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Exploring the Experiences of the Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) Club at the University of Zimbabwe: Implications for Student Entrepreneurship Development

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Abstract: This was a study into the experiences of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) students at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). Against the backdrop of shrinking economies and rising unemployment, university students are facing the risk of entering a jobless market. This makes it imperative for them to develop entrepreneurial competencies while they are still at school. SIFE is one such platform and its distinction lies in it being a student initiative. The paper was guided by the following questions (i) 'What are their motivations to take part in SIFE?' (ii) 'What has been the learning experience through the SIFE programs?' (iii) 'How much has SIFE contributed to the students' entrepreneurial skills and knowledge development?' (iv) 'What challenges are they experiencing?' (v) 'How much institutional support have they received?' and (vi) 'How can the SIFE programme be improved for the benefit of student entrepreneurship development?' The research was based on mixed methods as the choice of research design, cluster sampling and use of survey questionnaire to gather data. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Most students thought their curriculum was relevant and they also benefitted a lot from complementary SIFE activities. They joined SIFE due to its reputation and prospects of business learning as well as links to successful SIFE alumni. They face challenges which include time management and funding.

Key words: Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE), entrepreneurship, curriculum, business skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Background to SIFE

This was a study into the experiences of Students in Free Enterprise (SIFE) students at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). A global phenomenon, Students In Free Enterprise (SIFE) is a student based business development organization which inculcates generic business start-up competencies among university students. The rigorous training includes marketing research, development of marketing and business plans and fundraising among others. (Plumly et al 2008:11) At the University of Zimbabwe, the SIFE club has been operating invariably like other universities. However, the experiences of SIFE students differ from university to university. This research seeks to investigate the experiences of the SIFE club at the University of Zimbabwe. This is done to find out their motivations, existing opportunities and challenges, their learning curves and experiences, impact of the programme, the institutional support they have and need and their views on how SIFE can be improved.

According to Nunamaker, (2007) as a response to the growing frustration of employers have with the levels of professionalism exhibited by graduating students experiential learning has become popular. Experiential learning offers non-traditional orientation to learners emphasising creativity and risk-taking. The SIFE club provides business grooming through an

entrepreneurial experience, giving students “new business start-up issues such as writing marketing and business plans, obtaining a business loan, and applying for licenses and permits”. (Plumly et al 2008:17; CalvertV and Kurji, 2012:5)

The study of student driven SIFE activities takes place against a background where scholars (Jones et al, 2011:417) question the effectiveness of entrepreneurial education in taught format. On the other hand, scholars like Bagheri (2012:539) emphasise “entrepreneurial leadership competencies, particularly among university students” which cannot be taught per se. Eickhoff (2009:5) concurs that such competencies are “a fundamental precondition for successfully establishing and operating an enterprise.”

This research would distinguish between the faculty-centric understanding and perception of taught entrepreneurial skills and the SIFE student-centric nurturing dimension. A distinctive understanding of these two dimensions is crucial for the effective and holistic development of university based business development initiatives in light of the emergent knowledge economy. This would also address Udu’s (2014) concern with the multitudes of university graduates who throng private and public sector corporations/institutes looking for advertised and unsolicited employment opportunities when all the time options/alternatives for entrepreneurship are available.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship is anchored on ideation; applicable ideas Ama Aka (2014). Entrepreneurship has been defined as a dynamic interaction of entrepreneurial attitudes, activity, and aspiration that vary across stages of economic development (Acs & Szerb, 2009). Pedagogy in entrepreneurship can be traced back to 1947 when Harvard Business School introduced courses addressing entrepreneurship. The teaching of entrepreneurship and requisite skills requires innovative pedagogy such as internships or business plan competitions not usually part of the standard university teaching program (Volkman, 2004). Volkman (2004) identifies the following entrepreneurial skills to include- leadership, creativity, marketing/sales, negotiation, administration, time management, self-motivation, financial management and a range of interpersonal skills.

In recent years higher education institutions have been under pressure to re-align their business model towards becoming entrepreneurial universities driving innovation and creativity (Clark, 2004). Kirby (2005) and Rae (2004) opine that teaching of business is not adequate for one to become an entrepreneur. Universities must re-align the students thinking and behaviour and this requires a change in content and pedagogy. According to a UNESCO report (Delors, 1996) emphasis is for a balance between different ways of learning is stressed. The report identifies four pillars of education in the 21st century to include: a) learning to know conceptual, theoretical, how to learn); b) learning to do practical, applied knowledge and skills including entrepreneurship to affect change); c) learning to be; and d) learning to live together (as diverse culture).

Obanya (2009) opined that education in Nigeria should focus on imparting the following skills- generic skills of learning, communication, adaptability, creativity, team spirit, literacy, information and information technology (ICT) fluency and lifelong learning. Crijiin and Vermeulen (2007) and Cuervo et al. (2007) viewed that entrepreneurship was an integral part of the economy further challenging tertiary institutions to intervene socially and economically. Entrepreneurial theory should be also at centre of standard curriculum. Entrepreneurship eclectic theory focuses on psychological, sociological, economical theories among others (Ama Aka (2014). Psychologists opine that there is an inner urge for desire to change (Joseph Schumpeter, 1934; McClelland, 1961; and Hagen Everett, 1963. Sociological theory views a person as a motivating factor for entrepreneurship (Max Weber, 1949; Thomas Cochran 1965 and Frank Young 1971. Economic theory emphasizes economic principles of demand and supply as drivers of one becoming an entrepreneur (G.F. Pananek (1965), J.R. Haris (1967) and Kozo Yanamura (1968)

In literature reviewed debate is abound as to how entrepreneurship can be taught or is teachable (Volkman 2004, Aman Aka, 2014, Jones, 2004). The general agreement is however that it can be taught but requires that its pedagogy is devoid of the esoteric and modularize approaches associated with standard university program delivery.

