



Congested Lectures: A Case for Educational Quality

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ABSTRACT

The intricacy and the rapport between overcrowded lecture halls and educational quality is considered a point of focus for this paper. As this paper examines how overcrowded lecture halls affect teaching and learning quality, the study aims to explicate the relationship between overcrowded lectures and the quality of education rendered thereof. Despite numerous studies conducted, little is noted in the literature on promoting class size reduction policies. Three purposefully nominated participants were interviewed as data informants to gather data. This identified cohort seemed the most relevant are university lecturers experiencing the glitches of congested lecture halls. The study findings indicate that overcapacity in lecture halls results in (i) lessened academic performance and (ii) narrowed student interaction. This paper recommends that there is an urgent need to foster an academic climate that is conducive to student success and gratification.

KEYWORDS

Instruction; higher education; congestion; academic performance; quality education; academic climate.

INTRODUCTION

To put on board all stakeholders involved in the sphere of teaching and learning as a process, it is imperative that some critical terminologies as the focus of this investigation, be clarified. Osai et al. (2021) declare that congested lectures are referred to as overcrowded lecture sessions resulting from limited space, often depicted by students who sit uncomfortably and inappropriately due to a lack of seats; some even sit on the stairs or directly on the floor. This disrupted learning environment seems to reduce engagement. Concurrently, educational quality is considered the degree to which an institution encompasses within itself a collection of dimensions determining the value of education, and these dimensions may include but are not limited to learning outcomes and teaching excellence (Mensah et al., 2022).

As a fundamental aspect in institutions of higher learning, the primary mode of instructional delivery is lectures that play a critical role in knowledge dissemination, advancing critical thinking skills to enhance intellectual engagement. Be that as it may, congestion in lecture halls might derail and compromise the instructional format's effectiveness and efficiency (Ayanwoye, 2021). Because of the not-so-conducive situation, there are anticipated difficulties in course material access and student-lecturer viable engagements (Ayeni et al., 2019). Non-viability caused by overcrowding can also hinder a lecturer's ability to provide tailored attention, feedback, and student support, weakening the quality of education (Rivkin & Schiman, 2015; Zorba, 2023).

A closer look at the existing situation in higher education settings shows a pressing concern about congested university lecture halls. Student enrolments in the university fluctuate and accumulate alarmingly, hindering quality education delivery (West & Meier, 2020). This paper, therefore, explores the potential consequences of overcrowded lecture halls versus the university lecturer's experiences as recipients of teaching in those overcrowded learning spaces. Such encounters are reported to pose significant challenges to delivering quality education due to a lack of resources and infrastructure expansion (Olaleye et al., 2017). Delving into the matter with a critical eye, it is a real hassle for university teachers to be faced with challenges to contend with accommodating large class sizes yet expected to maintain academic excellence (Molise, 2021). Equated to clogged lecture halls that strain physical resources, it affects the overall learning environment and student academic experiences (Lőrincz & Komar, 2023). With the claims outlined, this paper felt it imperative that due to the prevalent nature of overcrowding in lecture halls, there is a dire need to undertake this investigation to examine educational quality impact versus student outcomes.

Despite the studies conducted about congested lectures impacting educational quality, this paper identified a gap in which little is being noted concerning class size reduction policies (Zenda, 2019). As perceived by the author of this manuscript, I contend that although lecture halls differ in volume, they are likely to offer some benefits of individualized attention, yet they do not necessarily serve for guaranteed and improved academic attainment. In addition to that, class size reduction might financially impact sustainable educational imperatives (Cho et al.,

2012). Therefore, the study aims to interrogate the issue of overcrowded learning environments and the educational experiences of university students as perceived by lecturers who render teaching services across a wide range of programs buttressing the university-prescribed curricula.

Background

Research notes some factors that can contribute to the emergence of overcrowded lecture halls. These factors include rising student populations, resource constraints, and limited infrastructure advancement (Peter et al., 2019). Although lectures, with their critical role of knowledge dissemination and fostering intellectual engagement, could be in the instructional format, their effectiveness is threatened by overcrowding (Saud et al., 2020). As pronounced by Amtu et al. (2020), overcrowded classroom environments create negative consequences that underscore student participation as measured against the intended learning outcomes.

Studies conducted by Osai et al., (2021) contend that debates around overcrowded lecture halls need to be broadly perceived as such trends can shape contemporary higher education landscapes. With the workforce demands that tend to evolve within the workplace, one can highlight intensified student enrolments leading to demographic shifts that tend to expand higher education access. In addition, Ogunode and Odo (2023) strengthen the discussions by noting the extent to which the extraordinary strains on the university can be. Although some efforts are put in place to expand campus facilities by investing in technology-infused learning environments, some institutions of higher learning are still held up by the dynamics of overcrowded classrooms (Mensah et al., 2022). This entanglement is mainly noticed when students enroll in high-demand programs (Neilson & Zimmerman, 2014).

