



Shrinking Civic Spaces in Institutions of Higher Learning Project

Psychosocial Support and Student Resilience Building Report



30 October 2020 | Catholic University of Eastern Africa | Nairobi-Kenya

Compiled by: Leonida Odongo

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Background	3
Psychosocial Issues affecting university students	4
Student voices on Psychosocial Issues and coping mechanisms.....	8
Emotional Intelligence.....	9
Building Resilience	10
Conclusion.....	11

Introduction

The psychosocial Support and Student Resilience building was an activity under Haki Nawiri Afrika's Shrinking Civic Spaces in Institutions of Higher Learning, a project supported by Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung -Eastern Africa Regional Office, whose goal is to expand the civic space among students in institutions of higher learning. The objectives of the project are: Enable students solve community problems; To Enhance the capacity of university students to demand and defend their rights; To strengthen responsiveness to issues affecting students in institutions of higher learning and Enhance the capacity of university students to access justice.

Background

Students in institutions of higher learning in Kenya go through a lot of issues. These range from anxiety over passing exams, lack of confidence, lack of preparedness for exams, peer pressure, poor choice of friends, substance abuse, indecisiveness, broken relationships, body shaming and low self esteem among others. Many a times students lack the mechanisms to support their psychosocial challenges, sometimes students do not feel confident and / comfortable enough to share what they are going through with fellow students or relevant entities (counselling department) within their universities. Left with fewer options for coping, many students live in stress and are vulnerable to substance abuse and other forms of negative peer pressure.

The situation has been complicated more with the onset of Covid 19 and the resultant closure of institutions of higher learning, which left students with two options, either to continue living within the vicinity of their campuses, for those who did not make it to travel back home, or travel back home to be with families and guardians. University students and parents/guardians were ill prepared for the experience of a pandemic, many parents/guardians lost their jobs and other sources of incomes, many students were unable to continue with classes (online learning) due to internet challenges, many had challenges in sitting for exams because of network problems, inadequate bundles, lack of gadgets and being ill prepared for online learning and online examinations. The online learning sessions also meant more household expense in terms of bundles for families which had already lost their sources of livelihoods, in addition, students had to pay for online learning, straining the already meagre household financial resources for vulnerable families.

On 30 October 2020, Haki Nawiri Afrika organised a psychosocial support and resilience building session for students at Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). The objective was to provide a safe space where students could discuss psychosocial issues affecting them and how they were coping. It was also an opportunity to share experiences of how Covid 19 has

disrupted them and explore coping mechanisms to adjust to the new normal. The session brought together 90 students drawn undertaking diverse courses including Finance, Justice and Peace, Human Resource Management, Nursing, Law, Community Development and psychology.

During introduction, an overview of Haki Nawiri Afrika was shared, including mission and vision and how the organisation works with students and the community in general.

Sharing an Overview of Haki Nawiri Afrika



Psychosocial Issues affecting university students

Participants were asked to share issues affecting them and relate them, both positive and negative in relation to Covid-19. The experiences covered incomes, disruption of learning, family adjustments and social processes. The discussions also focused on positive elements at individual and family levels that have come about as a result of Covid-19. The students' experiences were as follows:

Fear

It was said that Covid-19 has brought a lot of fear to the student community and their families because, this is a virus that is not well understood, shrouded in speculations and in extreme cases results into death.

It was mentioned that the speculations around Covid-19 bring about a lot of anxiety to students and their families.

Disruption

It was shared that Covid-19 has led to closure of learning institutions and at the same time disrupted operations in universities. Many students due to closure of these institutions could not continue with their semesters, the closure period was also not defined because of the uncertainty of when things would go back to normal. This resulted into anxiety on when students will go back to school. As noted by UNICEF, 17 million students from pre-primary school to universities in Kenya stayed at home during the pandemic.

It was also discussed that Covid-19 has disrupted household incomes through loss of jobs, in some cases both parents lost their sources of incomes. Some students said that prior to Covid-19, they were engaged in various income generating activities, with some using the proceeds of these enterprises to supplement their school fees. The closure of institutions thus meant they could no longer continue operating their small businesses leading to loss of incomes and more financial burden transferred to parents /guardians.

Experience sharing session



Loneliness

Participants expressed feeling lonely because they had to go back home, not in communication or contact with their fellow students. It was also said that the initial weeks when Covid-19 was reported in Kenya and learning institutions closed, many students felt idle as they did not have things to do at home, some participants shared feeling lazy and getting into a comfort zone which was difficult to come out of when learning institutions re-opened. Additionally some foreign students were forced to stay in Nairobi because of border closures.

Gender based violence

It was reported that with closures of institutions and disrupted incomes, there was an increase in cases of Gender Based Violence. Some students reported witnessing cases of abuse within their neighbourhoods.

Depression

One student shared being subjected to depression as a result of loss of jobs for both her parents. The student reported getting hospitalised due to depression because her parents were venting their frustrations on the student.

Disrupted social life

Socialising among students was disrupted as many went back home to be with their families. Additionally, some students could not be with their families because they are international students and with border closures, were unable to reunite with family members back home. This led to a lot of anxiety.

In discussing positive impacts of Covid-19, the students shared the following:

Personal growth

This resulted from having a lot of time at home and reflecting on own personal growth. Some students identified and nurtured new talents such as fitness and Zumba, others engaged in technology related activities.

