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An Assessment of Trends and Issues in Career Counseling in Higher Education and Application in African Learning Context

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Abstract:

Career counseling assists people cope with issues associated with career or occupational aspects of their life. In educational settings, career counseling assists learners to identify, own, and manage their personal career issues and facilitate the task of finding alternative solutions. In Kenya, higher education students have key career transition struggles ranging from poor preparation from high schools, while in higher education many continue to struggle on what courses or career paths to follow and upon graduation they suffer from what employers' call 'graduates unprepared for the world of work'. The purpose of this paper is to assess career counseling issues and trends and their implication to career counseling first in the job market and then in educational settings. The trends on career counseling tends to lean towards the western countries but in Kenyan and African context the trends become issues that career counselors will have to grapple with. The paper therefore will attempt to contextualize the trends into Kenya context so that career counseling can have relevance in meeting the students' needs.

Keywords: *Career counseling, career transition, changing work places, frequently changing courses, global changes and technological advancements, unprepared graduates*

1. Introduction

Career counseling is an approach that assists people cope with issues associated with career or occupational aspects of their life. It includes all counseling activities associated with career choice over a life span (Zunker 2006). Fundamentally, career counseling brings to perspective the relationship between self-understanding and the world of work. In educational settings, career counseling is part of school career guidance programmers. It assists learners to identify, own, and manage their personal career issues and facilitate the task of finding alternative solutions (Soumeli 2012). Students are therefore expected to make decisions, commit to action in order to manage their career transitions. In view of foregoing, this paper will assess career counseling issues and trends and their implication to career counseling first in the job market and then in educational settings. The trends on career counseling will lean towards the western countries but in Kenyan and African context, the trends become issues that career counselors will have to grapple with. The paper therefore will attempt to contextualize the trends into Kenya context so that career counseling can have relevance in meeting the students' needs.

2. Issues and Trends in Career Counselling in the Work Places

Globalization and advancement of technology is creating changes in the world of work. These changes require adjustments on the part of the labour force and practitioners. The society is also changing from an industrial base to an information base. This makes a shift from tangible goods to service oriented jobs (Shepard 2008). These changes are having an impact on education and so it has become necessary for career counseling to relook at their practice with an end in sight of assisting their clients navigate the emerging issues and trends. Some of the trends in the work places are:

2.1 The Changing World of Work

It has already been mentioned that technology is affecting the nature of work and creating major changes in the workplaces. Shepard(2008), enunciates that the explosion of internet and worldwide instantaneous communication are some of the globalization phenomena that are responsible for changing career options. In the west, one of the effects is an emerging class of workers who are skilled in specialized service with high levels of technical abilities. These workers form an elite and highly employable class but they also form a small number of population and the high-tech companies that need such workers are few. In Kenya, such jobs are information technology driven and are held by young people under 40 years. They are innovative and their contribution in telecommunication industry is already evident especially in money transfer.

The implication is that career counselor should provide information to students on service-oriented opportunities. This is because technology jobs target a few people but service-oriented careers give opportunities for imagination and

creativity which is limitless. So, career guidance in higher education should champion for inclusion of business and entrepreneurship skills in all programmes. This will change the mind-set of university students to move away from white collar jobs to an endless of opportunity that comes with innovation.

Another implication for career counseling is that while technology may seem result in technical and labour force shortages in the west, technology creates opportunities for innovation in any field. In Kenya, the level of technology cannot be compared with the West and so there should be a warning on blindly introducing inappropriate technologies in quest of serving a small population of technology savvy. Therefore, career counseling should facilitate in creating awareness on career choices that can lead to development of appropriate technology that is adaptable to the local environment. Such technology would serve more people and have more impact in the community.

2.2. Career Transitions

2.2.1 Inadequate Preparation of High Schools to Higher Education

Of great concern to career counselors in higher education is how high school students are prepared for university education. Bangser(2008) in his report on preparation of high school students to post-secondary education and employment showed that many students' high school experiences often do not prepare them adequately for postsecondary education and the world of work. This poor preparation spills over into higher education. Therefore, special attention should be paid on how to prepare students leaving high school to universities.

