

# I JUST WANT TO BE SOMEBODY: EXPLORING STUDENTS' MOTIVATIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN UNIVERSITIES

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## ABSTRACT

There is burgeoning literature on the challenges confronting many Sub Saharan African universities. Such challenges have worsened in the present neoliberal context of the universities. This article draws on a qualitative data in three public universities in Ghana to discuss students' motivations of going to the universities and their experiences in the institutions. It discusses how students perceive and deal with the institutional challenges they are confronted with. Whilst the various challenges cannot be ignored, it appears many of the students have adopted "adaptive preferences" to deal with their challenges and sustain their motivations. I argue for the universities to strive to boost student services not only academically, but socially, including leisure and networking activities. Also, in the neoliberal context of the universities, I suggest the universities to encourage intrinsic value of knowledge other than its instrumental usage.

**Keywords:** students, motivations, expectations, challenges, adaptive preferences, social support

## INTRODUCTION

Universities in the Sub-Saharan Africa are confronted with many challenges. These challenges, including limited funding and infrastructure, have become unprecedented in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due more to the neoliberal context in which the universities are operating (Teferra and Altbach 2004). Neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2008, 22). It requires minimum government intervention in provision of social services and endorses the supremacy of the market.

In the neoliberal context, governments subventions to the universities keep dwindling, whilst the institutions are mandated to self-generate more income. On the other hand, the higher education market has become increasingly competitive and students have become more demanding and better informed about what services and support they expect to receive whilst studying at university (Hazelkorn 2017).

With the challenges and expectations confronting universities, there is equally a growing literature on the increased demand for higher education in Africa (World Bank 2010). However, with the increased demands and expectations of higher education, the institutions need to provide an excellent quality student experience to safeguard their continued organisational existence.

Though student experiences have multiple definitions, in this article, it is conceived as the totality of a student's interaction with the institution (Temple et al. 2014). Students' experiences can be categorized into five components: the application experience, the academic experience, the campus experience and the graduate experience (Ibid.). The application experience spans the interactions between prospective students and the university up to when the students arrive on campus. The academic experience involves students' interactions with the institution associated with their studies, particularly on the teaching and learning processes. The campus experience includes student life unrelated with study and the graduate experience includes the institution's function of supporting graduates quest and process of getting employment.

Basic to student experiences is for universities to foster a sense of belonging in students. This need is especially important in the neoliberal era where there is deemphasising on public good and limited sense of care (Carolissen 2012; Yuval-Davis 2011). Belonging is about "emotional attachment", about feeling "at home" (Yuval-Davis 2011). The home, as a metaphor, connotes a protected space, positive values and warm feelings (Young 1997). It is "an on-going project entailing a sense of hope for the future" (Hage 1997, 103). It gives a sense of identity and provides the foundation for various aspects of life including work, family, citizenship and many other human interactions (Adams, Bezonsky and Keating 2006). The home, in many universities globally, reflects these ideas of identity and providing the foundation for one's future. It is configured as a place of safety, love and care, a place where the psychological, physical, academic and social wellbeing of students are predominant (e.g. Websites of institutions in the study).

The home concept equally denotes other challenges and risks similar to the physical homes such as oppression, exclusion, violence and exploitation. (e.g. Young 1997). However, there should be every effort to eliminate such anti-social behaviours in the higher educational context. Young, admonishes the need to uphold the values of safety, individuation, privacy, preservation and the total wellbeing of the student.

In Ghana, similar to global happenings, many of the universities have embarked on varied changes to enhance student experiences (Manu, Garriba and Budu 2007; Morley et al. 2010). In spite of these efforts, the universities continue to face many challenges including limited

funding and infrastructure (Ibid.). Little research has been conducted to explore local students' motivations and experiences (Manu et al. 2007; Morley et al. 2010). In the discourses of making students feel at home, international students have mainly been the focus (Websites of institutions in the study). This article presents findings on a study conducted to explore what motivates Ghanaian students in their interest and choice of universities, their expectations and their experiences. It also looks at how they respond to the challenges. The overarching aim is to explore ways to enhance student experiences and satisfaction in the universities in Ghana. The article will be in four parts. The first presents the methodology, the second discusses the findings, the third looks at the implications for practice, whilst the fourth presents the conclusion.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The research adopted the qualitative methodology to enhance an in-depth exploration of students' expectations, experiences and responses to challenges confronting them in the universities (Punch 2009). Data was drawn from three public universities in Ghana: RO, MT and RY. All the universities are among the biggest universities though their age of establishment and size differ significantly. Among the three universities in the study, RO is the oldest, the biggest, and also has the best resources and infrastructure. It is followed by the MT with comparably good infrastructural facilities. RY is the youngest university in the study which has comparable limited infrastructural facilities.

