Original Article

Navigating Dual Roles: Understanding the Experiences of Pregnant Students Juggling Academia and Parenthood at a University in Western Uganda

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of pregnant students balancing academic responsibilities and impending parenthood at Mountains of the Moon University, a diverse institution with a growing need to promote inclusivity. Recognising the intersectionality of these dual roles, the research investigated the challenges faced by pregnant students, their coping mechanisms, and the support structures available to them. A qualitative approach was employed, using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions to gather rich data from 10 pregnant students, 5 student mothers (recently delivered within 3 months), the Dean of Students, the university nurse, and the university counsellor, all purposively selected. Findings indicate that pregnant students face academic, social, and emotional challenges, including physical discomfort, stigma, and limited institutional support. Despite these hurdles, they exhibit resilience through peer and family support, personal motivation, and self-care practices. However, the lack of explicit institutional policies such as maternity leave, flexible academic schedules, special examinations, and alternative assessments was cited as a major constraint. Participants stressed the value of informal support systems while revealing gaps in university structures and practices. The study recommends that universities adopt customised policies to accommodate pregnant students' unique needs. It also advocates for faculty and staff training to foster a more empathetic and inclusive academic environment. Furthermore, establishing comprehensive support programs, including counselling services and peer networks, is essential to empower this group. By implementing these measures, institutions can create a more equitable and supportive academic landscape, enabling pregnant students to thrive while managing the responsibilities of motherhood.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a critical role in providing individuals with the necessary skills and knowledge for success in the labour market. However, access to this 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 labour 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 (Alam & Sharmin, 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 (Shang, 2024). These efforts emphasise education as a tool for promoting gender equality and empowering women to contribute meaningfully to society (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 elaborate approach to supporting pregnant students in higher education (Riley & Garner, 2023; Hillier, 2023).

While universities worldwide are committed to providing inclusive education that serves a diverse student body, gaps still exist (Tumuheki, Zeelen, & Openjuru, 2024). This inclusivity is vital in preparing students for a global workforce that is increasingly diverse and multicultural. Some universities, such as the University of Cape Town and the University of Melbourne, have established notable programs supporting marginalized populations such as students with disabilities and Indigenous learners, respectively. However, the specific challenges faced by pregnant students remain inadequately addressed. These students often encounter physical, emotional, and financial difficulties that fall outside the scope of traditional academic support systems (Sebastián-González et al., 2023). Even in universities that support rural or low-income students, pregnant students frequently face systemic barriers, as demonstrated in a Spanish context where institutional support failed to accommodate young pregnant women returning to education (Cascant-Sempere & Pardes-Fuses, 2024). Thus, it is imperative for universities to acknowledge the exceptional challenges faced by pregnant students, ensuring they receive the

necessary support 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 marginalisation, which not only affects their academic participation but also impacts 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, requiring tailored support to navigate the demands of pregnancy and parenthood alongside their educational goals (Diab & Bulani, 2023; Frimpong-Manso et al., 2022; Gadzekpo, 2025).

Pregnant students often must balance rigorous coursework, extracurricular activities, and the impending responsibilities of parenthood. This balancing act requires not only academic resilience but also resourcefulness in managing their personal and academic lives. Without institutional support, these students are at risk of falling behind or dropping out of their programs. Universities must take active steps to address these challenges by implementing policies and resources that support pregnant students' academic journeys while recognising their unique needs and contributions to campus life (Riley & Garner, 2023).

This research project explored 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, this study contributes to the development of more inclusive policies that support gender equality and ensure pregnant students can continue their education without compromise. This research, purposefully sheds light on the intersection of gender, education, and social

support in fostering an inclusive academic environment as advocated for by several authors (Hillier, 2023; Tumuheki et al., 2024).

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 enrolment and retention in higher education (Odaga, 2019). These policies primarily include the provision of additional admission points for female applicants typically 1.5 bonus points during university admissions, as well as reserved quotas and scholarship opportunities for women in underrepresented fields such as science and technology. While these measures have contributed to improved gender representation, they often overlook the specific needs of pregnant students. These students face multiple challenges, including stigmatisation, lack of institutional support, and the dual burden of academic demands and impending motherhood. As a result, their academic progress and well-being are significantly hindered. This situation reflects a persistent gap between policy intentions and the lived realities of pregnant students in higher education institutions like Mountains of the Moon University.

