

Against All Odds: Student Parents in Public Universities in Kenya

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Abstract: *Kenya's higher education student population has of late expanded tremendously due to increased demand for education and more public expenditure in this level of education. This expansion has also witnessed an increase in student parents who are likely to encounter challenges in their pursuit of learning opportunities in these institutions, unless public universities refocus their approach to the provision of higher education and the effect this has on the socio-economic status of the students. The purpose of this study was therefore to find out the impact of existing university structures on parenting students and how universities can initiate necessary changes to address any noted weaknesses in catering for the needs of this student category. Drawing from a social constructivist theoretical framework, with a socio-educational approach, this study presents research investigating student parenting in a public university in Kenya. Data was collected through interview and focus group schedules from eighteen (18) student parents and ten (10) university officials. The paper offers useful insights on how universities can make it possible for parenting students to progress smoothly through their studies.*

Keywords: *Public University; Student parenting; Student-mothers; Socio-Education; University Completion Rates.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The increase in demand for higher education in Kenya with the resulting surge in number of students seeking higher education opportunities has resulted in an increase in the number of universities, affiliated campuses and educational centres in various locations in Kenya (Chemnjor. 2013). In addition, this increase has resulted in a diversified student population of whom an increasing percentage is student parents. Students who are parents are increasingly enrolling for university and higher education these maybe students who become parents prior to or after joining university.

Student parenting can be found across the diversified student landscape from undergraduate, graduate or post-graduate students, as well as school-based students who are students who hold a regular job, and come for classes during school holidays. In a study on student parenting in the university (Seo 2001), the author recognizes political and social influences that have impacted on the organization. One emerging social trend identified by the author is that the demographics have changed to include more university students who are older with children and may have had diverse occupations and experiences in life, leading to an emerging body of students with more social responsibilities than the typical eighteen year old that has just finished school. Political influences are the demands for expansion of university education to cater for the growing population graduating from primary and secondary levels of education. This necessitates a deeper examination of challenges encountered by parenting students as they navigate their way through their studies in the public universities, which this study hoped to unravel. It gives a background to the student parent in higher education with an emphasis on public universities in Kenya, examining the effects of approaches and practices of the public university in regard to this group of students, as well as the consequences of these on the student parent.

1.1. A Literature Review

Literature on student parents in public universities has been approached from different dimensions. An array of factors influences the changing demographics of the university student body. Studies have identified some of these as external emerging social trends which include the increase of a higher

population of university students who are older, with children and may have had diverse occupations and experiences in life (Moreau and Kerner 2012, Seo 2001). Resulting in a change from the “typical” student who has just finished secondary school to a congregate of university students today with responsibilities and parenting cares. Not only will these changing demographics affect the student body landscape but they will in turn influence emerging social trends in the public university which will necessitate attention.

These external trends result in internal publics who expect a difference in adjustment of the richer input that they bring into the institution than has previously been the case with the “traditional” student entering the university. For example, since this group of students have parenting cares with needs and expectations that relate to the burden of parenting they will look to the university administration to consciously take into account this burden of parenting while studying on the student. Some of the issues that may be peculiar to student parenting and which may lead to self examination of effect of change would be if for instance a student parent has a child who needs medical attention, there will be a focus on how the university and the student negotiate the leave process where, how and with whom, as well as the implications on the student and the institution (Medved and Heisler 2002), leading to an awareness of this and other processes involved. In addition these emerging social trends will lead to putting a voice to the representations in the changing student body that were hitherto unheard of with corresponding demands that will require a response from the university internally whether in policy change or routine checks and adjustments.

Internal demands are related to external demands nationally where there are emerging social trends and expectations placed on higher education institutions, especially in the area of inclusiveness and availing of educational opportunities for all whether students with children or without. The Ministry of Education in Kenya acting externally as a national policy making body recognises the need to have equal opportunity for all notwithstanding paternity or maternity, and includes this expectation as indicated in the Ministry of Education (Sessional Paper No.1, 2005) which is part of the policy concerning education, this has consequences on the internal institutional trends of the university leading to change in attitude and views that may differ from the norm.

