

Navigating Dual Roles: Understanding the Experiences of Pregnant Students Juggling Academia and Parenthood at Mountains of the Moon University, Uganda

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Abstract: This study examines the experiences of pregnant students balancing academic responsibilities with pregnancy and impending parenthood at Mountains of the Moon University (MMU), Uganda. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected between July and August 2024 from 12 participants recruited through snowball sampling: 11 pregnant students, who provided written responses to a semi-structured guide and a university counselor, who was interviewed as a key informant. The data were analyzed through manual thematic coding. The findings reveal that pregnant students experience physical discomfort, fatigue, and health-related absences that disrupt class attendance and the completion of assignments, alongside stigma from some lecturers and peers, emotional strain, and financial pressure. The university has no policy that specifically addresses pregnant students; its gender policy is silent on their needs, leaving students dependent on the discretion of individual lecturers and support staff without a structured framework to work from. The findings suggest that support at the university is discretionary rather than rights-based, reflecting a national policy framework that addresses pregnancy in schools but not in universities. Students cope mainly through peer and family support and personal determination, but because such informal support is unevenly available, it cannot substitute for institutional measures. The study recommends a dedicated support framework for pregnant students, including maternity leave, flexible deadlines and schedules, and alternative assessments, alongside training for faculty, counselors, and health staff, and structured peer support. These measures can foster a more equitable academic environment in which pregnant students can pursue their studies while preparing for parenthood.

Keywords: academia and parenthood; challenges and coping mechanisms; inclusivity in higher education; pregnant students; university policies for pregnant students

1 Background

Higher education plays a critical role in providing individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for success in the labor market. However, access to higher education is shaped by a

variety of structural practices and policies that can hinder participation, particularly for women. Although women's representation in both the labor market and academia has steadily increased, their journey through higher education is still marked by socio-economic and cultural barriers that can limit their full potential (Hailu et al., 2023). Pregnant students, in particular, face unique challenges, such as gender inequality, socio-economic adversity, and neglect of their psychological and physical needs, which can significantly impede their academic success (Espiritu et al., 2023; Sebastián-González et al., 2023).

The increasing participation of women in higher education is facilitated by initiatives that support women's empowerment and gender equality (Hailu et al., 2023). These efforts emphasize education as a tool for promoting gender equality and expanding women's agency and choices in their personal, social, and public lives (Maluleke et al., 2023). Despite these advancements, pregnant students face compounded difficulties that are often overlooked within academic settings. The transformation that comes with impending parenthood, combined with academic pressures, can disrupt their educational pursuits. This intersection of academic responsibilities and personal changes necessitates a more comprehensive approach to supporting pregnant students in higher education (Hillier, 2023; Riley & Garner, 2024).

Many universities worldwide are committed to providing inclusive education that serves a diverse student body, including students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as mature-age entrants, students in employment, first-generation students, and student parents, including pregnant students (Tumuheki et al., 2024). This inclusivity is vital in preparing students for an increasingly diverse and multicultural global workforce. However, while universities address the needs of many marginalized groups, the specific challenges faced by pregnant students remain inadequately addressed. These students often encounter physical, emotional, and financial challenges that are not visible within traditional academic support frameworks (Sebastián-González et al., 2023). It is therefore imperative for universities to acknowledge the particular challenges faced by pregnant students and to ensure that they receive the support necessary to continue their studies successfully.

The social exclusion of pregnant students in academia has significant implications for gender equality. Pregnant and parenting students often experience marginalization, which affects not only their academic participation but also their future career opportunities (Ajayi et al., 2023). Understanding the experiences of pregnant students within academia is crucial for developing inclusive learning environments that promote gender equality and ensure equal opportunities for all students. These students face a unique set of challenges that add complexity to their academic journey and require tailored support to navigate the demands of pregnancy and parenthood alongside their educational goals (Diab & Bulani, 2023; Frimpong-Manso et al., 2022). Without such support, pregnant students are at risk of falling behind or dropping out of their programs (Riley & Garner, 2024).

