

## Namibian university students' views on male students' educational underachievement

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### Abstract

*This article is about Namibian University students' understanding of male students' educational underachievement. Using a pragmatic parallel mixed methods research design, systematic, criterion and case study sampling techniques, the researchers collected data from 807 University students. The researchers also conducted focus group discussions with some of the sampled students. From document analysis, the researchers ascertained that substantially more female than male students had been enrolled in all public and private Namibian Universities for more than three decades and these female students during this period consistently performed academically better than male students in all the universities studied. University students reported that on average, female students performed better than male students in several fields of study because they were focused, motivated, worked harder, did not waste time socializing in dysfunctional ways (e.g. abusing alcohol and drugs), actively participated in learning activities, worked collaboratively, were willing to learn, were organized, were persistent and did not easily drop out of universities. While this type of gender disparity in higher education academic achievement was consistent with that demonstrated in Southern African countries of Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, it was inconsistent with that demonstrated in Malawi, Mozambique, and Zambia where male students academically outperformed female students. Gender disparity in academic achievement in higher education in favour of males is also prevalent in Sub-Saharan African countries of Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda. In several African countries such as these, the focus is on how to increase female participation in higher education. The researchers have instead in this article proposed several initiatives on how university, administrators, lecturers, and students, Ministries of Education, NGOs, communities, and UN agencies in Namibia should support male university students who educationally underachieve. For instance, to increase male students' enrolments in tertiary educational institutions, universities in collaboration with the Ministries of Education and other education stakeholders should put in place programmes aimed at supporting schools in their efforts to prevent boys from dropping out of school, to increase boys' survival and promotion rates, to reduce boys' school leaving rates, to reduce boys' failure rates and to reach out to parents of boys who may keep them out of school because of not valuing education. In addition, universities should provide counselling and guidance services tailored to the needs of male students. Professionals such as therapists, psychologists and social workers could be deployed by universities to guide and counsel male students on their studies, alcohol and drug abuse and on career aspirations.*

**Keywords:** women, men, gender disparity, educational underachievement, Namibia, university, students, higher education

### Background

According to Welmond and Gregory (2021, p. vii) educational underachievement could be defined in three ways. "First, underachievement in terms of low levels of participation in education, including enrolment and retention; second, underachievement in terms of low levels of completion or graduation; and third, underachievement in terms of low student learning outcomes, also

referred to as underperformance". The researchers apply all these senses of educational underachievement in this article. In 2012, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) published the *World Atlas of Gender Equality in Education* report. In this report, UNESCO provided evidence, which indicated that more women than men attained higher education

qualifications in the United States of America, in most of European Countries, in all Latin American Countries, except Bolivia, in Australia, in Russia, in most Asian countries, including China, in the Caribbean countries, in Saudi Arabia, and in Iran. Although no data on the issue were available in most African countries, UNESCO (2012) reported that more women than men obtained higher education qualifications in Algeria, Botswana, Comoros, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia and Tunisia. According to Reeves (2022), Welmond and Gregory (2021), UNESCO (2020) and Saadat et al. (2022), gender disparity in higher education attainment that is in favour of women now covers more countries of the world than it did in 2012.

As indicated by UNESCO (2012, 2018, 2024), in Namibia, there now exists gender disparity in academic achievement between men and women that is in favour of women in all public and private tertiary education institutions (National Council for Higher Education, 2018, 2020). For instance, this type of disparity exists at institutions such as the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) where more than two thirds of graduates for more than 30 years, in many fields of study, have been female (UNAM, 2023; Namibia University of Science and Technology, 2019). Based on the 1992-2023 enrolment figures and 1992-2022 graduation statistics from UNAM, the disparity in academic performance between male and female students reflects the fact that more female than male learners qualify from Secondary Schools to enter tertiary education institutions. This is the case because more male learners than female learners drop out of primary and secondary schools, display lower performance, and have lower promotion and survival rates from lower to higher school grades (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, 2012-2022; UNESCO, 2022a). The Namibia Higher Education Statistical Yearbook data for 2018 (National Council for Higher Education, 2018) provided more evidence affirming the assertion that more female than male students studying at all public and private tertiary education institutions in the country passed their examinations.

This gender disparity in academic achievement between men and women became disconcerting to us for three reasons. Firstly,

according to Welmond and Gregory (2021) and Diprete and Buchmann (2013), there is a relationship between male educational underachievement and violence, family breakdown, loosening of community cohesion, poor health outcomes and economic instability. Secondly, the likelihood of unemployment either increases or declines with level of education. The less educated men are the more likely they become either unemployed or get employed in low-paying jobs (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013). This has been linked to gender-based violence amongst partners in Namibia (Edwards-Jauch, 2016). Thirdly, there is a relationship between educational underachievement amongst boys and men and economic and social disadvantage (Welmond & Gregory, 2021; Reeves, 2022; Whitmire, 2010). For instance, “the better-educated have better health and more stable marriages and family lives” (Diprete & Buchmann, 2013, p. 5) than the less-educated.