As students enter university, there are those that chose to be parents and those that get caught up into parenting whether male or female. The university has been assumed to be a place for academic pursuit, yet most student parents enter university at a prime age, and may choose not to put off childbearing until they finish their studies as may be expected by the university norms and culture or the society. The literature on student parenting has been approached from different perspectives. There are those that focus on the burden of parenting as it relates to the academic requirements of the institution and there are others that address the impact of parenting on the social lives of the student. This paper attempts to locate both the institutional response to the burden of parenting in the face of academic pursuit, as well as an analysis of the implications of the institutional approaches and structures on this group of students in an attempt to articulate the challenges facing the student parent. The question raised in the exploration of this phenomenon is:

What is the Kenyan public university socio-educational approach or approaches with respect to student parents?

In seeking an answer to this question the following are examined; University Culture and Socialization of Students as well as the relationship between Theory and Practice of the university in regard to student parents.

1.2. University Culture and Socialization of Students

Culture in higher education impacts greatly on approaches and practice in the management of student parents, institutional culture has been portrayed as overlapping concepts round which the behaviour and performance of the members in an organization may be explained and used to address concerns in the organization, as people transmit, communicate and perpetuate knowledge, attitudes as well as shared assumptions (Tierney 1988). This leads to organizations conceptualizing attitudes and norms peculiar to that particular group that become embedded in the structures of the organization and are often taken for granted by the people within that organization.

Therefore since culture is seen to be the role of wider held norms and beliefs while climate is seen to be the direct experiences within the work process and interactions within the environment (Hart and Shoolbred 1993), there is a need to analyse patterns and meanings that have been historically

grounded in assumptions of student parents and how these become ideology that impacts on student parenthood. Questions arise in connection to the structures that are in place in the public university and how people make meaning out of these, as well as how student parents cope regarding personal, educational, social, psychological and financial needs in the higher education environment. As student parents enter the organization they find pressure to cope with assumptions concerning personal needs included in these are expenses related to health, food, clothing, housing and hygiene as well as tuition and related expenses these impact on equity and equality in access to education for all on a level playing ground.

Culture influences institutions at various levels, it influences decisions and operations within the organization, as well as assisting in the understanding and developing of shared goals, it influences choices and defines essentials in the organization Tierney (1988) suggests that practice can be improved through recognizing that culture helps address potential or real conflict holistically and not in isolation. Any contradictions are easily recognizable, and can be addressed systematically as seen in structure or operation and perception or comprehension, of the position of the different groups in the organization. This paper acknowledges the perceptions of student parents in regard to the institutional performance thus defining the approaches used in respect to these students. It attempts to evaluate the everyday decisions that are implemented according to their role and the influence they have on the culture of the institution. This is done in an effort to create an understanding of the symbolism of the decisions, actions and assumptions made by the individuals in an organization, leading to support and appreciation of how institutions manage student parents. Institutions could do with a meaningful and constructive engagement and understanding of the perspectives converging on the organization both internally and externally. Bearing in mind that there is pressure to conform to the expectations of major stakeholders or constituencies both internal and external (Emmanuel 2007). The demands made on the institution will influence the structure of the organization, the mood of the organization as well as how the organization reacts to its students and its orientation towards provision of education. Identifying the direction the institution desires to take or is headed to; helps focus the approaches and practices to be taken in a holistic manner (Tierney 1988).

Socialization of students in higher education incorporates key dimensions of culture the passing on of elements of a group's culture to its new members (Schein 2004). This enables making space for new members and showing accessibility and availability of leaders, management and other staff (Tierney 1988). This socialization influences the knowledge and understanding of student parents on different dimensions such as adapting, perception of acceptance, accessibility, warmth and openness in the new environment. As a student parent there are certain understandings and knowledge that may be transmitted or not, depending on the approaches taken to socialization by the organization. It is therefore important to articulate what the university wants to achieve in relation to how it socializes its new members. Availability of information and sharing of information helps in providing possible solutions and alternatives to issues which may arise and in so doing help in addressing any conflict that may arise between scholarship and parenthood.

