

Challenges Faced by Student Leaders in Managing Student Affairs in Public Universities in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Effective management of student affairs in public universities continue to pose a major challenge to university administrators and student leaders in many parts of the world including Kenya. Public universities are perpetually ravaged by rampant incidences of student unrests and strikes yet innovative approaches meant to curb such incidences have been adopted that involved student leaders in governance of institutions of higher learning. The effectiveness of these innovative approaches in university governance is not clearly documented. The rationale of the study was to analyse the challenges faced by student leaders in managing student affairs in public universities in Kenya. The study employed descriptive survey research design. Stratified random sampling was used to select student leaders from public universities in Kenya. The sample size comprised of 19 members of student governing councils, 50 class representatives and 73 clubs and society leaders, making a total of 142 respondents. Data was collected using questionnaires. Analysed data revealed that 50.4% of the student leaders experienced challenges while executing their functions. The major challenges included conflict between academic pursuits and leadership roles, lack of teamwork among student leaders and students' ignorance of university policies and statutes. The study further established a strong and statistically significant relationship between the challenges faced by student leaders and effective student affairs services in public universities at 0.05 levels of significant with a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.789. The study concluded that challenges experienced by student leaders may impede effective discharge of their duties and may result in poor service delivery leading to incidences of riots. The study recommends that student leaders should be assisted to solve internal problems that may affect the effective discharge of their duties as a way of addressing unrests in public universities.

Key words: Challenges, Democracy, Harnessing Student Leadership, Participative Leadership

INTRODUCTION

From the inception of universities, all formal powers of decision making were tightly and legally vested in board of trustees. Student leaders had very restricted control on the governance of universities. Only students from Latin America held noteworthy positions in universities' decision making processes (Altabach, 2006, de Boer & Stensaker, 2007). The 1960-1970s global wave of university democratization gave opportunities for student leaders' involvement in decision making processes on matters affecting their wellbeing. Students' protests across the world in the industrialized nations in 1970s demanded institutional reforms especially in the students' governance and leadership in institutions of higher learning.

Student leadership refers to education practices that give university students opportunity to participate in decision-making and discharge their responsibilities as active citizens. Oanda (2016) posits that student participation

in African higher education governance started in 1970s. This was a period of prolonged students' protest against anti-welfare and stern policy of the structural adjustment programmes, the major one being an end to free higher education. What followed was the introduction of cost-sharing, tuition fees and privatisation of various services including student accommodation, catering and support services (Munene, 2003 & Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). The effect of reduced funding of higher education was further aggravated by the demands to increase enrolments, given the successes of post-independence health and increase in population.

Management of student affairs at the public universities in Kenya is becoming increasingly complex and delicate issue. While institutions endeavour to balance multiple priorities in a competitive environment, critical issues such as globalization, massification and democratization of higher education are exerting a lot of pressure on the management of student affairs. Again, student population in universities has increased rapidly. This has placed extra pressure on universities infrastructure that

was originally built for a small number of students. Munene (2003) and Byaruhanga (2006) aver that congestion has become prevalent and basic learning facilities such as libraries, classrooms and laboratories are depreciating rapidly.

Bosire, Chemnjor and Ngware (2008) argue that the ultimate bearers of the challenges experienced in public universities are the student leaders and university managers who have to adjust their expectations according to the prevailing conditions. In particular, university managers have to implement government policies that sometimes are unpopular to students (Sifuna, 2012). On the other hand, student leaders are expected to be considerate and influence students to contend with the situation as it may be. The state of affair makes student leaders to fear repercussions from students as well as intimidation from university management. The confusion results in poor services delivery and unfulfilled dreams about university education. Student leaders have to bear the pressure from both students and university management.

Student protests have interfered with the stability of universities prompting the management to take suppressive measures that justify the use of force to resolve such conflicts (Republic of Kenya, 2014). As such, universities continue to be breeding ground of political agitation, activism and violence aggravated by the fact that there are shortfalls in government funding that has led to reduced quality of services and facilities available at all universities. In the present day, no matter how the government answers to student protests, either by suppression or negotiation, universities are still battlefield of students' protest.

