Knowledge Of Millennium Development Goals Among University Faculty In Uganda And Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the level of knowledge of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) among university faculty. The assessment is based on data from 197 academic unit or faculty heads randomly selected from universities in Uganda and Kenya. Frequency distributions and logistic regression were used for analysis. Slightly more than one in three (36.1%) faculty heads were knowledgeable about issues related to MDGs—awareness of goals, correct number of goals, year of establishment of goals and deadline for achieving them. Univariate logistic analysis of knowledge of issues related to these goals on the basis of the characteristics of universities and faculty heads showed hardly any significant variations with these variables. The results point to a general, shallow knowledge base with regard to aspects related to the goals among the university faculty. Thus, to enhance the contribution of universities towards fostering knowledge of MDGs among students, such an understanding must first be established among the university faculty, particularly the teaching staff.

Keywords: UN Millennium Development Goals; Role of Universities; Uganda; Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Twelve years ago, at the United Nation's Millennium Summit, world leaders adopted a potentially historic pledge to reduce extreme poverty by half, child mortality by two-thirds and maternal mortality by three-quarters, among other goals. The goals, referred to as the Millennium Development goals (MDGs), represent a global partnership to respond to the world's main development challenges by the year 2015. With only three years remaining, countries must accelerate their efforts towards achieving the eight anti-poverty goals by their 2015 target date. To do so, every individual and institution must assume a responsibility for achieving the goals rather than pointing to the United Nations (UN) and governments as related literature seems to suggest (e.g., CRS, 2010; Wamala, Chamberlain & Nabachwa, 2012).

Universities in particular are "uniquely positioned between the communities and the governments they serve. They are at the core of societies – and often in the rebuilding of broken ones as reflected by the MDGs (New Straits Times, May 2, 2010)". Although their role in knowledge building cannot be underestimated, universities are considered to be inactive participants in the implementation of the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) (UMI & University of Botswana, 2011; Wamala et al., 2012). Their efforts to integrate MDG-related issues into university learning are few, uncoordinated, and fragmented. As a result, final-year students enrolled in Ugandan and Kenyan universities are reported to have a shallow knowledge base with regard to aspects related to the MDGs. The proportion that was aware of the development goals, the correct number of goals, and the target date for achieving the goals was 23.4% (Wamala et al., 2012). The situation for students in Cairo University with regard to their knowledge of the MDGs was virtually identical (Cairo University & UNDP, 2010). The findings of the Cairo University MDG awareness study reveal that three-quarters (75%) of students were unaware of the goals (Cairo University & UNDP, 2010). Thus, it is highly probable that students registered in other African universities have a similar level of knowledge of the MDGs.

A Uganda Christian University (UCU) MDG awareness study conducted in 2011 attributes the inability of universities in Uganda and Kenya to contribute effectively towards knowledge building on MDG-related issues to shortfalls in the availability of four major aspects: collaborative arrangements or social networks with external civil societies and/or NGOs; platforms to disseminate research findings to students, faculty, and the community (e.g., seminars and workshops); provisions for revising contents of curriculums to accommodate aspects related to MDGs; and consultations with relevant stakeholders outside universities during the reviews of the aforementioned content. However, proceedings of the 2010 conference of the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) attribute the inability of universities to effectively contribute to knowledge building on the topic of MDGs to the failure of governments and international donors to recognize higher education in the current MDGs. The findings corroborate results of the 2011 UCU MDG study where students and faculty in Ugandan and Kenyan universities felt that governments, NGOs, and the UN were the main bodies responsible for fulfilling the goals rather than the university.

However, the depth of knowledge about the MDGs among the staff, particularly the academic staff, in these academic institutions has never been closely examined. Recent studies have focused on the need for these academic institutions to revise their curriculums' contents to integrate aspects related to the development goals (e.g., UMI & University of Botswana, 2011; Wamala et al, 2012); nevertheless, no assessment of the capacity of university faculty with regard to the subject matter of the goals has been performed. To remedy this, this study investigates the position of university faculty with regard to knowledge of issues related to the development goals. This is because an understanding of the MDGs must first be established among the university faculty, particularly the teaching staff, in order to enhance their contribution towards fostering knowledge of issues related to the goals. In other words, an assessment of the capacity of university faculty to contribute to the attainment of the MDGs should be the first step in enhancing the capacity of universities to reach their full potential to achieve this knowledge among their students.

