Characterization of higher education spatial injustices: Cases of selected Sub-Saharan universities

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this study was to explore the experiences of academics in relation to the challenges they face regarding office space. This paper was underpinned by the qualitative exploratory research design within the interpretivist philosophy. This paper explores the varied expressions of participants (three lecturers, two senior lecturers, three associate professors, four full professors, and three managers) through semi-structured interviews on how they characterize spatial challenges in their selected universities. In its examination, I undergirded the thesis of this paper on the social justice theory and on the concept of space as espoused by Lefebre (2004). In addition, extant literature on the epistemology of academic space and academic performance was intensively evaluated. The result of this study provides a glimpse of the socially just challenges academics face regarding office space. This study is of significance because there is scarcity of research on the comparison of office space provision in relation to selected universities in the Sub-Saharan region. In addressing this scholarly gap, the paper provides insights in the epistemology of space, social justice, and academic performance and how space can disrupt the academic agenda.

Introduction

Universities contribute to the social, economic, and environmental growth for the communities by creating potential graduates that are ready for the workforce (Bawa, 2018; Chakraborty et.al., 2021). Therefore, academic role players are critical. An effective and productive academic needs to be provided with the tools of the trade, and amongst the most critical ones is the provision of an academic office that is socially just and habitable which will enable academic performance (Oluwunmi & Gbarayeghe, 2022; Sultan et. al., 2016; Vischer, 2007). Without well-resourced and socially just offices, the institutions` academic projects of higher learning, particularly universities are far from success.

History and research record Africa as a continent with a history of colonialism and this has serious ramifications on the spatial issues in Higher education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2017). The colonizers in their projects neglected socially just spatial constructions, particularly in areas where most marginalized communities stayed particularly the majority black population (Hawthorne, 2019). The spatial planning during the colonization epoch resulted in the creation of academic spaces, such as universities which

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were sub-standard and reflected features of spatial injustices (Monama, et.al., 2022). This paper is not purposed on the colonization agenda but attempts to provide the link between spatial politics in relation to office space for academics. I also argue that governments after colonization cannot hide behind centuries of colonization but also take responsibility for failing to address the spatial challenges. For this reason, I embrace the assertion championed by Madikizela Madiya (2021) that space is politically and ideologically produced and demands a situation that legitimizes a need for the exposure of injustices in terms of access to quality and dignified physical and technological resources for education.

The concept of space in Higher Education includes several dimensions and this paper focuses on the physical aspect (office space for academics). Toker and Gray (2008, p. 310) posit that "Over the past decade or so, space or perhaps more accurately spatial analyses, has begun to play an increasingly prominent and important role in the innovation process literature". The critical dimensions of space include physical, social, digital, and legislative/policy space. Literature on Higher Education space is scant and this paper attempts to add to the epistemology of Higher education space. In this article, space is not just a geographical concept limited to classrooms, libraries, etc, but it is defined as a theory (Lefebre, 2004; Madikizela, 2021). Space in higher education is very critical as it impacts on the learning outcomes. As I argued earlier, the politics of space can be characterized by the unjust and unfair distribution of such space to its role players and in this case academics.

Academic performativity does not occur in a vacuum and is related to the environment. Space as environment is critical and in her seminal book, "The Power of Place, Gallagher (1993, p.12) argues, "Throughout history, people of all cultures have assumed that environment influences behavior. Now modern science is confirming that our actions, thoughts, and feelings are indeed shaped not just by our genes and neurochemistry, history, and relationships, but also our surroundings". Following from the latter assertion, I argue that high academic performance is related to socially just academic office space.

Research of utilization and management in higher education have flourished in the digital workspace. The majority of those studies focus on space utilization and student learning (Trawalter, Hoffman, & Palmer, 2021). There is also scientific work that explores space and academic performance (Mahlangu, 2022, Madikizela-Madiya & Atwebembeire, 2021). Research indicates that physical space at universities particularly in Africa faces unparalleled challenges (Chikafalimani, Kwibami, Moyo, 2021). Through scanning of literature, I realized that there is a serious scholarly gap in the experiences of academics regarding the provision of office space, hence this study. The implication of this paper was to provide insights into how academics in the selected Sub-Saharan universities experience the provision of academic office space. This paper consists of several themes that focus the discussion on specific reference to the understanding of the concept of space and its relation to higher education, the subsequent exploration then delves into the criticality of office spaces as enablers of academic performance. The section further focuses on the theoretical underpinning of the study and the methodological account. Finally, the last segment of this article addresses the findings and conclusion.