### **Statement of the problem**

Although the gender disparity in academic achievement between men and women has existed in public Namibian tertiary education institutions for more than three decades, little has been done by the educational system in general and the higher education institutions in particular to attend to the issue. To create awareness on the matter, the researchers conducted the Namibian boys’ underachievement and under-participation in education research study (Zimba et al., 2023). The main purpose of this study was to find out what accounted for the disparity in academic performance between male and female learners/students. In this article, the researchers report on data obtained in the study that pertained to Namibian university students’ views on male students’ underachievement and under-participation in their academic studies. Using structured questionnaires, the researchers wished to find out from university students the following:

1. Reasons why female students performed better than male students in classes;
2. Their views relating to the impact of cultural aspects on academic achievement;
3. their views on why male students under-participated in education;
4. Their views on available learning support for male students at their universities;

5. Their views on students' learning task attitudes, beliefs, hopes, and behaviours that influenced their academic achievement.

In focus group discussions, the researchers ascertained University students' views on the male students' underachievement and under-participation in their studies by asking them questions on:

1. Whether they agreed with the view that male university students were less motivated than female students to work at academic tasks,
2. Whether female students worked harder than male students,
3. Whether the socialization (i.e., the upbringing) of male students promoted underachievement in education at the universities,
4. Why more male students than female students took longer to graduate from universities, and on
5. Suggestions students had regarding how male students could be supported by universities, lecturers and communities in order to improve their academic achievement.

### Literature review

In their book *the African Experience with Higher Education*, Ajayi et al. (1996), argued in support of gender equality in higher education that benefited women. In their view, because women's representation in the majority of African Universities was dismal, there was an urgent need to create awareness of this disparity. According to them, doing this was crucial because women's participation in higher education would promote democracy and socio-economic development in African countries.

Currently, in countries such as Botswana, Lesotho, Eswatini and Namibia, these arguments should be made in support of men's participation in higher education (UNESCO, 2012, 2016, 2020, 2022a; 2024; Reeves, 2022). This should be the case because according to UNESCO (2022a, p.14), "at the global level, almost no country with data has achieved gender parity at the tertiary level. The gender parity index data in 2019 for tertiary enrolment showed 88 men for every 100 women enrolled at tertiary level." As pointed out in the background section, in Namibia, this proportion is in the range of 30-66 men for

every 100 women enrolled in Higher Education Institutions (e.g., UNAM, 1992-2023). Moreover, arguments in support of men's participation in higher education would be consistent with UNESCO's Education 2030 Framework for Action that has been designed to implement the Sustainable Development Goal 4 whose target 4.3 stipulates that by 2030, the world should "ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university" (UNESCO, 2016, p. 20). T

he researchers ascertained from UNAM's, NUST's and from other Namibian tertiary education institutions' statistical data that the majority of female students academically performed better than their male counterparts. For instance, graduation statistics from UNAM and NUST demonstrated that except in some Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields of study, more female than male students for more than 30 years obtained degrees and other qualifications in various fields of study (UNAM, 1992-2023; NUST, 2016-2020). At UNAM, during this period, more than 66% of the graduates have been women. Based on enrolment figures from the two institutions and from other Higher Education Institutions in the country (National Council for Higher Education, 2018, 2020), the disparity in academic performance between male and female students reflects the fact that more girls than boys qualify from Secondary Schools to enter tertiary education institutions. This is because more boys than girls drop out of primary and secondary schools, in general display lower performance, have lower promotion and survival rates from lower to higher school grades.

Academic performance in the STEM fields of study was a contested area between male and female students in Namibian tertiary education institutions. This was the case because although more male students than female students passed their examinations in some STEM-related subjects, more female than male students passed their examinations in other STEM-related subjects. For instance, some data from UNAM and NUST revealed that for a number of years, more female than male students graduated with qualifications in the medical fields. Specifically, since its inception in 2009, the School of Medicine at UNAM has produced more female than male doctors.

What was uncontested was the fact that Higher Education female students performed substantially better than male students in 2018 in almost all of the non-STEM subjects in which examination results were reported on by almost all Higher Education Institutions in Namibia. An important general implication the researchers deduce from all this is the point that male students' underachievement in education is not displayed in all fields of study. There are STEM-related subjects such as Engineering, Mathematics, Physical Planning and Computer Science in which male students at tertiary education institutions perform academically better than female students (National Council for Higher Education, 2018). This is consistent with research data obtained from universities in Ghana (Quarshie et al., 2023), Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe (UNESCO, 2024), Uganda (Odaga, 2020), Kenya and Rwanda (Hailu et al., 2023) and in universities in Tanzania (Kavenuke & Kinyota, 2023).

