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Recruitment and Orientation of Students Studying Environmental Health in African Higher Education Institutions



Executive Summary

For many students attending African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the course and subsequent career they follow may not be their first choice due to limited places and school/placement results. This is also compounded with the transition from government school systems to higher education where expectations are different and self discipline and study are essential. A survey of environmental health students in seven HEIs in six African countries indicated that only 68% received orientation when starting their university careers. Two out of every five students indicated that environmental health (EH) was not their first choice of course and just over half of those reported that they did not know what environmental health was when they began the course. Induction and orientation of new students has been shown to assist academic integration and enhance student outcomes. However, many EH departments in HEIs do not currently have a standard orientation and induction process for new students, often relying on institutional systems to undertake this task which can overburden students with information and systems. Subsequently, students are unaware of academic expectations, are unfamiliar with facilities and departmental staff and cannot see where their studies are taking them in terms of a career. To overcome these obstacles the Africa Academy for Environmental Health (AAEH) has developed a guidance note for student recruitment and orientation which contains generic packages departments can adapt as necessary. These systems have been piloted and adapted as necessary. The AAEH therefore advocate the following recommendations: (1) that all EH departments in HEIs follow the guidance document to assist in the adaptation and socialisation of students into the higher education system, (2) that further research be undertaken in HEIs to identify suitable innovative and interactive methods to achieve student orientation in both school and HEI level.

Background

A successful transition from school to university is crucial to academic success. Nevertheless, current school systems in the majority of African countries are failing to prepare learners for higher education. This is compounded by the fact that universities may also be ill – equipped to accommodate these learners and do not currently provide them with sufficient support in the form of orientation and induction to begin their academic careers positively (Nel., et al. 2009). For many African countries, the systems by which students are selected to study courses lie in the hands of the HEI rather than the learner. Often students do not receive placements on their first choice of study course and may be placed, without previous knowledge or consultation, on a course with which they are unfamiliar and have no interest. In these circumstances, the need for appropriate consultation with students at secondary school level and induction to HEIs is essential to reduce attrition rates and secure a future workforce capable of helping African countries meet the Millennium Development Goals.

Current status of induction and orientation for environmental health courses in Africa

The AAEH in conjunction with the Association of African Universities (AAU) Mobilising Regional Capacity Initiative (MRCI) conducted an electronic survey of undergraduate students (n = 142) studying environmental health in 7 HEIs in 6 African countries to determine their concerns regarding student orientation and selection of courses and future careers. Two out of every five respondents indicated that environmental health was not their first choice of course/career when applying to university. Furthermore, just over half of these indicated that they did not know what environmental health

was when they began the course. One in three students did not receive induction when they began their courses, and this was found to be associated with students in the latter years of their degrees indicating that this trend was changing in recent years. Nevertheless, comments pertaining to induction showed a general feeling from students that content was too short and should be extended over a period to allow them to orientate themselves with the environment, course and expectations. It was also felt that the course and profession should be advocated at secondary schools level, through mass media and to communities to increase awareness of environmental health in practice. It was also felt that more effort should be placed on interaction with stakeholders including the need for guest lectures from EH practitioners in different fields to expand student awareness and knowledge for future careers. Lastly, respondents felt that more innovative methods should be used during induction and orientation to maintain interest and awareness in students.

AAEH approach to improving environmental health courses in Africa

Through the MRCI grant, the AAEH has sought to develop and research appropriate and innovative ways in which departments and institutions can tackle student recruitment, induction and orientation. An orientation package was drafted and piloted at the National University for Science and Technology (NUST) for new students and has now been developed as a generic package for other institutions to adopt. A generic package has also been developed for school talks and orientating stakeholders on the merits of environmental health as a career choice. The AAEH generic curriculum for BSc programmes in environmental health for Africa also contains a component of 'Introduction to Environmental Health' to allow students to become familiar with the various pillars of the EH profession. A number of recommendations on the development of career talks for schools and induction of students have been outlined in a guidance document available on the AAEH website for institutions to utilise (www.aeah.net). These include the need for:

- Partnerships with professional associations to assist in promoting EH as a profession in schools
- The use of community outreach as a means to promote EH as a profession in communities.
- The use of institutional websites in promotion of departments and courses to prospective students.
- Bridging programmes to assist students to cross the gap between secondary school and higher education.
- Innovative approaches to orientation programmes to help students become more familiar with systems, resources and procedures of the university, and develop social relationships with their classmates, e.g. activity based projects.
- Importance of identifying tutor support.
- The development of student exchange visits through regional networks.

Policy Recommendations

The current limitations of both school and university systems in most African countries can greatly affect the retention and quality of students produced from HEIs offering environmental health. These graduates have an essential role in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and therefore it is imperative that HEIs prioritise effective recruitment and induction within their faculties and departments. The experience of the AAEH has identified a number of limitations in the current systems within member institutions and therefore recommends the following actions to improve recruitment and orientation of students:

1. All EH departments in HEIs follow the guidance document produced by the AAEH (www.aeah.net) to assist in the adaptation and socialisation of students into the higher education system,
2. Further research is undertaken in HEIs to identify suitable innovative and interactive methods to achieve student orientation in both school and HEI level.

References and Further Reading

- Nel, C., Troskie-de Bruin., C, Bitzer., E. (2009) Students' transition from school to university: Possibilities for a pre-university intervention. *South African Journal of Higher Education* 23(5).
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