

Full Length Research Paper

Effectiveness of counselling services on retention rate of undergraduate students in selected universities in Kenya

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The purpose of the study is to assess the extent to which counselling services in universities in Kenya influences students' retention rate. The study was carried out in 2018 where one hundred and one medical students in first year second semester from two public universities were studied to determine the effectiveness of counselling services on retention rate of undergraduate students. Quantitative data were collected using questionnaires while qualitative data were collected using focus group discussions. The student participants were divided into two groups: experimental group and control group. The experimental group underwent 12 sessions of psycho-education counselling. At the end of the psycho-education programme, it was found that there were statistically significant differences between group means as determined by two-way ANOVA ($F(1,99) = 4.470, p = 0.037$), thereby revealing that counselling services significantly influence the retention rate of students. Students in the experiment group had a higher retention rate and were therefore more likely to graduate ahead of those in the control group. From the results, counselling equipped students with knowledge and skills that helped them deal with developmental issues that often interfere with their studies hence higher retention rate. Recommendations and implications of the study are discussed.

Key words: Retention, retention rate, psycho-education, counselling services, selected universities.

INTRODUCTION

Psychological wellbeing of university students worldwide is increasingly gaining recognition as an aspect that is important for retention of university students. Nelson-Jones (2011) views counselling as a service that involves helping people to function adequately or improving functionality and maintaining how they perform and live in different stages of their lives. Counselling services offered to university students are important in helping

them deal with day to day challenges faced in the context of the university and outside university environment. These could interfere with their learning thus affecting their retention. Although universities have invested heavily in student counselling services, empirical information on the effectiveness of the service in enhancing retention rate is lacking.

First year university students are challenged by new

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learning, teaching and assessment. Students experience anxiety about course work and get disappointed by drop in grades after the first set of exams. Students may also experience a lot of freedom as they are not followed closely by their lecturers. This freedom may pose a challenge in planning and managing time that may interfere with their studies. In general life in university exposes students to transitional challenges in personal autonomy, social relationships, compatibility among roommates, feeding habits and adjustments to academic programmes (Wangeri et al., 2012) and these challenges could affect their retention and stay at university. Moreover, all the aforementioned challenges could affect the mental health of students and could lead to low retention rate.

According to Pidgeon et al. (2014), resilience in the university environment is positively associated with greater mental health as well as successful transition and adjustment to university life, all of which are attainable through counselling. For instance, in Australia, a study comprising 89 university students revealed that students experienced high levels of mental difficulties, which was attributed to developmental problems, pressure of academics and change of environment (McGillivray and Pidgeon, 2015). Such aspects can make students to defer their studies thus prolonging their stay in university.

Using five years market share and retention data 2005-2010, McGillivray and Pidgeon (2015) found that the average attrition rate in universities was within the range of 12% but varied anywhere from as low as 9%. In 2013 the Australian national average dropout rate for first year students reached 14.85%, proving the highest since 2005. Specifically, in the University of Tasmania, nearly one in three students drop-out (McGillivray and Pidgeon, 2015). This is attributed to students battling disadvantages such as those first in their family to attend university, part time students and mature students juggling studies, work, and family, and unable to find a balance (Burke, 2016). These studies provide information on challenges experienced by students transiting to universities, but they are limited in demonstrating how counselling services could be used in addressing these challenges.

In America, a research conducted on retention rate reveals that at least one in three first year students do not make to graduation due to family problems, loneliness, academic struggles and financial difficulties (Redmond et al., 2011). These are issues associated with mental health which could be addressed through counselling. However, it is not clear from the study if counselling was employed to help students to solve the problem. A similar finding was observed in Canada where statistics on participation, graduation and dropout rate revealed that in a class of 2009-2010, 43% dropped out of the university (OECD, 2011). The survey results from the students who dropped out suggest that they were already struggling with meeting deadlines, academic performance and study

behaviour, drawbacks which forced them to quit in their first year, but which could have been handled through effective counselling. Yet these studies have limitations in explaining whether counselling services were employed to enhance functionality of students in their new university environments.

In Africa, Macgregor (2007) reports that 40% of South African students drop out of the university in their first year of study due to financial difficulties and family ignorance. Macgregor further found out that on average only 15 to 20% of students complete their degrees in the allotted time. This was attributed to poor career choices, domestic problems, pregnancy, poverty, partying and societal factors. However, it is not clear whether counselling services were utilized to assist the students or, if used whether they were effective in addressing the problems experienced.