Although strides have been made to promote gender equity in higher education (Hailu et al., 2023), the experiences and support needs of pregnant students in Ugandan universities remain underexplored. This gap leaves policymakers and educators ill-equipped to implement responsive and inclusive interventions. The absence of structured institutional support not only increases dropout rates and academic underperformance among pregnant students but also perpetuates broader gender disparities in education (Kakuru, 2022). Kakuru's (2022) qualitative study revealed that pregnancy-related interruptions are a major contributor to female student attrition, with most

institutions lacking formal systems to support expectant learners. These circumstances often compel students to withdraw temporarily or permanently from academic programs. While disaggregated national statistics on pregnancy-related dropout are scarce, available institutional and qualitative evidence highlights a concerning trend of academic attrition among this group. Notably, Makerere University introduced a Student Work Scheme in 2024 to support financially vulnerable students, enabling over 60 learners to earn flexible income while continuing their studies (Kannyange, 2025). However, such initiatives have not yet been tailored to address the complex needs of pregnant students, whose challenges extend beyond financial hardship. This study, therefore, explored their lived experiences and institutional needs to inform inclusive policies that ensure equitable academic engagement for pregnant learners at Mountains of the Moon University.

Research Objectives

- To investigate the experiences of pregnant students juggling academia and impending parenthood at MMU.

- To find out the available policies & support systems for pregnant students at MMU.

- To explore practical strategies and recommendations for supporting pregnant students' academic success at MMU.

Research Questions

- What experiences do pregnant students juggling academia and impending parenthood go through at MMU?

- Which policies/support systems does the university have for accommodating the unique needs of pregnant students?

- What practical strategies and recommendations can be implemented to better support pregnant students' academic success at MMU?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pregnant students in higher institutions of learning face compounded challenges that are not adequately addressed by existing institutional structures. Shang (2024) argues that despite the increasing enrolment of non-traditional students, including pregnant women, the academic environment in many Ugandan universities remains largely unchanged, often overlooking the specific needs of this group. The lack of institutional support for pregnant students highlights the deep-rooted bias against motherhood in academia. This bias persists despite the growing visibility of female academic staff who balance both motherhood and professional roles (Riley & Garner, 2023). Unintended pregnancies continue to push many young women out of education, leaving them without the necessary resources or frameworks to support their academic pursuits while navigating the complexities of parenthood. As noted by Cunningham (2024), pregnant students in higher education often feel stigmatised, a sense of alienation that intensifies their vulnerability in an academic environment that is ill-equipped to cater to their unique needs (Maluleke et al., 2023).

The intersectionality 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. 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. 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, Saruna (2024) points 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 marginalises their experiences (Fischer, 2024; Hillier, 2023). 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), 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 fulfil both academic and familial roles (Akala et al., 2025; Gadzekpo, 2025). 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 labour 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 resilience. However, such coping mechanisms do not eliminate their struggles. Cunningham (2024), Riley and Garner (2023), 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, where 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 to understand the unique barriers pregnant students face and to advocate for institutional changes that can better support them in their academic journeys.

In order to effectively address the challenges faced by pregnant students, it is necessary to develop a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. Hillier (2023) suggests that universities must move beyond their traditional academic models and adopt policies and interventions that recognise the complexities of balancing pregnancy and parenthood with academic responsibilities. The development of such policies would empower pregnant students, helping them navigate the dual demands of motherhood and academic success. Identifying barriers to educational attainment is critical, especially for those who face additional challenges due to pregnancy and parenting. This research, aimed at documenting the experiences of pregnant students at MMU, seeks to inform the creation of customised support mechanisms that can enhance the academic journey for pregnant students, ensuring they are not left behind due to societal expectations, stigma, or lack of institutional support. By addressing these gaps, the academic community can ensure that pregnant students receive the assistance they need to thrive in academia, fostering an environment of inclusion, equality, and success.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, utilising in-depth, structured interviews to gain rich and detailed insights into the experiences of pregnant students navigating the intersection of academic life and impending parenthood. A total of 18 participants were engaged in the study. These

included 15 university students who were either pregnant or had given birth within three months prior to the data collection period in December 2024 (Semester I, 2024/2025), as well as three key university personnel directly involved in student welfare services: the university counsellor, the dean of students and the university nurse. Participants were purposively selected based on their lived experience of pregnancy while enrolled at Mountains of the Moon University, located in Western Uganda. Inclusion criteria required that students were currently enrolled and had been pregnant during their academic journey, while those who were not enrolled during their pregnancy or who declined consent were excluded. This criterion ensured that the insights gathered reflected both the personal and institutional dimensions of pregnancy-related challenges within a university setting. Ethical approval was secured from the university's research ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Participants were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