Supporting pregnant students is not only a matter of institutional practice but also of social justice. Access to education is a right recognized in international human rights law, including the obligation to eliminate discrimination against women in education (United Nations, 1979), and gender equality in education is a global commitment under Sustainable Development Goals 4 and 5 (United Nations, 2015). When pregnancy leads to the interruption or abandonment of higher education, it is predominantly women who bear the consequences, reinforcing existing gender gaps in qualifications, income, and representation in public and professional life. Gender

equality therefore requires that the responsibilities of pregnancy and childcare do not fall on women alone, and that women are not forced to choose between education and motherhood.

In Uganda, the legal and policy framework broadly supports gender equality in education. The 1995 Constitution guarantees women equal rights and provides for affirmative action to redress historical imbalances (Government of Uganda, 1995), and female applicants to public universities receive additional entry points, a measure that has increased women's enrolment (Odaga, 2019). The Uganda Gender Policy further commits the state to addressing gender inequalities across sectors (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2007). Pregnancy nevertheless remains a major cause of interrupted education: nearly one in four young women aged 15–19 has begun childbearing (Uganda Bureau of Statistics [UBOS], 2023). The government's main policy response, the Revised Guidelines for the Prevention and Management of Teenage Pregnancy in School Settings, sets out procedures for pregnancy prevention and the re-entry of young mothers, but it applies to schools rather than universities (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020). To our knowledge, no equivalent national framework exists for pregnant students in higher education, leaving the matter to individual institutions. Uganda's gender policies have therefore focused largely on increasing women's access to university, while the conditions that enable pregnant students to remain and succeed once enrolled have received far less attention.

This study explores the experiences of pregnant students at Mountains of the Moon University (MMU) in Fort Portal City, Uganda, with a particular focus on their resilience and resourcefulness in navigating the academic challenges they face. By revealing the hidden realities of pregnant students, the study aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive policies that support gender equality and ensure that pregnant students can continue their education without compromise. Through this research, we aim to shed light on the intersection of gender, education, and social support in fostering an inclusive academic environment (Hillier, 2023; Tumuheki et al., 2024).

2 Problem Statement

An ideal education system ensures equitable access to opportunities and resources for all students, fostering inclusivity regardless of gender, socio-economic background, or life circumstances. In Uganda, the government has implemented affirmative action policies aimed at increasing female enrollment and retention in higher education (Odaga, 2019). Despite these efforts, pregnant students face unique challenges that hinder their academic progress and overall well-being due to the lack of a structured support system. These challenges, such as stigmatization, limited institutional support, and the dual burden of academic responsibilities and impending motherhood, remain largely unaddressed. This situation highlights a significant gap between the government's policy intentions and the lived realities of pregnant students in higher education institutions such as Mountains of the Moon University.

Although strides have been made to promote gender equity (Hailu et al., 2023), the experiences and support needs of pregnant students in Ugandan universities remain underexplored, leaving policymakers and educators ill-equipped to implement effective solutions. The absence of structured support systems not only contributes to dropout and poor academic performance among pregnant students but also perpetuates broader gender inequalities in education (Kakuru, 2022). Addressing this gap requires a deeper understanding of their lived experiences, coping strategies, and institutional needs. By investigating these dimensions, this study provides

insights that can inform the development of tailored interventions and policies, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable academic environment for pregnant students in higher education.

3 Research Objectives

1. To investigate the experiences of pregnant students juggling academia and impending parenthood at MMU.
2. To find out the available policies and support systems for pregnant students at MMU.
3. To assess the effect of pregnancy on students' academic undertakings at MMU.

4 Research Questions

1. What experiences do pregnant students juggling academia and impending parenthood go through at MMU?
2. Which policies and support systems does the university have for accommodating the unique needs of pregnant students?
3. What effect does pregnancy have on students' academic undertakings at MMU?

