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Proliferation of university institutions in Africa: Student academic life and mental health challenges

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Abstract

The proliferation of university institutions in Africa over the years has been linked to producing a large pool of educated people and at the same time to the undermining of universities in a very fundamental way. An important area highlighted in this article is the concern given to the students' mental health in order to sustain their academic life. Students struggling with mental health issues, increasingly find it hard to fully participate in their student career and as well as the health and safety of the institution's overall student body. Institutions of learning are considered as a focal point for mental health support for students due to their ecological set up and in many cases they are the first point of access for screening and intervention. Providing evidence-based practices to address student mental health difficulties ought to be considered a priority area in spite of the apparent observed perennial flagrant incompetence and self-serving orientations underlying the management of university systems. Besides all other areas of engagements, African governments and university administrators need to transform higher education especially the approach to mental health issues for the sustenance of a mentally healthy and academically competitive student population and to insure campus safety.

Keywords: University education, mental health, academic problems, evidence-based practices

Abstrait

La prolifération des institutions universitaires en Afrique au fil des ans a été liée à la production d'un large bassin de personnes éduquées et, en même temps, à la destruction fondamentale des universités. Un aspect important mis en évidence dans cet article est la préoccupation que suscite la santé mentale des étudiants afin de maintenir leur vie académique. Les étudiants aux prises avec des problèmes de santé mentale ont de plus en plus de difficultés à participer pleinement à leur carrière et à la santé et à la sécurité de l'ensemble des étudiants. Les institutions d'apprentissage sont considérées comme un point focal pour l'appui aux étudiants en matière de santé mentale en raison de leur structure écologique et, dans de nombreux cas, elles constituent le premier point d'accès pour le dépistage et l'intervention. Fournir des pratiques fondées sur des données probantes pour aborder les problèmes de santé mentale des élèves doit être considéré comme un domaine prioritaire, en dépit de l'incompétence flagrante persistante et des orientations égoïstes observées sous-jacentes à la gestion des systèmes universitaires. Outre tous les autres domaines d'engagement, les gouvernements africains et les administrateurs d'universités doivent transformer l'enseignement supérieur en particulier l'approche des problèmes de santé mentale pour assurer la subsistance d'une population d'étudiants compétitive mentalement et académiquement et assurer la sécurité du campus.

Mots clés: Enseignement universitaire, santé mentale, problèmes académiques, pratiques fondées sur des preuves

CONCERN FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND CHALLENGES

Higher education in the developing world is becoming one of the most valued experiences today. Education is considered to be the major instrument for promoting socio-economic, political and cultural development. This has attracted a fast growing rate of opening of both public and private based universities in recent years (see National Council for Higher Education, [NCHE], 2018). The number of students enrolling for university education in Africa has risen to unprecedented figures than previously. In 1960, Africa had six universities and Uganda by 1987 had only one university institution with about 10,000 students (NCHE, 2006). Onokala and Onwurah (2001) quoting Sawadago (1994), stated that between 1980 and 1990 students' enrolment in the universities in Africa increased by 61% from 337,000 to 547,000 within the 10-year period.

In Uganda within the last ten years, there has been a significantly observed upsurge in university student enrollment in the pursuit of tertiary training and in particular university education. This student enrollment of both local and international students seeking higher education over the recent years was recorded at, 98,433 in 2010 and 257,855 in 2014/2015; while a slight drop in enrollment was observed at 254,043 in 2015/16 representing a drop by 1.5%. The number of institutions of higher learning grew from 212 in 2014/15 to 224 in 2015/16. The majority of these institutions are private 73% while the public stand at 27% by 2015/16 (NCHE, 2018).

Recent literature and anecdotal evidence on the plight of the existing higher institutions of learning have opened discussion on the expansion of university education in Africa over the years. Some have noted flagrant incompetence and a self-serving orientation that underlies the massive growth of higher education with the consequences of undermining universities in a very fundamental way (Onyango-Obbo, 2018; Tamrat, 2018; The National Council for Higher Education, 2006) creating universities as symbols rather than as centres of excellence with a low caliber product being produced (The Inter-University Council for East Africa [IUCEA], 2008).

On his stand on the current status/crisis of universities in the regions in Africa, Onyango-Obbo (2018) sees the proliferation of universities undermining their very minimal reason d'être. It is not knowledge and skills of engagement in the ever changing world of work that they give full attention to, nor being the brain and pace setters in the countries' civil and political life but also the research agenda is lacking; infrastructure growth and commitment

to motivate the rank and file of staff remains a challenge and worst still universities have become beds of radicalizing students who need to be deradicalised.

