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Gender disparity and academic performance among the undergraduates of Fountain University, Osogbo

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Abstract Historically, women are perceived to have been relegated to the second fiddle positions in social schema, especially in cultures where patriarchy predominates. Since the Industrial Revolution in England, women have taken it upon themselves to liberate their kind in all facets of human engagements. This determination, therefore, necessitated the proliferation of various groupings for women's liberation. One crucial means adopted for achieving this objective is to acquire Western education, a potent strategy often used to break barriers of real and perceived oppression by men. They 'wrestle' power from men and now take charge of most aspects in which men hitherto reigned supreme. This study was spurred by the trend of female students leading in academic performance in public and school examinations. A survey of the academic performance of Fountain University students for four years was carried out with a specific focus on gender performance. Senior Secondary School Certificate examination results, final results of graduating students, library attendance and Students' Disciplinary Committee reports were examined. Interview sessions were conducted

with six (6) parents (IDIs) and five (5) school officials (KIIs). These were complemented with ten (10) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students. Radical Feminist Theory was employed to provide explanations on the study's findings, which were content analysed.

Introduction

Education is a series of progressive activities that facilitate learning or the acquisition of skills, knowledge and values. It is the process in which individuals' capacities and potentials are developed to be successful in a specific culture or society (Goni, Ali & Bularafa, 2015). In this regard, education serves mainly as a function of individual development. Education starts right from birth and continues throughout life. In any society, providing education is fundamental for human resource development. Education, in its broadest sense, is a process designed to inculcate the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to enable individuals to cope effectively with their environment (Goni et al., 2015; Joseph et al., 2015). Its fundamental purpose is to promote the most total individual self-realisation for all people. With the recognition of education as a veritable key to individual and national development, the rate at which people tend to clamour for education has increased (Quadri & Olowo, 2013).

In any educational system, the learning outcome is determined by assessing performance. The basis of certification is not only for its usage in entering the labour market but also for horizontal and vertical mobility. Learning outcomes are evaluated to determine what has been learned and make decisions regarding candidate selection for higher studies or job placement (Hughes, 2017). As described by Trucchia et al. (2013), "student academic performance is associated with psychological well-being, feeling of satisfaction with achievements, and coping with stressful situations". According to Huang et al. (2021), academic performance is "a quantifiable indicator of learning gain and is affected by factors like student engagement, social, geographic and demographic characteristics". It is characterised by students' performance on coursework and other types of examinations or assessments (Kyoshaba, 2009). Students' academic performance is a measure of how the student has performed for a period in the academic parlance. It can be measured as semester-based, session-based or throughout the duration of the course of study (Aisida, 2021). One of the most common and effective barometers of measuring students' academic performance is the grade attained from examination (Nwokocha & Amadike, 2005). Indisputably, students' academic performance always differs even though they are in the same educational setting. The performance difference has been associated with many factors, such as social, psychological, economic, environmental, and personal factors (Irfan & Shabana, 2012).

In recent times, gender differences in academic performance have been one of the contemporary issues worldwide (Abdu-Raheem, 2012). Several researchers have attempted to define and even conducted studies on gender as a factor in academics. For instance, Flynn (2012) described gender as "the range of physical, biological, mental and behavioural characteristics about and differentiating between masculinity and femininity". In common usage, gender refers to the sexual

distribution between males and females. However, social scientists refer to the term as a social construction rather than a biological phenomenon (Leonard, Benjamin & Sagary, 2011). Gender is a social construct that differentiates men from women in a society as they assume their social roles (McSweeny et al, 2016). According to Labey (2003), gender is a psychological experience of being a male or female. Unlike sex, which has to do with only the distinction between male and female based on biological characteristics, gender encompasses other personality attributes such as orientation, roles, and identity-based on an individual's self-conceptualisation. For example, Singh (2010) opines that gender is a sociocultural construct that entails the differentiated roles and responsibilities of men and women in a specific society. Singh's opinion implies that gender determines an individual's position in a particular society's cultural, social, political, and economic system. The sociocultural difference between men and women is the crucial reason for examining academic performance concerning gender.

In Nigeria, remarkable strides have been made towards achieving gender mainstreaming in education over the past years. Such effort is reflected in the gender mainstreaming office's introduction in some institutions to increase awareness of gender issues. Although there is a typical traditional stereotypical belief about women's academic performance that women seem to work less hard than men and that female students achieve lower grades in school in general. However, research has shown that women perform better than men in specific settings, while men outperform women in other aspects (Kisigot, Ogula & Munyua, 2021; Parajuli & Thapa, 2017; Oluwagbohunmi, 2014). However, Hartley and Sutton (2013) reported that boys develop gender stereotypes where girls are perceived as academically superior regarding motivation, performance, and self-regulation.

