Lack of time' includes the following: Busy at work, other commitments, family commitments, and not prepared for the examination.

'Job commitments' include the following: Not able to get study leave/not allowed by their employer to go and write examinations, was out of town with work during the time of the examination, not able to study due to job commitment, did field work during the time of the examination, and went for training with work during the period of the examination.

'Others' include the following: Missed venues, did not go for examination verification and as a result did not get the timetable, missed dates for oral and examination registration, lack of motivation by NAMCOL, not collecting their admission permit, missing names on the systems, not allowed to write examination, 'Was told that if she did not attend classes she is not allowed to write the exam', did not get admission permit, name was incorrectly spelled, did not get timetable, 'Because the canter was full and I did not get a chance to do oral', failed mock exam and gave up, "Did not complete assignments and was told that I cannot write exam", lost admission permits, was discouraged because they failed mock exams, and assignments.

RESULTS - TUTORS AND HOCs

One of the requirements for the Dropout Study was for tutors and HOCs to give their views and recommendations as to why learners drop out. The questionnaire was administered to the tutors and Head of Centres in NAMCOL Regions. The questionnaire focused on what factors they think contribute to learners dropping out of their subjects and the following transpired:

- Relocation - due to learners finding jobs elsewhere.
- Learners travel long distances to centres and most of the lessons are taught after 13h00, which make it difficult to travel back home so late, as it is not safe to walk alone. Transportation as well as transportation fees are also obstacles.
- Learners are not motivated to take their studies seriously.
- Some learners drop out because they find employment and then opt for money instead of finishing school. Examples of the types of jobs they find include babysitters, local shops (Cuca shops) and housekeeping. In certain cases, the employers do not want to release these learners to write their exams.
- Learners do not have the financial means to travel to the centres to register for the examination.
- Ladies fall pregnant and thus, drop out.
- Some learners prefer to go to private institutions offering classes every day.
- Learners lack information regarding the examination dates. Some learners do not collect their timetable at all so they end up with no information regarding the exam dates.
- Learners feel that subjects are not well taught because the time for tutoring is too short.
- Lack of competency in English, hence learners drop out because they do not understand the content of the subject being taught.
- Insufficient preparation for exams that may be a result of mixing social life and/or employment with their studies.
- Lack of parental involvement in their children's education.
- Learners are not exposed to career guidance, which builds their esteem towards setting concrete life goals.
- A sense of belief that non-attendance does not have consequences as compared to formal schooling.
- Some learners do not register for the end of the year examinations and are, therefore, not able to sit for the exam.

- Some learners collect their exam permits too late, thus they end up not writing their exam because the exam date has passed and/or no correction can be made with regard to registered subjects.
- Few contact sessions per week; three hours per week is insufficient.
- Peer pressure – they no longer attend lessons as they are involved in relationships, alcohol abuse and want more freedom.
- Lack of prior knowledge in subjects makes it difficult for learners, especially those who are working, to cope. When learners realise that they do not understand or experience difficulty in the subject content, they drop out.
- Learners enrol because they are forced by parents.
- Some learners fear to write exams.

Tutors and Head of Centres further had to highlight what they think, could be done by NAMCOL, to reduce these dropouts and this is what they had to say:

- Introduce more centres to accommodate learners living far from existing centres.
- Encourage learners and educate and motivate them on the importance of education.
- NAMCOL should introduce full-time tutors so that lessons begin as early as possible.
- Pay a competitive salary to tutors to motivate them to give their best at tutoring.
- Motivational talks from regional offices to encourage learners to take their studies seriously.
- Classes should start in the morning to allow for longer teaching hours.
- Workshops held should emphasise on the importance of registering with NAMCOL, writing your exam and its benefits in future.
- Another way of communication (such as SMS) via cell phones regarding the day and time for exams in different subjects should be considered so that learners do not miss the exams due to lack of information.
- HOCs and examination heads must always encourage learners to collect their timetable on time, and tutors should keep on reminding their learners about the exam date for their subjects through various communication channels.
- Heads of examination should trace the learners who did not collect their timetable.
- Tutors should avoid being absent and in the process discourage learners.
- Encourage parents to take up full responsibility to

motivate and support their children with their studies.