5 Literature Review

Pregnant students in higher institutions of learning face compounded challenges that are not adequately addressed by existing institutional structures. Tumuheki et al. (2024) argue that despite the increasing enrollment of non-traditional students in Ugandan universities, academic environments remain largely unchanged and often overlook the specific needs of these students, a gap that extends to pregnant students. The lack of institutional support for pregnant students highlights the deep-rooted bias against motherhood in academia, a bias that persists, as studies from the United States show, despite the growing visibility of female academic staff who balance motherhood and professional roles (Riley & Garner, 2024). Pregnancy, whether planned or unplanned, continues to push many young women out of education, leaving them without the resources or frameworks needed to support their academic pursuits while navigating the complexities of parenthood. As noted by Cunningham (2024) in the United States, pregnant students in higher education often feel stigmatized, and this sense of alienation intensifies their vulnerability in an academic environment that is ill-equipped to cater to their unique needs, a pattern also reported in South Africa (Maluleke et al., 2023).

The intersection of academia and impending parenthood further complicates the academic experience for pregnant students, as they are tasked with balancing academic deadlines alongside the physical demands of pregnancy. In the Philippines, Espiritu et al. (2023) describe the physical and emotional toll that pregnancy takes on students, including the stress of managing prenatal appointments while maintaining academic performance. According to a study on academic mothers in Ontario in Canada, Hillier (2023) underscores these difficulties by exploring the challenges of academic mothers who must navigate graduate studies, family life, and societal expectations, all while dealing with the physical strains of pregnancy and the stigma associated with it. Similarly, in a study of doctoral students in the United States, Mirick and Wladkowski (2018) point out that pregnancy and motherhood within academia often lead to feelings of disgrace and isolation, as these experiences do not conform to the traditional academic "norm." The silence around pregnancy and parenting in academic settings further exacerbates these feelings, leaving pregnant students to struggle in an environment that marginalizes their experiences (Fischer, 2024; Mirick & Wladkowski, 2018). This silence

creates a pervasive culture of stigmatization, forcing pregnant students to conceal their pregnancies or downplay their responsibilities as mothers.

The logistical and emotional challenges faced by pregnant students are compounded by societal and academic pressures. According to Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022), in a study from Ghana and Uganda, pregnant students face physical discomfort, emotional stress, financial difficulties, and difficulties accessing necessary healthcare services. These barriers are further intensified by the gendered expectations surrounding motherhood, which place additional responsibilities on mothers to fulfill both academic and familial roles. In Uganda, these expectations are shaped by social norms that position childbearing as central to women's social status while assigning most childcare and domestic work to women (Kakuru, 2022). At the same time, pregnancy outside marriage is often treated as a moral failing, so that pregnant students may encounter judgment from family, peers, and staff rather than practical support (Kakuru, 2022). Such norms help explain why responses to student pregnancy tend to be informal and discretionary: pregnancy is frequently regarded as a private or family matter rather than as an issue of educational equity requiring institutional policy. The increasing number of pregnant students in higher institutions of learning necessitates a closer examination of their experiences, particularly within the context of graduate and undergraduate studies. As Hillier (2023) highlights, the disproportionate division of domestic labor and the "invisible load" of motherhood create tensions for pregnant students, who struggle to meet the conflicting demands of being an ideal student and an ideal mother. These tensions underscore the need for institutions to understand the unique challenges pregnant students face and to develop policies and support systems that allow them to succeed both academically and personally.

