

## Module 7

# Student Access and Retention



## **Module 7**

### **Student Access and Retention**

#### **Expected Outcomes**

1. Better understanding of the structure and processes of student poverty in institutions of higher learning and how they affect student retention and performance, with special focus on women students;
2. Developing gender-sensitive pro-poor indicators for use in facilitating resource allocation for teaching and learning
3. Utilizing and continuously reviewing student poverty and gender-sensitive pro-poor indicators according to changing trends in poverty;
4. Sensitising academics, managers and administrators to ways to adjusting to student poverty in a gender-sensitive manner;
5. Improvement of access and retention for women students;
6. Establishment of support systems for vulnerable women students.

#### **Institutional Context**

African universities have predominantly been designed as residential, full-time institutions where young people undertake studies. At independence, the model was altered in the interests of improving access, resulting in increased enrolments by students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. The disadvantaged groups included women, minorities and some of the poor. As development stalled in the seventies, higher education became more distressed, resulting in drastic measures to adjust economies and politics.

Students are increasingly distressed, as structural adjustment and economic stagnation have negatively affected economies. This has resulted in the reduction of state subsidies to higher education and greater efforts towards cost-recovery. Such measures have reduced access to higher learning for the poor and increased the inequalities by class, gender, ethnicity and other factors. The growth of private institutions in higher education also facilitates the exclusion of poorer students. The increasing divide between the rich and the poor has created social cleavages that facilitate dissatisfaction by the poor and produced social instability.

Many universities are located in urban areas where there is high pressure for land, transport, accommodation and other services. Those in the smaller centres also suffer from scanty and underdeveloped infrastructure, capacity and access to other resources that are necessary for effective academic interaction. The pressure to increase enrolments after independence created other difficulties such as inadequate staffing, state financing, provision of sanitation, housing, books and other teaching resources. This marked the deterioration of the quality of students' educational experiences, teaching programmes and higher education in general. Many students from affluent backgrounds left national institutions for the west or for private tuition. The brain drain by qualified academics also occurred simultaneously, resulting in national institutions of higher education catering increasingly, for the more desperate students with fewer options.

Regardless of the privatization and increased costs of higher education, demand by the poor and other sectors of societies, still outstrips provision and access, resulting in the poorest, particularly women, continuing to be excluded from higher education. The deterioration in the quality of secondary schooling concomitant to the dwindling of economic support results in institutions having to manage and upgrade under-prepared students who are poor and disadvantaged and unable to make optimal use of tuition and other support services offered in these institutions. There is therefore need to develop pro-poor indicators that are gender-sensitive, within which institutional reform and restructuring can occur and deliver the expected outputs in higher education.

## **Problem Statement**

Gender discrimination continues to erode the effectiveness of higher education in fostering development. The failure by most African governments to meet the Millennium Development Goals in education is worsened by the fact that the majority of unschooled people in Africa are women, particularly the older ones. There is very limited provision for secondary and higher education or adult literacy and continuing education for older women and men who might have missed out on education because of poverty. In contrast, many non-African countries have a wide array of courses available to adults who missed out on education in their youth. Former communist countries as well as OECD countries provide many opportunities for “catch-up” education and training courses through community colleges.

Within educational institutions, the policies for granting aid and supporting students to succeed in their studies have little or no sophistication and do not differentiate between poor and non-poor students. The blanket grants/loans programmes through state funding encourage institutions not to develop internal indicators that can help poor students who are often under-prepared for higher education, to succeed. This results in dropping out, repetition of years, under-achievement and under-performance and alienation of poor students, particularly women. Often, these students do not continue to further their studies, full or part-time because of their negative experiences in higher education. This leads to loss of talent and resources that could have been channelled into development of institutions and nations.

Poorer men and women students are less mobile regionally and internationally and are more likely to retain commitment to their institutions. Therefore, there is a greater possibility of reducing unit and general costs in higher education by aiding poorer rather than rich and middle class students to finance their studies and to recover full education costs from the richer students. This would reduce pressure on institutions while supporting cost recovery, which would in turn lead to the increase in financing and improvement of the quality of the institutions. Developing pro-poor indicators that are gender sensitive is one of the steps necessary for developing a sustainable, equitable and just system of higher education. Many studies have already indicated how students are coping with poverty in different higher education institutions.<sup>1</sup> Below is a list of some of these manifestations and indicators of poverty. You can add on to the list or discard those that do not apply to your institution. In addition, you can refine them by asking your students to develop a list of these indicators by gender, age, class, race, ethnicity and religion.

