

Encouraging the Participation of Australian-African Students in Higher Education Through Community Outreach Initiatives

Kwadwo Adusei-Asante

School of Arts & Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia
K.adusei@ecu.edu.au

Abstract

This paper briefly discusses the rationale and outcomes of the Aim Higher Summit, a community outreach initiative that seeks to inspire young people from Sub-Saharan African (SSA) backgrounds living in Western Australia to participate and excel in higher education. The event follows a recent community consultation with SSA high school students and their parents in Perth. The Aim Higher Summit is one component of a two-prong approach devised to address revelations from the consultative exercise that SSA students in Perth high schools were experiencing challenges in their academic pursuits and not making informed choices about their post-high school educational pathways. Highlights of the 2016 event, which brought together successful SSA professionals to inspire young people of African descent through narratives of their life journeys, are shared in this paper.

Introduction

In late 2015, we conducted a community consultation exercise with Sub-Saharan African (SSA) high school students and their parents living in Perth. Fifteen students (aged between 16 and 25) and their parents (numbering 15) participated in the consultative discussion. The purpose of the exercise was to learn about the experiences of SSA students in Perth high schools and to obtain insights for addressing potential academic challenges. The exercise came in the wake of the lessons learned in the first year of the implementation of the Top-Up programme in 2015. The Top-Up initiative supports SSA students at Edith Cowan University (ECU), Western Australia enrolled in various Bachelor programmes (see Adusei-Asante, Awidi, & Doh, 2016; Adusei-Asante & Awidi, 2017).

The community consultation exercise revealed that African high school students in Perth high schools were experiencing difficulties in their academic journeys, felt intimidated, discriminated against and profiled, and did not believe that they could achieve highly in education. Anecdotes also showed that SSA students felt that they are deliberately discouraged from aspiring to higher education after Year 10 (Adusei-Asante & Awidi, 2017). The key message from the 2015 community consultation exercise was the need for an empirical study to scientifically establish the experiences of SSA students in Perth and an outreach event that inspires SSA students to pursue and succeed in higher education.

As a result, we designed the Aim Higher Summit (AHS) as an annual community outreach event, at which matters relating to education in African communities in Perth are discussed. The event brings together successful SSA professionals in various fields to encourage SSA young people to participate in higher education and make informed post-secondary choices. The inaugural event was held in December 2016 at ECU, Western Australia.

Literature Review

Higher education has been found to be a key facilitator of social mobility for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Cunningham & Trinidad, 2016). Other scholars have argued along similar lines: in the long term, higher education improves an individual's income, health, employment opportunities, social status and personal dignity (Affolter & Allaf, 2014; Clarke and Leigh, 2011; Dockery, Seymour, & Koshy, 2015; Samani & Lozeva, 2016; Turner & Fozdar, 2010). The benefits of higher education to a person's community and overall national productivity have also been noted (see Samani & Lozeva, 2016; Turner & Fozdar, 2010).

Various studies have chronicled the educational needs of students from SSA backgrounds living in Australia. Burgoyne and Hull (2007) revealed that refugee Sudanese students were reported to experience many academic learning difficulties. Turner and Fozdar (2010) reached similar conclusions in their research on 40 adult Sudanese learners in three different Australian educational settings, citing a lack of trusting relationships with teachers as a key factor. A recent study by Gatley et al. (2017) found that although Sudanese students are motivated to study, their written English is poor. We have argued elsewhere (Adusei-Asante, Awidi, & Doh, 2016, p. 1) that some SSA students present with varied and complex academic needs, including but not limited to, difficulties with (1) English language comprehension; (2) conceptual learning; (3) academic achievement; (4) self-esteem; (5) managing academic work, family and work commitments; (6) career guidance; and (7) adjusting to the Australian way of life. In addition, some SSA students appear to consider 'help-seeking' as a sign of weakness and or are unfamiliar with conceptual learning.

Given the benefits of higher education, the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education ('Bradley Review') set a target to expand the percentage of university students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds to 20% by 2020 (Bradley et al., 2008). The Bradley Review has given rise to equity initiatives in schools and higher education institutions nationwide, targeting people from low SES backgrounds (Gore et al., 2015; Naylor et al., 2013; Silburn, 2010). However, SSA students have not received direct and specific attention as learners with specific characteristics, nor have their within-group differences been articulated (Adusei-Asante & Doh, 2016). This has been partly due to the prevalence in the literature of ideations that identify issues such as a person's SES, quality of school or university career guidance and outreach programmes, and educational background of parents and/or family as predictors of post-secondary school destinations (Cardak et al., 2014; Somerville et al., 2013).

One of the key messages from our interaction with SSA students and their parents in 2015 was the desire for an initiative that inspires in educational matters. Community outreach programmes are considered an effective means of achieving good learning outcomes, including improved student attendance and achievement, while allowing education institutions to build successful links with community (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Sheldon, 2003, 2007). The literature also indicates that same-demographic mentoring relationships have enhanced prospects of success through role modelling (Allen & Eby, 2003; Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Marelich, 2002; Lankau, Riordan, & Thomas, 2005).

The Approach: 2016 AHS

A panel of eight professionally successful Africans spoke at the 2016 AHS. The professionals were drawn from academia, accountancy, engineering, law, medicine, nursing, information technology and social work. The professionals (five women and three men) were each allocated almost 10 minutes to provide an overview of their career and associated challenges. After their individual speeches, the panel took questions from over 70 participants, comprising mainly African high school and university students and their parents. African churches and community groups in Perth were helpful in promoting the AHS.