A carefully developed interview guide was used to steer conversations around key themes such as academic challenges, university policies, available support systems, and the effects of pregnancy on learning and performance. The interviews were conducted in a private and comfortable setting to ensure openness and trust. To ensure data credibility and trustworthiness, the study applied member checking by summarising key points during interviews for validation and used peer debriefing with an independent researcher familiar with qualitative methods. The qualitative data obtained were analysed using thematic analysis, a systematic approach that facilitated the identification of common themes, patterns, and variations in the students' perceptions. The analysis process involved transcription, coding, categorisation, and theme development. NVivo 12 software was employed to support the coding and organisation of data, enhancing analytical rigour and traceability. By

centring the lived experiences of pregnant students, this study purposed to contribute meaningfully to policy and institutional dialogue towards creating a more inclusive and supportive academic environment in higher learning institutions (HIL), with a case focus on Mountains of the Moon University.

FINDINGS

The findings reveal the multifaceted challenges faced by pregnant students as they strive to balance academic responsibilities with the physical, emotional, and social demands of pregnancy. These challenges are categorised into four thematic areas: academic difficulties, social and personal hurdles, gaps in institutional support, and coping mechanisms. Each category offers insight into the lived realities of pregnant students, highlighting areas where higher education institutions can foster greater inclusivity and equity.

Participant Demographics

The study involved 15 pregnant or recently postnatal university students enrolled at Mountains of the Moon University during Semester I of the 2024/2025 academic year. Participants ranged in age from 19 to above 30 years, with the majority falling between 22 and 25 years (n = 7). They represented all levels of undergraduate study, with the largest group being second-year students (n = 8), followed by those in their third year or beyond (n = 5), and year one (n = 2).

In terms of pregnancy status, 10 participants were pregnant at the time of data collection, while 5 had given birth within the preceding three months. Marital status was relatively evenly split, with 8 participants identifying as single and 7 as married. The study also considered participants' residential arrangements, which revealed that 9 students lived in private rented rooms or group-based hostels, while 6 had relocated to their marital or parental homes for increased support and privacy during or after pregnancy.

A notable feature of the sample is the predominance of in-service students (n = 9), who typically attend weekend or modular classes while balancing academic and employment responsibilities. The remaining 6 were enrolled in regular full-time academic programs. This distinction is important as it influenced the participants' access to academic support and flexibility in learning. The grouped demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Grouped Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 15)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n = 15)
Age	19–21	4
	22–25	7
	26–29	2
	30 and above	2
Year of Study	Year 1	2
	Year 2	8
	Year 3 or above	5
Pregnancy Status	Currently pregnant	10
	Postnatal ($\leq$ 3 months)	5
Marital Status	Single	8
	Married	7
Residence Type	Private hostel/room	9
	Parental/Marital Home	6
Mode of Study	Regular	6
	In-service	9

Academic Challenges

Pregnant students frequently encounter academic challenges that hinder their ability to fully engage 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 participant explained:

"Pregnancy has affected my ability to attend class, especially during morning hours and afternoon classes... Though I prefer morning classes, I always endeavour to attend" (R4, 2024).

This finding aligns with Sebastián-González et al., (2023), who identified physical ailments such as fatigue and back pain as significant barriers to academic participation among pregnant students. 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).

These challenges are consistent with Hillier's (2023) observation that pregnant students often struggle to meet academic expectations due to the dual burden of academic and maternal responsibilities.

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 to graduate in time" (R7, 2024).

The pressure to perform under such circumstances often leads to stress and anxiety, as highlighted by

Riley and Garner (2023) and Baird (2023). Another student noted:

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

This finding resonates with Sebastián-González et al.,'s (2023) advocacy for adaptable academic accommodations, which can empower pregnant students while fostering a supportive educational environment.

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 marginalised 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).

This finding aligns with Sebastián-González et al., (2023), who identified unconscious biases in academic settings as a barrier to meaningful engagement for pregnant students. 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. The other day, it was the counsellor who helped strengthen me when I was totally off" (R4, 2024).

This is consistent with Baird (2023), who noted that societal attitudes often perpetuate the misconception that motherhood and academic success are incompatible.

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).

This aligns with Hillier's (2023) findings on the financial and emotional burdens faced by pregnant students, which often go unnoticed in traditional academic settings.

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. We just struggle to keep going" (R11, 2024).

