

Perceptions of Chinhoyi University of Technology's staff and students regarding the Communication Skills course (Shadreck Nembaware, Chinhoyi University of Technology)

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Abstract

This study explores the myriad of perceptions, perspectives, attitudes, approaches and conceptions about the module Communication Skills (CUACE101) which is a campus-wide compulsory course taught to all Chinhoyi University of Technology first year first semester (1.1) students. The motivating factor for this study has been an endless debate on the merits of the course to a university curriculum whose niche and mandate is predominantly technology-oriented, hence the need to establish the rationale for a communication course appropriately packaged to yield not only a fully qualified graduate but also a wholesome citizen whose harmonious combination of well-accentuated faculties fits them for an indelible impress on a career terrain tilted in the direction of twenty-first century global imperatives. The research thus motivates for a perceptive shift from a fragmented and compartmentalized view of a university graduate, embracing rather the merits of higher education's systemic vision driven by a synthesis of multi-disciplinary curriculum design dynamics. Inspired by the Reconstructionist philosophy, this qualitative exploratory study yields a taxonomy of themes and trends by respondents from various disciplines at Chinhoyi University of Technology, necessitating a broad-based and holistic approach to university curriculum programming. The global currents have triggered a paradigm shift from the instruction of communication as a course in commonplace literacy fundamentals (reading, speaking and writing skills) to a more nuanced discipline that factors in a host of globalization-compliant dynamics like information literacy skills, critical thinking skills, people skills, cultural literacy, technopreneurial skills, communicative competence and corporate wisdom. The study deploys focus group discussions (for CUACE101 students) and CUT schools deans questionnaires, triangulating qualitative methods to establish key internal stakeholder perceptions on the campus-wide course (Communication Skills). The study's findings map out a blue-print for influencing policy and practice in curriculum design, implementation and review.

Key Words: Curriculum design, university education, twenty-first century skills, information literacy skills, critical thinking.

Introduction

The perpetual array of globalization-related dynamics impinging on the higher education teaching and learning space require a perceptive re-alignment of curricular to suit existential imperatives of the human society. The euphoria of 21st Century Skills speaking to macro and micro curricular in modern universities has not spared the Communication Skills course design, considering that this university-wide service course has to answer to both generic and discipline specific requirements in view of the quality-assurance benchmarks defining competent graduates churned out by our universities. Whilst universities are multi-stakeholder establishments, it is rewarding to begin internally, focusing on the staff and students and how

they perceive the Communication Skills (CUACE 101) module offered as a campus-wide course to all first year first semester students at Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT).

Notably, the roadmap to the Communication Skills course design at CUT has witnessed multiple thoughts, feelings, attitudes and suggestions that are typical of the higher education space. Being taught by humanities and soft-sciences oriented lecturers to university candidates learning under a university of technology with hard sciences core mandate, the course has invariably created scope for a tussle of philosophical notions on what it should constitute and how it should be configured. Consequently, over the last 13 years of CUT's existence, the university's Communication Skills curriculum has evolved into different shades and thrusts, becoming a ridge confluence of multiple stakeholder expectations, yet it is still an autonomous discipline that requires critical reflections on its design, development, review and implementation.

The course has witnessed the inclusion of various dimensions in its teaching purview, including Information Literacy Skills (ILS), critical thinking, reading and writing skills, interview skills, grooming and etiquette as well as the traditional oral, aural and literacy learning benchmarks. This research, therefore, endeavours to unpack these various considerations, opening up parameters of engagement with the course's key internal stakeholders at CUT, in a bid to shape the course content and form-wise to enhance its compatibility and compliance with 21st century quality assurance yardsticks for higher education. The findings of the research will, therefore, speak to policy and praxis.

Background to the study

Traditionally, Zimbabwe's universities, including Chinhoyi University of Technology, Midlands State University and University of Zimbabwe, have always had Communication Skills as one of the basic entry-level modules that build a base for university candidates, becoming a pre-requisite for further courses in subsequent semesters. However, the design and instruction of the Communication Skills curriculum was traditionally limited to bare literacy basics that taught students reading, listening and writing skills. However, industry and commerce have continually placed macro-curriculum imperatives on university course offerings, necessitating a revision of tuition to suit employer expectations, citizenship responsibilities and social compliance dynamics. As such, Communication Skills in Zimbabwe's universities has become a confluence of multiple stakeholder expectations. For example, Chinhoyi University of Technology places tremendous predilection on critical thinking, Great Zimbabwe University places disproportionate weight on national heritage studies, whilst National University of Science and Technology directs focus at information literacy skills. These differences in thrusts which foreground institution-specific inclinations in Communication Skills curriculum design create scope for informed inquiry into perceptive re-alignment of the course with the view to yield a functional taxonomy of generic and discipline-specific requirements.

A fundamental consideration to factor into the discourse at hand is that Communication Skills is a two-pronged course that equips university candidates with the skills to navigate across the academic terrain, whilst at the same time accentuating employability skills with the view to fare competitively in the post-university phase of working life. Such a course naturally brings with it a vogue of dynamics that synergize to make a composite whole. This study is thus inspired by the endeavour to unpack the various constituent parts of this unique course through an audit of its design in both classical and contemporary Zimbabwean university dispensations.

Quite notably, globalization has been a key variable in defining the direction, thrust, content and ethos of university curricular. The advent of information technology solutions to academia has opened a vogue of interactions with the international space, creating room for a cross-fertilization of ideas across the disciplinary, geographical and institutional divide. Access to an array of online resources and the popularisation of e-learning platforms in Zimbabwe has necessitated skills transfer and capacity development with the view to unlock value from the merits of the worldwide web. As such, Communication Skills training in universities has had to respond to these imperatives, alongside a host of other techno-driven teaching and learning dynamics.

