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Summary

This study, having been motivated by my personal work experiences in the students' registry service at Makerere university, was conducted within the theme of widening access and participation under the larger banner of lifelong learning. It is premised on the perception that participation is more than just opening/widening access, especially for students who prior to liberalisation of higher education had been excluded (diploma holders) or underrepresented (mature age) in university education. In comparison to students who gain admission to university through mainstream direct entry route, both diploma holders and mature age students in Uganda join university through unpopular alternative entry routes of diploma and mature age. As such, in this study both categories of students are given an identity name Non-Traditional Students (NTS).

The main argument of the thesis is that in this day and age when higher education has been transformed from the monopoly of the elite to the right of the masses, it is important that higher education institutions such as universities rethink both the way they serve the changed/diversified student populations and their position and purpose in development, as well as in relation to other forms of education. Working with university actors such as students, lecturers, administrators and managers and other relevant stakeholders outside the university such as employers and education sector policy makers, I tried to examine what it means to talk of participation in university education for non-conventional university students. Accordingly, the study focused, on the one hand, on understanding the experiences and participation needs of NTS, i.e. the response of universities to meet their needs, and on the other hand, on enabling such students achieve meaningful participation, i.e. promoting their agency to cause social change in the way they participate in university education.

The research question that guided this study is: What are the experiences and participation needs of non-traditional students in university education and how can they be supported to attain meaningful participation?

To answer this question, the following specific objectives were set to guide the study:

1. Establish the meaning of participation and the (socio-cultural) context within which NTS make decisions to participate in university education;
2. Establish the NTS' motivations to participate in university education;
3. Explore the policy and practice provisions available to NTS within the institution environment;