In their youth entrepreneurship studies Ng et al. (2013) cites Ashley-Cotleur, King, and Solomon (2009) two categories of motivators to include demographic variables, (2) attitude, value or psychological factor. Robichaud, McGraw and Roger (2001) observed four kinds of categories: (1) extrinsic reward, (2) autonomy, (3) intrinsic reward, and (4) family safety as motivating factors for entrepreneurship interest in youth. Pretorius and Shaw (2004) highlighted obstacles to entrepreneurship development to include not enough capital and lack of resource, ability to take risk. Papulova and Makros (2007) also highlight the lack of management skills as barrier to youth entrepreneurship development. In concluding their study Ng et al. observed that to become entrepreneurs youth needed to be really serious to start and own a business. They also require mentorship and technical skills necessary to run businesses.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In formulating the research questions, the study was guided by the quest to investigate the experiences of the students who are members of the SIFE club at the University of Zimbabwe. Thus the research questions are designed to extract specific aspects about the various experiences in the course of their work. The study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What are their motivations to take part in SIFE?
2. What has been the learning experience through the SIFE programs?
3. How much has SIFE contributed to the students' entrepreneurial skills and knowledge development?
4. What challenges are they experiencing?
5. How much institutional support have they received?
6. How can the SIFE programme be improved for the benefit of student entrepreneurship development?

The various questions of the questionnaire are designed along the lines of these questions.

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the experiences of the SIFE students at the University of Zimbabwe, the researchers have chosen to use mixed methods as the choice of research design. According to Johnson & Onwuegbuzie (2004) Mixed methods has the enable the researchers to approach the study from a multiplicity of perspectives, concepts and approaches in the context of the same study project. Yink (2009:41) also notes that the use of research methods broadens and strengthens the study through the convergence of evidence. Lingard et al (2008:460) perspective provides an important elaboration on the fact that beyond integration of methods during the collection and analysis of data, a central key is the framing of a clear and strategic connection between/among the methods and instruments that are 'mixed'.

The research shall use cluster sampling whereby through conducting simple random sampling within specific clusters (Suhr, 2009:1) at SIFE. Considering the description of business activities conducted by SIFE students in Plumly et al's(2008:17) portrayal, the different members are at different levels of development regarding business start-up issues (writing marketing and business plans) capitalising (obtaining a business loan) and making licensing applications. Thus the experiences are different, making it necessary to sample them in their clusters.

The survey questionnaire shall be used to collect important baseline information to collect a foundation for systematically understanding the student's experiences. This is done using various benchmarks. The survey questionnaire had both questions yielding quantitative responses (close ended questions) and qualitative responses. The quantitative survey data shall be processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Subsequent to the analysis of the survey data, the researchers shall carry out focus group discussion (FGDs) groups to discuss the key experiences of the respondents within the context of their group dynamics. Some of the key issues and themes

would then be pursued through key informant interviews with those distinguished students who have managed to achieve high scores in SIFE competitions and produced outstanding perspectives during the FGDs. The interviews will enable the researcher to probe deep into deep seated elements in the experiences of the students. This makes it possible to capture unique and high value opportunities for synergy with university business development institutional mechanisms.

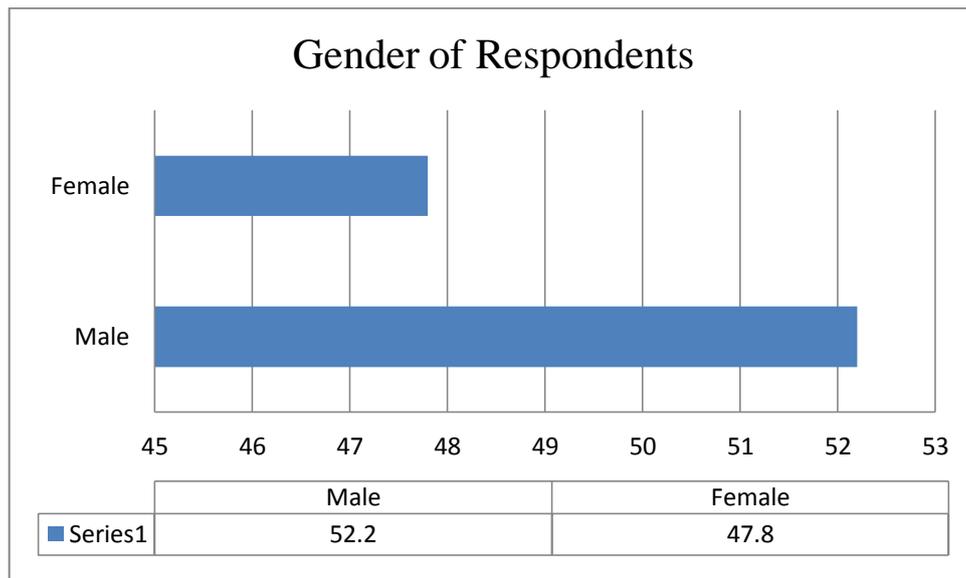
In the end it is hoped that the inquest into the experiences of the students at SIFE can open new horizons for the partnership between students (pursuing autonomous initiatives) and the university structures and processes.

