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Contents

Challenges Facing Student Affairs Practitioners in Zimbabwean Universities: The Call for a Higher Education Meta-Normative Framework

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Abstract

In this study, we have argued that it is not possible to talk of quality assurance in student affairs management without a clear articulation of the theoretical meta-normative framework for higher education that will enable student affairs practitioners to visualize, articulate and carry out their mandate. We have argued that before talking about quality assurance in student affairs management, it is critically important to define education, outline its aims and discuss its philosophical underpinnings. We have noted also that the reason why student affairs practitioners are facing challenges related to quality issues has more to do with the lack of a conceptual understanding of education and the "one-size-fits-all" model which most universities are using to manage student affairs.

Introduction

In this study, we look at the correlation between student affairs management and quality assurance in Zimbabwean universities. We argue that for student affairs practitioners to efficiently and effectively do their work, there is need for the university concerned to have a proper higher education meta-normative framework that is guided by well-articulated educational aims and objectives. We argue that while a *meta-normative framework* in Western moral thought would be based on virtue, deontological and teleological underpinnings, a *meta-normative framework* in the context of African moral thought would be an ethical framework that is anchored on *hunhu/ubuntu.*

Having said that, we argue that most of the challenges facing student affairs practitioners in Zimbabwe today are a result of the failure by universities to properly define education, appropriately delineate its aims as well as suitably establish its mandate. Our position is that conceptual deficiency at macro levels of administration inform and lead to bad performance at meso and micro levels of curriculum design and implementation. We argue that quality assurance in student affairs ought to be anchored on a deep conceptual understanding of what education is, as well as its rootedness in axiology and human metaphysics. In our view, this understanding helps in the proper articulation of the broad aims of education and how these broad aims are realized in educational institutions. It is our considered view that lack of knowledge and skills on how these broad aims of education can be integrated within the university curricula creates problems at micro levels. In this study, we make an attempt to define education and to show how a proper understanding of education can position institutions for accruing great results through quality service delivery in student affairs departments.

Research methods

Data for this study was collected through the administration of questionnaires which targeted both administrators and students. The study also utilized the personal experience of one of the writers of this article who happens to be the dean of students at the University of Zimbabwe. In terms of the administration of questionnaires, 15 questionnaires were distributed to the afore-mentioned research subjects. Some of the questions contained in these questionnaires were:

1. What is quality assurance?
2. What is a meta-normative framework?

3. Is a meta-normative framework necessary in the management of student affairs?

4. What challenges are faced by the student affairs department at the University of Zimbabwe?

5. Do educational administrators have an understanding of the importance of student affairs?

The targeted research subjects preferred to be anonymous and as researchers, we assured them that we were not going to disclose their names. It should be borne in mind that confidentiality is important in research ethics as it ensures that the research subjects are protected from any form of victimization, should there be that possibility. Confidentiality also allows the research subject to be confident in responding to questions knowing that nothing will happen to him or her and that the data he or she discloses will be protected.

Research findings

The study had two major findings. The first key finding (judging from the responses of the research subjects), was that student affairs management was not possible in the absence of clearly articulated educational aims as drawn from the definition of the concept of education itself. The challenge was that there was lack of knowledge and skills on how to integrate these aims within the university curricula. The second key finding was that student affairs was often misunderstood by most educational administrators to the extent that they treated it as ancillary and not a core business of the university and this complicated the roles and responsibilities of student affairs practitioners.

Discussion of findings

The meaning of education

Philosophically speaking, the term *education* is often misunderstood by many

people. In fact, most people simply associate the term education with the mere transmission or transfer of knowledge and the mere initiation of a person into his or her own culture. *Education,* in our view, is much more than that. While classical philosophers have grappled with the meaning of the term *education* and while most of these have used the term with reference to cultures and morals, contemporary scholars have gone beyond this rendering, looking at education as a process that leads to the total and complete development of human potentialities (Peters, 1987). In this section, we will sample definitions of education and reflect on their implications for student affairs. These definitions are important for our understanding of how concepts of education can influence theories and models of student affairs management.