The dropout rate in Kenyan universities is likely to be higher because students face multifaceted challenges such as examination anxiety, economic hardships, psychological and social issues like stress and relationship challenges common to third world countries. A study conducted by Capital Campus (2014) pointed out that student dropout rate in universities in Kenya is a fact that should attract the attention of the education authorities and the government. The study enumerated several reasons among them lack of access to university fee and other financial requirements, poor performance in examinations and failure to cope with the classroom stuff or has no strength and focus to keep studying the course and therefore drop out. Peer pressure is another reason for dropping out. The study identified other problems like crimes and pregnancies. However, the study fell short of explaining if any counselling services are offered and how effective they were. This is despite the fact that all universities in Kenya have counselling services designated to help students improve in their mental health. Moreover, these services are supposed to constructively address the problems students face and complete their studies in time. Furthermore, Chacha (2015) cites that the dropout rate for dental and medical school students in Nairobi University was at 50%. In the same article, Hudson Alumera a dental surgeon in the same university concurs with the statement and attributes this phenomenon to lack of passion, dedication, right mind-set and wrong choices of career. All these factors hinge on the psychological wellbeing of students. Counselling programmes are designed to address these challenges and enhance retention rate by providing students with good grounding on their psychological wellbeing before they proceed to second year. However, there is a dearth of empirical knowledge on whether counselling services are employed to help the students and if employed their efficacy in helping students in improving their retention rate in Kenya.

Notably, there are some studies that have been done in some countries that demonstrate that counselling had

been employed to address challenges faced by students at the university. For instance, in Brazil, counselling centres are helping students to select careers, on the basis of aptitude and interest and not on familiarity or perceived status of the career (Hutz-Midgett and Hutz, 2012). Counselling services in universities has reversed student dropout rates and made Nigerian universities to have the highest student retention rate in Africa (Agboola et al., 2014).

To find the influence of effective counselling services on students' retention in university, this study examined the effects of psycho-education on students' retention rate. The hypothesis of the study was: There is no statistically significant relationship between counselling services and the retention rates of undergraduate students in universities in Kenya. The study was guided by the Common Factors Theory (Grencavage and Norcross, 1990) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). These theories informed the study on different approaches and evidence based practices in counselling that account for much of the effectiveness of psychological treatment that result in positive outcomes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A mixed design involving a quasi-experiment design and phenomenological design was used in this study. Participants were divided into two groups: experimental group and control group. The participants were randomly assigned to either the control or to the experimental group. A triangulation embedded approach was then employed because of its capacity to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data that builds the strengths of different methods used in data collection while neutralizing their weaknesses. In addition, the approach allowed the researcher to increase the sample sizes which was valuable for enhancing external validity.

Location

This study was carried out in two public universities in Kenya. Public universities in Kenya have high student enrolment and therefore the dropout rates may be difficult. Students in the selected public universities therefore offered a fertile environment to study the effectiveness of counselling services on retention rate in universities in Kenya.

Participants

The study sample was 104 students. Initially 104 students were randomly sampled for the study but three dropped out due to undisclosed engagements. One student from the experiment group and two from the control group dropped out. Therefore, 101 participants engaged in the study representing 98.1% of the sample size, which is a good sample size in research in social sciences (Saleh and Bista, 2017). All the participants were informed of the discomforts/risks, benefits and rewards of the study and they were assured of confidentiality upon which they consented to participant in the study.

Measures

The retention rate was measured using an adopted College Level

Academic Retention Scale developed and validated by Carvalho and Chima (2016). The scale is a standardized and reliable method of predicting retention in universities.

Methods of data collection and procedures

Quantitative data were collected by participants in the experimental group and control group completing a students' "retention at university scale". The scale has 14 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scale had a Cronbach alpha of 0.889 which reflected a satisfactory reliability surpassing the recommended reliability coefficient of 0.70 considered acceptable in social science studies. Qualitative data were collected from focus group discussions. Two focus groups were set up: one focus group consisted of participants in the experiment group and the other consisted of participants in the control group. Three stimulus questions were proposed to participants in the two groups. These questions were: What are the possible reasons why you may drop out of university? Is the number of students dropping out of university alarming? How has counselling service contributed to your continuation in this university?

