

Impact of Deferments of Study by Undergraduate Students in Public Universities: A Survey of Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Sustainable economic development is a function of skilled human resource and a product of education. Governments aim at producing human resource through provision of globally competitive, quality, inclusive university education with improved completion rates. The Government of Kenya has broadened access to higher education by implementing Free and Compulsory Basic Education and waived fees paid for exit national examinations. These policies opened doors for an increasing population of bright but needy students to access university education, however, completion rates remain an elusive uphill task for majority of them. This paper addresses the impact of deferments of studies by bright needy students in public universities. The target population was 283, consisting of 277 students, 3 deans of schools and 3 deans from students' affairs departments. The study utilized mixed methods with a survey design and purposive sampling approach. Data was collected through document analysis, questionnaire, focused group discussions (FGD) and interviews; and analysed through descriptive and inferential statistics. Findings indicated that the major reasons for deferments were financial constraints (59.3%) and fear of failure (42.6%). The study recommended introduction of deferment scholarships, food tickets, regular appeals for internal and external assistance and introduction of a unit to address plight of these students. The study concluded that deferments cause depression, dropouts and delayed completion rates negating the purpose of providing inclusive higher education with improved completion rates.

Key Words: Higher Education, Deferments, Completion rates

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INTRODUCTION

University education plays a critical role in production of human resource, with relevant skills and attitudes required for economic growth (GoK, 2014). These skills and attitudes are the cornerstone for driving and sustaining Vision 2030, the country's blueprint for development (GoK, 2010). Through Vision 2030, Kenya plans to transform into a globally competitive and prosperous nation with a high quality of life for all by

the year 2030. Higher education, therefore, is one of the bridges for achievement of this Vision.

Education and training is structured into two major segments --firstly, a basic cycle consisting of 3 years of early childhood care development, 2 years of pre-primary, 8 years of primary and 4 years of secondary learning (GoK, 2005, 2013). Secondly, higher education (university), which is the final cycle, takes maximum of 4-6 years depending on preferred course of study by students. This structure is designed to offer learners equal chances of advancing to the highest level of learning (Taskforce Report, 2014). It enables the Government of Kenya to implement equity that reflects national diversity with enhanced student completion rates (GoK, 2014).

The Government has implemented several policies to allow all learners to benefit from education, and achieve educational goals (GoK, 2010). Pupils are required to undergo Compulsory Free Primary Education and Free Day Secondary Education (Khamisi, 2011, Hornsby, 2012, GoK, 2014). The Government waived fees paid for exit national examinations, which had been wa a financial burden for disadvantaged families. The Government further committed itself to:

Ensure that children belonging to marginalised, vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are not discriminated against and prevented from pursuing and completing basic education.....parents/guardians who fail in their responsibility to ensure that children remain in schoolare liable to a fine not exceeding one hundred thousand or imprisonment not exceeding two years or both (GoK, 2013 pp 241)

The above mentioned policies opened doors for bright but needy students from disadvantaged families to access university education more than ever before (GoK, 2012). Definitions of punishments for parents/guardians who fail to keep their children in school was a firm indicator that the Government is committed in keeping all children

in school. University education gives students a chance to implement their career choices, through study of relevant courses (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2016, Zunker, 2006). Increased accessibility to public university education has not been matched with increase in funding, a challenge, not only in Kenya, but in all Sub-Saharan African countries. In acknowledging this, The World Bank reported that “Africa is the only continent in the world whose expenditure on individual student pursuing university education has reduced in the face of ever increasing social demand for this education” (The World Bank, 2008, pp ix). The decreased funding has negatively affected the increasing population of bright but needy students’ completion rates. Their humble families are required to support them financially for basic needs, accommodation and statutory requirements, which is an uphill task for many.

