

Full Length Research Paper

Analytical study on the causes and possible solutions to apathy among undergraduate students

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This study focused on the causes of apathy among undergraduate students in Makerere University using the College of Education and External Studies, School of Education as the case study. It sought to establish the causes and possible solutions to the challenge of academic apathy among undergraduate students. The study adopted a descriptive cross sectional survey case study design, and a total of 359 respondents comprising students, the college academic and non-academic staff and purposively sampled students' parents/guardians were interviewed. It was established that there are institutional, administrative, and students based causes of apathy and the solutions are pegged to the specific cause.

Key words: Economics of education, apathy, philosophy of education, socialization and education.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

On average, students who are admitted into higher institutions of learning in Uganda are viewed as adults and are taken as mature enough to manage their affairs. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda 1995, article 34, any person above the age of 16 years is deemed an adult and thus held responsible for his/her actions and can manage themselves. Unfortunately, reports from both public and private universities and other tertiary institutions in Uganda indicate that many students of both genders in some instances do not conduct themselves in ways which are in consonance with maturity (Kowalski, 2003; Muwagga and Kaahwa, 2008; Mamdani, 2007). There are allegations that many of the students do not attend lectures regularly, do miss their course work tests, do not keep academic deadlines, come to class in drunken state, and some drop out of the university for no justifiable reasons except laziness and

lack of concentration. Different reasons are cited for example it is alleged that over 60% of the students' early academic formation is more skewed towards rigid parental and school control which are very minimal in tertiary institutions of learning in Uganda. It is also alleged that the examination and rote centered pedagogy suffocates personal initiative and motivation. This thus becomes the anchor for laziness and lack of seriousness later in advanced academic life in tertiary institutions of learning. In almost all primary and secondary schools in Uganda, children are subjected to:

- Studying and being taught in order to pass examinations.
- Teacher-centered pedagogy is prime in all class and out of class instruction and learning.
- In all school activities, teachers are ever around to monitor and direct both the class and extracurricular school activities.
- Children are monitored by their guardians to ensure that they stay and complete school.

Unlike in the secondary and pre-secondary education, tertiary institutions of learning in Uganda do not have the control mechanisms imbued in primary and secondary

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education. The control becomes less prominent at university level. Taking Makerere University as a case study, it is revealed that the role of both academic and non academic staff in lieu to the students is to mentor through child centered pedagogy (<http://policies.mak.ac.ug/>).

This paper is in response to complaints raised by lecturers in the College of Education and External Studies (CEES), specifically in the School of Education (SOE). For example in a departmental meeting while discussing why students engage in examination malpractice, one lecturer said:

“Many of our students do not attend lectures, they do not hand in course work assignments on time and at times their work does not reflect students who are serious with their studies” (the statement made by one lecturer in an academic departmental staff meeting in the 2012/2013 academic year).

Another lecturer of philosophy of education lamented that out of 160 students sampled in a philosophy of education lecture, only 18 knew the names of the Dean of the School of Education and only 29 had ever read Makerere University policies on student academic affairs. These revelations being of teacher trainees could be an eye opener on the state of affairs in the entire Uganda's university education and the attitude of its graduates.

University education does not only play a vital role in shaping the nature of future leaders of the different countries, it also provides students with an environment in which they mature and develop their personal philosophies. It is assumed that the more time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities, the more they gain from their education. On the other hand, true learning in a university context can be seen as a multi dimensional activity where students engage and are engaged in academically oriented discourses, knowledge generation (epistemological midwifery) singly in libraries or laboratories, in teams or with their colleagues, in lecture rooms with lecturers/tutors, or in offices with their academic mentors. As a solitary activity, individual students engage in meditation, analysis, synchronization, and either passive or active generation of knowledge or awareness of new knowledge paradigms. Universities pivot on an assumption that the students, irrespective of their age, are mature excavators of knowledge in which case the university is a knowledge mine where each active stakeholders in his/her docket gets what he/she came to get.

