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# Undergraduate Students' Perceived ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS AS CORRELATES OF LEARNING OUTCOMES

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#### **Abstract**

This study examined the relationship between undergraduates' perception of the academic environment, their attitude to academic work and achievement. A total of 348 undergraduates who formed the sample were drawn from five departments in three universities in Nigeria. The study revealed that four dimensions of the academic environment as perceived by students, seemed to be potent factors influencing students' attitude to academic work. These perceived factors were; commitment of lecturers to teaching and commitment expected of students; personal attention given to students; academic guidance and respect for students. Two other dimensions - freedom in students' learning and the relationship with students correlated significantly with only one dimension of attitude to academic work respectively. However, students' GPA correlated negatively with two dimensions of academic environment - academic guidance and personal attention given to students. The implications for teaching and learning in Nigerian tertiary institutions were discussed.

### Introduction

Universities, the world over, are seen as main environments where higher learning and research are facilitated. The "disciplines" or the departments within the universities have become known as the "academic homes" of students because of the intrinsic role they play in shaping the lives of students and the faculty members (Winteler, 1981). Students, both at home and abroad have played significant roles in evaluating the quality of learning environments as well as the quality of instructions that go on in these institutions through self-rating of academic characteristics. In recent times, the debate of whether students can effectively evaluate the teaching-learning environment and the teaching process of their lecturers has been on. The issues at stake in these arguments are whether students do recognize what constitute teaching effectiveness criteria, or whether their emotional disposition and the grades lecturers award them do influence the stability and reliability of their ratings? Research evidence (Ramsden, 1979, Onocha, 1995a and 1996) has shown that such students' rating of their academic environment has not only become stable and reliable in the short term but also in the long term.

It is worthy of note that students' evaluation of teaching and learning has become important consideration in the annual appraisal of lecturers in many American Universities and Colleges, However, this phenomenon is gradually being discussed and debated by Stakeholders in university education in Nigeria. The focus has been on its usefulness and applicability in this part of the world. It is hoped that when the debates and discussions are over, the resulting reforms

would have repositioned students' evaluation of teaching and learning in a better pedestal in the Nigerian university system.

Among the attempts made in the past to assess the academic environment of foreign universities was from the perspectives of faculty members. Of the several studies that investigated this, Peterson, Centra, Hartnett and Linn (1970), Ramsden (1979), Gaff, Crombag and Chang (1976) reported that distinct academic cultures exist within various departments. The Peterson et al (1970) study, specifically, reported that these differences as measured by achievement tests were common place. Their study therefore, revealed that the perception of faculty about the department characteristics and individual student descriptors were not related to students'(o) Tj0.573.Tw-0.1804Tc( perceptio)

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teaching and learning at this level of education in Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to determine undergraduate students' perceived academic environmental characteristics as correlates of learning outcomes, more so as the academic departments have been described as the "academic

i.e. commitment expected from students and commitment to teaching of lecturers, personal attention to students, relationships with students, freedom in students learning, academic guidance and respect for students and the six dimensions of ATAWS on the one hand and with GPA on the other were computed. ATAWS dimensions were: effectiveness of instruction and effectiveness of administration, tests/examinations, lectures/assignments, studying, usefulness of university education and **time required** of students/assessment. The probability level for determining significant level was P < 0.05.

## **Results and Discussion**

Research question 1 examined the influence of students' perception of their academic environment on students' attitude to academic work. This result is presented in Table 1.

Table I: Inter-Correlations of students' Perceptions of their Academic Environment on their Attitude to Academic Work

Students' perception		Attitude	Dimensions of Attitude to Academic work					
of Acad. Environment		to academic	1	2	3	4	5	6
		Work						
1.	Commitment	0.3167*	0.0308	0.2660*	0.2196*	0.0456	0.0009	0.3694*
2.	Attention	0.3200*	0.2143*	-0.1855*	0.2087*	0.1300*	0.0329	0.4156*
3.	Relationships	0.0568	-0.0988	0.0371	0.1244*	0.0780	-0.0627	-0.0387
4.	Freedom	0.0527	0.0620	-0.0002	0.0160	0.0970*	-0.0278	-0.0316
5.	Guidance	0.3309*	-0.1258	0.1992*	0.2173	0.1218*	0.0551	0.3776*
6.	Respect	0.1480*	-0.1872	0.1932*	0.0936*	-0.0526	0.0200	0.1904*

<sup>\*</sup> Significant correlations at P<0.05 (One-tailed Test)

N.B. = On the dimensions of attitude to academic work.

- 1 = represents Effectiveness, 2 = Tests/Exams, 3 = Lectures/Assignments 4 = Studying,
- 5 = Usefulness of university degree and 6 = Time required for academic work/assessment method.

## Nomenclature of academic environment scale were abridged.

The results in Table I indicate that students' perception of their academic environment correlated significantly with four dimensions of attitude; such as, commitment of lecturers and commitment expected from students correlated (0.3167) with students' composite attitude to academic work. The specific dimensions of students' attitude that were significant here were students' positive disposition to taking tests and examinations (0.2660), disposition to lectures and assignments (0.2190) and the adequacy of time required of students and the assessment method adopted (0.3694). Personal attention to students (i.e. student - faculty relationships) correlated (0.33200) with attitude and specifically with effectiveness (0.2143), tests/examinations (-0.1855) lectures and assignments (0.2087), studying (0.1300) and (0.4156) with time required for academic work and assessment method used.

