

Original Paper

Perceived Barriers to Regular Class Attendance of BCommH

Students in University of Community Health, Magway

Htin Zaw Soe^{1*}, A B¹, Khin San Lin¹, Thet Su Zan¹, Nant Yee Mon Thwin¹ & Nanda Hlaing¹

¹ University of Community Health, Magway

* Htin Zaw Soe, University of Community Health, Magway

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Abstract

Education is essential not only for every citizen to survive in dignity but also for nation building. In any education settings, students' regular class attendance plays a vital role for obtaining good academic achievements. A cross-sectional analytic study was conducted among BCommH students (n=410) of University of Community Health, Magway from October to December 2017 using a mixed method with objectives of exploring their perceived barriers of regular class attendance and possible solutions. Data collected by pretested semi-structured questionnaires were entered into computers and analysed by SPSS software version 18.0 with a significant level of 0.05. Qualitative data were assessed by content analysis. Significant findings related to irregular class attendance were level of previous class [OR = 3.08 (95% CI: 1.6 – 5.91) (p < 0.005)], monthly financial aid from family of MMK 100,000 or more [OR = 2.24 (95% CI: 1.29 – 3.86) (p = 0.003)], travelling pattern to and from campus by other means [OR = 7.76 (95% CI: 2.13 – 28.21) (p < 0.005)] and lunch taking pattern in week days [OR = 1.91 (95% CI: 1.13 – 3.23) (p < 0.025)]. Among the perceived barriers most of students (82.2%) stated illness as a barrier followed by being busy with preparation for examinations (46.4%), getting up late from bed in the morning (41.1%) and lecture room with high indoor temperature (40.5%). In in-depth interviews, students mentioned the reasons of missing classes as weakness in teaching system, their socio-behavioral factors and poor class room conditions. In conclusion the present study unearthed the various perceived barriers and these barriers should be removed by appropriate means including intensive oversight of faculty and staff on the students, reinforced with introduction of time management concepts into curriculum and making teaching learning environment more friendly to and happy for students, leading to more regular attendance among the students finally to achieve their high academic grades.

Keywords

Perceived barrier, class attendance, university students

1. Introduction

Education is essential not only for every citizen to survive in dignity but also for nation building and its progress as a whole. There are basic education, vocational education and higher education. In any education settings, students' regular class attendance plays a vital role for obtaining good academic achievements. University of Community Health, Magway, Myanmar is the only university producing Bachelor of Community Health (BCommH) graduates who become Health Assistants (HAs) once they are employed as government servants. HAs are one of categories of Basic Health Staff (BHS) in Myanmar health sector. These BHS members are mainly serving community members in rural areas presenting seventy per cent of country population. They are frontline health workers (Frontline Health Worker Coalition, 2017) in the areas where medical doctors are rarely positioned. Their main tasks are concerned with primary health care. Thus their role in country health sector is of paramount importance. If they are competent in workplaces most of diseases among local people can be avoided saving life and resources. Therefore qualified graduates should be generated from the university. In this case beginning from undergraduate level they should be trained to meet the course objectives. Recently 20 – 30% of first to final year students have class attendance rate for didactic lectures below acceptable level of 75%. Such low class attendance rate is due to various reasons among the students like physical health and mental health grounds (Factors influencing school attendance for chronically absent students in the Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD), 2017) and being married and working for part time jobs during school days (Alghamdi, Yamani, Khalil, Albarkati, Alrehili, & Salih, 2016). If it is not addressed in time failure rate in final examinations will increase. These reasons are their perceived barriers. If these barriers can be removed for instance by an arrangement of campus based health clinics (Breaking barriers to attendance, 2017) in the case of chronic health issues which kept students out of campus regularly, and then their attendance rate will increase supporting in their process of learning lessons. The results of the present study will aid in finding possible solutions against perceived barriers to regular class attendance among the students. Therefore the present study was conducted with objectives of (i) to explore the perceived barriers to regular class attendance of BCommH students in University of Community Health, Myanmar and (ii) to find out possible solutions for these barriers.

2. Materials and Methods

Study design: A cross-sectional analytic study using a mixed method was performed.

Study population: Study population were BCommH students from First to Final Year at University of Community Health during 2017 academic year.

Study area: Study area was University of Community Health in Magway.

Study period: It was from October to December 2017.

Sample size: It was calculated as $n = z^2pq/d^2 = 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 / (0.05)^2 = 384$ ($p = 0.5 =$ proportion of students with one of barriers to regular class attendance). For nonresponse, 7% of n was added. Final sample size was $384 + 26 = 410$.

Sampling procedure: All students were involved in the study.