Research also reveals that many pregnant students cope with these challenges through the support of peers, family, and their own resilience, though such coping mechanisms do not entirely eliminate their struggles. Cunningham (2024), Riley and Garner (2024), and Fischer (2024) observe that while peer and family support can offer some respite, it is not enough to counteract the broader systemic issues faced by pregnant students. The absence of a supportive academic landscape, in which pregnancy and parenthood are acknowledged and accommodated, means that pregnant students continue to operate within an environment that is not conducive to their success. This gap in support is particularly evident at Mountains of the Moon University in Fort Portal, Uganda, where the experiences of pregnant students remain under-documented and largely overlooked. It is crucial to bring these experiences to light in order to understand the unique barriers pregnant students face and to advocate for institutional changes that can better support them in their academic journeys.

Hillier (2023) suggests that universities must move beyond their traditional academic models and adopt policies and interventions that recognize the complexities of balancing pregnancy and parenthood with academic responsibilities. Much of this literature, however, originates from North American contexts, where legal protections require universities to accommodate pregnant students. No comparable legal mandate applies to higher education in Uganda, which limits the transferability of these findings and underlines the need for context-specific evidence such as that presented in this study.

6 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of pregnant students as they navigated academic responsibilities alongside pregnancy and impending parenthood at MMU, Fort Portal City, Uganda. The study involved 12 participants: 11 pregnant students and

one university counselor. Pregnant students were eligible to participate if they were registered students of MMU, currently pregnant, and aged 18 years or above. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, whereby eligible students helped to identify other students who met the study criteria. The university counselor was included as a key informant to provide an institutional perspective on the experiences and support needs of pregnant students.

Data were collected from July to August 2024 at MMU by a female member of the research team, using a semi-structured guide covering participants' experiences of pregnancy while studying, the challenges encountered in their academic work, available institutional policies and support systems, and the effects of pregnancy on their academic activities. The 11 pregnant students were sent the guide, which they completed in writing as open-ended responses and returned to the researcher. The university counselor was interviewed one-on-one at her office in a session lasting approximately 40 minutes. No audio recordings were made: the students' written responses were retained as submitted, while the counselor's oral responses were documented in detailed notes taken during the interview and written up in full immediately afterward. Participation was voluntary, and the researcher explained the purpose of the study and the nature of participation before obtaining verbal informed consent from all participants.

The data were analyzed through manual thematic coding. The researcher read through the students' written responses and the counselor's interview notes, identified recurring ideas and patterns, and grouped related responses into themes reflecting the participants' experiences. Particular attention was given to academic challenges, social and personal experiences, institutional support, and ways of coping with the demands of pregnancy and academic work. To maintain confidentiality, participants' names were not disclosed; instead, identification codes (R1, R2, R3, and so forth) are used when presenting their responses. The research data were stored on the researcher's password-protected personal computer and Google Drive.

7 Findings

The findings reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by pregnant students as they strive to balance academic responsibilities with the demands of pregnancy. They are presented under five themes: academic challenges, social and personal challenges, gaps in institutional support, coping mechanisms, and the impact of pregnancy on academic performance. Together, these themes provide a detailed understanding of the lived realities of pregnant students and highlight areas where higher education institutions can foster inclusivity and equity.

7.1 Academic Challenges

Pregnant students frequently encounter academic challenges that hinder their ability to engage fully in their studies. Many respondents reported difficulties maintaining class attendance, meeting assignment deadlines, and participating in extracurricular activities due to physical discomfort and emotional strain. One respondent explained:

“Pregnancy has affected my ability to attend class especially during morning hours and afternoon classes... though I prefer morning classes, I always endeavor to attend” (R4, 2024).

Physical discomfort was a common reason for missed classes. Another participant shared:

“Sitting for long hours during lectures causes back pain and swelling of legs... sometimes I miss classes due to fatigue or dizziness” (R2, 2024).

Meeting assignment deadlines also emerged as a recurring issue. While some students managed to meet deadlines, many struggled due to health concerns. One participant reflected:

“I have always tried to complete my assignments though not in time and with a lot of difficulty but I have to endure because I need the degree” (R7, 2024).

Other students relied on extensions to cope. One noted:

“I often need extensions for assignments because my energy levels fluctuate, affecting my productivity” (R5, 2024).

