

**Psychological Preparedness of Distance Learners: Implications on Achievement among
School-based Undergraduate Students in Kenya**

Owen Ngumi

ngumiowen@yahoo.com

Department of Psychology Counselling and Educational Foundations, Egerton University, Kenya

Tabitha Mwaniki

Mwaniki64@yahoo.com

Centre for Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance, Masinde Muliro University of Science
and Technology, Kenya

ABSTRACT

Psychological preparedness represents a critical component of the process of entry into an educational programme. Among adult learners, this is compounded by the fact that re-entry into school is a major shift from their ordinary life, a distortion of regular routines, and a challenge of adjustment into school life. Among school-based learners in Kenya, empirical data is lacking with regard to their psychological preparation and eventual entry into university programmes. Thus this study was designed to examine the extent of psychological preparedness of school-based learners and the implication of this preparation on academic performance. The data was collected from 232 school-based undergraduate students in 2 public universities in Kenya during the residential sessions of the programme. The study focused on certain variables; awareness, reasons why adult learners go back to school, educational goals, career goals, challenges of the programme, and impact on academic performance. The findings of the study reveal important facts on the situation of school-based learners at entry into the programme and the impact this has in the entire learning process. The findings of the study identify gaps in the learner support systems for distance learners in public universities, and recommends how this can be improved.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the recent past, the school-based programme of study for undergraduate students was introduced in Kenya, as a mode of distance education. It was specially tailored for teachers in employment as a sort of in-service course. According to Ansello (1982), such a programme is demand driven, as in tandem with Maslow's theory of needs; there is an increase in the need to know. The theory emphasizes the need for self-enrichment and vocational advancement. Kenyan teachers have enrolled in great numbers into the programme. The demand for school-based programme has been strengthened by certain key motivational factors, which according to Niles (1995) are the need for competition and social approval. Teachers are further driven by the need for promotion and the possibility of a higher pay upon getting an extra certificate. They also feel the need to fit in with their peers who have enrolled for the programme, probably because they will earn social approval when they become like them (Niles, 1995).

Most of the students who join the school-based programme in Kenya are adult learners. Majority of them are people who have been working for a long time, have stable careers, have families or are in stable relationships, and have fairly stable economic status. The entry into school once again upsets the above equilibrium, and hence there is need for a lot of adjustment. The aspiring student needs to restructure his/her life in order to fit into the schooling environment and at the same time continue with ordinary life activities and professional progression. According to Devertelyi (1995), adjustment of the individual into the system may be affected by situational factors, personality traits, cultural background, and gender-role orientation. For instance Myers (1986) argues that men in their mid forties may undergo the transition, which constitutes the "midlife crisis", and this may affect their adjustment to the school-based programme. At the same time there are an increasing number of modern women entering employment and the classroom in spite of the demands being made on their time (Myers, 1986).

In most cases the school-based students are teachers and this forms the basis of the programme being structured along the primary and secondary schools' calendar, so that they can attend residential sessions during the school holidays. Therefore these students are individuals who are tuned to working through the term and having three solid holidays every year. Joining the programme therefore means they have to forfeit their much-cherished holidays. The programme is also crowded since the students are expected to cover a lot of work within a short time. This implies that most of

the residential session is consumed by class work, conducting research, writing of term papers, and other forms of assignments for ordinary working time within the school term. As expected, this takes up the time the teacher is supposed to be preparing lessons and apart from assignments suffering a lack of adequate time, the competition it gives to the teachers' normal workload is very stressful. One way in which such stress can be combated is by putting in place learner support mechanisms to enhance self-directed learning skills. If inculcated at the onset of the programme, such skills will prepare the student because they will come to appreciate the support offered by instructors, and this will lead to high academic achievement (Victori, 2007).

Most of these students are used to life at home in familiar neighbourhoods with which they have established a relationship. Their lives revolve mainly around the home and the workplace, thus shifting from this lifestyle poses a challenge and with poor preparation, this may lead to stress and anxiety (Goody, 200). The personal, psychological, social, career, and educational preparedness and level of adjustment are probably the key determinants of success of their academic endeavours. Most of these students are adults, and cognitively they are demonstrating ability to learn and retain new knowledge. Myers (1986) argues that despite occasional difficulties in adjusting to demands of coursework and testing, adult learners can still be successful in their academic pursuits. Driven by clearer goals and greater motivation to move up the professional ladder, they could even perform better than their younger contemporaries. According to Goody (2000), students who are not well prepared for what they are to expect may experience frustration and anxiety, and these could leave the students feeling disoriented.