Economic activities

It was shared that Covid-19 sharpened skills, thus identification of new sources of income such as becoming a gym instructor.

Family bonding

It was mentioned that family members spent more time together, making it possible for enhanced interpersonal relations among siblings, parents and guardians. Some participants however pointed out that being in proximity with parents affected them because parents/guardians perceived the students to be idle.

Experience sharing session



Adjustment to a new normal

It was said that with the realisation that Covid-19 would cause disruptions for a long time to come, many of the participants adjusted to new ways of living including adherence to government regulations on Covid-19, which at first were not comfortable such as curfews, and ban on inter-county travel.

Isolation from peers

The participants explained that they could not visit their friends because of maintaining social distance and the stay at home directive. Additionally, the participants shared missing the social interactions they previously had as a student community.

Death and loss

Some participants shared losing close relatives and friends to Covid-19; restrictions for example mourning processes and even burial, which had to be done under strict health guidelines to contain spread of the virus, also affected them.

Student voices on Psychosocial Issues and coping mechanisms

“ I was stuck in Kenya and could not see my relatives. I almost got kidnapped”.-Olivier Aol, Student, CUEA

“Paying for tuition for online classes which were a disaster, was very stressful”. - XX¹ Student, Catholic University

“With Covid 19, I had to take up more responsibility at home, I was forced to be mature”. -James David Adero, student, CUEA

“I now feel better and have realised I’m not the only one who was going through turmoil”. -Lewis Otieno, student, CUEA

“Nothing prepared me for the mental state that the lockdown made me, I have always been in school always doing something, you feel depressed because there is no hope of lockdown ending soon” Sharon Kurgat, student CUEA

“ During the school closure due to Covid-19, I was able to explore new talents, I enhanced my dancing skills and had time to reflect -Tabu Juma, student - Catholic University

“ I felt unloved, school is where you see your friends .In school we used to go out clubbing, but at home parents were always keeping watch”-Juma Tabu Eric

“My parents lost their jobs due to Covid-19, their frustrations were being vented on me, I became depressed and was hospitalised- Mary^{*2}, Catholic University

I realised that this thing is not going to end so, I improved on my fitness skills, and I started zumba sessions - Juma Tabu Eric

¹ Name has been concealed to protect the identity of the student

² The name has been changed to protect the identity of the student

Student Voices on Psychosocial issues and coping mechanisms



Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence was described as the ability to understand own feeling and feelings of others and to motivate us for the purpose of managing our emotions effectively within relationships. It was said that this is also referred to as “ people smartness”. It was explained that according to Buorey and Miller (2001) Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Intelligence Quotient (IQ) are distinct yet complementary forms of our overall intelligence. It was mentioned that we need EQ in order to differentiate outstanding leaders, teams and organisations from others. The benefits of Emotional Intelligence were described as being calm under pressure, resolving conflicts effectively, leading by example and being empathetic towards colleagues.

The components of EQ were described as follows:

Self-awareness: Where one is able to accurately sense and identify persona feelings and at the same time be able to understand and evaluate them.

Self-regulation: This was discussed as the ability to understand one’s emotions and use that this understanding to turn situations to one’s benefit. It was pointed out that this is when one is able to use their feelings to reason and act accordingly.

Social awareness: This was described as the ability to understand and respond to the needs of others. Relationship management was discussed as

the on how best to interact with others to achieve an outcome that best suits ones needs or the needs of others. It was emphasised that emotional intelligence is important and that is the foundation of skills such as team-work, empathy, stress tolerance, accountability and rational decision-making.

Discussion on Emotional Intelligence



It was mentioned that for one to cope, they have a responsibility of changing their ways of thinking. Coping skills that were suggested included planning and management where an individual has laid down steps of what they want to do and becoming a master of themselves and their environment. It was explained that exercise is also important and it helps rejuvenate the body's system and at the same time keeps the body fit. Talk therapy was explained as finding someone to talk to, sharing fears with one's friends .It was emphasised when we talk about an issues they get held solved. It was mentioned that one has to interact with friends and also make use of social media but in moderation.

Building Resilience

Resilience was defined as preparing to cope with various life situations. It was said that for change to happen, or for coping to occur, it must begin with the mind. Community resilience was described as having or creating some form of transformation or change in the community.

Emotional resilience was elaborated as being able to explain why one is feeling the way they are feeling. Physical resilience was described as the ability to cope and recover from various things, the ability to bounce back. It was also emphasise that in order to cope well, one needs to learn to accept things as they come.

Conclusion

The psychosocial support and resilience building session enabled students to share issues affecting them in a safe space. The platform helped reassure the students that they were not alone .The sharing of experiences helped reduce anxiety among the students. Additionally the participants were able to identify new coping mechanisms.

Annex 1: Psychosocial support and resilience building activity poster

HAKI NAWIRI AFRIKA

PRESENTS

A DIALOGUE WITH THE
THEME :

**Building coping mechanisms and resilience
among university students**

Venue: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa

30th October 2020, from 1:30 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Discussant: Albert Migowa, Psychology and Emotional
Intelligence practitioner

The dialogue will
focus on:

- Psycho-social issues affecting the student community
- How can students cope with challenges?
- How has Covid-19 disrupted learning?
- And loads more to discuss

Karibu! Lets share, engage and learn!

Enquiries: Edgar 0741403897