Makerere University College of Education and External Studies (CEES); School of Education (SOE)

Makerere University was first established in 1922 as a

technical college and later transformed into a University College and an affiliate to the University of London. It later became the University of East Africa. In 1970, it became an independent National university of the Republic of Uganda. The College of Education and External Studies (CEES) is made up of the School of Education (SOE), the School of Distance and Life Long Education (SODLL), and the East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development (EASHESD). CEES offers both day and evening programs, and also offers access mode to both external and regular student study programs. It admits both private and government sponsored students at undergraduate level; but at postgraduate level, all students are private sponsored. Detail of students' nominal enrollment for academic year 2012/2013 in CEES is presented in Table 1.

Data in Table 1 reveal that CEES is home to 6,515 students while the SOE has 2,405 students. It should be noted that these are served by 125 academic staff and 60 non-teaching staff.

Conceptualization of the challenge of students' academic apathy

There is general apathy among undergraduate education students at Makerere University. Students do not respond whenever they are called upon by their instructors on issues regarding their academic work, they do not hand in assignments on time, many of which have to repeat papers (SOE examination records, 2012/2013). Consequently, a number of them have ended up staying longer than expected on the program, hence the low graduation rates and at times unrest in the school of education. According to Pearsall and Trumble (1996), apathy is defined as lack of interest or feeling indifferent. On the other hand, the online encyclopedia (www.wikipedia.org) defines apathy as lack of interest in or concern for things that others find moving or exciting. In this study, apathy was taken to mean poor or lack of response to academic related matters or activities among undergraduate students of the School of Education at Makerere University, while academic matters or activities in this study context meant attending lectures, doing coursework, regularly reading information on University, School and College's notice boards, timely submission of school practice acceptance forms, checking on one's academic records and thereafter acting accordingly, timely response whenever called upon to carry out an academic activity. The study viewed undergraduate students as all those persons offering an academic program of study leading to the award of a Bachelor of Arts/Science/Education degree of Makerere University. The study did not include the Bachelor of Education Distance/External students since these only appear at the university for a very limited time for face to face instruction and examination sessions that do not last

Table 1. Current Student Enrolment in CEES 2012/2013.

School	Programme	Student enrolment
School of Education		
a)	PhD	25
b)	M.Ed Curriculum Studies	5
c)	M.Ed Foundations	7
d)	M.Ed Language Education	10
e)	MEd Science Education	6
f)	PGDE	15
g)	BA (Education)	1,675
h)	BSc (Education)	438
i)	Undergraduate Retakes/Problem cases	132
j)	Graduate problem cases (those who have not registered/have been deregistered or have stayed put since completion of course work)	65
	Subtotal	2,405
School of Distance and Lifelong Learning		
k)	MACE	08
l)	BACE	660
m)	B.Com (External)	2,330
n)	B.Ed (External)	535
o)	BSc (External)	73
p)	BARI (External)	18
q)	CYP	08
r)	DPPM	304
s)	Retakes and other problem case students	304
	Subtotal	4,068
East African School of Higher Education Studies and Development		
t)	MA Educational Policy and Management (From academic year 2010/12-2012/13)	42
	Subtotal	42
Grand Student Total		6,515

(Source Principals office CEES).

more than three weeks per session.

Different reports of problematic student behaviors are on the rise globally, not only in the classroom but in society at large (Kowalski, 2003). Some of the common dysfunctional behavior by students include: immature tendencies of shouting in areas gazetted for silence; for example in computer laboratories and libraries, making irritating noise at a time when all are silent, or thoughtless behaviors or classroom incivilities which include but are not limited to: lateness or leaving early, tardiness, inappropriate cell phone and laptop usage in class while teaching and learning session are underway, side conversations during class, disregard for deadlines, unresponsiveness when called upon, grade grubbing,

sniping remarks at professors, cheating during examinations and tests (Nsereko-Munakukaama, 1997; Boice, 1998; Kowalski, 2003). In this paper, the study was concerned about disregard for deadlines; and unresponsiveness among undergraduate students of education at Makerere University with special emphasis on the causes and possible intervention to inform university policy on students' academic progression.

Several educational economists argue that when students and/or their parents pay tuition fees, they tend to take their studies seriously; students want to spend as little time on the programme as possible so as to minimize costs (Ayot and Briggs, 1992; Sachs and Larrain, 1993; Hillman and Jenkner, 2004; Gomes-Neto

and Hanushek, 1994; Natarajan, 1993). Conversely, the educational economists argue that government-sponsored students tend to relax academically since they do not feel the financial pinch of their education. It is strongly believed that payment of their tuition would make students more concerned about their academic progress and therefore keen to read information posted on notice boards and act accordingly whenever called upon.