### **Population, sample and sampling techniques**

The universities were selected based on their mission statements, size, location and years of establishment. The feasibility of getting access to the universities was also considered. In each university, three schools were purposely selected. One department was selected from each school. The Departments were Economics, Agricultural and African Studies departments. These departments were selected because they are among the biggest departments in all the universities. They also involve different kinds of study and their graduates enter different sectors of the national economy.

The snowball sampling technique was used to select a set of final year undergraduates from the selected departments. Student leaders in each university were also purposely selected and interviewed. All respondents were local students and all were regular students who pursued full time programmes. None of them was married, and none was above 25 years. The majority of them had not maintained a steady job before coming to the university.

### **Means of gathering the data**

The means of gathering data were group narrative interviews comprising a minimum of three and a maximum of six students. This method provided students an opportunity in a non-threatening group setting to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences where their opinions were compared and contrasted. In all 44 students comprising 33 males and 11 females were interviewed through group interviews.

The major questions centered on students' motivation for going to the university, their expectations and how these expectations were being met. The interviews also explored their reasons for selecting particular universities and programmes, what aspects of student life they enjoyed most and what they enjoyed least.

### **Ethical issues**

At the beginning of every interview session, respondents were encouraged to ask questions concerning the interview that they did not understand, and I then explained. No participant was forced to participate in the research and no one was forced to say something he/she did not want to. Negotiating and renegotiating thus became an integral part of the interview process.

I explained to participants their right to withdraw if they chose to and also assured them of confidentiality and anonymity. Before the interviews, participants were given consent forms to read and append their signatures of approval. Respondents were also not pushed to answer any question in any particular way. Since participants and the institutions of this study were assured of anonymity and confidentiality when seeking their permission and consent to engage in this research, detailed contextual information cannot be divulged in this article lest I risk making the identities of institutions and individuals involved.

## **STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This section discusses the findings of the research which will be thematically presented. The themes are students' motivations and expectations, students' experiences, their adaptive preferences and strategic negotiations, and the implication for practice.

### **The motivations and expectations**

Participants' responses on their motivations and expectations of entering the universities reflected three main imperatives: economic, social, and intellectual and moral imperatives. Cutting across these themes, were respondents goal to "be somebody" (Morley et al. 2010). All

respondents, irrespective of their motivations expressed their critical need to be somebody in the society. I now turn to the imperatives.

### ***Economic imperatives***

The greatest motivation of students to seek university education was job opportunities and security. All respondents attested that entering the universities was fundamental to their career opportunities. Their preferred jobs were diverse included the Banking sector, NGOs, social work, law, research, academia, business and politics. There were not much nuances among the various groups of students except that each group of students chose jobs more related to their field.

Participants' responses conform to global neoliberal discourses, which have informed students' motivations and have equally shaped the policies and practices of employers and employees (Harris 2011). In the present neoliberal universities, students are expected to be equipped with mainly skills to satisfy the job market. Employers want workers who will effect and deal with changes in a changing world. They wish their employees to possess intelligence, flexibility and adaptability and to quickly learn. University graduates are perceived as more likely than non-graduates to meet these criteria (HEA 2007). It behooves on the individual to attain the "necessary quality and skills" to prove himself to attain upward mobility in the society (Walkerline 2003). Interestingly, over 90 per cent of the respondents wished to be in self-employment. This response was not particularly surprising especially in the context of the high national rate of unemployment among the youth. Graduates face very uncertain market. Again there is much global, national and institutional discourses on entrepreneurialism (Harris 2011).

The next motivation of students in attending universities, which is equally linked to job opportunities is to enlarge their social network. According to all respondents, social networking will enable them to interact with several people, widen their social network and enhance their opportunities for future employment.