The focus group discussions were recorded and the recorded information was later transcribed. Students in both groups were subjected to a pre-test where the students filled a retention rate scale. Then the experimental group was taken through twelve sessions of psycho-education during their first year, second semester. The topics covered were study skills: time management, motivation, problem solving, creative thinking, decision making and attitude. Other topics were, career planning, stress management, social relationships, financial management, and substance use and abuse. After the experiment group went through the psycho-education programme, students from the two groups were again tested using the same retention rate scale as used in the pre-test and their probabilities of dropping out were measured.

Methods of data analysis

Quantitative data were collected from the 104 students using a questionnaire. This data were coded and entered in the Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 20 (SPSS -20) for analysis. It was then analysed using descriptive statistics mainly percentages and means. Inferential statistics namely the 2-way ANOVA was used to test the differences in the two groups (experimental and control group). This statistical test determined the differences between means of retention rate. Quantitative results from the analysis were presented in tables and pie-charts. An inductive coding method was used for qualitative data analysis. A codebook was built based on the data from the focussed group discussions. The code unit used was a phrase with minimum two words. Sub-themes emerged from each theme in the form of narrative quotes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two groups comprising an experimental group and a control group were randomly selected from the school of medicine. Students in both groups were subjected to a pre-test where the students filled a retention rate scale. Then the experimental group was taken through twelve sessions of psycho-education during their first year, second semester. The topics covered were study skills: time management, motivation, problem-solving, creative thinking, decision making and attitude. Other topics were,

Table 1. Indicators of students’ retention in university before psycho-education.

S/N	Strongly agree				Agree				Not sure				Disagree				Strongly disagree				Missing				Total	
	E		C		E		C		E		C		E		C		E		C		E		C		F	%
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	13	25.5	8	44	15	29.4	22	44	2	4	12	23.5	7	13.7	6	12	4	7.8	2	4	0	0	2	4	101	100
2	17	33.3	11	46	20	39.2	23	46	6	6	5	9.8	4	7.8	2	4	4	7.8	6	6	1	2	5	10	101	100
3	13	25.5	13	52	21	41.2	26	52	2	4	11	21.6	3	5.9	2	2	0	0	2	4	3	5.9	1	2	101	100
4	14	27.5	8	32	14	27.5	16	32	7	14	5	17.6	8	15.7	6	12	6	11.8	7	14	0	0	2	4	101	100
5	6	11.8	13	40	23	45.1	20	40	3	6	6	11.8	8	15.7	10	20	5	9.8	3	6	3	5.9	2	4	101	100
6	3	5.9	4	6	5	9.8	3	6	21	42	5	9.8	19	37.3	18	36	18	35.3	21	42	1	2	1	2	101	100
7	19	37.3	16	40	22	43.1	20	40	3	6	7	13.7	1	2	5	10	1	2	3	6	1	2	2	4	101	100
8	35	68.6	27	28	14	27.5	14	28	2	4	2	3.9	0	0	2	4	0	0	2	4	0	0	1	2	101	100
9	36	70.6	36	18	12	23.5	9	18	1	2	1	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	2	2	3.9	1	2	101	100
10	23	45.1	28	26	17	33.3	13	26	2	4	4	7.8	4	7.8	2	4	0	0	2	4	3	5.9	2	4	101	100
11	26	51	23	34	23	45.1	17	34	4	8	2	3.9	0	0	1	2	0	0	4	8	0	0	3	6	101	100
12	25	49.0	25	32	20	39.2	16	32	2	4	2	3.9	1	2	1	2	0	0	2	4	3	5.9	3	6	101	100
13	27	52.9	28	36	20	39.2	18	36	1	2	3	5.9	0	0	2	4	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	101	100
14	14	27.5	13	44	23	45.1	22	44	3	6	5	9.8	2	3.9	5	10	5	9.8	3	6	2	3.9	2	4	101	100
Average	19.4	38.0	18.1	34.1	17.8	34.9	17.1	34.1	4.2	8.0	5.0	10.4	4.1	8.0	4.5	8.9	3.1	6.0	4.2	8.0	1.4	2.8	1.9	3.9	-	-

