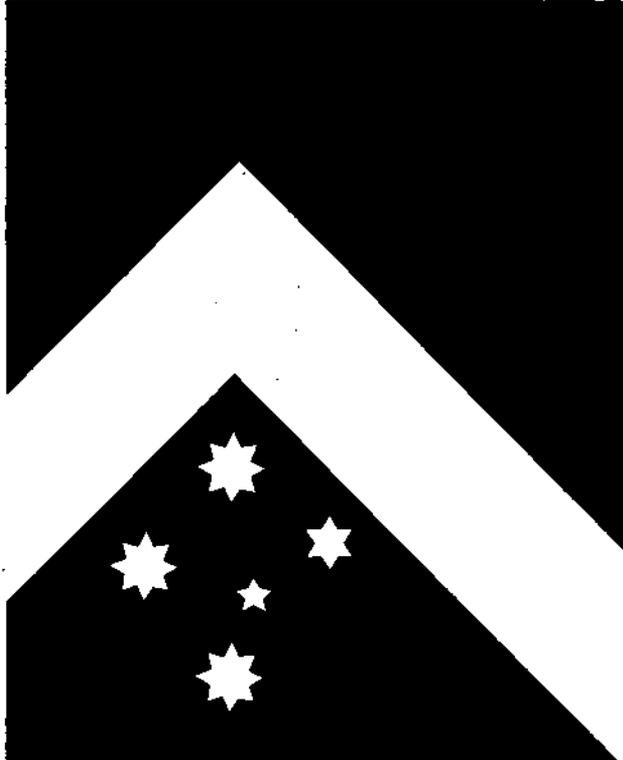


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Weekend Schools:  
The Gippsland  
School of Business  
Experience



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FACULTY OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

# School of Business and Electronic Commerce

## Working Paper Series

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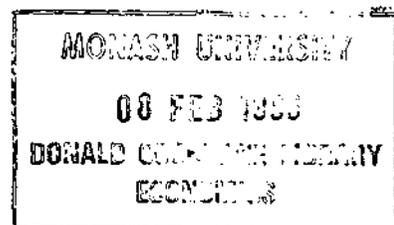
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**Monash University  
Faculty of Business and Economics  
School of Business and Electronic Commerce**

**Working Paper Series**

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**WEEKEND SCHOOLS:  
THE GIPPSLAND SCHOOL OF BUSINESS  
EXPERIENCE**

**by  
Lyn Horsfield and Geoff Perks**

**ISBN 0 909170 73 8**

**Abstract:**

*In his article "Weekend School Survey", Parer (1988, p.297) speaking of Monash University Gippsland Campus (MUGC), claimed that students who do not attend Weekend Schools are disadvantaged. The current view of the School of Business, MUGC, is that no distance education student who is unable to attend a Weekend School should be at a disadvantage from non-attendance. This paper seeks to evaluate the reasons for Weekend School attendance and examine the question whether students who do not attend Weekend Schools are disadvantaged. It was found that although there is a very strong demand for Weekend Schools by distance education students, the relationship between Weekend School attendance and students final grades was difficult to evaluate due to inherent limitations.*

**November 1995**

## Introduction

Communication is critical to the success of distance education. Communication can take various forms, and there has been much debate over what services should be offered to distance education students. In the early 1980s the printed word was considered the most important medium for communication in distance education (Holmberg, 1981, p.61). Other communications including radio, television, audio and video tapes as well as face-to-face contact were viewed as supplementary. In the 1990s there has been a growth in the use of communication methods that were previously considered supplementary. This paper specifically deals with the issue of face-to-face contact as a communication mode for distance education. Parer (1988, p.297) has stated that face-to-face contact may not in fact be supplementary. In his article, "Weekend School Survey", Parer's closing comment regarding Weekend Schools at Gippsland Institute (now Monash University - Gippsland Campus, MUGC) was:

...there is an underlying assumption by many course developers that shortcomings in Study Guides and packages can and will be compensated for at Weekend Schools; and *students who do not attend are disadvantaged*. (emphasis added) (Parer 1988, p.297)

This paper will commence where Michael Parer concluded. While students not attending Weekend Schools were perceived to have been disadvantaged in the late eighties, at present (1994), the view of the Gippsland School of Business (MUGC) regarding Weekend Schools is strikingly different to that of Parer's opinion. Professor Murray Cree (1993, Acting Head, Gippsland School of Business) declared, as from second semester 1993, the official policy on Weekend Schools in the School of Business was:

Weekend Schools are primarily intended to expose students to the university way of life. All content presented should be a supplement to the stand alone materials contained in study guides and unit guides. No formal lectures are to be given. However, topic seminars in reasonable numbers are desirable. *No distance education student who is not able to attend a weekend school should be at a disadvantage from non-attendance*. (emphasis added) (Cree 1993)

This paper seeks to evaluate the reasons for Weekend School attendance at the Gippsland School of Business, and examine the question whether students who do not attend Weekend Schools are disadvantaged. A study of the academic results of those students who did and did not attend Weekend Schools was undertaken to determine if in fact non-attendance, as suggested by Parer, is a disadvantage. In addition, as a result of a cloud of uncertainty surrounding the continued existence of Weekend Schools in the School of Business, a survey was undertaken to determine the reasons behind students attendance at Weekend Schools, and possible alternatives they would support in the event of Weekend Schools being phased out.

### Background

The concept of Weekend Schools at MUGC originated in 1972 when distance education was introduced to the then Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, within the School of Social Science. Max Hopper, the Foundation Director, who had previously been involved with distance education at the University of New England, introduced the "New England model" for distance education in Gippsland. This resulted in the Weekend School.

In the past, a Weekend School has been described as incorporating:

- formal lectures (where the lecturer addresses the students on the subject area)
- seminars (two-way discussion between the lecturer and students)
- tutorials (two-way discussion between the lecturer and students on pre-determined questions).

As indicated above, within the School of Business, Weekend Schools are being used for seminars.

Generally four Weekend Schools are offered to distance education business students per subject per semester. Each Weekend School provides for subject seminars of approximately 2-4 hours duration, all held on the Gippsland campus. Weekend Schools have been offered to distance education students as a part of the educational service.

Students studying via distance education generally have domestic responsibilities (family); are employed either full-time or part-time; between the age range of 25-35; and are studying to either reinforce their current employment position, to enhance future employment prospects, or to facilitate proposed career changes.

In the School of Business, Weekend School attendance is optional. In courses run by Schools where interaction skills are imperative (such as Welfare Studies), attendance at Weekend Schools is compulsory.

#### For and against Weekend Schools

The arguments put forward for the need for Weekend Schools by the Gippsland School of Business academic staff, included:

- student acquisition of knowledge of subject material
- a meeting place for external students to form study groups
- motivation of students
- a unique option offered by Gippsland, providing a competitive advantage in attracting potential students.

The arguments for the phasing out of Weekend Schools, included:

- it is unfair to offer Weekend Schools to a select group of people (i.e locals or those willing to travel)
- expensive in terms of time/dollars
- abolish Weekend Schools to force quality, in terms of a "stand alone" package.

Parer's study in 1988 found staff views regarding Weekend Schools similar to those presented above. Staff in 1988 agreed that Weekend Schools were beneficial in terms of student interaction and the formation of study groups, and for the clarification of subject material, though they did concede that the time taken in conducting Weekend Schools was too demanding. Indeed, staff responses to Parer's survey stressed other unsatisfactory aspects of Weekend Schools including issues such as poor timetabling and poor teaching conditions. No mention was made, in 1988, of the equity of student access or cost issues as expressed by School of Business staff in 1993.

Holmberg (1981, p.61) saw that the decision by educational institutions to use face-to-face sessions (such as Weekend Schools), was not based solely on rational reasoning, but rather, influenced by tradition. He also suggested that negative prejudice affects attitudes to non-contiguous (i.e non-personal) forms of study. Cameron, et al. (1991, p.10) suggests that many educational institutions have failed to validate their educational philosophy regarding residential schools. Consequently, the use of residential schools in such programs has little, if any, verifiable educational validity. The educational validity of Weekend Schools at the Gippsland School of Business will be examined by studying reasons for Weekend School attendance and whether students who do not attend Weekend Schools are disadvantaged.

### **Is non-attendance a disadvantage?**

Student results were evaluated to determine whether non-attendance at Weekend Schools had an affect on student learning. Levels of attendance at Weekend Schools over the last 21 years, seems to support the Gippsland Campus view that Weekend Schools are a valuable learning tool. In 1993, analysis of attendance at Weekend Schools by students enrolled in accounting subjects has revealed that on average 75 percent of students attend at least one Weekend School. The survey also indicated, most students considered Weekend Schools a vital part of their study (the survey is discussed in greater depth below).

