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Towards a transformative lifelong learning agenda for non-traditional students at university

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Abstract

Liberalisation of higher education in Uganda meant opening its provision to the private sector, and also running a public-private mix model at public institutions. Consequently, the composition and needs of the student population at universities have changed due to flexibility in provision of study programmes and access routes. Students who had previously been excluded are also joining in increasing numbers. This article uses the feminist frameworks to equality and difference, discourses of integration and exclusion, and the concepts of Othering and Other to unpack equality of access, equity and inclusivity spaces of these new types of students. The aim is to contribute towards a learning agenda that promotes quality and sustainable educational development for all. We draw our findings from the voices of non-traditional students at a public university in Uganda. We validate these with voices of other germane actors to understand better the institutional policy and practice environments available to them. The equal opportunity provision has widened access for NTS but their equity and inclusivity spaces remain inadequately filled. To achieve sustainable inclusive and equitable quality higher education, we suggest a policy, practice and provision environment that promotes a transformative lifelong learning agenda.

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Sustainable educational development, inclusive education, equitable education, university education, non-traditional students, lifelong learning

Introduction

The global policy shifts in funding priorities for developing countries in the 1980s and 1990s necessitated reducing of state expenditures and changing of state funding priorities in developing countries (Masanja & Lwakabamba, 2016; Nyanchoga, 2014). In Uganda, two changes took effect in the education sector: the minimisation of the role of the state in higher education; and the shifting focus of education funding from higher education to primary and secondary education. For higher education this policy shift reducing state support created a deficit in funding, opening doors to such reforms as liberalisation of higher education to the private sector; and cost sharing and privatisation at public universities (Bisaso, 2010; Mamdani, 2007; Mugisha, 2010).

As the higher education system became open to all those who could afford the costs of education, the demand and subsequently the student numbers of those joining universities increased. At Makerere University, this massive demand combined with the university's desire to improve its financial situation, ushered in non-traditional flexible study programmes in form of evening and external offerings, and expansion of existing access routes bringing on board, for the first time, the diploma entry scheme (Makerere University Senate, 1991). These developments in turn resulted into a dramatic change in the demographic profile of students, diversifying it to include students from non-traditional backgrounds – the non-traditional students (NTS).

In this study, we define NTS as the undergraduate degree students who: (a) either did not obtain the standard high school certificate or obtained it but did not have continuous transition from upper secondary (high school) education to university education; and (b) gained access to university education through diploma or mature age entry schemes. These students are usually older and tend to have responsibilities beyond their academic obligations, such as those derived from work and family environments (Kasozi, 2002; Openjuru, 2011; Tumuheki et al., 2018). Yet, traditionally, higher education systems were designed to serve the traditional students – young people who are dependents and fulltime students with only academic obligations (February, 2016; Kasworm, 2010; Openjuru, 2011). In such systems, NTS may continue to face a number of barriers originating from both within and outside the institutional environment (Tumuheki et al., 2018), mainly linked to the complexity of the NTS roles at home, work, academic institution and community. The aim of this article is to unpack the equality of access, equity and inclusivity spaces of NTS at university to contribute towards a transformative lifelong learning agenda that promotes quality and sustainable educational development for all.

Conceptualisation of Exclusion and Integration of NTS in Higher Education

The terrain of higher education has undeniably changed. The reduction in NTS' numbers in developed countries notwithstanding, many studies show that there is increased diversity within higher education student population (Bowl & Bathmaker, 2016) especially within developing countries, as characterised by increasing proportions of working and mature part-time students with caring/parenting responsibilities (February, 2016; Openjuru, 2011; Tumuheki et al., 2016b). However, the efforts for inclusion tend to focus more on recruitment/access and not retention, progression and completion. Consequently, the construction of university as an inclusive space where different students are comfortable to express their differences and have their diverse needs acknowledged and met remains speculative (February, 2016; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). As a matter of fact, non-traditional groups of students continue to face many challenges within the academy, for example, stigmatisation and unfriendly scheduling, that construe their full participation, even within contexts where equal opportunity policies are in place (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