E: Experimental group; C: Control group; 1, I know how to deal with upsetting problems that affect my studies; 2, I am satisfied with the extent of my intellectual development since enrolling in this university; 3, Faculty members have been available to help me make course choices; 4, I am satisfied with my academic experience at this university; 5, I am confident that this is the right university for me; 6, I am satisfied with the quality of training I am getting in my programme of study; 7, I am sure if I transfer to another university of my choice; 8, I will not get better training than what I am getting currently; 9, I am not thinking of transferring to another university; 10, I am not thinking of transferring from my current course to another course; 11, Given a choice, I could never defer my studies to engage in other activities; 12, The course I am pursuing is not difficult; I have not lost interest in the course I am studying; 13, The programme I am studying has a direct link with my preferred career in future; 14, This university regards students’ welfare and I am very comfortable being a student at this university.

career planning, stress management, social relationships, financial management, and substance use and abuse. After the experiment group went through the psycho-education programme, students from the two groups were again tested using the same retention rate scale as used in the pre-test and their probabilities of dropping out were measured. Results are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1 presents indicators to students’ retention rate before psycho-education programme while Table 2 shows indicators to students’ retention

rate after the experiment group went through the psycho-education programme. Students in both groups were again given the retention rate scale. In summary, an average of 81% of participants in the experiment group (strongly agreed = 48.8% and agreed = 32.2%) had high potential to complete their current courses in the same university as compared to 66.8% of participants in the control group (strongly agreed = 41.9% and agreed = 24.9%) that had high potential to complete their current courses in the same university. In the experiment group, an average of

12.1% of participants (disagreed = 8.4% and strongly disagreed = 3.7%) had low potential to complete their current courses in the same university.

In the control group, an average of 29.1% of participants (disagreed = 20% and strongly disagreed = 9.1%) had high potential to complete their current courses in the same university. An average of 6% of participants in the experiment group was not sure whether they would complete their current courses in the same university. An average of 4.6% of participants in the control

Table 2. Indicators of students’ retention in university after psycho-education.

S/N	Strongly agree				Agree				Not sure				Disagree				Strongly disagree				Missing				Total	
	E		C		E		C		E		C		E		C		E		C		E		C		F	%
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1	18	35.3	6	12	24	47.1	19	38	2	3.9	0	0	2	3.9	16	32	5	9.8	8	16	1	2	1	2	101	100
2	6	11.8	3	6	22	43.1	11	22	5	9.8	0	0	16	31.4	19	38	2	3.9	16	32	0	0	1	2	101	100
3	4	7.8	2	4	26	51	14	28	3	5.9	3	6	13	25.5	15	30	1	2	14	28	4	7.8	2	4	101	100
4	26	51	9	18	8	15.7	12	24	7	13.7	3	6	5	9.	14	28	4	7.8	11	22	1	2	1	2	101	100
5	11	21.6	6	12	22	43.1	15	30	4	7.8	2	4	6	11.8	18	36	8	15.7	7	14	0	0	2	4	101	100
6	20	39.2	22	44	24	47.1	23	46	1	2	2	4	5	9.8	0	0	1	2	2	4	0	0	1	2	101	100
7	26	51	20	40	12	23	16	32	9	17.6	8	16	4	7.8	5	10	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	101	100
8	37	72.5	35	70	13	25.5	12	24	1	2	2	4	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	101	100
9	39	76.5	41	82	9	17.6	9	18	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	101	100
10	38	74.5	30	60	11	21.6	16	32	0	0	3	6	0	0	1	2	1	2	0	0	1	2	0	0	101	100
11	26	51	27	54	21	41.2	10	20	0	0	2	4	3	5.9	11	22	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	101	100
12	41	80.4	30	60	8	15.7	1	2	2	3.9	0	0	0	0	16	32	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	6	101	100
13	38	75.5	38	76	12	23.5	5	10	0	0	1	2	0	0	6	12	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	101	100
14	18	35.3	24	48	18	35.3	11	22	9	17.6	6	12	5	9.8	18	36	1	2	5	10	0	0	0	0	101	100
Average	24.9	48.8	20.9	41.9	16.4	32.2	12.4	24.9	3.1	6.0	2.3	4.6	4.3	8.4	10.0	20.0	1.9	3.7	4.6	9.1	0.6	1.1	0.8	1.6	-	-