At the root of all this, Aina (2010) has observed that "higher education in Africa today consists of institutions, systems, and practices that lack distinct values and goals, or a mission and vision connecting them to the major challenges of their local and global contexts" (p.22). This concept seems to unfold in instances where a noticeable change in psychosocial environment permeates universities affairs with its toll in various angles within the campus infrastructure. For instance, university mental health status has not been given the attention it deserves to address students' mental health challenges (Ovuga, Boardman & Wasserman, 2006; Nsereko & Basa, 2017). Education has become increasingly competitive in terms of students admissions and with enrollment pressures, a limited highly qualified staff capacity and the perennial financial crisis (funding and income uncertainties and poor financial management) to make even their financial budgets (NCHE, 2018; Aina, 2010; NCHE, 2006). Students and lecturers are in full protest mode over perennial discontentment, the increasing higher cost of university education in comparison to the affordability of parents providing tuition etc., increased pressures on the inadequate infrastructures coupled with deteriorating facilities and an unprecedented increase in unprofessional conduct and university students antisocial behaviour, e.g., incessant strikes at both public and private universities involving looting shops in the neighbourhood, substance abuse, and cult activities on university campuses (Onyango-Obbo, 2018; Mayega, 2015; Ekundayo & Ajayi, 2009; (IUCEA, 2008).

In an effort to keep afloat due to dwindling universities' funding sources, some universities pursue monetary profit oriented approach without due consideration for clash with national goals such as access, equity, regional development and quality. Tamrat (2018) has pointed out that a move to increase sources of revenue, traditional public universities in Ethiopia are incorporating unregulated privatization measures that might compromise the focus of institutions away from their core educational mission and the traditional goals of universities.

Other studies have equally observed campus related academic problems. For instance, Aderogba (2011) and Ajuonuma (2006) have highlighted prevalent academic challenges although they may not be extensive in academic institutions in Africa. The problems included, the mediocre academic preparations for students leading to low academic achievement levels; the apathy about reading and

studying at university. These are demonstrated in less student hours devoted to academic work, but much time is spent in social engagements; rampant difficulties in writing moderate grade essays; the phenomenon of “cut and paste” of assignments from the internet; the endemic academic malpractices, including plagiarism of course work; employing the services of academic bureaus to write coursework assignments, even research papers for credit; examination impersonation; buying examination questions and marks along the academic pipeline, e.g. involving lecturers, examiners, faculty administrative staff, supervisors and invigilators; assisting students to write examinations; arbitrary award of marks for vested interests.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the quantitative aspects of university education have become the main focus of attention in recent years for many proprietors of such institutions and policy makers for possible effective competition at the market. Some institutions operate as for-profit institutions, taking education as a product for sale and education institutions as merchants with education goods to sell. An audit of their performance alludes to an out dated curricula, based on memorization and not on problem solving: all of which are oriented towards civil service employment. (IUCEA, 2008; NCHE, 2006). Other stakeholders outside the university, both as employers of graduates, research and training collaborators have also expressed an increasingly long-standing concern for the products churned through these universities (Materu, 2007, Onyago-Obbo, 2018).

Notwithstanding the contribution of the many mushrooming universities to a high level manpower training by acquiring both physical and intellectual skills among the population; nations and peoples asserting their collective self-confidence and competitive advantage in all spheres, there is concern that universities as institutions of learning in this very competitive world must undergo wholesome transformation (Onyago-Obbo, 2018; Aina, 2010; NCHE, 2018). Incidentally the majority of literature on Africa’s current university education systems reviewed, do not look at a mental health component as an issue of significant importance for reform and governance to address university systems. The paradox of a university to be a university is looked at by addressing the ‘overall inadequacy in infrastructure supportive of quality teaching and research’ (IUCEA, 2010).

A fundamental reform must go beyond the exclusive emphasis on non-health policy areas such as enrolment, existing academic programs and their relevance, research and publications, academic staff and infrastructure, education facilities, financing of higher

education and governance (Nsereko & Basa, 2017). The student’s life imperatives should take center stage because he/she serves the main stay of these institutions and the programs designs being run at various levels of the university curriculum.

A student’s physical, social, emotional, spiritual and psychological well-being have been looked at as significant predictors of academic performance. Having a stable physical and psychological state would predict high performance in academics compared to those who are not physically, mentally and psychologically fit. In other words, those who are experiencing psychological problems such as depression, anxiety and stress may face problems in managing their academic performance (Md Yasin & Dzulkifli, 2009; Roesch, 2015)..

STUDENT’S MENTAL HEALTH AND ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

The majority of university students fall within the age bracket of 19-24 years (Nsereko, Musisi, Nakigudde & Holtzman, 2014; Nsereko, 2017). The first episode of many psychiatric disorders happens to fall within this age bracket which coincides with first entry into postsecondary education (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000). During this stage most of the major mental disorders such as mood disorders, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, suicide, substance use disorders and schizophrenia have their onset; and these may continue into adulthood as chronic mental illnesses leading to mental health impairment and a wide range of health habits which can influence medical diseases e.g. obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis in adulthood (Bulik, 2002; Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2006; Evans et al., 2005). From a randomly selected university student population in Uganda research has shown that 37% of the students were positive on psychosocial vulnerability with the following break down on individual scale factors: 35% had emotional problems; 49% had Traumatic experiences 37.8% had academic problems; and 21.5% had antisocial behavior (Nsereko, et al, 2014).