Literature in Namibia is scanty on why men underachieve and under-participate in higher education and on why more women than men graduate from higher education institutions. From a global perspective, Reeves (2022) states that women achieve better than men in higher education because they wish to be financially independent from men, they worry about what would happen to them if they were not educated, their appetite for success is higher than that of men and they are more motivated to succeed at university than men. The assertion on motivation is consistent with some of the data the researchers obtained in our study. Consistent with Reeves' (2022) views, Gladwell (2008) argued that success amongst men and women in general and success in education in particular results from hard work, persistence, willingness to learn, help from family members and others as no one succeeds alone and socialization in the family that is conducive to success in life and in education. To elaborate on the matter of socialization, Gladwell (2008) advanced the "concerted cultivation" and the "natural growth" parenting styles.

In the concerted cultivation parenting style, at an early age, children are supported by their parents to go beyond school work and learn through a variety of extra-curricular activities. In these activities, children learn teamwork, how to interact with others,

(including adults such as teachers), how to seek for help and attention if needed, how to be responsible and how to share information. Once acquired, these skills serve as prerequisites for success at any level of education, including higher education. The researchers wondered whether men who underachieved at universities in Namibia utilized these social skills or not. In the natural growth parenting style, parents do not give this type of support to their children who largely depend only on education provided by the school. To relate this to some communities in Africa, for various cultural reasons some parents prefer to enrol more male than female children in school and in universities, (Kavenuke & Kinyota, 2023; Mama, 2003; Quarshie et al., 2023; Odaga, 2020). This is inconsistent with universities in Asia where parents financially support their daughters' university education (Saadat et al., 2022).

The researchers wished to find out how the socialization of some male students promoted their underachievement in education at Namibian universities. Jansen (2017) seemed to imply that to some extent, underachievement in education at South African Universities was due to poverty, financial constraints, medium of instruction and cultural alienation. Welmond and Gregory (2021) made the point that male students tended to be more negatively affected by poverty as a cause of educational underachievement than female students. The opposite is the case in several African universities where female students are reported to perform worse than male students due to financial constraints (Ahuja & Garutsa, 2024; Association of African Universities (AAU), 2006; Odaga, 2020; Hailu et al., 2023). The researchers wished to find out how these factors affected male students' underachievement at Universities in Namibia.

Based on literature from all over the world, Welmond and Gregory (2021) concluded that labour market patterns, social norms and learning, teaching and characteristics of educational systems provided explanations for boys' and men's underachievement and under-participation in higher education. Under the labour market patterns category, the need for immediate employment put more pressure on some men than women to engage in income-generating activities at the time they should be focusing on tertiary education studies. This might lead

them to underperform in their studies. In addition, it was reported that in some Middle Eastern countries some men were not motivated to participate in higher education because this level of education was not needed for successful careers in the civil service. Moreover, in some Middle Eastern countries, University qualifications were not required for employment in the informal sector. Because of this several men from such countries did not desire to pursue higher education studies.

Buhl-Wiggers et al., (2021) and UNESCO (2022b) related educational underachievement amongst boys and girls to labour force participation. Buhl-Wiggers et al. (2021) reported that the gender-gap in academic achievement in favour of girls was wider where boys' labour participation was high, and it was narrower where girls' labour force participation was high. In tandem with this, UNESCO (2022b) reported that in Lesotho where a pastoralist economy was practised, several boys either educationally underachieved or dropped out of school to become herd boys and look after livestock. The researchers wondered whether these labour market-related reasons could be used to explain educational underachievement and under-participation in higher education that is demonstrated by several men in Namibia. With respect to social norms, Welmond and Gregory (2021) provided research evidence indicating that lack of parental oversight over boys' or young men's academic activities led to their underachievement in school and in higher education. Notwithstanding this, fathers' influence in their sons' education was context sensitive. It was not influential in countries where the upbringing and education of children was the responsibility of mothers. This was so in the Middle Eastern and North African countries. In such countries, it would be inappropriate to use the absence of fathers from households as an explanation for boys' and men's educational underachievement.

In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, gender-segregated education systems are used. In these systems they have gender-segregated schools where male teachers teach only at boys' schools and female teachers teach only at girls' schools. Research evidence (Welmond & Gregory, 2021) has shown that this arrangement does not solve boys' and young men's educational underachievement.

Regarding explanations of boys' and men's educational underachievement due to learning and teaching processes, Welmond and Gregory (2021) discussed the following research-based issues.

Firstly, they indicated that the literature they reviewed revealed that background cognitive and affective knowledge and skills, engagement in the learning process, learner interests and learner attention influenced academic achievement. Boys and men tend to educationally underachieve when their prior knowledge and skills, interests and what attracted their attention were not considered in teaching. UNESCO (2018) indicated that unbiased curricula and textbooks and sensitization of teachers and lecturers about the needs and interests of boys and men at schools and universities might mitigate all this.