Education, in its general form, is defined as the transfer of knowledge from one generation to another; it is a system or practice of teaching and learning (Encyclopedia Americana, 1992). Also in its broadest meaning, "education is any process by which an individual gains knowledge or insight, or develops attitudes or skill" (Ibid.). Plato refers to education as the process by which the physical, mental and spiritual capacities of the learner are developed and the eye of the human soul is turned outside towards the light (cf. Stumpf, 1966, p. 54-55). Thus, education, for Plato, must touch the head, the heart and the hand. In other words, for Plato, education must improve and perfect the functions of the human intellect/cognition, psychomotor, empathy and compassion.

Moving from Plato, through to contemporary philosophers of education like Peters (1987, p. 10), the definition of education somewhat gets more refined. For Peters, education is the initiation of the young and immature members of society into complex bodies of knowledge by mature and experienced members

who have mastered and specialized in these bodies of knowledge (Ibid.). This process of initiation must lead to the development of desirable states of mind and any process that does not lead to a...desirable state of mind is not educational (Ibid.). Education must lead to progressive, positive change; leading to the development of integral character, hence the existence of contemporary distinctions between being educated, being schooled and being learned.

It is also important for us to have an appreciation of the African concept of education because it has very good implications on student affairs ethos. Watkins (1943, p. 666-675), Ociti (1973), Scanlon (1964), Mbiti (1967), Kenyata (1965), Boateng (1983, p. 335-336) and others have described traditional systems of African education prior to the coming of Islam and Christianity as largely holistic, encapsulating the physical, emotional, psychological, moral, spiritual, productive and reproductive potentialities of man. Smith (1940, p. 64-83) has described education as initiation of youths into the moral, philosophical, and the cultural values of the community. Davidson (1969, p. 85) concurs that African education was designed to develop a complete human being; and "... inculcated a sense of respect for elders, of brotherhood among members of the age set in question, and of skill in practical matters such as the use of arms..."

Laye (1954, p.128-129) has emphasized the holistic intent of traditional African education in his description of circumcision experiences in Guinea, West Africa by remarking thus, ".....we were to be absolutely straightforward, to cultivate all the virtues that go to make an honest man, to fulfil our duties toward God, toward our parents, our superiors and our neighbors." Mushi (2009) defines African education as the process of passing the inherited knowledge, skills, cultural traditions, norms and values by tribal members

from one generation to another. This education, for Cameroon and Dodd (1970) was lifelong, that is, from cradle to the grave, with the ultimate goal being to prepare citizens for problem solving, socio-economic and political roles.

From the above expose of African education, it is clear that traditional Africa also had the three cardinal aims of education, that is, cognitive, psychomotor and affective aims. "It put emphasis on practical learning and the young adult learned by watching, participating and executing what they learn…", and several skills opened to all, which "…consisted of basic skills, knowledge and attitudes that enabled individuals to live and function effectively in the tribe"(www.eric.ed.gov/../recordDetail). Having sought the meaning of the term *education*, it is imperative that we outline and discuss the challenges facing student affairs practitioners in Zimbabwean universities today.

Challenges facing student affairs practitioners in Zimbabwean universities

We believe that the challenges confronting universities in developing countries today is a result of the lack of a meta-normative framework for student development and support, among other challenges. Our position, which is anchored on our research findings, is that student affairs is an area that is not understood by many educational administrators. As this study found out, many university administrators and academics regard student affairs as ancillary, non-core business of their institutions. This perceived peripheral role of student affairs, which is birthed out of ill-understanding of the discourse, leads to a plethora of problems.

Firstly, it leads to failure by institutions to adequately plan for student development and support. Without a proper metaphysical foundation for

student affairs, it is not possible to plan adequately for it. If educational administrators at macro level think that the role of their institution is strictly cognitive development of students, all their attention, energies and resources get directed towards intellectual development. The institution that perceives their role as that of developing physical and psychomotor skills of students also channel their energies towards development of such skills.