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<sup>1</sup> A study done by the Institute of Development Studies in Zimbabwe entitled the *Zimbabwe Human Development Report 2003 Redirecting our responses to HIV and AIDS (2003)* shows the extent to which secondary school and university students indulge in transactional sex in order to obtain bus transport and food.

## **Known Indicators of Student Poverty in Institutions of Higher Education**

Some of the known indicators of student poverty are:

- Ignorance of and inability to afford or access advice on career possibilities, institutional offerings, prerequisites for specific programs and demands of programs.
- “Squatting” on campuses by students with no entitlement to residence, food and other resources due to inability to afford transport, food and shelter on and off campus.
- Theft and mutilation of books, journals and other resources due to high competition for or inability to afford books, stationery, computers. There is often no access to libraries and other teaching and learning resources on and off campus.
- Shoplifting and theft of money, clothes, food and books from other students' rooms and public and common spaces on campuses.
- Transactional sex and overt or covert sex work with taxi drivers and touts, affluent people, tourists and diplomats by male and female students off campus.
- Involvement in transactional sex, overt and covert sex work by students on campus in exchange for good grades, access to texts, food and accommodation.
- Vending and trading of shoes, clothes and other commodities from residences, offices and university spaces during lecture and study time.
- Dropping out by students citing inability to pay tuition and other fees.
- Preference for 'low risk' and traditional programs with the lowest financial costs, shorter completion times and high pass rates.
- Insufficient consumption of food and consumption of starchy, low calorie food some of it prepared and sold under unsanitary conditions.
- Poor dress, grooming and hygiene by students living in unsanitary, transitory and unsatisfactory accommodation.
- Inattentiveness, sleepiness, late or non-attendance of lectures, tutorials and other learning sessions due to poor living conditions.
- Intolerance for course work that is demanding, non-examinable or/and for enrichment and intellectual stimulation.
- Overt expressions of deprivation during times of conflict, civil disobedience, demonstrations and distress on and off campuses.
- Non involvement in sports, extramural, civic and associational activities which might demand time and financial expenditure while enhancing self-esteem, exposure to governance, participation and citizenship on and off campus.
- Corruption and embezzlement of student funds by student executives whose competition for leadership and governance positions is motivated by financial gain.
- Membership in cults, gangs and other organizations that afford poor students opportunities for expressing forms of hyper-masculinity and accumulation in environments characterized by poverty and gender distress of varying forms within and outside institutions of higher education.
- Extortion of money and other resources by cults, gangs and other criminal organizations that attract distressed students and prey on disempowered and poor students.

However, there are gender differences in the indicators of poverty. Some indicators may more appropriately apply to men than to women and vice versa. In order to make your indicators more gender sensitive and pro-poor, you will need to involve different players for example, Dean of Students, Hall Wardens, Staff Advisers who deal with student issues. In this process, you will need to engage these players, on the basis of their experiences with student issues on how poverty manifests itself by gender in your institution.

### Activity 7A

Identify the 5 most important indicators of student poverty in your institution. How can your institution set about dealing with these challenges?

#### **Lack of Gender Disaggregated Data**

There is generally inadequate gender disaggregated data, covering not only enrolment, but also social and economic background, academic achievement, accommodation and participation in extra-mural activities. Strengthening communication and information systems can make it possible to minimize dropouts and sexual harassment. For example, implementation of appropriate legislation can be undertaken if data analysis identifies specific points for such intervention.

However, the lack of data makes it difficult to identify accurately or quickly, areas where women students are facing problems, whether this is in certain disciplines or under certain living conditions. The lack of data also makes it difficult to measure women's levels of participation and performance and identify students who are experiencing problems promptly.

Some areas where information is needed include:

- Gender imbalance at admissions. Fewer women are admitted, and admission may vary according to disciplines. Data availability will make it easier to devise appropriate interventions such as linking up with girls' secondary schools or providing bridging course in science and technical subjects.
- The types of accommodation available to women, and the disadvantages of such accommodation. For example it may be more difficult for women than for men to find off-campus accommodation, which is safe and secure. Women students with children may be the most badly affected.
- Indicators of problems, such as absenteeism, failure to do assignments, illness, etc.
- Achievement levels as well as areas where women are facing learning problems;
- Drop out rates and the reasons for dropping out. Women may face marital or pregnancy problems leading to them dropping out. However there is little data on this.
- Sexual harassment reports. These are not collated or disseminated, so that it is difficult to organize suitable interventions to support victims, or to minimize dangers.