1.3. The Relationship between Theory and Practice in Regard to Student Parents

The study was informed by two socialization theories which addressed the approaches in the management of student parents in the public universities in Kenya. One is structural functionalism and the other is symbolic interactional theory. The structural functionalism focuses both on the structure and function of the organization with an emphasis on the role of social structure. By focussing on the role of the social structure and highlighting the interrelated parts which are held together by norms and values to gain equilibrium, the actions of individuals and institutions are explained in terms of the functions they perform (Mann 2007). Mann explains how the structure of social function presents people as engaging in actions rooted in norms and values of the cultural system thus society is seen as a system with subsystems that perform basic functions, which must be internalized through socialization. If there is dissonance in the socialization process it leads to conflict (Bruce 1998). This theoretical perspective sheds light on values of the university and the importance given to educational goals and successful completion of the university studies up to graduation. Since parenting and childcare may fall outside this social value system. This theory is useful in attempting to explain the conflict that may arise in areas that are crucial to the academic survival of the student parent in the academic environment of the university.

The other socialization approach, symbolic interaction recognizes the influence of the individual social interactions, seeking to understand the private and the inner experiences of the individual, the values and meanings that objectives have for the individual (Mann 2007). Contemporary sociological theory defines symbolic interaction as an approach to the scientific study of human conduct and that symbolic interaction takes the view that the social organization is a framework to develop actions by the people, “culture”, “social systems”, “social stratification”, or social roles (Mann 2007). Individuals interpret and act on the basis of meanings arising from social interactions which they encounter. Therefore it is possible to have conflict arising as a result of identity practices (Lynch 2008). Identity practices are taken to convey the way student parents manage their dual identities within the dominant academic culture and support the reality of the identity they live out. Identity support is part of constructing an identity that can survive in the academic environment of the university. Since identity construction is a social process in which student parents experience either support or lack of support for the role they are involved in, it becomes part of the socialization into the university culture.

The university culture has certain conceptions about “parenting” and “schooling” which are often in conflict. Proper parenting as far as dominant culture is involved normally does not include the parent being a student; neither does culture expect that proper schooling can be combined with parenting. Therefore for an individual to attend to both adequately a conflict occurs which needs to be resolved. There has to be a way for the student parent to circumvent this conflict successfully resulting in identity practices that student parents devise to survive and represent each identity adequately (Lynch 2008). Some of these practices were seen to result in identity crises for the student, and dissonance in their lives. It is only through an appreciation of how the individual operates in the structures of the university with its cultural norms and values that the situation of student parents can be explained. Symbolic interaction deals with individual social interactions that seek to come to terms with the private and inner experiences of the individual and the values and meanings different objectives have for the individual.

An investigation of the student parent against identities and social structures which project the individual both as student as well as parent guided both by the norms of academia as well as the socio-cultural scripts concerning parenthood will expose a conflict. The conflict arising has to be resolved since the symbolic nature of both roles student and parent in the socio-cultural environment is often in conflict with the structural elements around which each role is performed (Lynch 2008).

Each of these socialization theories is limited in explanation of the approaches taken in regard to parenting and scholarship, symbolic interaction in its inability to explain social structures, and functionalism is limited in its explanation of how people alter their actions based on the structures and functions around them. But they prove useful in bringing to focus the issue of socialization of student parents in higher education and how to address the approaches taken by public universities to student parents in the organization. In addition they prove useful in addressing structure and function of the institution and society the way these affect student parents as well as the individual university. They demonstrate the interaction of the student parents to the values, norms and expectations of the university and society as a whole.

In light of the matters raised here, it was considered important to ask student parents their experiences in the university as well as university staff who interacted and provided services to this group of students.

2. METHODS

2.1. Research Approach

A qualitative study was conducted in order to investigate areas that need attention in regard to educational opportunities and the approaches taken towards university student parenthood. This was necessary so as to examine the effect of the socialization process that student parents undergo, the norms, values and attitudes that create or decrease educational opportunity for individual students. The aim was to develop a strategy that would enhance the approaches taken towards student parenthood in the public university.