To conceptualise how an all-inclusive, equitable and sustainable quality higher education can be constructed, we draw from the feminist frameworks to equality and difference (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009) to discuss three discourses of integration and exclusion in relation to social policy provision for NTS. First, the 'equal opportunity' discourse postulates that equality is achieved by enabling women to be more like men predominantly through anti-discrimination legislation. In education, this discourse assumes a student population with similar needs, able to exercise flexibility towards meeting student obligations – perceived solely as academic. Yet NTS' obligations at university are comprised, in-tandem, of both academic and other life obligations such as those derived from work and familial responsibilities. These 'other' needs are in part embedded within the neoliberal policies of increased commodification, marketisation and diversification of higher education (Masanja & Lwakabamba, 2016; Nyanchoga, 2014) and the changing labour market terrain that necessitates individuals to become flexible lifelong learners (Jarvis, 2007). Within the liberal framing, the characteristics of the term 'other' – in this case, the non-academic obligations of the NTS are perceived as the problem (Bacchi, 1999). This approach therefore overlooks NTS' barriers to participation and favours certain groups of students against others thereby casting the latter as deviants or intruders.

The discourse of 'exceptionalism' or 'special treatment' (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009), is a measure of compensation to the derogatory mishaps of the 'equal opportunity' discourse. From the gender perspective, this approach is equated to Fraser's caregiver parity model (Fraser, 2000) which recognises that women have different roles from men and to honour this difference, recommends compensatory measures. In the education terrain, this model justifies interventions of special nature for marginalised groups such as affirmative action or what Marandet & Wainwright (2009) call 'other types of different treatment' (p. 114). It underscores the notion of fairness/equity through acknowledging the differences within the student population. But its success can only go as far as flexibility is possible and as supported by the institutional policy environment. Therefore, as an integration approach it is weakened by the fact that it not only depends on the good

will of the implementers but also denies the 'application of a strict principle of equal treatment' (Young, 1989, p. 268), much to the disadvantage of the 'other' group.

The third discourse – 'transformation' (Rees, 1998 in Marandet & Wainwright, 2009), also equated to Fraser's universal caregiver model (Fraser, 2000), seeks to promote a society where men and women are recognised as both caregivers and workers. In the higher education framing this would translate to recognition of *all* students as, also, caregivers and workers, so as to transcend the existing model of the young, fulltime and flexible student associated with higher education. The major benefit of this discourse is the recognition and integration of the private and public spheres (Lister, 2003) of the student so that the cost and burden of adaptation is shifted from the individual to the institution and the state. By doing so, this discourse seeks to create an inclusive university organised and modelled around the diversity of its students' needs, responsibilities and identities. From the lifelong learning perspective this discourse seeks to change the education experience of NTS through promotion of transformative and equitable policies within the university and other institutions of influence on the education project of NTS, protected by the state statutes on individual's right to education. The above conceptualisations however cannot be understood in isolation of context.

NTS Participation in Higher Education: The Ugandan Context

In Uganda, a university degree is so much highly valued and prestigiously regarded in society that not achieving it renders one to be seen and feel as a failure (Tukundane et al., 2014). As such, the societal perceptions of university education have been found a major in shaping the motivations of NTS for university education (Tumuheki et al., 2016a). The neoliberal policies, specifically privatisation of higher education have contributed to this trajectory for NTS, albeit with some costs. For instance, the Ugandan society is characterised by pre-held conceptions of who, especially in terms of age 'fits' to study at university (Openjuru, 2011) with such practices as stigmatisation, marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination against the perceived 'out-of-age-intruding' students likely inevitable. Since identity construction is a social process (Lynch, 2008), the societal preconceptions, perceptions and attitudes may also impact on the way NTS perceive themselves and construct their identity at university and among their student peers. They may end up exhibiting feelings of shame, alienation, low self-image and low confidence in abilities (Gallacher et al., 2002).

Such discourses and conceptions are better understood through the concept of Othering, associated with post-colonial and feminist theories (Brons, 2015; Jensen, 2011). Discussing othering from the poverty perspective, Lister (2004) defines it as a 'process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between "us" and "them" – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained' (p. 101). It's closely associated with and reinforced by the related social processes of stereotyping and stigmatisation, permeated with negative value judgements (Lister, 2005). Language is an important aspect of the othering process which may aid names and labels that are demeaning to the 'Other', sometimes leading to low self-esteem, shame and stigma.

