Institutional-Based Students Academic Dilemmas in a Selected Public University in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to find out academic dilemmas of Institutional Based Students (IBS) in Kenyan public Universities. IBS have different academic dilemmas from those of regular students. The objectives were to explore academic dilemmas, find out how the university management addresses these dilemmas and to propose interventions that could be undertaken to ameliorate these dilemmas. The study hoped to foreground academic dilemmas faced by IBS. The target population included all IBS in public universities. Study sample comprised of 14 lecturers and a systematic random sample of 327 IBS from the School of Education. Data were collected using questionnaires, interviews guides and focus group discussions. Findings revealed limited teacher/learner interaction and general naivety among the IBS in what university education life is all about. Study recommended a teaching/learning model similar to the regular students, effective online communication with IBS and mentoring sessions.

Introduction

The world over, and more specifically in the developing countries, changes in the tertiary education sector have resulted in academic staff having to accommodate a higher proportion of students from diverse backgrounds. The increasing diversity of students means that sometimes the numbers of academic staff are often inadequate to meet the learning needs of all students. Dilemmas abound and this calls for interventions to help Institutional Based Students (IBS) negotiate their academics and life in general.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the need for institutions to focus on interventions that would assist the diverse and growing number of students has risen due to the continuing massification of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Statistics from United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organizations (UNESCO) show that from the turn of the century to 2008, enrolment in tertiary education in Sub-Saharan Africa grew by 82% totalling to more than 4.5 million students (UNESCO, 2008).

Who are these IBS?

These groups of students are not as homogenous as regular students. They differ in terms of their age profiles, the duration they have stayed outside of educational institutions until they join college, the time they have at their disposal to commit to academic work and their prior academic qualifications and profiles among other differences. According to the description of this group of students in literature, some have stayed outside formal learning institution slightly longer and are therefore, coming as mature students (Obanya, 2004). Others are working and this means that the time they have to concentrate on academic work is limited. Besides, some of these students' access institutions through a second chance opening which meant that, academically speaking, they had not qualified as highly as their regular counterparts, though this does not mean that they were academically weak. These characteristics of the non-traditional students are what make them a priority for any institution based interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives were: to explore the academic dilemmas of IBS in a selected public university; to find out from the IBS and lecturers how the university management was addressing these dilemmas and to propose interventions that university management can undertake to ameliorate these academic dilemmas.

Scope of the Study

Due to the constraints of time and resources, this study was limited to one public university in Kenya. The respondents were limited to students enrolled as IBS in School of Education (SoE). A total of three hundred and twenty seven students in the various departments of SoE offering the Institutional-Based Programme (IBP) were sampled.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Social Support Theory by Williams, Barclay and Schmied (2004). Social support is the perception and actuality that one is cared for, has assistance available from other people, and that one is part of a social support network. Social support could be measured as the perception that one has assistance available, the actual received assistance, or the degree to which a person is integrated in a social network. In essence, if IBS receives social support from the university management and related stakeholders, chances of academic success are higher and vice versa.

Review of Related Literature

Globally, expansion of education systems at all levels has led to a dramatic increase of the number of students seeking access to and enrolling in HEIs. On the other hand, HEIs are obliged by respective governments to increase the diversity of the student intake and student retention as critical performance indicators. In countries such as Kenya, HE has been the fastest growing segment of the education sector in the past 10 years, averaging 6.2% each year (Republic of Kenya, 2009). Increasing globalization has further presented new opportunities and challenges for HEIs internationally. The challenge is how to provide engagement opportunities to students from disadvantaged back-

grounds, adult and part-time students who were increasingly becoming the majority in African universities.