E: Experimental group; C: Control group; 1, I know how to deal with upsetting problems that affect my studies; 2, I am satisfied with the extent of my intellectual development since enrolling in this university; 3, Faculty members have been available to help me make course choices; 4, I am satisfied with my academic experience at this university; 5, I am confident that this is the right university for me; 6, I am satisfied with the quality of training I am getting in my programme of study; 7, I am sure if I transfer to another university of my choice; 8, I will not get better training than what I am getting currently; 9, I am not thinking of transferring to another university; 10, I am not thinking of transferring from my current course to another course; 11, Given a choice, I could never defer my studies to engage in other activities; 12, The course I am pursuing is not difficult; I have not lost interest in the course I am studying; 13, The programme I am studying has a direct link with my preferred career in future; 14, This university regards students’ welfare and I am very comfortable being a student at this university.

group was not sure whether they would complete their current courses in the same university. An average of 1.1% of participants in the experiment group did not respond to whether they would complete their current courses in the same university. In the control group an average of 1.6% of participants in the control group did not respond to whether they would complete their current courses in the same university. This summary finding is presented in Figures 1 and 2.

Pre-test results and post-test results were compared. The study found that students who

went through the psycho-education programme in the experiment group had a higher retention rate compared to those in the control group who never went through the psycho-education programme. Counselling services enable students to acquire skills and knowledge that are invaluable in resolving personal issues which otherwise would affect their studies resulting to dissatisfaction with courses, transfer of courses, transfer to other universities, deferments, discontinuation, and drop out among others. Skills learnt during the psycho-education programme appear to have enabled

students in the experiment group to manage personal issues, thereby giving them ability to plan their time facilitating concentration on their studies.

Having looked at descriptive statistics employed in this objective, a two way ANOVA was further used to test whether the differences were statistically significant. A null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between counselling services and the retention rates of undergraduate students in universities in Kenya was put to a test and results are represented in

Percentage Retention in Kenyan Universities before Psycho-education

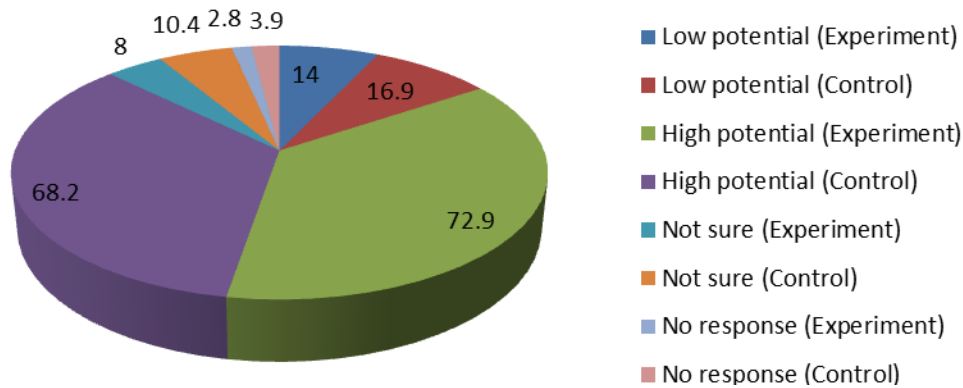


Figure 1. Retention rate in Kenyan universities before psycho-education (pre-test).

Percentage Retention in Kenyan Universities after Psycho-education

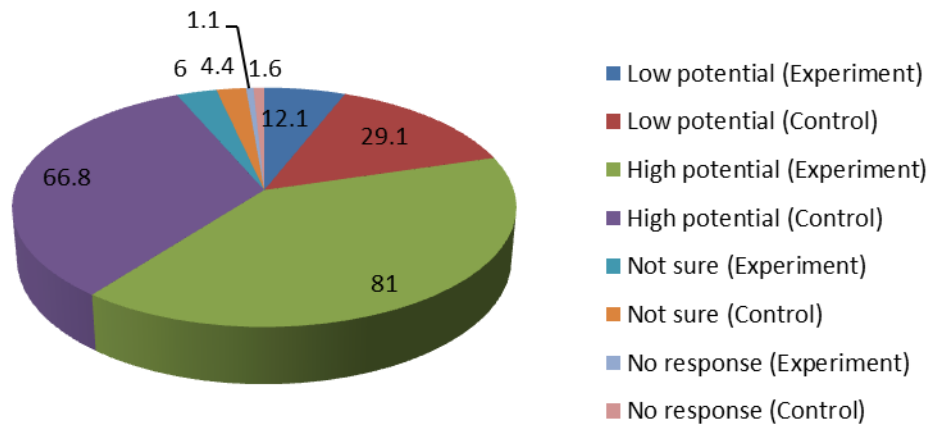


Figure 2. Retention rate in Kenyan universities after psycho-education (post-test).