The economic imperative equally influenced students' choice of universities. In an era of neoliberalism, rankings and competitions among universities, students are cautious of the universities they choose to study (Rauhvargers 2011). Students and parents choose universities which are high on university rankings and have perceived international reputation. Unsurprisingly, all the respondents in RO chose the University because it was perceived as a Center of academic excellence and has higher international reputation. The majority of respondents at TM also chose the University because of its academic excellence. The University of RY was not the first choice of majority of the students. It was a second choice after they did

not gain admission particularly to RO.

Economic imperatives equally underlined students' choice for particular programmes although there were nuances among the different groups of students. The majority of students from the Departments of Economics deliberately chose their programmes because they had interest in them. Others, especially those in the African studies and Agriculture, chose their respective programmes because those were the programmes available for them. However, the majority of all the participants thought their programmes will enable them to achieve their respective goals in life and to give back to society by helping the marginalized and the poor. The Economic and Agriculture students were more career oriented than those of African studies. Students of African Studies emphasised more of knowledge acquisition, character development and critical thinking as the basis of university degree.

Among all the respondents, students from the RO were surest of gaining employment after school. Whilst they did not mention any particular advantage related to being students of RO, they were very optimistic about the programme they were pursuing.

### ***Social imperatives***

The second most important motivation of the majority of respondents was the perceived respect and privileges society accords to those who complete tertiary institutions. Respondents indicated that society respects and gives differential treatment to those who attend universities. As one student emphasised:

“... You realise that everybody seems to be aspiring to this particular level. And society has also accepted the fact that before you gain some kind of prestige in society, before some kind of respect, you have to be a graduate of a university ... so I believe, I came to the university because of that.”

Another student remarked “after university, you are seen as someone very, very, very, unique, someone very important in the society”. The majority of respondents explained further how even before completing the university, they are treated differently in various aspect of the society including their churches and neighborhood. Mostly, society has much hope in the graduate as a responsible citizen who will help address the cultural, economic and social challenges of society. The university graduate is expected to improve society by advancing and disseminating knowledge (Ronning and Kearney 1998).

This sense of privileges is not uniform. According to respondents, individuals are offered certain privileges based on the particular university they attended. Though MT is comparatively younger than RO, students in MT believe they are perceived highly and perform better at work

places than students in RO and MT.

### ***Intellectual and character development***

Respondents also attested to knowledge acquisition, critical thinking and character development as motivations for going to university. The majority of respondents were optimistic that the knowledge they acquire will have positive impact on their character. One respondent emphasized that those who go to university develop better character than those who enters any other higher educational institution.

“One thing I know is normally when a person comes out of the university, the person behaves differently from somebody who just completed the senior secondary school (SSS) even if the person [the SSS graduate] has got a reputable job ... how the university graduate talks, how s/he behaves is different ....”

“Let’s assume, two people are twenty years, one enters the university for four years, the other person enters the polytechnic for three years, you realized that the person who went through the academic process for four years is matured than the person who went through the process for three years. Please I hope you know what I am talking about ... university education makes a person more mature.”

However, except students pursuing a degree in African studies, these motivations were the last to be mentioned. Students of MT and RY attested to these motivations more but it appears, they saw critical thinking and character development as “by products” one acquires as a student. It is significant to note that the roles of universities to enhance knowledge and critical thinking appear to have shifted. These roles have given way to what could be perceived as existential roles of universities to produce graduates to meet market demands (Harris 2011).

What I argue as particularly interesting and surprising was the assertion by some students in MT and RY Universities that they chose their particular universities because of the “suffering” they know they will experience. They wished to be “toughened”. Comparably, the Universities of TM and RY have less infrastructure, are relatively young and far from the national capital. One of the respondents, in explaining why he choose TM, explained:

“The suffering, I wanted to enjoy the suffering, oh yes ... I wanted to come here, meet the roughness of life, when I go outside here, I will go and see or make it smooth. I had a choice to go to RO. I had a choice, I had a perfect combination in ... but I said I will come to MT.”

This statement, confirms that socially underprivileged groups often made decisions about which institution to enter based on practical, rather than academic reasons (Ball 2002, in Morley et al. 2010). The majority of students from the RY and MT universities gave varied examples of how

their experiences in the universities enabled them to exhibit resilience and positive attitude at various times and in various circumstances.