University instructors in the discipline of Communication Skills have also had to grapple with the challenge where each discipline places so much weight on the discipline-specific requirements they have for the

Communication Skills curriculum, invariably ignoring the requisite balance struck by curriculum designers in catering for various sets of needs-based considerations. Resultantly, the university red brick walls have turned into battlefronts for tussles between key players in various disciplines as toxic energies are expended in the battle for disciplinary supremacy.

The study at hand has endeavoured to explore this simmering vortex of divergent views by gaining insights into stakeholders perceptions, feelings, attitudes, receptiveness and expectations when it comes to the conceptualisation, design, development, implementation and review of the Communication Skills course at Chinhoyi University of Technology. Noticeably, the findings of this qualitative research will speak to dynamics obtaining in the local institution, though there is scope to extend key research considerations to the broader higher education context within which Zimbabwean universities are operating. As such, there is bound to be closer considerations of how mandate, policy, niche area and philosophical leanings will determine how institutional stakeholders perceive key aspects within curriculum design as the course content and delivery dynamics address institutional peculiarities.

Paradigmatic perspective

In terms of theory, this research deploys ‘Reconstructionism’ as the philosophical lenses guiding the study’s key discourses. As a theory that emerged from the social sciences and got perceptively adapted into the realm of education, ‘Social reconstructionism’ is a philosophy that emphasizes the addressing of social questions and a quest to create a better society and worldwide democracy. Reconstructionist educators focus on a curriculum that highlights social reform as the aim of education. Theodore Brameld (1904-1987) was the founder of social reconstructionism, in reaction against the realities of World War II. He recognized the potential for either human annihilation through technology and human cruelty or the capacity to create a beneficent society using technology and human compassion.

George Counts (1889-1974) recognized that education was the means of preparing people for creating this new social order. For reconstructionists, curriculum focuses on student experience and taking social action on real problems, such as violence, hunger, international terrorism, inflation, and inequality. Strategies for dealing with controversial issues, enquiry, dialogue, and multiple perspectives are the focus. Community-based learning and bringing the world into the classroom are also key strategies. Breithorpe & Swinarski (1999) note that the value of education is measured in terms of its contribution to the attainment of social good. This explains why for Pestalozzi (1894), for Montessori (1936), for Dewey, for Freire, for Brameld (1956), education united the head, the heart and the hand. Learning without changing or doing is not learning. Nor can an individual learn something new without its affecting his or her actions in the world.

Reconstructionists believe that systems must be changed in the pursuit of a better social order. Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian whose experiences of living in poverty led him to champion education and literacy as the vehicle for social change. In his view, humans must learn to resist oppression and not become its victims, nor oppress others. To do so requires dialogue and critical consciousness, the development of awareness to overcome domination and oppression. This is the backdrop against which the study at hand endeavours to explore the needs and sensibilities of staff and students at CUT, and how these impact on the thoughts, reflections and ideas they bring to bear upon Communication Skills as a course at Chinhoyi University of Technology. The study is thus guided by the reconstructionist drive to disturb the existing situation in order to enhance the necessary re-alignment and utilitarian re-adjustment in the design and delivery of the Communication Skills module at CUT.

Problem Statement

The Communication Skills module has invariably become a canvas of disjointed concepts, with the lack of congruence in stakeholder expectations resulting in unplanned and unstructured material coverage which confuses the candidate. Discipline-specific considerations ought to be guided by a central philosophy that makes out synergies and functional connections between different programme offerings. The service course ought to demonstrate its relevance in the wake of divergent expectations, yet still retaining its universal applicability to academia, corporate circles and the society at large.

Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following main and specific objectives:

Main Research Objective

The study sought to assess internal stakeholders' (staff and students) perceptions towards the design and delivery of the Communication Skills curriculum.

Specific Research Objectives

The study specifically sought to:

- Establish perceptions of CUT students and staff regarding the design and delivery of the Communication Skills course
- Make out the discipline-specific expectations of various schools on the content and form of the CUT Communication Skills course.
- Find out the roadmap to a balanced CUT Communication Skills course which caters for both generic imperatives and discipline-specific expectations in light of the multi-stakeholder nature of the campus-wide course.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following main and specific questions:

Main Research Question

The study sought to answer the question: What are the internal stakeholders' (staff and students) perceptions regarding the Communication Skills course at Chinhoyi University of Technology?

Specific Research Questions

The study specifically sought to answer the questions:

- What are the perceptions of key internal stakeholders (staff and students) regarding Chinhoyi University of Technology's Communication Skills course
- What factors determine the expectations of each discipline regarding the nature, content, design of the Communication Skills course at Chinhoyi University of Technology?
- How best can the Communication Skills course at Chinhoyi University of Technology be aligned to cater for multiple stakeholder expectations?

Delimitations of the Study

The study was confined within the margins of exploring just two groups of internal stakeholders of the Communication Skills course at Chinhoyi University of Technology. Whilst the study was undertaken with the full awareness of the various levels at which stakeholders' expectations feed into the design of the course, the study limits itself to exploring just two categories of internal stakeholders who are the staff and students at Chinhoyi University of Technology. The endeavour is to establish the convergence and divergence of the perceptions by sub-groups within the two broad categories of internal stakeholders under focus.

Literature Review

A review of the literature is a summary and synthesis of relevant literature on a research problem. It is a coherent, integrated, narrative, interpretative criticism that critiques the status of knowledge of a carefully defined topic of the selected relevant existing literature (Notar and Cole, 2010). Literature review helps the current study in making a strong case for its research objectives and research questions. According to Fink

(2009), the process of literature review involves reading of related material, analysing, making scholarly evaluations, and constructing scholarly summarisations about a specific research topic.