The extent of learning that has taken place can be evaluated in a number of different ways. Traditionally, assignments and examinations have been the means of assessing student learning in business studies. Other methods of assessing student learning, such as the ability of the student to perform in the future workplace, are more difficult to apply. This has led to predominant use of exams and assignments for assessment.

Early studies show that correspondence students perform at least equally well to classroom students (Child 1965, p.81). The question of Weekend Schools is concerned with more than a comparison of the results of on-campus and distance education students. A comparison needs to be made of the results achieved by distance education students who have had face-to-face contact with academic staff (by attending Weekend Schools)

and those who have not.

Analysing the study results

The average mark (assignments and exam combined) of distance education students who did not attend any of the Weekend Schools, who attended one Weekend School, and so on, was calculated. The hypothesis tested was that if Weekend Schools enhanced student learning, then it would be expected that the greater the number of Weekend Schools attended, the greater the average mark would be for the attending group of students. For example, we would expect those students who chose not to attend any of the Weekend Schools to get a lower average mark than those who chose to attend some, or all four of the Weekend Schools. A cross-section of accounting units were reviewed, for the years 1989-1992, the results of which have been summarised in Table 1.

	Not Attend	Attend One	Attend Two	Attend Three	Attend Four	Overall
No. of Students	59	33	37	53	49	231
Average Grade	56.03	51.59	51.86	59.21	56.31	55.00
Standard Deviation	14.69	17.02	17.79	13.78	16.87	

**Table 1: Relationship between number of Weekend Schools attended and students final grades**

As can be observed from Table 1, there was very little difference between the average marks for those students who did not attend any of the Weekend Schools and those who attended all four. A t-test was performed comparing the average results of those students attending no Weekend Schools and those attending all four Weekend Schools. The results of students attending (all four Weekend Schools) and those not attending were not statistically significantly different (at the .01 level). Between these two limits, the average mark for those who attended one, two, or three Weekend Schools does not conform to the hypothesis being tested, that is, that if Weekend Schools enhanced student

learning, then it would be expected that the greater the number of Weekend Schools attended, the greater the average mark would be for the attending group of students

Another interesting observation was, the "overall" average compared to the average of those students who did not attend any of the Weekend Schools was very similar. In other words, those students who did not attend any Weekend Schools reflected the average mark of all students. In considering the averages alone, the results do not support the view that Weekend School attendance would improve the average mark. In fact, Weekend Schools seem to have little influence on the students' marks. Accordingly, the results appear to satisfy the current School of Business policy that Weekend Schools not disadvantage students who do not attend.

Professor Cree argues that the primary objective of Weekend Schools is to expose students to the university way of life. McNicol (1992, p.8) shows his support for this view, stating:

...The enduring benefits of university life seem to be related to what happens when groups of talented people with a common curiosity about a field of knowledge are put in one another's company.

The similarity in the final marks of students attending and not attending Weekend Schools may show that students who have academic competence and confidence did not bother to attend Weekend Schools. Those students with less confidence and academic aptitude may have gained benefits from the Weekend Schools, which brought them up to the same level as the more gifted students. This would support the assumption that Weekend Schools are a useful method of instructional delivery, as they may assist less academically able students to achieve better results.

Regression analysis was used (Table 2) to further test the relationship between Weekend School attendance and the final grade of students.

Regression	Output
Constant	54.1929
Std Err of Y Est	16.1254
R Squared	0.0038
No. of Observations	231
Degrees of Freedom	229
X Coefficient(s)	0.6614
Std Err of Coeff.	0.7085

**Table 2: Regression analysis between number of Weekend Schools attended and students final grades**

The number of Weekend Schools attended was the independent variable, with the students' final results being the dependant variable.  $R^2$  is the starting point for this type of analysis, as it shows the percentage change of the dependent variable that is explained by changes in the independent variable. The present analysis is intended to establish whether percentage change in the final grade is explained by attending one or more Weekend Schools. A value near zero indicates very little relationship between the variables. A value of one indicates very close relationship. In this study,  $R^2$  was .0038, clearly indicating that there is very little, or no, relationship between Weekend School attendance and students' final results. Both the t-tests and the regression analysis provide evidence that no relationship exists (quantitatively at least) between Weekend School attendance and the students' final results.

