

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Exploring Factors of Absenteeism Among Students Attending Community Medicine Department

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Abstract

Background: Frequent absence from classes may lead to improper learning and poor academic performance. Absenteeism can make teaching - learning environment unwelcoming and impacting those also who attend classes regularly. **Aims & Objectives:** To explore factors responsible for absenteeism among second professional students attending Community Medicine Department and to formulate recommendations to deal with absenteeism. **Material and Methods:** A Cross sectional study was conducted among 132 second professional medical undergraduate students attending Community Medicine Department in a teaching hospital. A self-designed pre validated questionnaire comprising of various sections related to teaching –learning factors was used to explore factors responsible for student absenteeism. Faculty perception regarding student absenteeism and recommendations formulated to deal with it were recorded separately. **Data analysis:** Data was entered in MS Excel and Chi Square test was used for analysis. **Results:** Among 132 study participants, majority of the participants (62.1%) were females who were residing in hostels. Highest percentage of absenteeism (40.1%) was during examination time. Extracurricular activities like sports/gym, browsing net and parties were significantly ($p < 0.001$) associated with absenteeism. **Conclusions:** Absenteeism can adversely affect academic performance and low attendance can demotivate teachers also to teach with keen interest.

Keywords

Absenteeism, Faculty, Perception, Medical Students, Community Medicine

Introduction

Frequent absence from classes may lead to improper learning and poor academic performance. Despite strict rules, absenteeism of students is a major concern. Absenteeism refers to frequent absence from classes without any good reason.(1). Student's commitment to learn courses such as Medicine is reflected by high attendance which enables him to grasp both basic and clinical subjects and equips him with adequate aptitude and skills to perform best in Medicine.(2,3)

Student absenteeism has a wider implication on the institute, parents and in turn society as well. In terms of quality, absenteeism is a waste of educational resources,

time and human potential. (4) It disturbs well-being of class, making teaching - learning environment unwelcoming and impacting those also who attend classes regularly. Numerous studies have identified factors linked to absenteeism such as; class size, poor lecturing methods, lack of interest in subject personal factors like ill health, excessive socialization and unfavourable learning environment.(5)

Studies have shown that better attendance is related to higher academic achievement for students of all backgrounds, but particularly for students with lower socio-economic status.(6) .Despite introduction of new computer based soft wares which assist in making lectures more presentable and interesting absenteeism still

remains a major concern for a healthy Teaching – Learning process(7).

Main aim of medical education is to produce good clinicians with in depth knowledge and reasonable clinical skills which can be achieved with high motivation to attend the classes. Since, low attendance in lectures has been a trend which Community Medicine Department has been witnessing since a long time, this study was planned in order to explore factors responsible for student absenteeism and to formulate recommendations in order to deal with it effectively.

Aims & Objectives

1. To explore factors responsible for absenteeism among second professional students attending Community Medicine Department.
2. To formulate recommendations to deal with absenteeism.

Material & Methods

Study Design: A Cross sectional study was conducted among 132 second professional medical undergraduate students i.e 2017 batch attending Community Medicine Department in a teaching hospital after seeking approval from Institutional Ethics Committee.

Study Population: The study was conducted among 132 second professional medical undergraduate students, attending Community Medicine Department in a teaching hospital.

Study Area – The study was conducted among 132 second professional medical undergraduate students, attending Community Medicine Department of Punjab Institute of Medical Sciences

Study Tools: After planning and seeking approval from Institutional Ethics Committee, validation of the questionnaire was done from 2016 admitted batch of students and this was followed by sensitization of students and faculty to absenteeism. A self-designed pre validated questionnaire was employed for the purpose of the study. The questionnaire was designed to seek responses regarding absenteeism from students as well as faculty. The questionnaire comprised of various sections. First section contained information on demographic variables like age, sex, area of residence and second obtained information on individual factors linked to absenteeism, including common factors responsible for absenteeism like schedule of the classes, lack of interest, senior's influence etc. Information related to personal factors, teaching -learning factors related to absenteeism was recorded on five point likert scale. The study embraced relevant factors, considerably influencing absenteeism like personal factors any health issue, feeling home sick, peer pressure, poor family relationships etc. Class room environmental factors like size of the class room, ventilation and sitting arrangement were also recorded.