Quite significantly, a review also points out research strategies and specific procedures and measuring instruments that are productive in investigating one's topic (Torraco, 2005). This brief review of literature will direct focus at a few thematic variables that include a systems approach to curriculum design in Communication Skills, theories of curriculum design, twenty-first century skills as well as the shift in scope from the traditional to the contemporary approaches in the design and delivery of content. Key macro and micro curriculum variables are thus at the centre of the studies by scholarship in and around the subject under consideration and focus is largely directed at the strategies for synthesizing and optimizing key components shaping an ideal Communication Skills curriculum.

Systems approach to Communication Skills instructional design

In light of this research's exploratory study of the varied key internal stakeholders' perspectives on Communication Skills as a course, it is paramount to note the trends taken by contemporary scholarship in the configuration of a globalization-compliant curriculum. The instructional process, or teaching, has traditionally involved instructors, learners, and textbooks. The content to be learned was contained in the text, and it was the instructor's responsibility to "teach" that content to the learners. Teaching could be interpreted as getting content from the text into the heads of learners in such a way that they could retrieve the information for a test. With this model, the way to improve instruction is to improve the instructor, that is, to require the instructor to acquire more knowledge and to learn more methods for conveying it to learners.

However, the contemporary approach to learning has ushered in a new paradigm that views instruction as a systematic process in which every component (teacher, learners, materials and learning environment – including macro and micro factors affecting instruction) is collectively paramount to meaningful and fruitful learning (Dick, Carey and Carey, 2000). This perspective, usually referred to as the 'systems point of view,' has seen advocates adopting a systems approach to instructional design. In considering different disciplines' multiple perspectives on Communication Skills as a course, it is crucial to bear in mind contemporary imperatives and their conception of various parts of a system and their interrelatedness. The parts of a system, in their strategic differences which converge at shared goals, depend on each other at both input and output levels, with the entire system using feedback to determine whether its desired goal has been reached. This is the model against which the design and review of the Communication Skills curriculum at Chinhoyi University of Technology is configured.

Communication Skills and quality assurance imperatives

It is rewarding to review studies on Communication Skills in higher education in light of how the module speaks to institutional and broader quality benchmarks. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Quality Assurance is the systematic review of educational programmes to ensure that acceptable standards of education, scholarship and infrastructure are being maintained (<http://www.unesco.org/new/org/edu>). Quality Assurance can only be effective when all stakeholders understand and embrace its challenges and benefits. Mutambwa, Takavarasha and Kahari (2014) contend that one of the challenges stakeholders face in the Zimbabwean educational system is a clear understanding of the role and importance of communication skills as part of acceptable standards of education and scholarship. It is essential to note that Communication Skills as a module encompasses a whole canvas of critical components that can never be ignored in the formulation and conceptualization of any university's quality assurance policies and benchmarks.

It is paramount to understand the role of Communication Skills within the context of Quality assurance as envisaged in the Zimbabwe Council For Higher Education Act [Chapter 25:08], published in the Government Gazette: 28th April, 2006 with the date of commencement of this Act fixed as 1st October 2006. Chinhoyi University (2012) defines 'quality' as 'fitness-for-purpose.' In the same vein, Marginson (1997) observes that many countries are debating whether their tertiary education systems are indeed fit for

use, in the sense of providing the education and training that students and society need. Scholarship converges on the argument that Communication Skills, being part of quality assurance in education, is a 'fit-for-purpose' course that provides the training needed by students and society to navigate real life dynamics and existential challenges. Noticeably, no academic or professional system can function without effective communication.

Twenty-first century skills

It would be a gross fallacy to conceive of the Communication Skills module in the contemporary dispensation outside the broader framework of what scholarship has come to characterise as a matrix of twenty-first century skills. Emerging as the leading advocacy organization championing the infusion of twenty-first century skills into education, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2008) advocates the creation of an aligned, 21st century public education system that prepares students, workers and citizens to triumph in the global skills race as being the central economic competitiveness issue for the next decade.

The underlying philosophy, cognizant of technological determinism and the vortex of global currents enveloping the international community, is that in an economy driven by innovation and knowledge, in marketplaces engaged in intense competition and constant renewal, in a world of tremendous opportunities and risks, in a society facing complex business, political, scientific, technological, health and environmental challenges, and in diverse workplaces and communities that hinge on collaborative relationships and social networking - the ingenuity, agility and skills of the members of society are paramount to the competitiveness of graduates churned out by any world-class institution of higher learning.

In this regard, it is interesting to draw examples from the American educational system, where changes driven by globalization and its related competences have spoken to the paradigm shift in educational realignment. In the case of USA, the Skills Commission report argued that, for the U.S. to maintain its global competitiveness, it will not be enough for America to ensure students are merely competent in traditional school subjects. Other countries will still have workers who excel in those subjects and who are willing to work for lower wages. According to the Commission, Americans will have to offer something else: "The reason—and the only reason—that the rest of the world would be willing to pay us twice as much as equally competent people is if we add creativity and innovation on a grand scale to sheer competence," not just among elite managers but for virtually everyone in the labor force (National Centre on Education and the Economy, 2007: 28).

Historical factors

University education in Zimbabwe started as early as 1957 when the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland was established. The royal charter to establish a university had been granted in 1955 with the University of London. The school of medicine was established through an arrangement with the University of Birmingham. In 1965, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland came to an end with the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI), and with it, the University of Rhodesia came into existence. In 1980, Zimbabwe became independent and the University of Zimbabwe came into existence as the only university in the country (National Archives of Zimbabwe).

In 1991, a second university called NUST (National University of Science and Technology) was established in Bulawayo. With the passage of time, new state-owned universities were opened in all provinces of the country. These universities include: Harare Institute of Technology (HIT), Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT), Bindura University of Science Education, Lupane State University, Midlands State University (MSU), and Great Zimbabwe University (GZU). There are also a number of private and church-owned universities in Zimbabwe such as Women University in Africa (WUA), Africa University (AU), Zimbabwe Ezekiel Guti University (ZEGU), Catholic University in Zimbabwe (CUZ) and Solusi University among others. It's the government's policy to have at least one state-owned university in each of the country's ten provinces (Chetsanga, 1995, Mapako *et al.*, 2012).