Educational economists also argue that if a student stays on a programme longer than scheduled, that constitutes wastage of resources. The line of argument is that scarce resources have to be used up by such students twice or even more times as and when they repeat a grade or retake a given course (Itaaga, 2013). Similarly, by a student staying longer on a programme, he/she is blocking another student from joining the institution or programme (Atkinson, 1983; Ayot and Briggs, 1992; Psacharopoulos and Woodhall, 1985; Cameron, 2005; Muwanika, 2010).

The above arguments would seem to be credible but upon close examination and in the Makerere University context, the available facts from the Department of the Academic Registrar of Makerere University privately sponsored students seem to be more problematic than those sponsored by the government. This raises a number of questions, for example: Why do some students take up programs, pay for them, and at the end of the day do not want to get value for the money paid?

Different philosophers of education and scholars on students' social behavior seem to suggest that the student dysfunctional tendencies are indicative of a bigger and more complex moral and social challenge emanating from the society and socialization process students undergo and have had in and in their pre university context (Musoke and Mugagga, 2011). It is reported that many students come to university not ready for independent life. Many are closely dependent on their guardians and can only work upon close supervision. Such students are confronted with the immense freedom found at the university. This freedom becomes a shock and a cause for moral and social dilemma for many of them similar to that talked about by Jean-Paul Sartre the renown existentialist French philosopher who argued that when man is confronted with freedom, he/she either utilizes that freedom profitably (authentically/autonomy) or degrades his/her being and fails to choose what to do. Thus as Friedrich Nietzsche noted, man is bent on annihilating his/her morality or slides in a state of alienation as Karl Marx contends (Stroll and Popkin, 1989). When applied to the students' context, a student who cannot control or harness his/her freedom profitably is moving towards intellectual annihilation and this annihilation may become a pivot for future dysfunctional adult life. This could provide us with good answers to the many societal challenges among Ugandan university graduates in private and public life.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive cross sectional survey case study design. This design which combines a number of study designs and triangulation was preferred because it allowed the study to get detailed examination of the study respondents and the implied data. The study by use of this design was able to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. The study population included academic and non academic university staff, students and their sponsors. The specific study sample included: final year BA and BSc with Education, SOE academic and non academic staff, subject coordinators, Heads of Department in the SOE, CEES academic registrars, the Dean of the SOE, Deputy Principal and Principal of the College of Education and External Studies. The specific study sample was selected using the random, convenience and purposive sampling techniques but taking into consideration and adapting the recommendations and sample determination table of Krejcie and Morgan, which reveals that beyond a certain point (about N=5,000), the population size is almost irrelevant and the sample of between 400 or 500 would suffice (Table 2) (Gay, 1996: 124). The data got through the questionnaires, focus group discussions and interviews were presented under themes related to the issues under contention namely: the causes and possible solutions to the challenge of students' apathy.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

University-related causes of students apathy

The different university stakeholders were requested to list the salient causes of students' apathy. The causes are listed under two titles namely:

- Those related to the students' socio-economic background and up-bringing either at home or in the pre-university academic formation.
- Those emanating from the lecturers and the university pedagogical and non pedagogical facilities.

The students and the lecturers were requested to list some of the causes of students' academic apathy and the following were revealed as the key reasons why students are not actively involved in their pedagogical university activities. The different respondents were sampled taking into consideration their respective overall university population and the following were their respective percentages: males (62%) and females (38%); privately sponsored (74%) and government sponsored students (27%); those from urban background (67%) and those from a rural background (23%). Their responses on the causes of apathy are summarized in Table 3. The table presents a summary of the factors most cited by the students.

Table 2. Composition of the study sample.

s/n	Category	Selected	Percentage of the total
1	Administrators	10	2.5
2	Subject coordinators	20	5
3	Academic staff	60	15
4	Students	300	75
5	Support staff	10	2.5
	Total	400	100

“Administrators” included the Dean, the Heads of Department, Principal and Deputy Principal.