Secondly, it was observed that boys and men who educationally underachieved were less motivated than girls and women. This was so because such boys and men were less likely to report that they desired top assessment grades, less likely to be anxious about their grades, and less likely to report that they expected to complete their university studies. In addition, Martin (2004) reported that whereas Australian girls were assessed to be higher than boys in learning focus, planning, study management and persistence, boys were assessed higher than girls in self-sabotage or self-handicapping. All this was consistent with the work of Saadat et al. (2022) who reported that female university students in Asian countries performed better than male students because they were more motivated and held positive attitudes towards learning. Among other things, our task was to find out whether University students who educationally underachieved in Namibia displayed these characteristics.

Thirdly, student engagement in learning was influenced by the learning environment, the curriculum, assessment, instruction, classroom leadership and management. Each of these could either support or undermine boys' and men's educational under-performance. To promote boys' and men's educational achievement, it has been proposed that educational institutions should employ a cadre of teachers (lecturers) "with skills to move beyond mere curriculum delivery to engaging students, assessing for understanding, and employing effective pedagogies to meet students' needs" (Melmond & Gregory, 2021,

p. 27). FAWE (2015) and Kyei (2021) argued that issues that influence women's educational underachievement at several African universities should go beyond what happens in the classroom and include learning environmental factors such as sanitation, security, sexual harassment, access to reproductive health services, family responsibilities and incidences of gender based violence at university campuses. The researchers wished to find out from sampled University students whether these pedagogical and social factors influenced academic performance of men and women at university campuses in Namibia.

## **Methodology**

### **Research design**

The researchers used a pragmatic parallel mixed methods design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were concurrently collected. The researchers used the case study design when answering qualitative research questions.

### **Sample**

The researchers used the systematic sampling technique to collect data from the University of Namibia (UNAM), the Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST) and the International University of Management (IUM) students. Quantitative questionnaire data were collected from 807 students whose mean age was 23.4 years. Whereas 44.7% of the students were male, 55.3% of them were female. Although 807 students from these Universities provided quantitative data, 45 of them who constituted five focus groups yielded qualitative data.

### **Research instruments**

For the quantitative part of the study, the researchers used structured questionnaires and for the qualitative part, they used interview guides and data recorders.

### **Procedure**

After obtaining permission to have access to tertiary education institutions and after making logistical arrangements, the researchers administered questionnaires to sampled students from the three educational institutions. Researchers also undertook focus group discussions amongst sampled students. With the consent of sampled students, the

researchers used data recorders to record proceedings of focus group discussions.

### **Research ethics**

The study only commenced after receiving institutional ethical clearance and approval from the University of Namibia Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all sampled students at the beginning of data collection sessions. After explaining the purpose and procedures of the study to them, students were asked to confirm their consent to participate in the study by filling in and signing an informed consent form. Researchers informed sampled students about their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research exercise once participation had begun. Sampled students were informed that their responses to research questions posed in the questionnaires and focus group discussions were to be treated as confidential by not sharing them with individuals who did not belong to the research team. The researchers assured the sampled students that participation in the research would not cause them psychological, emotional, spiritual and physical harm because all research activities would be undertaken humanely and respectfully.

### **Data analysis**

In addition to frequencies, the Chi-square was used to analyse quantitative research data obtained through structured questionnaires. After transcribing and coding focus group discussion data, researchers used typological data analysis and content analysis to analyse the data.

### **Results and their discussions**

In this section, the researchers present and discuss quantitative and qualitative data according to the questions they asked earlier. On the issue of reasons why female students performed better than male students, the majority of the sampled students gave two types of responses. Firstly, they reported that some male students performed worse than female students because they were more frequently absent from their classes than female students. Secondly, the majority of them disagreed with statements which indicated that female students performed better than male students because male students were not focused, were indisciplined, believed that they could be employed without education,

found the universities' curricular boring and irrelevant, were given less attention by lecturers than female students and because they were more affected by family poverty than female students (see Table 1). To us, this implies that some male students' underachievement in their studies was mainly due to absenting themselves from learning

activities. Notwithstanding this, it should be noted that more than 40% of the sampled students agreed that some male students performed worse than female students because they were not focused, they believed they could be employed without higher education qualifications and because they found the University subject matter boring (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Reasons why female students perform better than male students in classes**