7.2 Social and Personal Challenges

Social and personal challenges also emerged as significant barriers for pregnant students. Respondents reported experiencing stigma and subtle forms of discrimination, often referred to as “academic micro-aggressions.” One participant described feeling marginalized by faculty attitudes:

“Though I haven’t faced any discrimination or stigma from my peers, some lecturers look at someone pregnant with wonder... it makes me feel bad” (R6, 2024).

Peer stigma was also a recurring theme, with one respondent sharing:

“Yes, I have faced some stigma from peers who assume that I am less committed to my studies” (R4, 2024).

The emotional toll of pregnancy further compounds these challenges. Many respondents described feeling overwhelmed by the dual demands of academia and impending parenthood. One participant shared:

“It can be incredibly hectic and overwhelming, especially when my health is not okay or when I have personal problems and at the same time thinking about tuition deadlines” (R3, 2024).

7.3 Gaps in Institutional Support

Institutional support for pregnant students at MMU was found to be inadequate, with many respondents reporting an absence of formal policies addressing their unique needs. One participant noted:

“I’ve not heard of any policies here regarding us pregnant students” (R11, 2024).

Another elaborated:

“I don’t know anything in line with maternity leave for students and no established procedures for assignment extensions... you are at the mercy of that lecturer” (R2, 2024).

This institutional gap was corroborated by the university counselor, who confirmed that while MMU has a gender policy, it does not specifically address the needs of pregnant students: “The gender policy is silent about our support” (University Counselor, 2024). She also pointed to practical shortfalls in the campus environment, including the absence of resting spaces for pregnant students and the risk of malnutrition among those unable to access adequate food. In the absence of a dedicated policy framework, her support was largely limited to informal

guidance and referrals, such as encouraging students to disclose their pregnancies to their parents, offering nutrition and self-care counseling, and referring students with medical needs to appropriate services. Her account suggests that the policy gap identified by students is felt on both sides: students receive no formal accommodation, and support staff have no structured framework to work from, leaving both to rely on individual discretion and goodwill.

7.4 Coping Mechanisms

Despite these challenges, pregnant students demonstrate remarkable resilience through various coping mechanisms. Peer and family support emerged as critical resources. One participant shared:

“My friends take notes for me when I miss class and remind me of deadlines when I feel overwhelmed, which helps a lot” (R6, 2024).

Family support was also highlighted, with one respondent stating:

“My family has been my backbone, especially financially and emotionally. They encourage me to push through even when I feel like giving up” (R3, 2024).

Another participant noted the practical and emotional benefits of open communication with peers:

“I have always been open to my peers. I share with some of them how I feel in case I am not well, and this helps them see how to help me” (R10, 2024).

7.5 Impact of Pregnancy on Academic Performance

Lastly, the impact of pregnancy on academic performance was a dominant theme. Participants described how physical symptoms, emotional stress, and logistical challenges hindered their ability to excel academically. One respondent reflected:

“Balancing coursework with pregnancy has been incredibly hard. Sometimes I can’t even sit through a lecture because of nausea, and deadlines feel like a mountain I can’t climb” (R7, 2024).

Another participant shared:

“Some days, just getting to class feels like an achievement. I often miss deadlines because my schedule revolves around doctor visits and health concerns” (R9, 2024).

8 Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant challenges faced by pregnant students at MMU, reflecting broader issues in higher education. These challenges are rooted in academic, social, and institutional dimensions, with profound implications for equity and inclusivity in academic spaces. This discussion examines these findings in light of existing literature, providing a deeper understanding of the experiences of pregnant students and offering insights into potential interventions.