Table 3. Students’ responses on the causes of apathy.

s/n	Cause of apathy	Percentage
1	Lecturers are not available and do not encourage students to consult them	100
2	Most Lecturers especially the female lecturers are rude so it is wastage of time to consult them outside class time	89
3	Most students feel it is useless to read information on notice boards and on other places such as the university intranet.	96
4	Some students have full or part time jobs either in the course of the day or at night. Thus many are either too busy or are tired to consult lecturers out side class	73
5	Female students claimed that they fear of sexual harassment from either their colleagues or lecturers	67
6	Lack of pedagogical support facilities for example computers and limited personal study rooms in the college of education and external studies	93
7	Many students are not computer literate and they are not given ICT skills	87
8	Too many notices on the boards, one cannot know which ones are new/old/important etc	87
9	Lack of interest in their course since many took up education as a last resort because a) it is the cheapest course at the University b) their parents forced them to offer it	64

Source: Student respondents.

Findings in Table 3 reveal that the most common reason cited by all the interviewed students as the key cause of apathy to the students is the lecturers who are not available and do not encourage students to consult them. This was corroborated by one student who said:

“I read the notice that I was supposed to see the lecturer concerned, I went to his office several times but decided to give up since the man could not even keep the time we made an appointment to meet. I was given his telephone contact but when I called he told me to keep checking

until I get him in the office. This man thinks that because we are students we are idle with no other important things to do” (Statement by one of the interviewed students in the 2011/2012 academic year).

The above statement was corroborated by what the study found in a focus group discussion with the lecturers. It was revealed that out of the interviewed 45 lecturers, only 14 had clearly indicated the time when they were to meet students for private academic consultation. This revelation was enhanced by what one lecturer said:

"As long as am in the office I attend to students who show up, if am out of office for a week then I will attend to them when I get back to office. I have ever tried to put up a schedule of attending to students but they (the students) never respected it so I gave up".

On the other hand, another lecturer said:

"I have ever put a schedule on the office door for attending to students' issues but they wrote funny comments on it like: always be in your office, you are sitting on our marks, we have no time for you. After some time, they plucked it off the door. Since then I have not bothered to put up a schedule of attending to students again".

Findings in Table 3 also indicate that 96% of the interviewed students revealed that many of them feel that reading official notices is wastage of their time; one student who was interviewed put it this way:

"We are not awarded any marks for knowing all university policies or communications from University management so many of us see no reason to read notices" (Response by one of the year three education students in the 2011/2012 academic year).

Findings in Table 3 also indicate that a significant number of students admitted for the Bachelor of Education course are not well disposed to do this course. Out of the sampled 300 students, only 48 revealed that they chose education as their first choice, the rest revealed that they took up teacher training programme because they had failed to qualify for other better courses, while others complained that they had been coerced by their parents/guardians to join teacher training. In a focus group discussion, one student in a sad tone said:

"I was told to do this course (Education) by my father, me I had wanted Medicine; actually am doing the course as a last resort and to please my dad".

On the other hand, when academic staff was requested to list some of the causes of students' academic apathy, they singled out lack of sensitization of students about their academic obligations and responsibilities. Out of the sampled 45 lecturers, 41 revealed that students are not fully oriented into university learning and study. This seems to be summarized into the statement made by one lecturer who said:

"Our students do not know how to manage their freedom, their lives and time given the nature and structure of university education. For many of these youngsters, it is the first time they are staying away from the eyes of either their parents or teachers. As soon as they reach

university, they find themselves in a situation where they have to make personal decisions with no one to dictate when to study, who to relate with, what and when to eat food. Their newly found freedom could be the major cause for the apathy. Many only discover that they misused their freedom when they are faced with the reality of failure or poor grades at the end of the semester" (Statement made by one lecturer in the department of Foundations and Curriculum studies, academic year 2011/2012).

The study also found out that what is called apathy could actually be absenteeism by students as a result of having a significant number of working students. The above revelation is corroborated by what one female student said in an interview:

"Many of our lecturers think we do not want to study. This is not true, we are not stupid to pay our money for a service and then refuse to consume or take up this service. Many of the students have to work either during day or at night to either support themselves or their families and siblings. Hence many of us do not have time to stay at the university apart from the time to attend lectures after which we immediately either go home to rest or to work but this in most cases is construed as not being interested or apathy".