- Develop a form that each student has to sign upon registration to agree that they will comply with all the requirements of the subject they enrolled for.
- Extend examination registrations and make it compulsory.
- Encourage learners to register for subjects they did already at school in order for them to be able to catch up quickly because it will be a revision to them.
- Advertise examination registration dates and times in the newspapers and radio stations in order to ensure learners have the information.
- Examination centres should be flexible. Allow learners to write exams at any centre as long as they have registered for the examination.
- Learners taking certain subjects like Accounting, for the first time, should not be allowed to register as prior knowledge of such subjects is needed in order to make it easier for the learner to pass the subject.
- No fee should be attached to examination registrations.
- Encourage learners to set goals for themselves in order for them to be motivated.
- Remind learners on a constant basis about correcting their details and collecting their examination permits, using different media platforms.
- Increase incentives for tutors in order to motivate them to always give their best.
- Parents should encourage learners regularly in order to find out if their children are attending classes.
- Social workers should educate female learners about family planning.
- Involve traditional leaders/councillors to regularly have meetings with learners.
- Payment of exam fees and registration period for enrolment to be done simultaneously.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, several tendencies affecting dropout rates were identified. Conflict with employers and family commitments were found to be the main factors leading to learners dropping out. The reasons given by the HOCs and tutors for dropping out were not very different from those typically given by the learners themselves. The main factor associated with dropping out seemed to be work, since the vast majority of students have jobs and, therefore, claimed "lack of time" as an obstacle to finish their studies. In addition, many students have to travel long distances to hand in their assignments, attend classes and sit for examination.

From the responses it is evident that reproductive health should be given to learners to prevent pregnancies and also to encourage those that fell pregnant to continue with their studies. Employers play a vital role in contributing to the success of learners as they should be encouraged to allow learners to go and write

examinations. NAMCOL should aim at providing clear, persistent and continuous information regarding the examination dates, collecting timetables, and venues in order to avoid confusion with the learners. The College should be flexible in its operations to provide the students, who faced unforeseen situations, with a way to continue in the programme. Learners should be exposed to career guidance as a way to motivate them and constructive ways should be created to involve the learners in learning, and encourage instructors to attend classes and interact with the students.

The employment of counsellors is also recommended, e.g. to assist students in integrating study demands with work and family responsibilities, provide intense pre-entry counselling and social obligations, and also to provide guidance in time management. Minimise the turning away of learners on the basis of not having receipts for admission – copies should be kept at the examination centres for those that lost theirs; be flexible and allow learners to sit for examination at any open centres (some of the relocated learners find it difficult to go back and sit for examination where they initially registered).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Introduce more centres to accommodate learners living far from existing centres.
- Encourage learners, motivate and educate them on the importance of education.
- NAMCOL should introduce full time tutors so that lessons begin as early as possible.
- Pay a competitive salary to tutors to motivate them to give their best at tutoring.
- Motivational talks from regional offices to encourage learners to take their studies seriously.
- Workshops held should emphasise on the importance of registering with NAMCOL, writing your exam and its benefits in future.
- Another way of communication (such as SMS) via cell phones regarding the day and time for exams in different subjects should be considered so that learners do not miss exams due to lack of information.
- HOCs and examination heads must always encourage learners to collect their timetable on time, and tutors should keep on reminding their learners about the exam date for their subjects.
- Heads of examination should trace the learners who did not collect their timetable.
- Tutors should avoid being absent and in the process discourage learners.
- Encourage parents to take up full responsibility to motivate and support their children with their studies.
- Develop a form that each student has to sign upon registration to agree that they will comply with all the requirements of the subject they enrolled for.
- Extend examination registrations and make it

compulsory.

- Encourage learners to register for subjects they did already at school in order for them to be able to catch up quickly because it will be a revision to them. Avoid registering learners who are not familiar with the said subject. Learners taking certain subjects like Accounting, for the first time, should not be allowed to register as prior knowledge of such subjects is needed in order to make it easier for the learner to pass the subject.
- Advertise examination registration dates and times in the newspapers and radio stations in order to ensure learners have the information.
- Examination centres should be flexible. Allow learners to write exams at any centre as long as they have registered for the examination.
- Examination registrations should be free.
- Encourage learners to set goals for themselves in order for them to be motivated.
- Remind learners on a constant basis about correcting their details and collecting their examination permits, using different media platforms.
- Increase incentives for tutors in order to motivate them to always give their best.
- Parents should encourage learners regularly in order to find out if their children are attending classes.
- Social workers should educate female learners about family planning to reduce the pregnancy rate.
- Payment of exam fees and registration period for enrolment to be done simultaneously.
- Tutors and HOCs should monitor the submission of learners' assignments and follow up on those who did not hand in their assignments. It was found that learners dropped out because they did not complete their assignments and tend to give up easily.
- NAMCOL should seek ways to ease/reduce the examination fees or exempt learners from paying.
- Decentralise centres for the learners not to worry about transport fees.
- Staff members should refrain from miss-informing learners, e.g. 'if one does not attend classes than one will be allowed to write the exam', 'If you fail the mock examination you won't be allowed to write examination'.
- Encourage those who failed the mock examination, and failed to hand in all assignments, to continue and to sit for examination.

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