There have been varied arguments against the role of the university in character development. A key argument is that there has been little evidence of the impact of the university on character development in spite of some attempts to enhance character development of students (Carr 2016). Again, with emphasis on character, universities would be imposing their ideas of what is helpful over what is truthful on students (Mathews 2016). Moreover, individuals may be blamed for their lack of social mobility for not exhibiting correct virtues (Ibid.). Such perception will perpetrate meritocratic view of neoliberalism which ignore the nuances in individual circumstances. Despite these arguments, I argue the need for the universities to emphasis virtues including honesty, integrity and flexibility. These character traits are needed in the neoliberal era where knowledge which are “scientific, rational, objective, specialised, technological and apolitical traits are privileged” (Burke and Jackson 2007, 29).

### **Students' university experiences and their satisfaction**

In the study, three predominate themes emerged on experiences of students in the universities. These are experiences associated with the application process, academic experiences and social experiences. This article looks mainly at the academic and social experiences and how they satisfy students' motivations.

#### ***The academic experience***

This section focuses primarily on how students perceived the curriculum to satisfy their needs. Though the majority of all the respondents in the three universities were happy with the programmes they were pursuing and their employability, they expressed varied concerns about their academic experiences. Their satisfaction could be linked to several changes to the curriculum in all the universities recently. A major goal of all the universities in the study is to attain “World class” status (Gyamera 2015). To attain this feat, several changes have been made to the curriculum including infrastructural development. These changes vary from institution to institution and from department to department.

Key changes have occurred at University of RO, followed by MT and then RY. The Universities of RO and MT have embarked on significant infrastructural expansion including halls of residence, lecture rooms and internet facilities. This is being driven by the need to meet international standards such as student size per lecture hall and number of students in rooms at



the halls of residence.

Concerning programmes and courses, a major discourse in all the universities, studied, is to encourage entrepreneurship as a virtue in students, this is especially at the Departments of Economics and Agriculture in all the universities. At the RO University, every student in the Agricultural Department does a three-hour credit course in entrepreneurship whilst at the MT University students of Agriculture are required to do a two-hour credit course. An Agribusiness programme has also been introduced in each of the three Departments of Agriculture to encourage such business skills in students.

This career focus of the universities conforms to the motivations and expectations of majority of students to be equipped with the relevant skills for the market. Though university education is not solely for employment, it appears the Universities have accepted global and national discourses and demands to effect changes in the curriculum to make graduates more employable. The rampant dominance of neoliberalism has underscored the instrumental perception of knowledge, which has infiltrated global universities (Harris 2011).

In the neoliberal context, three models could be identified in the universities: the intellectual, the managerial and the consumerist models. The intellectual model perceives the university as an arena of intellectual engagement which emphasises the inherent value of knowledge. There is “free and critical thinking, diversification and disciplinary integrity, and a passion for scholarship and research” (O’Byrne and Bond 2014, 577). The managerial model focuses on university management and perceives the university as a business entity which feeds the market. It emphasises, “performance indicators and league tables, quality assurance processes and their impact on the curriculum, the standardisation of practices and the rhetoric of employability, and continual restructuring” (Ibid., 576).

The consumerist model also perceives the university as a business. It is more concerned about students, parents and employers. Subsequently, it is obsessed with the concept of “student satisfaction”, acquisition of skills and employability. The most important value here is “value for money” and students possess an unlimited right and great expectations (Bond and O’Byrne 2013, 141). The intellectual model appears to have been eroded out by the managerial and consumerist models. Universities currently functions under “pure instrumental rationality, a rationality that champions ‘skills’ over knowledge, functionalism over intellectualism, employability over critical self-reflection” (Bond and O’Byrne 2013, 140). Such ideas undermine the role of universities, which is to foster critical thinking, sound judgment and reflective decision-making (Harris 2011).

There is an inherent value in knowledge itself which cannot be reduced to the market. The

universities should move towards a trilogue of the models where each will complement one another (Bond and O'Byrne 2013). Students should be provided with the necessary facilities, interpersonal relationship and a conducive environment to engage critically with knowledge and critical thinking. Equally, the universities should provide the fundamental skills to enhance students' employment.

A more challenging situation is that the instrumental perception of knowledge has been internalised by students: they seem not to be aware of any importance of knowledge acquisition. The main focus of the majority of respondents was to achieve financial rewards from the knowledge they acquire. The instrumental motivation of acquiring a university degree to gain employment was underlined by their respective universities.