The two-hour programme also featured a session on university pathways in Australia and ‘tips on doing well at school’. A documentary featuring the outstanding achievements of an African surgeon, who saved a person involved in a near-death motor accident in Perth through a roadside operation, was screened on the night.¹ Following the plenary session, participants interacted with the professionals to ask personal educational questions. The AHS participants were also treated to live music, cultural dances and African cuisine, free of charge. The 2016 AHS event was funded by the federal government’s Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), under the auspices of the School of Arts and Humanities, ECU.

Outcomes

Over 70 participants attended the 2016 AHS. Most people, including the professionals who spoke at the event, remarked that they were inspired. High school students shared similar thoughts on feeling motivated to pursue high education. A female high school graduate who attended the event remarked that:

I feel very empowered. Seeing fellow African women who have done great things was very inspiring. I had not thought of going to Uni[versity] but I feel I can do it too.

Following the AHS, the student quoted above and another young person who attended the event enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing programme at a Perth university.

¹ The documentary was telecast Australia wide on various networks in 2016. See <https://www.facebook.com/TodayTonight/videos/1141352645904190/>.

Parents who attended the event expressed their gratitude to the organisers. Most parents left more knowledgeable about university pathways, while being inspired by fellow Africans who have been successful in their respective fields. University and TAFE students who attended the 2016 AHS also established networks with the speakers, some arranging mentoring relationships.

Through this event, we learned that exposure to people of their kind that have attained high status in their respective endeavours could be an important strategy for inspiring younger minds to aspire to great heights. We also learned that community outreach events are effective for promoting educational aspirations among people from low SES backgrounds and minority groups. We are looking forward to partnering with other organisations to expand the AHS in Western Australia and the rest of Australia over the next three years.

Question for discussion

In what ways could we better promote higher education participation among Sub-Saharan African students in Australia?

References

- Adusei-Asante, K., Awidi, I., Doh, D. (2016). Improving Retention and Academic Achievements of African Students in Higher Education through Community Development. In *proceeding of the STARS conference*, Perth.
- Adusei-Asante, K. & Awidi, I. (2017). Educational Experiences of African high school students in Perth: Findings from a community consultation exercise. In *proceeding of AFSAAP conference*, Perth.
- Allen, T. D., & Eby, L. T. (2003). Relationship effectiveness for mentors: Factors associated with learning and quality. *Journal of Management*, 29(4), 469-486.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H. & Scales, B. (2008) Review of Australian Higher Education. Final Report. Commonwealth of Australia: Canberra. Retrieved from www.deewr.gov.au/he_review_finalreport.
- Cardak, B., Bowden, M. & Bahtsevanoglou, J. (2014). *Are low SES students disadvantaged in the university application process?* National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education Curtin University.
- Clarke, P. & Leigh, A. (2011). Death, dollars and degrees: socio-economic status and longevity in Australia. *Economic Papers* 30(3): 348–355.
- Cunninghame, I. & Trinidad, S. (2016). The role of higher education in facilitating social mobility. In *proceeding of the STARS conference*, Perth.
- Dockery, Alfred, Richard Seymour, and Paul Koshy. 2015. "Promoting Low Socio-Economic Participation in Higher Education: A Comparison of Area-Based and Individual Measures." *Studies in Higher Education* 41(9): 1692–1414.

- Ensher, E. A., Grant-Vallone, E. J., & Marelich, W. D. (2002). Effects of perceived attitudinal and demographic similarity on protégés' support and satisfaction gained from their mentoring relationships. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 32(7), 1407-1430.
- Gore, J., Holmes, K., Smith, M., Lyell, A., Ellis, H., & Fray, L. (2015). *Choosing university: the impact of schools and schooling*. Final report to the National Centre for Student Equity in higher education. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wpcontent/uploads/2015/09/Choosing-University-The-Impact-of-Schools-and-Schooling.pdf>.
- Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement. Annual Synthesis 2002. National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.
- Lankau, M. J., Riordan, C. M., & Thomas, C. H. (2005). The effects of similarity and liking in formal relationships between mentors and protégés. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 67(2), 252-265.
- Samani, S. & Lozeva, S. (2016). Higher Education Outreach to Disengaged Youth: Case of Ride AHEAD. *The International Journal of Diversity in Education*, 16 (4), 21-39
- Sanders, M. G., & Harvey, A. (2002). Beyond the school walls: A case study of principal leadership for school-community collaboration. *Teachers college record*, 104(7), 1345-1368.
- Sheldon, S. B. (2003). Linking school–family–community partnerships in urban elementary schools to student achievement on state tests. *The Urban Review*, 35(2), 149-165.
- Sheldon, S. B. (2007). Improving student attendance with school, family, and community partnerships. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 100(5), 267-275.
- Silburn, J., Earnest, J., De Mori, G., Linda Butcher, L. (2010). 'Life': Learning Interactively for Engagement – Meeting the pedagogical needs of students from refugee background, Australian Centre for Teaching and Learning.
- Somerville, M., Gray, T., Reid, C., Naidoo, L., Gannon, S. & Brown, L. (2013). Student Trajectory Aspiration Research (STAR): A Study of Aspirations, Enablers and Barriers to Further Education in the Blacktown Learning Community. Research Report.
- Turner, M., & Fozdar, F. T. (2010). Negotiating 'Community' in Educational Settings: Adult South Sudanese Students in Australia. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 31(4), 363-382.