Funding University Education

After independence, funding university education in Kenya has been the sole responsibility of the Government from 1963 until 1992, when cost sharing was introduced (Kamunge, 1988). Government sponsors all qualifying students uniformly through Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) established in 1995, irrespective of the unit cost of the undergraduate programme pursued. HELB also disburses loans, bursaries and scholarships to all Kenyan students who apply and qualify. However, increased enrolments at universities and colleges as a result of favourable education policies have overstretched HELB funds, making it difficult to meet yearly application demands (Thuo, 2017). In addition to HELB, there are other avenues for needy students to seek funds for university education.

Universities are sensitive to welfare of needy students and support them through Work-Study programs. This is a widely practiced concept in many universities all over the world; it is intended to assist needy students to earn allowances, based on the number

of hours they work as they study (Standa, 2000). These allowances are expected to be given on regular basis to subsidize their living expenses. Evidence from work-study forms indicated that students are paid Ksh30 per hour, and are expected to work for a maximum of 10 hours per week, which translates into Kshs.300 per week (Dean of Students, 2013). These programs are commendable, but with the ever increasing population of needy students, financial resources are overstretched. Some universities have scrapped off the program in recent times due to inability to sustain it, and, therefore, permanently removing a source of financial avenue at this level for bright but needy students.

The Constituency Development Fund was introduced in 2003 by the Government with the aim of curbing poverty at the grassroots and addressing historical injustices. It was rationalised that education bursary support for students from vulnerable poor families, those affected or infected by HIV and AIDS and orphans would remain in school and acquire basic education without interruptions (GoK, 2014, Maathai, 2010). Although this fund has been mismanaged in some constituencies, it has offered hope to many disadvantaged students, whose tuition fees was paid and they completed school. Secondary school education is a transition to university education, and these same students from humble families require continued financial support to clear university studies within stipulated timelines.

Deferments

Sometimes despite all the available interventions mentioned, students are still unable to fund their university education and are forced to defer their studies. Bright but needy students from humble backgrounds face numerous challenges and have studies interrupted midstream as they defer. Deferment process involves the head of department, dean of school, dean of students and deputy vice chancellors in charge of academics. This process is basically meant to create awareness and interventions by the

signatories, if any, to assist the affected students to proceed or cancel deferment. Unfortunately, interventions do not happen in many cases as officers involved either delegate their duties of signing the forms to junior officers or sign without raising any questions with students. Experience has shown that many students end up as casual labourers with the aim of acquiring money for upkeep, accommodation and other needs when they resume studies. Education which is regarded as a powerful tool to improve people's lives (Mathaai, 2007), and is expected to leave positive learning experiences on students at university level, become a source of frustrations as bright but needy students delay their completion rates.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Placement in desired courses in public universities is a dream come true and a cause for celebration among bright but needy students with their families from disadvantaged backgrounds. They embrace this opportunity as a springboard from poverty to improved life styles for themselves and families. Most of these students manage to complete secondary school due to favourable educational policies in addition to scholarships from various organizations and well-wishers. They report to universities energized with full knowledge that their studies will take stipulated time frame of 4-6 years, depending on program of study. At registration time, most of them easily pay for statutory requirements from wages saved from working before joining university. Within a short time, they realize they require regular funds for upkeep, accommodation, fare, learning materials among other needs. They devise several ways of survival ranging from hawking food or second hand cloths, doing laundry for friends at a small fee, serving as bouncers, comedians at night entertainment joints, doing dishes and keeping room clean in lieu of non-contribution for collective food budgets. Others form habits of leaving rooms early and getting back late to avoid watching roommates prepare and eat food. Majority who live in pocket friendly rooms

in crime infested locations are at the mercy of criminals who entice them with easy money. A few engage in intimate relationships with older partners for money. All these activities are time consuming and have negative impact on students, as they shift their focus from study to survival. This paper discusses how public universities and the Government of Kenya can address the plight of bright but needy students to enable them complete their studies within stipulated timelines, curb dropout rates and achieve one of the goals of providing higher education that enables the Government to implement equity that reflects national diversity with enhanced student completion rates (GOK, 2014).