Data collection methods and instruments: Student participants filled in the pretested semi-structured self-administered questionnaires. Thirty-eight students (ten students from each of second and third years, and recently graduates and eight students from final year) with very low class attendance were interviewed by well-trained faculty members (i.e., tutors) of UCH using interview guidelines till information becomes saturated. The data collected in questionnaires were entered into a computer and analysed by an SPSS software version 18.0. Chi-squared test was used to find out associations between independent (background characteristics) and dependent (class attendance). Odds ratios with 95% confidence interval were calculated to determine strength of association. Qualitative data were handled by content analysis. The proposal was submitted to Ethics Review Committee of UCH. Verbal informed consent were obtained from student participants and data collected were kept confidential.

3. Results

Background characteristics of the student participants ($n=410$) were elicited by the present study (Table 1). They were aged 19.3 ± 15 (range: 17-26 year). Males were 76.8% as nearly as in enrollment to university in first year (i.e., male: female = 4:1). They were from university's second year, third year, final year and those just graduated at the time of interview, with distribution of 25.4%, 25.1%, 27.6% and 22.0% respectively, reflecting their previous year experiences of barriers to regular class attendance in campus. Most (71.7%) came from rural communities and were Buddhists (96.8%) and unmarried (96.3%). Their matriculation score were 452.6 ± 15.2 (out of full score 600), and two thirds made their enrollment on their own desire while the remaining one third by parental pressure. Nearly 90% of students lived with their both parents still alive and over 80% received monthly financial aid of Myanmar Kyat (MMK) 100,000 or more (range: 0 – 300,000; median: 100,000). But just 8% went through their university life with monthly scholarship MMK 30,000 from charity organizations. Majority (64.6%) had their lodging at private hostels outside campus and traveled to and from campus by their own motorbikes (52.4%) and had their lunch at campus canteens with their own cost (73.2%). Regarding smoking and alcohol drinking habits, 11.7% of them smoked and 19.8% drank. In connection with extra-curricular activities, 73.4% took part in at least one event of sports, 32.9% in fine arts activities, just 10% in University Students' Union. The study found out that 21.7% of students attended the class regularly and the remaining (78.3%) faced with at least one of barriers they perceived throughout university life. Among those with irregular class attendance ($n= 321$) most (74.1%) missed their lectures one to two days a month.

When making data analysis irregular class attendance was associated with level of previous class [OR = 3.08 (95% CI: 1.6 – 5.91) ($p < 0.005$)], monthly financial aid from family of MMK 100,000 or more

[OR = 2.24 (95% CI: 1.29 – 3.86) ($p = 0.003$)], travelling pattern to and from campus by other means [OR = 7.76 (95% CI: 2.13 – 28.21) ($p < 0.005$)] and lunch taking pattern in week days [OR = 1.91 (95% CI: 1.13 – 3.23) ($p < 0.025$)] (Table 2). Other characteristics were not statistically associated with irregular attendance.

Among the perceived barriers most of students (82.2%) stated illness as a barrier followed by being busy with preparations for their examinations (46.4%), getting up late from bed in the morning (41.1%) and lecture room with high indoor temperature (40.5%) (Table 3).

Table 1. Background Characteristics of Student Participants of University (n=410)

Variable	Mean \pm SD/Category	Frequency (%)
Age (year)	19.3 \pm 1.5 (Range:17- 26)	-
Gender	Male	315 (76.8)
	Female	95 (23.2)
Previous class	First year	104 (25.4)
	Second year	103 (25.1)
	Third year	113 (27.6)
	Final year	90 (22.0)
Residence	Rural	294 (71.7)
	Urban	116 (28.3)
Religion	Buddhism	397 (96.8)
	Christianity	11 (2.7)
	Hinduism	1 (0.2)
	Islam	1 (0.2)
Marital status	Unmarried	395 (96.3)
	Married	15 (3.7)
Matriculation exam score (full score = 600)	452.6 \pm 15.2	-
	< 450	179 (43.7)
	\geq 450	231 (56.3)
Own desire to enroll the university	Yes	258 (62.9)
	No	152 (37.1)
Living parent status	Both parents	366 (89.3)
	Single parent	44 (10.7)
Monthly financial aid from family (MMK)	\leq 100,000	76 (18.5)
	> 100,000	334 (81.5)
Scholarship obtained	Yes	35 (8.5)
	No	375 (91.5)

Table 1. Background Characteristics of Student Participant of University (n=410) (Continued)