Faculty perceptions and recommendations were considered in an attempt to tackle absenteeism.

Study Strategy- Students were explained the purpose of the study and questionnaire was administered to them ensuring strict confidentiality and anonymity. Both student and faculty perception regarding absenteeism was recorded on a questionnaire. Out of 150 students, 132 participated in the study as 18 students were absent on the day of the survey. The questionnaire was distributed in lecture hall while the students were seated and were not allowed to discuss among themselves.

Data Analysis

Data was entered in MS EXCEL and analyzed via SPSS version 21. Chi square test was used to establish association between absenteeism and different variables. p value <0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

Ethics Consideration – The study was conducted after seeking approval from Institutional Ethics Committee, participation of students was on voluntary basis , ensuring confidentiality and anonymity after obtaining their consent .

Results

This Cross-sectional study was conducted in an attempt to explore factors responsible for absenteeism among second professional students attending Community Medicine Department. 150 students were approached for this survey and out of 150 students, 132 participated in the study on voluntary basis and 18 students did not attend the class on the day of survey. The study conducted among 132 students revealed following findings.

Among 132 students who participated in the study ,87.1% were from urban area and 12.9% were from rural area. 62.1% of the study subjects were females and 37.9% were males. A large proportion of students (56.1%) belonged to age group of 20-22 years and majority i.e 57.6% were residing in hostel.

[Table 1](#) Depicts baseline characteristics of the study participants. A large proportion of students (66.7%) expressed self-motivation as a factor for joining MBBS. Majority of the students i.e 68% walked on foot to college and only 16.6% used bike as a mode of transport to commute.78% students were able to reach college within 15 minutes from their place of residence. The most common place to have meal was college canteen and café as 53.8 % students took meals at college canteen /café. Majority of the study participants i.e 62.1% expressed that their meal timings did not coincide with their lectures.

[Figure 1](#) Reveals absenteeism as per timing of the classes. Highest percentage of absenteeism (40.1%) was during examination time, indicating students were concentrating more on the subjects in which they had to appear for exams. This was followed by missing classes (35.6%) held in the morning and 19.7% skipped weekend classes as most of them were residing in hostels and had to go home on weekends.

[Figure 2](#) represents common factors, responsible for absenteeism. A large proportion (33.3%) students felt that it is a third professional subject and they already feel overburdened with other subjects. 18.2% responded that there was no assessment of the subject in the first two years which was another contributing factor to absenteeism. Lack of interest in the subject and inconvenient schedule of the classes were factors mentioned by 12.9% and 7.6% students respectively.

[Figure 3](#) shows factors related to learning environment, responsible for absenteeism. A large proportion of students (40.2%) mentioned ill ventilated lecture halls, especially during summers as the most common factor for skipping Community Medicine Classes. The second most common factor (33.3%) revealed was unfavourable learning environment. Overcrowding in class rooms, uncomfortable sitting arrangement and technical factors were mentioned by 12.9%, 6.1% and 4.5 % students respectively.

[Table 2](#) represents personal factors related to absenteeism. The study revealed that 30.3% participants agreed that frequent health issues are responsible for absenteeism. 28% students agreed that going late to bed is another factor related to absenteeism as students browse internet at night, compromising their sleep. 22% students agreed that poor time management is another factor. This was followed by home sickness, poor family relationships, peer pressure as revealed by 17.4%, 12.1% and 12.1 % students respectively.

[Table 3](#) shows student's perception regarding teaching-learning factors related to absenteeism. Majority of the students (38.6%) agreed that certain topics were dry and they were asked to learn on their own. 31.1% students responded that they felt they could catch up even if certain topics were missed.