Theorizing the concept space and its relation to Higher education

Scientific literature is rich with debates about what space is and its relation to the concept of place. This discussion will trace some scholars of note who contributed immensely to this epistemology of space and place. In addition, the discourse will further be integrated within the focus of this examination, namely higher education and academic space. This latter position is in line with Temple's (2018, p. 133) argument that "the relationship between the physical form of a university or college and its academic effectiveness should, in principle, surely be susceptible to empirical analysis: the physical form is, after all, unlike much else in higher education, definite, quantifiable, slow to

change – often concrete. But perhaps paradoxically, the physical form has proved to be the single institutional characteristic that has been hardest to link convincingly to academic effectiveness or even to academic activity in general." From this line of reason, there is a relationship between university office space and academic performance. This argument will be engaged later in the ensuing sections of the paper.

I deem it logical to first explore the concept of space in detail. The concept of space cannot be addressed without reference to place. Temple (2018) notes the significance of the symbiosis of the two concepts and acknowledges the philosophical and sociological meaning of the concepts of space and place. The author maintains "I will neatly (I think) sidestep the involved arguments in both philosophy and sociology by simply asserting that place is created by people using space for particular purposes: place, then, is space which has meaning for its users; it is special space" (Temple, 2018, p.136). It is noteworthy to state that the concepts of place and space have varied throughout the recent history of geography. Entrikin (1991) has illustrated quite well the idea grounded in the humanistic discipline by dividing place into objective and subjective. The subjective dimension embraces individualistic meanings attached to place basically at the representational level whereas the objective denotes the 'naturalistic qualities of place'. What Entrikin (1991) calls the betweenness of places is the meeting point for the subjective and objective space, a place where meanings and objective reality are encountered.

Lefebvre (1991) challenged the binary notion by introducing the third term. Lefebvre, and later also imbued with meaning in everyday place-bound social practices and emerges through processes that operate over varying spatial and temporal scales. Different distinctions by Lefebre (1911) and Soja (2008) on space and place are based on the following dimensions. Perceived space: (Abstract): Which invisibly surrounds peoples' bodies and conceived space (Concrete): our knowledge of spaces which is primarily produced by discourses of power and ideology constructed by professionals such as planners, engineers, and researchers. In this case, universities are designed by spatial planners and engineers, and in the planning, space is conceived. In the conception, the perceived occupiers who are academics are not consulted.

As argued, colonizers then constructed space from an ideological point of view. A point, in this case, is the South African Apartheid government during the era of Verwoerd, the then minister of Native Affairs retorted that "There is no place for him [the black child] in the European [white South African] community above the level of a certain form of labor. Until now he has been subject to a school system which drew him away from his community and misled him by showing him the green pastures of European society in which he is not allowed to graze" (Troup, 1976, p.22). These irresponsible divisive, unjust, and unfair comments demonstrate that the construction of the education system as space is based on ideology to constrain role players including academics. These relate also to the creation of academic office spaces in institutions of higher learning. There is a link between the construction of university spaces during the colonial era and the dawn of democratic government. The agenda of space as an ideology in Africa for blacks was designed to constrain progress (Hawthorne, 2019); Ndlovu-Gatsheni, (2017). This predestined project created challenges for democratic spatial planners as they had to redesign some of the spaces ill-designed by colonial masters.

The criticality of office spaces as enablers of academic performance

Several factors lead to academic success and performance in higher education spaces. Amongst others is the design and the provision of socially just productive academic space. By socially just office space, I mean the office space that is just and fair, habitable, and well-resourced for academics to perform their academic responsibilities of teaching and research. The space must provide a motivating and inspiring working atmosphere. There is an authoritative body of scientific research that confirms this assertion (Vitasovich, et. al., 2016; Voordt, 2004). Providing staff members with well-crafted and

well-designed academic office space does have spinoffs for university academic projects. Strange and Banning (2015); and McElroy and Morrow (2010) are of the view that there is a link between office space and organizational culture as workspace reflects organizational culture. Academic office space which is socially just and positive breeds positive working environments.