It is paramount to note that with the massification of education also came the challenges of mass production of graduates released on an economy hamstrung by austerity measures to the extent of failing to absorb the influx of human capital released by these various universities. The myriad of economic turnaround blueprints has subsequently seen the government trying to streamline and mainstream curricular in the various institutions of higher learning in order to make each university answer to mandate-specific course offerings in line with socio-economic benchmarks dictated by the broader geo-political dynamics. In the exploration of key mandate variables defining each university's curriculum design model, it is important to analyse how these macro level factors speak to the Communication Skills curriculum design at Chinhoyi University of Technology.

Purpose of University education in Zimbabwe

University education in Zimbabwe was meant to achieve economic, social, political and technological objectives. When Zimbabwe got independent in 1980, there was only one university in the country – the University of Zimbabwe. Before independence, university education was elitist – only the chosen few were allowed to proceed to university. Therefore the first objective of university education in independent Zimbabwe was to ensure accessibility to higher education by all (Mapako *et al.*, 2012). The purpose of universities in Zimbabwe is derived from different *Acts of Parliament* set up to establish each. This therefore means that different universities have different purposes in Zimbabwe. For example, some of CUT's objectives are as follows:

- “The advancement of knowledge;
- The development and practice of design and technology
- The teaching and application of sciences, art and design;
- The preservation, dissemination and enhancement of knowledge and skills relevant to the development of the people of Zimbabwe;
- The nurturing of entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity on the part of all the members of the University; and
- The creation of opportunities for income generation through consultancy work, training and other similar activities, with the ultimate aim of making the University a self-sustaining entity” (CUT, 2015:3).

In general, society expects that degree-granting institutions will ensure that college students develop discipline-specific competence as well as generic skills (e.g., communication, written, oral, tolerance, compassion) and dispositions (e.g., attitudes, beliefs, curiosity) at the completion of a bachelor's degree. Current research suggests that undergraduate education is not just about discipline specific knowledge or cognitive skills; instead, dispositions and cognitive skills that enable graduates to be effective citizens are also valued outcomes for students completing a bachelor's degree in the 21st century (Chan, Brown & Ludlow, 2014:2).

Research Methodology

This research is an exploratory descriptive qualitative study which is conducted to explore and describe the perceptions of staff and students at Chinhoyi University of Technology towards the Communication Skills course. Quite typically, the subjectivities of a qualitative study are manifest in the biases that a researcher carries in the process of undertaking a research study. In this regard, the researcher is one of the lecturers for Communication Skills, hence the researcher's interests, priorities and biases have to be bracketed out in order that they may not influence the research findings.

In this research, questionnaires are distributed to the Deans of all the 6 schools at Chinhoyi University of Technology. The thrust of the questions to be addressed is basically on their own thoughts, perspectives and suggestions towards the course, factoring their generic and discipline specific expectations.

Also, the researcher conducts a focus group discussion with first year, first semester students of Communication skills, endeavouring to find out their own perspectives, those of their peers, those of their respective schools and the general thoughts across the university community regarding Communication

Skills as a course at CUT. The researcher makes an assumption that being new at CUT, the students are bound to be as honest and fair in their responses, and these will come in handy to establish, through a triangulation of findings, the themes, trends, patterns and thought tracks yielded by these research instruments as the roadmap towards perceptively reviewing the course under study.

Participants

Botma *et al.* (2010:52) describes participants as those individuals who have been invited to participate in the study and who have been well informed about it, and are willing to take part and give input to the study. Individuals are selected to participate in qualitative research based on their first-hand experience with a culture, social process, or phenomenon of interest (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007:29).

The participants' active involvement in the inquiry is according to Speziale & Carpenter (2007:29) to help those who are interested in their experiences or cultures to better understand their lives and social interactions. In the case of the study at hand, the selected staff and students at Chinhoyi University of Technology constitute the key internal stakeholders whose perspectives, perceptions, opinions and reflections about Communication Skills as a module, hence their responses as participants will yield patterns and trends that should inform practice at the levels of curriculum design, policy and instructional models.

A non-probability purposive sampling technique will be used to select participants, to take part in a focus group discussion as well as questionnaires to be completed by key informants. There are two groups of participants, namely the 2016 First year first semester students of Communication Skills at Chinhoyi University of Technology (**Focus Group Discussions**) and the Deans of all the 6 schools at Chinhoyi University of Technology (**key informants**). The responses of these categories of participants will be triangulated to yield patterns, trends and themes for analysis by the researcher.

Data Collection

Data collection is defined by Grove *et al* (2013:523) as the process of selecting participants and gathering data from these participants. Speziale and Carpenter (2007:29) state that the terms participants or informants are used by qualitative researchers to illustrate the status those studied play in the research process. After the participants have been selected to take part in the research and they have agreed to participate, they will be contacted by the researcher to prepare them for the actual data gathering exercise (focus group discussion, interview or questionnaires). During data collection, the researcher will play the role of *Observer as participant* s described by Speziale and Carpenter (2007:42) in which the main activity of the researcher is to observe and potentially to interview. The research question will be "what are the perceptions of staff and students regarding the Communication Skills course at Chinhoyi University of Technology?" This might be followed by probing questions to clarify participants' responses.

For the focus group discussions, the 300 students (from two schools – Entrepreneurship and Business Sciences, as well as Hospitality and Tourism) are divided into their usual tutorial groups of about 12-15 participants. Each group elects two students to co-facilitate a discussion based on the following set of questions:

- What were your personal expectations about Communication Skills as a course when you joined CUT?
- Are there any changes now to your perceptions after having started the course?
- What are the perceptions about the course in your school and departments?
- What do your fellow colleagues say about it?
- Is the course proving to be beneficial to your current academic life as well as your future career-path?
- What are its strengths and shortcomings in terms of content and course design?