The break from the routine of everyday life to which one is used and entry into the world of school with all its demands is no mean task, and it requires a well prepared individual who has good adjustment skills. The student has to leave home to attend the residential session and put up in the university, a rental house, or live with friends. They also have to contend with separation from spouses and family, which may be very stressful. Further, the students have to learn to adjust to attending lectures, coping with assignments, private study, and the most stressful of all, sitting for their examinations. Sedgwick and Yonge (2001) point out that student preparedness, which includes both cognitive and psychological components, is necessary for facilitation of a positive experience, which in turn increases learning effectiveness.

Schooling especially for middle-income earners, more often than not, comes with economic strains, which upset lifestyle and sometimes ability to sustain one's needs and those of dependants. This is because most of the students are in the self-sponsored programmes, which require that they either use their savings to finance their studies, or take loans to do so. The Universities have become very strict with the issue of fees payments to the extent that students are not allowed to take their examinations unless most of the fees have been paid. The financial problem is compounded by the rising cost of living while away from home, and the fact that most of the students are themselves parents with children who are making financial demands on them as well. Failure to have proper preparedness may lead to stress and anxiety, which impacts negatively on their academic achievement.

The school-based programme comprises intensive sessions taken during the normal school holidays. Most of the students are required to reside within the college or in its environs. Separation from the family during residential sessions of the programme is another cause of concern. This introduces anxiety over the welfare and security of the family, and a deficit in the social needs of belonging and sexual intimacy. Since most of these students are in the middle adulthood, the issues of relationships and intimacy pose a great challenge. According to Erik Erikson, this is a time when the individuals are struggling with the challenge of achieving intimacy, forming relationships, and growing in their capacity for love (Myers, 1986). This coupled with being in a new social setup introduces other levels of socialization and sometimes intimate sexual relationships within the college circles. This may lead

to further strain on the emotions of the student, and/or strain on the relationship with the family, leading to more anxiety and stress. Guilt and/or deep psychological involvement may be causes of failure to achieve ones academic goals. Counselling programs need to be put in place as part of preparation and support for the students if they are to succeed academically. As Blake (2007) rightly asserts, counselling approaches and practices should be adapted to the changing needs of the learners.

Pursuit of academic goals is mostly linked with a future goal of career progression and mobility. Notably, the social lives of these adult students revolves around not just physical and cognitive changes linked to ageing, but largely around life events associated with work, marriage, and parenting (Myers, 1986). At the same time their new role as students means new relationships, new expectations, and new demands, hence it is important that they are prepared for these events. There is therefore need to plan appropriately for an educational programme so that its pursuit does not become a precursor to frustration in future. Some students may start to develop reservations in the middle of the programme due to changing trends of the job markets and career demands, or due to new realizations about their long-term career objectives. As they progress in their studies, new knowledge may lead to acquisition of new lenses through which they view their goals and endeavours. This may introduce totally new dimensions to their life, which may impact on their academic achievement.

Integration of the studies into the usual working programme may introduce the dimension of conflict of interest. This is because a lot of the assignments have to be done during the normal working hours, and this is also the time when the student is supposed to be preparing themselves for examinations. It follows that if a student has to do well, then the schedule of work has to be more or less compromised, and this may hurt the employer. There is failure by some employers to provide a supportive learning environment at the workplace, employment and research initiatives. This leads to lack of promotion of lifelong learning among the workers, and this is an impediment to academic achievement of the employed student. At the same time, the student may have to compromise the time and attention they need to give to their families, which may lead to stress, or at the worst, poor academic performance (Zim, Zadnik and Radloff, 2003).

The students enter into a ready-made programme for which they are not required to make an input regarding how it will run, or even how long the course will take. This means they have to work towards fitting into the programme no matter what it takes. Involvement of the students in making the programme design may enhance ownership of the programme and hence contribute to psychological preparedness. Hopstock (2008) is of the opinion that a student who is prepared for education or training, and who participates in decisions about attending the course is more motivated in learning. In fact motivation correlates positively with adult learners' self-concept, readiness to learn, and orientation to learning. Gharth (2002) asserts that cooperative learning and the degree of academic support correlates with achievement.

2. METHODS

Participants

This study was carried out in two public universities in Kenya; Egerton University and Masinde Muliro University. Both universities have distance-learning programmes, which are conducted on a school-based basis. The students are scheduled to attend three four-week residential sessions in a year, where they have a one on one interaction with their lecturers, sit for part of their continuous assessment tests and examinations. During the intervening three-month period, the students are working in their respective schools, reading on their own, and working on their work-based assignments.