## Points of Entry in Developing Pro-Poor and Gender Sensitive Indicators of Poverty

Pro-poor and gender sensitive indicators need to be developed in the context of institutional gender and general policies such as those for career guidance, selection into programs, admissions, registration, financing, residential entitlement, access to remedial and other teaching and learning resources, health services and recreation. Where such policies are in existence, it is necessary to examine them in order to determine points of entry for intervention. In many cases, institutions may have vague policies relating to disadvantaged groups rather than poor people, women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, war veterans or other people who have been historically disadvantaged in accessing higher education. You then have to give flesh to these statements in your institution.

### Activity 7B

Conduct a study of problems encountered in dealing with the following in your institution. You can do this through desk studies of institutional records supplemented by key informant interviews amongst academics, managers, administrators and students who are involved in adjudicating issues in these institutions. You can start by looking at the following specific factors:

- demand, access, equity, support and other factors influencing admissions,
- retention and performance of various groups
- gender, ethnicity, class, age, bodily ability and any other factors that are related to access, admission, retention and performance.

Then conduct a trend analysis by examining these processes over five years. This exercise provides a starting point for developing interventions for developing pro-poor indicators that are gender sensitive in higher education.

## Programme Areas for Intervention

### *i) Career guidance prior to admission into higher education*

While secondary education may not be available to large numbers of poor people, especially girls, there are some rural and urban schools for poor children, which could benefit from support by institutions of higher education. This is an area for intervention since many poor students decide on careers on the basis of financial and social criteria that may not optimize their abilities. It may be necessary to liaise with secondary schools in poor rural and urban areas to promote orientation and support the study of science and technology subjects by able girls and poor students by apprising them of opportunities and providing them with social and moral support for their choices. In many countries, poor students and women end up enrolling for teaching or nursing because these are the only careers they know about and for which they are paid even when they are still in training. It is to these groups of poor high achievers that support for higher qualifications should be targeted. This can be done through holiday camps for science, mathematics and other areas in which poor students and girls are not sufficiently represented.

## ***ii) Registration for colleges and universities***

This is an important area for intervention especially in those countries where colleges compete for students. Students should indicate their socio-economic standing so that their economic needs can be assessed. This could be undertaken by assessing the school they attended, the sponsors who have come forward to vouch for their loans, etc. This form of means testing helps to identify and target needy students and to assist them. Accordingly, a formula or quota can be agreed on the basis of the levels of difficulty men and women face in accessing higher education.

During registration, it is often easy to recognize problems of course choice due to poor or inadequate knowledge of available offerings or possibilities. Sometimes, students desire course changes when they feel more confident or have obtained information that they lacked previously due to poverty and deprivation of knowledge. Such information should be collated in the process of determining the numbers and magnitude of such problems and how they affect different genders, age groups and ethnicities.

## ***iii) Availability of learning materials***

Frequently, poor students have little exposure to libraries, books, computers and laboratories and have difficulties with reading, research and other skills when they are admitted into higher learning institutions. They might have to use their loans to support siblings and parents. Therefore, there must be institutional safeguards that enable them to cover their basic needs. For example, access to accommodation on campuses, availability of institutional meals and libraries is critical for students' success, especially for women. When women stay with relatives or in lodgings, they tend to be overloaded with housework and domestic chores, which interfere with their academic work. Such students need to be allocated accommodation on a quota basis so that they can concentrate on their work. On many campuses, women students have double workloads, at home and at their institutions. Residential accommodation eases the burdens on them significantly.

Access to books, computers and other resources is usually organized on the basis of gender groupings. Male students constitute majorities on many campuses and can monopolise and circulate books and other resources amongst themselves, cutting off women students from these resources. The organization and distribution of these resources need to be gendered such as through installing computers in women's residences, operating reserve and short-term borrowing on a roster to enable all needy students to access scarce resources equitably by gender, class and other bases. The severe shortage of textbooks in most African tertiary institutions can be tackled by having libraries stocked up with multiple copies of key textbooks, and by providing low cost photocopying facilities on campuses.

## ***iv) Safety and security***

Safety and security are very important for women students. They run the risk of sexual assault and rape on campus, in residences, on public transport, when walking home and when using libraries, especially at night. Campus security also needs improvement because there are risks

of and actual sexual assaults recorded on many campuses. Lack of cars or safe transport is an income issue and poor women students need better security and safety on and off campus. Poverty compromises women students' security more than men's, especially when there is a shortage of affordable, safe, secure and good quality transport.

There is need for developing adequate and gender-sensitive security audits on campuses so that the security arrangements take into account the gendered manifestations of insecurity, theft, assault, rape and general gender violence. For example, security shuttles could be mounted to escort women to specific spaces and men could be forbidden to access women's toilets, bathroom areas and laundry areas.