DATA AND METHODS

This study is based on data sourced from the 2011 UCU MDG awareness study conducted in Ugandan and Kenyan Universities. Students and faculty heads from the selected universities and/or academic units were interviewed on general aspects related to the MDGs and specifics with regard to development goal five - maternal health. The study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey with a quantitative approach to data and methods. The focus of this article is on data relating to heads of departments or academic units. However, course coordinators and lecturers were interviewed in the event that the academic unit heads were not readily available for interview. A multi-stage stratification by countries, university foundation bodies (private vs. public) and discipline (science vs. arts) was adopted to obtain a representative sample of faculty heads or representatives. Primary data were obtained from 197 faculty representatives in selected universities and/or academic units using questionnaires. The data in this article were analyzed at three stages. First, a descriptive summary of the characteristics of faculty heads and universities (i.e., age, sex, program, country, and area of permanent residence), awareness, and knowledge of issues related to MDGs were presented using frequency distributions. Second, associations between the characteristics of faculty heads and universities by knowledge of issues related to the MDGs were examined using univariate logistic regressions. The analysis at this stage helped examine independent associations between explanatory variables and the outcome variable (i.e., the knowledge status of individuals with regard to issues related to the MDGs). A standard probability value (*p*-value) criteria for keeping predictors for further investigations at the multivariate stage, suggested by Hilbe (2011), was adopted: predictors with a parameter *p*-value of higher than 0.25 during the univariate logistic regression were excluded from the final model, unless otherwise indicated; it was unlikely that these variables would contribute anything to the final model. Third, variables that satisfied the inclusion criterion were investigated further using multivariate logistic regression (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000). The logit function was investigated for appropriateness compared to the complementary log-log and probability link functions of the outcome variable – whether faculty member or head was knowledgeable about MDG issues or not.

RESULTS

The faculty members examined in this study are predominantly male (71.6%), working in private universities (75.6%), and possessing a master's degree as their highest education qualification (65.2%), followed by 22.8% with doctoral and post-doctoral qualifications. Slightly more than half (54.3%) were from Kenyan universities and approximately four in nine (46.2%) were employed in the science disciplines. With regard to

academic position at the universities or academic unit, the highest proportion was department heads (40.0%), followed by lecturers (37.8%) and senior lecturers (10.6%); the rest were course coordinators. As earlier stated, faculty representatives, comprising lecturers and course coordinators, were interviewed in the event that the faculty heads were not readily available for interview. The faculty representatives were considered knowledgeable regarding programs offered at the academic units.

Knowledge of MDG-Related Issues

Of the 197 faculty members, 181 (91.8%) were aware of MDGs. This figure represents university faculty heads or representatives who reported having some knowledge of issues related to the UN development goals. To ascertain whether they possessed detailed understanding of the MDGs, faculty heads or representatives were asked questions about important aspects related to the goals. The three aspects adopted in the investigation of knowledge of MDGs were number of goals, year of their establishment, and deadline for their achievement. These aspects were considered vital in the assessment of each participant's understanding of the development goals. In other words, a faculty member expected to provide knowledge to students about MDGs must be aware of these three aspects. Table 1 presents a status distribution of the positions of faculty heads with regard to knowledge of issues related to MDGs, on the basis of three aspects presented herein.

Table 1: Knowledge of Issues related to MDGs among University Faculty

Knowledge Status[a]	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	71	36.1
No	126	63.9
Total	**197**	**100**

[a]Represents faculty head or representative aware of the MDGs, correct number of goals, year of their establishment, and deadline for their achievement.

According to Table 1, slightly more than two in six faculty representatives (36.1%) had knowledge of issues related to the development goals. This figure suggests that a low proportion of faculty representatives in Ugandan and Kenyan universities have a good knowledge base with regard to aspects related to the development goals.

Likelihood Estimates of Knowledge of MDG-Related Issues

The likelihood estimates of knowledge of issues related to the MDGs were established using univariate logistic regressions on the characteristics of faculty heads and universities. The variables were suggested to be potential predictors of the outcome variable - knowledge of issues related to the goals.

The analysis at this stage served the purpose of not only investigating independent effects of the variables on knowledge of issues related to the goals but also identifying variables for consideration at the subsequent stage of analysis - the multivariate stage. Table 2 presents the results of likelihood estimates of knowledge of issues related to the goals by the characteristics of faculty heads and universities - the independent variables.