Table 3.

Table 2 shows that null hypothesis being tested is rejected because the calculated $F(1,99) = 4.470$, at $p = 0.037$ is greater than critical $F(1,99) = 3.94$. The relationship is significant. The null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant relationship between counselling services and the retention rates of undergraduate students in universities in Kenya is rejected. The rejection of the null hypothesis means that counselling services influence student retention rate in universities in Kenya.

The finding supports the common belief that counselling enables students to complete studies. This finding agrees with findings by Lotkowski et al. (2004) who found that

academically focused psycho-education programmes including factors such as academic self-confidence, achievement, motivation, goals commitment, social support and involvement contributes to increased retention rates in American universities.

The two-way ANOVA analyses indicate that counselling intervention influences students' retention rate in university in that students who went through psycho-education showed a low potential of dropping out than those who did not. This revelation is in agreement with Odes et al. (2009) who found that in American universities, college freshmen retention significantly improved because of counselling intervention.

Table 3. ANOVA for counselling services and retention rate.

Parameter	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.091	1	1.091	4.470	0.037
Within Groups	24.157	99	0.244	-	-
Total	25.248	100	-	-	-

N = 100; Group df = 1; Sample size df = 99; α = .05; F = 4.470; p = .037; critical F = 3.94.

These findings reinforce Terenzin et al. (1996) who stressed students' characteristics as the main determinant factor of a student stay in university and found that students drop out of college because of factors outside the institutional control notably, change of career goals and negative attitude towards the institution. Although these factors were not tested because they were beyond the scope of this study, it is possible that they could be present among medical students at the Kenyan Universities therefore contributing to their poor retention. Psycho-education impacted skills on positive attitude towards academic performance and retention rate. Students with a positive attitude will have the ability to cope with the environment within their institution and focus their career goals.

According to the common factors theory (Grencavage and Norcross, 1990) institutional goals can best be achieved if clients' needs (a main factor in the theory) are factored in the institutional strategy. Therefore, if the university counselling factors the students psychological needs in their counselling programme they will not only attract the students to utilize the services but will also empower students with abilities to take charge of their own academic lives. Each institution has a goal of maintaining its clientele and attracting more students. Universities therefore could prevent student dropout and transfers to other institutions through psycho-education.

From the focus group discussions, four themes emerged: financial issues, alcohol and drugs abuse and course difficulty. The first theme to emerge from the focus group discussion was financial issues. Participants were in general agreement that financial difficulties were the major cause of both dropping out of university and differing studies. Students find problems in clearing their fees and also they face financial challenges in maintaining their upkeep. The massive university student enrolment has led to reduction of the amount of loans students get from the government through its agency the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB). For instance most Government sponsored students in university heavily rely on funds from HELB for tuition and upkeep. For instance, a participant noted:

"...quite a number of students failed to get loans from HELB this semester....some of my classmates these deferred their studies..." [Male student]

The issue of lack of school fees is a real challenge to

university students especially the high cost of medical courses as noted by a student participant:

"...I have a friend who dropped out of university...his was a case of fees challenge which saw him on and off university...he did not perform well at some point...he dropped out...and the last time we talked, he had started a business...up to now he has not come. I feel very sorry because medicine course is for the top cream...bright students in the country but failure to attend class for lack of fees means you cannot perform well...." [Male student]

Some students have real financial challenges when it comes to accommodation and food. Most students do not have enough money to cater for their accommodation and food throughout the semester. This is as a result of totally missing out on HELB loans or sometimes poor management of the money they get from their parents or guardians. These students spend much of their time trying to make ends meet in terms of accommodation and food leaving little time to attending classes. This assertion is reinforced by another participant who said:

"...accommodation is very expensive...with reduced HELB funding getting adequate accommodation and food is a big issues...medical books and kits take a toll on the little we have...it is not a surprise to learn that one of us has dropped out..." [Female student]

Some of these students struggle with their studies because of financial challenges end defer their studies and even drop out.