Objectives of the study were to determine the impact of deferments on completion rates of undergraduate bright but needy students; and explore measures which universities can take to improve completion rates of students.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The target population was 283 which was made up of 277 students who deferred studies in the past three academic years, three (3) deans of schools and three (3) deans of student affairs respectively. Purposive sampling was used to select 83 student participants, 57% females and 43% males while deans of schools and deans of students' affairs were purposively selected due to their small numbers.

Data Collection Methods

The study employed mixed methods with a survey design to assess the impact of deferments on completion rates of undergraduate bright but needy students in public universities in Uasin Gishu County. Data was collected using questionnaire, focused group discussions, document analysis and face to face interviews; and analysed using inferential and descriptive statistics. The questionnaire for students was divided into four sections. Section one covered background information, which included, age,

gender, year of study, course of study, school (faculty), parental status (live or dead) and income, type of primary and secondary school attended (public or private) and accommodation (private or in the university). Section two covered financial status of students, family income, financial support at primary, secondary and university level of education, and finally income generating activities they engage in to support their daily needs. Section three dealt with deferments, the number of times differed, causes, and individual feelings about deferments. Section four covered, examinations, level of preparedness, quality of preparation, re-taking of examinations and general performance. Focused group discussions covered financial status of respondents, family, support given at basic education level, survival techniques and reasons for deferments.

FINDINGS

Financial constraints: Majority of the respondents (59%) agreed that the main reason for deferments of study was financial constraints. When asked how they managed to complete secondary school despite coming from humble backgrounds, majority (53%) said they relied on sponsors, and goodwill, teachers, relatives, and politicians.

In cases where students had tuition sponsorship only, 35% paid for university statutory items from funds raised through harambee (fundraising), or individual savings earned as casual labourers before joining university. This meant the students had inadequate amounts of money for upkeep.

When asked how they managed to get their daily needs, 33% said they did assignments or made notes for classmates, cooked, and washed clothes, and dishes and kept rooms tidy in exchange for food. When asked how they felt about this arrangement, many of them, 54%, said they appreciated that they didn't starve, but suffered from low self-

esteem, they felt sad with no sense of belonging as their humble backgrounds turned them into 'useable tools of sorts by others'.

Other participants (19%) who did not get accommodative roommates chose to leave their rooms very early in the morning or return very late at night to avoid seeing them prepare and eat food in their presence. Others teamed up and hired rooms off campus, in slum areas where rent is pocket friendly, but with high crime rates.

Financial challenges push them into criminal activities as a readily available source of money and they also become vulnerable easy targets for criminals. On the item of how often they requested for upkeep money from home, 45% said rarely. Reasons for response were summarized by one of them, who stated that:

I come from a polygamous family of twelve children. Am the third born overall, I was sponsored in secondary school by..... I did well in KCSE examinations and I was admitted in one of the established national schools in Kenya. I worked for this institution as an untrained teacher before joining university. It pays only for tuition fees, the burden of payment for statutory items and upkeep falls on my shoulders. Although am required to work for it every time am off session, but my course is so demanding, we rarely have long breaks among terms, therefore I can't work for the much needed money. The financial base of my family is weak, last time I went home, my father gave me Ksh.800, fare back which is Ksh.730, I was left with a balance of Ksh.70 for upkeep for the term which is three months. Now tell me, is this the type of a father one can ring to ask for money..... (Respondent, 2016)

Income generating activities: Asked how they handled financial challenges, 43%, said they engaged in several activities; to earn their basic needs, including but not limited to hawking foodstuffs or second hand clothes in halls of residences, serving as bouncers at night clubs for males, some were hired as part-time comedians, Deejays, recreationalists (in health facilities at night) or waiters in small eateries. Those who stay on campus

easily turn their rooms into centres of criminal activities like selling and buying of stolen items especially cell-phones or laptops which are on high demand in or outside universities, others join gangs that harass or rob other students of their valuables within campuses.