Secondly, failure to grasp the length and breadth of the broad aims of education lead to skewed and/or warped aims and objectives of both academic and non-academic departments in educational institutions. While many academics understand a great deal about how to enhance intellectual and psychomotor skills of students, the same cannot be said about their understanding of the affective aims of education. There is a general ill-conceived perception among academics that issues to do with student character and personality are not their business. Other issues that academics also relegate or just do not bother about relate to soft skills, life skills, leadership skills, entreprencurship skills, etc. Such perceptions usually result from a lack of deep understanding of what education entails and how educational goals are realized.

A well-developed philosophy of education such as the one propounded by Peters above will help educational administrators to articulate educational goals, their vision, mission, values, strategic plans, programmes and activities. Peters' view of education as "processes that lead to desirable states of mind," for example, proffers a notion of education that prompts educational administrators and academics to put systems and programmes that enhance holistic development. For Peters, education must lead to desirable thought patterns, attitudes, actions, decisions, lifestyles, dreams and aspirations, among others. This kind of education leads to an integral personality.

This view of education, together with the African view as outlined and discussed earlier, challenges educators in general, and student affairs practitioners in particular, to explore all aspects of human potentialities. It challenges them to put in place programmes and activities that engender physical, intellectual, social, moral, spiritual and emotional growth in students. This notion, which leads to a balanced education, seeks to nurture students that are confident, efficacious and self-reliant in thought and action. It seeks to groom a person with deep appreciation of beauty and aesthetics; an individual with a spirit of enterprise and entrepreneurship.

Thirdly, it is very unfortunate that sometimes academics that rise to meso and macro levels of administration without this philosophical foundation of education fail to discharge their duties diligently and efficiently. This conceptual deficiency then leads to lack of prioritization of student affairs in the distribution or allocation of both human and financial resources. Many student affairs practitioners in Zimbabwe are either unqualified or under qualified for the tasks they are performing. Heads of student affairs departments are usually academics are hired on the strength of their experience as lecturers. These academics are rarely inducted on best practices in student affairs. Support staff in areas dealing with life and soft skills development usually possess limited knowledge and skills on student development and support.

Fourthly, we believe that other strategic thrusts such as ethics, leadership, entrepreneurship and personal effectiveness are often superficially covered because of lack of both expertise and a full understanding of their role in the complete development of students. The role of education as:

The process of developing and nurturing...student growth, in

and beyond the classroom context, and preparing them ….as active participants and contributors to the development of the economy and the deepening of democracy, is seldom understood by academics and administrators who lack philosophy of education (Speckman & Mandew (manuscript), 2014, p. v).

It is important to note that student development and success are direct results of deliberate, well planned and carefully structured development programmes and activities. The nature and extent of student success depends largely on the measure to which student services practitioners critically reflect upon and consistently review the assumptions, content, delivery and appropriateness of student development programmes, support structures, services and initiatives. The vision, mission, values and quality assurance benchmarks for Student Affairs need to be rigorous, goal oriented and theoretically informed.

Other problems besieging student affairs practitioners in Zimbabwe, which are not peculiar to Zimbabwe though, are related to massification, access, equality and standardizations (Dalton, 1999; Gupta, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; UNESCO, 2004). The nationalistic agenda to see all citizens receiving an education, compounded by Zimbabweans' insatiable appetite for education has seen universities and colleges enrolling more students against the backdrop of ever decreasing financial support. This has naturally compromised on the quality of service delivery in student affairs. In fact, student affairs is seldom remembered during budgetary allocations because of other high priority areas such as libraries, IT and science laboratories, lecture venues and furniture.

The crippling combination of socio-cultural ambivalence and scepticism is

another phenomena that is antithetical to student affairs progress in developing countries like Zimbabwe. Student affairs practitioners always find themselves confronted by bipolar tensions between Eurocentrism and Afrocentrism. 'Cultural appropriateness' is also one of the factors that determine pace and direction in student affairs' endeavour to nurture students with a global appeal (Schreiber, in Speckman & Mandew, 2015, p, 11). This problem often arises when universities strive to strike a balance between internationalization or globalization and 'localization'. The question often asked is: "Whose culture should take precedence?" This remains a major question for educational administrators in Africa. We hope to answer this question in the last section of this study.