Globally, studies have shown that (a) three of every four students were uncertain or tentative about their career choice at college entry (Frost, 1991), (b) only 8% of new students felt they knew "a great deal about their intended major" (Erickson & Sommers, 1991) (c) over half of all students who entered college with a declared major changed their mind at least once before they graduated (Foote, 1980; Gordon, 1984), and (d) only one senior out of three would major in the same field they preferred as a freshman. Whereas academic dilemmas can be contextual, most of these cited in other contexts are very similar to the African context and Kenya in particular. According to UNESCO (2008), University students in Africa are increasing having financial challenges leading to high personal and institutional debts.
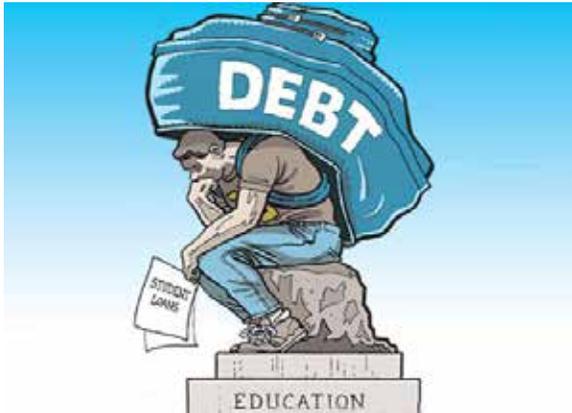
Study Design and Locale
The study adopted a qualitative case study approach. A case study technique was adopted to enable the researcher to achieve, among other things, an in-depth collection and analysis of data. One public university deemed information rich (Creswell, 1998) was purposively sampled as the locale for the study.

Study Population and Informants
Target population for the study included all students enrolled in the Institutional Based Programme (IBP) at the selected university. These informants were critical to the investigation since they provided most of the insightful, analytical, and specific information from which the study based its findings and recommendations on the academic dilemmas and interventions that would assist them overcome the dilemmas. Informants included all IBS enrolled in the various degree programmes and lecturers in the School of Education (SoE).

Instruments for Data Collection and Ethical Considerations
Research instruments included:
i. A questionnaire for students and lecturers.
ii. Focus Group Discussion Guide for the students.
iii. Interview Schedule for lecturers.
iv. Document Analysis Guide to solicit relevant student data.

Before embarking on fieldwork, researchers obtained research permit from the National Council of Social Sciences and the university office of research, and obtained informed consent from all the informants.

Data Collection and Analysis
Students' questionnaires were administered first during their learning sessions as this was the best time to meet them under the supervision of the researcher and the two research assistants. Data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively, guided by the study objectives.

Findings
The following aspects were highlighted as challenges encountered by IBS in the university in order of magnitude: Limited time to do assignments such that most of them reported coming back to the institution with overdue assignments; Poor attendance to lectures; Lack of awareness about social support services while in the university; Limited and sometimes lack of Lecturer/Learner interaction due to large number of IBS; Lack of adequate communication channels; Lack consultation hours on lecturers office; Balancing between family, work and university education; Technology was another challenge as some IBS reported to have come from areas/regions which lacked electricity, computer services, while others were computer illiterate. So, for some to do assignments, they had to commute to major towns in search of computer facilities such as the internet. This made them pile up assignments and only rushed in the last minute, some days to opening time leading to duplicated and/or shoddy work.

Challenges Encountered by Lecturers
These include: Busy schedules leaving little on room to attend the IBS; Generation gap related problems- Some IBS enrolled at rather advanced ages and so coping with university education was a challenge; Lack of computers and connectivity to illustrate use of internet and writing scholarly works; (23.8%) reported students expecting monetary support; Lack of adequate space in terms of privacy and convenience; Low levels of perception on academic matters; Students showing indifference to the programme; One lecturer suggested that, could be the students were not informed while another stated that the students were not exposed to the university life.

Suggestions on how to Improve Academic Dilemmas of IBS
Organizing for computer classes, set time outside the semester when students meet mentors, holding a session with them the first day they come, monitoring to ensure all students are mentored, giving student manuals, making an effort to reach students at their work stations, prepare organized mentors on topic of interest, setting up structured and non-structured information desks, having trained and motivated mentors, mentoring office where students are allocated mentors, having occasional sessions on academic success with them, giving matriculation to students and give lecturers incentives, recognition and rewards, and training of lecturers on mentoring skills.

Conclusion
Challenges encountered by IBS were lack of awareness of availability and accessibility of mentoring resources and personnel, lack of mentor/student relationship and communication, lack ICT integration sessions, lack of students' welfare and guidance services, limited time and heavy work load.

Study findings from this study stress that unless the university realizes the diversity and the complexity inherent among the IBS and provide interventions, the quality of education will be compromised and this would mean that the management would be sending out students who do not add value to the society. This in essence is a gross economic wastage and abusive to growing economies like Kenya.

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