- What more can be added to the Communication Skills course to help it unlock value in the lives of university candidates?

In the case of key informants (School Deans), the researcher administered questionnaires where the participants were expected to answer questions related to generic and discipline-specific perceptions about Communication Skills as a course at Chinhoyi University of Technology (see appendix).

The purposive sampling technique is considered appropriate for this study as the researcher is familiar with the population from which the sample is selected. The participants are students of Communication Skills as well as School Deans who are policy-makers and contributors to the content and context of curriculum design at senate level. This is in line with Speziale and Carpenter (2007:94)'s view that purposive sampling selects individuals for study participation based on their particular knowledge of a phenomenon for the purpose of sharing that knowledge.

Speziale and Carpenter (2007:29) further state that participants are selected for the purpose of describing an experience in which they have participated. As such, the research yields responses from participants who are key internal stakeholders of instructional design at Chinhoyi University of Technology. The researcher is aware that school deans deliberate on staff and student reviews for each course and in this regard, they occupy a vantage point from which to reflect on shared opinions, thoughts, perceptions and perspectives about each particular course at school level. This creates room for the responses to influence policy and trends in the way modules are designed, packaged and delivered to candidates.

Respondent Characteristics

This study was carried out at Chinhoyi University of Technology, where there is a fair balance of genders. Focus group discussions were conducted, where students of the Communication Skills course (First year first semester) 2016-2017 CUT academic calendar year were the participants in this study. For purposes of neutrality and objectivity, the researcher used the small tutorial groups of this class, ranging between 10-15 in numbers per group, where each group appointed their own discussion facilitator and secretary to list down views in light of the key discussion questions available. The students were thus free to participate and share as much information as they wanted in an atmosphere of free, relaxed, collegial and mutual engagement.

For the key informant questionnaires (CUT school deans), the researcher managed to reach out to the following key respondents:

1. Dean – School of Engineering Sciences and Technology
2. Dean – School of Wildlife, Ecology and Conservation
3. Dean – School of Agricultural Sciences and Technology
4. Dean – School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics
5. Dean – School of Art and Design
6. Dean – School of Hospitality and Tourism
7. Dean – School of Entrepreneurship and Business Sciences
8. Director – Institute of Lifelong Learning and Development Studies
9. Director – Academy of Teaching and Learning

Notably, the Institute of Lifelong Learning and Development Studies currently does not offer any taught programmes where Communication Skills is taught like in all other schools, but it is the Institute that houses the Centre for Language and Communication Studies under which Communication Skills falls. As such The Institute of Lifelong Learning and Development Studies (ILLDS) is a key stakeholder and respondent to the study at hand.

The Academy of Teaching and Learning (ATL) is the one that offers the Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education, for which the current research is a key requirement. As such, the ATL is a key respondent for this study in that it is a key stakeholder in the standardization of instructional design at CUT in tandem with the Directorate of Quality Assurance.

Focus group discussions (CUT First Year First Semester students of Communication Skills)

The researcher invariably walked around the venue for the focus group discussions, The Gym Hall, where various groups were engaged in discussions on the basis of the key questions asked. There was a slide show of the questions beamed for all participants to see, and it guided the deliberations in all the participating groups. Although it was notable that some group members appeared to have been busy with other engagements, taking advantage of time off from their normal lecture schedules, the significant majority was quite actively involved in the deliberations and contributed to the notes they took down as responses for their respective groups.

Profiling of Students' Perceptions of the Communication Skills Course

It was quite notable from the responses by the students participating in the course that there was a significant gap between their initial expectations of the course and what the course actually turned out to be. Thematically similar recurrent participant responses included:

- *Didn't expect to do communication skills since we did it in high school.*
- *It is pointless. I don't expect to gain anything.*
- *It's supposed to be dropped because it unnecessarily increases the load*
- *It is a waste of time.*
- *Wasting time. We did it at A Level and got examined by ZIMSEC.*
- *It is supposed to be done for only one hour not two.*

Notably, the assumption emerging from these responses is that the course is a mere repetition of the same grammar elements covered in the compulsory language course in high school. Another response was:

- *An advantage to those who didn't do Communication Skills at A Level.*

It is quite evident that a good number of the respondents commence the course with a perception that it is all about language, grammar and communication. It is thus significant for curriculum designers of the CUT Communication Skills to be conscious of these assumptions in their packaging of the Communication Skills module in order that they may spell out quite clearly its outcomes, objectives, thrusts and deliverables.

Other notable responses included:

- *What is the purpose of this module?*
- *It is a mere waste of time.*

This set of responses needs qualitative attention as it denotes that students are aware of the need for perceptive prioritization. However, the same students require assistance in order to understand the scope, value, relevance and primacy of Communication Skills as a course which mediates gaps obtaining in whatever their chosen sphere of endeavour (academically and professionally).

The researcher also noted the following pattern of responses:

- *It helps to mould students' behaviour and etiquette.*
- *It's a vital course to any student of any program because one cannot fit in the industry without good communication skills.*
- *It enhances mature thinking*
- *It improves interest and ability to access library (OPAC)*
- *To create awareness in students of those skills of thinking, personal organisation and language use necessary for academic success.*

Quite notable in the cluster of responses above is the positive appreciation by students of the merits of Communication Skills in going beyond the confines of their present academic studies to speak to the dynamics of their social and corporate spheres. Curriculum designers would do well to take note of the students awareness of the need for cogency, erudition and fluency in their articulation of concepts, hence their expectation that the skill is supposed to enhance their communicative competence.