As a consequence, more girls achieve the general qualification for university entrance. Gender disparity in academic performance has been investigated for some time, resulting in substantial literature. However, there is inconsistency among all the studies as some researchers found insignificant gender disparity in students' academic performance. In contrast, others found significant differences, with either males or females performing better. On this basis, this proposed study intends to investigate further gender disparity in students' academic performance at Fountain University, Osogbo.

Statement of problem

The world has become increasingly competitive, and the quality of academic performance has become a key factor for personal progress. This has put considerable pressure on students, parents, teachers, schools, and the educational system. The educational system generally revolves around academic performance, although other outcomes are also expected. Consequently, a significant amount of time and effort from schools are being used to assist students to achieve better academic performance. In Nigeria, the problem of students' poor performance has been a major educational issue. Nevertheless, It becomes logical that while attempting a solution to any problem, it is crucial to understand the predisposing factors to such a phenomenon. That explains why scholars have tried to unearth the factors leading to poor student performance. Very critical in

this regard, among other factors, is gender disparity, which is significantly linked to academic performance. Many studies carried out worldwide among students at different levels of education found a significant gender difference in academic performance. Several studies reported that female students outperform their male counterparts (Parajuli & Thapa, 2017; Khwaileh & Zaza, 2010; Orabi, 2007), while other studies observed males passing more than females (Kisigot, Ogula, & Munyua, 2021; Nnamani & Oyibe, 2016). On the other hand, some studies did not observe significant gender differences in academic performance (Joseph et al., 2015; Goni et al., 2015). Not minding the contradictions in research outcomes, facts exist to establish that differences in performance are majorly influenced by some underlying factors (Parajuli & Thapa, 2017; Oyibe & Nnamani, 2016). It is in response to the need to identify the underlying factors that this study has examined the influence of gender disparity on the academic performance among Fountain University Osogbo students in Osun State, south-western Nigeria.

Research questions

The study intended to provide answers to the following research questions:

i. Are there gender differences in academic performance of students in the chosen study area?
ii. What factors influence gender differences in academic performance of students, if any is observed?
iii. To what extent does academic performance influence access to employment opportunities in the study area?

Theoretical framework

Based on gender disparity in students' academic performance, this study is guided by Radical Feminist Theory (RFT). Thus, RFT is a perspective within feminism that calls for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy will be eliminated in all social and economic contexts, while recognising that women's experiences are also affected by other social divisions such as race, class, and sexual orientation. RFT was originated in the 1960s (Willis, 1987). It sees patriarchy (male dominance) as the most pressing issue for women. While examining the cultural reproduction of patriarchy in several publications, Splender (1982), in her 'Invisible Women', exposed the negative impacts of education on the womenfolk. To her, patriarchal assumptions were embedded in both formal and hidden curricula. Given its relevance to the labour force, the feminists viewed the educational system as a patriarchal institution dominated by men.

As RFT argued, education is only a first step toward becoming a leader in the future workforce. In their view, gender differences still characterise school subject selection (Colley, 1998). According to Heaton and Lawson (1996), the' hidden' curriculum is a significant source of gender socialisation. Spender (1982) believes that teachers give different types of attention to boys and girls throughout the school; he claims that girls are praised for their appearance, good behaviour, and neat work. He investigated the argument of gender inequality in education further

and stated, "What is considered inherently interesting is knowledge about men." Because men control the records and value system, it is widely assumed that men have done all the exciting things and made history, discoveries, inventions, and feats of skill and courage – according to men. We are led to believe that these are essential activities that can only be undertaken by men. And it is because of these that men's activities dominate the curriculum (Spender, 1982).

Methodology

An exploratory approach was adopted as the design for this study because it offers an in-depth contextual reality and is helpful for organising research in a manner that will point out key elements of the research (Universal Teacher, 2017). Senior Secondary School Certificate examination results, final results of graduating students, library attendance and Students' Disciplinary Committee reports were examined. Interview sessions were conducted with six (6) parents (IDIs) and five (5) school officials (KIIs). These were complemented with ten (10) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with students. Purposive sampling technique was used to select participants in the qualitative data gathering process. Data were obtained through In-depth and Key Informant Interviews guides alongside FGD notes. Content analysis was used to analyse the data gathered using a thematic analytical approach.