Variable	Mean \pm SD/Category	Frequency (%)
Living place during university attendance	Hostel inside campus	118 (28.8)
	Private hostel outside campus	264 (64.4)
	Relatives' house	7 (1.7)
	Monastery	17 (4.1)
	Other	4 (1.0)
Traveling pattern to and from campus	School bus	52 (12.7)
	Own motorbike	215 (52.4)
	On foot	98 (23.9)
	By other means	45 (11.0)
Lunch taking pattern in week days	At campus canteens	300 (73.2)
	Own lunch box	18 (4.4)
	At hostel inside campus	92 (22.4)
Smoking habit	Yes	48 (11.7)
	No	362 (88.3)
Alcohol drinking habit	Yes	81 (19.8)
	No	329 (80.2)
Participation in sports activities	Yes	301 (73.4)
	No	109 (26.6)
Participation in fine arts activities	Yes	135 (32.9)
	No	275 (67.1)
Participation in Students' Union	Yes	40 (9.8)
	No	370 (90.2)
Regular class attendance	Yes	89 (21.7)
	No	321 (78.3)
Frequency of irregular attendance (day per month) (n= 321)	1-2	238 (74.1)
	3- 5	74 (23.1)
	≥ 6	9 (2.8)

Table 2. Association between Background Variables and Class Attendance among Students (n=410)

Variable	Category	Class attendance		OR (95% CI)	p value
		Not regular	Regular		
Previous class	First year	88	16	3.08 (1.6 – 5.91)	< 0.005*
	Second year	66	37	1	
	Third year	101	12	4.72 (2.38 – 9.34)	< 0.005*
	Final year	66	24	1.54 (0.83 – 2.84)	> 0.05
Residence	Urban	91	25	-	0.962
	Rural	230	64		
Living parent status	Both parent	286	80	-	0.831
	Single parent	35	9		
Monthly financial aid from family (MMK)	> 100,000	271	63	2.24 (1.29 – 3.86)	0.003*
	≤ 100,000	50	26	1	
Traveling pattern to and from campus	School bus	41	11	1.35 (0.6 – 3.04)	> 0.05
	Own motorbike	165	50	1.19 (0.69 – 2.06)	> 0.05
	On foot				
	By others	72	26	1	
Lunch taking pattern in week days		43	2	7.76 (2.13 – 28.21)	< 0.005*
	At campus canteens	244	56	1.91 (1.13 – 3.23)	< 0.025*
	Own lunch box	13	5	1.14 (0.36 – 3.66)	> 0.05
Smoking habit	At hostel inside campus	64	28	1	
	Yes	40	8	-	0.367
Alcohol drinking habit	No	281	81		
	Yes	68	13	-	0.168
	No	253	76		

* Statistically significant

Table 3. Perceived Barriers to Regular Attendance among Student with Irregular Attendance (n= 321)

Category	Perceived barriers	Frequency (%)
Teaching system of university	Dislike teaching pattern	34 (10.6)
	Fail to understand lectures	56 (17.4)
Learning system of university	Pay much attention to private tuition	2 (0.6)
	Pay much attention to preparation for exams	149 (46.4)
	Perceive lectures unimportant	15 (4.7)
	Be not interested in lectures	61 (19.0)
Teaching learning environment	Lecture room with poor light	49 (15.3)
	Lecture room with poor ventilation	97 (30.2)
	Lecture room with high indoor temperature	130 (40.5)
	Lecture room with poor projector	88 (27.4)
Socio-behavioral factors	Illness	264 (82.2)
	Getting up late from bed in the morning	132 (41.1)
	Missing school bus	57 (17.8)
	Peer conflicts	1 (0.3)
	Financial difficulty	16 (5.0)
	Doing business	6 (1.9)
	Depression	82 (25.5)
Others	27 (8.4)	

In in-depth interviews, 38 students (35 males and three females) with low class attendance rate were interviewed by faculty of UCH. They expressed their perceived barriers under the themes of teaching learning systems, and socio-behavioral and environmental factors.

Regarding teaching learning system, the following three students mentioned as follow.

“I do not understand lectures very well and it is boring to learn. I would like teachers to explain us lectures slowly and check the list of students’ attendance. I request teachers to pay more attention till students become to understand”

(18 year old male student of second year class)

“Lecture times are too prolonged. I request to make lectures interesting to students”.

(21 year old male student of final year class)

“It is tedious to learn in class. I suggest to change the current teaching system into an active teaching learning system”.

(20 year old male BCommH graduate)

In connection with socio-behavioral and environmental factors, the three students stated as follow.

"I fail to attend the class due to illness and my personal social affairs. Sometime I do not come to campus when I prepare for class tests or final exams. I think I must make myself healthy. Teachers should teach us till we understand well".

(17 year old female student of second year class)

"I miss the lectures due to my getting up late from bed, my illness and sometime my social affairs. Class rooms should be made well lighted and installed with sufficient number of air conditioners ...summer will come in very soon".

(23 year old male student of third year class)

"Sometime I get up late from bed and feel bored. The weather is also hot. I suggest to install class rooms with more air conditioners, to build a larger sports ground and an indoor stadium in the campus and create high-class campus canteens".