MacDonald, et.al., (2022, p.267) note that "Academic work is complex and varied with characteristics of both professional autonomy and collaborative intellectual interactions shaping professional growth and productive work". For this reason, for academics to perform and be productive, occupying well-resourced, habitable, and user-friendly offices is imperative. Habitable spaces enable academics to be creative and innovative both in their teaching and learning, and research (knowledge production). "Office space is a cognitive resource that requires sufficient investment to ensure the best possible outcome from academic work" (Hopland & Kvamsdal, 2020, 1). Socially just constructed offices enhance high academic performance and productivity. Vitasovich, et.al., (2016) argue that having a private and quiet work environment available in the form of office space is fundamental to academic performance. Similarly, Francis and Andamon (2019) maintain that office space is of critical importance in enhancing academic performance.

The opposite is true where unjust and inhabitable offices constrain performance. University facility divisions should ensure that they provide adequate budgets for the establishment of state-of-the-art offices for academic staff members. In the process of the creation of such spaces, there should be consultative arrangements with academics who are the prime users of such spaces. Research indicates that university management does not consult staff members when addressing the aspect of office space and their opinions are not canvassed (Hopland & Kvamsdal, 2020). It is therefore critical that the process of office design and provision should be consultative. This is fundamental in understanding what academics prefer and want.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

This paper applies two theories. The first theory of the study is the theory of spatial justice. The inclusion of this theory is justified in that it is apposite because when the design, distribution, and provision of offices are sub-standard and are not just and fair, this is simply an injustice. Further, (Soja, 2013) believes that office is space and space is geography or spatiality and the justice of spatiality needs to be examined hence the theory of spatial justice. Spatial justice involves "the fair and equitable distribution in space of socially valued resources and opportunities to use them" (Soja, 2009). The space we live in can have negative as well as positive consequences on everything we do. For Soja, spatial (in)justice is both an outcome and a process that results in such outcomes. Space is not a container of human activity but an active force shaping human life. Soja (2003) argues that women and men are spatial beings as well as social and temporal beings. Humans produce space. Space is socially produced and therefore can be socially changed.

In addition to spatial justice, I also deployed Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional theory of justice (redistribution, recognition, and representation). Before adding the third dimension to her theory, Fraser (1998) argued that claims of social justice seem to be divided into two types, claims for the redistribution of resources and claims for the recognition of cultural difference. Fraser's theory draws on three dimensions namely recognition, redistribution, and representation (Dahl, et.al., 2004; Fraser, 2020). She argues that resources should be distributed fairly and based on recognition of societal members and in this case the academic staff as a university community. As part of representation, the design and creation of academic offices should not be done without the inclusion of them. This assertion fits well with the dimension of representation as identified by Fraser. The distribution of offices to academics requires a just, fair, and inclusive approach by higher education authorities.

Method

The study is anchored on qualitative research design in delving deep into the experiences of the academics in characterizing the provision and distribution of office space and the challenges they face. This approach was deployed based on the views of Silverman (2021) and Polit and Beck (2017) that qualitative research digs deeper into people's lived experiences. Further, this examination was approached from the constructivist-interpretive philosophical stance where knowledge is crafted from the realities of the participants' natural settings (Blandford, et.al., 2016). This project followed a multiple case study design (Lune & Berg, 2017) in the selected higher education institutions in Sub-Sahara.

The sampling technique that used in this research was purposive sampling. Those who participate in the samples are lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, professors, and management representatives were subjected to rigorous semi-structured interviews. The selection of the purposive sampling technique was based on the objectives of this study (Silverman, 2021). In the selection of the participants, I included (three lecturers, two senior lecturers, three associate professors, four full professors, and three managers). The total number of participants was fifteen. Participants were drawn from the education and human sciences faculties from all institutions. In addition to that, the selection criteria included gender mix (male and female), public universities, and participants with not less than 3 years of experience were considered. The study was guided by the following grandeur question: How do you experience the availability, distribution, and occupation of the office space in your institution? Data analysis is a tedious and lengthy process that needs careful attention and involves the logical process of organizing, structuring, and making sense of the vast amount of data by the researcher (Paton, 2016). I employed an inductive approach to data analysis underpinned by the thematic data analysis method. This process was preceded by data transcription. For ethical reasons, names of participating institutions were withheld (Sileyew, 2019) safe to state that the participating universities were from South Africa, Zambia, and Uganda.

