Challenges and Recommendations Regarding Teaching Large Classes at University Level

Kenyatta University and Syracuse University*:
Africa-U.S. Higher Education Initiative Partnership

Building Capacity Through Quality Teacher Preparation

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Over the past twenty years most countries, particularly developing countries, have seen a large increase in the number of students seeking higher education. This phenomenon has been called the massification of higher education and has occurred globally (Mohamedbhai, 2008). A consequence of this growth is increasing pressure on teaching staff and institutions, usually resulting in, among other effects, increased class size. Large classes of between 300 and 1,000, and even more, at the undergraduate level are not uncommon in a number of countries (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010).

Survey Research

As part of our partnership project, one of the activities we undertook was to survey public universities in Sub-Saharan Africa regarding class size and strategies for teaching large classes. Using the Internet, we developed a list of universities that fit our criteria and searched for email addresses of deans of Schools of Education, or academic administrators if we were not able to find the email address of a dean of a School of Education. We amassed a list of 70 people and sent them a link to our survey that was available on SurveyMonkey™.

The survey asked six questions: (1) what type of college or university is the institution [public or private], (2) how many undergraduate students are enrolled at the institution [less than 5,000; between 5,000 and 10,000; between 10,000 and 20,000; between 20,000 and 30,000; more than 30,000], (3) what is the average class size in undergraduate courses [less than 50; between 50 and 100; between 100 and 300; between 300 and 500; more than 500], (4) does the institution have any undergraduate courses that have more than 200 students [yes or no], (5) what strategies do faculty members use to teach large classes effectively, and (6) if the respondent knows of faculty members at the institution who are able to teach large classes effectively would the respondent be willing to give an email address for us to follow up.

We received 10 responses to our survey, from one private and nine public institutions. Three of the schools enroll more than 30,000 students, while two enroll between 20,000 and 30,000, two enroll between 10,000 and 20,000, and three enroll less than 5,000 students. Four schools reported that their average undergraduate class size is between 300 and 500 students, one school reported between 100 and 300, four schools reported between 50 and 100, and one school reported an average class size of less than 50 students.

Respondents listed a variety of teaching strategies, including using (1) group assignments, (2) supplementary teaching/ learning materials, (3) collaborative teaching, (4) peer learning, (5) ICT Moodle management, (6) pod casting, (7) tutorial support, (8) peer tutoring, (9) breaking into smaller groups for discussions, (10) buzz groups, (11) clickers, (12) small group tutorials, (13) postgraduate students as tutors, (14) materials

with active textual engagement, (15) written tasks and feedback, (16) multimedia, (17) differing assessment techniques, (18) parallel activities, and (19) the café method where students choose from a menu of options.

Large classes are often perceived as one of the major obstacles to the attainment of quality education. Several research studies have been carried out that directly point to the disadvantages of large classes. Many have advocated for small classes as a key factor in ensuring quality education for all learners. In spite of these efforts, large classes remain a reality in many countries affecting learners across all levels of the education system. Researchers have found that student motivation, perceived learning and teacher sensitivity are factors commonly affected by large classes. Large classes inhibit students' opportunities to receive feedback and interact with other students and teachers. Carbone and Greenberg (1998) found a general dissatisfaction among students related to large classes, and Biggs (1999) found that the practical problems faced by students and teachers increase and change in their nature as class size increases.

Workshop Recommendations

As part of the KU-SU partnership activities, we conducted a survey of all of the Department of Educational Communication and Technology faculty members to gain baseline data on a variety of teaching and learning issues; included among these issues were class size, supporting all learners, and integrating technology into teaching. Twenty-one faculty members completed the survey and the respondents identified large classes as one of the top two concerns related to teaching the teacher education units. Nearly 95% of the respondents reported that classes are too large while nearly 90% noted that tutorials are too large. Due to the faculty members' responses on this issue, we chose to address teaching and learning in large classes for our first workshop sponsored through the Kenyatta University-Syracuse University partnership.

The workshop was held at the Kenyatta University Conference Centre on October 13, 2011. We discussed the challenges associated with large classes, both for lecturers and for students, and some strategies that lecturers and students can use to deal with large classes.

The recommendations arising from this workshop establish a clear need to address issues related to teaching and learning in large classes.

- ***Recommendation #1:*** There is a need for more teaching staff members. In the late 1980s, there were 68 full-time faculty members in the Department of Educational Communication and Technology preparing approximately 1,200 students in teacher education programs per year. In 2011, there are 21 full-time faculty members and 8 tutorial fellows who are responsible for 92 units (30 undergraduate units, 62 masters units), teaching approximately 5,000 students in teacher education programs. Due to the important need for pre-service teachers to have practical experiences to develop their teaching skills, we need to have smaller classes to achieve this.

- ***Recommendation #2:*** There is a need for larger and improved physical facilities and equipment. Existing lecture halls should be equipped with LCD projectors and multiple screens so that all learners can see visual displays and Internet connectivity should be upgraded. There is a critical need for new facilities for the Department of Educational Communication and Technology that include (1) teaching and demonstration laboratories for sciences (biology, chemistry, physics), mathematics, languages, social studies, art and design, and music, (2) technology-rich classrooms, (3) a teacher education library, (4) an instructional computer laboratory, (5) an educational media production unit, and (6) technical support. Since the department is a skill-based department, these facilities are required so that lecturers can adequately prepare teachers through practical experiences.

- ***Recommendation #3:*** There is a need for professional development for staff members. Staff members of the department need support for professional growth and development to stay abreast of best practices in teacher education, including integrating technology

and supporting all learners, both for their own teaching and to be able to prepare teachers with these skills.

Given these needs, we recommend that these occur in three phases—immediate (0-3 years), mid-term (4-10 years) and long-term (beyond 10 years). We suggest that immediate goals include constructing a resource centre with the facilities described in Recommendation #2, hiring needed academic and technical staff members, equipping lecture halls with LCD projectors and multiple screens, upgrading internet connectivity to high speed, and supporting staff professional development through workshops and conference attendance.

We suggest mid-term goals include adding more lecture halls, hiring needed academic and technical staff members, equipping rooms with SMART Boards, completing the resource centre, having 24-hour internet access for students, and continuing to support staff professional development.

Our suggestions for long-term goals include equipping the resource centre to a state-of-the-art level, hiring needed academic and technical staff members, continuing to upgrade technology on campus, and continuing to support staff professional development.

References

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