After that, this overpopulation must be perceived far beyond physical constraints as it profoundly impacts quality teaching and learning. For this claim, Eboatu and Ehirim (2018) denote that the larger the class size, the lesser student engagement is. This, therefore, is a wake-up call for all recipients involved in the sphere of teaching and learning because congested classroom environments tend to lower active learning opportunities while at the same time being prospects for deteriorated academic performance (Wright et al., 2017). In the same vein, when lecture halls are overcrowded, those existing inequities in educational access are intensified and, in one way or another, remarkably alter marginalized student populations (Munna & Kalam, 2021).

From the historical point of view, Chimbi and Jita (2021) opine that scholars have since taken into cognizance how maintenance of manageable class sizes is crucial as it helps to stimulate learning and teaching imperatives. Muhammad et al., (2021) allude that small class sizes are worthwhile learning spaces with upgraded student participation and efficient teacher-learner engagements. All these critical aspects are then equated to excellent academic outcomes. Nevertheless, learning institutions are held up in stringent measures of resource constraints' realities and budget limitations (Barrett et al., 2019). It, therefore, becomes worth mentioning that such barriers are a borderline towards achieving the expected educational

outcomes, thereby hindering ideal class size ratio achievement in higher education learning environments (Koc & Celik, 2015).

Parallel to such claims, Hong and Zimmer (2016) advocate for integrated learning technologies, with online platforms as the borderline to address the overcrowding constraints in lecture halls. It is further argued that learning systems with adaptive individual assessments can help mitigate negativity affecting large class sizes (Farrell, 2019). Supposedly, universities can optimize learning experiences to promote student success by leveraging technology-infused learning. Equally, Mensah et al. (2022) propose blended learning models with their underlying advantage of combining face-to-face instruction with online learning platforms. The blended learning mode is renowned for its beauty in permitting diverse learning preferences, thus optimizing physical classroom space. This promotes functional learning and accommodates varying class size limitations (Hidajat et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, understanding the complexities of the interplay between overcrowding, educational quality, and student experiences is essential for informed and re-imagined policy reforms (Carlson & Lavertu, 2018). For this paper to have examined some root causes and consequences of overcrowded lecture halls, this inquiry seeks to underwrite an understanding of challenges facing contemporary higher education with the identification of strategies that would foster ideal and diverse learning environments (Olayinka et al., 2022).

On the contrary, there are researchers with different opinions on this argument. These educational experts outline differing opinions on how overcrowded lecture halls impact the quality of education. As Franklin and Harrington (2019) are scholars advocating for redefined teaching and learning strategies to mitigate barriers experienced within the process, there is an argument that to embed some innovative and collaborative tactics; there should be a shift of focus from traditional lecture-based instruction. Schlaffer (2018), with his viewpoints that are also contrasting, affirms that translating to learning environments that are technology-enhanced can lead to active learning strategies likely to promote profound course material understanding, irrespective of how huge or small the classroom attendees are. These claims are meant to determine how crucial instructional quality and student engagement are when restrained to the class size and its underlying educational outcomes (Akin-Ibidiran et al., 2022).

On the same conflicting accord, there are scholars identified as critiquing overemphasized lecture-based tuition. Fredricks et al. (2019) argue that instruction conducted in a lecture-based mode for higher education settings can deprive some students because of its non-inclusive approach. Instead, learner-centered approaches prioritizing experiential learning opportunities are considered the best as they accommodate learner diversity. For universities to generate inclusive learning environments, diverse student needs should be the prerequisite. All the stated viewpoints, differing as they are, reflect a multifaceted nature debated in line with overcrowded lecture halls, thus compromising quality education in higher education. Seemingly, a crucial need is to unpin effective strategies to accommodate an augmented learning environment (Ikegbusi et al., 2022).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Embedded in this inquiry is the Jean Piaget Constructivist Theory by Waite-Stupiansky (2022). The Swiss psychologist Piaget is renowned for his numerous works on children's development. This theory posits that through real-life experiences and relations, learners begin to construct knowledge. As outlined by Waite-Stupiansky (2022), learners at this stage take an active role in building understanding yet creating a sense of the information around them. Through constructivism, active learning resumes because children need not be considered passive recipients of knowledge; instead, they need to be regarded as active builders with the power to engage with their environment, constructing understanding through self-exploration. Wertsch and Sohmer (1995) also argue that during this constructive learning process, learners build upon the existing knowledge and develop new and emergent ideas through social interaction and language cognition. As children encounter new experiences, they interpret information through assimilation and accommodation.