Subsequently, respondents in all the three universities expressed concern and displeasure about the content of the curriculum. With the emphasis on employment, a major demand and challenge of all the universities is to provide practical training instead of academic knowledge. All students in all the universities appeared apprehensive about the limited practical knowledge of the course content. One student noted:

“We only spend most of our time in the lecture room reading notes, copying notes, we don't even go out to the field to explore what is happening, or what they do.”

The majority of participants indicated, for instance, that they read computer courses without computers. They do not have access to properly equipped labs.

In terms of assessment, in many of the courses, they write examinations with limited practical assessment. According to some participants, the theoretical mode of assessment discourages students from attending classes because as one student explained:

“All that they (lecturers) are looking for is what the student can reproduce [notes]. So if this is what you are looking for, why should I come and sit in the lecture hall for two hours when I can be sitting and watching television and use some 30 minutes to cover what has been taught at the lecture? If that is the case, I will sit at home and enjoy myself. At the end of the semester, I quickly brush through some past questions and pass.”

Respondents also felt they do not undertake professional development programmes including how to write CVs and interview skills. Though in some cases, they may attend seminars on these job related skills, mostly, they have to pay money, which they found quite unbearable:

“Why don't they teach us skills for interviews? Why don't they teach us how to write our CVs? You go for an interview and an interviewer will take your CV and will begin to shake his/her head,

and you say are out of the university? You say you are a graduate? You can't even write a CV."

Students also did not have much opportunity to go for industrial "attachment". Industrial attachment is a policy by some tertiary and higher educational institutions in Ghana to provide opportunities for students to spend a period of time, (maximum of three months) with relevant organisations to acquire some practical experience. It gives opportunity for students to demonstrate their potential for future employment with the company or other companies when they graduate. Students on attachment are supervised, nurtured and monitored to unearth and develop their potentials for employment. Majority of respondents mentioned private universities where their students easily get jobs because they have the opportunity to go for "attachment".

The majority of respondents also complained about limited career counseling. Many students are unable to decide what they actually wish to do. As one Economic student at the University of RO said to me, "maybe you can go round and conduct a survey and ask a little and they [students] will tell you oh I don't know what I want to do after school".

Respondents' statements suggested that the universities are less able to meet students' demands despite of the neoliberal position adopted by the universities and the extent to which they aim to be career oriented.

### ***The "socialisation process" and networking***

What students describe as "socialisation process" involves activities and opportunities to interact with friends, colleagues and other students. It also involved entertainments including hall week celebrations and games. As indicated earlier, a key motivator for students to enter the universities was the opportunity to broaden their social network. In addition to the economic view of socialisation in the universities, its importance for sense of belonging for students cannot be overemphasized (Carolissen 2012). Respondents indicated that their ability to socialize boosts their sense of belonging and confidence and also relieves their varied stressors. It helps them to relax in the context of the various challenges that confront them. Again the socialization process helps them to find their life partners and also to develop intimate relationships.

Unsurprisingly, when students were asked what they enjoy most in the University, all of them emphasised the socialization and networking. Students emphasised the importance and their joy at networking. They believe various opportunities will "open", particularly job opportunities once they are able to make the right "connections".

With the exception of RO students, all respondents complained of limited or lack of leisure

facilities on campus. According to them, they engage so much with course work that they are unable to take advantage of the few leisure activities which are available from time to time. One student explained:

“I like having fun with my peers, I enjoy going out to play games, what I enjoy least is freedom. Here you don't have freedom, even here there is not a single day that we will not say that Agricultural student do not have lectures.” (Student of Agriculture, MT).

Another student added: “I enjoy groups; I do not enjoy how I spent all my time learning” (Agricultural student, MT).

It could be that students at RO University did not complain because the University is located in the capital of Ghana and they have access to various social activities. Interestingly, students of MT kept referring to students of RO and how they are very interested in socialization activities and entertainment. Students think the opportunities of socialization of RO will help them better in their career endeavours. One student explained:

“Our lecturer was saying this yesterday that how students in [MT] are brought up they become too grade conscious ... GPA conscious. Instead of thinking of how I should plan for my future ... they will be thinking about ‘look I have second lower, I want to get 4.0’ ....”