Period-factor shifts in perceptions

There is also a notable shift in the students' perceptions as they begin to warm up to the course as reflected in the following responses:

- *We realise how we need to be communication competent and how we are improving after every lecture*
- *After commencing the module, we realised that it is an aid to other crucial modules like 'Principles of Management.'*
- *It's not all about English but about communication so it's important*
- *Helps to give a know-how on the effective ways of dealing with conflicts associated with communication.*
- *It helps to be critical thinkers*

The researcher makes out a traceable pattern where students gradually debunk initial opinions about the course as they begin to be exposed to other new dimensions once they enrol for the course. It would be essential in the context of instructional design to assist candidates in this fruitful process through deploying methods of delivery that foster discovery, engagement and personally-informed appreciation of the course and its merits.

Discipline-specific considerations

There is an observable difference in the responses by students doing programmes under the School of Entrepreneurship and Business Sciences, and those doing the two programmes on offer under the School of Hospitality and Tourism. From the Business-related programmes, such responses were noted:

- *For Accountants it is not necessary as the only communication needed is with my books*
- *Expected to have modules directly linked to Accountancy*
- *Should not be a module for BSCAC students*
- *Communication seems to dwell much on principles of management so why can't it be put as a sub-heading in principles.*
- *Other lecturers in our school say it's useless and a waste of time*
- *Fellow colleagues say it's useless*

Noticeably, whilst the respondents share their perceptions, it appears that they have also not been immune to the influences of the opinions coming from other lecturers whose ideas impact on the students' approach to the course. Whilst some respondents feel that communication, in the context that they have situated it according to their understanding, is a bit divorced from the basic functions they deal with in Accounting, it is observable that the views from lecturers in other departments, as well as the views from other fellow students, impact quite strongly on the shaping of opinions, perceptions and attitudes that students develop towards the course.

Participants in this survey who are students from the School of Hospitality and Tourism also shared some mixed perceptions. Some of the responses were:

- *More relevant to students of Hospitality and Tourism*
- *It's of benefit*
- *No need to do it again since we did it at A Level*
- *More practicals, less theory*
- *ILS is not really necessary*
- *It helps to identify models of interactive learning.*
- *Identify student habits that promote adjustment to university learning*

The researcher notes that students generally agree that communication is quite central to the Hospitality and Tourism as a profession, presumably because of the shared thought that practitioners in that discipline have to brace for interface and engagement with various publics, clientele and stakeholders. However, it also appears that to some extent the course catches them off guard as they also indicate that they are clueless about its exact expectations.

Responses yielding recommendations

Significantly, quite a couple of responses from students' focus group discussions were indicative of suggestions and recommendations. Such notable responses included the following:

- *We are supposed to do referencing and citing first before other topics*
- *Syllabus should include how to write formal documents*
- *Should have a different lecturer when it's time for tutorials*
- *Expect to be taught on writing CVs, memos, reports and articles*
- *Assessment should be in the form of interviews not examinations*
- *More practicals, less theory*
- *It should encompass key aspects which are relevant to our courses such as report writing*
- *It should factor in field trips and open up platforms for us to interact with colleagues and professionals from other institutions*

It is observable that students shared quite some significant thoughts which should be put into consideration when reviewing and implementing curriculum in Communication skills, especially considering that students are the major internal stakeholders of the course whose input should constitute their needs and sensibilities.

The other curious and observable trend is notable in the following responses:

- *Everyone should just pass (no carry)*
- *Just concentrate since lecturers will make you fail*
- *If we fail it, no one must carry or supplement for it*
- *The lecturer is fun so it's interesting, he makes us laugh*
- *It must not be examined, it just must be a refresher*

Emerging from this pattern of responses is an indication of how lightly the course is taken amongst students, as they have no fuller grasp of its import in the scheme of their respective disciplinary pursuits.

Questionnaire: CUT School Deans

The researcher administered questionnaires to the deans of the various academic schools at CUT, bearing in mind that these offices are custodians of the design and delivery of courses offered to the candidates in their respective constituencies. Another guiding thought was that Deans receive students' assessment feedback instruments, as well as peer assessment for the tuition offered under their schools by the academic members of staff. As such, the dean's desk is the reception for key thoughts, ideas, perspectives, suggestions and recommendations on matters affecting the academic life of the students in their respective school. In the context of the research at hand, the dean is a key respondent in establishing the perceptions around Communication Skills as a course in light of their school's programming dynamics.

The respondents were generally agreed on the importance of communication in mediating key academic and professional processes, noting its paramountcy in the scheme of academic programming. However, a 2 out of the 9 respondents took a hard-line stance in outrightly refuting the importance of the course in light of what they considered as disciplinary peculiarities.

The interface of hard and soft sciences

The researcher noted mixed perceptions amongst the respondents and these mixed responses should be fully situated within the context of CUT as a predominantly Science and Technology-related institution whose key mandate falls under the purview of hard sciences. This technicality is part of the motivating factors behind undertaking this research, especially considering the need to establish needs that are both generic and discipline-specific in light of Communication Skills. Some notable responses were:

- *The course is misdirected in that it is general. It is not discipline specific. The scope for the programmes we offer requires discipline-specific priorities.*
- *The course as it is packaged cannot meet the needs of our discipline. There is need to introduce another course or strand of the course with the view to meet discipline-specific outcomes.*

- *The course should also tie up with Introduction to Statistics and Research Methods for Scientists. It's objectives must feed and draw from Introduction to Statistics and Research Methods.*

The above cluster of responses were all from one respondent who outrightly stated that the course is meeting neither generic nor discipline specific requirements of their school. The same respondent noted that their key requirements communication-wise are:

- *Scientific communication*
- *Scientific writing/Scientific journalism; writing with the general populace in mind*
- *Writing for scientific literacy.*

In devising possible strategies to address discipline-specific communication requirements, curriculum designers in Communication Skills would do well to take note of these expressed sentiments, opinions, perceptions and perspectives.

However, it is also noteworthy that another dean from a hard-sciences oriented school had a different set of responses which included:

It's a good component that adds value but key issues that need to be addressed include writing skills and presentation aspects.

