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Making Sense of the Delivery of Non-Academic Student Support Services at Kyambogo University

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The study explored how staff make sense of the delivery of non-academic student support services at Kyambogo University. Acquiring this deeper understanding was crucial because when staff make sense of their work, they are able to contribute to the fulfilment of the university's objectives and are more driven to work for the good of others. When they see how their effort is having an impact and value on students, it also enables them to feel satisfied with their work. The study was based on semi-structured interviews with 11 staff who deliver non-academic student support services at Kyambogo University. The findings showed that staff made sense of their work when it benefited others than themselves. When the delivery of the services contributed to the creation of meaning, and when it resulted in their personal satisfaction, they were motivated to work more effectively and efficiently in order to support the success of all university stakeholders. The paper recommends that since the staff's work aims to serve others' needs and aspirations, management at Kyambogo University should provide assistance to staff in order to preserve the spirit of service by fostering a culture of trust and a safe psychological environment that motivates staff and secure their involvement, commitment, and dedication. Further, the delivery of the services leads to staff satisfaction when it satisfies the beneficiaries; hence, management should assist staff in achieving personal satisfaction since it motivates them to work by facilitating them in the form of workshops and conferences in order to build their capacity in the field.

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INTRODUCTION

The delivery of non-academic student support services is essential to students' success in higher education because it fosters the growth of their interpersonal abilities, leadership potential, ethical awareness, and identity development in relation to one another (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017). The services hence enhance students' classroom learning. The staff collaborate with other university departments to deliver services that have an impact on students' academic advancement (Seifert et al., 2022). The delivery of these services must systematically and deliberately aim at preparing graduates who will be useful to the nation (Amante, 2021). Rozikin et al. (2020) share that academia is not the only service that should be focused on and provided to students within higher education institutions. The nature and significance of the roles, therefore, necessitate staff who are able to make sense of the delivery of the services amidst the changing nature of higher education (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017). According to Crabtree, Briggs and Woratschek (2021), the changes in higher education have led staff to take on an increasingly vital role within higher education; however, the diversity and range of staff in contemporary higher education, together with the complexity and dynamism of the activities they undertake, makes their role at times to be comprehensive yet not understood.

According to Naifeh (2019), the division faces complex, broad, non-specific, comprehensive and ever-changing roles as a result of decreasing funding to public institutions and the changing nature of higher education and society. The staff's work supports university management in the implementation of organisational objectives; therefore, management should support staff in order to respond to the increasing complexities in higher education and the delivery of services (Ryttberg & Geschwind, 2017). Since higher education institutions have high expectations of

their employees to perform optimally and to be committed to the organisation's objectives, they should turn their focus on motivating, supporting, and valuing them in the performance of their work in order to make sense of it. (Van Straaten et al., 2016). When staff are valued and appreciated, a sense of belonging to the organisation is created, which motivates them to make sense of their work, which benefits the institution (Van Straaten et al., 2016). If this is not done, the staff will not make sense of their work, and this may lead to demotivation and frustration, which will affect the institution's goals. According to Roberts (2018), student success is more likely when institutions recognise the essential value of staff sense-making of their contributions within the student life cycle.

This study unveiled the crucial role of staff in making sense of their work at the university. The higher education landscape is dynamic; hence, we need to have staff who make sense and re-examine their roles to respond to the dynamism appropriately. Further, the study is vital to managers of the university; they should ensure that staff make sense of what they are doing, why, and the impact of that work. This will contribute to efficiency in the workplace.

Statement of the Problem

The delivery of non-academic student support services is critical for the success of any university and its students, given the complexities and dynamic nature of higher education and society. The dynamic nature leads to increasing student demands and, hence, increasing complex roles. This necessitates staff who have the capacity to make sense of the delivery of the services amidst increasing challenges like decreasing funding and staffing. The university has strived to put in place a structure headed by a dean of students, policies, and guidelines to regulate and streamline the delivery of the services.

However, the delivery of non-academic student support services is constrained by complexities like increasing student population and diversity, which lead to broad, expanding, borderless, diverse, and ever-changing roles (Naifeh, 2019). It is this background that necessitated a study to explore how staff make sense of the delivery of non-academic student support services at Kyambogo University. This will inform management on the improvement and rethinking of new approaches and strategies on how staff make sense of the delivery of non-academic student support services at Kyambogo University. If staff do not make sense of the delivery of the services, then students will not benefit from it, and gradually, this will affect their educational experience and consequently affect the whole institution and the nation at large.

