Enhancing Students' Achievement and Career Success: The Role of Students Engagement in Higher Education

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Abstract: - Studies have shown that effective engagement of higher education students leads to outstanding achievement and career success. From available literature, engagement has been studied from the emotional, behavioural and cognitive dimensions with little attention to students' engagement with industry through higher education faculties. This article sheds light on the relationship between and among the three dimensions of engagement and how they can be evoked by industrial engagement as the chief driver of students' achievement. To promote students' achievement and career success, university faculties are considered the nerve centre in the formulation and operationalisation of student engagement services through active engagement with appropriate industries, involvement of students in programme enrichment and above all, acknowledgement of students' as partners and bona fide members of a learning community. All of that are considered as incentives for students' behavioural compliance.

*Keywords***: Achievement, Career Success Engagement, Higher Education**

I. INTRODUCTION

Among the objectives of higher educational institutions is to engage students in relevant learning activities that enhance capacity for development and growth in their chosen career. Studies conducted in countries like the United States of America (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005), Australia (Krause & Coates, 2008), New Zealand (Van der Meer & Scott, 2009), England (Mann, 2001) and Turkey (Gunuc, 2014) have shown a positive correlation between students engagement and learning outcomes. In Africa, available literature shows that Nigeria and South Africa have documented studies which correlate learning outcomes to student engagement (Abubakar, Abubakar & Itse, 2017). Kuh (2003) notes that when students in higher education are involved in educationally purposive activities, by way of participation in the organization and development of the content and process of learning, they acquire capabilities and the confidence required to walk themselves successfully through higher education and their working life. On the premise that meaningful engagement predicts achievement and career success, it is important for higher educational institutions in Africa to understand the elements of students' engagement that have the greatest impact on their achievement and career success. Knowing those elements could inform universities to implement policies that involve students in the development of content and processes of higher education, as well as open up opportunities to adopt quality assurance practices that can enhance the competencies of graduates and their job market price. This article brings to the fore, the constituents of students' engagement that can be deployed by African universities to turn out graduates with pricey skills in the job market.

II. FOUNDATIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF STUDENTS ENGAGEMENT

The idea of students' engagement and its impact on achievement dates back to the 1990s when education researchers began studies into the factors that influence students' commitment to learning (Zekpe & Leach, 2010). The earliest conceptualization was that desired learning outcomes are determined by the time spent on academic task and the quality of effort exerted in academic work (Strydom, Basson & Mentz, 2010). It was later extended to cover effective educational practices principled on student-staff interaction, collaboration among students, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations of students, and appreciation for diversity of talents and ways of learning (Blaich & Wise, 2011) Since then, there have been various approaches to studies on students' engagement. Generally, the consensus is that students' engagement is induced by motivational factors in the learning environment (Schuet, 2008), the way educators practice and relate to students (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005), institutional culture and structures (Porter, 2006) and the social and political context under which teaching and learning occurs (Yorke, 2006).

In many western countries and Europe in particular, students' opinion about the content, practices and processes of higher education is key to development and delivery. For example, the European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education {ENQA} (2015) mandates higher educational institutions in Europe to engage students and incorporate their ideas into the process of higher education quality management. Based on these and other proponents of students' involvement in higher education quality management, the concept of engagement has been defined to reflect the responsibilities of learners, educators and institutions.

III. DEFINITION OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Willms (2003) defines engagement as students' sense of belonging to a school community and active participation in the school's activities based on acceptance of the values of the school. Kuh (2003) defines students' engagement as the time and energy devoted by students to educationally relevant activities inside and outside of the classroom, and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in the activities. According to Manning, Kinzie and Schuh (2006) and Coates (2005), students' engagement connotes how higher educational institutions allocate resources and organise learning opportunities, conditions, expectations and services to encourage student's participation and benefit from involvement in learning activities. A more detailed description of engagement was proposed by Coates (2009) which measures the construct along a six-item scale, namely:

  i. Academic challenge, i.e. how expectations and assessments challenge students to learn.
  ii. Active learning, i.e. students' effort to actively construct their knowledge.
  iii. Student and staff interaction, i.e. level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff.
  iv. Enriching educational experiences, i.e. participation in broadening educational activities.
  v. Supportive learning environments, i.e. feelings of legitimacy within the university community.
  vi. Work-integrated learning, i.e. integration of employment-focused work experience into study.

The definitions suggest that effective students' engagement is pivot on the interdependence between students, faculties and the remaining structures of a university. Whilst university students, particularly in Africa are under pressure to devote more time and effort into studying, the relevance of what and how they are expected to learn to the most critical needs of African economies is uncertain. Considering the fact that Africa is dominated by rural agrarian population, small to medium scale industries and limited vacancies in formal sector employment, universities ought to pay more attention to developing content and processes that build students' capacity and passion to steer career development toward the ultimate goal of creation of personal enterprises within the context of African economies. Unfortunately, many African universities are inadequately resourced to pursue such objective. Learning is mostly theoretical, rote and confined to classroom talking and writing with limited opportunities for out-of-classroom learning experiences. Most assessments are pen-and-paper based and do not give opportunities for practical application of knowledge and development of industry relevant skills. All of these constitute barriers to students' engagement in African universities that deserve serious attention.