When parents managed to give fees, the temptations to misuse was high due to peer pressure with upgraded lifestyles. 9% of them go themselves older people as sexual partners for the whole purpose of getting money, but kept this as top secret from families and friends out of embarrassment. Regardless of a weak financial base at home, a few respondents (5%) said sometimes when they were financially hard up with nowhere to turn to, they got money from unsuspecting parents as they lied about increased fees or needed money for non-existent items. Lack of financial discipline resulted into misuse of available funds and within a short time. All these activities are time consuming, and can easily distort students' focus from study to income generating activities with risk of becoming social misfits.

Fear of failure: Fear of examinations is a common problem that confronts all students at university regardless of course of study. Pre-examination time is a period marked with intense revision programs organized on individual or group levels. Examinations results are used to determine students, who progress to the next class, sit special/supplementary examinations, repeat class or be discontinued from the program.

Bright but needy students listed reasons for fear of failure as follows: poor preparation for examinations (49%), struggles to clear fees balances (63%), reporting late at the beginning of term/semester (21%), inability to purchase textbooks and other resources (52%), inability to pay rent and engaging landlord/lady into hide and seek game (27%) and learning on empty stomachs (53%); and family conflicts (47%) in courses where

students are required to attend 80% of their lessons to qualify to sit examinations. Some of these students convince their friends to sign on their behalf as they continue missing on quality learning.

Cheating in examinations which arises from fear of failure is an ever present temptations for this population of students who face numerous challenges and therefore, perceive deferment as a safer option than taking an examination when their mental framework is clouded with fear of failure as expressed by a respondent saying:

....my mother took a case in court against my dad. Before this, the relationship between my parents had become nasty and was made worse by the court case. This separated my family into three. Some of my siblings stood with dad, others with mum while i took a neutral position. Little did I know that this would cost my relationship with both parentsthis brought a prolonged time of no communication to them. A 'simple' condition for any of them to pay attention to me was that I support him/her and to be a witness against the other party, something I thought wasn't wise to do. As exam approached, I had no one to pay my remaining fees despite numerous reminders.... About two weeks to exam, a period within which the hearing of the case had been fixed, I decided to take casual work in my home town to raise my fees balance and upkeep money but I was unable. I missed the exam, which I had not adequately prepared for; as I was torn apart by trauma caused by this case. I applied for special exams, and I managed to go for field work through struggles. I was requested by my department to defer studies..... this would delay my academic journey, I pleaded with them, I explained my case against my will as I didn't want people to know what I was going through..... (Respondent, 2015).

Similar fear of failure due to lack of inadequate lesson attendance was evident from this participant who summarized as follows:

My classmates are now in 3rd year of study, I deferred in first year due to financial constraints. My parents divorced when I was in lower primary, they both remarried, my father left the country with his new wife and my mother settled in a different county, they both cut communication with us. Am the first born in a family of four, and I

can't recall their faces if they ever appeared. We were left under the care of our widowed ageing paternal grandmother. I did well in primary due to sponsorship, I was selected to join one of the national schools, I reported empty handed, I had been given fare by my former class teacher. I explained my plight to the principal who allowed me to start learning and staff contributed towards my basic needs. In Form Two, the principal was transferred, and the new one demanded for fees payment. I was once again thrown out in the cold, after missing a term, I was recalled to continue learning on condition that I commit in writing that one day, and I would pay the accumulated fees, which remains pending to date. I obtained a mean grade of A in KCSE, I was admitted to university but I deferred on the day I reported, which was towards the end of the academic year due to financial challenges. I did any casual labour to raise money for upkeep and statutory requirements, I was readmitted and I managed to clear first year studies. I deferred once again in second year, I had earlier applied for HELB loan which was allocated but disbursed to the wrong account, I wasted a lot of learning time, making follow-ups in Nairobi and Huduma Centre but each time, I was told to wait. I missed term one examinations, I deferred once again.there was no point of sitting an exam, even if given a chance when I know very well in advance that I will fail(Respondent, 2015)