Research Question

How do the staff make sense of the delivery of non-academic student support services at Kyambogo University?

RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Review

The sense-making theory is a useful and influential approach to understanding how individuals and organisations make sense of their experiences and navigate their environments. Sense-making is a process by which people give meaning to a collective experience. At times, sense-making has a self-fulfilling nature in which individuals' past experiences and expectations cause them to extract cues that support their previous sense-making efforts and often lead to reinforcement of previous sense-making (Kramer, 2017). Sense-making occurs because organisational experiences are constantly changing, and so organisational members must make sense of their environment in order to modify fittingly to the changing environment (Kramer, 2017). Hence, Weick postulated seven properties of sense-making, and a reflection on these properties helps us to make sense of our experiences and evaluate the impact they had on

us and what makes this experience have this particular impact (Kudesia, 2017).

According to Weick et al. (2005), the properties include identity and identification, that is what people think and what they are in their context shapes, what they enact, and how they interpret events. Retrospection is when people's past experiences help them to derive meaning from the present experiences. We continually look back at our experiences to make sense of what took place and then in the context of what we know and perceive now. Enactment: people enact the environments they face in dialogues and narratives. Sense-making is a social activity because what one person does is dependent on others. Sense-making is ongoing, and it never starts because it never stops. Extraction of cues: People extract cues from the context to help them decide on what information is relevant and what explanations are acceptable. Plausibility is preferred to accuracy because the world is not static; filtering, speed and enhancement often outweigh accuracy. Accuracy is not of much practical help in this equivocal postmodern world, mixed with conflicting interests and multiple shifting identities. According to Weick et al. (2005), people do not need to perceive the current situation or problems accurately to solve them, but they can effectively simply make sense of circumstances in ways that appear to move towards the general long-term goals. Plausibility applies in changing situations than accuracy.

Despite its positive contribution, it was criticised for confining to interrupted episodes that need to be restored and for enabling retrospective sense-making at the expense of prospective sense-making (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015). Further, the theory overlooks larger institutional contexts in which sense-making occurs and concentrates on only human activity. Regardless of this, sense-making is a valuable theoretical perspective for exploring organisational complexities; hence, in this study, it was appropriate because I was addressing complexities and ambiguities present in the delivery of non-academic student support services that keep on changing. Further, it was helpful as it provided staff with a process of

solving complexity in their practice of supporting students, which involved enactment, selection, and retention. It involves gaining information from others and using understanding to guide future actions, which are proactive processes. Hence, by using the sense-making theory, I focused on respecting individuals and the knowledge they bring throughout the study and what they were doing. Staff were able to reflect upon who they were professionally, personally, and socially, refining this process and their experiences. They were able to suggest new strategies as they drew from the extracted cues to move forward. The sense-making theory is a key leadership capability for the dynamic world we live in today as it allows administrators a better grip on what is going on in their environment (Ganon-Shillon & Schechter, 2016).

Empirical Review

Making Sense of the Delivery of Non-Academic Student Support Services

Effective delivery of non-academic student support services depends on staff who re-examine their roles in order to understand the complexities and ambiguities characterizing their various responsibilities (Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016). This calls for staff who make sense of the delivery of services in response to the dynamism in the higher education landscape. According to Weick & Sutcliffe (2005) and Brodie et al. (2021), managers should ensure that everyone within the organisation makes sense of what they are doing, why, to what ends, and how. This is because when they make sense of their work, organisations find them desirable and support organisational outcomes. Further, the world is dynamic; therefore, it is necessary to better understand what is going on in their surroundings. Bailey and Madden (2016) correspondingly shared that when staff make sense of what they do, it leads to passion and personal connection to significant events which were completely unexpected. In order for staff to make sense of their work, it should have a positive meaning, contribution to work and motivation to contribute to the greater good (Brodie et al., 2021). It should also have a

positive and significant experience which contributes to a purpose-oriented sense of fulfilment in one's life.