The constructivist theory has some educational implications. As students can effectively construct knowledge, overcrowded classrooms hinder such ability, reducing individual attention (Ismajli & Krasniqi, 2022; Kusi & Manful, 2019). Although social interaction is considered a critical stance in teaching and learning ideologies, learning environments that display an element of congestion normally lead to limited meaningful student-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions (Bernard, et al., 2022). For the prescribed curriculum to ignite the student's cognitive abilities, abstract problem-solving tasks are not efficiently administered in overcrowded classroom settings because aspects of experimentation and exploration are not easily put into effective practice due to overcrowding encounters.

For overcrowded classroom settings, this is a wake-up call for teachers, who are expected to create a technology-rich classroom environment that uses visual aids to stimulate exploration and discovery. Another critically identified implication is that research (Kusi & Manful, 2019) consistently reports that overcrowded classrooms seem to have a negative impact when student achievement is measured, which is aroused by increased distractions. One disadvantage of these implications is perpetuated absenteeism because students normally feel less connected to the classroom environment (Gallegos et al., 2024). Ultimately, as teachers are then made aware of understanding learner roles in knowledge construction, they are expected to be the sole providers of learning environments that are engaging and accessible, as well as catering to all diverse student needs.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was used to unpin the realities of quality education in overcrowded classroom environments. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) argue that this approach is used to investigate some lived experiences related to an existing phenomenon. Hence, research is science. An attempt was made to discover the actual realities of congested learning spaces as measured against education efficacy, and by so doing, I was trying to unfold the critical

dimensions of the problem confronting the education system (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). Therefore, it is worth noting that qualitative research methods were applied as they offered an understanding of the lecturer's perspectives, which are held within the overcrowded context of the lecture halls.

This study administered a case study design to unpin the problem investigated (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). A case study is a qualitative research design that is mostly observed as an intense investigation of a group, unit, or person. This method assists in extracting rich and in-depth data relating to the variables underpinning the investigated problem (Creswell, 2002). Furthermore, the steps undertaken when administering this type of design allowed for narrowing down the complex topic being investigated into controllable items, and this strategy helped me to gain an expanded perspective on the phenomenon of congested learning environments versus the quality of learning. As I collected detailed information for this case, I was cognizant that all cases investigated are bounded by both time and activity, so it was imperative to use specific collection procedures (Gubrium et al., 2012).

Instrumentation

This paper employed semi-structured interviews as data-gathering tools (Maree, 2020). The reason for administering this qualitative instrument was to explore the social complexities shaping lecturer experiences and perceptions thereof in overcrowded learning environments. Another essential aspect of these qualitative interviews was capturing human behaviour intricacies and attitudes based on working in congested lecture hall environments (Burke & Sass, 2013). These semi-structured interviews comprehensively explored lecturers' perceptions and experiences in overcrowded lecture environments as the interview schedule contained open-ended question types, and probing as follow-up questions provided a wide range of responses that, as an investigator, I had not anticipated. Another dimension brought about by probing was the challenges experienced by students in these congested learning environments as perceived by their lecturers, thereby affecting the processes of teaching and learning and likely to have an impact on learners' academic performance. How participants articulated their feelings and experiences perpetrated a deeper understanding of the investigated issue.

Population and Sampling

The population of this study comprises all university lecturers offering tuition in postgraduate programs for diverse disciplines. Tuition was offered to students at levels one to four enrolled in one university located in the rural area of the Eastern Cape Province. Three participants were then sampled as data informants (Demuth & Mey, 2015). The sampling strategy used for this qualitative investigation was purposeful (Creswell, 2014). Three purposefully nominated participants were interviewed to gather data. This identified cohort seemed the most relevant as they are university lecturers experiencing the glitches of congested lecture halls across the stated levels and have rendered services in this research site for the past couple of years.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was administered to explore complex phenomena, leading to an understanding of research participants' perspectives on issues relating to congested learning environments. Thematic coding as a qualitative research method was employed, greatly assisting in explicating patterns and themes that emerged from the textual data collected (Nieuwenhuis, 2013). With its flexibility and systematic nature, this qualitative data analysis procedure permitted the uncovering of underlying meanings. To outline a more detailed description of how this process was incurred within the context of this investigation, overcrowded lecture halls' impact versus educational quality, I familiarised myself with collected data. As I read and re-read transcripts and field notes, I comprehensively understood the content in context. Thereafter, text segments that were identical and alike were grouped, while also noting those categories dissimilar to each other. As I compared and contrasted codes and clustered related concepts together, I revisited data to ensure diverse participant perspectives. This led to identifying and forming patterns within the analyzed data (Gubrium et al., 2012).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure measures of validity and reliability, some strategies were employed throughout the investigation process. To cater for external validation, the sample used was representative in that lecturers selected as participants emanated not from one single department but across diverse faculty departments, thus leading to findings being regarded as generalizable. In line with the context, this study was conducted in a real-world setting where participants were allowed chances to share and reflect on their usual lecture hall environment. For this contextual relevance, real-life experiences were brought to the fore. In addition to that, to avoid compromising readers, in the introductory section, a clear definition of terminologies like congested lectures and educational quality was embedded for stakeholders involved to be conversant with the focus of the study. Such a strategy in research is considered construct validity. Henceforth, reliability was also ensured by being transparent regarding the methods administered. This includes giving specifics of the sampling techniques used to identify participants as well as instruments used as data gathering instruments.