In my classes female students perform better than male students, because male students:	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Are not focused.	171	21.2	254	31.5	283	35.1	89	11.0	10	1.2	807	100
Are absent from classes	109	13.5	208	25.8	323	40.0	150	18.6	17	2.1	807	100
Are in-disciplined	178	22.1	338	41.9	175	21.7	91	11.3	25	3.1	807	100
Believe that they can be employed without education	244	30.2	201	24.9	218	27.0	133	16.5	11	1.4	807	100
Find the subject matter boring	132	16.4	299	37.1	273	33.8	88	10.9	15	1.9	807	100
Find the subject matter irrelevant	173	21.4	361	44.7	186	23.0	63	7.8	24	3.0	807	100
Are given less attention by teachers than girls	344	42.6	236	29.2	111	13.8	96	11.9	20	2.5	807	100
Are more affected by family poverty than girls	346	42.9	247	30.6	91	11.3	110	13.6	13	1.6	807	100

With respect to the effect of culture on male students' academic achievement, the majority of the sampled students responded that some male students performed worse than female students **not** because traditionally and culturally, they were allowed to put in minimum effort in education, were allowed to defy authority, were allowed to hold the view that education did not have relevance to their roles in society, and because they were allowed to engage in mischief. To us, these indicators of culture seemed not to have any impact on

some male students' underachievement in their studies. According to Odaga (2020), this interpretation is inconsistent with what happens in Uganda where culturally patterned constructions of gender roles, duties and obligations privileged more men than women to be educated at higher education institutions.

According to Table 2, some male students underachieved in their studies because they under-participated in activities that would promote their academic achievement. The majority of sampled students confirmed this by

reporting that more male students dropped out of universities or vocational training centres than female students, more male students left tertiary education institutions because of misbehaviour than female students, more female students completed their University education than male students, more female students than male students participated in psychosocial development programs (e.g., clubs and professional societies), and because

more female students participated in class learning activities than male students. In addition, the majority of sampled students disagreed that male students' energy and participation were stifled by the structured nature of university classrooms (see Table 2). The researchers interpret all this to mean that some male students' lack of participation in learning events led to their underachievement.

**Table 2: University students' views on why boys under-participated in their studies**

According to my experience as a student:	Responses											
	Strongly disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly agree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
More male students drop out of university or college than female students	141	17.5	170	21.1	277	34.3	206	25.9	13	1.6	807	100
More male students leave the tertiary institution because of misbehaviour than female students	78	9.7	148	18.3	377	46.7	190	23.5	14	1.7	807	100
More female students complete their University education than male students	69	8.6	170	21.1	294	36.4	251	31.1	23	2.9	807	100
More female students than male students participate in psychosocial development programs (e.g., clubs and professional societies)	83	10.3	177	21.9	326	40.4	204	25.3	17	2.1	807	100
More male students participate in sport activities than female students	44	5.5	84	10.4	280	34.7	370	45.8	29	3.6	807	100
More female students participate in class learning activities than male students	83	10.3	216	26.8	306	37.9	175	21.7	27	3.3	807	100
Male students' energy and participation are stifled by the structured nature of University classrooms	135	16.7	367	45.5	205	25.4	79	9.8	21	2.6	807	100

The researchers predicted that some male students would underachieve in their studies because of not being provided with adequate

learning support at the universities. This prediction was supported when sampled students asserted that some male students were



given less psycho- social support than female students, they were more susceptible to engage in toxic entertainment (alcohol and drug abuse) than female students and because lecturers were more willing to support female students in learning activities than male students (see

Table 3). It is essential that those male students who underachieve in education because they abuse alcohol and drugs are provided with rehabilitation services and facilities by universities.

**Table 3: University students’ views on available learning Support in their tertiary education institutions**

Male students academically perform worse than female students because:	Responses											
	Strongly agree		agree		disagree		Strongly disagree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Male students are given less psycho-social support at the University than female students	139	17.2	206	25.5	297	36.8	145	18.0	20	2.5	807	100
The fact that male students are expected to “grow up” and fend for themselves early stifles their self-esteem	128	15.9	207	25.7	297	36.8	147	18.2	28	3.5	807	100
Male students are more susceptible to engage in toxic entertainment (alcohol & drug abuse) than female students	142	17.6	334	41.4	223	27.6	87	10.8	21	2.6	807	100
Lecturers are more willing to support female students than male students in learning activities	318	39.4	305	37.8	96	11.9	62	7.7	26	3.2	807	100

The researchers expected that some male students would academically underachieve because of engaging in behaviours and activities that would undermine that achievement. Some of the data the researchers obtained supported this expectation because the majority of the sampled university students affirmed that female students were more collaborative on learning tasks than male students, male students preferred to work in isolation than female students, female students were more eager to share academic

information than male students, male students did not care about their academic achievement and that they were less concerned about their future (see Table 4). It is reasonable to expect some male students to underachieve if they disengage themselves from learning activities, do not cooperate with others when learning, and do not care whether they succeed in learning (Reeves, 2022; Welmond & Gregory, 2021; UNESCO, 2022a; Ngugi wa Thiongó, 1986).