When staff make sense of their work, organisations find the qualities of those employees desirable and support organizational outcomes (Brodie et al., 2021). Making sense of one's work is a major contribution to motivation, and therefore, it is crucial to discover how professional staff make sense of their work. If staff do not make sense of their work or are not appreciated, they feel their work is meaningless (Bailey & Madden, 2016). Van Wingerden and Poell (2018) opined that sense is made of work when it is significant and positively meaningful for an individual. In a similar reflection, Brodie et al. (2021) explain that for work to be meaningful to someone, it should have three facets, including positive meaning attached to work, the contribution of work to making meaning and motivation to contribute to a greater good. Meaningful work should therefore, have positive and significant experiences at work which contribute to a purpose-oriented sense of fulfilment in one's life.

Bailey and Madden (2016) in their study found that when people made sense of their work, there was passion and personal connection to significant events which were completely unexpected and not routine. In their study, participants felt that their work made sense to them when it meant more to others than themselves, for example, when staff saw their student graduate from university or when a community organiser helped others accomplish a common goal. They further made sense of their work after reflecting on the situation rather than being realised at the exact moment it was happening. They gave an example of a garbage collector who reflected that his work made sense since he contributed to a cleaner city for everyone. Similarly, Seifert et al.'s (2022) study found that professional staff made sense of their work when they helped students to succeed in the university and collaborated among colleagues to create high-performing teams. Hence, understanding their contribution to the organisation helps them to

value what they do and stay committed to their roles.

Bailey and Madden (2016) attested that though sense-making is always associated with positive experiences, they found out in their study that sense-making is not always positive. The experience of coping with challenging conditions led to making sense than they would have in a smooth situation. Therefore, Seifert et al. (2022) affirm that the multifaceted nature of work in student services helped staff to feel more challenged and make sense of their work. The variety of tasks and duties associated with non-academic student support services work facilitated and provided what a participant called opportunities for building links outside of their service. Hence, in taking on additional tasks like counselling, participants felt meaning in serving students' needs.

A number of scholars (Aquino & Cabrera, 2020; Crabtree et al., 2021; Evangelista, 2021) agree that non-academic student support services are considered a vital component that contributes not only to the student learning experience but also to their academic success. It helps to retain student and to encourage their comfort at the university. The scholars are in agreement that the major purpose of the services is to ensure welfare of students in order to enhance their educational experience. Thus, services are for students with the aim of improving their life at campus. Hence, the services remain incomplete without those key components that assist students to perform well in their educational experience. Support to students made sense to staff because it created a positive and significant meaning to individuals.

Furthermore, Castiello-Gutiérrez et al. (2021) found out that the staff made sense of their work when it enabled them to fulfil some part of their identity or sense of purpose. Almost all participants linked their passion for student development with their own experiences. They related to their lived experiences to find meaning in fulfilling their purpose. They made sense in how their role helped them to be contented with their identity or purpose. Further, sense-making

allows staff to find personal fulfilment and satisfaction in their work. When they see the impact and value of their contributions, it enhances their job satisfaction and engagement levels. They feel a sense of accomplishment and pride in their work, leading to higher levels of motivation and productivity.

Seifert et al. (2022) posited that professional staff made sense of their work when they worked and collaborated with other staff members. The sense was made or instilled by simply working with other like-minded colleagues and sharing ideas. This collaboration approach extends beyond one's unit to include other partners across the campus. These included residences, student life, Information Technology, admissions, registrars, recruitment, and crisis response. In support, Castiello-Gutiérrez et al. (2021) emphasized that participants made sense of a common goal of serving students and attending to their needs. This is achieved by partnering with other campus actors because it creates support networks for their students. Castiello-Gutiérrez et al. (2021) also aver that participants made sense by providing support to students by interacting with other offices and inclusion.

In the delivery of their work, participants related with others inside or outside the university. They went the extra mile to serve their students across their units, working with other units on campus and using their networking skills to serve their students in a better way. Similarly, Brodie et al. (2021) affirm that interdepartmental relations were vital, especially with support areas like medical and counselling. They added that social connectedness contributes to a sense of belonging, getting to know one another and the small actions that people take to get to know each other. Much as the employee relationship with co-workers and supervisors affects the psychological condition of employees in the workplace, such relationships also increase psychological meaningfulness and employee engagement in the workplace (Ariani, 2015).