In trying to understand the most typical academic challenges of university students, the Boston University Centre for Psychiatric Rehabilitation Student Self- Assessment of College Classroom Difficulties (2009) was designed to identify such tasks as the following: It is difficult for the student to maintain concentration, student tends to stay away from people at school, student is disorganized, student panics when s/he has deadlines or exams,

student experiences a lot of memory problems, student is easily distracted, when faced with a novel task, student is easily confused, often student does not have enough energy to complete work, student comments that s/he 'goes blank' when called upon in class/exams, student is absent from classes frequently, student has poor peer relations.

Using the same instrument to identify the frequency of such issues among students visiting Ontario's college counselling and disability centres (Holmes, Silvestri & Kostakos, 2011) found that 67.7% of all students experienced academic challenges. The most frequent difficulties included maintaining concentration, being easily distracted, frequent absences from class, not having enough energy to complete academic work and difficulties with organization. The academic challenges were logically linked to the symptomatology associated with specific types of disorders. Panic in relation to exams and deadlines was associated with anxiety-based disorders while absenteeism from school and issues of completing essay examinations were related to mood disorders.

Anson, Bernstein and Hobfoll (1984) observed that anxiety that manifested as leading to student difficulties in concentration, lack of motivation and interest, poor attendance, and physical health such as headache and fatigability affected students' academic achievement. It was also reported that students with high anxiety level perform poorer compared to those with low anxiety.

Other studies have indicated an inverse relationship between academic achievement and depression, anxiety and stress. Depression among students was noted to result in lack of courage in what they were doing, a feeling that they were not reaching the standard of performance set for them leading to feelings of disappointment and despair and failure. Such a condition definitely contributed many serious problems in their academic life such as poor grade. (Md Yasin & Dzulkifli, 2009). Fine and Carlson (1994) found out that the symptoms of depression such as difficulties in concentration, lack of interest and motivation, preoccupations, fatigability, and poor attendance affected performance in school, college, or university.

Rawson, Bloomer, and Kendall (1999) observed that taking and studying for exams, grade competition, and the large amount of content to master in a small amount of time created academic stress among students that affected performance. Stress which is perceived negatively also manifested as devastating through reduced effectiveness in study, contributed to bad habits, and resulted in negative long term consequences, including absenteeism, poor academic performance, and school dropout, physical and

psychological impairment, decreased overall adjustment and made the students more vulnerable to many social and psychological problems, thus contributed lower grade point average (GPA) in final year (Murphy & Archer, 1996; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000).

Regardless of the plight of running mental health infrastructure on campuses, the mental health of students play an important role in their academic careers. Although the studies looking at students' academic problems have examined unifactorial dimension of internalizing problems with a causative effect, upcoming research indicate that students' mental health problems ought to take a multidimensional approach incorporating both internalizing and externalizing factors for a wholesome mental health assessment (Bruffaerts, Mortier, Kiekens, Auerbach, Cuijpers, Demyttenaere et al., 2018; Nsereko, 2017; Nsereko, et al, 2014). Students' externalizing problems as well have a marked decrease in academic functioning (Bruffaerts, et al., 2018). As a basic consideration universities must develop livelihood strategies through evidence-based programs, processes i.e. the provision of mental health services to cater for high support need students for the emotional health and maturity of its population among other things because of the leadership role it plays and its incapacitation will have direct effect on its community.

CONCLUSION

In the light of unprecedented opening up of universities coupled with their inherent infrastructural challenges, the onus to integrate evidence-based practices that spell out certain bench marks to be observed to address student mental health and academic problems is on the African governments, universities leadership structures, interest groups. These must determine whether they genuinely need universities and higher education institutions that address the needs of the whole student person. Students struggling with mental health issues increasingly find it hard to fully participate in their student career and as well as the health and safety of the institution's overall student body (Stone, 2008; National Eating Disorders Association [NEDA], 2013). The goal should not only be to have a myriad of university campuses to increase a large pool of educated people, but also to build a student community who are mentally healthy and able to reach their full potential. Creating a healthy and high-functioning student population will act as the bedrock to a fuller participation in coursework and become contributing adults after graduation (NEDA, 2013). ■

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Biography

Norman D Nsereko is a senior lecturer at Nkumba University, Uganda. He developed a psychological instrument measuring students' psychosocial problems (USEPP). He is Associate Editor (MHRIJ) and a mental health researcher and recipient of two University Research Grant Awards, an award from Academy for Eating Disorders (AED) Scholarship for People from Low Income Countries (2017); he engaged in counselling services, supervises research dissertations/thesis at undergraduate and graduate levels. He is a member of the EJC-TRAP European and International Advisory Board.

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