2.2. Data Collection

The research methods used in this study relied on multiple sources with an interpretive approach which made an attempt to question assumptions whether correct or incorrect. In-depth interviews were conducted with student parents and university staff. Focus group discussions were carried out to provide understanding of what was being studied, in addition observation and analysis of documents was done. The interviews were conducted over a span of three months.

2.3. Participants and Sample

Purposeful sampling was done in this study of individuals who experience parenthood in the public university. Sampling was done purposefully to get information rich individuals (Creswell 2001), who were chosen because they were seen to be more knowledgeable and informative about student parenting in the public university in Kenya, and the information given would depict their reality in a public university. The location was one public university and a constituent college in Kenya.

2.4. Data Analysis

Considerable overlap among modes of qualitative data analysis occurred in the study. The study used an interpretive interactive approach the iterative approach where by information was collected by observing, interviewing then transcribing the information, reflecting on it initially analysing it then gathering more information if need be.

The data collected was subjected to various frames of interaction. These frames were used to analyse and compare knowledge with previous events and personalities. Themes evident from the preliminary analysis of the data were identified and interpreted. Analysis of the focus group data was done through categorization of responses in terms of questions asked based on the theoretical frameworks chosen for the study. The results were then combined in a focused manner by placing them within previous research.

A summary of the findings regarding student parents their experiences and parenthood in the public university are discussed under the following four themes which arose in response to the research questions based on assumptions of the study and influenced by the social theories underpinning the study.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As earlier indicated, the themes that emerged from the study are largely related to how the student parents negotiate the university structure, both administrative as well as academic. In the quest to fulfil their potential the students needed support and the way they relate to this support emerged as important themes.

3.1. Experiences Relating to Student Parenting and the University Structure

The study tried to find out whether the public university was aware of the changing and diversified student body and the response of the university to these changes. From the responses of staff, some were aware of these changes and they felt that these should be incorporated in the policy and practice of managing all students especially students who are parents, because if this was not done, then the university will not be as competitive in the area of liberalization and privatization of higher education. One member of the university community put it so well:

we need to stop assuming that the student parents are not part of us, because at any one given time, they are there, they have always been, and will always be...as we plan the programs for the university the student parents need to be slotted in

Still some of the staff were of the opinion that the university should not be involved in the business of student parenthood since the students who enter university are deemed to be mature and should be responsible for their actions, but those that expressed that opinion were in the minority.

From the students' responses, it was evident that they did not want to be seen as a problem but wished that in spite of parenting, the university would provide options for them which they were even prepared to pay extra for. They expressed that they were treated as outsiders instead of being regarded as part of the university community and they felt isolated from the rest of the university fraternity.

3.2. Role of University Support Services

The research explored the role of the university in terms of support services. Responses from the staff were unanimous in the need for students to receive support. However the methods given were varied; for the academic staff they observed they were ill-equipped to be student counsellors and therefore there was need to identify a process to follow, a policy that gave direction on whom to send the students to. For the student counsellors, they expressed the fact that everyone who deals with students in the public university whether academic or administratively needed a course in counselling so that they are in a position to direct the student toward help. The student's response indicated a desire for more interactions both with the academic and support staff which was limited by the fact that they lived off campus.

3.3. Academic Structure and Student Parenting

The study sought to establish the impact of the burden of parenting on the academic interactions and interpersonal relationships of student parents. The staff interviewed felt that though the student parents tried to put on a brave face it was not an easy task balancing student parenting and scholarship, and based on their responses there was need for more counselling and advice to avoid students finding themselves in such a situation. Though the staff agreed that the students concerned worked very hard, there are times these student parents were caught up in blaming themselves as well as having a poor self image.

3.4. Administrative Structure and Student Parenting

The study sought to establish the impact of the administrative structure and student parenting. The general perception was that the university seemed ill-prepared to respond to the needs of student parents, and the structures and the systems did not account for parenting in the public university. According to the administrators and even some of the academic staff interviewed there were no mechanisms in place for 'capturing' student parents in the university and therefore no formal programmes tailored to the student parents. If one became a parent or entered the university as a parent, they had to find their own way of survival.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The research addressed the student parent in the context of the university structure, role of university support services, academic structure as well as the administrative structure and student parenting. Based on these themes the following conclusions are drawn.