Academic challenges are a central theme in the experiences of pregnant students, many of whom struggle to maintain consistent attendance, meet deadlines, and participate in class activities. These difficulties, as articulated by respondents R4 and R2, stem from physical discomforts such as fatigue and back pain. This finding is in agreement with Sebastián-

González et al. (2023), who noted that the physical demands of pregnancy often hinder academic participation. Furthermore, the lack of institutional accommodations exacerbates these challenges, as highlighted by Kakuru (2022) in the Ugandan context, pointing to the need for flexible academic policies that prioritize the well-being of pregnant students. The stress and anxiety generated by the pressure to perform under such circumstances have also been reported by Riley and Garner (2024) and Baird (2023), and the students' reliance on extensions supports Sebastián-González et al.'s (2023) call for adaptable academic accommodations.

The emotional and psychological toll of pregnancy adds another layer of complexity to the academic experiences of pregnant students. Respondents such as R3 described feeling overwhelmed by the dual demands of academia and impending parenthood, a sentiment echoed in Hillier's (2023) research on the mental strain faced by pregnant students. This finding underscores the need for universities to provide accessible mental health resources tailored to the needs of pregnant students. Without such support, the stress of balancing these roles can negatively affect both academic performance and personal well-being.

Social challenges, including stigma and subtle discrimination, emerged as significant barriers. Respondents such as R6 and R4 described experiencing "academic micro-aggressions" and peer stigma, which often undermine their confidence and sense of belonging. These findings align with Sebastián-González et al. (2023) and Baird (2023), who identified societal attitudes and unconscious biases as key contributors to the marginalization of pregnant students. Addressing these issues requires a cultural shift within academic institutions, in which inclusivity and empathy are prioritized through awareness campaigns and sensitivity training.

The findings also reveal a tension between Uganda's access-oriented gender policies and the realities of retention. Affirmative action has helped bring more women into university, yet once enrolled, pregnant students encounter an academic environment organized around an implicit "ideal student" who is unencumbered by pregnancy or care responsibilities (Hillier, 2023). Lecturers who "look at someone pregnant with wonder" (R6) and peers who assume pregnant students are "less committed" (R4) enact this norm, while R7's determination to "endure because I need the degree" shows how the burden of adjustment falls on the individual student. Gender equality in higher education therefore cannot be measured by enrolment alone; it also depends on whether institutions adapt to the lives of the women they admit.

Institutional support, or the lack thereof, plays a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of pregnant students. The absence of formal policies, as highlighted by R11 and R2, leaves students reliant on faculty discretion, resulting in inconsistent and inequitable treatment. This finding is consistent with Anderson and Green (2022) and Msipu Phiri et al. (2023), who advocate for explicit institutional policies, including maternity leave and flexible deadlines. The rigidity of institutional structures, as noted by Tumuheki et al. (2024), further compounds these challenges, emphasizing the urgent need for systemic reform. This gap was not only felt by students but also confirmed from within the institution: the university counselor's account that MMU's existing gender policy is silent on pregnant students' needs indicates that support staff themselves are working without a structured mandate, leaving both students and those meant to assist them dependent on informal, ad hoc arrangements.

Beyond confirming existing literature, the findings point to a distinctive pattern in how pregnancy is managed at MMU: support is discretionary rather than rights-based. Students described being "at the mercy of" individual lecturers for extensions, while the counselor,

lacking a policy mandate, relied on informal guidance, including encouraging students to disclose their pregnancies to their parents. Such responses, though well-intentioned, frame pregnancy as a private or family matter to be resolved by the student and her relatives rather than as an institutional responsibility. This mirrors the national policy landscape, in which re-entry procedures exist for schools but not for universities (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2020), suggesting that the gap observed at MMU reflects a broader policy silence rather than an institution-specific oversight.