According to Table 2, only one variable (i.e., the position of a faculty head or representative) would qualify for consideration in the multivariate analysis ($p < 0.25$). This suggests no further investigation of the net impact of likelihood estimates of knowledge of MDGs at the multivariate level in a logistic regression or its equivalent. In other words, a further investigation of these variables in a multivariate logistic model would not yield significant results and neither would the variables yield any significant contribution to the final model and/or analysis. However, the analysis in Table 2 suggests that lecturers (including assistant lecturers) were less likely to have knowledge of issues related to the MDGs, in comparison with the academic unit department representatives.

Table 2: Likelihood Estimates of Knowledge of issues related to MDGs in Univariate Logistic Regression by Potential Predictors

Independent Variables	OR[a]	LL[b]	χ^2	*p*-value
Country				
Uganda			-	
Kenya	0.80	-128.50	0.52	0.4674
Foundation Body				
Private			-	
Public	1.15	-123.94	1.17	0.6720
Discipline				
Sciences			-	
Arts	0.99	-120.36	0	0.9868
Sex				
Male			-	
Female	0.98	-125.56	0.01	0.9525
Highest Degree Attained				
Doctorate and Higher			-	
Master's	1.03	-120.65	0.01	0.9220
Bachelor's	0.79	-120.54	0.23	0.6302
Position				
Department head			-	
Course coordinator	1.20	-120.21	0.15	0.6929
Senior lecturer	0.69	-120.04	0.48	0.4842
Lecturer	0.51	-118.18	4.20	0.0403

Note. Knowledge of MDGs refers to awareness of MDGs, correct number of goals, year of their establishment, and deadline for their achievement.
[a]OR represents odds ratio
[b]LL represents Log Likelihood estimates

DISCUSSION

A high proportion of university faculty (91.8%) was aware of MDGs; this figure represents faculty heads or representatives who reported having some knowledge of the development goals. However, further analysis of this knowledge revealed a shallow knowledge base with regard to issues related to the goals—slightly more than one in three faculty heads or representatives (36.1%) mentioned the correct number of goals, the year of their establishment, and the deadline for their achievement. These findings support literature (MFPED, 2010; UMI & University of Botswana, 2011) that suggest a dearth of concrete MDG-focused programs among Ugandan universities. Hence, it is not surprising that students in Ugandan and Kenyan universities were reported to have a shallow knowledge base of issues related to the goals (Wamala et al., 2012). The situation is worse among students in Cairo University, among whom three-quarters (75%) were unaware of the development goals (Cairo University & UNDP, 2010). In other words, an assessment of knowledge of issues related to the MDGs among these students is likely to uncover that a lower proportion are aware of the development goals. The situation with regard to knowledge of MDGs among faculty members of Cairo University may not be significantly different from that in Ugandan and Kenyan universities. Such low figures of knowledge of MDG-related issues among students could undoubtedly be attributed to the aforementioned shallow knowledge base. Nevertheless, the findings in the literature that suggest a limited focus on the MDGs in curriculum contents among universities in developing countries (UMI & University of Botswana, 2011) were supported by the findings in this work. As a result, the 2011 UCU status report on the contribution of universities towards the attainment of the fifth development goal reports that governments, NGOs, and the UN, rather than universities, were the main bodies identified by faculty and students as being responsible for fulfilling the goals.

In the analysis, with regard to the characteristics of faculty member and university, no significant variations were observed in knowledge of issues related to the development goals, with the exception, however, of position held in university ($p < 0.05$). In the results, increased odds of possessing knowledge of issues related to the goals among faculty heads in comparison with lecturers (including assistant lecturers) could be attributed to the longer period of service by the faculty heads. In fact, faculty heads in Ugandan and Kenyan universities are expected to be

senior lecturers—having a doctorate and evidence of having authored or coauthored scholarly material published in reputable journals (e.g., Makerere University, 2009). However, assistant lecturers have, in most cases, freshly received master's degree qualifications, which are their highest qualifications; hence, in the context of their knowledge of issues related to the goals, these professionals may not be very different from students. It is no surprise that a shallow knowledge base of aspects related to the goals was reported among final year students (graduates and undergraduates) enrolled in Ugandan and Kenyan universities (Wamala et al., 2012).

In sum, the inability of universities to contribute to the enhancement of knowledge of the MDGs among their students is partly a result of a shallow knowledge base among their faculty with regard to aspects related to the development goals. Thus, efforts towards achieving a full potential of universities in pursuing the attainment of the UN development goals, need to first build a knowledge base of aspects related to the goals among the faculty and particularly the teaching staff.

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