4.1. Student Parents and University Structure

The University as we know it is changing, with the requirement to become more universal and to manage more complex change (Dopson and McNay 1996). The context that universities are operating in is more demanding and as more students seek places in universities and as they make their preferences known, there is competition to attract students which is affected not only by the academic programs on offer but the services that cater to the student needs as well. This is influenced by the belief in the student as a whole therefore the university needs to focus on all aspects that go into the makeup of this student; social, economic, financial as well as academic. The provision of advice and help to the student about the various support services of the university greatly eases the process of decision making and of informed choices Rowley (1996) maintains that the university should be proactive rather than reactive to developing customer needs.

Funding in the university is linked to students, more recruitment of students and the need to create ways to relate better with the student as customer results in choices being made. Therefore choices as to whether to incorporate non traditional students in the university structure leads to the recognition of the budgetary consequences associated with the new choice policies. The result is innovation which has been defined in one way as any response in programs or organizational routines to competitive pressure exerted by choice (Plank and Sykes 1999).

The University structure is based on policies of equal opportunities, and as such the underlying assumption is that the students are entitled to such opportunities and that these must be distributed equally and with reference to equity, in addition there is the understanding that any assumptions are open to questioning. The purpose of education in addition to serving the principle of the goals of equity and social justice is to play a critical role in preparing a workforce. This role is affected by

tradition, culture, law and custom, these too are affected by change, and as rules change, organizations adapt, since they are not passive agents but they actively seek to shape the rules that regulate their existence and behaviour (Plank and Sykes 1999). When there is a policy that encourages choice, it creates boundaries which in turn channel access and opportunity thereby creating a basis for inclusion and exclusion.

Out of the interview discussions, what emerged is the need to recognize student parents; the process of acknowledging that student parents are part of the university body will be the first step towards identifying what are their needs and how the university can provide appropriate services to student parents which may differ from those required by the regular student body. The provision of these services will be influenced by the institutions' mission or purpose more so as the university collaborates both with the internal and external publics. One of the ways that the university stops being an "ivory tower" and becomes part of the community is by reaching out and identifying how it can be of help to the local community and how the local community can gain by the university being in their midst. Putting a "face" to the institution as well as creating awareness of the environmental influences within which the institutions operate becomes an important part of the universities corporate responsibility.

4.2. Role of University Support Services

As a public institution it is important for the university to comply with the law and not discriminate any student on the basis of gender, disability and ethnicity among other human rights. But simply not discriminating is not the same as supporting non-discrimination. Research has shown that support for student parents can help them achieve Fust (2011) in Minnesota's resource for teen pregnancy information (MOAPPP). Not all institutions may have the resources to support or provide all the services needed by pregnant and parenting students and their children, but they can coordinate those services for students by partnering with community-based organizations, day care centres and public health, nursery and social services agencies this idea was observed by one of the interviewee's. Community involvement and effort in the provision of housing, childcare and having a community association that looks out for the student parent was mentioned as a possibility of the role of the university in support services.

A growing area of the higher education enterprise is related to student affairs and student development functions. These are administered under different programs in different universities. In the case of this study, they were attached to the office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of Academics. But both staff and students affirmed that they have learning benefits not only for the student parents but for the whole student population which research supports, that enhancement of these programs has benefits that accrue to the quality and overall reputation of the institution (Dickeson 1999). Some of the university support services or programs that were mentioned to be of significance to the student parents included; financial aid programs, enrolment management, student recruitment and retention programs, childcare policies and services, student government liaison, residence halls programs, academic support services, student advising programs as well student health and counselling programs. These were some of the areas of student support that were significant to the student parents through the discussions in the interviews. What came up was that not all of the services needed to be provided by the universities, some can be outsourced and be well coordinated by the university with information flowing to all the parties involved. Another point that came up was the fact that in provision of these support services they ended up not only benefiting the student parents but that majority of the student population as well as the university community gained.