In Kenya, in order to prepare high school students, universities visit high schools to share their programmes and university life of a student. Organizations also visit schools during career days; employees give insights into the world of work. These insights are good for making career choices because more often than not high school students lack information on the educational requirements for particular jobs(Bangser 2008). Kenyatta University organizes an annual career week in January where they invite high schools to learn about the courses offered. Students also get an opportunity to interact with faculty and students. Besides, the Commission of University Education (CUE) holds regional universities' fair targeting schools as participants to learn what universities offers and what courses are approved. Such activities help students have a better understanding what each programme is all about. This facilitates informed career choices and decision making and also reduces frustration of admission to courses a student has little information about. These activities improve the transition which has an effect in higher education.

2.2.2. Students Frequently Changing Courses in Higher Education

Transition from high school to university can be difficult for students, and many university teachers feel that they are often ill-prepared (Wangari, Kimani, and Mutwelel 2012). The first challenge for universities is that some students frequently change their career plans and others have difficulties in making decisions on college majors and careers. Others are concerned whether the university will nurture their aspirations and motivation to learn(Zunker 2006). In the USA, in order to facilitate decision making and reduce frequent changes some universities offer a cluster program; this consists of a set of year-long courses exclusively for first-year students. Experienced faculty teach a topic from several different disciplines (Mooney n.d). At the final quarter of the program, the students are engaged in a series of a range of seminars focusing on specific topics. Students pick those that most interests them. This provides an opportunity to study one topic in-depth in a small class environment. The length of this program enables a gradual transition into college and facilitates courses choices (Mooney n.d). This programme also helps the students to be familiar with how university's teaching and learning process is conducted. Mooney actually adds that since the class is taught by the same faculty the programme has familiarity of a high school class without sacrificing college-level rigor (Mooney n.d).

In Kenya, there are many students who are dissatisfied with the courses they are enrolled. First, students joining universities are centrally done by a statutory body, the Kenya Universities and Colleges Placement Services (KUCCPS). The placement is systematic, and the student has to apply for the courses on offer by the universities and universities determine the capacity for each course. The placement is on merit and the student has a choice of four courses. The student can make preliminary choices and application while in high school. When the examination results are out, the student has an opportunity to revise their choices based on their results and the requirements of the courses. This one way the student has an opportunity to change their course. Where the student does not change their courses and their results do not meet the requirement the computer system will allocate the student in any course so long as they meet minimum university entry. This forms the bulk of the students who complain that the system has given them a course they have not applied for. To mitigate some of these potential problems, KUCCPS has a mandate to offer career guidance to all schools and they are in the process of developing a career hand book for career information.

In Kenyan public universities, these students from the bulk of those who frequently change their career plans. This is especially so because of centralized system of placing students. This may not be the case in the USA; students are not placed by the government; their challenge might be too many universities to choose from. Some universities have responded positively to the problem by giving students an opportunity to change their courses when they report. However, the opportunity has to be within the same university and the student must fulfil the course requirements.

Technical University of Kenya has a program on career awareness for all first year when they report. In this programme all the students carry out a career interest inventory test to determine whether they are in the courses according to the interests. Based on career test students are allowed to change the courses within the university. The university has done this programme for three years and the incidences of students changing courses have drastically reduced. Although the change of courses is restricted within the university and to courses requirements; the programme gives students an opportunity to re-examine their career interest and make choices again and in other areas adjust career choices accordingly. Engaging in career exploration for such students is a positive move because they may discover new areas they believe will be satisfying and rewarding (Clercq, Galand, and Frenay 2017). It is likely for such students to persist in their academic journey otherwise they can easily drop out.

In USA, Columbia University has a career development model that helps first year just like Technical University. The university acknowledges that career exploration process can be daunting. In this case career services department encourages students to carry out career assessment so that they are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and support to their career in the university and over their lifetime (Sharma 2016).

Strathmore University, private university in Kenya has a prequalification interview of all students who wish to study any of their courses. This again helps in reducing the same problem of changing courses as has been mentioned. While in the USA the universities have a system of supporting students who are unsure of their career plans, Kenya is struggling but we have a few examples to learn from.

The implication for career counseling is that career planning should start in early years of the student and so universities with teacher training programme should incorporate courses on career counseling as mandatory. Amri(2013) agrees that first year of higher education forms the foundation of students' academic life and career. So, there should be efforts to encourage career decisions early, motivate them to have a purpose for their studies.

In practice, Kenyan universities are comparing well with universities in the USA but the Kenyan students are centrally placed in the university. This may be rigid and inflexible in allowing students in latitude in their choice.