Findings

The presentation of the findings is based on the expressions of data collected through the semi-structured interviews which were guided by the meticulous developed interview schedule. The views were drawn from varied categories of three lecturers coded as LA, LB, and LC, three senior lecturers coded as SLA and SLB, three associate professors coded as APA, APB, and AS C four professors coded as PA, PB, PC, and PD. From management, three different categories participated, the school directors coded as SD, the dean (DA), and the head of department (HOD). The sample was coded to observe compliance with ethical protocols. I conducted data analysis guided by the views of Paton (2016) and Marshall and Rossman (2005) in that data was rigorously reviewed and reevaluated. This process was characterized by backward and forward processing of data to ensure that the themes were confirmed. It is critical to note that an attempt was made not to contaminate raw data through my unbiased standpoint in dealing with such. Thus, my research positionality was spelled out from the onset. This was to ensure that the study was credible, trusted, and dependable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The following discussion provides a detailed presentation of the thematic strands of the study.

Limited spatial offices for academics

Providing staff members with tools of the trade and office accommodation is imperative. This is fundamental in making sure that there is desired production. On the matter related to the provision and availability of academic space, participants across

various universities lamented this aspect. A mixed bag of messages was presented by participants. In echoing her viewpoint on this matter, LC voiced her thoughts as follows:

"Added to the multiple challenges, the issue of limited office space, the university resolved that professors should instead be encouraged to apply to work from home to free already limited office space, but the problem was that this was later rescinded because performance-related issues of few individuals which was not properly handled and affected even the innocent".

However, despite the dominant perceptions of most participants which expressed lamentations on matters related to the provision of spacious and socially just spaces, this academic strongly maintained a contradictory view. PB was of the view that despite the challenges, her appointment was immediately accompanied by a satisfactory office. Her views are captured as follows**:**

"I think my experiences have been good. I don't know whether I was lucky enough, but when I came here, I was allocated this office, which I think as compared to other people, and I know most of my colleagues are sharing offices, but like I said I am very much fortunate because, with the space that I have, I can do whatever that I want to do. I don't have disturbances. I spend much of my time alone. If I want to read something I can read, if I want to interact with my students, I can do that because of the space that I have, which I think is something good for me"

From the views of the participants cited verbatim above, it is clear that they expressed contradictory sentiments concerning academic office space. One can conclude that these participants experience the provision of office space differently.

Multiple interdependencies operating in institutions

Universities operate as an "ecosystem" with various stakeholders in the form of departments with specialist functionaries that are not independent of each other. Examples can be the ICT department, university facility department, and Human resource department cooperating to provide needed services to all stakeholders. These departments function in cooperative manners and if not well coordinated can delay several matters that require attention which can impact negatively on the academic agenda. In expressing the frustrations on this arrangement, the HOD shared the following thoughts:

"As an institution, the provision of resources operates based on a multitude of inter-dependencies. As indicated, ICT controls the utilization of technological spaces. But University Estates controls the utilization of the physical spaces. Like ICT, University Estate also struggles to finalize allocation, refurbishment, and maintenance of office spaces. Critical as these interdependencies are, they are hampered by severe capacity constraints, which adds to the frustrations of staff. As can be expected, these challenges have the unintended consequence of causing friction, eroding openness and collegiality among staff".

In narrating the commitment to assist and the frustrations experienced, the school director (SD) from one of the selected participating universities retorted:

"I'm passionate about providing my departments with the necessary tools they need to do their job well – ICT requirements, sufficient and comfortable office spaces, uninterrupted supply of electricity, heaters to warm their offices in winter, and an enabling and supportive working environment to attract staff and make my school the school of choice. This is easier said than done given the challenges posed by the university's inter-dependencies on executive managers. I'd like to be seen as the school director whose school

oozes collegial working and social relations, but often these aspirations are unachievable because some of the challenges are beyond my control as school director".