The staff interviewed both academic and administrative mentioned the significance of finances in the burden of parenthood. Another area of support that was seen to be significant was enrolment management. Concern in this area came up as the discussion focussed on structures in the university that would be of benefit to the student and how the university can restructure itself to reach not only student parents but many other marginalised segments of the society. A need was expressed for more research and investment in online registration and information to enhance the access to education since the student body is becoming more diversified. Childcare policies and support services was seen to be another area that would greatly benefit the student parents. Most expressed a desire to just have "a place where the child was taken care of" thereby giving them peace of mind for the time they attended classes. Though the student parents did not complain they emphasised the difference it would make in their lives since the burden of parenthood sometimes forces the student parents to make drastic choices.

Through the discussions, childcare and a policy on support services was noted as a benefit not only to the student parents but to the university community as a whole. The student parents were not averse to paying extra for these services since they already pay for those that mind their child but when it becomes a communal effort, it can be subsidised for the good of the university this was a service that both staff and students agreed can even be outsourced and it becomes a community effort.

The issue of residency and halls has been overwhelming to the staff in charge. The universities where these interviews were conducted are still expanding and so housing is a big challenge. In the course of the discussions, when the issue of comparing with other public universities came up, not many have accommodated the high housing demand. But it was argued that since many of the public universities are expanding constituent colleges in rural areas then there is need to factor family housing into the expansion agenda, more so when it is taken into account that most of the areas of expansion are in the countryside where housing outside the university may be hard to come by as opposed to those universities based in the urban areas or more established towns and cities which are more built up and university students can easily have access to housing in the environs surrounding the university. The policy as of now is that the students vacate the halls of residence when they are five months into their pregnancy. Most said they were able to get some place around the university. A member of staff commented that

since most universities have less than 30% living on campus there is need to have a community outreach where the issues to do with housing security can be tackled in a cross cutting way by involving the community and in fact not segregate the student parents out there, but have all the issues to do with housing off campus coordinated for the benefit of all the students

This member of staff argues that as the university out sources for student housing it will be beneficial for the reputation of the university since with the community outreach involvement there is mutual benefit to all. As the university recruits and improves on enrolment, they can avail information to prospective students on where to get appropriate accommodation.

Student health and counselling was a department that needed to be strengthened. In one of the campuses where the interviews were conducted the counselling department had been drastically reduced due to cost cutting measures. Staff both academic and administrative reasoned that many of the students who faced one crisis or another would easily have avoided these problems if there was a vibrant and functioning counselling unit one of the academic staff interviewed observed;

we are lecturers not trained to be counsellors so the university was putting a lot of pressure on lecturers to counsel and we are not trained for that

They underscored the fact that matters pertaining to course selection, career choice and anything else to do with academic life they can advise on but personal issues, they pass them on to the student counsellor or student affairs division. It was therefore imperative that a proper counselling unit and a crisis centre were developed and enhanced more so with the expanded and diversified student population. Most members of the university concur that these student support services are crucial to the academic affairs more so as the student numbers grow.

Though the university may do cost cutting in some of these non-academic areas it may be necessary to bear in mind that the value of some of these non-academic services is to build up and support the student body. There is need as Dickeson (1999) advises to focus on the special elements that address efficiency, effectiveness and centrality to the mission when dealing with student support services, since these go a long way in sustaining and retaining student numbers as well as the reputation of the institution as a student centred university.

4.3. Academic Structure and Student Parenting

Academic support services and student advising, is an area that can be improved greatly. Most of the student parents indicated that due to time constraints they were unable to consult with their academic advisors. They said by living off campus they had limited time to attend to all the matters that were academic and as a result academic advising they felt was not a priority. On the other hand due to increase in enrolment the academic staff was overwhelmed by the number of students whom they were assigned to advice. In addition the staff felt that there was suspicion on what the students believed to be academic advising. This was a hindrance to proper interaction between academic staff and their advisees. In addition the academic structure in relation to student parents is greatly wanting

in that mechanisms of identifying student parents are nonexistent as expressed by most of the participants. There does not seem to be a clear way of identifying and directing student parents where to go for help. One lecturer said:

the students are suspicious about student advising they avoid seeking out the advisers my advice is that the university should set aside two days in the semester which should be for interaction with the lecturers and in fact the whole university fraternity this will help reduce the suspicion and help overcome the hurdle between the two groups

The academic staff maintained that there was need to come up with activities that the student advisor can relate to, so that after interaction days' students will start realising the benefits of academic advice and begin seeking out the academic advisor without suspicion as was the case.