The cultural identity of NTS as a group within the higher education terrain is problematic because participation is conceived within the notion of a conventional university student that suits the student identity as opposed to multiple or blended identities of NTS (February, 2016; Marsman, 2014; Lynch, 2008) derived from both the private and public spheres of students (Lister, 2003). As a way of fitting within the structures of the current higher education system, NTS may adopt a different but considered 'fitting' student identity (Gallacher et al., 2002), which may put their true real life identities at risk. However, especially in the African context, adult students may also distant themselves from the formalised status of the learner such as that of student and expect to be treated with respect in consideration of the (superior) power relations (related to age and responsibility) they enjoy at work and at home (Openjuru, 2011), that may conflict with the power status accorded to students by other university actors.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study with elements of participatory action research (Creswell, 2018). Data used in this article are mainly drawn from the narratives of 15 unstructured in-depth interviews (Riessman, 2008) administered to three cohorts of NTS: five current students, seven graduates and three dropouts of the School of Computing and Informatics Technology (CIT) undergraduate degree programmes. Since we intended to explore into individual stories of NTS' lived realities and experiences, our selection of the participants did not aim at achieving representativeness of the sample but at the 'richness of the data' (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 49). We supplemented individual interviews with data from a workshop intentionally held for and with only the NTS stakeholder group. The rationale for this special arrangement was to create a safe conversational space (Owens, 2006) to allow the primary participants group more freedom of speech and interaction. As a way of validating NTS experiences at university we corroborate their voices with qualitative data drawn from interviews with 16 other actors in the university: three staffs involved in policy development, four in administration, five in academia; and four 'traditional' students.

Interviews lasted between 60–90 minutes. Although they were all conducted in English sometimes some interviewees used colloquial speech, for example, '*naye*', '*I am like*', etc. Data from the interviews and workshop were first transcribed and later analysed by means of a meaning-making process involving coding and development of themes with the aid of qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (Flick, 2014). In presenting the findings, we use excerpts from the data sources mentioned above. All names used are pseudonyms.

Findings

The study findings are organised along three major themes; provision of and access to services and facilities, interaction with staff and interaction with fellow students. We situate the presentation of the findings into the conceptual framework on exclusion and integration of NTS in higher education using the discourses of *equal opportunity*,

exceptionalism and *transformation*, concepts of *Othering* and *Other,* theorised earlier on under the Ugandan context section.

On Provision of and Access to Services and Facilities

Enrolment of NTS into university was characterised by limited intake capacities allotted to alternative entry routes on both fulltime and part-time study programmes, making entry through both diploma and mature age entry schemes very competitive. Although mature age is among the admission avenues, it was not being utilised at CIT. As if this was not limiting enough, the application form for non-traditional applicants had only one choice slot compared to up to six choices for the direct entry applicants, who unlike the NTS also have the opportunity to apply online.

This finding not only challenges the core ethos of 'equal opportunity' provision aimed at widening access opportunities for the marginalised groups, but also portrays the university's unpreparedness for equity and inclusion. In bid to securing a fall-back position and maximise chances of admission, NTS bought and filled as many application forms as possible:

> ...I bought three forms…I applied for BRAM first choice, I applied for Office and Information Management…then I had no any other choice I am like any way let me just put IT [Information Technology] …Do you know the reason why I made more than one choice? We were more people who were applying for records… [yet] only one place, so I am like, will I stand a chance? (Naome)

These gaps point to the need to increase the choice slots for NTS because of the mismatch between the needs of students and the supply side. These findings were corroborated by an administrative staff involved in policy development:

> …at the time of application we expect non-traditional students to indicate one choice because we assume that they know what they want, and the rest put 6 choices, the traditional …[also] for the non-traditional students they don't qualify to apply online because we don't have the information in the system that we want, online application covers only traditional students. (Christian)

Whereas buying many forms increased chances for admission, it nonetheless also acted as a tool for social exclusion of diploma holder applicants who sought to join on government sponsorship and got admitted on 'wrong' programmes. This is because the change of programme policy which would provide a window for equity, was reported exclusionary and in need of transformation:

> I went and inquired; is there chance of changing a course? They were like no. Actually they should at least give a chance of changing a course using diploma because you people, you feel you don't want to lose it […] that offer […] you have to go in for that. (Naome)

Because non-traditional students are a highly diverse group and located in non-definite locations, it creates the challenge of how to reach them and with what kind of information (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). Information availability and dissemination were found discriminatory and incognisant of the needs of NTS who combined studies with work especially those enrolled on the evening programme with fulltime day employment.