The main argument from respondents' perspective is that if you do not network you will limit your career opportunities.

Students from the University of RO confirmed that they did not have much problem in networking. One student indicated:

“Well I will say RO is an institution that teaches students how to blend academic life with socialization, that kind of stuff. I am looking at people from may be MT or something. I mean you can't have a university where you always force students to study and ... but in RO, all those students can have a good time. When we are serious, we are serious. It is like some fever that spreads on campus. If we are having fun we are having fun, so it is easier to be in RO because it teaches you to blend seriousness with your social life.”

Social activities offer opportunities for students to interact with people. They boost students' sense of confidence, identity, sense of belonging and bonding to the institution (e.g. Temple et al. 2014). Social activities eventually enhance retention of students in the universities.

## **THE SILENCED STUDENT AND THE CASE OF ADAPTIVE PREFERENCE**

The majority of respondents emphasized their inability to seek redress for many of the

challenges confronting them. Such voicelessness of students conforms to a key characteristic of the neoliberal university. The emergence of the neoliberal university has generated the silent student (Suoranta and FitzSimmons 2017). A “silenced student” merely receives pedagogical messages, consumes educational goods, and is supposed to obey “taken-for-granted orders of the university” (Ibid. para. one) Though Consumerism confers the critical importance on students to make incessant demands in relation to their educational needs, yet they are denied the power and the voice to participate in the process of meeting these needs (O’Byrne and Bond 2014).

The neoliberal context has affected how universities define the roles of students. The universities perceive “students as clients whose purpose is to study and graduate, but not to revolt or act as political beings .... Universities seem to prefer passive students rather than active ones” (Suoranta and FitzSimmons 2017, para. one). Though Suoranta and FitzSimmons wrote in the context of Finland where the neoliberal ideologies embraced by universities discourage student revolt, it is applicable to the Ghanaian context. In some cases, students may express their dissatisfaction but such expressions may not be heeded by the university authorities. One respondent explained:

“... I want to be a lawyer and I am going to stand for students. Because I believe that even in our current situation, we are being cheated but because we don’t have anybody to speak for us we are left in the dark .... There are certain things that are happening in our institutions that are not good and we don’t have voice. If I send the school to court, I might be sacked. But then if I have a lawyer who will stand behind me ....”

The students try to play safe by becoming strategic negotiators and developing adaptive mechanisms. In terms of limited practical knowledge, some of the respondents explained that they try to learn what they perceive as practical lessons from friends and colleagues by observing and by serving on various committees. One of the participants narrated how he learnt event planning by serving on a committee for events for their hall week celebrations. This is how he put it:

“Frankly speaking, now in the University, I see that if I had not been wild enough, if I had not been conscious enough to make sure that I get myself something doing before I go out, I would have been a liability to society, because, I was going out virtually with nothing...Nothing in the sense that I was going to depend on the government to employ me.” (Economics student, MT).

In spite of the challenges, what I argue as significant was the resilience of some of these students and the desire to go through their perceived challenges and hardships in the universities to “be

somebody” in the future. As indicated above, the majority of students from the Universities of MT and RY perceive the hardships they were experiencing as blessings in disguise. The universities, which are perceived as having the harshest conditions, have the majority of their participants not talking about the hardships but the opportunities derived from the hardships. Participants at the University of MT explained they have developed better character traits because of the strenuous experiences they go through. One respondent explained:

“... it is very difficult to see someone who left here and became worse because even the situation here and the stress we go through here ... if you are worse, you become bad, if you are worst you become worse, so you will change.” (Lady, final year Economics, University of Ndebang).

The question I raise is whether this approach of respondents is not a case of adaptive preference. Preferences formation “is the unconscious altering of our preferences in light of the options we have available” (Colburn 2011, 52). It could be that these students have adopted such attitudes to enable them deal with their challenges, recognizing that there could not be much positive changes. They need to brave the situation to change their lives; “to be somebody in the future”. Such approach could limit students’ ability to be assertive, demand their rights and also ask for better facilities and services. It denies students their sense of autonomy because it undermines the extent to which their preferences are ones that they decided for themselves. They are simply limited by resources. I agree with Sen that it is significant to argue that “deprived people may lack the courage to desire any radical change and often tend to adjust their desires and expectations to what little they see as feasible. They train themselves to take pleasure in small mercies” (Sen 1996, 52). Again, universities do not simply react to student expectations. They shape them as well. Higher education institutions have substantial influence over the discovery and development of their students’ expectations including the extent to which students expect staff availability, improved support services and facilities, and assessments (Nelson and Kift 2000).