This finding is in agreement with Anderson and Green (2022) and Msipu et al., (2023), who argue that the absence of structured support systems leaves pregnant students vulnerable to academic disadvantages. Similarly, Shang (2024) highlighted the rigidity of institutional structures in higher education, which often fail to accommodate the needs of non-traditional students.

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).

This finding aligns with Msipu et al., (2023) and Mwakililo et al., 2025, who emphasised the importance of peer networks in fostering a sense of belonging and mutual support. 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).

This finding resonates with Sebastián-González et al., (2023), who identified family involvement as a key factor in mitigating the challenges faced by pregnant students.

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).

This finding is in agreement with Frimpong-Manso et al., (2022), who emphasised 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 ensure that pregnant students can achieve their academic goals without compromising their well-being.

Institutional Support and Stakeholder Perspectives

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 respondent elaborated thus:

"I don't know anything in line with maternity leave/special exams for students and no established procedures for assignment extensions... you are at the mercy of that lecturer. The other day when I was operated on while giving birth, I missed central tests. It was easy for some lecturers to give me a redo while it required a lot of explanation for other lecturers" (R2, 2024).

This finding is in agreement with Anderson and Green (2022) and Msipu et al., (2023), who argue that the absence of structured support systems leaves pregnant students vulnerable to academic disadvantages. Similarly, Shang (2024) highlighted the rigidity of institutional structures in higher education, which often fail to accommodate the needs of non-traditional students.

Institutional stakeholders acknowledged these gaps. The university counsellor confirmed that although policies are lacking, there are growing efforts to push for institutional change:

"We currently have no official framework tailored for pregnant students, but there have been internal conversations with leadership. I've personally advocated for clearer guidelines that protect their academic progress and emotional well-being." (C1, 2024)

"Most times, I assist on a case-by-case basis, which means outcomes depend on how much advocacy we can do individually. It's difficult when students don't even know where to start." (C1, 2024)

"Pregnancy is still viewed as a private matter here, which limits our ability to address it structurally. That must change if we are to support these students effectively." (C1, 2024)

From an administrative standpoint, the Dean of Students expressed concern and acknowledged the absence of formalised procedures, while pointing to emerging momentum for policy development:

"We've seen these challenges over the years, but until recently, no one had systematically documented them. This study gives us a basis to push for action." (C2, 2024) *"If we want students to succeed despite pregnancy, we must go beyond goodwill. We need formal guidelines on attendance, assignment extensions, and health accommodations."* (C2, 2024)

The university nurse, working under the Dean of Students, highlighted a visible rise in pregnancy-related cases and the institutional silence around support pathways:

"I meet many students with pregnancy-related symptoms from dizziness to serious back pain but there's no protocol to support them academically beyond what I can informally recommend. I only provide possible medical attention and refer them where necessary" (C3, 2024)

"Sometimes students come here in distress, unsure whether they should attend class or rest. I can advise medically, but I have no channel to communicate that to academic departments officially." (C3, 2024)

These institutional perspectives echo the experiences of pregnant students and reinforce the urgency of developing formal, accessible, and compassionate frameworks. While there is evidence of individual commitment among support staff, the lack of structural clarity continues to expose pregnant students to academic and emotional vulnerabilities. These findings collectively point to the need for higher education institutions to develop comprehensive policies and support systems that address the unique challenges faced by pregnant students. By fostering an inclusive and supportive academic environment, institutions can empower these students to succeed both academically and personally.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study highlight the complex and often underrepresented challenges faced by pregnant students at Mountains of the Moon University (MMU), echoing wider issues across higher education institutions, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa. These challenges are deeply embedded in academic, social, and institutional structures and disproportionately affect young women navigating the critical transition between youth and adulthood. As institutions continue to champion inclusivity, it becomes increasingly important to recognise pregnancy not as an exception, but as a natural, possible stage in students' lives. This discussion engages with these findings and situates them within current literature, drawing attention to areas requiring immediate attention and long-term reform.

Academic challenges were consistently highlighted as the most pressing concern for pregnant students. Many participants reported difficulties maintaining class attendance, concentrating during lectures, and meeting continuous assessment deadlines due to fatigue, back pain, nausea, and fluctuating energy levels. As expressed by R4 and R2, these experiences are not isolated, but rather symptomatic of an academic system designed with the assumption of uninterrupted student mobility and physical wellness. These findings are strongly supported by Sebastián-González et al., (2023), who observed that physiological changes during pregnancy significantly impede academic functioning. Nguyen et al., (2021) further notes that the absence of flexible academic frameworks in many institutions amplifies the academic stress pregnant students endure, ultimately pushing some to withdraw or underperform. Universities must therefore reconsider rigid schedules and explore more adaptive, student-centred approaches.