[Table 4](#) depicts factors determining absenteeism. As it is evident from the table absenteeism among females (74.3%) was significantly (p value= .003) higher as compared to males (25.7%). Frequency of absenteeism was significantly higher (p value =.003) among urban natives (97.5%) as compared to rural natives (2.8%). Having meal in college canteen and café was significantly ($p < 0.001$) associated with increased frequency of absenteeism, revealing that students spent considerable leisure time in the college café. Absenteeism was not associated with season although a large proportion of students (72.2%) remained absent for more than four times per month during festivals but this difference was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

Faculty Perception Regarding Absenteeism

Majority of the faculty members (30.8%) perceived lack of assessment as the most important factor responsible for absenteeism.

Recommendations given by faculty in an attempt to deal with absenteeism are as follows:

The most common recommendation (30.7%) was feedback is important in order to timely assess possible reasons responsible for absenteeism followed by stringent action like detaining students if they are not regular and are not doing well in academics. ([Table 5](#))

Other recommendations were teaching students in small batches and limiting duration of the class till 45 minutes.

Discussion

Student absenteeism is a matter of great concern in higher education especially in a Medical College. Frequent absenteeism can adversely affect student's performance and leads to considerable wastage of educational resources. It also demotivates teachers to teach with keen interest. Main Aim of Medical education is to produce responsible clinicians with reasonable skills and this can only be achieved if students not only have regular attendance but are motivated enough to attend classes with great interest. Students skip classes because of student centred, home and society related causes. Department of Community Medicine has been witnessing absenteeism among students since a long time, especially among second professional students. Therefore, this study was conducted in order to explore factors regarding absenteeism and formulate recommendations in an attempt to deal with it effectively.

The study will be discussed in accordance to the objectives outlined earlier.

Student Factors related to absenteeism

Absenteeism as per timing of the classes

The current study revealed that majority of the students (41.1%) responded that absenteeism was highest during examination time. This finding is consistent with observations of a study conducted by Tripura K et al (2015) Tripura in which 55.8% students agreed that absenteeism coincided with preparation of internal exams.(8) These findings are also consistent with findings of Alghamdi A et al (2016) Umm Al- Qura, Mecca, Saudi Arabia in which it was found that majority of student absenteeism (78.6%) was during pre- exam period.(2) A high number of student absenteeism during pre exam period could be explained by their allotting of this time for intensive study before the exam.(1) The study also revealed that 35.6% students responded that they skipped morning classes. These findings are similar to a study conducted by Desalegn et al (2014) in Hawassa University Ethiopia. Missing early morning classes could be attributed to going late to bed.(5)

Student's Perception Regarding Teaching-Learning Factors Responsible for absenteeism

The current study revealed that a large proportion (48.5%) students agreed that they were not interested in certain topics. 32.6% students did not find teaching style of few teachers interesting. These findings are supported by study conducted by Wadesango N and Machingambi (2011) South Africa it was documented that there is a link

between absenteeism and lack of interest in the subject and poor teaching strategies.(9) This is further supported by study conducted by Tripura K et al (2015) Tripura in which poor teaching strategies were responsible for student absenteeism.(8) Lack of interest in the subject matter could be attributed to the fact that course work is vast, rigorous and demanding(5) Poor teaching strategies make the lecture boring. Inaccessibility to lecture content (31.1%) and Teacher's persona (31.1%) were other common factors hindering regular attendance. This is further supported by a study conducted by Massingham P and Herrington T (2006) in which it was reported that accessibility to lecture content in form of slides /videos have their own contribution to absenteeism.(10) In a study conducted by Sharma P et al (2017) Haryana, it was observed that fifty percent of students agreed that teachers personality affects their understanding.(11) These findings are consistent with the current study in which 31.1 % students responded that teacher's persona influences teaching – learning process.