Due to lack of information, some participants reported making study choices that did not suit their interests, sometimes resulting into dropping out due to failure to connect the offered study programmes with their dreams and aspirations, as shared by one of the dropout participants:

> …the course I was doing, okay, I was not expecting it to be as hard as I found it, but since it was not part of my future as in future aspirations, dreams, I had this in mind that however much I do it I will cross to business… (Alon)

Scheduling challenges have been reported widely in many studies on integration of NTS in university education (e.g. Lynch, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Moss, 2004). Being aware of their circumstances, NTS in this study intentionally chose to apply and study on the evening programme knowing it would suit their busy schedules. However, they were surprised that the university expected them to be flexible enough to fit into the university schedules for lectures, tests, examinations and course works, to the extent that sometimes lecturers made impromptu changes in approved class timetables without prior notification to students.

> We experience a lot of problems when it comes to that area [scheduling] … we always find lectures have already started … we get also problems with submitting course works in time because most lecturers say course works are supposed to be submitted at five o'clock, so you come and course works have already been taken… (Group 1 – Workshop).

Such findings underscore a weak policy framework (Openjuru, 2011) for ensuring retention and progression of these students.

Scheduling challenges were not limited to academic activities but also extended to key administrative functions of the university due to lack of an inclusionary policy on working hours. Subsequently, access to administrative services such as orientation, registration and examination clearance was reported difficult especially for the evening working students, often resulting into unsolicited behaviours such as forcing their way into the examination rooms.

These findings were corroborated by the policy makers in the university who expressed ambivalence about the policy on working hours within which members of staff were expected to be at university to teach or provide administrative services to evening students:

> Originally when we were introducing this [evening programme], we thought government would be the one to come up with policy… I remember the Ministry of Education's answer was that let's have the thief first then the law will come in…. I know there was a strike by

> members of staff of [name of academic unit]; I think I have a letter from one of them that "are they also supposed to teach in the evening? Is that a requirement?" So you can see even the staff themselves are querying… the evening students are treated like a by the way. (Josephat)

Related to the scheduling challenges above are the encumbrances on the official working hours for staff set between eight in the morning and five o'clock in the evening. This means that the non-traditional students group majority of whom study during evening come in at five o'clock when administrative services are no longer accessible.

The ambiguity surrounding the policy on working hours, mirrors the limited and unequal opportunities evening working NTS had towards accessing learning facilities such as computer laboratories and libraries. Moreover, the curricula for both fulltime and part-time study programmes were designed with the same duration period within which to complete, making it more constraining for the 'part-time' students as acknowledged by an administrative staff:

> …the biggest thing I see with the non-traditional students; the time we give them for their activities is short. All activities from five to nine, these other are given from eight to five [o'clock] and that very time again we expect them to do all the things; go to the library and read, go to the labs and do practicals, attend lectures, register, […], in four hours that is doing too much… (Timothy)

The misunderstandings between the NTS and staff point to the need for more flexible arrangements and onboarding policies to increase awareness among staff and students. Nevertheless, some NTS who joined through diploma holder scheme benefited from exemptions such as gaining admission straight to year two through the university's credit transfer policy. Although being treated special may sound as an inclusive strategy it can be a form of exclusion through denying the so called 'special' ones an equal chance of participation:

> … those who joined in year two, we are having a problem of registration, for us we don't register online, we register manually so you find the long queue, like the first years have come, they are so many, you also have to register manually... (Jackie)

The quote above shows that the 'special treatment' accorded at admission was neither reflected nor sustained in the provision of administrative services. More so, these students felt marginalised when it came to the inclusion of their records in the information management system resulting into challenges of missing marks and or exam permits because of carrying forward same student numbers used at diploma and being allocated registration numbers similar to those of first year students:

> …I registered, then when it came to the time of getting the examination permits, my permit was missing for like three times […] I am (also) having missing marks for last semester, not only me but also colleagues that joined in year two. (Jackie)

NTS who combined study with caring/parenting responsibilities felt that the university did not appreciate their situation since it did not have provisions for supporting child care. The financial constraints notwithstanding, the need to establish a child care facility at the university was acknowledged by both students and staff as an important intervention in enabling transformation. One NTS interviewee retorted:

> …when you know that your kid (baby) is safe and you can always go and see that kid at least and you know, breastfeed and all that at least things can be okay because for me I left my kid (home) and I was too too stressed. (Dativa)

Despite acknowledging that the existing policy framework for provision of and access to services and facilities was discriminatory to NTS, staff attitudes remained largely inclined to demanding flexibility on the side of the students and not of the university: *'... however, we should also understand that as an institution we can't fit in the student's programme'* (Timothy).

On Interaction With Staff

Participants shared narratives which showed that they were neither known nor expected to be part of the university student population by their lecturers. This made them feel that the lecturers' perceptions of university student identity and therefore their attitudes were more in favour of students who joined university straight from high school than through alternative entry routes:

> Those lecturers, I don't even think they know that there are people who are upgrading; they don't all that expect it. It's like for them they know they are dealing with people from A level – first year, second, third year… (Dativa)

One of the lecturers corroborated on their lack of awareness of what constitutes their student population:

> … they [NTS] were a silent group that was more or less unknown. You would get to know them when they probably came to you and they may not necessarily tell you their background…but maybe when you go on to probe them why they haven't done their assignments in time, that's when they start telling you how they have to fend for themselves.... (Anna)

NTS believed that lack of awareness on the part of lecturers impacted negatively on the responsiveness to their learning needs most especially linking theory to practice. The lecturers indeed acknowledged their inability to include the learning needs of NTS in teaching:

> …when I am teaching (name of the course) you find that an evening student will ask you something maybe you have not taught but they know it, and they know you are supposed to mention it at some point, but you, you don't mention it but because they have it in the field or

> they have interacted with it somewhere, they will ask you a question and because you have not been in the field, you may not be in position to answer it there and then… (Beatrice)

Failure of staff to recognise both the private and public spheres of students gave NTS feelings of having unequal rights to participation, being the 'other' students in the university (Sissel et al., 2001) – what Bacchi (1999) terms 'the problem' to the institution; resulting into feelings of neglect, exclusion and intrusion:

> …and you know when you are like you are not a normal student things are hard … the lecturers would mark our tests, those course works… they would always misplace them, may be they thought maybe we are lost … the people they communicate [to] is those normal students. (Dativa)

Failure to recognise the varied identities and needs of NTS made some lecturers ignite feelings of stigmatisation and victimisation among them bringing further down their already shattered images from the past, as illustrated in the story of Silver:

> I could come late [but] I would sit in front of my lecturer… reason being that whenever I could want to ask a question; I am asking a question someone who is old who is older than the students in the class, so I just wanted to talk to him closely that's why I was seating in front that whenever I was asking a question I could say but sir not putting up the hand then I would ask a question, otherwise people would be laughing at me and start looking at me naye (but) that gentleman has [he] also come to study? …
>
> I remember one time there was a lecturer […] I asked a question in class and then he said "but you see you people, most people do not understand at the spot, others understand in the morning, others understand at midnight; now this one is asking me an obvious question". Now people started laughing at me… and after that they realised that I was the one who was asking such a question. (Silver)

On one hand, Silver's experience was humiliating but also showed that NTS experienced own feelings of shame and held preconceptions about old age as a barrier to participation (Openjuru, 2011).