V. STUDY FINDINGS

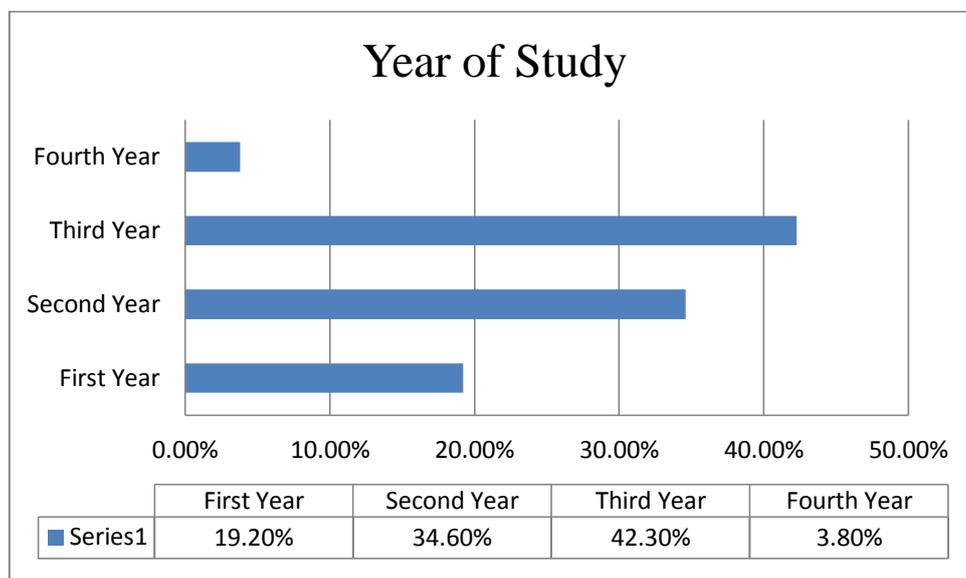
The following is a presentation and analysis of the data that was collected from the active SIFE members at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ). The data is divided into a section on demographics, frequencies of independent variables.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The following data shows the demographic characteristics of the SIFE students’ club at the University of Zimbabwe (UZ).



The majority of the students (52.2%) are male while the minority (47.8%) are females. The SIFE activities are therefore dominated by male students. The following data, is concerned about the students’ year of study.



The majority of the members (42.3%) of the SIFE club are in their 3rd year, followed by those in the second year (34.6%), followed by those in their 1st year (19.2%) and finally those in their fourth year (3.8%). The researchers also conducted a cross tabulation against the position of a student and their year of study and the Pearson Chi Square (p) shows statistically significant results.

Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|--------------------|---------------------|----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 64.063 ^a | 42 | .016 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 47.840 | 42 | .248 |
| N of Valid Cases | 26 | | |

The cross tabulation between the respondent's year of education and their position in SIFE produces statistically a significant relationship, ($p=0.016 < 0.05$ at 95% confidence level). Thus there is an association between a student's year of study and their position in the club.

What are their motivations to take part in SIFE?

The data on the motivations to join SIFE are divided into first the manner by which they joined SIFE and the reasons why they joined SIFE. The first section deals with the methods by which they joined SIFE.

Top among the methods of joining SIFE was the influence of advertising.

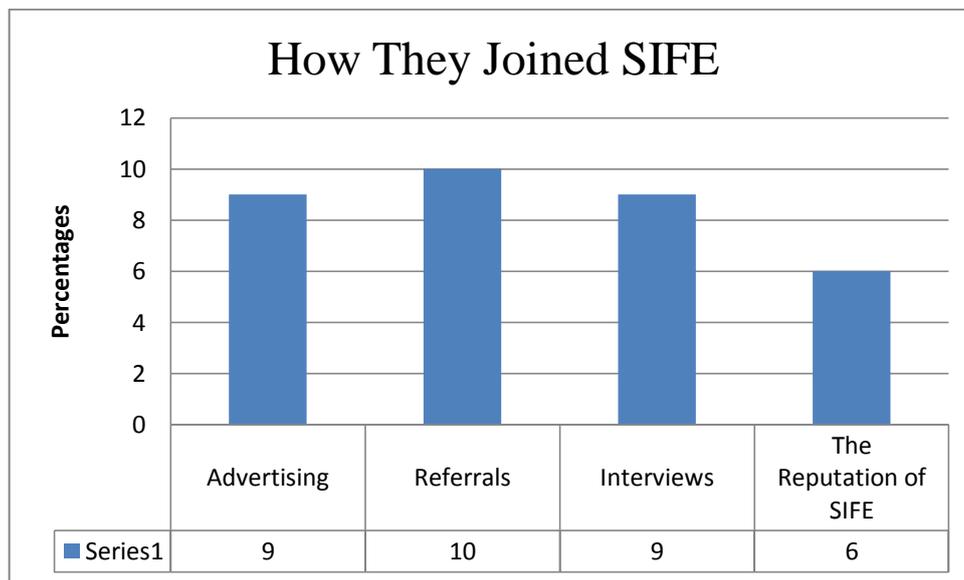
The influence of advertising in attracting SIFE membership is very influential in attracting students to the UZ SIFE club. The key forms of advertising are (i) ordinary posters in strategic areas (ii) faculty of Commerce notice board (iii) newspaper articles about SIFE and (iv) online advertising which includes SIFE website, Twitter and, Facebook page.

The next most important factor was the influence of referrals. Most students would say they were invited by friends, pro active SIFE members and classmates. The other students would say they got information on SIFE from the life skills coordinators and during orientation.