**Table 4: University students' views on male students' task behaviours, attitudes, beliefs and hopes**

Study habits:	Responses											
	Strongly agree		agree		disagree		Strongly disagree		No response		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Male students spend less time on academic activities than female students	131	16.2	137	17.0	318	39.4	197	24.4	24	3.0	807	100
Male students are more disengaged than female students on class activities given by female Lecturers	249	30.9	345	42.8	143	17.7	48	5.9	22	2.7	807	100
Female students are more collaborative on learning tasks than male student	127	15.7	249	30.9	331	41.0	76	9.4	24	3.0	807	100
Male students prefer to work in isolation than female students	195	24.2	364	45.1	155	19.2	67	8.3	26	3.2	807	100
Female students are more eager to share academic information than male students	149	18.5	286	35.4	243	30.1	92	11.4	37	4.6	807	100
Male students do not care about their academic achievement	181	22.4	269	33.3	204	25.3	121	15.0	32	4.0	807	100
Socialization stifles the male student' ability to express his feelings with regard to the negative consequences of	86	10.7	200	24.8	297	36.8	191	23.7	33	4.1	807	100

his underachievement												
Male students are less concerned about the future	140	17.3	320	39.7	244	30.2	74	9.2	29	3.6	807	100

The researchers applied the Chi-square statistic to make comparisons by students' gender. Whereas more female than male students agreed that male students performed worse than female students because they were not focused (Chi-square = 28.7; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ), and because they were absent from classes more frequently than female students were (Chi-square = 20.8; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ), the majority of both male and female students disagreed that male students performed worse than female students because they were indisciplined (Chi-square = 24.4; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ) and because they believed that they could be employed without education (Chi-square = 34.1; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ). It appears to us that although more sampled male than female students did not acknowledge that some male students' academic underachievement was due to lack of focus on academic tasks and because of absenting themselves from those tasks, it did not mean that these factors did not influence academic underachievement of some male students. Female sampled students thought they did. Similarly, indiscipline and devaluing the employment purchase of education would remain plausible explanations of some male students' academic underachievement whether both male and female sampled students unanimously agreed that this was not the case.

The researchers endorse the comparative data that revealed that the majority of male and female students agreed that more female than male students completed their tertiary education (Chi-square = 37.3; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ) and that the majority of both male and female students agreed that more female than male students participated in psychosocial development (Chi-square = 9.9; df = 3;  $p < .02$ ) because they confirmed what was reported by the frequency data that the researchers discussed above. Whereas the researchers judge the finding that the majority of both male and female students agreed that more female than male students participated in class activities (Chi-square = 41.5; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ) to strengthen the understanding that lack of participation in class activities negatively influences some male students' academic

achievement, they judge the finding that more male than female students agreed that male students were given less psychosocial support at tertiary institutions than female students (Chi-square = 37.5; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ) as a confirmation of what researchers discussed above. This was also the case when more female than male students disagreed that male students spent less time on academic activities than female students (Chi-square = 76.7; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ).

In our view the findings that the majority of both male and female students agreed that male students preferred to work in isolation (Chi-square = 30.2; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ), that the majority of both male and female sampled students agreed that female students were more eager to share academic information than male students (Chi-square = 8.8; df = 3;  $p < .03$ ) and that significantly more female than male students agreed that male students did not care about their academic achievement (Chi-square = 17.5; df = 3;  $p < .001$ ), confirm the interpretation that these factors would undermine some male students' academic underachievement. To triangulate some of the students' quantitative data, the researchers discussed above, they conducted focus group discussions with 45 students from UNAM, NUST and IUM. The discussions pertained to five issues that were listed earlier. The researchers present and discuss data on the five issues as follows:

***Whether University students agreed with the statement that male students who academically underachieved were less motivated than female students***

The researchers surmised from the responses on this aspect that female students were more motivated than male students because they cared about their studies and valued educational success. In contrast, male students did not do this and as a result they underperformed in their studies. In addition, whereas female students were more motivated in education because they wished to be independent from men and acquire their own property by excelling in education and they

wished to demonstrate their equality with men through education, they were also more motivated because they were more passionate about their studies than men. These findings are consistent with findings the researchers referred to in the literature review (Reeves, 2022; Melmond & Gregory, 2021; Martin, 2004; Saadat et al., 2022). From a gender perspective, these findings mean that the fight for equality and independence from men motivated female students to excel in education. For them to succeed, male students could also be motivated to academically achieve by encouraging them to care about their studies.

Notwithstanding all this, it is important to recognize that there were male students who were more motivated than female students because they tended to be competitive and tied their status in society to success in education. The researchers noted that these motivational anchors were less stable because they were not intrinsic but extrinsic (i.e., contextual) and therefore dependent on external influences. Because the motivational anchors female students used were mainly intrinsic, they would lead to stable academic achievement that would be context independent.