Fear of failure in examinations in this population of students is real as expressed by these two respondents; they miss a lot of quality learning and revision time as they struggle to get money to pay fees balances, attend field studies, pay rent, acquire basic needs among others needs which compromise their ability to maximize their potential in academic. Temptations to have unfair advantage over others by cheating in examinations are higher when caught; they face disciplinary proceedings, which may result into, cancelling results, sitting special examinations, suspension or discontinuation from study, deferment, therefore, is a safer option

Parenthood: Getting in the family way is not uncommon among university students, but for bright but needy students, it makes a bad situation worse. With the arrival of a

baby, there is more pressure for funds for its welfare, baby sitter and alternative accommodation off university, if a student was previously accommodated. Parenthood contributed 21% for reasons of deferments. All female participants who deferred on the basis of motherhood agreed that they were unprepared for the new roles, which are very challenging. Attending lessons, completing assignments on time, engaging in group discussions or going for field trips became very difficult to accomplish. Some faced rejection from families particularly those who became fathers; this was well captured by a male respondent saying:

I had known my girlfriend before we joined different universities in the same county. We were both aware our families did not approve of our relationship. Unfortunately she conceived and delivered through caesarean section. I spent most of my study time and borrowed funds to clear medical bills and hire a room for her and the baby. Her family forced me to marry, and barred her from going home, to protect the family image as the father is a pastor. My father refused to pay my fees saying that since I had decided to father children than learn, i should take full responsibility like all husbands. My mother who would have been more understanding in such situation by taking care of the baby had passed on when I was in secondary school. Due to many challenges I faced , I deferred my studies as I knew I stood high chances of being discontinued if i sat examinations I deferred (Participant, 2016).

Male students rarely share their challenges of fatherhood and studies, in most cases, they prefer to remain silent but females are more open on the same issues and willing to seek advice and with family support, this enables them to continue learning. A few female students suffer embarrassment on account of humble family backgrounds, upon realization that they are pregnant, and their babies would add an extra burden on the family which eke a living from irregular casual labour. This fear drive them into keeping such pregnancies a secret, and parents, never know of the existence of a grandchild or know that their daughter deferred, one of the participant in such situation, defended such decision on grounds that;

My parents have struggled as long as I can remember to put food on the table and keep us in public primary and secondary schools. Am the first born in a family of seven siblings, I performed well in KCSE, and earned a place in a course of my choice in one of the public

universities in Kenya. It was a dream come true for me and the entire family, I promised myself to work hard and improve the living condition of my family. At the beginning I was able to pay for statutory requirements without a problem since I had worked as an untrained teacher in a local secondary school and managed to save some money. By second term, life became difficult, I was unable to buy basic needs and once in a while my dad would send me Ksh.500 for a month, which was hardly enough, he is a casual labourer at construction sites, and opportunities to work are not regular. Under pressure from my friends, I fell into the hands of a sponsor who provided a very soft life which I had dreamed about but was out of reach for me. When I discovered that I was pregnant, I was so stressed that I was unable to concentrate in class, I attempted suicide, but my roommate rushed me to hospital, to make it worse, the father to my unborn child made a big U-turn, changed his cell-phone numbers and disappeared from circulation. I saw discontinuation 'staring' at me, I knew for sure, I wouldn't pass my examinations, I deferred and went to live with a friend, as my parents didn't want to hear about my pregnancy.....(Respondent 2016).