The next most important factor was the SIFE interviews. It follows that after the posters have been put up, many students show up for the SIFE interviews. A lot of the students got to be interested after attending these interviews, even if some may not have joined in the same year they were interviewed.

The reputation of SIFE is another major motivation for students to join the club. The following are some of the most captivating responses from students based on the reputation of the club. They would say things like: "I was intrigued by the combination of business entrepreneurship and community service"; "I met a friend who gave me an insight on the club and how it benefited me as an entrepreneur and businessman to be"; "... I researched what it was about and I was interested"; "... I got to understand the great work they are doing to change the lives of the people and I was keen as well as passionate to be a member and work effectively with them" and "It was through their hard work that I was inspired to join them." Thus it is clear beyond doubt that the reputation of the club is a major contributor to the membership.

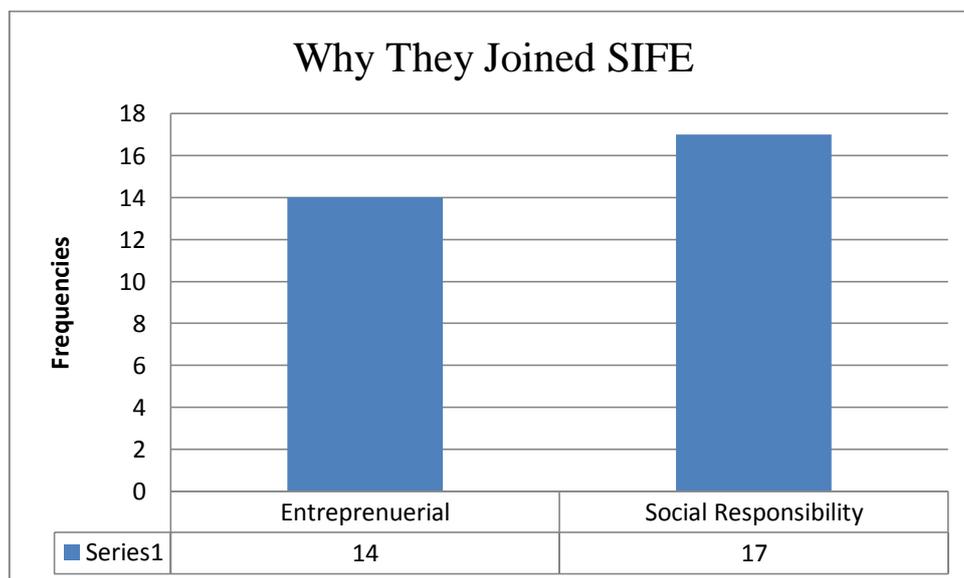
Having understood the different dynamics, the different responses were codified into themes under the same topics and quantitized. They show the following patterns illustrated in the table below.



The vast majority of the students joined through referrals, followed by advertising and interviews and lastly the reputation of the club.

Reasons for Joining SIFE

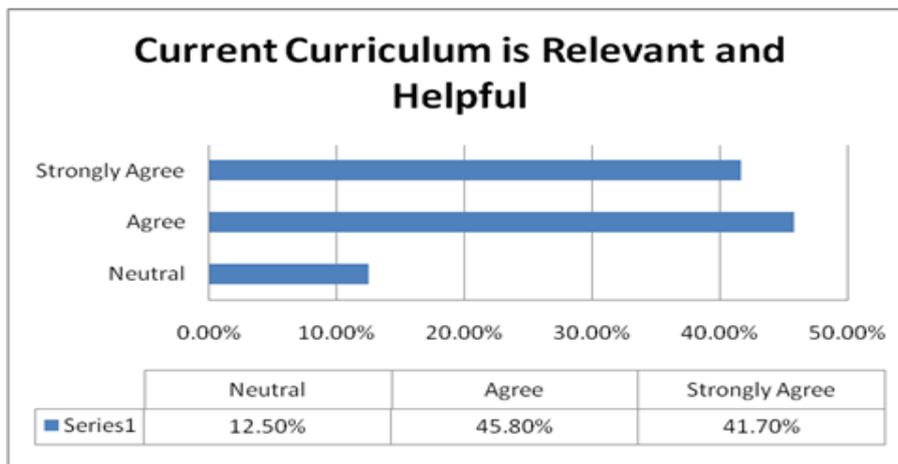
“The two main themes that emerged from the data analysis were (i) ‘an interest in an interest of learning entrepreneurial/business skills’ and (ii) ‘Social Responsibility/Philanthropy’. The various responses were quantitised and they are illustrated in the table below.



It is quite interesting that most of the students indeed had a business interest, but were also equally moved by the need to exercise social responsibility and philanthropy.

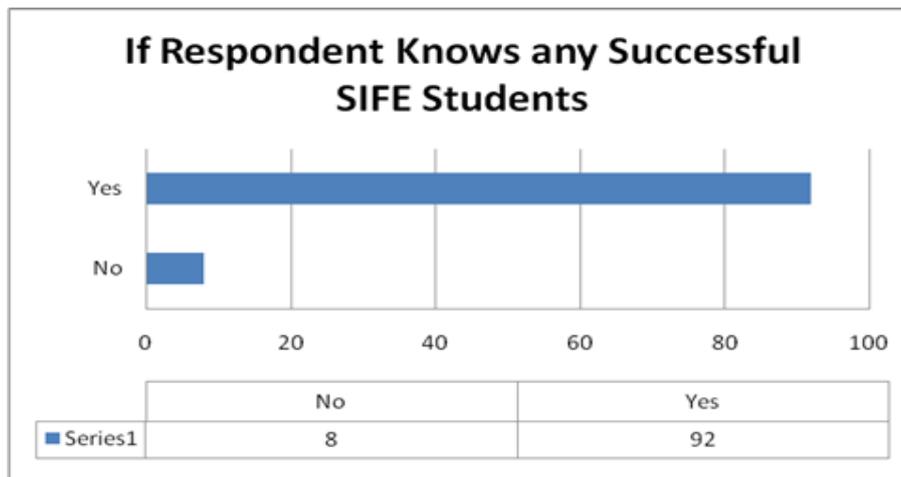
What has been the Learning Experience through the SIFE Programs?