#### ***Whether female students worked harder than male students***

The researchers gleaned from the responses that female students worked harder than male students because of fear of being ostracized by their parents who required them to succeed in education. Such parents, however, did not hold a similar requirement for male students. In addition, it was reported that “female students worked harder than male students because they feared dropping out of the University”. It would appear that male students who underachieved in their studies were not held accountable for their studies by their parents and they were not afraid of the prospect of dropping out of the university. It was further reported that female students worked harder because they expended more effort on their studies, were persistent and cared about their success in education. In contrast, male students did not care whether they succeeded in education. As a result, they underperformed. This interpretation makes sense because it was reported that “female students worked harder because they were more responsible than male students and took their studies seriously”. However, male students worked less hard

because they abused alcohol, did not value academic success and expended little effort in their studies (Mungoo, 2017).

#### ***How the socialization (i.e. the upbringing) of male students could promote underachievement in education at the universities***

The researchers learnt from the focus group discussions that “because of employing socialization laxity, some parents pampered male students and allowed them to do whatever they wished to do”. As a consequence of this, some male students learnt to behave in a ‘layback’ manner, did not manage their time well but wasted it on entertainment activities such as playing soccer and did not focus on education. All this led to underachievement in their studies. This interpretation is consistent with Gladwell’s (2008) assertion that one of the sources of success in education is the employment of the concerted cultivation parenting style that the researchers referred to in the literature review section.

It was reported that some male students underachieved at the university because they were encouraged by their families to start taking responsibility early as part of their training for assuming the role of ‘head of household’. To encourage the male students to do this they were provided with insufficient money for upkeep by their families. To supplement the insufficient funds, the male students involved worked part-time and /or ran businesses. Although this might undermine academic achievement, it could in fact promote the development of the spirit of entrepreneurship amongst the male students (AAU, 2006).

#### ***Why more male than female students took longer to graduate from universities***

The researchers gleaned from the sampled students’ responses that some male students took too long to graduate because they were not serious with their studies, they missed tests and assignments, lectures, were not organized, were not focused on education, and they engaged in too many non-educational activities such as trying to make money to support themselves and their families and run businesses they engaged in as they studied. It seems to us that the combination of disorganization, irresponsibility, and over-exerting oneself produced academic

underachievement in some male students who underachieved. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that some male students did not mature early (Reeves, 2022), goofed around and wasted their parents' money socializing instead of studying. From a university curriculum point of view, it was reported that some male students underachieved because they failed to cope with too crowded University programmes with too many modules, were forced by their families to study what they did not wish to study, took courses that were too hard for them and because they were forced by their sponsors to study courses that were too difficult for them. To us these problems could be ameliorated through revamped academic guidance and counselling that Deans of Students' offices and the Registrars' offices could offer at the universities.

The universities' role here should be to mobilize resources from the private sector, academic foundations and other sources to finance the education of male and female students in need. In addition, government funding should, in an affirmative action fashion partly be disbursed according to the financial standing of male and female students. Those students from poverty-stricken families should be prioritized for financial support (Jansen, 2017).

***Suggestions students made regarding how male students could be supported by universities, lecturers and communities in order to improve their academic achievement***

The researchers distilled a number of messages from the focus group discussions. Firstly, it was affirmed that universities should have guidance and counselling programmes that would encourage male students to focus on education and not drop out from universities to get jobs that did not require much education. Such programmes should instil in the young men the value of education and why it was important to be educated in the modern world. Secondly, as was pointed out in the literature review section (Melmond & Gregory, 2021) some male students underachieved because they were provided with educational services of low quality. To remove this barrier to academic achievement, sampled students proposed that universities should employ competent and inspirational lecturers. Not only should such lecturers be inspirational in their teaching, but they should also understand their

subject matter. To ensure that this takes place, Universities should recruit competent and knowledgeable lecturers. Thirdly, it was also suggested that the adage: 'if you educate a woman, you educate the nation' should be complemented by the adage: 'if you educate men and women, you educate the *entire* nation'. This change would communicate to male students the message that their achievement in education is as valuable to society as that of their female counterparts.

Fourthly, to provide male students with community male role models of repute, it was suggested that men should not be given leadership positions if they did not qualify to hold them. This should be done to prevent the spirit of entitlement developing in the male students. This would motivate and inspire male students to work hard at the universities—especially when they see that *qualified* people, including women get the leadership positions. The point here is that occupational, academic, political and social positions earned on *merit* would be a source of inspiration to male mentees than those which are obtained through corruption. Fifthly, parents as members of the community should regularly monitor the academic records of their sons at the Universities to ensure that they were in fact focused on education. They should not wait until their sons drop out of the universities (Saadat et al., 2022).

Sixthly, the researchers discerned from the students' responses that male students' learning should be monitored more closely by lecturers. This would enable lecturers to identify male students with learning or other problems early and support them to work through their problems. In order to engage with their students, lecturers should use e-learning platforms at their universities to monitor their students' work and interact with them. This would enable lecturers to motivate their students and find out if they were having learning problems (Khan, 2024).

