Emerging Scholars Research Summary

Youth Aspirations and Experiences: A Case Study of Alternative Higher Education Programs offered by an NGO in Malawi

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ABSTRACT

Malawi struggles with youth access to higher education. Up to 60% of eligible university candidates may not be accepted, while less than 1% of Malawi's qualified cohort get enrolled in some form of tertiary education. This paper reveals youth's experiences in alternative higher education programs and show if the programs align with their aspirations, prepare them for lives that they have a reason to value and enhance their wellbeing. The broader Ph.D. study from which this paper stems used a qualitative case study based on the views of youth from a selected NGO. Limited explorations and knowledge on whether alternative higher education programs offered by NGOs for youth who fail to access university in Malawi meet the youth's aspirations; the paucity of such studies in Malawian higher education necessitated empirical research on this topic. The paper uses the capabilities approach as a conceptual framework to refine it within higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, nations are dealing with numerous challenges in public higher education that include access, participation, equity, and relevance. Despite efforts to improve access, Malawi still struggles to provide higher education to its growing youth population. While several alternative educational strategies have been identified in the literature, universities are still being hailed as the most beneficial option (Busson, n.d.; United Nations (U.N.), 2011). Ironically, universities struggle to accommodate most youths who qualify and aspire to pursue higher education. Studies reveal that up to 60% of eligible university candidates may not be accepted in the Malawian context due to limited infrastructure and facilities (Mahlaha, 2012). The National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) in Malawi reports that in 2018 less than 30% of the eligible candidates were enrolled in public universities (Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MoEST), 2019). Moreover, less than 1% of the qualified cohort are enrolled in some form of tertiary education (U.N., 2010).

However, there are limited critical explorations on alternative programs offered by private organizations for youth who fail to access university in Malawi; those that do hardly consider youth perspectives (Hardgrove, Pells, Boyden & Dornan, 2014). 'Although alternative pathways and credentials have conceptual and practical appeal, evidence of their efficacy is thin, and quality assurance is weak' (Brown & Kurzweil, 2017, p.4). The paucity of such studies, especially in Malawi, necessitates empirical research on this topic. Therefore, this paper explores alternative higher education (AHE) programs that youth may access and reveal their experiences in these programs while investigating whether the programs align with their aspirations. In doing so, the paper shows youth's unique experiences of the ways AHE programs do/can prepare them to live meaningful lives that they have a reason to value and enhance their wellbeing. The paper enables us to understand if AHE satisfies or stifles youths' educational aspirations, enables capability achievement, and enhances wellbeing.

This paper considers AHE programs as those that the youth attend in the absence of mainstream universities and colleges. In Malawi, these institutions are sometimes run by NGOs, are not controlled by the NCHE, but the Technical Entrepreneurial Vocational Authority (TEVETA) and are ranked lower than universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Limited access to universities and colleges has seen the mushrooming of alternative provision of post-secondary education with the different underlying assumptions of what AHE can contribute to those who attend. Four main approaches dominate scholarly debates on what should be achieved in and through AHE.

The first approach looks at AHE as a way of achieving equity of access. Scholars such as Denti and Guerin; (2008) argue that as in any education, alternative education should give equity to all groups of people and incorporate in the curriculum elements that can influence attitudes, behavior, and interpersonal skills in students from different backgrounds. Other scholars such as Odo, Adenle and Okwori (2012); Sadideen and Kneebone (2012) argue that AHE programs should be designed to equip youth with technical and practical skills and knowledge, which will be usable after completion for employment and sustainable livelihood. These scholars make a case for action-based programs (Rasmussena & Sørheim, 2006). These scholars overly focus on the methodology and how teaching should be done to enhance technical and practical skills and pay much attention to the instructors and the teaching process and less attention to the students. While the approach is essential in addressing pedagogical concerns in alternative forms of higher education, it does not necessarily address youth aspirations for AHE programs. Another approach stresses the need for AHE to spur economic development through job creation and entrepreneurship opportunities. Higher education should provide the 'know how', competencies and employability for those entering the labour market (UNESCO, 1998) and alleviate youth unemployment (Kamyab, 2018).

Finally, capabilities approach scholars such as Mkwananzi (2019), Walker (2019), DeJaeghere and Baxter (2014) and Walker and Mathebula (2020) argue that alternative post-secondary education such as entrepreneurship education and any higher education program should reduce poverty, provide livelihood opportunities enhance capabilities and functionings for individual's wellbeing. Moreover, Boateng and Löwe (2018) observe that these scholars have convincingly criticized the literature on higher education aspirations that overly focus on economic and financial concerns at the expense of other aspirations such as social relationships or familial obligations. Focusing on access and the monetary benefits of education and occupations is limited. The capability approach merges the various approaches and goes beyond. It allows us to consider an individual as aspiring for different things for different reasons that lead to a life of value. However, previous research employing the capability approach has inconclusively explored AHE programs and the extent to which they fulfill the various aspects of a good life that youth aspire for.