The emotional and psychological toll of pregnancy compounds these academic challenges. Pregnant students are not only required to meet academic expectations but are also managing hormonal shifts, anxieties about childbirth, financial uncertainty, and social judgment. R3's narrative of being overwhelmed by tuition deadlines while dealing with poor health encapsulates the precarious balancing act many face. Hillier (2023) underscores that without intentional psychosocial support, pregnant students are vulnerable to burnout, isolation, and depression. This signals the urgent need for embedded mental health services that are sensitive to maternal transitions not only reactive counselling but proactive psychosocial care integrated into student support services. Such an approach would represent a progressive, gender-responsive stance by the university.

Social and interpersonal dynamics further shape the learning experience of pregnant students. Participants like R6 and R4 spoke of subtle but powerful acts of exclusion from lecturers and peers. These "academic micro-aggressions" are often rooted in unconscious bias, the perception that pregnancy signals a loss of seriousness or intellectual competence. The literature reflects this pattern of stigmatisation. Baird (2023) and Sebastián-González et al., (2023) argue that these experiences form part of a gendered academic culture where non-traditional students, particularly those visibly navigating motherhood, are viewed as deviating from normative student identities. Addressing these challenges requires cultural and structural shifts: workshops for staff on inclusive pedagogy, institutional campaigns on student diversity, and embedding anti-discrimination clauses in academic policy.

Institutional support or the lack thereof emerged as a critical theme with wide-reaching consequences. Respondents R11 and R2 voiced frustration with the absence of maternity-related academic policies. Their experiences reveal a systemic gap: while higher education welcomes students from reproductive age groups, it remains unprepared to support them when pregnancy occurs. As confirmed by C1, the university counsellor, there are no official guidelines for maternity leave, assignment deferrals, or health-related class exemptions. This leaves students vulnerable to inconsistent, discretionary treatment by individual lecturers. Anderson and Green (2022), as well as Msipu et al., (2023), have documented this absence of formalised protection across many African universities, calling for the urgent institutionalisation of flexible study pathways. Shang (2024) adds that the rigidity of existing university structures is incompatible with the lived realities of student-mothers and must be urgently reformed if equity is to be achieved.

Stakeholders within the university acknowledged the systemic gaps and, in some cases, expressed the will to advocate for reform. The university counsellor (C1) noted that while internal dialogue has begun, actual policy implementation is yet to materialise:

"We currently have no official framework tailored for pregnant students, but there have been internal conversations with leadership. I've personally advocated for clearer guidelines that protect their academic progress and emotional well-being. The challenge is that change is slow when it depends on informal effort and not policy." (C1, 2024)

Similarly, the Dean of Students (C2) reflected on how this study offers critical insights that could guide reform:

"We've seen these challenges over the years, but until recently, no one had systematically documented them. This study gives us a basis to push for action and may serve as a wake up call. If we want students to succeed despite pregnancy, we must go beyond goodwill. We need formal guidelines on attendance, assignment extensions, and health accommodations." (C2, 2024)

The university nurse (C3), who works closely with pregnant students under the Office of the Dean of

Students, also affirmed the limitations of the current support system:

"I meet many students with pregnancy-related symptoms from dizziness to serious back pain but there's no protocol to support them academically beyond what I can informally recommend. Sometimes students come here in distress, unsure whether they should attend class or rest. I can advise medically, but I have no channel to communicate that to academic departments officially." (C3, 2024)

These accounts reinforce the argument that without institutional commitment and structured communication pathways between academic and welfare departments, students will continue to fall through the cracks.

Importantly, the silence around pregnancy in higher education is not neutral, it is an active oversight that reinforces exclusion. Most university students fall within the reproductive age group. Additionally, MMU, like many public universities, has no policy that prohibits the admission of married or expectant students. Therefore, it is neither surprising nor deviant for students to become pregnant during their academic journey. What is problematic is the failure of institutions to plan for, support, and normalise this possibility (Shang, 2024). From a girl-child advocacy standpoint, we must affirm that the right to education includes the right to continue learning through life transitions, including pregnancy and motherhood. These students are not "exceptions"; they are living proof that women can embody both intellectual pursuits and reproductive roles without compromise (Anderson & Green, 2022).