Factors related to learning environment

Students may skip classes if they find class environment is not desirable and conducive enough for learning. In the present study it was found that a large proportion of students (40.2%) mentioned ill ventilated lecture halls, especially during summers as the most common factor for skipping Community Medicine Classes. Overcrowding in class rooms, uncomfortable sitting arrangement and technical factors were mentioned by 12.9%, 6.1% and 4.5 % students respectively. Similar findings were reported by Dashputra A et al (2015) in which poorly ventilated lecture halls, overcrowding and uncomfortable sitting arrangement were important factors contributing to absenteeism.(12) The second most common factor (33.3%) revealed was unfavourable learning environment. This finding is similar to findings of Desalegn et al (2014) and Alghamdi A et al (2016) in which study participants reported unfavourable teaching strategies as one the major causes of absenteeism.(5)

Relation of extra-curricular activities with absenteeism

Sharmin T et al (2016) Dhaka documented that many college students have poor time management skills. The most obvious signs of poor time management skills are spending considerable time in extracurricular activities like browsing net, hanging out with friends, sports / gym and sleeping.(13) These findings are synonymous to the current study in which it was observed that indulgence in sports /gym, browsing net and hanging out with friends was significantly ($p < 0.001$) associated with increased frequency of absences as 44.4% students who were absent for more than 4 times per month were involved in sports /gym. Browsing net and hanging out with friends were other factors associated with increased frequency of absenteeism and this difference was highly statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). (Figure 4)

Personal Factors related to absenteeism

In a study conducted by Dashputra A et al (2015) it was observed that common reason for absenteeism is sickness. Unexpected life situations can occur like illness of student or family problem and then student tends to miss class.(12) This finding is consistent with the finding of present study 30.3% participants agreed that frequent health issues are responsible for absenteeism. 28% students agreed that going late to bed is another factor related to absenteeism as students browse internet at night, compromising their sleep.

Teacher Related Factors

In the present study it was found that 48.5% students strongly agreed that teacher's efforts are important to generate interest in the subject. 43.8 % agreed that creative teaching techniques are important. Similar findings have been documented in study conducted by Hunter and Tetley (1999) Australia who found that the professional education students will not miss lectures that are interesting and those considered important to their degree.(14)

Other Factors- In the current study it was observed that absenteeism among females (74.3%) was significantly (p value= .003) higher as compared to males (25.7%). Frequency of absenteeism was significantly higher (p value =.003) among hostelier (77.8%) as compared to day scholars (22.2%). This could be attributed to the fact that majority of the participants were females and were residing in hostels. The day scholars live under supervision of their parents and have certain restrictions. As remaining absent is a matter of personal choice, students living in hostel do not have much binding to attend the classes.

Outcome- Factors related to absenteeism were explored. Faculty and students were sensitized to absenteeism and recommendations formulated can help in tackling absenteeism.

Conclusion

Absenteeism especially in Community Medicine department is becoming a trend. In the current study it was found that absenteeism was high during preparation time. Unfavorable learning environment and disliking of teaching style of few teachers were other factors contributing to absenteeism. Spending considerable time on activities like browsing net, parties and gym were other factors responsible for absenteeism among students. In the light of new curriculum ultimate aim is to produce responsible clinicians with good skills and in depth understanding of all the subjects which is only possible if students are motivated to attend classes regularly.

Recommendation

Factors responsible for absenteeism should be dealt with effectively as Medical profession deals with human life and ultimate aim is to produce responsible clinicians with good skills and in depth understanding of all the subjects

which is only possible if students are motivated to attend classes regularly.

Limitation of the study

The study was carried out for a short span and only one batch was included.

Relevance of the study

The factors responsible for students absenteeism were explored and recommendations were formulated by faculty in an attempt to tackle absenteeism. Students would be motivated to attend more classes in Community Medicine, which in turn will not only improve attendance but also academic performance. With improved attendance, teachers will also get a boost and they will feel more satisfied. Over all this will enable in producing an Indian Medical Graduate who is more responsible and can cater to needs of the community.

Authors Contribution

All author contributed equally.