Seifert et al. (2022) contributed that being appreciated by colleagues and when an urgent

problem is solved via the right cooperation and actions made sense in their work. In support, Ariani (2015) upholds that appreciation from co-workers and supervisors creates a caring environment at the workplace. Further, individuals who are appreciated by colleagues connected with them have psychological meaningfulness in the workplace. Ariani (2015) asserts that when staff understand how their work fits into the large organisational frame work, they can collaborate more effectively with colleagues from different teams. Clear sense-making facilitates communication, coordination and cooperation, enabling staff to work together towards common goals. The participants noted who they worked with (fellow staff), who they worked for (student) and the services they offered that created a sense of meaning. They cannot do without the three because in enacting their daily experiences, they often mention students, staff, and the activities or services (Castiello-Gutiérrez et al., 2021). Further, the authors share that sense-making encourages employees to stay attuned to changes and developments in their work environment. By understanding the context and evolving needs of the organisation, staff can adapt more effectively to new challenges. They can proactively seek solutions, suggest improvements, and embrace changes with resilience.

Making sense of the delivery of the services provides benefits like increased motivation, self-fulfilment, and collaboration and, contributes to a positive work environment and enhances individual and organisational performance.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative single-case design because it helps to provide a deeper description of the study area (Yin, 2018). The design also allows the use of multiple data collection methods that allow triangulation of findings, which enhances data credibility. The participants were purposively chosen from the thirty-eight staff who serve in the units that deliver non-academic student support services at Kyambogo University. Purposive sampling was used because it helps to target the most

appropriate participants to inform the study (Patton, 2015). Eleven staff were chosen based on their knowledge of student issues and the relationships they cultivate with students within their respective units. It was also based on one being in a senior or headship position for more than five years. In the absence of such a person, the longest-serving staff in the unit would be considered. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, and these were vital because they enabled verbal interaction with the participants. An interview guide was used as an instrument of data collection, and this helped to guide interactions with the participants to avoid diverting from the main focus of the interview. Inductive thematic analysis was used whereby the data collected from participants was categorised into codes that formed subthemes that were eventually condensed to form themes. Relevant data extracts were sorted according to themes, which later formed findings of the study that helped to answer the research questions.

FINDINGS/RESULTS

The study came out with two sub-themes, others' fulfilment and personal fulfilment, which were later condensed to form a theme on servanthood. The study revealed that staff made sense of the delivery of non-academic student support services when it made a positive and significant meaning to individuals. They willingly served and placed others' needs, interests and aspirations above their own. They aimed at contributing to the well-being and success of those being served; they helped students to succeed at university, as well as the university, to achieve its goals. In this regard to making a positive and significant contribution, Speck shared that;

Participation and engagement in sports engage students not to do other negative activities. It enhances their sports talents and skills because when they get a degree or diploma, they may not get a job immediately, but sports may help them to get jobs outside of academic jobs.

Similarly, Colton emphasised the importance of fulfilling others' needs other than himself when he shared that;

It makes a lot of sense to me when these students sleep in a conducive, clean, and well-organised environment that is noise-free. When their meals are good and served on time, they will be healthy and happy, which will help their minds to concentrate on their studies and, hence, succeed in their academics.

Staff also revealed that they take on additional responsibilities like counselling and attending meetings outside their job description in order to make a positive contribution to others. This extra work contributes to the university activities and, subsequently, students' success. For instance, Sedge shared that;

I attend many meetings outside my official roles that are hectic. I am on the ad-hoc committee on regularizing small business around campus, I am on the security contract management committee of guards and security services, and I was co-opted as a member of the bids evaluation committee and any other duties as assigned by my superiors. But this makes a lot of sense to me because it contributes to students, the staff, and the entire community.

Similarly, staff, as individuals, made sense of their work when it helped them to achieve their personal fulfilment. In this case, Plaine reported that he was happy because of his work, which has helped him to fulfil his calling;

I am fulfilling a purpose which I am called to serve. I am motivated by the ability to fulfil God's call. I believe God called me to serve him, and recognising that call gives me continual motivation to serve him in a place where he has placed me.

Further, Plaine affirmed that delivery of the services made a lot of sense to him after reflecting on his work not at that particular time but after

realizing the outcome of his work; he reported thus;

It motivates me to see students coming and being able to move out of this university as whole persons; they have earned their degrees, and they have also been effectively ministering in the Chapel. When they get out, they will not only be technical people in an organisation but even in the community; they will be responsible and useful people, adding value. When I see that mentorship, that growth, and they come back to testify and give us reports, that is a motivating factor that makes sense to me.