The resilience demonstrated by these students cannot be overstated. Despite limited institutional support, respondents like R6 and R3 relied heavily on peer and family networks. These findings are consistent with Msipu et al., (2023); Mwakililo et al., 2025 and Sebastián-González et al., (2023), who identified emotional solidarity and practical support as vital coping mechanisms. However, such reliance on informal systems is not sustainable. Universities must build on these insights to create formal support mechanisms, structured peer mentorship programs, mother-friendly study spaces, and family-inclusive outreach strategies that bring reproductive health and academic success into the same conversation.

Internal motivation, personal faith, and future aspirations also emerged as powerful driving forces. Respondents like R7 articulated the role of belief systems and long-term academic goals in sustaining focus amidst hardship. While these inner resources are critical, they should not be used as a justification for institutional complacency. Rather, they underscore how much more these students could achieve if supported by compassionate, gender-responsive academic ecosystems (Anderson & Green, 2022; Msipu et al., 2023; Mwakililo et al., 2025). Indeed, it is imperative to note that personal resilience, while admirable, must never substitute the duty of institutions to create inclusive structures. When institutions fail to act, they inadvertently shift the burden of survival onto the very students they are meant to empower.

The long-term academic implications of pregnancy remain deeply concerning. Respondents such as R7 and R9 shared how the convergence of pregnancy-related physical discomforts and academic deadlines sometimes made even basic participation feel like an insurmountable task. As Frimpong-Manso et al., (2022) argue, without deliberate structural accommodations, student-mothers are burdened with dual responsibilities that compromise both immediate academic performance and long-term graduation outcomes. In this context, flexible class schedules, alternative assessment formats, hybrid learning options, and policy-driven extensions must no longer be treated as exceptions, but rather as foundational features of inclusive academic practice.

Taken together, the findings of this study present a compelling call to action, higher education institutions must reframe how they perceive, support and plan for the presence of student-

mothers. Pregnancy is not a disruption to intellectual capacity, it is a stage of life that can and should coexist with academic growth. Especially within low-resource settings, universities must shift from reactive gestures to institutionalised frameworks that uphold the dignity, equity, and academic aspirations of all students regardless of their reproductive journey.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals the intricate and often overlooked challenges that pregnant students face in their pursuit of higher education, specifically within the context of Mountains of the Moon University (MMU). These challenges ranging from physical strain and emotional stress to social stigma and institutional neglect hinder full academic participation and success. The findings demonstrate that while students show extraordinary resilience and motivation, they do so in the absence of formal support systems. The situation at MMU reflects similar patterns identified in other public universities in Uganda and across sub-Saharan Africa, where policy frameworks addressing student pregnancy remain vague or non-existent. These contexts, characterised by limited resources, rigid academic structures, and cultural stigma, provide minimal structural protection for expectant and new mothers enrolled in tertiary education.

To address these gaps, the study underscores the urgency of developing institutional policies that explicitly accommodate the needs of pregnant students. These may include maternity leave provisions, flexible deadlines, hybrid learning options, and mechanisms for confidential academic support. Moreover, establishing counselling units with maternal health awareness, enhancing peer-support systems, and sensitising academic staff through inclusive pedagogy training can foster a more responsive learning environment. By implementing these reforms, MMU and similar institutions can create equitable academic spaces where pregnancy does not jeopardise educational attainment. In doing so, universities not only promote gender equity but also reinforce their commitment to holistic student development, retention and academic excellence.

Recommendations

- Universities should develop deliberate support systems specifically designed for pregnant students. These should include flexible academic arrangements, such as modified class schedules and attendance policies, to accommodate pregnancy-related health and caregiving needs.

- Institutions should implement more accommodating academic policies, particularly around deadlines and assessments. Extended deadlines, alternative submission formats, and make-up opportunities can significantly reduce academic pressure and improve retention and performance.

- Faculty and staff should be trained on the challenges faced by pregnant students, including unconscious bias and gender-sensitive support practices. Such capacity building can foster an empathetic and inclusive academic culture that promotes student well-being and dignity.

- Comprehensive institutional support services should be established, including specialised training for university counsellors, nurses, and peer mentors. As echoed by the university counsellor, structured peer support networks and gender-aware health services are essential to meet the emotional and social needs of pregnant students.

- Higher education institutions should create feedback mechanisms and engage in ongoing dialogue with pregnant students, allowing them to shape the policies and services intended for their benefit. Student voices must be central to designing solutions that are contextually relevant and effective.

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