The second theme which emerged is alcohol and drug abuse. Alcohol and drug abuse is a major challenge in universities. Students are increasingly being involved in this vice. There is easy access to these drugs and alcohol by the students. Students engage in alcohol and drug abuse in two forms: peddlers and consumers as noted by one counsellor participant:

"....it is not that students only get drugs from people outside the university.....there are a few students who sell drugs and alcohol in disguise to fellow students who are consumersmore and more students are being attracted or recruited into the drug abuse cycle due to peer influence...." [Male student]

Alcohol and drug abuse has ensnared some students into

addiction even where universities have programmes meant to sensitize students every semester such as the drug week on the calendar of events. These students are only interested in getting drugs and alcohol and they rarely attend lectures. Most of them end up missing exams either by being barred from doing exams because they have squandered money meant for tuition in procuring drugs and alcohol or they simply miss out class because they are not well prepared. One participant noted:

“....parents give us school fees to come and pay but a few of us do not actually, they don't pay....that is the money they use to buy alcohol and also to be involved in drugs and other things outside class...” [Male student]

Another participant noted:

“....there is a close relationship between poor grades and alcohol and drug abuse especially male students. More male students fail...majority when they fail they are usually deferred.....” [Female student]

Some students have been influenced by alcohol and drugs to the point that they never attend class. They always appear confused. One participant noted:

“....there is this particular case that is addicted to drugs and he missed exams last semester.....he did not pay fees and missed exams although the parents assumed that he had paidhe looks confused and out of touch to reality because of the drugs.....” [Female student]

The third theme that emerged from the discussion regarding student retention was course difficulty. Sometimes the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement (KUCCPS) place students to programmes unilaterally disregarding their preferred choices. As a result, many students end up in programmes which were not of their choice. These students do not find their courses interesting and they find the course content to be difficult. One participant said:

“...I know of a student who failed, he did a supplementary forcing him to take a whole year out of college...when he took the exam again, he failed...this particular student was engaging in too much social life...too much for a medical student....at least every day you must read something, you feel guilty sleeping without reading a book...it is not like any other course where students do fewer units per semester....in medicine we sometimes do as many as 21 units and very involving... [Male student]

Students relate course difficulty with choice of university. When students apply for university selection, they are given options of choosing a number of universities

offering similar courses. Usually students select the universities in order of preference. If a student is selected to a university which is not his first choice but ends up in a university which was the second or third choice but still in the same programme such as medicine, he is likely to be discontented and the course will seem difficult as remarked by a participant:

“...sometimes students lack interest in their studies thereby failing because they are still fixated with the idea that were it in their first choice of university the content could have been delivered differently...” [Female student]

This observation echoes Griffith Quality, Planning and Statistics (2015) while investigating reasons for attrition at Griffith University found that students who had not selected the university as their first choice university left the university to other universities.

In summary, counselling is an important intervention in boosting student retention in university. It helps students to resolve psychosocial issues which may otherwise derail their academic progression in university thereby resulting in drop outs, prolonged stays, course transfers or institutional transfers. The psycho-education programme in this study reduced the participants' potential prospect of dropping out as earlier. Indeed, Griffith Quality, Planning and Statistics (2015) reported that student dropout rate in Australia reduced because of counselling. In the study, counselling helped students to sort out personal difficulties such as family and finances. The psycho-education programme also instilled in participants a sense of institutional belonging thereby increasing retention prospects as found out in another study by Han et al. (2017), where students' feelings of belongingness increased their retention in college. It is therefore possible to argue that counselling service could enhance retention rates.

Conclusion

It was important to establish the rate of retention among students in universities in Kenya in order to establish issues that make them to drop out of the university or transfer to other courses or other universities so as to determine ways of addressing the issues with the aim of preventing future drop out or transfers in universities in Kenya. Once students enrol for courses at university, there is a clear understanding that the courses are time bound and therefore students are expected to complete their courses in time to avoid incurring extra costs to parents/guardians/sponsors and the universities.

Completing courses in time enable universities to free up facilities in order to benefit potential students lined up for enrolment. Retention rate in universities was based on the students' need to transfer to other course, discontinuation from study or transfer to another institution.

The study found that counselling services in universities significantly influences retention rates of students. Students who go for counselling gain a lot such as study skills, time management skills, problem solving skills, creative and critical thinking which can influence their decision making in switching to other courses, discontinuing studies or transferring to other institutions.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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