Mentorship: A missing link in education in Sub-Saharan Africa?

Sub-theme: Education: Enhancing Access; Ensuring Student Success

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Abstract – In the West, start-up companies are developed in college dorms and sold later for billions of dollars. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), students sweat it out in libraries and later go on to spend years on streets looking for jobs. Various arguments have been presented on the possible causes of this general gap in fortunes for graduates from the West compared with those from SSA. This paper aims to show that the absence of mentorship programs could be a missing link in the quality of higher education in SSA. I will look at the history of approaches to mentorship in education from around the world and trace trends down the centuries. I will then consider the status of relationships between students, faculty and parents, taking into account the changing lifestyles of society in 21st century SSA. At this point, I will identify the short-comings of the traditional supervisor-student relationship in unleashing the full potential of students. I will attempt to ascertain the influence of these relationships on the overall education experience of the students, hoping to show the importance of intentional and consistent mentorship to students. My conclusion will propose some suitable approaches to mentoring students of higher education in SSA.

Introduction

In the West, start-up companies are developed in college dorms and sold later for billions of dollars. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), students sweat it out in libraries and later go on to spend years on streets looking for jobs. Indeed, the gap between the yields of institutions of higher education (IHE) in the West and in SSA is huge. The majority of students, if they have survived the high attrition rates, graduate to no employment (Sawahel, 2011) and they may have previously changed courses, usually from science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) courses to fields deemed "less challenging" like the social sciences and arts (Harvard University, 2007) which often find no relevance in the economy (Mohamedbhai, 2008). As such, universities don't lead development (Cloete et al, 2011; Sawyerr, 2004) and where they would have, they are constrained by the high rates of brain drain (Mihyo, 2008).

Several factors are fronted as the causes of the above gaps including; high rate of increase in enrolment without a related increase in capacity and infrastructure (Mohamedbhai, 2008), decreased funding from both governments and donors with its associated problems (Sawyerr, 2002), admission of unqualified and underprepared students due to the need to raise funds from tuition fees (MacGregor, 2012), inadequate staffing due to brain drain of qualified staff, inability to attract quality staff and absenteeism of the few available due to 'moonlighting' (Mihyo, 2008; Sawyerr, 2002; Tettey, 2006), outmoded curricula containing more theory than practice with no relevance to the economy (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000), inadequate capacity to do research (Cloete et al, 2011; Kellerman et al, 2012; Sawahel, 2011; Sawyerr, 2004), inadequate university-industry collaborations and overall operation below capacity (Tettey, 2006).

While reforms and innovations in several areas are being undertaken to improve the quality of education of IHE in SSA (Mihyo, 2008), student affairs have been notably neglected (Mohamedbhai, 2008). One of the critical areas of student affairs is mentorship. A lot of literature exists exploring the meaning and types of mentoring, the nature of effective mentoring, the benefits and impacts of mentoring in education at both undergraduate and postgraduate level and in workplaces (Bozeman & Feneey, 2007; D'Abate, 2010; Ehrich & Hansford, 1999; Jacobi, 1991; Nickels et al, 2012). However, the majority of this literature is focused on North America. There is a great paucity in research and

literature about mentoring in SSA and an online search may generally yield literature from North America with a few exceptions like a research report exploring mentoring as a mechanism to foster student retention, persistence and completion in South African universities (Pillay, 2011). However, mentoring has achieved great prominence in the workplace, perhaps due to increasing globalization of company practices.

A brief history of mentoring

Many definitions of mentoring have been given by various authors but in this context, the definition below given by Bozeman and Feneey (2007, p. 731) will suffice;

> Mentoring: a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and the psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé).

Mentoring has a long history of practice but a relatively shorter one of theory (Bozeman & Feneey, 2007). In practice, the relationships between gurus in Buddhism, rabbis in Judaism, teachers in early Christendom and their disciples are all forms of mentorship. In Europe, the practice of apprenticeship that developed in the late Middle Ages under crafts guilds and town governments involves mentorship.

From the 20th century to date, mentorship in education has been more pronounced in North America especially USA. Mentorship programs exist in communities, schools, colleges and universities and particular programs like the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and the Coca Cola Valued Youth Program have recorded significant success (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2010; Rhodes, 2002). In most schools, the programs have primarily targeted at-risk youth to help them reform and join and/or stay in school. Several mentoring programs also exist for undergraduates, graduate students and even junior faculty (Douah et al, 2007) and a significant number of these programs are geared towards students or faculty from minority groups like Hispanics and African Americans (Freeman, 1999; Gasman, 1997; Pope, 2002).

In Europe, mentoring is still done in the form of apprenticeship (Gasman, 1997) though with several modifications especially where dual education systems have been adopted and this includes places where apprenticeship has been fully replaced by internships – another form of developmental interactions. However, colleges and universities do have mentorship programs.

In SSA, mentorship exists in communities through informal initiatives and very few schools do have any formal structured mentorship programs like the African Leadership Academy (ALA, 2011). In universities, mentoring programs are conspicuously absent at the undergraduate level. However, some programs are carried out at graduate level and among faculty like the Leadership and Equity Advancement Program (LEAP) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Tettey, 2006).

Relationships between parents, students and faculty

Most parents in SSA are largely uninvolved in their children's tertiary education apart from giving financial support and being available for a few occasions. The assumption is usually made that the children are old enough to make sound decisions and chart out their own destiny (Sawyerr, 2002). Even where a few parents would have desired to be more involved, they may find themselves incapacitated, not having been educated themselves and for those that were, the tendency is to inhibit rather than to nurture and unleash students' potential (Harvard University, 2007).