From these negotiations and adaptive preferences, one key theme that emerge is the silence of students as they negotiate the many challenges confronting them. There have been various debates about the use of silence by oppressed people. This is not to say that students in the universities are oppressed but there is the fact that they are confronted with many challenges they have to deal with silently.

Though people argue that silence is a form of disempowerment, it could be a great tool of empowerment (Fivush 2010). Fivush argues that silence is a powerful strategy for dealing with challenging situations. Being silent can be a form of power. Whilst the university authorities

presume students are being obedient and conforming, students will be scheming what to do to survive. For instance, students deal with the big classes, lack of practicality of lectures, unfriendliness of lecturers and limited tutorials by absenting themselves from class, memorising notes from lecturers during exams period and reproducing them.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

The need for institutions to provide excellent quality student experience is important for students' satisfaction and institutional survival. The values of the "home" which lay the foundation for individual's future should be reflected in the universities. The following interventions are suggested to enhance student experiences in the universities and to fulfil their goals in life.

### **Academic experiences**

Support services should be boosted to help students manage dissatisfaction and to meet the rigorousness of academic life. There is the need for academic counsellors and mentors who will guide students in their academic work. Staff who engage in student services should be encouraged to undertake training to upgrade their professional skills and knowledge to enhance quality student support services and timely access to support services by students.

There is also the need for the curriculum to be informed by the contemporary realities of higher education and national context including the job market and student preparedness thereof (Nelson and Kift 2005). However, the role of the University as a knowledge hub should not be undermined. I advocate for the tripolar-model in which the intellectual, the managerial and the consumerist complement each other to ensure smooth experiences for students.

The universities could liaise with various organizations and institutions to encourage students to do voluntary services and provide such opportunities. Volunteering services will enhance their job related skills, networking, work experience and give them better opportunities to get jobs (Wowk 2011). The establishment of an employment unit in the universities could address many of the challenges of unemployment fear in students by providing many of the abovementioned avenues (Ibid.).

### **Social services**

Contemporary notions of the student experience extend well beyond the traditional focus on curriculum, assessment and pedagogy to include extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities should form a vital part of students' experience to create good opportunities for

friendship and learning (Miller 2011). A very essential need is for the universities to develop strategies and policies to enhance students' social life. It appears almost all the universities in the study did not really consider the social life of students. The Universities should encourage students to actively engage in vibrant co-curricular including clubs, debates and cultural group celebrations to complement the classroom experience and build community. The universities should boost the social activities by establishing centres for student engagement. These centres will advise student organizations and help develop variety of programs including.

### **Appropriate channels for students to express their grievances**

There is the need for the universities to recognize, appreciate and undertake strategies to address students' grievances. Students should be allowed to ask questions, dialogue or revolt against unfavourable and undesirable policies and practices.

Students who express grievances should not be penalized or "tagged". Their beliefs and practices should be "cleaned" of adaptive preferences as these preferences do not encourage autonomy and independence in decision-making (Alkire 2008). Universities are democratic public sphere and they should support students, and develop in them the confidence to perceive themselves not only as scholars but citizen activists able to connect studies to enhance total development of the society.

### **CONCLUSION**

The provision of quality student services has become an important aspect of higher education. Though the universities in the study are confronted with varied challenges, I argue for them to develop and adopt strategies to enhance student services. The universities should embark on activities which will enhance the comfort, identity and confidence of students not only academically but socially. It is critical that the universities develop strategies to help students adopt effective strategies to deal with challenges and also be assertive. Whilst students should be encouraged to cherish the intrinsic value of knowledge rather than extrinsic mainly informed by monetary values and the job market, they should also be given some foundation to prepare them for the job market. I advocate for the tripolar-model in which the intellectual, the managerial and the consumerist do not work in opposing manner but rather complement each other to ensure smooth experiences for students. Most importantly, the universities should strive to make the universities a "home" for students devoid of oppression and alienation.

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