IV. RELEVANT LITERATURE

On the premise that students engaged in learning are likely to graduate with high achievements, it is important to understand that learning in higher education goes beyond perceiving, understanding, recognizing, analysing and making meaning to include mastering principles, understanding proofs, remembering factual information, debating ideas and above all, acquiring methods, techniques and approaches to solving practical problems in real life situations (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2009). In that context, most authors consider student's engagement in higher education as a predictor of achievement, first, from the perspectives of class engagement and secondly from the perspective of campus engagement. Sadly, industry engagement which should take centre stage in higher education learning is scarcely mentioned in available literature. This notwithstanding, so long as higher education seeks to prepare graduates to provide solutions to societal problems, their engagement with industry can never be trivialized.

According to the proponents of class and campus engagement (Trwoler, 2010; Gunuc, 2014), students are motivated to engage in learning when the learning environment is enticing and the institutional culture kindles a sense of belonging. In effect, students get involved in learning when they feel comfortable with the social life of an institution and are unreservedly treated as entitled bona fide members of the school community. On class engagement, they assert that achievement is predicted by cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement (Trwoler, 2010; Gunuc, 2014).They argue that class engagement stems from delight in mental difficulties and challenges (cognitive), readiness or willingness to comply and participate in class activities (behavioural) and lastly, passion, interest and attitude toward the educator, subject content, peers and the class culture (emotional). Between students and the university, there is a controversy about who should take greater responsibility for students' cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement.

Some views place greater responsibility for engagement on the student's than on the educator and institution. This might hold in jurisdictions where teaching and learning is conducted under circumstances where educators and institutions are well resourced and prepared to offer students the environment, opportunities and tasks that stimulate engagement. That aside, it is believed that cognitive engagement is the product of emotional and behavioural engagement (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Li & Lerner, 2013). Hence if African higher education system can create the requisite inducements for emotional and behavioural engagement of students, a lot more students, irrespective of their pre-tertiary exposure and experience could develop cognitive engagement. Unfortunately, most African higher educational institutions pay superficial attention to such seemingly insignificant but critical needs of students which are capable of transforming their achievements.

V. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Consensually, students' achievement is predicated on cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement. However, in higher education, the constituents of each form of engagement and how they relate to students' achievement and career success have not been fully explained. With regard to higher education, this article regards industrial engagement, seldomly mentioned in available literature as the chief driver of students' achievement and career success because every university course of study ultimately leads to graduate participation in industry. Hence, by common sense, and as earlier purported by Coates (2005, 2009), industry-focused experiences must be integrated into teaching and learning and must take significant proportion of learning time. To maximise students' learning experiences, achievement and career success, university faculties must articulate cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagements to drive industrial engagement through effective teaching practice and faculty-industry-linkage. The conceptualization of the four predictors of achievement is as shown in Figure 1.
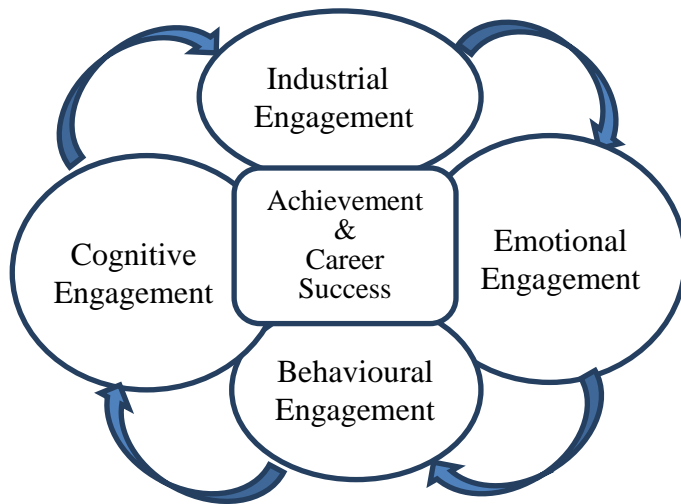

Figure 1: Drivers of students' achievement in higher education

VI. ELEMENTS OF ENGAGEMENT DRIVING STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT

In higher education, industrial engagement is probably the most effective tool for developing intrinsic motivation for achievement. When students learn through industry-focused experiences, it spawns emotional engagement which in turn leads to behavioural adjustment appropriate to the requirements of a course of study. Emotional engagement and self-induced regulated behaviour nurtures the readiness for effective cognitive engagement. For students with a clear purpose for pursuing higher education, this could guarantee academic achievement and career success. The four modes of engagement (industrial, emotional, behavioural and Cognitive) are described as follows:

Industrial Engagement

Based on the definitions of student engagement by Kuh (2003) and Coates (2005, 2009), industrial engagement is conceptualised as time and energy devoted by students to acquiring industry-focused experiences by virtue of opportunities created by universities for students to acquire such experiences. From available evidence, universities in Africa are incapable of ensuring effective industrial engagement. In Ghana for example, Boateng and Ofori-Sarpong (2002) as well as Gondwe and Walenkamp (2011) lament the inability of universities to equip students with industry relevant skills through university-industry linkage programmes. According to the authors, notwithstanding the setting up of industry liaison offices in almost all universities, many students are still unable to acquire industry relevant skills because many companies do not benefit from their working relations with universities and therefore refuse to accept students for work experience. The situation would have been different if university faculties in Africa are noted for teaching and research that have significant relevance to industry needs. Until faculties are able to engage students with industry either through collaborative research, industrial placement or integration of industry-focused experiences into classroom teaching by multimedia technology, the chances of producing high achieving graduates with capacity to excel in the world of work shall continue to be slim.

Emotional Engagement

With consistent exposure to industry, students become awakened to their career needs and develop commitment to acquiring problem-solving skills and knowledge, not for the sake of passing examinations, but for the purpose of fitness for performance in industry. Emotional engagement can be reinforced through periodically planned programmes of intellectually stimulating debates, or discussions with participation from students, faculty staff and industry representatives. Such activities endear faculties to students and whip up subject interest, affection for lecturers and commitment to knowledge discovery and sharing among peers (Trwoler, 2010; Gunuc, 2014). Informed by industry realities and a sense of membership of faculty and the university community, students crave to enrich their knowledge, direct their own learning and create new knowledge applicable to solving industry problems. In that respect, faculties and lecturers must go beyond the straight jacket official teaching and learning credit hours to engage students informally for the purpose of creating rapport to understand their academic progress, learning difficulties and career development plans. Such academic support services can best be operationalized by faculty career consultants. Unfortunately, such provisions are rarely available in African universities. In so far as African universities keep to the routine of teaching, testing, passing and graduating students without effective programmes of students' emotional engagement, students' achievement and consequently graduate performance at industry shall continue to be poor.

Behavioural Engagement

It is voluntary conformance to the conduct and ethics required to excel in a specific discipline. According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004), students who voluntarily comply with norms and shun disruptive behaviour often have greater tendencies for higher achievement. In higher education, behavioural engagement in academic disciplines is difficult to attain because of the complexity of social life in university campuses. However, if students are consistently engaged industrially and emotionally, exhibition of achievement oriented behaviour like class attendance, attentiveness, participation, questioning, timely completion of assignments, ethical use of learning resources and efficient use of time comes naturally. Rules and regulations of faculties, departments and universities are observed by students with little or no application of sanctions. With attainment of such level of personal compliance exertion of time and energy into academic work becomes natural.

Cognitive Engagement

According to Gunuc and Kuzu (2014), cognitive engagement involves investment in learning and learning goals through self-regulatory planning driven by delight in mental difficulties and inward motivation for achievement. Fredricks et al. (2004) define it as students' psychological investment of effort and time in understanding subject matter, acquiring skills and implementing self-regulating strategies. If students would take delight in expending time and effort to tackle mentally challenging tasks, the task itself and the challenge it poses to students must be relevant and rewarding. In addition, if students would develop appropriate self-regulating strategies to sustain their cognitive engagement, the assigned rewarding task must be followed by prompt feedback after task accomplishment. This implies that cognitive engagement can be enhanced by effective teaching with clear learning objectives, autonomous learning opportunities for students to create and extend knowledge, students' ability to clarify their learning goals, appropriate assessment methods, raising task standards with adequate support for task accomplishment and above all, students' vision about their future self (Kanno & Norton, 2003). Unfortunately in most African universities, the learning environment, academic support services and the practice of teaching in some instances fall short of the needed motivation for cognitive engagement. Hence a lot of African students graduate out of universities with paper qualifications without adequate cognitive preparation for high achievement. Perhaps the university system preoccupied them with learning to pass examinations to the detriment of developing cognitive capabilities to enhance their industry worth.

VII. CONCLUSION

Students' engagement as a tool for promoting achievement and career success has not been fully exploited in African higher education. University faculties are unable, unwilling or failing to acknowledge the fact that students' achievement and career success hinge on appropriate industrial engagement which in turn depend on emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement. To enhance students' achievement and success, university faculties must take responsibility to formalize concrete and dependable arrangements with specific industries to give students ample opportunities to put classroom work into practice. Such arrangements would strengthen student-faculty connectivity and engender appreciation for challenging academic tasks and subject matter relevance. Secondly, faculties must be resolved to integrate students' input into the entire enterprise of teaching, learning and research through the university quality assurance schemes. Such honour accorded students will nurture a learning community of student-staff collaboration and facilitate self-regulatory conformance behaviour. When given the necessary support as collaborators of a learning community focused on finding solutions to the needs of industry and society, rather than knowledge seekers, many African students will exhibit outstanding achievement and navigate themselves successfully toward desired career goals.

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