2.3. Graduates Unprepared for the World of Work

Universities have the task of enhancing analytical skills of students and preparing them to solve problems in the workplace. In many countries there is a growing concern of unemployed graduates. Forces such as globalization, technological expansions and advancement, economic instabilities, demographic trends may be contributing to these phenomena (Beers 2017). Therefore, higher education needs to look for ways of preparing the students for the world of work. Some universities have developed work readiness programmes as part of their curriculum such as: work – experience based and job search strategies programmes. In that regard, universities are now approaching industry to work together so that graduates are ready for work once they finish their degrees. They create partnership on student's internship or industrial attachment.

Rogers-Chapman and Darling-Hammond(2013) postulates that work experience programme gives learners opportunity to get hands-on learning experience in the workplace. This hands-on experience is important to students' development of soft skills such as interpersonal skills, communication skills etc. The student can also observe on-going activities in their area of study and interact with employees on the job. The main programs are internships, job shadowing, workplace simulations, and apprenticeships (Zunker 2006). In this approach, classroom instruction is linked to workplace skills through placements outside the classroom.

The other method of helping students to be work ready is job search training. According to Zunker(2006), most universities offer training on job search training. Job search strategies training give students practical steps to improve chances of getting a job and the tools to use. The main are résumé writing, cover letter and interview skills. In the US most universities have two main programmes: on- campus recruiting programme and job fairs.

On-campus recruitment programme gives employers an opportunity to hire students. They visit the campus to hold information sessions and interviews for both full-time jobs and internships. Job fairs offer the opportunity for those seeking career information or employment opportunities to meet directly with a variety of employers in one day(Princeton University 2013).In Kenya, University of Nairobi traditionally has had a good reputation of companies recruiting top students in different disciplines. The service is done through the Dean of students' placement service. Kenyatta University also have a similar service in the careers department. Strathmore is becoming popular with employer and gives career talks on work readiness.

By these local examples, it shows that the universities are providing similar service to the students just like in the USA. In July 2017, the Institute of Human Resources management organized the first job fair at the University of Nairobi. Many universities students attended this historic event. This shows the country is making strides in supporting students in work readiness and an opportunity to interact with employers. The implication is that career services to students are a major component of university programmes and should be given prominence. The students should be assisted in analyzing their college and work - experience and how to incorporate this information in their resume when looking for jobs or internship.

3. Application in African Learning Contexts

The perception career counseling is a young profession is now a myth. In review of literature about USA and the services offered in universities, the practices are in place in African institutions. Amani and Sima(2015) contends that despite the wide range of careers for students to choose from, the career guidance and counselling that is needed is still poorly

implemented. This then gives the African context of implementation as an issue and not that the practices are totally absent. The fact there is awareness that there are many careers shows that career counselling exists. To overcome barriers of implementation, the Tanzanian government is proposing in teacher training curricula, career guidance to be a compulsory course. Its aim is to prepare teachers to gain more knowledge of issues relating to occupations. Therefore, career counseling will have qualified staff to implement it.

In South Africa career guidance and counseling deals with issues of racial segregation. Maree (2009) affirms that career opportunities in South Africa are not fairly distributed. South African career patterns remain skewed in favour of previously privileged groups, and the majority of black persons are still not receiving adequate career counseling. But there are efforts to overcome by institutionalizing career guidance by establishing statutory bodies to oversee its development. South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is a statutory body with the mandate to work across the education and training systems and fast track the area of career development. SAQA is responsible for developing career pathways for careers counselors at all levels and sectors; and establishing a national guidance reference group to give strategic leadership (Walters 2009). Higher education is already receiving better career counseling services.

Nigeria has a similar issue of recognition and poor implementation just like Tanzania. The effect is that many students struggle with career choices and career decision making process. Many college students lack ideas on which course to study in the higher education after leaving the schools. Students' occupational/career choices are influenced by parents, friends, relatives, teachers, printed information, scholarship awards and pressure groups (Nweze and Okolie 2014). Therefore, career counseling if implemented effectively will help students to sort out problems of career mismatch and misalignment

4. Conclusion

Global changes and technological advancements will continue to affect education, career and employment. Although these may sound a threat to the practice, these changes provide opportunities for career counsellors to re-orientate and re-direct university students towards innovation and service-oriented careers in all career fields especially utilization of online platforms. This will reduce their over reliance on white collar jobs.

In higher education career guidance activities should facilitate student understanding of career development as a lifelong learning process. Kenya is already on the move in provision career counseling services to students. The challenge will be to harmonize the scattered services into guidelines from which each institution can contextualize the services.

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