In Kenya, the responsibilities of student leaders are outlined in the University Act 2012. Student leaders are obliged to serve their electorate conscientiously as well as consider the university mission and goals (Republic of Kenya, 2012). Time and again, student leaders find themselves in dilemma and confrontation with either the students or the university management. Reforms in higher education, changes in social values and technology have modified student leadership roles over the time. There has been a shift from performing mainly social and religious functions to a highly charged political activism (Sifuna, 2012). The shift has been causing conflicts between the student leaders and university management. This has instigated a lot of trouble to a number of student leaders. Some hardly complete university education without suspension, expulsion or imprisonment.

Change in governance of higher education such as participatory leadership, has addressed some of the challenges facing the student leaders in Kenya through the introduction of University Act 2012 and affirmative action programmes (Republic of Kenya, 2012). However, the high concentration of educated and diverse student population in one place constitute a potential threat to participatory leadership. Divergences views of numerous students may slow down the decision making processes and consensus. Again many students want to communicate their views through social media groups, ignoring and usurping the duties of student leaders. The social economic diversity of students' background and complex nature of student services are also potential challenges to student leaders who may not be well grounded on administrative competencies.

The society also has contributed to challenges faced by student leaders in universities. Parents are not playing their

leadership roles by supporting their own children. They are not giving young people attention, time, love, discipline and training them to become responsible adults. Parents, cleric and public leaders are dishonest and tell lies. They tell young people not to be violent while marketing and glorifying violence at home, in churches, in offices and at public meetings. At the same time, professionals stand on the streets and teach the same student leaders that it is okay to down tools in schools, hospitals, universities and other civil offices instead of seeking amicable solutions and still expect good students' leadership in our educational institutions. When the government fails to reach a negotiable conciliation with striking professionals, it creates impression to student leaders that demonstrations and strikes are the only ways to have their concerns addressed.

Statement of the Problem

University managers continue to be confronted with the challenge of students' non-adherence to set discipline standards in their institutions. The adoption of the innovation of harnessing students' leadership in the management of institutions of higher learning is deemed an instrumental strategy that can help control unrests and riots in universities. Student leadership as a form of participatory democracy is designed in such a way as to strengthen students' governance of institutions of higher learning. In Kenya, universities have adopted participatory leadership as a strategy of enhancing democratization of students' participation in the shared management of student affairs with university authorities. The University Act 2012 and the Constitution of Kenya 2010 provides for students' involvement in the governance of their institutions (Republic of Kenya, 2012). However, even as student leaders oversee and plan the welfare of students, there are still constant complaints over the unsatisfactory provision of students' services (Republic of Kenya, 2014). The participatory role has improved a lot but the persistence of students' protest in public universities in Kenya is a signal that student leaders' effectiveness is still questionable. This necessitated the researcher to analyse the challenges faced by student leaders while meeting their obligation.

Objectives

The study was based on the following objectives which were to;

- i. Analyse the challenges faced by student leaders while managing student affairs in public universities in Kenya
- ii. Propose the solutions to the challenges faced by student leaders while performing their functions
- iii. Examine the relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their provision of student services.

Hypothesis

The study tested the following null hypothesis;

Ho₁: There is no statistically significant relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their provision of student services.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed descriptive survey research design (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). Stratified random sampling was used to select student leaders from four public universities. The research used 10% of target population to sample two categories of public universities and 30% to sample student leaders. The sample size comprised of 19 members of student governing councils, 50 class representatives, 73 clubs and society leaders, making a total of 142 student leaders. Data was collected using questionnaires which were administered directly to student leaders and were given time to respond. Structured questionnaires were used to capture quantitative data while unstructured questionnaires were used for qualitative data. The reliability coefficient of the structured questionnaire was calculated using Cronbach coefficient alpha and a reliability coefficient of 0.7 was obtained. This means that the instrument was reliable. Focus group discussion was used to collect qualitative data. Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative data was cleaned, coded and then grouped into themes. Quantitative data collected through structured questionnaires was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics such as percentage, means, standard deviation and Pearson Correlation Coefficient. Different forms of data presentation techniques were used such as narration, percentages and frequency tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion were based on the objectives and hypothesis of the study.

- a) The first objective of the study was to analyse the challenges faced by students' leaders while executing their functions. The findings of the study are indicated in Table 1.