The next section is concerned about the learning experiences of the students during their time in the club. The first factor was concerned about the relevance of their curriculum to their SIFE activities.



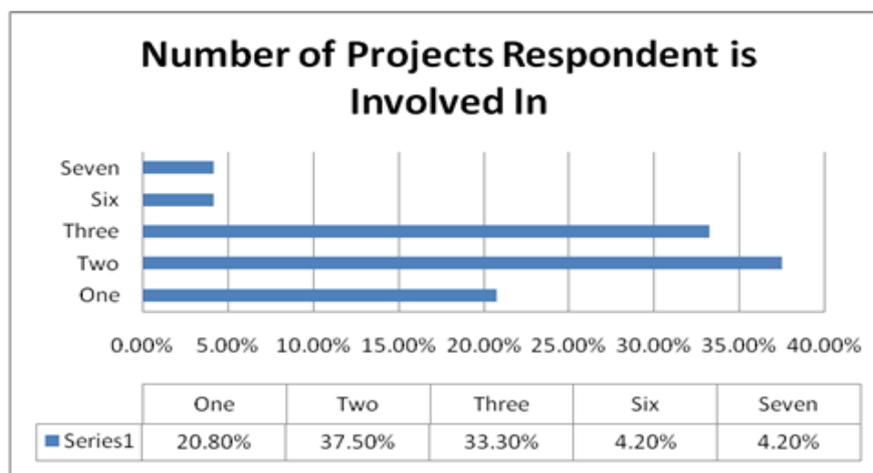
The vast majority of the students (87.5%) agree that the current curriculum is relevant and helpful while 12.5% are neutral. Thus the curriculum is generally relevant for their activities in the business club.

The next data is concerned about if the students knew anyone who has been involved in SIFE which would act as a motivation for vision building.



92% of the respondents know some successful SIFE students while only 8% do not. Thus knowledge of successful SIFE alumni is a major factor during their learning curve that promotes their participation in the club.

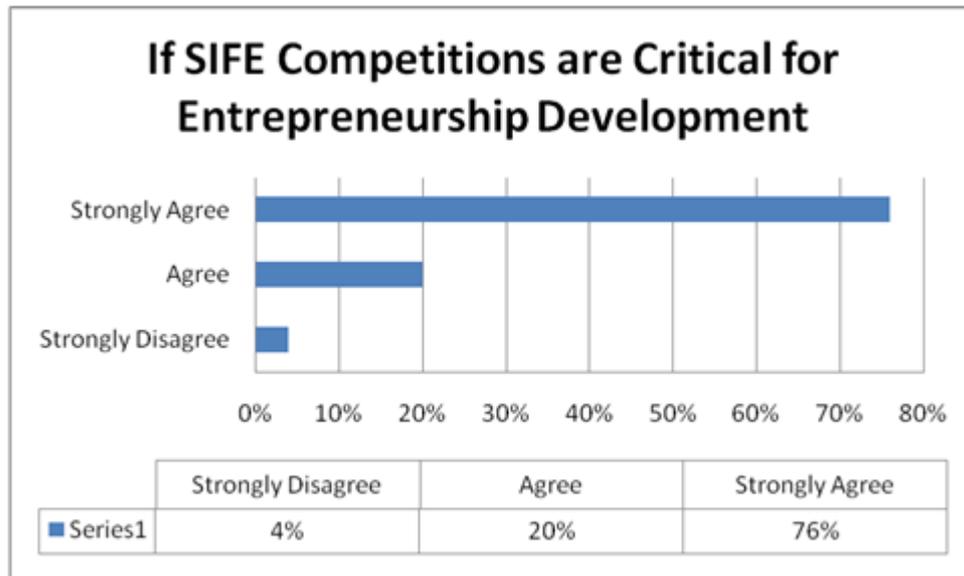
Next, the researchers sought to investigate the number of projects that the students were involved in. This is illustrated in the section below.



The highest number of students were involved in two projects (37.5%) followed by those with three projects (33.3%); a single project (20.8%) and finally six and seven projects at 4.2% each) Thus most students were involved in two or three projects on average while 8.4% were involved six and seven projects and another 21% involved in only one.