This study was carried out during the residential sessions in the respective institutions, and the subjects were 232 undergraduate students. There were 130(56%) students from Egerton University and 102(44%) from Masinde Muliro University. 113 (48.7%) were male while 119(51.3%) were female students.

Instrument

The instrument used was a 25 item questionnaire which was divided into three. The first section sought the demographic statistics of the respondents for purpose of comparison. The second part sought information about the students' preparedness for entry into the school-based programme and the effect of the challenges they have met on their academic achievement. The third section sought to find out how the school-based programme has affected the students' career and educational goals.

3. RESULTS

Most school-based students (51.3%) acquire information about the programme from the mass media. Another 43.5% of the students acquire this information from their friends. 3.4% of the students and 1.7% acquire this information from the schools where the work and from the university respectively. The general feeling from the students about their level of psychological preparedness at entry into the programme was that 2.6% were very poorly prepared, 15.5% were poorly prepared, and 60.8% were well prepared, while 21.1% felt they were very well prepared for entry. There were no notable gender differences in the preparedness of students for entry into the programme, and across various age brackets the preparedness was similar.

As they entered the programme, 60.8% of students expected to find heavy workload in the programme while 39.2% did not expect heavy workload. The majority (55.2%) expected the programme to be tight while 44.8% did not expect a tight programme. While 79.3% expected to be separated from their families, 20.3% did not expect to be separated from their families. Financial constraints were expected by 76.3% of students, but 23.7% did not expect to have financial constraints. In terms of adequacy of information at entry into the programme, 23.7% of students feel they had adequate information, while 76.3% feel that they had inadequate information about the school-based programme.

As they continue with the programme, 47% of the students feel that heavy workload has had a positive effect on their academic performance, 43.5% feel that heavy workload has had a negative effect on academic performance, while 9.5% have not felt any effect of workload. The complexity of subject matter at university level has had a positive effect on the academic performance among 52.6% of students, a negative effect among 40.9%, and no effect among 6.5% of students. The tightness of the programme has had a positive effect on the academic performance among 37.5% of the students, a negative effect among 56%, and no effect among 6.5% of students. Separation from the family during residential sessions has had a positive effect on the academic performance among 28% of students, a negative effect among 40.5% of the students, and no effect among 31.5% of students.

Financial constraints have had a positive effect on the academic performance among 18.5%, a negative effect among 75.9%, and no effect among 5.6% of the students. The bulk of the students (78.9%) had taken loans (from Cooperative societies and commercial banks) to finance their education, 17.2% were using personal savings, 2.2% had held fundraisers, while only 1.7% were on grants and scholarships. Consequently 54.7% of students felt that their financial status had deteriorated due to the programme, but 14.2% felt that their financial status had improved, and for 31% of students the financial status had remained the same.

35.3% of students reported that they had knowledge of sexual activity among students, and this behaviour was attributed to separation from the family by 55.6% of the students. Students who felt that sex was a need even during the residential sessions were 19%. The majority of students (78.4%) felt that sexual activity had a negative effect on academic performance, 5.6% felt that sex had a positive effect on academic performance, while 15.9% felt that it had no effect. Based on students' responses, sexual activity is not very rampant during residential sessions. 37.9% of students reported that sexual activity was very low, 26.3% reported that it was low, and 17.7% reported that it was average. However 9.1% felt that sex activity was high and another 9.1% felt that it was very high during residential sessions.

The majority of students (56.5%) reported that they had joined the programme for academic advancement, but the rest of the students had varied reasons as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Students' Reasons for Entering the School-based Programme

Reason for Entry	Percent
Academic Advancement	56.5
Vertical Mobility on the Job	22.0
Frustration in the Current Job	16.4
Prestige	3.0
Peer Pressure	1.3
Pressure from the Family	0.9
Total	100.0

The experiences that students have had in the school-based programme have largely impacted positively on the students' educational goals and career aspirations. The majority (95.3%) feel that the programme has affected their educational and career goals positively, but 2.2% and 2.6% of students have been affected negatively or have felt no effect respectively. As a result, 95.3% aspire to join postgraduate studies after completion of their current programme, but 4.7% of the students do not aspire to advance their education beyond the current level. The majority (86.6%) felt that the school-based programme has had positive effect on their career goals, 8.2% felt that their career goals have been negatively affected, while 5.2% had felt no effect on their career goals.