Ethical considerations

When this investigation was conducted, this paper considered and addressed key ethical considerations (Creswell, 2012). Informed consent was obtained directly from the participants themselves. They willingly agreed to participate in the conducted inquiry as aspects of congested learning environments directly affected how their teaching pedagogies were administered. Upon realizing that pseudonyms would be used, participants felt much at ease, thereby removing identifying information from transcripts. This was done solely to ensure that participants' identities remained protected throughout the research. To observe these ethical issues, I wanted to uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct to respect participant rights (Kowal & O'Connell, 2004).

FINDINGS

Upon analysis of the gathered data, the study found that there is a substantial correlation between clogged lecture halls and weakening educational quality. It was reported by the concerned participants that students displayed some difficulties in fully concentrating and interacting with their lecturers when teaching and learning course material was comprehended in overcrowded settings. The major findings revealed that overcrowded learning environments result in lessened academic performance and narrowed student interaction.

Lessened Academic Performance

In line with this finding, S1 submitted:

I have been offering across first-to-fourth-year students for the past couple of years in this institution. It has since become a norm that our lecture halls seem overcrowded as they fail to consume the enormous student numbers currently registered for that module or program. I believe this leads to diminishing academic performance caused by the not-so-conducive learning environment.

Of the same sentiments, S2 contends:

I have noticed that for both summative and formative assessments, there is some negative correlation when measured against the backdrop of the class size. Most students tend to attain lower marks when compared to students in less crowded setups. This usually has an effect because it is tantamount to not achieving the expected learning outcomes.

S3 also lays some claims:

As I conduct face-to-face engagements with my students, due to the large enrolment, some are expected to attend whilst standing as no more chairs can accommodate them. For such practices, students typically display dissatisfaction and lack of attention. This indeed indicates some detrimental impact on teaching and learning efficacy. Moreover, such frustration highlights increased stress levels leading to disengagement by most students.

Narrowed Student Interaction

Debates within this finding resulted in S1 claiming:

As I complain about student performance in some instances, they would express their frustration caused by insufficient time for meaningful interaction with their peers regarding lecture hall discussions in an overcrowded environment. It seems as if their lecture hall's overwhelming class size impedes their ability to actively engage in group discussions, seek clarification, and even ask questions. This indeed leads to a sense of impartiality for teaching and learning processes to be considered viable.

Of a similar opinion, S2 commented:

A cohort of students once gave me a shocking surprise whilst I was just in the middle of my presentation by abruptly lifting their hands. Today, temperatures were extremely high, ranging from approximately 38 degrees Celsius. As I allowed them time to engage,

almost all of them reported they were disconnected from course content due to extreme heat, and as a result, they felt demotivated and lacked interest in proceeding with the lecture.

S3 argued:

Lecturing in overcrowded classrooms creates unfavourable conditions affecting both teachers and students. This overcrowding, caused by increased enrolment quotas, is associated with great distractions and disciplinary issues; filling classrooms with more students than intended can affect teachers' ability to teach effectively and students' ability to learn. The bigger the number of congested students, the noisier it gets, this normally causes a lack of concentration.

As indicated by the findings of this study, congested learning environments are detours to comprehension and communication efficacy (Venketsamy et al., 2020). Extreme noisy backgrounds experienced by lecturers and students were reported to lead to hearing difficulties during discussions and presentations (Ecole, 2021; Angrist et al., 2017). For students not to fully comprehend when lectures are conducted is a real hassle that has been noted to raise anxiety and stress levels as students can no longer perform efficiently due to the congested learning environments, they find themselves in (UNESCO, 2017).