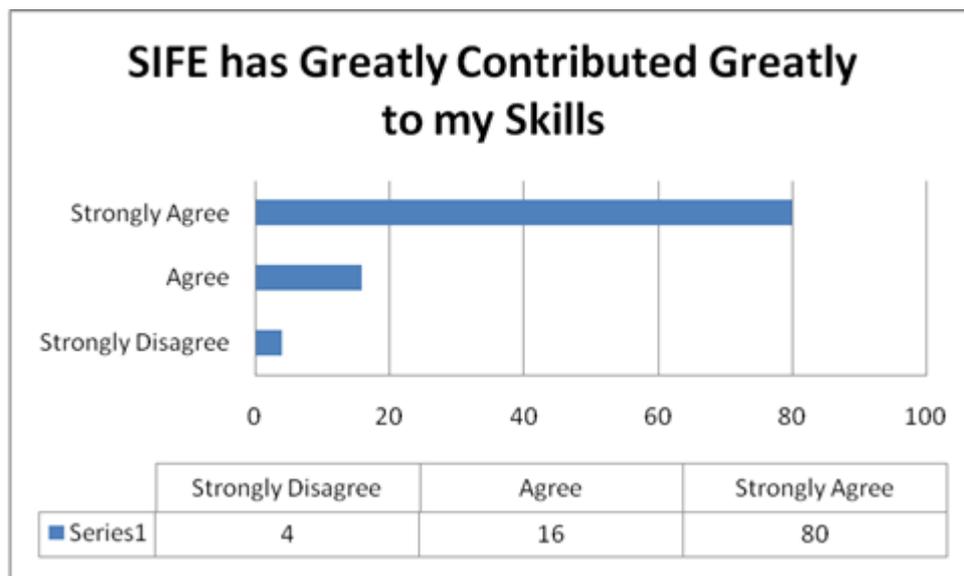
How much has SIFE contributed to the students’ entrepreneurial skills and knowledge development?

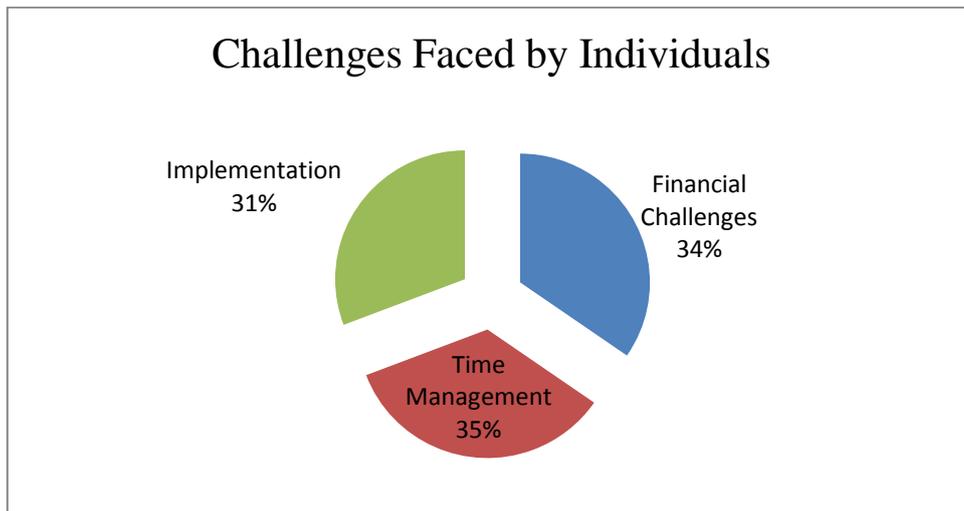
The following section is concerned about the students self reported opinion on the importance of SIFE competitions to the development of their entrepreneurial skills.



96% of the SIFE students think that the competitions are critical for their entrepreneurial development while 4% do not. Thus the competitions have a huge impact on the development of the club members’ entrepreneurial skills.

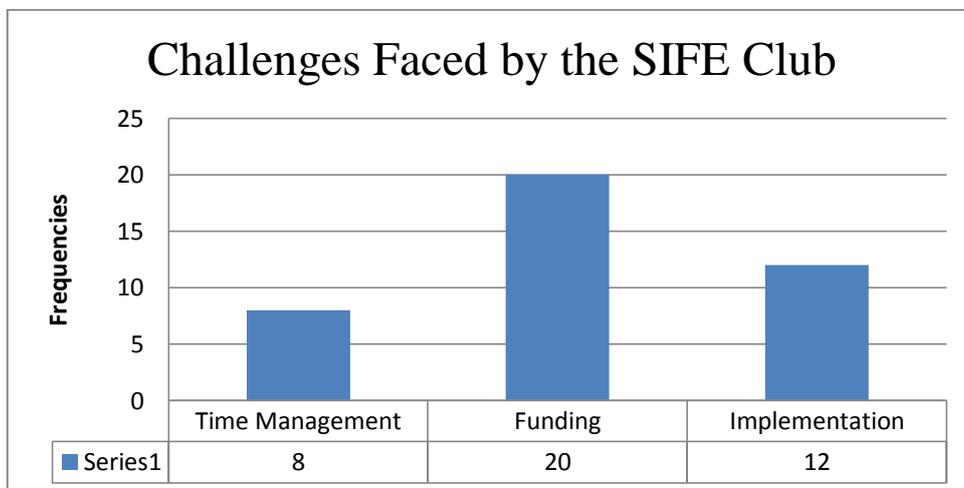
The next question was a general impression on the contributions of SIFE on the development of the students’ business skills.