Additionally, some NTS shared narratives which showed that despite lecturers being aware that their student population also comprised of students from non-traditional backgrounds, they still put out stigmatisation acts that othered them:

> …one day he [lecturer] came in class and said "you people some of you people you take time to study you know, because of, you want to hurry in marriages… you boys be careful…some of those girls actually they are women, they are here with kids, they aim at some people who have something in their pockets … that's why they are here and old like that" (Naome)

Consequently, some students conveyed their disappointment about the way lecturers failed to comprehend and appreciate their multitasking demands and responsibilities:

> I really feel so bad about the lecturers who chase us out of class. He says "when you find I have already entered class you don't enter" …you've struggled to get here; you have been taking care of other responsibilities […] and he says "where have you been? just go out". (Group 2 – Workshop)

Although NTS generally reported a discriminatory and exclusionary relationship with members of staff, they also acknowledged that some staffs understood the complexity of their situation, and took a proactive stance to assist wherever they could, such as allowing them to submit late their assignments if they had genuine reasons. However, for some lecturers, their power was misused by disrespecting and keeping a distance from students perceived to have 'stretching' needs, including the 'traditional' students'. Such behavioural attitudes especially in the African context could be explained by the superior power status lecturers have in relation to their students, seeing themselves as 'us' and students as 'them' (Lister, 2005). This is in sharp contrast with the power status that older, working or parenting students expect to be treated with (Openjuru, 2011). Staff who held such attitudes were found reluctant to make exceptions:

> …they have to arrange either they come from work and come and see me […], after evening class I close and go …it's not fair to them but […], you just have to understand that once you have enrolled for a degree you don't say I don't have time because you are supposed to know that you have come to the degree and not work. (Josh)

Asked about how best the university could serve NTS, a senior administrator suggested the need for transformation of staff attitudes: *'... our own attitude towards them; may be, that's the starting point; do we regard these guys also equally highly'*?

Interaction With Fellow Students

NTS narrated mixed stories on their interaction with fellow students. Their interactions were shaped mainly by the attitudes and perceptions the latter held for or against them. On the one hand NTS expressed exclusionary experiences with especially day class traditional students based on two related issues, age and avenue of entry: *…traditional students, ... some of them behave like kids, some of them see us as failures in life, when someone gets to know you are 32 years and you are still studying, he thinks that you are a failure…* (Albert). Subsequently, NTS were often addressed as 'mature' – a demeaning and mocking name for students who join university through avenues other than direct entry.

On the other hand, NTS reported that the traditional students had high expectations of them derived from their prior experiences and practical orientation. This they said usually came into effect through socialisation during group work assignments and class presentations. Jackie shared: *'...some see you as a different person; they expect you know everything so they always come approach you; how do you go about this ...?'* Traditional students corroborated this finding recognising that the knowledge and skills NTS derive

from their other identities and learning environments enriched learning and promoted mutual interaction with them:

> There are some lecturers who you find are not good at explaining and when he says something and the class seems not to have understood what he or she is talking about, those specifically who are in the field and they have gotten experiences to that, they give an explanation and you find the class getting the point very well than when it was explained by the lecturer. (Simon)

Although NTS took pride in the positive perception of traditional students about them, some still preferred not to identify themselves as NTS because it would be more ridiculing in case they were not able to excel as expected, as shared by group three participants at the workshop: *'at times we intend not to tell people how we entered into campus, because people will start judging according to how you perform'*.

From the narratives above, it is evident that there is stigma attached to being a non-traditional student which is mainly felt in contact with fellow classmates.

Corroborating this finding, Maudah, a traditional student shared the experience she had with an NTS on identity disclosure: '*…she told me "don't tell anyone about it, people will start undermining me" ... most are scared, they say people will look at them in a bad way…*'. Identity is a very pertinent issue because youth-oriented universities tend to limit the power, privilege and advocacy of older students which pushes them to alienated and marginalised identities (Kasworm, 2010). In some situations, NTS may experience what Erikson (1968) terms identity crisis since they have to reconfigure their identities to fit in a system that largely supports student identity over other identities such as worker, husband and father, wife and mother embedded in their day-to-day roles.

In this study, such role based-identities sometimes were used by traditional students as justification for exclusion of NTS in group work assignments:

> …when I was in first year that's what I did; […] I told him I know it's hard but you try … come on time but he never made it. Well, green as I was, I had to make him quit… (Rodney)

On the contrary, NTS acknowledged that traditional students were a great resource through facilitating academic discussions and providing them lecture notes and updates on schedules for tests and group assignments. Julie a graduate NTS and a mother of three said: '*I got these two students they helped me out up to the final day. I never got a retake, I was surprised, but mainly it was because of those discussions*'.