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Tables

TABLE 1 BASELINE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENTS

	N	%
Reason for Joining MBBS		
Self Motivation	88	66.7%
Parents wish	21	15.9%
Social status	8	6.1%
Peer Influence	15	11.4%
Mode of Transport used to Commute		
College bus	4	3%
Own Car	10	7.6%
Car pool	6	4.5%
Walk on Foot	90	68%
Bike	22	16.6%
Time taken to reach college		
0 -15 minutes	103	78.0%
15- 20 minutes	12	9.1%
>20 minutes	17	12.9%
Place to have meal		
College Canteen/Cafe	71	53.8%
Restraunt	30	22.7%
Home	31	23.5%
Meal timing coinciding with lectures		
Yes	50	37.9%
No	82	62.1%

TABLE 2 STUDENTS PERCEPTION REGARDING PERSONAL FACTORS RELATED TO ABSENTEEISM

Personal Factors responsible for absenteeism	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Frequent health issues	18 (13.6%)	20 (15.2%)	24(18.2%)	40(30.3%)	30(22.7%)
Poor Time Management skills	14(10.6%)	16(12.1%)	51(38.6%)	30(22.0%)	21(15.9%)
Going late to bed and lack of sleep	29(22.0%)	10(7.6%)	29(22.6%)	37(28.0%)	27(20.5%)
Feeling home sick	42(31.8%)	23(17.4%)	29(22.0%)	15(11.4%)	23(17.4%)
Poor family relationships	53(40.2%)	30(22.7%)	17(12.9%)	16(12.1%)	16(12.1%)
Peer pressure	53(40.2%)	30(22.7%)	17(12.9%)	16(12.1%)	16(12.1%)
Unfavourable hostel environment	47(35.6%)	25 (18.9%)	30 (22.7%)	14(10.6%)	16 (12.1%)

TABLE 3 TEACHING FACTORS RELATED TO ABSENTEEISM

Teaching Factors related to absenteeism	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Do not find teaching methods of few teachers interesting	16(12.1%)	14(10.6%)	24(18.2%)	43 (32.6%)	35(26.5%)
Do not understand language use by teachers	40(30.3%)	42(31.8%)	20(15.2%)	25(18.9%)	5(3.8%)
Not interested in certain topics	18(13.6%)	16(12.1%)	21(15.9%)	64(48.5%)	13(14.4%)
Inaccessibility to lecture content	20(15.2%)	20(15.2%)	30(22.7%)	43(31.1%)	11(8.3%)
Teacher’s persona influences teaching-learning process	17(12.9%)	24(18.2%)	39(29.5%)	41(31.1%)	11(8.3%)
Do not attend classes of strict teachers	44(33.3%)	7(5.3%)	53(40.2%)	26(19.7%)	2(1.5%)

TABLE 4 FACTORS DETERMINING ABSENTEEISM

Factors	Absences				P Value
	1-2 Times/Month	3-4 Times/Month	>4Times	Total	
Gender					
Male	19 (25.7%)	10 (45.5%)	21(58.3%)	50 (37.9%)	.003
Female	55(74.3%)	12(54.5%)	15 (41.7%)	82(62.1%)	
Native					
Rural	16 (21.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1(2.8%)	17 (12.9%)	.003
Urban	58(78.4%)	22 (100%)	35(97.5%)	115(87.1%)	
Current Residence					
Day Scholar	37 (50.0%)	11(50.0%)	8(22.2%)	56(42.4%)	0.01
Residing In Hostel	37(50.0%)	11(50.0%)	28(77.8%)	76(57.6%)	
Place To Have Meal					
College Canteen /Cafe	42(56.8%)	11(50.0%)	18 (50%)	71(53.8%)	<.001
Restraunts	8 (10.8%)	6(27.3%)	16(44.4%)	30(22.7%)	
Home	24(32.4%)	5(22.7%)	2(5.6%)	31(23.5%)	
Season					
Summer	3 (4.1%)	1(4.5%)	2(5.6%)	6(4.5%)	>0.05
Winter	22 (29.7%)	9 (40.9%)	8 (22.2%)	39(29.5%)	
Festivals	49 (66.2%)	12 (54.5%)	26(72.2%)	87(65.8%)	