It was also revealed that the high student lecturer-ratio of between 400 to 1 lecturer in foundation courses makes it difficult for easy student-lecturer interaction either in or out of class. The study also revealed that limited pedagogical infrastructure and other facilities such as Information Communication Technologies were reported as other causes of apathy among students at the School of Education. The academic staff reported that the School had only twenty functional computers in one computer lab serving over 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students.

The above findings imply that many students might be missing out on personal study since many of them as revealed in their responses do not fully engage their supposedly academic mentors namely the lecturers, and they have no time to carry out research or revise their work. This in the long run may be the major course of plagiarism and examination malpractice. This concurs with what was reported in the Annual Makerere University academic registrar's reports of 2000-2012 that there is a challenge of cheating in examinations and course work tests. The findings also imply that the lecturers in the School of Education might not be playing their role of both mentoring their learners in and out of class.

The out of university causes of students' apathy

The study sought to establish the factors outside the university which might also be responsible for students'

academic apathy. Both the lecturers and students were requested to list these factors and the following were revealed:

From the focus group discussion with lecturers and other staff, it was revealed that many students come to university from poor academic background where they are in most cases coerced to study or read, so when they come to an environment where they have to do it on their own they find problems. This was also revealed by Ssekamwa (1997) who noted that the biggest challenge with Uganda's primary and secondary school education is the problem of teachers teaching students in order to pass examinations. He laments that the entire secondary and primary curriculum kills students and pupils' intellectual independence.

THE WAY FORWARD AND CONCLUSION

This study sought to find practical solutions to apathy among undergraduate students at the School of Education. Respondents were therefore asked to suggest ways of reducing apathy and the following responses were obtained.

Almost all interviewed lecturers recommended that there is need for sensitization of the public about the importance of the teaching profession. This is expected to improve on the public's image about the teaching profession. Therefore education students' attitude towards the profession may change for the better. The students recommended that there is need for the Government of Uganda to review its policy on education and the teaching profession in particular. This calls for improving the image of the teacher by increasing their pay and betterment of their terms and conditions of service. The interviewed CEES administrators recommended that there is need to review the university policies that are so relaxed and favor the students in order to make them more responsible for their academic activities. This will keep them on their toes and make them more mindful of their academic obligations hence reducing apathy.

The students also recommended that there is need to improve the pedagogical and non pedagogical university infrastructure to make academic activities at the university more appealing/interesting to the students hence their participation. Well-equipped computer labs should be established in all schools and should commensurate with the number of students.

It is recommended that the University should hire more lecturers so as to increase the lecturer:student ratio. This will ensure that lecturers are in their offices to attend to students as and when they show up; and that the lecturers are not overwhelmed which in several cases makes them stressed and get out of office. The study also recommended that lecturers should follow up students regularly for example through the use of

dossiers. It is recommended that lecturers should strictly follow deadlines and keep reminding students about such deadlines. The School of Education should carry out proper sensitization of the students about their academic obligations and duties/roles. They should also endeavor to put in place functional information desks to effectively serve the students.

The study further recommended that the Government of Uganda and other financial institutions should introduce student bursaries and a loan scheme to alleviate the students' financial woes/worries and enable them concentrate on academic work. There is need to improve on communication between the students and their lecturers and/or administrators through more facilities for internet access, and notice boards that are not overcrowded. Possibilities of using Short Message Service (SMS) to communicate to students should be explored since the majority of the students have mobile telephones. It is also recommended that private hostels where the majority of the students reside should have rules and regulations which should be strictly adhered to. This will keep the students in shape and make them style up academically, hence more responsive to their academic obligations. The study in addition encourages lecturers to endeavor to learn and address students by their names consistently. Students should be made to know that the lecturers know them by their names; this will improve on their responsiveness. It is also recommended that lecturers should try to engage students one-on-one. They could use the time right before and after class to make small talk with students, that is, ask about the weekend, or the homework, or common interests. The issue here is to make students aware that lecturers are more approachable than they thought. Lecturers are advised to make good use of the first day of class. Use the first day to create the right climate for productive interaction. On such a day, one could highlight the model and the behaviors one would like to see.

In conclusion, it is imperative that the teaching staff should allow students to participate in setting ground rules for the teaching and learning sessions since it is main and pivotal focus for teaching and learning at any educational level. Having students participate in setting the rules for classroom behavior and interaction might not be feasible for every class but it has the benefit of making the students more interested in the rules which are set to affect them.

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