#### Limitations of the study

Limitations inherent in the study included:-

- The inability to determine whether the population is homogenous. Each student may be unique in terms of astuteness/ability to learn. That is, students may obtain differing degrees of benefit from attending Weekend Schools. Moreover, other factors that may affect individual student learning include work pressures, family commitments etc.

- The impossibility of determining whether students who did attend Weekend Schools would have achieved different results if they had not attended.
- The inability to determine whether those students not attending Weekend Schools differed in their preferred methods of learning.
- Information regarding Weekend School attendance was not available for all subjects, but was limited to subjects for which records of Weekend School attendance had been kept.

For these reasons, it is impossible to form a definite conclusion from the test of the relationship between Weekend School attendance and the students' final results. Possibly, those who attend no Weekend Schools do just as well as those who attend all four. On the other hand, Weekend Schools may help students who do attend to obtain a better result, bringing their marks to the same level as that of more gifted students who do not attend.

### **Weekend School Survey**

The number of students enrolled in each subject who attended at least one Weekend School was generally high. In most cases, approximately three-quarters of the students attended at least one Weekend School in the subjects under review, indicating the strong demand for Weekend Schools. This raises the question of why is there such a demand? That is, why do distance education students wish to attend Weekend Schools? To examine this question, a survey was made of all distance education accounting students who were at the final Weekend School for Semester One 1993.

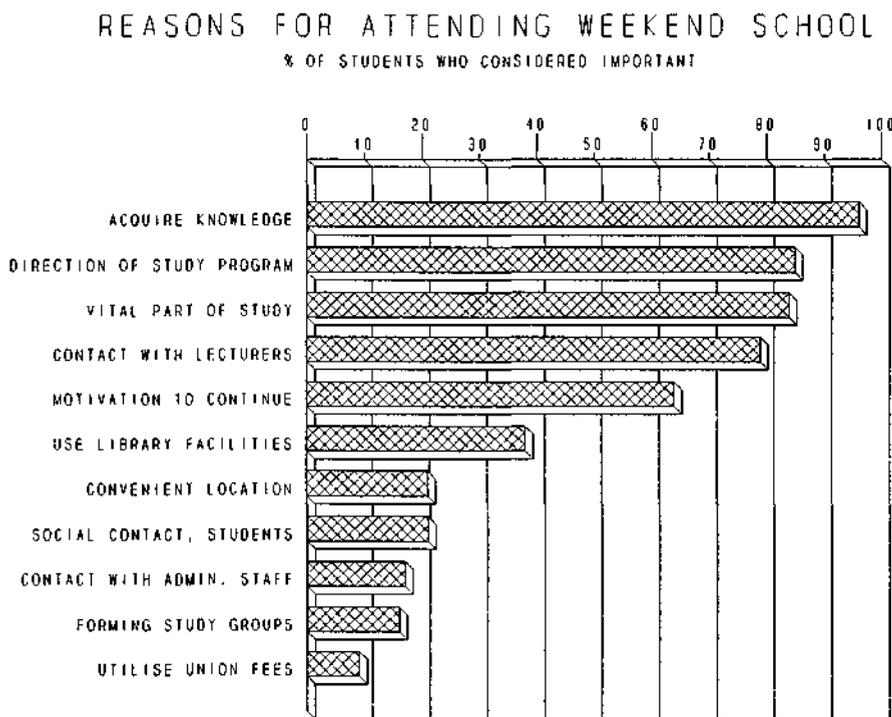
One hundred and fifty-five students responded to the survey, 56% male, and 44% female. Approximately half of these students were between the ages of 25-35 years, with a further quarter between 36-45 years, and the remainder were either under 25 or over 45.

Thirty-two percent of students were from the Gippsland region, while 56% travelled from Melbourne, 10% travelled from other areas of Victoria, and there was 1 interstate student

who attended the Weekend School. This, combined with the fact that the survey found only 20% of students who attended considered the location convenient, shows that many students perceive Weekend Schools to be of significant value to them, to the extent that they are prepared to go out of their way to attend. Quite a number of the students (66%) also had dependants (children, partner etc.) to consider, meaning time away from home was an important factor.

Reasons for attending Weekend Schools

The students were given a list of possible reasons for attending Weekend Schools. They were asked to number each reason from 1 (important) to 5 (not important), with extra space being left for additional comments. Figure 1. summarises the results.