Shuttles dedicated to students at specific times could be mounted to allow female students to access safe, secure and affordable transport so that they do not have to struggle for transport with other travellers. This could reduce transactional sex with affluent people, transport operators and providers. However, women students can also undergo courses in self-assertiveness and self defence as social survival skills. This in recognition that even when special services are provided, they too have their limitations

**v) *Part-time and temporary employment for students***

Unlike in the United States, where there are many opportunities for part-time and temporary employment of students, organized by tertiary institutions themselves or by neighbouring private enterprises, there are few or no such opportunities for students in most African countries. Yet the need for students to earn some income may be greater in Africa than elsewhere: students from poor families often find themselves in the position of supporting their parents and their siblings. Their loans and scholarships may be utilized for such support instead of for feeding themselves or buying textbooks. Programmes which will enable students, particularly indigent students, to earn enough money to support themselves, are urgently needed and should be initiated by tertiary institutions in collaboration with the state, with private enterprise and with donors. Such work programmes could be done during the long vacations, and could be linked to the training they are receiving, for example, medical students working in hospitals, education students in schools, engineering students constructing infrastructure in remote rural areas.

**vi) *Entrepreneurial programmes***

Many poor students are involved in entrepreneurial undertakings to support themselves on the campus such as selling clothes, food items, sewing, providing body care services. Entrepreneurship programs on campuses should be organized to avail poor students opportunities to conduct their businesses in an organized, professional manner and without being a nuisance to other students and staff.

**vii) *Monitoring of poor students***

To minimize wastage, it is necessary to have a monitoring system and financial and other aid to poor students so that they do not drop out of their courses. If they have to drop out, there should be measures to ensure that re-entry is not difficult especially for female students who have care obligations to sick or other relatives who need care.

**viii) *Sports and recreation***

Poor students may not participate in sports and recreational activities, partly because they may lack the time to do so. Sports and recreational activities should be encouraged, not only for the physical benefits they offer, but as possible career options and opportunities to earn incomes for poor students with sporting talents.

**ix) *Student governance***

Student governance needs to be democratized to afford poor students, particularly women, the right to participate in campus life. Quotas, residence and program-based representation could be developed so that males do not dominate every aspect of campus life. Student elections also need to be organized so that they are devoid of the violence, which inhibits participation by females.

**x) *Outlawing cults and gangs from the campus***

Cults and gangs should be outlawed on campuses and extortion or exploitation of poor students severely punished.

**xi) *Sexual harassment***

Gender policies that penalize sexual harassment and gender violence should be implemented to empower the poor and women students to protect their own interests and advocate their own causes. The policies should be well publicised and the redress mechanisms should ensure safety and security for the complainants.

**Activity 7C**

Work out which are the five most important interventions to improve student welfare and retention in your institution. How would you go about instituting such interventions?

**Expanding Boarding Facilities for Women Students**

There is a dire shortage of boarding facilities for women students, particularly for women with special needs including women with babies. There is also resistance to expanding or establishing such facilities. Data is needed on facilities available for conducive working and learning environments for women students, including accommodation, child care, distances between buildings so that women students are protected from attack, poor lighting. There is also a need to investigate the interactions between government and private suppliers of accommodation and the impact that has on the affordability of student housing. In some African countries, student-housing supply has been handed over to private providers.

## **Support Systems for Vulnerable Women Students**

Presently most African higher education institutions do not have a special office or dean in charge of women students, whereas such offices exist in some western universities, such as the University of British Columbia. African tertiary education institutions should seriously consider the establishment of such an office, to enable them to focus better on women's needs, particularly on the needs of lower income women. Such an office can handle issues like sexual harassment, pregnancies, reasons for absenteeism and dropping out. Women students are known to drop out because of financial, maternal, marital or other gender/social issues. There is at present no structure to support women facing such problems.

Such an office could also carry out research on the reasons leading to low participation and high dropout of women students. FAWE has identified the lack of mentors, role models and self-confidence as some of the reasons for low participation and high dropout rates. Such an office could provide support programmes in the form of workshops and networks which would assist women students.

Women who drop out can be supported by catch-up programmes, which will enable them to return to their studies after their pregnancy. Such catch-up programmes could be based on distance education.

## **Conclusion**

This module has added the variable of poverty and the impact it has on the already vulnerable women students on campuses. Learning to understand the needs of poorer students, in particular poorer women students, can better inform the policies and practices of universities in providing adequate and affordable services and infrastructure to produce a conducive, encouraging, enabling learning environment.

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