Therefore, the paper bridges this gap by exploring youth aspirations and experiences in AHE programs in Malawi framed by the capabilities approach.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

This paper uses the capability approach, a normative framework for assessing the wellbeing and effective freedom to live a life that an individual has reason to value. Alkire (2006) indicates that the capability approach is people-centred and values human agency, while Sen (1999) asserts that the approach allows us to reconsider the role, process and content of public education, offering a set of conceptual tools that would enable a rethinking of injustices in our education systems towards the development of fair and just solutions. The framework provides a tool for understanding youth and conceptualizing fair and just ways for addressing aspirations and youth wellbeing. Sen (1999) indicates that development is about fighting against social, political, and economic deprivations. Applied as a conceptual framework, the capability approach helped formulate questions on inequalities in higher education affecting youth aspirations and how NGOs address these aspirations in Malawi. Factors that affect the aspirational freedom of youth are also examined through the approach. As a robust normative framework for studying different forms of disadvantage, the capability approach provides a lens for exploring youth aspirations. It offers the possibility to examine educational strategies enabling suggestions for positive social change (Robeyns, 2006).

RESEARCH METHOD

The broader Ph.D. study from which this paper stems used a qualitative case study. The study was systematically and purposefully designed to have three levels of analysis comprising the national context (Malawi) at level one. A unique NGO institution was on level two, namely, St. John of God Hospitaller Services. The NGO runs an institute of vocational training and offers rehabilitation services for at-risk youth. The services are accessible to youth and other people recuperating from mental illness, those with disabilities, and other vulnerabilities that include teenage mothers, orphans, and poverty-stricken out-of-school youth (TEVETA, 2018; St. John of God, n.d.). The organization offered AHE to over 200 youths who failed to access university; moreover, its location in an urban area where most youth search for education after completing their secondary school made the organization a suitable case study. Individual human actors within the selected institution made level three. This design guided the collection of detailed information using various data collection methods (Creswell, 2009) and effectively collated evidence to answer the set research questions (Hamilton, 2011; Yin, 2009).

The researcher moderated Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) by focusing on general youth's perceptions of aspirations and experiences in AHE programs in Malawi and at their training institution with 24 youths. The youth were then asked to participate in individual in-depth/unstructured interviews. Twenty-three youths participated in the personal in-depth interviews. While the FGDs provided

consensus on issues discussed as the youth dwelt on issues of shared experience (DeJaeghere et al., 2020), the individual interviews captured personal stories that facilitated the production and understanding of the youth's meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2006). The study targeted youth 18 years of age and older, who had completed secondary school education, would potentially enroll with other higher education institutions but were pursuing courses at St. John of God Hospitaller Services Institute for Vocational Training. Semi-structured interviews were done with nine NGO staff members: three-course instructors, the programs manager, the coordinator of vocational training, a psycho-social counselor, two social workers, and the organization's director. Document analysis provided accurate, detailed, and unbiased information, captured official positions and meanings, further helped understand the matter under investigation, and triangulated the findings (Bowen, 2009; Merriam, 1988).

RESULTS

The initial findings demonstrate that youth aspire for higher education and can show agency for higher education by seeking alternative routes after failing to make it to university. Some will attempt to improve their grades by re-writing secondary school, leaving examinations for a competitive chance at university enrollment. An open-door policy regarding entry requirements that was in place at the NGO understudy enabled many youths to gain access and participate in post-secondary school education. The capability to aspire and hope, entrepreneurship and employment opportunities, be responsible citizens, gain confidence and economic independence, and choose to marry or not for girls are some of the capabilities and functionings that were enabled for youth in AHE. The findings showed that AHE helped create financial independence for several youths, AHE acted as a means of attending universities later. Attending AHE potentially enabled youth to establish an incoming generating activity to pay for higher education programs they aspired for. However, findings also revealed that AHE institutions made the youth feel inadequate as they viewed the institutions as lower-ranked. Furthermore, findings showed that while staff members valued self-reliance, economic independence, and being responsible citizens as essential capabilities that the institution offered the youth, the students thought being economically self-reliant was something essential gained through the programs.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that environmental factors may influence what people choose to do and be. The choices people make might be influenced by contextual forces surrounding them. Robeyns (2017) discusses environmental conversion factors affecting people's choices. While youth demonstrate agency for higher education, it is not enough to see them into university; hence they adjust their aspirations and learn in AHE programs. NGOs that offer AHE create real opportunities for youth from vulnerable backgrounds by providing free post-

secondary education. However, more needs to be done to have AHE facilitate youth aspirations achievement, including aspirations for university education, decent work, independent lives, and raised social status.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The paper contributes to the capabilities approach scholarship within the higher education landscape. It broadens the scope of the context that typically comprises studies in higher education by focusing on AHE in the Malawian context. The paper enables us to understand if AHE satisfies or stifles youths' educational aspirations, enables capability achievement and enhances wellbeing, and contributes to conceptualizing and implementing educational programs that may lead to youth wellbeing.

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