The course needs to have adjunct professors or guest lecturers to enable students to get diversified experiences from various fields and motivational speakers

Key areas that need focus and improvement include presentation and writing skills

What is highly notable in the above responses is the dean's consciousness of the symbiotic relationship between hard and soft sciences, especially in their appreciation that science and technology related disciplines require expert skills from other disciplines in order to accentuate the candidates' growth and capacitation in other finer engagements. The responses above yield an immediate recommendation where disciplines need to establish common ground for concerted efforts in converging at shared institutional goals through the merits of inter-disciplinary academic synergies. There is scope for collaboration as one discipline can mediate gaps in the other, and vice versa.

Another dean from yet another hard sciences-related school had the following to note:

- *Quite a useful and helpful course if well-structured*
- *It does add value to our students in that it helps their critical and analytical skills. They are also assisted in presentation skills*

In terms of suggestions on how the course can meet their needs, the respondent noted the following:

- *Group students according to schools as communication styles are school specific*
- *The course needs to be continuously reviewed as the university grows.*
- *Include scientific writing and referencing*

The above responses yield an overallly positive view of the course and also proffer suggestions on how it can best mediate gaps in their schools programming. What is interesting to note in the responses of the above respondent is that the responses have got the bigger picture of the university's institutional growth in mind.

A case for inclusivity

The Academy of Teaching and Learning as well as the Institute of Lifelong Learning and Development Studies significantly share in terms of suggestions for mainstreaming Communication Skills as a means to enable efficiencies, literacies, fluencies and capabilities that are needful across all disciplines. Some of the responses yielding such perspectives include:

- *Communication Skills is a pertinent course for all first year students*
- *A critical part of university education*

- *There is need for this kind of course at graduate level – including DPhil – especially writing skills at higher degrees level*
- *My only misgiving is that the course is offered in one semester only. It would be ideal if the course was taken for a full year to sharpen students' skills*
- *The course should be developed to create more scope for it to tackle research project/dissertation writing across all disciplines*
- *The course should be aligned with the 21st Century skills, demands of industry and mastery of IT skills in academic writing*
- *There is need to streamline the course content in line with international trends*

Because of their orientation towards soft skills, people skills and human sciences, the Academy of Teaching and Learning as well as the Institute of Lifelong Learning and Development Studies converge at the need to mainstream the course, as well as to streamline it in the context of global best practice, agreeing in principle on its centrality to university curricular.

Re-alignment/strategy-related responses

The traceable trend coming out of the responses by the school deans is the coming together of minds around the importance of the course as part of the university's curriculum. In that regard, it is important to note how the respondents in their respective rights indicate the need for enhancement of the course as foregrounded by the following:

- a. Discipline-specific attention
- b. Needs analysis based on disciplinary requirements (eg: scientific journalism for natural scientists, drawing for engineers, and report writing for agricultural scientists)
- c. Language fundamentals
- d. Importance of terminology and other discipline-specific communication tools
- e. Expressing oneself at different formal situations
- f. Teaching students in smaller discipline-specific groups
- g. Oratorical, presentation and facilitation skills in line with global best practice

The responses by the key respondents denote a perceptive picture of a university as a multi-stakeholder establishment where a vital campus-wide course like Communication Skills can be meaningfully packaged through inter-disciplinary initiatives that feed into and out of each other. A needful approach is to establish the scope for synergy of efforts in order to arrive at mutually beneficial instructional models where one discipline mediates gaps in another, and vice-versa.

Summary of the study

This study sought to assess the key internal stakeholders' (students and staff) perceptions regarding Communication Skills as a campus-wide course offered to all first year first semester students at CUT. The study specifically sought to establish perceptions of CUT students and staff regarding Communication Skills as a course offered to all CUT students at the entry semester (1.1). Key assumptions driving the research revolved around perspectives on course design and content, discipline specific sensibilities, curriculum priorities, attitudes, feelings, inter-disciplinary dynamics and the possibilities of convergence and divergence in disciplinary considerations. Much focus was also directed at the merits of synergy and constructive diversity in view of global trends on scholarship as well as inter-disciplinary thrusts propelled by twenty-first century higher education dynamics.

The study adopted the exploratory qualitative methodology as focus was on assessing the perceptions of key internal stakeholders (staff and students) regarding the university-wide first year first semester compulsory course, Communication Skills (CUACE101). Data collection was in the form of responses from focus group discussions with the first year first semester Communication Skills class of the CUT academic calendar year 2016-2017. Also, the study administered questionnaires to the following key respondents:

1. Dean – School of Engineering Sciences and Technology
2. Dean – School of Wildlife, Ecology and Conservation
3. Dean – School of Agricultural Sciences and Technology

4. Dean – School of Natural Sciences and Mathematics
5. Dean – School of Art and Design
6. Dean – School of Hospitality and Tourism
7. Dean – School of Entrepreneurship and Business Sciences
8. Director – Institute of Lifelong Learning and Development Studies
9. Director – Academy of Teaching and Learning

A sample of the key responses from the focus group discussions as well as all the responses from the 9 key informant questionnaires were analysed to map out emerging themes, trends and patterns in light of the study focus at hand.