**Figure 1: Reasons for Weekend School attendance**

From Figure 1. it is apparent that the single most important reason for attending Weekend Schools was to acquire knowledge of the subject. In fact, 95% of respondents agreed that this was the primary objective. Parer (1988, p.288) obtained a similar result in his study, finding that the clarification of academic content was the most common reason given for attending Weekend Schools. It is interesting to consider this point in conjunction with the student results discussed earlier. While students perceive they acquire knowledge through attendance at Weekend Schools, the analysis of student results showed little difference in the final marks of students attending Weekend Schools and their non-attending counterparts. Two possible explanations for this are, the benefit of attendance is only a student perception, or, attendance does assist less confident students in raising their final mark to the same level as more gifted students who do not attend Weekend Schools.

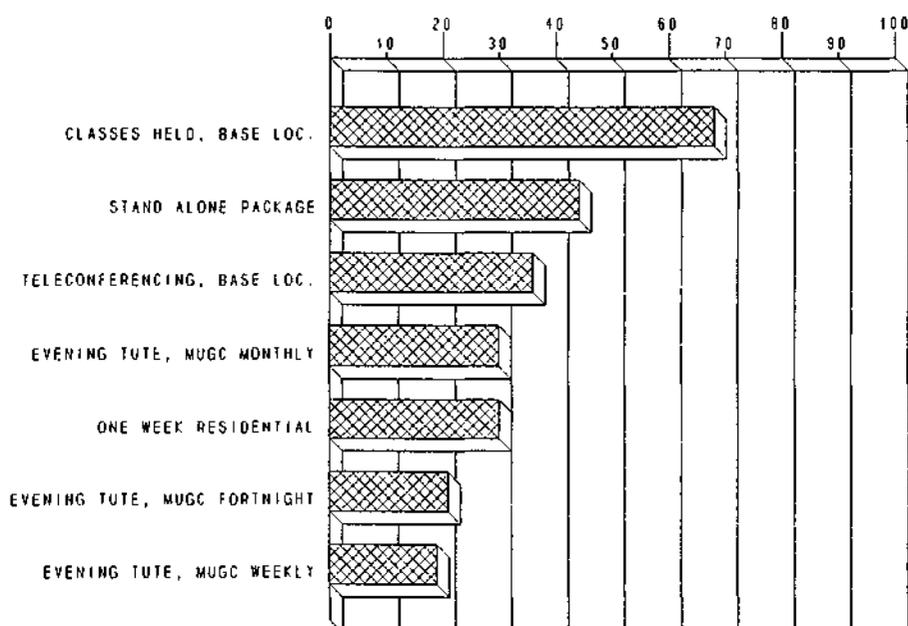
Other major reasons given for attendance at Weekend Schools were: they were a vital part of study; they were a source of information about the direction/structure of study programs; they provided the opportunity for contact with lecturers; and they provided motivation to continue. Aspects which were not considered as important were: the use of library facilities; social contact with students and the formation of study groups; convenient location; contact with administrative staff; and utilisation of union fees. It is interesting to note that while formation of study groups and student interaction was not considered an important issue in the present study, those items rated highly in Parer's study (1988, p.288).

#### Alternatives to Weekend Schools

Students were given a list of alternatives to Weekend Schools, and were asked to indicate their degree of support. For each alternative students could select one of five views from strongly support, support, neutral, against and strongly against. Figure 2. summarises the results of this question.

## ALTERNATIVES TO WEEKEND SCHOOLS

% OF STUDENTS WHO STRONGLY SUPPORT



**Figure 2: Favoured alternatives to Weekend Schools**

From Figure 2, it is evident that the most favoured alternative to Weekend Schools is classes being held from various base locations. Sixty-eight percent of the students strongly supported or supported this alternative. While the survey was conducted only with students attending a Weekend School, given this strong response it is possible that non-attendees may hold a similar view. This option therefore warrants further consideration.

The next most favoured alternative was a "stand alone package", defined as including a unit guide, unit book, and other materials. Forty-four percent of students supported or strongly supported this alternative. It is interesting to note that the current Weekend School policy states that materials are already stand-alone. Harrington (1993) raises the question whether insistence on Weekend Schools means that the materials are not sufficient. He argues that if study materials are sufficient, the educational purpose served by Weekend Schools is not clear. There may be need to justify the cost of a non-essential

teaching activity. On the other hand, if the materials are not stand-alone, there may be loss of potential students for whom Weekend School attendance is inappropriate. As already noted, the Gippsland School of Business policy on Weekend Schools is that materials are stand-alone, the primary purpose of Weekend Schools being to expose students to the university way of life.