Findings

Gender difference and academic performance

The study investigated the influence of gender factors on the academic performance of university undergraduates in Oshogbo, southwestern Nigeria. The study revealed that students' examination and continuous assessment scorles constitute significant determinants of academic performance. Good scores translate to higher academic performance. Confirming this, a participant expressed that:

> The main determinants of students' performance include what a student scores in the exam, and for students to get good scores in exams, it means they must have done some serious studies. Seriousness and commitment to learning principles contribute. Lack of seriousness makes lazy students fail assignments, which is part of the criteria for making summative evaluations. Therefore, laziness contributes to academic failure and low performance (KII/M/Lecturer/Fountain University, 2022).

Another interviewee submitted that:

> Students who pay much attention to their studies will pass exams. So, students need always to be confident in themselves. Yoruba proverb says, "Bi o ba ti duro ninu foto (photo) ni o ma ba' ra e lojo ti foto ba jade". Meaning, "how you pose for a picture determines your appearance in it." In other words, whoever fails to prepare prepares for failure. Examinations are not magic. If you read to understand, you will pass; otherwise, failure will undoubtedly come your way (KII/F/Deputy Registrar/Fountain University, 2022).

The above views align with Akomolafe and Olorunfemi-Olabisi's (2011) observation that as a student progresses from admission to graduation, the quality of his educational performances would likely be influenced by a complex interaction of some critical elements such as personal, social, academic, and institutional factors. It has also been confirmed that serious commitment leading to good scores influence students' academic performances. Differences in performance were also observed between male and female students. This observation is in line with Mankumari and Ajay (2017), who noticed that significant gender differences exist in students' academic performance. The scenario may be due to variations in motivation and encouragement available across genders. Where one gender is more motivated than the other, this tends to have implications for differentials in academic performance. The above view was supported by a participant who observed that:

> There are differences between students' academic performances across gender lines. In the past two years, the general observation is that female students perform better than male students across all the colleges (KII/M/Lecturer/Fountain University, 2022).

One of the participants in the FGD session remarked that:

> There are differences between male and female performances in my department, and the disparity was a bit pronounced. Females perform much better than males in many courses in this department (KII/M/Senior Admin Officer/Fountain University, 2022).

An insight was offered by a participant who opined that:

> Gender differences in academic performance depend on courses. Male students have been leading the class in some courses I have taken for the past few years, while female students excel in others. I do not, therefore, feel bold to conclude that one gender performs better than the other in academics (KII/M/Lecturer/Fountain University, 2022).

Another participant opined that:

> Someone's gender might not have much impact on performance because an individual's background, school environment, and other related factors influence learning outcomes. But generally speaking, I observe that these days, females are doing better in some programmes or disciplines traditionally classified as male-dominated programmes. It was discovered that females perform brilliantly well, far better than males, in engineering; the same is noticed in medicine. So, gender may not have anything to do with academic performance. All depends on individuals' socio-environmental, economic and cognitive attributes (KII/M/Lecturer/Fountain University, 2022).

Inconsistencies seem to characterise research outcomes on gender disparities in academic performance across various investigated higher institutions. For instance, Umar, Yagana, Alli, and Muhammed (2015) found no significant differences in gender composition and students' academic

performance. That, therefore, shows a weak correlation between gender and academic performance between male and female undergraduates. This observation was also supported by the works of several other scholars (Puju & Netragaonkar, 2014; Okafor, 2011; Farhan & Khan, 2015; Goni et al., 2015; Nez-Pea & Suárez-Pellicioni, 2016). On the other hand, Mankumari and Ajay (2017) discovered significant gender differences in students' academic performance. The female students were especially performing better than their male counterparts. This discovery corroborates several other studies which indicate that female students outperformed male students in academic performance (Obadaki & Omowumi, 2013; Zainal, Yahya & Rahman, 2104; Khan & Nawaz, 2012; Ahmad, Pervaiz & Aleem, 2015; Madara, 2016; Tarabashkina & Lietz, 2011). As Akomolafe and Olorunfemi-Olabisi (2011) discovered, female students seem more comfortable in social science disciplines and the English language than males, who are more grounded in natural science and mathematics. Justifying why some students could not get on well in academics, one of the participants observed that:

> Male students may not do well in their studies because some are into cybercrime, commonly known as "yahoo-yahoo"; some watch films online while the challenges posed by social media cannot be overemphasised. These take their time more than their studies and constitute significant constraints. It is not that they are not brilliant, but they have other things demanding their attention. If you ask some of them to name the players of notable European football clubs, they have responses at their fingertips. By this, they are not dullards; their focus is on less crucial other things (KII/M/Lecturer/FUO, 2022).

