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Title Pedagogies for Critical Thinking in Universities in Kenya

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Introduction

In recent years access to higher education in Sub-Saharan Africa has expanded rapidly with enrolments more than doubling between 2000 and 2010 (UNESCO, 2013). For example, by end of 2016 Kenya had 33 public and 37 private universities (Commission of University Education, 2016). However, accompanying this change is a growing understanding that the potential gains of Africa's expanding higher education sector may be compromised if the quality of education is not maintained and, indeed, improved. A number of quality enhancement initiatives such as academic staff development programmes, workshops and seminars on teaching are now being offered to lecturers (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2011; Omingo, 2016).

One of the primary assumptions of the interventions is that lecturers will engage students in their learning and this can encourage the ability to think critically about problems and to use evidence when making decisions. Such general skills are considered crucial for participation in the global 'knowledge economy', as they allow individuals to adapt technology and other innovations to local contexts and to propose new solutions to intractable problems (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2011; Brown, Green & Lauder, 2001; UNESCO, 2009). Easy access to an overwhelming quantity of information requires that individuals throughout the world have the ability to make determinations about the quality and reliability of a wide range of evidence ([Guile, 2006](#); [Peck, 2012](#)). As a result of these converging factors, critical thinking is frequently cited as being one of the graduate attributes most highly valued by employers (e.g. Harvey 2000; Lees 2002; Yorke & Harvey 2005) and therefore one of the most important learning outcomes of a contemporary university education.

In recent times, a growing number of institutions in Kenya are taking explicit steps towards improving student learning experience and have initiated various academic staff development activities (Omingo, 2016). This paper is part of a project 'Pedagogies for critical thinking' that builds upon Schendel's study (2013) by using the core elements of her methodology to investigate the impact of some of these locally-generated pedagogical interventions on student critical thinking ability. One of the central objectives of the study was to expand our empirical knowledge of how pedagogical practices affect the development of critical thinking in African university contexts. This paper examines the lecturers' and senior management understanding and assessment of critical

thinking, and assesses the factors that facilitate and constrain pedagogical reform and transformation within the university.

Methodology

The study has a longitudinal design, carried out in three phases. This paper captures the second phase of the study that is qualitative in nature, based on Kuhn's theory of critical thinking (1999), which conceptualises it as an umbrella term that describes a number of individual skills related to: the analysis and use of information, the evaluation of arguments, and the reliance on evidence when making decisions or proposing new solutions to problems. Fifteen lecturers, three senior managers and two directors in charge of teaching and learning from six universities were interviewed, using semi-structured interviews. Three of the universities had incorporated interventions that were believed to enhance critical thinking while three had not. The interventions include setting up of Centres of Excellence that facilitate workshops on teaching and learning and the use of problem based learning in one institution.

The Findings

All the respondents were able to define critical thinking although differently. This is in line with Brown (2015) who points out that critical thinking does not have a universal definition. For example one lecturer defined it as:

Critical thinking is simply being able *to analyse* a situation *objectively*, meaning that you are able to step out of situation and back seeing the person's point of view.

A director defined it as:

I mostly talk about critical reflective thinking which means it is questioning inside of me. It is reflecting back into me...

And a senior manager defined it as:

The ability of the student or anybody to actually see the whole, see more than the parts, see the connection between different parts and to see it from a multifaceted approach.

From their definitions critical thinking can be defined as the ability for students to organize their thoughts and analyse a situation objectively in a holistic way, deeply and from multiple perspectives. In addition, some lecturers stated that the whole process should assist students solve societal problems and/or benefit mankind. The terms used compares with Kuhn (1999) statement that critical thinking is an umbrella term.

Further, the respondents used the following terms to describe the critical thinking skills: questioning oneself in a reflective way, creativity, analytical, logic (systematic or coherent,) humility in the sense that one's answer is not always the only one or the only correct answer.

Although the assumption was that some of the lecturers interviewed were using interactive learning approaches one of the questions sought to determine what made a strong and weak assignment. According to Brown (2015) critical thinking is one of the employability skills that should be assessed. The lecturers explained a strong assignment as one whose content is current and varies, portrays creativity, use of correct language, has the students' voice, critiqued with the right formatting and referencing and the student provides real life examples.

Conclusion

Critical thinking skills are important to both the student and society. A student demonstrates such skills when he or she is able to clarify the issue at hand by identifying the sources used to develop and the argument or conclusion; analyses the ideas or evidence and critiques contradictory evidence, acknowledge personal biases and assumptions and draws conclusions (Brown, 2015). Whereas some lecturers consciously integrate critical thinking skills in their teaching by engaging students in their learning some do not. Interventions on lecturers learning supported by management, more so the head of departments are likely to enable more lecturers integrate critical thinking in their courses. The paper reflects on the challenges faced by departments in ensuring meaningful integration of pedagogical innovation into their everyday practice, and draws out implications for the broader agenda of enhancing quality in African higher education.

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