**Conclusion**

The researchers were baffled by the fact that although gender disparity in academic achievement that favoured females had existed in public and private Namibian tertiary education institutions for more than three decades, little had been done by the educational system in general and by the Higher Education Institutions in particular to attend to the issue. To create awareness on the

matter and to propose ways of doing something about it, the researchers conducted the Namibian boys' underachievement and under-participation in education research study (Zimba et al., 2023). The results of this study revealed that at tertiary education level, male students who educationally underachieved displayed a variety of scholastic, cultural and attitudinal needs that should be addressed by tertiary education institutions. The researchers hope that Educational Policy makers, university lecturers, university Vice Chancellors, parents, Namibian community members, and other educational stakeholders who read this article will be inspired to implement the university students' suggestions and the initiatives they have proposed with the aim of ameliorating boys' and men's educational underachievement in schools and in universities. Doing this would be consistent with Ngugi wa Thiongó's (1986, pp. x-xi) assertion that "any work... is not the result of an individual genius but the result of a collective effort".

Based on the background and literature review provided earlier, the researchers are aware that the interventions to ameliorate men's educational underachievement at higher education institutions in Namibia that researchers have proposed are inconsistent with interventions that have been advanced in several African countries where gender disparity in academic achievement, access, participation and representation in higher education is in favour of males. In such countries, the main focus of the interventions is on women's access to STEM fields of study, female representation and participation in higher education, and on advocating for equitable policy, staffing, leadership reforms in higher education to mitigate women's limited participation in the sector (AAU, 2006; FAWE, 2015; Hailu et al., 2023; Kavenuke & Kinyota, 2023; Mama, 2003; Mdlenleni et al., 2021; Quarshie et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2024). Our main argument in this article is that based on our findings, the focus of the interventions in Namibia should be on enhancing men's educational achievement, access to, participation and representation in higher education.

### **Recommended interventions**

Based on the results and discussions, the researchers highlight the following recommended interventions:

- To increase male students' enrolments in tertiary educational institutions, universities in collaboration with the Ministries of Education and other education stakeholders should put in place programmes aimed at supporting schools in their efforts to prevent boys from dropping out of school, to increase boys' survival and promotion rates, to reduce boys' school leaving rates, to reduce boys' failure rates and to reach out to parents of boys who may keep them out of school because of not valuing education.
- Tertiary education teacher preparation institutions in collaboration with Regional Educational Directorates, and the National Institute for Educational Development should organize decentralized in-service online and offline school and classroom/lecture room instructional management workshops and meetings to empower primary school teachers, secondary school teachers and lecturers on how to reach and teach boys and men who underachieve in education.
- Universities should include in their teacher preparation programmes modules on how pre- and in-service teachers could reach out to male students, meet their peculiar learning needs and mentor academic work habits that promote men's academic achievement. In addition, the researchers recommend that the existing teaching and learning improvement programmes that some Universities have should be adapted to include targeted in-service teacher empowerment projects on the teaching and learning of boys in primary and secondary schools.
- Universities should establish and use support groups and support programmes for male students. To effect this, lecturers should identify male students who underachieve and work with them in support groups such as tutorials.
- Universities should provide counselling and guidance services tailored to the needs of male students. Professionals such as therapists, psychologists and social workers could be deployed by universities to guide and counsel male students on their studies, alcohol and drug abuse and on career aspirations. This would be important because our data revealed that several male students who underachieved in education did so because they abused alcohol and

drugs. In addition, such programmes would encourage male students to focus on education and not drop out from universities to get jobs that did not require much education.

- Universities should mobilize material support for less privileged male students. This could include sourcing beds, mattresses, study materials, reading and writing study tables, solar-powered reading lamps and other basic provisions from the private sector and distribute them amongst male students who live in poverty-stricken informal settlements. In addition, the researchers recommend that to support the education of male students under financial strain, Universities should source scholarships for them from different kinds of donors such as philanthropic educational foundations, UN agencies on education (e.g., UNICEF and UNESCO), the Africa Development Bank and the World Bank.
- Universities should establish mentorship programmes for male students. In such programmes, seminars, conferences and workshops could be organized to raise awareness on the need to support male students' education and on coming up with effective strategies on how such support should be provided. To be effective, male students should be actively involved in such programmes.
- The word of God should be used to guide male students about what is expected of them not only in education but in life as well. This would be particularly wise when making decisions about what was right and what was wrong when engaging in socializing activities.
- Universities should, in collaboration with community agencies, NGOs, faith-based organizations and government entities on gender, establish and operate empowerment programmes for male students. Such programmes should promote gender equity in education that would highlight both female and male student educational support challenges and their ameliorative strategies.

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