TABLE 5 FACULTY’S RECOMMENDATION

Recommendations by Faculty	N	%
Feed back is important in order to timely assess possible reasons responsible for absenteeism	4	30.7%
Survey should be done to explore factors responsible for absenteeism on weekends and festivals	2	15.3%
Students should be taught in small batches with duration snot more than 45 minutes and practical should employ role play	2	15.3%
Weekend classes should be excluded from schedule	1	7.6%
Creating informal environment and relaxation period in betweenwill make teaching learning more welcoming	2	15.3%
Mentor mentee Programme can resolve personal factors related to absenteeism	1	7.6%
Taking firm action like detaining students	3	23.7%

Figures

FIGURE 1 ABSENTEEISM AS PER TIMING OF CLASSES

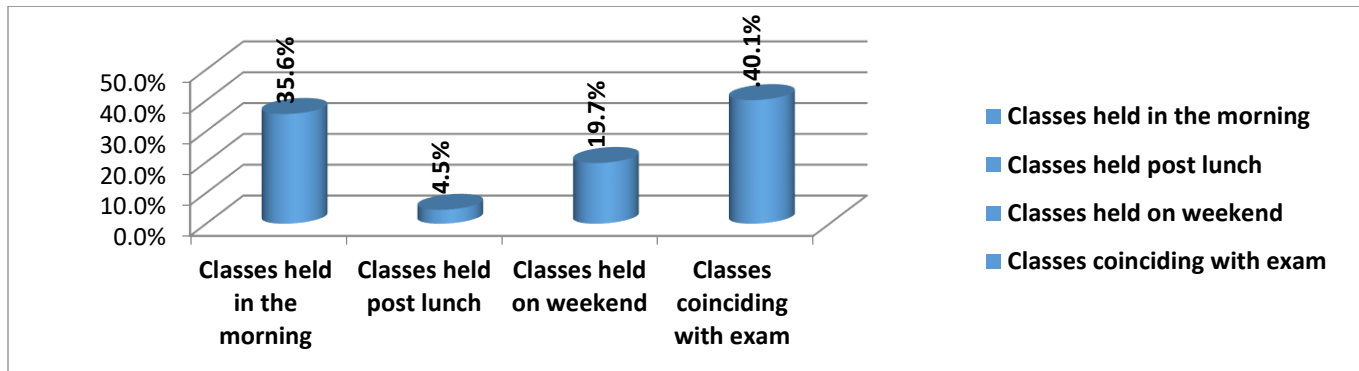


FIGURE 2 STUDENT’S PERCEPTION REGARDING COMMON FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR ABSENTEEISM

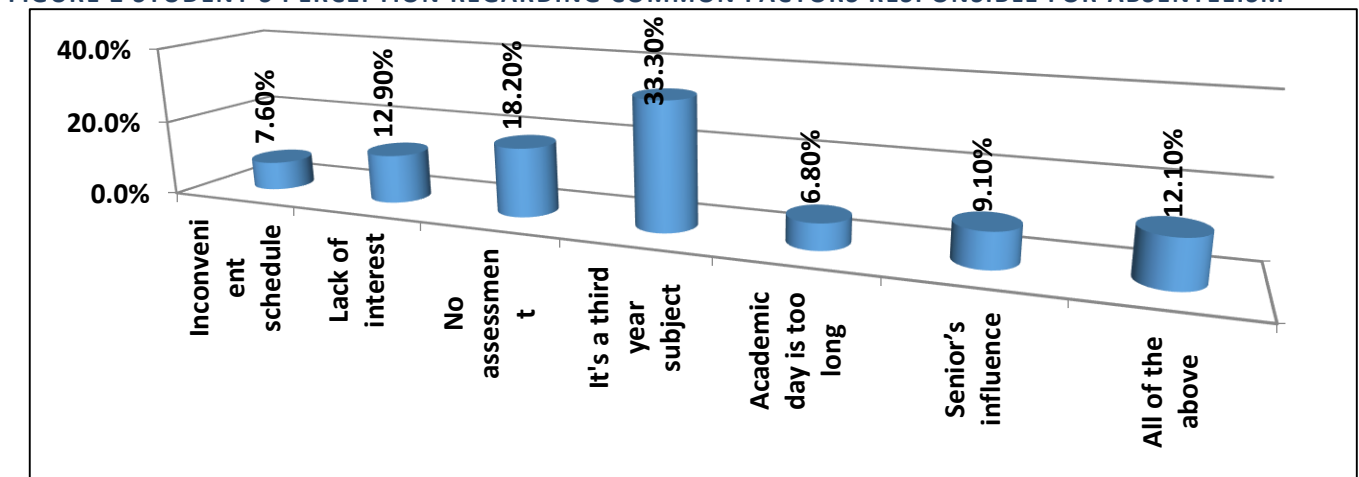


FIGURE 3 FACTORS RELATED TO LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

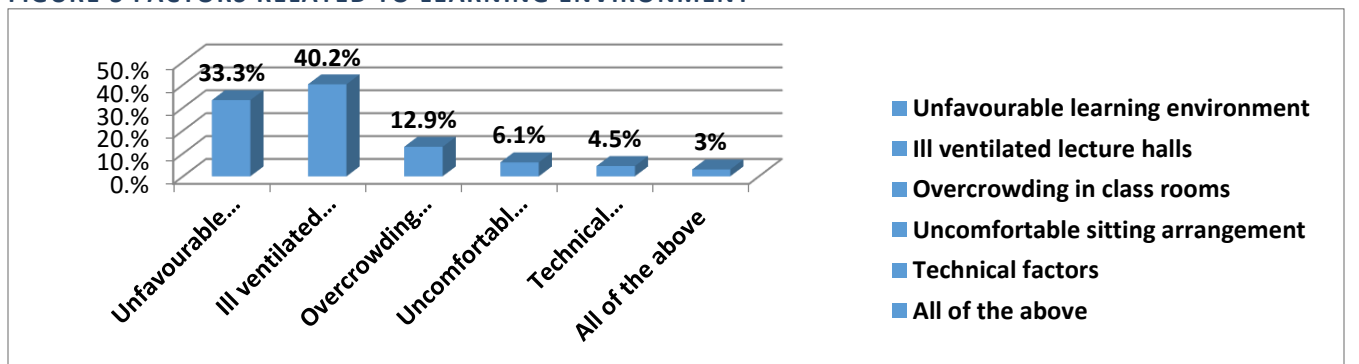
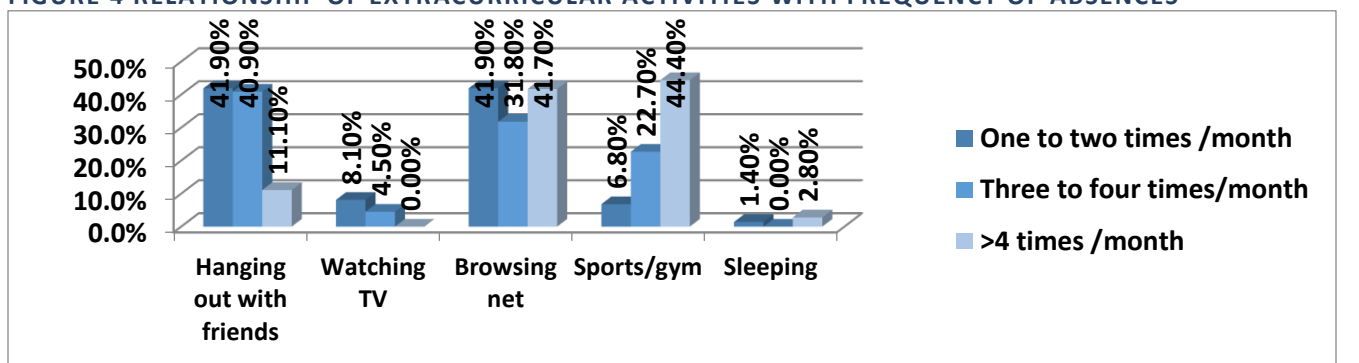


FIGURE 4 RELATIONSHIP OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES WITH FREQUENCY OF ABSENCES



$\chi^2 = 29.1, df = 8 p < 0.001$