Factors influencing academic performance

Generally, the factors that influence students' academic performance are social, economic, psychological, technological and environmental. While underscoring the importance of school infrastructure to the academic performance of university undergraduates, the study equally identified parental support, peer group influence, learning facilities, the social media revolution, and ecological influences as critical influencers of teaching and learning. One of the participants at the FGD session submitted that:

> If the learning environment is conducive, it enhances students' performance, but if not correctly positioned, students might struggle to grasp what the lecturer says. Also, 'monotony, they say, kills interest. To be running unreasonably long periods of learning also hampers good performance. The longer the period, the more the tendency to develop stress and fatigue (FGD/F/Student/CONAS/2022).

Another participant reiterates that:

> School infrastructure is affecting how students fare in their studies. For example, students cannot read comfortably in the library where facilities are not available or where none exist at all. They would be forced to read in their room, which may not be conducive to academic work (KII/M/Parent/Osogbo, 2022).

A middle-aged female participant agreed that:

> Generally, school infrastructure facilities previously affect learning outcomes. Therefore, if the school doesn't have the necessary facilities to assist in reading and learning, students might not gain the intended knowledge (KII/F/Lecturer/ FUO, 2022).

Supporting this view, another participant opined that:

> Students comfortable with the learning environment will concentrate more on their studies. This indicates that having access to state-of-the-art facilities and a learning-friendly climate promotes effective learning. A conducive environment equally encourages good reading habits. These, combined, significantly enable good academic performance (FGD/F/Students/Fountain University, 2022).

The preceding underscores the importance of the learning environment in academic performance, as inadequate lecture rooms and facilities are detrimental to effective learning. In addition to what a conducive learning environment can offer, participants mentioned tutorial attendance, finances, lecturer quality, peer influence, teaching strategies, and parental or family background as other crucial factors enhancing good performance. A female participant underscored the significance of good academic relations and how this promotes better performance.

As she argued:

> Tutorial attendance is among the key factors promoting academic performance simply because not all students can get what lecturers say in class. Moreover, the tutorial is helpful as it enhances academic performance (FGD/M/Student/Fountain University, 2022).

The role of finances in learning also cannot be over-emphasised. As submitted by a participant:

> Students' financial capability could also affect their academic performance. If a student is not strong financially, how will such a student cope with learning? Low financial capacity distorts smooth thought flow; this is not good for learning (FGD/M/Student/Fountain University, 2022).

Beyond ecological and economic factors, psychological influences were also noted to be playing substantial roles in academic success. For instance, a female participant said:

> My parents celebrate all my wins. No matter how small the achievement is, it always attracts encouragement from them. The bigger the win, the bigger the gift that accompanies it. They do this to encourage us as children, and I am always motivated to work harder (FGD/F/Student/2022).

Another female participant was of the view that:

> Besides financial support, moral support is the best parents can give their children as students. If a student does not perform well, parents must provide requisite encouragement instead of uttering negative statements. This helps the student to build more confidence (IDI/F/Student, 2022).

In the opinion of a male participant:

> Parents should be closer to their children or wards in school by paying routine visits to show their love and support to them, given the challenges of cultism and sexual harassment that are common in schools these days (IDI/F/Student, 2022).

The preceding underscores that parental support is vital to higher academic performance, as parents play crucial roles while their support influences students' performance. This presumption agrees with Akomolafe and Olorunfemi-Olabisi's (2011) observation, which indicates that stakeholders in the Nigerian educational system, including parents, guardians, lecturers, family members, counsellors, and others, are very concerned about students' academic achievements and standards.

The consequence of psychological factors and low financial capacity is in line with Tenaw's (2018) finding that female students' academic achievements are lower than that of males due to low self-perception and sexual harassment, which economic problems may warrant. Parental support or lack of the same do influence students' academic performance. Almost all the participants agreed to this position. The works of Afzal, Ali, Khan & Hamid (2010) also concluded that student motivation and academic performance have a direct relationship, with more motivated students performing better and a student with better performance always becoming more motivated.

Issahaku (2017) explained how social factors influence educational success. He maintained that the time students spend reading correlates firmly with their academic achievement. Most participants also agreed that peer groups negatively and positively affect students' performance. In the thinking of a participant:

> Peer group remains one of the key factors determining performance because sometimes one needs to be very serious. Otherwise, people around you can make you feel like y.ou are doing too much, and if you succumb and relax, you will face the consequences. Each must understand themselves and devise appropriate reading strategies (FGD/F/Student, 2022).