Funding by Higher Education Loans Board (HELB): Higher Education Loans Board disburses loans and bursaries to successful students in universities and colleges after application. Bright but needy students recognized HELB as central in their education, without it, they would not have accessed higher education. When asked whether they applied for HELB, majority of the respondents (84%) agreed they did, out of which 67% requested for maximum loan while 16% did not. Only 7% were allocated between Ksh45,000 - 50,000. Majority received minimum funds. On the item on whether they appealed for more funds, majority of the respondents (60%) said no, and alleged that it would not make any difference, because once HELB allocates, such decisions are rarely revised. Some of the respondents (33%) felt the amounts allocated were too low and undeserving students benefit more based on false information, as one of the participants said:

I was told by my neighbour, who is second year student in the same university I was to join, the type of information required by HELB

for maximum allocation. I decided to try, and indeed I received what I asked for unlike some of my classmates who said the truth but missed or received minimum funds. Sometimes one must organize oneself to get what they want. I know truth is a virtue but under such circumstances, it doesn't help..... (Participant, 2016)

Allocations made to dishonesty students put more strain on the overstretched funding agency with an ever increasing numbers of applications yearly. These remittances are sometimes delayed to the extent of becoming a source of worry instead of blessing for students who must clear any balances before they sit examinations. Asked to suggest how this allocations can be improved, 78% said there is need for transparency in allocations by allowing students representatives from each university to sit on the board to students' needs.

Funding by Constituency Development Fund (CDF): These funds are available on constituency basis to assist needy but bright students among other aims. When respondents were asked how many of them applied for bursaries, 87% agreed they did but only 46% succeeded and the amount given was Ksh.5, 000. This amount can hardly make significant difference in financial status of needy students with fees balances and no subsistence. This fund is controlled by politicians and is open to abuse. Many bright but needy students miss out or are allocated inadequate funds whereas those who are not needy get lion share of the bursary funds.

Assistance from University: When participants were asked whether they received any assistance from their institutions to relieve their situations, their responses showed that, some received financial assistance to clear medical bills, others got provision of monthly basic needs -- clothing, shoes, beddings, others got work-study opportunities, a critical number were supported by external sponsors, while others got school based

scholarships. This assistance was received through dean of students' offices which became a distribution centre after verbal and written appeals to university community by deans of students and student leaders. This was a strong indicator that university community is sensitive to needs of students from humble backgrounds and when requested, they are willing to assist. One of the beneficiaries of such assistance acknowledged such measures by saying:

.....indeed it is great honour to have the constant worry of where my next meal will come from and financial burden lifted off my shoulders. My hope has been rekindled and I see light at the end of the tunnel. I had come to a point where I felt giving up on school due to financial constraints I had. ... I am now at peace to pursue my academics without worry or anxiety of fainting on Wards Rounds before patients due to hungerI will forever be grateful for this golden opportunity..thanks for upkeep money and food..... (Respondent, 2016)

This respondent was on fees scholarship only and the responsibility of payments for other statutory requirements was for the family which was not in a position to do so. Hungry students cannot meaningfully pursue studies on empty stomachs. They require support for basic and secondary needs. While fees scholarships are important, universities can work out modalities to feed hungry students and keep them out of despair, to enable them concentrate on their studies.

Students are provided with opportunities to work as they study in work-study programmes. Majority of the respondents (80%) participated in this program after applications made through dean of students offices. Asked how regularly they get payments, majority (64%) confirmed payments are delayed, as this can be explained from financial point of view, as demand by students is high, universities are not generating more income to replenish the fund, therefore, payment on time has become

difficult, and students remain hungry for longer periods of time, compromising their ability to learn.

CONCLUSION

Higher education has been made more accessible than ever before for bright but needy students from humble backgrounds. This has been amplified by favourable education policies in addition to government funding agencies (HELB), Constituency Development Fund (CDF), private organizations and individual sponsors. The Government must workout modalities to ensure funds meant for bright and needy students serve the purpose for which they were intended, otherwise the goal of provision of university education which is inclusive with improved completion remains elusive for bright but needy students who require financial assistance to focus on their studies, clear out of the system without deferments which delays completion rates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 The Government of Kenya must consider putting structures in place to ensure funds meant for bright but needy students serve this purpose to help them focus on studies and complete their studies within the stipulated time frames.
2. Universities should introduce deferment scholarships and food tickets for such students, and appeal for internal/external scholarships.

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