This theme provided the expressions from the management perspective about the provision of offices to academics. Universities are complex organizations with different divisions or units. The views captured above demonstrate impediments in the allocation of offices to academics. Despite the willingness of management, as indicated by the school director, the complex and interdependent nature of these institutions poses challenges to the good intentions of allocation of offices by management.

Unilateral and exclusionary management decision-making approach

Decision-making is fundamental in higher education. In the process of the design and the allocation and distribution of office space, management should consult with stakeholders and in this case academics, because they are the ones who will be utilizing and occupying these offices. Excluding them is an injustice. One of the lecturers, LC raised this matter sharply and critically and had this to say:

"As a lecturer, my role is not much. The role of ensuring that I have enough physical space is mainly done by the administration. If for instance, I am sharing an office, it is not my duty to agree or disagree on using that space or ask someone to be part and parcel of the limited space I have. I think lecturers play a very limited role in that. It is mainly the administrators who do that. Our main role is teaching. Of course, we mention the issue of physical space in meetings but making sure that it is enabling is mainly done by the administration)".

The view on the exclusionary nature of decision-making was supported by one of the associated professors and APB raised the perceptions as follows:

"*University Management contributes to the constraints of the physical and technological spaces. I think it is administrative. It should start with the administration. The managers should be accommodative in terms of being willing to hear what people have to say in terms of how we can improve physical and technological space. It also has to do with the people who come up with these policies.*

As argued above, decision-making is central in organizations and universities. The assertions of the participants paint a picture of unilateralism and exclusion. Participants further lamented the fact that they are only informed on decisions regarding allocation and management does not consider them.

Increased number of students and staff appointments with no provision of more office space.

One of the frustrations gathered in this study was the exponentially increasing number of students. Participating institutions continue to experience this phenomenon consistently and unfortunately, participants lamented the fact that despite this dynamic, there is no consideration of building extra office space. LC was of the following view:

"If you have a population that is growing it should also mean the physical and technological space should increase in one way or another. And then it will narrow down to the key players, the people teaching, and also the learners who are receiving the information. So, something is lacking in terms of proper administration and management and also on the issue of government when it comes to policy and willingness to increase the capacity of the physical space".

The view echoed by the participant above raises a concern related to the student population that is growing. The increase in student enrolment means more resources are

required and, in this case, more staff members need to be employed and the more you employ staff members there is need for office accommodation. Unfortunately, the participants lamented the failure of university leadership to address this challenge.

Biased, unfair, and unjust allocation of office space

Participants LA and SLB demonstrated anger over the allocation of office space, and they expressed their frustrations as follows:
LA maintained that:

> *"In some instances, the distribution of office space is a challenge and unfair because it depends on your proximity with your head of department. Let me put it this way, when joining as a new staff member normally you get an office which you have to share with the other colleagues. Thereafter, as you are used, the office space becomes available for those who are not sharing, and you find that according to the list, you are supposed to be provided with sole office occupier, then suddenly somebody is favored. This is unfortunate because once you question this, it becomes a problem."*

In upholding the same thought SLB fumed:

> *"Infrastructural allocation does have eyes here. It can see who the darling of the boss is. This is very disturbing and there is nothing you can do. The departmental administrative officer who keeps records is also a problem because the person perpetuates the unfair distribution of office space, and it is unpalatable to share the office".*

The process of the provision of office space is critical and should be as transparent to academics as possible. Transparency is fundamental in that it will eliminate suspicion by staff members. The views of the academics indicate frustrations related to the processes of the provision of offices. Some of the challenges raised were that they were allocated unfairly and unjustly.

The exploration of the study highlighted on experiences of academics in relation to the challenges they face regarding office space. The participants ranged from lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, full professors, and management. This brings significant results covering in five critical thematic strands which include limited office space, multiple interdependencies operating in institutions, unilateral and exclusionary management decision-making approach, increased student numbers, and biased, unfair, and unjust allocation of office space. The participants provided illuminating views which are very critical in this study. The findings of the study to a large degree point to a plethora of challenges regarding the provision of office space to academics. In the next section, the study provides discussions on the findings of the study.