Another participant agreed that:

> Peer groups influence students' performance because those you consider your friends determine what you do and what you experience most of the time. If your friends do not believe in reading and hard work, you may share their beliefs willingly or otherwise. Likewise, if they value good academic performance, you will be influenced (FGD/F/Student, 2022).

Silva and Hill (cited in Kheswa, 2014) previously alluded that the absence of peer trust affects students' concentration and diminishes performance. The effects of peer influence could, however, be positive or negative. Thus, peer groups with positive goals may yield positive academic performance and vice versa. While this has been an agelong truth, there is a threshold where different students have sundry influencers that shape their personalities. The advent of modern technology, especially the onset of the social media revolution, has also contributed to students'

academic performance. All the participants agreed that social media also positively and negatively affect students' academic performance depending on the information sought. A participant expressed that:

> Social media has helpful and adverse effects depending on what you use it to achieve. For example, you will gain a lot if you use it to search academic or educative materials and other valuable information. Today, all helpful information is at your fingertips because of the internet revolution, unlike when you physically need to approach the library for hard copies of academic material. In most cases, however, many use internet resources uncontrollably in a damaging way, especially for entertainment, non-academic, and immoral purposes. Such usage could hinder academic performance (FGD/M/Student/Fountain/University, 2022).

The bottom line is that social media has good and bad influences. The outcomes depend on what you deploy it to achieve. In politics, business and commerce, entertainment, industry, and entrepreneurship, social media have been of tremendous help. However, the most valuable gains lie in its deployment for educational advantage. The findings underscore how powerful social media are and their impacts on students' academic performance.

Academic performance and access to employment opportunities

One of the participants refuted the age-long belief that good academic performance guarantees employment opportunities in Nigeria. He further explained that:

> The only thing that guaranteed employment is who you are or who you know. Someone who graduated with an ordinary Pass could secure a job ahead of somebody who got a first-class if the latter is not 'strongly connected'. Likewise, if people with first-class can prove their mettle, particularly in private organisations, they can get good jobs as well, but it is not that easy. Apart from academic qualifications, one should acquire a semi-formal education to provide additional skills and competencies. Such skills can add much value to the certificate at hand. For instance, most of our accounting students are trying to learn one thing or the other quite distant from their profession, which is not in the curriculum of their academic programme. This will surely be an added advantage to them (KII/M/Lecturers/Fountain University, 2022).

Another participant also reiterated that good academic performance does not guarantee employment opportunities and that other factors should be considered while seeking employment. According to the participants, these include:

> Connections, skills on demand and other assets. Schools are only to prepare the students, but the need to excel outside the four walls of school may be beyond academic excellence (KII/M/Senior Administrative officer/Fountain University, 2022).

This submission agrees with Fadokun (2009), who submits that schools are established to impart knowledge, and global institutions have come to be recognised as centres of knowledge

accumulation and transfer, with students being the most crucial asset for any educational institute. Students are, therefore, tasked to explore and learn more while they do not relent on good academic performance alone.

Conclusion

This study examined the influence of gender on academic performance among undergraduates of Fountain University, Osogbo. Some measures of inconsistency were noticed to have characterised outcomes of previous research measuring the impacts of gender disparities on students' academic performance. While some agreed that gender disparity exists, others considered it a myth. As discovered by this study, that there exist gender disparity in students' academic performance cannot be over-emphasised and is highly pronounced. Female students were discovered to have outperformed their male counterparts in virtually all academic programmes, including those generally classified as male-concentrated ones. Factors identified as having influenced academic performances included personal commitment on the part of the students, self-driven or externally induced motivation, parental supports, peer pressure, school infrastructure, advancement in technology, etc. Gender difference seemed not to have produced much impacts on career choice as students across genders chose courses of study based on personal desires, as different from gender consideration. The results also show that access to job opportunities is not solely guaranteed by high academic performance as far as Nigeria is concerned. Thus, factors influencing access to job opportunities in Nigeria include use of personal disposition, social networking, possession of relevant knowledge and skills etc.

Recommendations

In line with the key findings of this study, the following recommendations were advocated for:

a) Parents and stakeholder in education should encourage their children and wards to excel in their studies; they should monitor their performance and motivate them toward excellent performance.
b) Appropriate institutional changes and affirmative action are required to meet women's life improvement and gender balance demands.
c) The government should increase students' access to scholarship or loan schemes to encourage excellence in academic activities.
d) Lecturers and counsellors should assist students of both genders through rational emotive counselling for them to make necessary adjustments.

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