Discussion

To talk of sustainable, inclusive and equitable quality university education, there should be evidence that the said education goes beyond opening and or increasing access to supporting wider processes that reduce inequalities among different groups of students. This can be achieved through correcting those things that act as barriers to participation such as improper scheduling and lack of childcare facilities. The findings show that

although the ‘equal opportunity’ provision has widened access for NTS at the study university, their equity and inclusivity spaces remain inadequately filled.

The provision of and access to services and facilities was found problematic mainly because inclusive policies were not in place. There were quite a number of contradictions between the desired policy environment and practice including access spaces that are core to the ethos of equal opportunity. For instance, the lack of a clear policy on working hours for staff not only inhibited efficient service provision and delivery but also underscored the rhetoric stance of the ‘equal opportunity’ discourse. It was difficult to understand the purpose for which, and the target group for whom, the evening programme was established. NTS who combine studies with other life obligations such as employment and parenting were more affected by the unreliable policy environment.

The interaction gaps identified between NTS and staff on one hand and NTS and fellow students on the other also mirrored unequal opportunities for NTS in an education system anchored on the traditions of selective education (Mamdani, 2007). Although exceptions were administered to enhance their inclusion, chances of sustainability were limited due to much dependency on the goodwill of implementers.

The failure of the ‘equal opportunity’ discourse to adequately accommodate both the private and public spheres of NTS makes it a grandiloquence provision with limited chances of substantiating claims of egalitarian ideals. Also, surviving on the discourse of exceptionalism is risky and far from realising the tenets of equitable and inclusive participation. Nonetheless, not all is lost, for example, the mutual collaboration between NTS and traditional students in their learning process and the exceptional ‘understanding’ of the needs of NTS by some Faculty, present promising transformation opportunities. Accordingly, the lifelong learning agenda for universities ought to be focused on the transformation discourse which aims at creating an inclusive university, organised and modelled around diversity of its students’ needs, responsibilities and identities, and which promotes sharing of the cost and burden of adaptation between various stakeholders. In the case of NTS these include governments, educational institutions, employers, and individuals, including their families.

Drawing from the above ongoing discussion, it is evident that the policy and practice environments of the study institution remain traditionally inclined and more in favour of ‘traditional’ students, compromising the quality of the NTS’ educational and integration experience. This is partly attributed to the impact of neoliberal policies on higher education funding and opportunities for transformation. For instance, in the context of NTS, whereas privatisation of higher education in Uganda enabled the equal opportunity of access for NTS who could afford to pay, the increase in tuition to compensate the funding gap constrained the equity opportunity for transformation because NTS are often faced with financial constraints (Bowl & Bathmaker, 2016; Tumuheki et al., 2016b). Privatisation of higher education also impacted on the social class composition at universities (Oketch, 2021). Due to structural inequalities inherent in the way the education system is organised in Uganda, it is the students from wealthy families and direct entry route who obtain high competitive grades and therefore dominate access to university (MoES, 2012; Nshemereirwe, 2016). The access opportunities for the economically constrained students

are often limited within the system right from the lowest level of education and, majority of NTS fall in this category since they access university through alternative entry routes.

In conclusion, promoting the prospects of a transformative lifelong learning agenda in university education requires universities to purpose to transform into lifelong learning institutions (UNESCO, 2020; Zeelen, 2015). For instance, Makerere University must recognise and appreciate that when it opened its doors to ‘a new public’ it, like its student population, acquired a new identity with new demands, requiring an institutional mind-set change towards NTS. Accordingly, its policy and practice frameworks should embrace the different facets of lifelong learning – focus beyond access, to allow more flexibility in the study programmes and arrangements, onboarding policies for both staff and students, institute inclusive teaching and learning policy and pedagogical approaches, advisory support services and academic support to NTS. These efforts would not only contribute towards recognising and accepting other role identities of NTS but also their material needs for transformation, thereby enabling quality and equitable university educational experience for all learners.

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