4.4. Administrative Structure and Student Parenting

The structure of the university does not seem to encompass student parents as one of the administrative staff commented, it may not be a priority as of now, but as the university grows rapidly and with the university population increasing it will be necessary to have some structure in place to guide the management of this growth. What would be of benefit in developing such structures is to deliver the services that are expected not only to student parents but to all students.

4.5. Summary

Institutions have mission statements that reflect their growth as well as the changing social conditions. Those who are part of these institutions need to be well versed in the evolving mission statements as well as being aware of how they can be part of the process of achieving this growth. Reisser and Roper (1999) reiterate that there are goals set by higher institutions of learning like the university and there are stakeholders who hold them accountable educationally as well as socially. Conditions facing the universities and higher institutions of learning have grown increasingly challenging in the recent past, calling for greater accountability to the public in terms of reducing costs, and addressing the reduced funding and enrolments.

This paper set out to analyse how a public university interacts with a segment of its diverse student body. The challenges the university faces and areas that can be addressed to bring about transformation for the good of all the students involved and in the process address its mission and vision. The public university was seen not only to be accountable to many of its stakeholders, but in addition it needs to rise to the challenge of transformation. In doing that, there has to be a starting point which begins from the known to the unknown. This paper was an attempt to make known the experiences and the interactions of student parents with the university, as well as the approaches by the university to student parenthood. In the process hopefully set up a platform from which to launch out in a direction that will enhance the experiences of not only student parents but possibly many other students in the changing landscape of the public university as well.

4.6. Recommendations

Based on the literature review and the investigative study, various recommendations for enhancing the approaches taken by the public university towards student parenthood are proposed.

4.6.1. Role of the Public University

Since it is evident from the research that student parenthood is inevitable in the public university and that it is precipitated by various factors, the study recommended that any strategy to address student parenthood should be all encompassing, addressing issues in both of these categories. The aim should be to improve mechanisms that will reduce the pressure as well as vulnerability of the students.

4.6.2. Develop Staff- Student Relationship

All staff have a crucial role to play in reducing the impact of student parenthood in the public university. The current research noted that staff who interact with students in one way or another would benefit from a course in counselling; that way they will be prepared if a student seeks them out for advice or counselling.

It was recommended that since the study revealed that groups allocated to lecturers for academic counselling were too large that these be reduced for manageability, with guidelines on how to recommend the student to the appropriate offices where they may access specific or further help.

In addition it was recommended that a system be put in place to identify student needs and plan activities that will respond to these needs.

With the massive increase of student numbers and diversity in the public university, purposeful ways to connect with the students should be put in place through provision of office space and time for student consulting in the schedule of the staff and the programme of the university in order to enhance mentoring and role modelling for the students.

4.6.3. Role of University Support Systems

It was recognised that when support services are effective, they foster a positive institutional climate, as well as increase in retention and graduation rates of students. It was recommended that guidance programmes would be of great benefit if provided in the following support areas; study skills and time management; the handling of multiple responsibilities; personal growth and development, financial aid, academic and career development. These were areas identified as helpful in increasing retention and completion rates of the students as well as ease the burden of parenthood in the public university.

4.6.4. Emphasis on the Interrelationship between University Structures and Functions

The study recommended that all core functions of the university should work in correlation with other service providers. That way the student benefits and the university is able to fulfil its function adequately. Since student parenthood impacts on social, educational and economic aspects of the student it requires attention from all sectors and structures should be instituted so as to make the burden of parenthood lighter.

Finally in conclusion this study has shown the role of the public university in the interplay of parenthood and academic potential of the student, and the effect on the retention and completion rates of student parents. Change in the approaches to parenthood can help in mitigating the effects of parenthood on the students if all the parties take a decision to make it happen.

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