For the adverse effects on educational quality, findings of this investigation report that noticeable variations are impacting overcrowded lecture halls, and this affects lecturers from diverse disciplines. Be that as it may, these experiences are equated to teaching pedagogies entangling the specified course content. In this regard, West and Meier (2020) allude that there are modules or courses that, for them to be rendered successful, hands-on experiments, group activities, and discussions are the fundamental approaches for use. Therefore, overcrowding disruptions perpetuate and compromise learning outcome efficacy (Jackson, Johnson & Persico, 2016).

Similarly, another important factor that emanated from the analysed data relates to equity and inclusivity perceptions underrating the educational environment. For students with individual impairments, accessing overcrowded learning spaces clearly indicates a lack of lecture hall accommodation (Loeng, 2020). This challenging factor equates to intensified disparities in accessing educational opportunities and academic success (Agbedahin, 2019). In addition, for congested lecture halls to be congested, this indicates the failure to accommodate diverse learning styles. This is an apparent marginalisation of students with unique needs yet emanating from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds (Kohler, 2020). Therefore, it becomes crucial that a multifaceted approach be considered as a functional strategy to address these disparities, considering issues of accessibility, inclusivity, and equity in educational policy and practice.

Within a stream of findings that emerged was also an impact factor that could be equated to job gratification and effectiveness. For lecture halls to be overcrowded, the ultimate outcome was reported to be declining meaningful student-lecturer interaction (Ogunode & Ahaotu, 2020). Such interaction challenges in overcrowded environments often lead to a deficit in

classroom management. For lecturers to be compromised on delivering high-quality instruction is a real strain that causes hassles and misunderstandings between both parties involved in the teaching and learning situation. Further than that, not attaining the expected throughput when academic attainment is measured, the likelihood for most people is normally reported to be heightened stress levels and uncertainty with their own or self-teaching roles. Therefore, it is imperative to foster a supportive and collaborative work environment that would help to sustain excellent student outcomes and an equitable state of mind as desired for functional and efficient human resource personnel.

With the very high and last note on policy and practice, this paper has identified gaps following the class size reduction policies (Mohammed & Kuyini, 2021). This calls for policy implications with the reduction of class sizes such that there would be upgraded educational outcomes, coupled with the allocation of resources like hiring additional teachers and constructing additional lecture halls (Adarkwah, 2022). Additionally, it is imperative to consider consistent teacher training on aspects of overcrowded classrooms (Matshipi et al., 2017). Following these claims, policymakers are expected to revert to the drawing board to redefine teacher-learner-ratio proponents. Closely examining the listed critical factors can help augment the implications for educational quality in higher education settings. Summarily, the findings of this study underscore how urgent it is to implement systemic reforms that would help address overcrowding and improve academic progression.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that universities prioritize learning environments that are measured in a manner that enhances quality education. Implementing strategies like reduced class sizes, expanded teaching practices catering to diverse learning partialities, and resource investing could entail this notion. Further, there seems to be a need to leverage and embed technology learning platforms, alleviating physical infrastructure strain.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to illuminate the relationship between overcrowded lectures and the quality of education rendered by students registered and enrolled in one university located in the rural area of the Eastern Cape Province. As fundamental findings, this study discovered that when learning environments are congested, they significantly impact lowered academic performance and narrowed student interaction. The study, therefore, concludes that when lecture halls are overcrowded, they pose a hazardous and threatening situation to the worthiness of education. For this study to explicate overcrowding essentials versus student learning experiences, it then becomes imperative that some mitigation interventions be put in place to curb the acknowledged challenges. Consequently, a conducive and productive academic sphere could be attained through implementing improvement measures for instructional delivery.

Limitations

These are a set of aspects that have the potential to affect the scope of research conclusions. For stakeholders involved in the educational sphere to define subjective concepts differently, such as educational quality, it might have an adverse effect on the scope of the study. With their diverse schools of thought, policymakers, teachers, students, administrators, and the wider community as a critical body, for them to be subjective of educational quality simply depicts confusion and misinterpretation. Another limitation besides the definition of terms might relate to generalizing the study findings. Let us say, for interest's sake, if the study might consider undertaking research and identify a university located in a developed country but with limited infrastructure; in this case, specifically, the concept of congestion might be experienced in a different form when compared to the one situated in a rural setting with expansive facilities.

Future Studies

In line with the identified gap by this paper, that of silence by policymakers in the class size reduction, and in close interrogation of the study findings, future studies could reconnoiter more on overcrowded lecture hall dynamics and explore teaching pedagogies, classroom layout, and teacher-learner ratios. To benefit the sphere of academia, further probing could also investigate the long-term effects of overcrowding versus student retention and graduation throughput rates, equating all these suppositions to the quality of education and access.

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