Despite these challenges, the resilience demonstrated by pregnant students is remarkable. Resilience is broadly understood as a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to a person's adaptation or development, rather than as a fixed personal trait (Masten, 2001). It is also shaped by context: whether a person is able to draw on supportive family, community, or institutional resources plays as large a role in resilient outcomes as any individual quality (Ungar, 2008). Among the participants in this study, peer and family support emerged as critical coping mechanisms, with respondents such as R6 and R3 highlighting the importance of emotional and practical assistance from their networks. This finding aligns with Msipu Phiri et al. (2023) and Sebastián-González et al. (2023), who emphasized the role of supportive relationships in fostering resilience.

However, framing resilience in this way also exposes an important inequity: not every pregnant student has equal access to a supportive family or peer network. Where such support is absent, students are left considerably more exposed to the academic and personal demands of pregnancy, with little to fall back on. Relying on informal, unevenly distributed support therefore risks reproducing disparities among pregnant students rather than resolving them, since students without strong networks are left to manage largely alone. This reliance underscores the inadequacy of informal, individual-level coping as a substitute for institutional measures, reinforcing the need for structured peer mentoring programs and family-inclusive counseling sessions that do not depend on a student's personal circumstances or existing social capital.

Personal motivation and faith also play a significant role in helping pregnant students navigate their challenges. Respondents such as R7 described drawing strength from spirituality and long-term goals, a finding consistent with Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022), who found that young mothers in Ghana and Uganda relied on personal motivation and spirituality to cope with their challenges. While these internal anchors provide a foundation for resilience, they cannot substitute for systemic changes that address the root causes of the challenges faced by pregnant students.

The impact of pregnancy on academic performance is profound, with respondents such as R7 and R9 detailing how physical symptoms, emotional stress, and logistical challenges hinder their ability to excel. These findings are in agreement with Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022), who emphasized the dual burden of academic responsibilities and physical discomfort as significant barriers to success. Addressing these challenges requires tailored interventions, such as flexible schedules and alternative assessment methods, to bridge the gap between policy intentions and lived realities.

Overall, institutions must move beyond ad hoc solutions and develop comprehensive policies that address the structural barriers faced by pregnant students.

9 Conclusion

This study reveals the complex challenges pregnant students face in balancing academic responsibilities with the demands of impending parenthood at MMU, challenges that are likely to be shared by students in similar institutions. These students navigate physical, emotional, and social hurdles that hinder their academic engagement and performance, exacerbated by insufficient institutional support, societal stigma, and the financial and emotional demands of impending motherhood. These gaps reflect not only institutional practice but also a national policy framework that addresses pregnancy in schools while remaining silent on higher education. The findings underscore an urgent need for comprehensive interventions, including flexible policies such as maternity leave, alternative assessment methods, and tailored accommodations. Equally critical is fostering a culture of inclusivity and understanding through counseling services, peer support networks, and faculty training to better address their needs. By implementing these measures, universities can create environments that not only support academic success but also prioritize the holistic well-being of pregnant students. Such initiatives reaffirm the importance of equity in education, enriching the broader academic community, enhancing student retention and engagement, and setting a precedent for inclusivity in higher education.

Recommendations

- Universities should develop customized support systems specifically designed for pregnant students to address their unique challenges, such as maternity leave, flexible arrangements, and class schedules that accommodate their needs.
- Institutions should implement more accommodating policies on deadlines and assessments, allowing for extended deadlines or alternative submission methods. Such measures could alleviate stress and enhance learning outcomes for pregnant students.
- Faculty and staff should receive training on the specific challenges faced by pregnant students, fostering a more supportive and understanding academic environment that prioritizes student well-being.
- Institutions should establish comprehensive support services, including specialized training for counselors and health staff, in line with the counselor's view that such training is necessary to improve care for pregnant students, as well as peer support networks that provide pregnant students with the social and emotional resources they need to manage their academic responsibilities effectively.
- Institutions should encourage ongoing dialogue with pregnant students to understand their challenges better and adjust resources and policies accordingly.
- The Ministry of Education and Sports and the National Council for Higher Education should consider extending national guidance on the management of pregnancy, currently limited to school settings, to higher education institutions.

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