Discussion

Participants highlighted several issues related to space (office accommodation) which personally affect them. Some of the impediments and challenges were corroborated by the management of selected institutions. Chief amongst the problem areas were inadequate office space, biased and unfair office distribution, unilateral and exclusionary decision-making with matters related to office space, increasing student numbers and less office accommodation despite appointing new staff members, and multiple interdependencies. It is fundamental to note the finding regarding inadequate office space which might have dire ramifications on the productivity and delivery of the academic project. Academics require office space that is socially just and well-resourced to operate optimally and achieve the objectives required of them. This assertion is corroborated by the views of Strange and Banning (2015); and McElroy and Morrow (2010) who demonstrated a link between office space and productivity. In addition, to emphasize and confirm the importance of the link between office space and performance,

Vitasovich, et.al., (2016) assert that a private and quiet work environment available in the form of office space is fundamental to academic performance.

The finding on the increased number of students is corroborated by Mohamedbhai (2014) and Mok and Jiang (2017) who agree that institutions of higher learning are overwhelmed with increased enrolments. I argue that these increased enrolments require more offices for academics and failure to provide offices to all academics is unfair and unjust and links well with the views of both Soja and Nancy Fraser. I argue that management does not take the plight of those academics who do not have offices seriously, and this translates into social injustice. The study also established that despite the lack of adequate offices, the distribution of offices to newly appointed academics is also characterized by unfair, biased, and unjust practices. These practices can be summarized as spatial injustices and go against the views of both social justice theorists, Soja and Fraser as discussed.

It is of fundamental importance that different subsidiaries or auxiliaries of the universities operate smoothly and in a harmonious approach without hassles. The advantage of ensuring that different components of the university operate collaboratively is to ensure that delays are avoided. For this reason, the study also identified multiple interdependencies as a challenge to the provision of offices to academics. Accordingly, these multiple interdependencies hurt the provision of offices to academic staff members. Another striking finding which was highlighted in the study was related to decision-making. Decision-making is a very critical component of every organization. Decision-making scholars argue that when members of the organization are involved in decision-making, concerns, and complaints are limited. Exclusionary decision-making constitutes an unfair and unjust process and can only lead to unproductivity. The views of participants are corroborated by Hopland and Kvamsdal (2020) when highlighting that university management does not consult staff members when addressing the aspect of office space. Given this finding, I argue that this represents another form of social injustice and negates the philosophical arguments as advanced by both Soja and Fraser. Both these scholars argue that the distribution of resources should be fair and just. Fraser (1998) strongly holds the view that in the distribution of resources, the dimensions of recognition and representation should be considered. As a form of inclusive decision-making, university management should recognize and allow staff members to be represented in the decisions affecting office space not only in the distribution part but also from the onset of design.

Conclusion

The primary focus of this study was to explore and expose the spatial injustices that exist in some university spaces in sub-Saharan Africa, with specific reference to the distribution and the occupation of office space for academics. Stated differently, this paper was mainly intended to identify and characterize the challenges of academics regarding the provision of office space. In its examination, extant literature was rigorously evaluated, and the theories of spatial and social justice of Soja and Nancy Fraser were applied as lenses. This study produced several findings that are critically striking and add to the epistemology of university office space, which is a scarcely researched area. Based on the findings of the study, I conclude that selected universities in the Sub-Saharan experience pertinent office space for academics.

Despite putting efforts to ensure that the study was nearly accurate, the following limitations were identified. The number of participants from management was not adequate. Due to the nature of this study, the limited number of participants does not allow generalization of the findings. It was also a challenge in arranging interview sessions with participants, particularly from the side of management This study is significant in the sense that it provides novel insights, particularly in this scarcely researched focus area of academic office allocation. The findings of the study indicate that there are serious issues related to the provision of office space and the following recommendations are suggested:

Regarding the limitation of office space, I recommend that despite tight budgetary constraints faced by universities, universities embark on new mechanisms of engaging private businesses to address the shortage of office space. Secondly, senior academics particularly associate professors and full professors could be allowed to work from home to create more space for lectures and senior lectures. Resolving the issue of complex multiple interdependencies, individual universities should craft communication channels that deal with office allocation processes. In doing so, efforts should be made to develop democratic processes that create opportunities for academics to participate in office allocation matters.

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