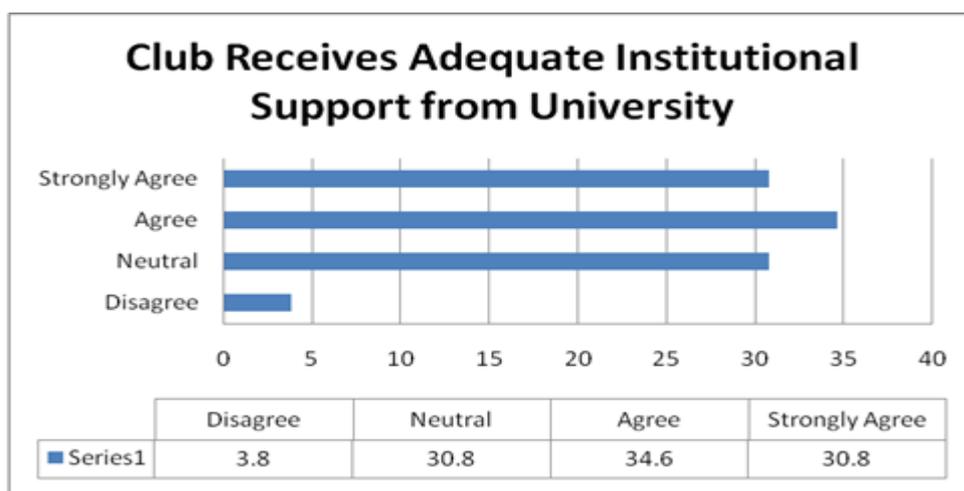
Most students face mainly challenges of time management (35%), followed by financial challenges (34%) and lastly implementation of the business innovations (31%).

The following section deals with challenges of SIFE as a club not the challenges faced by individual students.



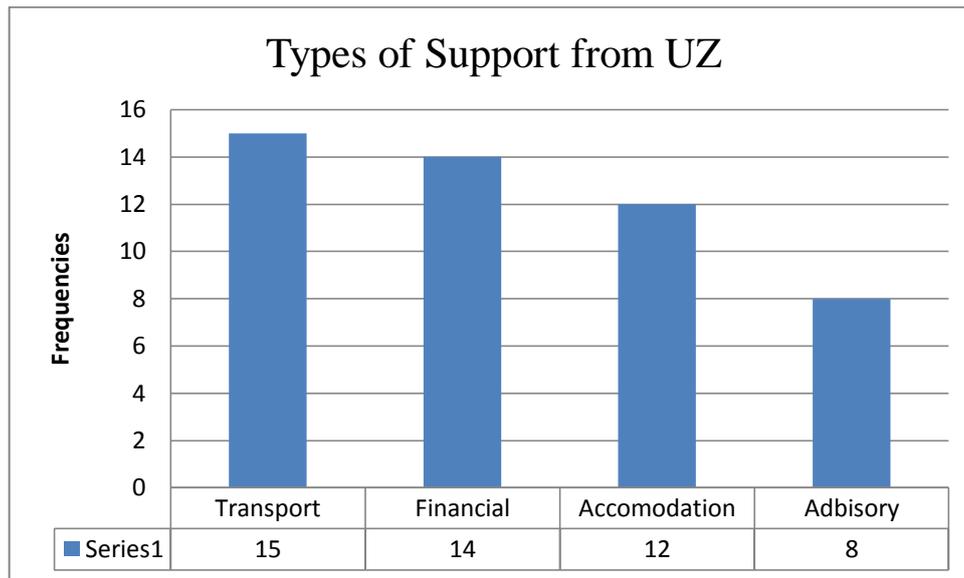
The club faced similar challenges as those faced by individual students. However the club at large faced higher funding implementation and implementation challenges than the individual students.

The next section is concerned about the different types of institutional support that the students receive at the club.



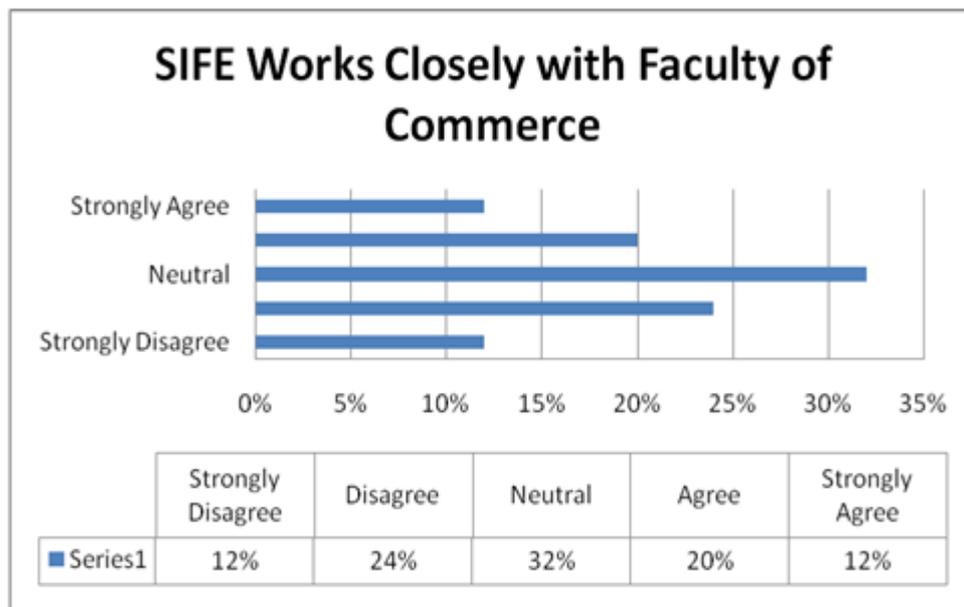
65.4% of the students agree that the club gets sufficient support from the university, 30.8% were neutral and 3.8% were in disagreement. Thus most of the students agree that they generally get sufficient support from the university.

The next section is concerned about the different types of support they receive from the university.



Most of the support from the UZ is in the form of transport, followed by financial support, then accommodation and lastly advisory. The club therefore receives a significant amount of support from the university.