Suffice to say that in Zimbabwe, there is a great deal of rhetoric about the place of *hunhu/ubuntu* philosophy with the backdrop of serious indulgence in Eurocentric beliefs and practices: a classic case of cultural ambivalence. Talk of a *hunhu/ubuntu*-driven educational system took a gear up since 1999 following the famous Nziramasanga Commission of Inquiry into Zimbabwean education. The commission concluded that the Zimbabwean education was Eurocentric in nature. Zimbabwe's desire to strike a balance between Afrocentric and Eurocentric philosophies can be picked in the government's Report to the 48th Session of UNESCO International Conference on Education in Geneva (25 – 28 November, 2008, p. 1) where the following was highlighted: "In order to fully democratize education, the Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture, has made strides in introducing and strengthening the learning and teaching of local African languages."

To enable the nation to be an effective member of the global village, the Ministry has embarked on promoting and strengthening the teaching of science

and technology, and "Further strides have been made in teaching subjects, such as Civic Education, that contribute towards inculcating values of patriotism and the philosophy of *hunhu/ubuntu*, and dealing with social and other challenges as and when they arise." Being part of a global consciousness promotes a shared understanding of the complexities of equality, human rights, social justice (Nussbaum, 1995); and internationalization promotes this global consciousness, and these are concerns of student affairs nationally and internationally (Gunderson, 2005, p. 246).

However, the internationalization-localization dichotomy has left student affairs practitioners with more questions and dilemmas than answers and solutions. Key questions in Zimbabwe today include: What are the key graduate attributes of students coming out of colleges and universities? Are universities producing Africans or Europeans? What is relevant education for Africa? Can our graduates do postgraduate studies in internationally acclaimed universities? Can our graduates fit in the world job market? Can our universities accommodate, academically and socially, students from the world market? Is technology serving us or destroying our children? Is internationalization a vehicle for development or vehicle of the doom of cultural norms and values in developing countries? Below, we proscribe a meta-normative higher education framework that will help address some of the challenges cited above as well as answering some of the above questions.

The call for a meta-normative framework in student affairs management
We believe that all educational programmes and activities must have a higher education meta-normative theoretical framework linking human nature to teaching and learning objectives and methodologies as well as a theory on how teaching and learning experiences can enhance moral, spiritual and intellectual

growth as man is a multi-dimensional being with inert propensities to grow socially, morally, spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and physically. This meta-normative theoretical framework, in our view, is critical for creating quality assurance benchmarks in education. But how is this meta-normative framework to be defined, in detail? It would be reasonable to begin by defining the word *meta* in relation to ethics before we can define the term *normative* and *meta-normative* something which we did not do in the introduction. To begin with, the word *meta,* in relation to ethics, refers to the base or structure of ethical thinking.

Thus, *meta-ethics* refer to the base or structure of moral or ethical content which base encapsulates the meaning of moral terms and concepts. The term *normative* used in relation to ethics, refers to the guiding standard or principle. The term *normative* thus, would refer to the moral theories deployed in the standardization of human acts. These may include: virtue theories, deontological theories, teleological theories and *hunhu/ubuntu* theories. While virtue theories, as defended by classical philosophers such as Socrates/Plato and Aristotle, tend to focus on the role of virtue or moral excellence in determining human behaviour; deontological theories tend to emphasize on the importance of duty in the definition human acts.

Teleological theories hold that moral acts are determined by desirable outcomes such as the promotion of human welfare or pleasure, while *hunhu/ubuntu* theories emphasize on the importance of the group or community in defining morality. The theories are well captured by the Nguni proverb: *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* which can be translated in Shona as *munhu munhu muvanhu* (a person is person through other persons) (cf. Mangena, 2012a and 2012b, Tutu, 1999 and Shutte, 2008). What this entails is that moral

responsibility rests more with the group or community than with the individual. Africans share the benefits and burdens of society through collective enterprise. Thus, while a *meta-normative framework* in Western moral thought would be based on virtue, deontological and teleological underpinnings, a *meta-normative framework* in the context of African moral thought would be an ethical framework that is anchored on *hunhu/ubuntu.*