Relationships with students correlated (0.1244) with disposition of students to lectures and assignments. Similarly, freedom in students learning correlated (0.0979) with studying. Academic

guidance was found to influence attitude to academic work (0.3309). Specific dimensions were: taking tests/ examinations (0.1992), disposition to lectures and assignments (0.2173), studying (0.1218) and the time required for academic work/assessment method used (0.3776).

Respect for students had strong influence on attitude to work and on several of its dimensions. With the

assignments and studying, as well as attending lectures, the time allocated for academic work and assessment method used. By this findings, the study supports recent studies such as Baird (1992) and Lamport (1994) who found that increased student - faculty interaction has a positive influence on students' personal and intellectual growth, career and educational goal. It is worthy of note to observe that the inverse relationship obtained between personal attention given to students and attitude to tests and examinations would seem to suggest that sitting for tests/examination and subsequently doing well in it does not necessarily depend on student - faculty interaction or on the frequency. This could be dependent on some other factors inherent in the student or the work environment. This way, this findings would seem to support previous findings that students were less concerned with student - faculty interaction, curriculum content among others, than they were with physical features of the academic environment such as parking of cars, the physical appearance of campus facilities, cost of fees and books, and safety (San-Diego Community College Research and Planning, ERIC, 1994).

On the one hand, the amount of student's discretion in choosing and organizing learning (freedom in students' learning) is positively correlated with the disposition to studying exhibited by the students. On the other hand, the relationships with student - that is the help and understanding shown to students also had a strong correlation with students' disposition to taking tests/examinations, attending lectures and doing assignments and the adequacy of the time required for academic work and the method of assessment used. This finding support the San-Diego's Community College Research and Planning (1994) study that over 86.2% of the students felt they were given the respect of adults, while 80.1% felt that the staff treated all students fairly equally.

The inverse relationship observed between students' GPA and their perceived personal attention given to them on the one hand and academic guidance on the other, have serious implications for teaching and learning in Nigerian tertiary institutions. This finding in conjunction with the earlier findings with respect to students' attitude in this study, would seem to question the quality of academic guidance and personal attention given to students by lecturers. The modest existence of these characteristics in some departments as English (Arts) or their complete absence as in Economics (Social Science) as reported by (Okwilagwe, 2002), clearly indicate the existence of some academic problems in these tertiary institutions. Or, could these findings be a case of what Becker et al, (1968) as cited by Ramsden (1981) explained as a situation where the academic environment value attendance and written work, but do not seem to reward students for showing intellectual involvement? Findings in this study contradict previous studies which revealed that personal attention through student - faculty interaction is a valuable factor in improving students' academic achievement during college. Wilson et al, 1975) (Baird, 1992; and Lamport, 1994; but corroborates those of Endo and Harpel (1982). Moreover, a lack of significant relationship was observed in this study between commitment of lecturers to teaching and student achievement. This senario could be attributed to some factors such as: the poor disposition to teaching exhibited by lecturers in some departments such as English (Arts), Economics (Social Sciences) and the presence in modest levels of such teacher characteristics as punctuality to lectures, innovativeness in teaching, coupled with approachability on academic matters and development of low self-esteem due to lack of commitment to teaching of their lecturers (Okwilagwe, 2002). It stands to reason that the lack of commitment to teaching on the part of lecturers could have a negative influences on students not wanting to study these courses as they lack the motivation to do so.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, the implication of the findings in this study for teaching and learning in higher institutions borders on not reducing the academic environment to a tense and anxiety producing place through placing more premium on studying, taking tests and examinations and the like. Also, to be noted, is the high degree of impersonality students say is prevalent almost in all the departments. On the contrary, it is the perception of students that a conducive social and psychological atmosphere or climate necessary for releasing the tension created by the context of learning should be provided in the academic environment. Such climates could be established through increased and purposive student - faculty, formal and informal interaction, enhanced and qualitative student - teacher relationships and respect for students which could possibly go a long way to enhance their academic achievement.

The current study was primarily meant to provide information and knowledge of students' perception of the teaching-learning environments of the universities used in the study. However, generalizations of the current research findings to other universities could be possible and fostered by application and transfer of learning to new inquisition milieus in spite of some extenuating factors and circumstances of the present study. This is because, the Nigerian students, to a very large extent, operate in a common national academic environment in which teaching and learning are guided by the same national educational policies within a national value system framework.

In the light of the findings of this study, these recommendations are made with a view to improving the teaching-learning environment in tertiary institutions in Nigeria as follows:

- i lecturers should encourage and indeed initiate purposeful academic consultation with students formally and informally (out-of-class), irrespective of their tight workloads;
- university courses should be designed in such a way that students' intersects are catered for, while students should be given high discretion and unrestricted access to selecting courses of great relevance and interest to their chosen career as well as freedom in organizing selflearning;
- iii. lecturers should be motivated to give selfless services and quality guidance to their students and not only to those they supervise. This would go a long way to boosting students' ego, self-esteem and improve better attitude to work that could translate into enhanced academic achievement, emotional and psychological contentment that could further fuel their drive to excel in their academic pursuit; and
- iv. Lecturers should show more commitment to teaching, be punctual at lectures, be approachable on academic matters and be innovative in teaching as these are some of the hallmarks of an effective teacher.

When these recommendations are truly and adroitly implemented, coupled with the development of positive, innovative and creative attitudes to teaching and learning by lecturers and students, conducive environment would result in sustainable quality education in universities in Nigeria.

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