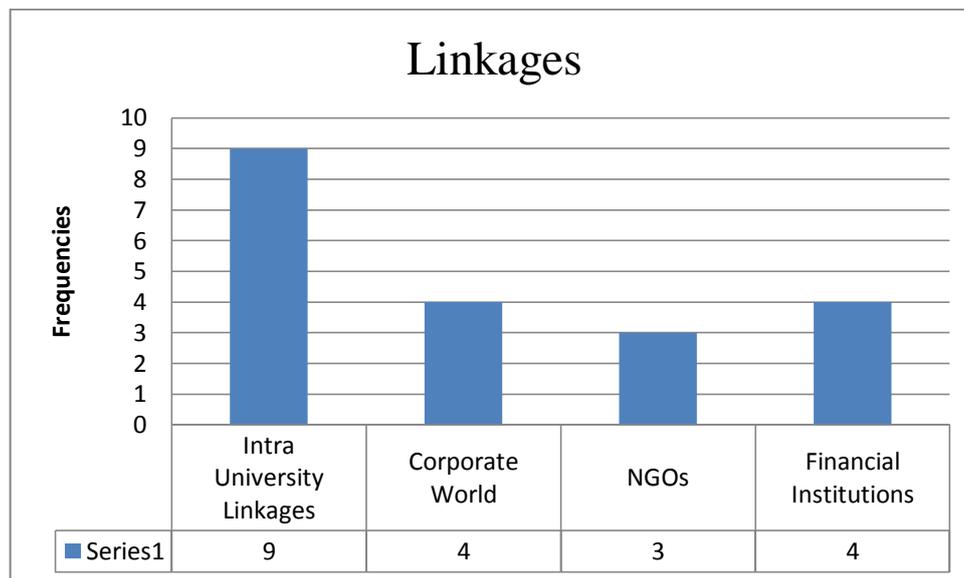
The next data is concerned about the level at which the club works with the faculty of Commerce.



36% of the students hold the view that SIFE students works closely with the Faculty of Commerce, 32% do not agree while 32% are neutral. Although the students are generally ambivalent on this issue, the majority of them indicate that they cooperate with the faculty of commerce.

How can the SIFE programme be improved for the benefit of student entrepreneurship development?

The final section is concerned about the different ways in which the SIFE club can be improved. The first section shows that the students indicated a number of institutional linkages which may help the club to thrive more.



Most of the students think that intra university linkages are important to drive the club to a higher level of efficiency. The next most important types of linkages that were identified are (i) linkages with the corporate world and (ii) linkages with financial institutions. Lastly the students requested linkages with NGOs. The other random answers which emerged from the students self reported perspectives are linkages with: (i) “successful entrepreneurs”, (ii) “ministry of youth”, (iii) “societies around Zimbabwe and the globe”, (iv) “other clubs doing the same thing as SIFE”, and (v) UZ “alumni.”

VI. SUMMARY

The respondent population was dominated by male students (52.2% male; 47.8% female) giving the findings a male bias. The majority of the members (42.3%) of the SIFE club are in their 3rd year, followed by those in the second year (34.6%), followed by those in their 1st year (19.2%) and finally those in their fourth year (3.8%). A cross tabulation was conducted between the year of study and against the position of a student and their year of study and produced statistically significant results. The data on the motivations to join SIFE are divided into (i) how they came to know about SIFE and (i) the reasons why they joined SIFE. Regarding the manner they discovered SIFE, posters at faculty noticeboards, newspapers, SIFE website, referrals from friends, SIFE members, classmates, SIFE interviews, and during orientation sessions. Regarding their motivation for joining SIFE, most cited the reputation of SIFE due to its appeal to prospective entrepreneurs and businessmen as well as their hard work. Regarding their learning experiences, 87.5%) thought the current curriculum was relevant, and 92% of the respondents professed knowledge of successful SIFE students in business. Most students between two projects (37.5%) followed by those with three projects (33.3%) and a single project (20.8%). Few cases had 6 or 7 (4.2% each).

Next the research sought to investigate the students self-reported perceived contributions of SIFE to their entrepreneurial skills and knowledge development. 96% of the SIFE students think that the competitions are critical for their entrepreneurial development and another 96% of respondents think that SIFE has greatly improved their skills. Coming to the challenges they face, both at individual and at institutional level they cited ‘time management’ ‘financial challenges’ (34%) and ‘implementation’ of the business innovations (31%). Regarding support from the university 65.4% of the students said they get it sufficiently. Specifically the types of support includes transport, financial, accommodation and advisory. They are ambivalent about their linkages with the Faculty of Commerce: 36% saying they work closely and 32% disagreeing. Lastly they suggested that SIFE would benefit from linking with the corporate world, financial institutions, NGOs, successful entrepreneurs, ministry of youth (iii) societies around Zimbabwe and the globe, other clubs doing the same thing as SIFE UZ alumni.

VII. CONCLUSION

The SIFE club has a lot of potential for student led business development. It is a relevant stakeholder in light of the emerging paradigm in Zimbabwe whereby governments are weaning off universities from funding. This makes it urgent for the different stakeholders to consider methods of entrepreneurship and business development. SIFE has a huge potential to attract students and instil entrepreneurial capabilities that may assist them in raising funds and also providing a proactive solution for graduates who are entering a job market with low intake levels and high levels of unemployment.

It is thus recommended that the SIFE club improve their planning systems of work flow design so that they can manage time and balance between school and entrepreneurship. They should engage mentors to help them improve on their project implementation. They should also design business projects which generate funds during the course of their term at college and not only emphasise on corporate social responsibility without livelihood security. They should also nurture a closer relationship with the Faculty of Commerce.

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