Other favoured alternatives to Weekend Schools were:

- teleconferencing from various base locations (36%)
- evening tutorials at MUGC on a monthly basis (30%)
- a one week residential workshop seminar (30%)
- evening tutorials at MUGC on a fortnightly basis (21%)
- evening tutorials at MUGC on a weekly basis (19%).

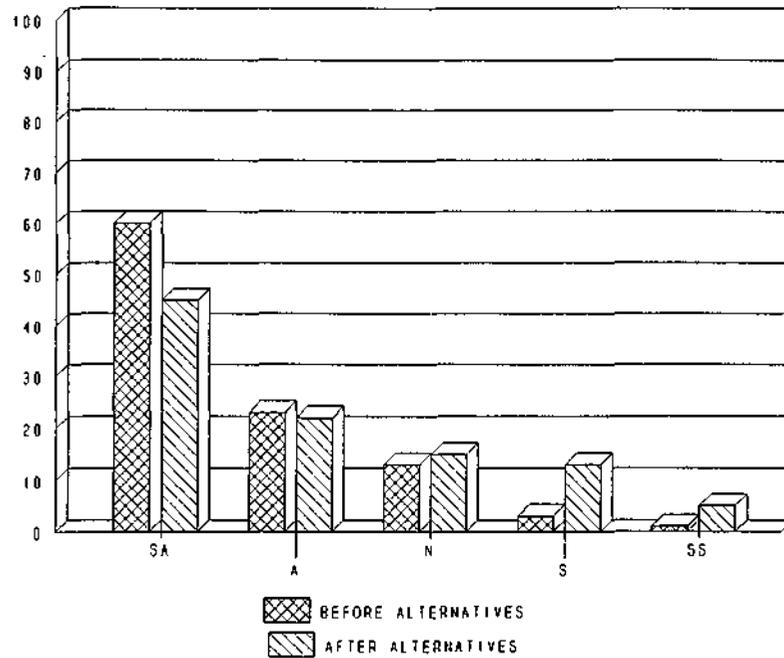
#### Termination of Weekend Schools

Students were asked whether they support the termination of Weekend Schools. Students were given five responses: strongly support, support, neutral, against and strongly against.

Students were asked this question twice; before and after being offered a range of alternatives. This was to determine whether offering alternatives would change students' views concerning the abolition of Weekend Schools. The results are summarised in Figure 3.

## TERMINATION OF WEEKEND SCHOOLS

% OF STUDENTS



**Figure 3: Termination of Weekend Schools**

Figure 3. shows that before being given any alternatives around 80% of students were strongly against or against the termination of Weekend Schools. After offering the students a number of alternatives, the number of students against or strongly against the termination of Weekend Schools fell to about 60%. This still represents a majority against the termination of Weekend Schools. The Gippsland School of Business's Quality Task Force (QTF) (1993) observed the considerable value that students attach to Weekend Schools. In November 1993, the QTF declared that MUGC's identity is associated with Weekend Schools, and that Weekend Schools provide the School of Business with a competitive advantage over other business courses.

## **Conclusion**

Communication is a critical element in distance education. There are various modes of communication available, although this paper concentrated on face-to-face contact, in the form of Weekend Schools. Parer (1988, p.297) suggested that those students who do not attend Weekend Schools will be disadvantaged. This paper shows that, quantitatively, there does not appear to be any relationship between Weekend School attendance and students final grades. Though, due to inherent limitations, it is difficult to evaluate the accuracy of this finding. From the survey undertaken, it was discovered that students who chose to attend Weekend Schools perceived an advantage in attending. The decision to attend Weekend Schools could be a function of students learning styles. Further research is needed to determine the strength of the relationship between student learning styles and Weekend Schools attendance. Establishing the link between student learning styles and the most appropriate method of material delivery is important in evaluating alternative modes of delivery. The survey also showed the existence of a very strong demand for Weekend Schools by Distance Education students. This strong demand for Weekend Schools supports their continuance at MUGC, providing the University with a competitive advantage in attracting distance education students who are able to attend Weekend Schools.

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