The students reported that they had faced serious challenges during the pursuit of their studies through the school-based mode. Besides financial constraints which affected 46.1% of the students, there were other challenges as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Challenges facing students in the School-based Programme

Main Challenges	Percent
Financial Constraints	46.1
Heavy Workload and Time Shortage	35.3
Loneliness Due to Separation from Family	9.5
Accommodation Problems	3.0
Lack of Reading Material	2.2
Complexity of Subject Matter	1.7
Balancing between Family and Studies	0.9
Sitting for Examinations	0.9
Poor Treatment from Lecturers	0.4
Total	100.0

3. DISCUSSION

Psychological preparedness of students requires that one obtains proper and sufficient information about the educational programme that he/she intends to enter. The most appropriate source of this information is the institution that provides the programme. School-based students in Kenya largely depend on the media, which provides only a skeleton of the necessary information. This means that the adequacy of information that students have when making educational plans and decisions is wanting. There is need to create more awareness among aspiring students and to provide better information dissemination avenues on the part of the universities. Students should be encouraged to gather as much information as possible about the programme of study and from relevant sources before making their decisions. Such information should include how the study programme will be structured, the credit hours to be taken, and duration of study per day, availability and type of accommodation, and total fees for the programme.

Most students have no idea what a degree programme and specifically a school-based one is like. As a result they blindly enter into it and find that they have difficulties dealing with heavy workload, complex subject matter, time constraints, and separation from their families. Universities' learner support programmes for students should include a comprehensive pre-programme orientation exercise through which students can learn what to expect in their course of their study. This knowledge will go a long way in encouraging students to make informed choices as well as put in place mechanisms to enable them cope with the challenges ahead. Further, the learner support programme should include students' services such as psychological counselling, educational counselling, academic advising, and career guidance. These services will ensure that students have appropriate adjustment strategies, coping strategies, stress management skills, educational goals, career aspirations, and decision-making skills.

The compounding effects of the challenges facing school-based students and the lack of preparedness for these challenges may lead to adjustment problems and stress, as well as failure to achieve optimum academic performance. This may explain the prevalence (though low) of sexual activity among students during residential sessions. Most students (83.2%) are married and the absence from their spouses may pose serious intimacy difficulties. The learner support programme should strengthen counselling services to equip these students with coping skills.

About a fifth of the students joined the programme for reasons other than academic and career advancement. While such factors may be motivating at entry into the programme, they may serve to demotivate the student once faced with unexpected challenges in the programme. Such students need critical support through educational and career guidance to redirect their focus on more positive purposes that can be served by the programme. This will help them see beyond their past failures and frustrations, and look beyond the completion of the programme hence set realistic educational and career goals.

4. RECOMMENDATION

- i.) To improve on the appropriateness of educational decisions made by school-based students, the Universities should establish information centres where students can learn as much about the programmes as they can.
- ii.) The Universities should have comprehensive orientation for the school-based students before the start the programme as a means of their preparation for it.

- iii.) The Universities should put in place guidance and counselling services for school-based students and encourage students to make use of them.
- iv.) As much as possible, students should be involved in making suggestions about the teaching timetable.

5. REFERENCES

- Arsello, E. (1982). Mature Adult and the Need to Know. *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 7(2):139-151.
- Blake, D. (2007). Adapting Counselling to Changing Learner Demographics via School-wide System of Support. *System* 35 (1):32-45.
- Deverthelyi R. (1995). International Students' Spouses: Invisible Sojourners of Intercultural Relations. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 19 (3):387-411.
- Gharth G. (2002). The Relationship Between Cooperative Learning, Perception of Social Support and Academic Achievement. *System* 30 (3):263-273.
- Goody, A. (2000). Adult Learners in Cyberspace Center for Staff Development, The University of Western Australia <http://sn.curtin.edu.au/tlf2000/goody.html>
- Hopstock, L. (2008). Motivation and Adult Learning: A survey among Hospital Personnel Attending a CPR Course. *Resuscitation* 76 (3): 425-430.
- Myers, D. (1986). *Psychology*. New York. Worth Publishers.
- Niles, F. (1995) Cultural Differences in Learning Strategies: A comparison of Overseas and Australian Students at an Australian University. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 19(3):369-385.
- Sedgwick, G. and Yonge, O. (2007). Undergraduate Nursing Students Willingness to "go_Rural". *Nurse Education Today*. In press corrected proof.
- Victori, M. (2007). The Development of Learner Support Mechanisms in a Self-access Center and Their Implications in a Credit –based Self-directed Learning Program. *System* 35(1):10-31.
- Zim, J., Zadnik, M. and Radloff, A. (2003) University and Workplace Cultures: Their Impact on the Development of Life-long Learners. *Radiography* 9 (2): 99-107.