Students in SSA come from a variety of backgrounds ranging from the very rich to the very poor ones who may not even be able to access student loans. Most students report financial encumbrances as their major problem (Harvard University, 2007; Sawyerr, 2002) which not only affects their studies but their relationships with one another, their parents and faculty. Consequently, students spend more time 'surviving' than thriving and find themselves isolated (Tettey, 2006) ignorant about how to utilize even the few resources available in the university to their advantage.

Since many universities in SSA are generally manned by aging faculty and unable to attract younger talented staff (Sawyerr, 2004; Tettey, 2006), students sometimes find it hard to relate to the older professors. Younger faculty with whom students would have related easier are often times unavailable, caught up "moonlighting" and doing extra work to raise a suitable livelihood given the low remuneration that is common among African IHE (Sawyerr, 2002). In fact, a number of professors have indicated their disinterest in mentoring arrangements both at undergraduate and graduate level (Tettey, 2006). As a result, more and more students are going through tertiary education simply for the purpose of obtaining a degree or certificate. While all students do have potential, skills and talents that can be used to make a good contribution to the economy, they are going by largely untapped and unexploited since they don't seem to be getting the necessary guidance and direction through mentorship to enhance and ensure their success.

While the traditional supervisor-student relationship may be fronted as a good platform for mentorship, it seems to have some short-comings in performing that function in SSA. As noted above, most universities in SSA have so many students with a few faculty and it is therefore humanly impossible for them to adequately pay close attention to the personal details of every individual student except for a little time to discuss academic work. This relationship is primarily focused on accomplishing specific academic objectives like research papers, dissertations and theses and hence leaves little time for anything else that would be necessary for wholesome mentoring of a student. The emphasis is on getting successful academic results out of the student than on his/her overall development as a person.

Supervision of students' projects is usually done over a short period of time and it may not make a lasting impact on the student. It typically goes on for one year at most and this is usually the last year of the students, program when the student has already gone through the formative years of their education experience. Moreover, most staff have not been oriented into the mentoring aspects that could be derived from this relationship.

The significance of mentorship

Mentoring students enhances the quality of teaching and learning. Through this kind of developmental interaction, students get knowledge, advice and support to guide them through the transition to post-college life. Being mentored increases the self esteem of young people (Buell, cited in Douah et al, 2007) and leads to more psychosocial support in short term and long term career development (D'Abate, 2010). Mentored undergraduate students are usually better able to access university resources, have higher retention and graduation rates and also possess more life management skills that help them deal with personal and family problems (Omatsu, 2000). Students with fewer resources are likely to benefit even more from being mentored (Erickson et al, 2009) since it shows them that the staff and university community care about their needs (Gasman, 1997), especially those that find themselves underprepared in the absence of foundation programs (MacGregor, 2012; Pillay, 2011). While enabling undergraduate students to build rapport with staff (Granitz et al, 2009), mentoring demystifies graduate studies and effectively creates a bridge towards graduate school. (Huss et al, 2002).

In the USA, mentorship programs geared towards minority groups have been shown to have an impact on minority college students (Pope, 2002), help African American students stay in school and make significant achievements (Freeman, 1999) and enhance the experiences of multicultural students (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). The White mentors in this case came to learn how to be effective in a multicultural setting! Several other benefits accruing to mentors have also been documented (Douah et al, 2007; Nickels & Kowalski-Braun, 2012).

Recommendations

Though most of the literature and examples of mentoring programs are from the West, it is possible to modify them, apply them in SSA and reap the benefits. To begin with, faculty should be sensitized about the benefits that mentoring can bring to the learning experience of their students. This is because most of them either seem to be unaware of the value of mentoring or are simply indifferent to it.

Students should also be enlightened about the need for being mentored while in school. Since there is an acute problem of understaffing, different approaches should be considered like having graduate students mentor the undergraduates (Barker & Pitts, 1997) and peer mentoring whereby older undergraduate students mentor their younger colleagues. Students could also be encouraged to get mentorship out of the university setting, perhaps from an alumnus or other reputable members of the community.

Formal mentoring programs usually offer the best results since they can be evaluated by specified goals and standards. For the start however, especially in institutions with no capacity to expeditiously create formal programs, informal arrangements should be made and faculty encouraged not to turn down students when approached, except when overwhelmed by numbers! In cases where formal programs have been put in place, participation should be made voluntary but as an incentive to students and staff, some awards should be instituted for the most exemplary mentors or peer mentors.

To take care of the shortage of time, e-Mentoring and blended mentoring which is a mixture of online and on-site activity should be explored. For those universities that can afford it, software for matching mentors and mentees like *Mentor Scout* can be used to ease the administrative process of mentoring programs. In cases where the costs of mentorship programs far exceed the available budgets, IHE should look into innovative ways of funding this venture including requesting for support from their alumni in the Diaspora since many might desire to make a contribution to their home countries without knowing exactly how (Mihyo, 2008). Above all, benchmarking with other universities has to be made for continuous improvement.

Conclusion

Mentoring students can greatly improve the quality of higher education and build capacity for SSA to compete favourably in the 21st century knowledge economy. Despite the short-term hurdles that could be met in implementing mentorship programs, the long term benefits far outweigh the costs that may be encountered. However, mentorship is not the single magic bullet that will solve all the challenges of higher education in SSA. Its implementation has to be in concert with efforts to improve other aspects of IHE before lasting changes can be realized.

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