Having said that, we argue that while universities in Africa should have an appreciation of the Western normative theories such as virtue theories, deontological and teleological theories, they must be guided by *hunhu/ubuntu* theories as these are rooted in African cultures, traditions and belief systems. *Hunhu/ubuntu* theories should therefore be deployed as a meta-normative framework to guide and regulate student behaviour in African universities and beyond. This is the missing link in university education and yet a complete man is one who has fully developed socially, spiritually, morally, intellectually, emotionally and physically. Elsewhere, Mangena (2015, p. 174) envisions a *complete man* as one "who is developed in terms of cognitive/intellectual, moral and physical capacities."

For Mangena, Zimbabwe's emphasis on cognitive/intellectual development has led to the churning out of morally inept graduates in the form of business people, accountants, lawyers, doctors and chief executive officers (CEOs) who, more often than not, have no moral regard to the welfare of other people (2015, p. 174). The Salarygate scandal of 2014 bears testimony to this claim as newspaper reports confirm that some of the CEOs at government enterprises such as the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) were earning mega salaries of around \$40 000 per month when low level employees were going home without salaries for about eight months. We are prompted to ask the question: Where is our *hunhu/ubuntu* in all this utter demonstration of

rapacious greed? A higher education meta-normative framework will lead to balanced education which will, in turn, produce a whole person.

Many contemporary educational institutions suffer the same criticism because they pay too much attention to drilling content and enhancing critical thinking at the expense of holistic development of students (Peters, 1987). In our view, the failure to promote holistic development is not only a university problem, it is also a national problem where too much emphasis is placed on scientific and technological subjects that enhance cognition, at the expense of Arts and Humanities subjects that develop character in students. Holistic development entails that an accountant, lawyer, medical practitioner, pharmacist or engineer, who is to be produced by the university, for instance must be fit in character, cognitive powers and physical astuteness. Thus, there is need to integrate cognitive/intellectual capabilities with physical, social and moral capabilities to ensure that this goal is realized (Mangena 2015, p. 172).

This deficiency, which springs from a poor understanding of education as alluded to earlier, needs to be addressed through adopting a deliberate, well planned and carefully structured higher education meta-normative framework. With this framework, student affairs departments will be able to complement academic departments in the full development of students. Whereas the ultimate mandate of the educational institution is "….to develop and nurture student growth in and beyond the classroom context so that learning takes place that prepares students for future roles as active participants and contributors to the development of the economy and the deepening of democracy" (Speckman & Mandew, 2015, p. v). In the context of this mandate, it becomes student affairs' role to put in place student development and success programmes and activities that engender full and uncompromised growth.

Student affairs, in its holistic approach to total student development and support, ought to take cognisance of all factors, personal, structural, social, cultural, psychological, internal and external, that impact on students' ability to develop and to succeed (Ibid). This approach will usher in a paradigm shift from the traditional *de facto* hybridization of the in *loco parentis* and intellectualist

approaches to student affairs, which lack a sound philosophical framework. According to the International Association of Student affairs and Services, "…the aim of Student affairs is to assist students in navigating their journey through the tertiary education landscape and add to their repertoire of educational and lifetime learning experiences" (Ibid). Student affairs is more than a welfare service or a reactive emergency unit where students in crisis are referred to. It is a very important department in any progressive university. However, for it to function optimally, it requires a proper meta-normative framework.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal in this paper was to argue that it is not possible to adequately plan for student affairs without a proper understanding of what education entails. We argued that concepts guide aims, goals and strategies. We argued that it is always critical to have a proper meta-normative framework for educational institutions if educational goals are to be well articulated and pursued with precision. The paper highlighted problems that are normally associated with lack of meta-normative frameworks. These included lack of prioritization of student affairs in budgets and staff deployment. We then argued that such tendencies then lead to unbalanced human development in the training and education of students. Proper framing of educational goals must lead to balanced development of cognitive, affective and psychomotor dimensions in students.

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