Similarly, Dylan shared that it made sense to him when he had a deeper understanding of students' challenges relating to his lived experience;

I draw from my own experience as a person with a disability; I can draw from the experience to support students in the challenges they have in this university, like limited accessibility to facilities like lecture rooms and churches and feelings of discrimination in the university.

Further, participants echoed how the delivery of non-academic student support services led to their personal fulfilment when they worked with other units and people in and outside the university. The sense-making theory stipulates that social activity is vital because what one person does is contingent on others. Hence, the delivery of services to students by interacting with other offices contributed to the staff's perception of their work as meaningful and therefore leading to their personal fulfilment. To this end, Coure had this to share;

When I organise an event, and it is not attended and supported by other people, it will not work. I need other people to talk to. I cannot talk to trees or buildings; I need people to communicate with. This will make my work smooth and comfortable.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

According to Brodie et al. (2021) and Van Wingerden & Poell (2018), in order for work to make sense, it has to be positive and significant for an individual, and it should contribute to making meaning and motivation to contribute to the greater good. To this end, the participants connected their work to student success because the purpose of non-academic student support services is to support students through their educational experience at the university. This finding is in line with Bailey and Madden's (2016) study findings that also revealed that participants felt that work made sense to them when it meant more to others than themselves and not at that particular time but afterwards. Hence, according to the scholars, this purpose of the services makes sense because it is positive and significant to the individuals.

Further, participants make sense of their work when they succeed in supporting students amidst complexities in their work. They work all the time, whether night or day, and they have no holiday. They have many diverse responsibilities that are boundless. This is in line with Bailey and Madden (2016), who posited that though sense-making is associated with positive experiences, their study found that sense-making is not always positive. The experience of coping with challenging conditions led to making sense than they would have in a smooth situation. In corroboration, Seifert et al. (2022) shared that the multifaceted nature of work in non-academic student support services helps staff to feel more challenged and hence make sense of their work. Therefore, the challenges and complexities in their work help them to make sense of their work after being challenged.

This study confirms, in line with Castiello-Gutierrez et al. (2021), that staff make sense of their work when it enables them to fulfil some part of their identity or sense of purpose. A participant reported that there are staff who dodge work, but I just ignore them and say let me serve as God called me to treat people. To further affirm this, another participant shared that we are extending

the mission of Christ as in Luke and recognising that call gives me satisfaction.

This study revealed that it made sense to staff when they worked with other units and people like medical centres, security, and student leaders to deliver the services. A participant emphasized by sharing that when they organise an event, they need other people to talk to, as they cannot talk to trees or buildings. Relatedly, the findings of Seifert et al. (2022) revealed that participants made sense of their work when they worked and collaborated with other staff members. The collaboration extends beyond one's unit to include other partners across the campus, like halls of residence, Information Technology, student life and so on. Similarly, Castiello-Gutierrez et al. (2022) affirmed that participants make sense of their work by providing support to students and by interacting with other offices and inclusion. In this study, the properties of the sense-making theory that came out prominently were identity, when participants made sense of their work when it led to their personal fulfilment. Social activity, when the staff worked with other units in the university to deliver the services. Retrospection was reflected when staff drew from their own lived experience to support students in their challenges.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that staff made sense of the delivery of the services by satisfying others' needs and their personal fulfilment. In this case, others included students, parents, the entire community and the university managers. When staff support students in the midst of challenges, and they succeed in their university experiences, they make sense of their role. Further, when they made a positive and significant contribution to individuals, this led to a sense of personal fulfilment in their lives. They made sense of their work by relating it to their identity and lived experiences, like fulfilling their calling to serve God, commitment and passion for serving students and drawing from their own experiences to please others. Therefore, their work comprises servanthood, which calls for adopting a humble and selfless attitude which drives staff to work

with dedication and collaboration to make others happy.

Recommendations

Since the work of staff in the department is directed towards others' fulfilment, management of the university should offer support to staff in order to retain the spirit of servanthood by creating a culture of trust and a secure psychological environment that inspires staff and secure their involvement, commitment, and dedication.

The work of staff leads to personal satisfaction when it satisfies the beneficiaries; hence, the management of Kyambogo University should assist the staff to achieve this personal satisfaction since it motivates them to work by facilitating them in the form of workshops and conferences in order to build their capacity in the field.

Areas for Further Research

To explore how staff make sense of the delivery of non-academic student support services in private universities in Uganda.

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