Summary of the findings

This section presents a summary of the research findings according to the objectives of the study:

Perceptions of CUT students regarding Communication Skills (CUACE101)

In general, the study shows that respondents have positive perceptions of the course, agreeing in principle on its merits to unlock value both in the course of their study life as well as in the larger context of their chosen career-paths. The majority of the responses expressed excitement with the course as it was not only value-adding, but it also provided a refreshing sense of adventure and fun away from their specific disciplinary thrusts. Students generally confessed that there was quite a significant shift in their original perceptions about the course (factoring in their own thoughts as well as ideas from senior students) and their emerging thoughts as a result of having embarked on the course in earnest. Respondents fairly agreed on the importance of Information Literacy Skills (ILS) as a pathway to effective research and exploration of the resources within the knowledge economy. Familiarisation with key search engines, databases, open and restricted access to academic resources was highlighted by the respondents as a key plus of the course. A good number of the respondents confessed their initial ignorance about what the course would entail, admitting their evolving consciousness on the course's broad themes and breadth of aspects it covered. Some respondents felt that the course was a repetition of some of the concepts they also cover in other courses like 'Principles of Management.' There were isolated extreme negative responses by respondents who felt that the course was a mere repetition of the grammar lessons they received in their high school compulsory language module, hence they proposed that the course be scrapped off their university curriculum completely.

Perceptions of CUT school deans regarding Communication Skills

The study sought to establish the perceptions of CUT staff (in this case, the various school deans) regarding Communication Skills as a course. Of the 9 key informants who answered the questionnaires, 7 are generally agreed that the course is satisfactorily meeting the generic and discipline-specific needs of their students, whilst 2 are not agreed on the course's relevance in light of their students' learning thrusts and outcomes. One key respondent suggested that the course be replaced by a course called 'Scientific Communication' since it is the one best suited to address the specific communication needs of the students in their school. The same respondent perceives Communication Skills as a purely language course which does not match the technical communication requirements of the candidates in their school. The majority of the respondents (77.7%) share in the understanding that once the current Communication Skills course is re-aligned to factor in aspects like technical communication, communicative competence, English language usage, oral and written skills, report writing, referencing and IT skills, then it is bound to value-add to candidates significantly.

Convergence and Divergence dynamics

From the findings and analysis, the traceable pattern of responses is that technically-oriented schools focus more on technical aspects of communication like technical report writing, scientific journalism as well as presentation skills, whereas business and soft sciences disciplines highlight the primacy of spoken and written skills, communicative eloquence, persuasive abilities and the ability to market one's competences in the wake of a cut-throat corporate environment. Factor analysis also showed the following curriculum design factors as being essential in building a well packaged Communication Skills module: formulating course objectives together with students, proper audit of students' generic and discipline-specific needs,

selection of appropriate content and delivery approaches for the course, learning experiences (practicals, field trips, industrial visits), inter-disciplinary shared instructional initiatives, availability of adequate and well equipped facilities/lecture rooms, opportunities to evaluate lecturers and courses, and proper organisation of content in the appropriate semesters.

Strategies to improve the Communication Skills course at CUT

There are a number of strategies that can be adopted to productively re-align the Communication Skills course at CUT. Respondents suggested to a larger extent the need to cluster students into smaller discipline-specific groups with the view to factor in key discipline specific considerations in curriculum design and delivery, for example technical report writing, scientific communication, journal entry dynamics, presentation techniques, oratory skills, communicative competence, ITC-literacy, soft skills and adaptive intelligence as factors contributing to the completeness of a CUT graduate. There is convergence of thought by respondents on the need to offer exciting learning experiences apart from the traditional lecture methods so as to improve the teaching and learning environment into an interactive, exploratory, collaborative and value-driven experience. Other strategies include the need to have adequate and properly equipped learning and teaching facilities that bring novelty to the higher education experience at CUT through improved interactivity and fruitful engagements.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to assess the perceptions of Chinhoyi University of Technology (CUT) staff and students regarding Communication Skills as a course. From the research findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The Communication Skills course at CUT is viewed very positively by both students and staff. Comparing the course at CUT with other Communication Skills curricular in other universities in Zimbabwe, it is safe to conclude that the course is quite comprehensive, well-structured and satisfactorily relevant to the needs of the corporate world to which we release our CUT graduates.
- It is essential to not only package an exciting, value-driven and competitive Communication Skills course, but to also share operational intelligence across all disciplines in order to enlist shared inter-disciplinary support in mooted a synergy of efforts that converge at how best the service course can mediate teaching and learning gaps productively and rewardingly
- The key deliverables of the course are based on the rational balance between generic and discipline-specific communication needs of the CUT community, and it is this healthy balance which should inspire the continued review, re-alignment and tweaking of the communication curriculum in line with emergent trends and imperatives.

In conclusion to the main objective, it may be safe to state that Communication Skills is a unique course that conflates key skills, fluencies, literacies and capabilities into a cocktail resulting from judicious selection of key curriculum aspects that are both generic and discipline-specific. Tuition and delivery in various disciplines at CUT can be streamlined in order to create scope for synergized efforts in fostering key competencies in CUT students. Curriculum design is bound to be fruitful and rewarding if faculty debunk the debilitating culture of the 'them-versus-us' approach, choosing rather to partner in the diversity of their disciplinary spheres towards churning out a complete, wholesome and holistic CUT graduate who fares competitively not only as an academic product, but also as a professional and a citizen of the twenty-first century.

Recommendations

In order to improve the course design and content of Communication Skills at CUT, the following recommendations are made:

- Segment students into clusters according to their disciplines in order to streamline curriculum in line with discipline-specific communication requirements
- Do a proper stakeholder mapping to ascertain stakeholder needs and requirements that can be factored into the design and delivery of the course
- Streamline course content in order to prioritise the delivery and development of key skills, fluencies and competences that give CUT graduates a competitive edge on the job market

- Conduct capacity development workshops across all disciplines to foster the culture of inter-disciplinary connections
- Involve Communication experts as part of the assessment team that visits students on industrial placement in order to broaden the scope for key competences that our candidates are assessed on
- Offer exciting learning experiences (exploratory, discovery, experiential and collaborative) apart from traditional lectures
- Avail adequate and well equipped learning facilities/lecture rooms (interactive boards, e-boards, overhead projectors, acoustic and sound systems) in order to promote an interactive, discovery-related, experiential, collaborative, engaging, fruitful and rewarding teaching and learning experience at CUT.

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