(21 year old male student of final year class)

4. Discussion

The results showed various pictures of students' life during university years. Nearly 80% of students missed their class ever due to many reasons they perceived. Out of students' characteristics, some were significantly related to irregular class attendance. Those in first year were three times more likely to be absent away from class than those in second year. In this case, first year student were probably more unfamiliar with university life and environment. Similarly third year students were five times more likely to miss the class with unknown reasons. Therefore, those in these years should be told to attend the class regularly and faculty should oversee the attendance roll call signatures. Residence is not associated with students' attendance. One study showed students residing in urban neighborhoods were more likely to miss school (Contributing factors of absenteeism, 2018). Similarly living parent status is not related with attendance in the present study while other study stated that students from single-parent family were more prone to miss school than those from two-parent family (Contributing factors of absenteeism, 2018). Interestingly, those with monthly financial aid from their families of MMK 100,000 or over were found to be two times more prone to failure to attend. Normally it is considered that financially well-supported students would be regular in attendance. In the present study this paradoxical event may be that affluent students may spend more in some matters rather than the academic, for example, going out of the campus to internet game-shops, going shopping somewhere else. Contrary to that, in one of studies, students who live in communities with high levels of poverty are four times more likely to be chronically absent than others often for reasons beyond their control, such as unstable housing, unreliable transportation and a lack of access to health care (Ten facts about school attendance, 2018). Those in the present study with more financial aid should be reminded to attend the class regularly. One thing associated with irregular attendance was travelling pattern to and from campus. Travelling by other means rather than by school bus, own motorbike and on foot had eight times more chance of missing class. These other means were travelling by other students'

motorbikes or cars. In this case, if students missed these vehicles, they also missed the class. Therefore students without own motorbikes and cars, living outside campus, should be advised to travel with university school buses. The other reasons behind this factor should also be explored further. In lunch taking patterns, students who took their lunch at campus canteens in week days were nearly two times more likely to fail to attend the class than those who took at hostels inside the campus. It may be due to the fact that those at canteens stayed beyond the lunch time hours and then miss the afternoon class. In this case, faculty should oversee the students at canteens during lunch time and a bell ringing system should be used to remind the students at canteens that lunch time is over and afternoon classes are about to begin. In the present study students' habit of smoking and alcohol drinking were also not associated with attendance. In other research found were a definitive link between teen substance abuse and school performance (Common reasons for poor attendance and related support, 2018). Individual perceived barriers, elicited by both quantitative and qualitative methods, were in high diversity but they should be paid due attention and their needs should be fulfilled. Among those, illness topped the list. In other study chronic illness like asthma, migraine, juvenile arthritis depression and anxiety were found to be contributing factors of absenteeism (Contributing factors of absenteeism, 2018). The measures to be taken for those students are encouraging them to do physical exercises regularly and seek prompt treatment at campus clinic. Time management concept should be introduced in curriculum as a remedial measure for those who were busy with exam preparations before their private study and final exams and those who got up late in the morning. Similarly as student perception of school culture and rigor of academic program is associated with their attendance (Contributing factors of absenteeism, 2018) the class room physical condition should be upgraded with more lighted florescent tubes, air-conditioners, and existing teaching learning system should also be changed to more interactive styles. Social and moral supports to students who were in needs should be provided by faculty and staff of university. Although UCH has a teacher-student mentoring system, this system must be strengthened to have more oversight on the latter. UCH has outdoor sports equipment in three places in campus for students' sports activities. But it is not sufficient, and the special arrangement should be made in such a way that students could participate in extracurricular activities, for instance, going excursion and hiking and mountaineering without affecting the main academic programs. An indoor stadium and a wider football field are to be built in coming year once State budget is allowed. By that means students would become more satisfied with campus environment supporting their attendance and academic ambition. It is also in line with – the saying in Myanmar education – “a happy school life makes a great academic achievement”. Moreover suggestion boxes should be placed on the walls near class rooms to enable the students to give their relevant suggestions to university administrative body. Some factors like financial difficulty are beyond university's control and they should be handled by students' parents and their living communities. As there was a clear statistical evidence of inverse relation between absenteeism and academic grades (Causes of absenteeism in university students and its effects on the academic performance, 2012) all stakeholders concerned should help to ensure the removal of barriers as possible

as they could. In conclusion the present study unearthed the various perceived barriers and these barriers should be removed by appropriate means including intensive oversight of faculty and staff over students, reinforced with introduction of time management concepts into curriculum and making teaching learning environment more friendly to and happy for students. By that mean students may attend the class more regularly achieving their goal of passing examinations with high grades and becoming qualified health professionals in future.

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