Data analysis was conducted in regard to challenges faced by student leaders while performing their functions. Results of data analysis were reported in accordance with the items listed in the Likert scale analysed in Table 1 and presented as follows;

i. Support from management

The study sought to find out how often student leaders get support from the management. According to the survey 50.7% of the respondents indicated that very frequently/frequently there is lack of support from university management as sometimes their views are disregarded while 41.3% indicated that rarely/occasionally there is lack of support. Some of respondents 5.8% indicated never and 2.2% had no response. This implies that student leaders' input in the management of university is minimal as well as opportunities to exercise their leadership abilities. This can lead to frustration and incitement to violence. Nelson (2010) affirms that many adults do not engage the youth in meaningful leadership opportunities, hence deny them a chance to develop managing capacity.

ii. Teamwork amongst student leaders

The research sought to determine whether there was teamwork amongst student leaders in universities. It was supported by 52.9% of respondents that, very frequently/frequently there is lack of team-

Table 1. Challenges faced by student leaders

Item	Frequency &%	Rarely	Occasionally	Never	Frequently	Very frequently	NR	M	SD
Lack of support from university management as sometimes their views are disregarded	<i>f</i> 34	23	8	28	42	3	2.86	1.43	
	% 24.6	16.7	5.8	20.3	30.4	2.2			
Lack of team work amongst student leaders	<i>f</i> 19	25	18	50	23	3	2.60	1.55	
	% 13.8	18.1	13	36.2	16.7	2.2			
Poor communication channels between students and student leaders	<i>f</i> 37	14	13	42	29	3	2.64	1.43	
	% 26.8	10.1	9.4	30.4	21	2.2			
Poor communication channels between university management and student leaders	<i>f</i> 33	23	18	26	35	3	2.94	1.40	
	% 23.9	16.7	13	18.8	25.4	2.2			
Mismanagement of finances by student leaders	<i>f</i> 42	33	27	21	12	3	2.47	1.31	
	% 30.4	23.9	19.6	15.2	8.7	2.2			
Students refusing to take advise from student leaders	<i>f</i> 40	49	14	14	15	6	2.36	1.32	
	% 29	35.5	10.1	10.1	10.9	4.3			
Students ignorance of university policies and statutes	<i>f</i> 17	24	21	35	35	6	2.70	1.45	
	% 12.3	17.4	15.2	25.4	25.4	4.3			
Student leaders being isolated and treated as traitors	<i>f</i> 38	42	15	15	25	3	2.61	1.47	
	% 27.5	30.4	10.9	10.9	18.1	2.2			
False image of students solidarity	<i>f</i> 41	40	17	23	14	3	2.47	1.35	
	% 29.7	29	12.3	16.7	10.1	2.2			
Conflict between academic pursuits and leadership roles	<i>f</i> 30	19	8	33	45	3	2.52	1.31	
	% 21.7	13.9	5.8	23.9	32.6	2.2			

Key: NR = No response

work amongst student leaders while 31.9% stated that rarely/occasionally there is lack of teamwork, 13% indicated never and 2.2% had no response. Lack of teamwork may cause conflicts and endless blame games amongst student leaders. According to Fajana (2002), teamwork improves performance and enhances the ability to solve problems.

iii. *Communication challenges between student leaders and students*

The study examined whether there are communication challenges between students and student leaders in service provision. The results revealed that 51.4% of the respondents indicated that, very frequently/frequently they are poor communication channels while 36.9% stated that rarely/occasionally there are poor communication channels, 9.4% never and 2.2% had no response. Communication challenges may lead to lack of knowledge in organizational structure, policies and statutes. Maina (2011) contend that student leaders should keep students informed about the challenges they face in service provision and the efforts they are making to address student concerns.

iv. *Communication challenges between student leaders and management*

The research sought to establish whether there are proper communication channels between student leaders and university management. In response to the above statement 44.2% of respondents indicated that very frequently/frequently there are communication challenges with management while 40.6% indicated rarely/occasionally, 13% never and 2.2% had no response. Communication challenges may affect the provision of quality of services which depend on adoption of management decisions by the stakeholders. Universities should consider making greater efforts to guarantee the provision of quality information to students through their leaders. According to CC-HER Bureau (2000) good communication entails providing clear information with regard to the rules and regulations of all boards and governing bodies involved in the functioning of the university.

v. *Mismanagement of finances*

The study investigated whether student leaders mismanaged student finances. It was indicated by 54.3% of the respondents that, rarely/occasionally there is mismanagement of finances by student leaders while 23.9% stated that, very frequently/frequently there is mismanagement of finances, 19.6% never and 2.2% had no response. This implies that there is transparency, accountability and sound management of student finances. Hence conflicts that arise between student leaders and students due to financial mismanagement may not arise. According to (Vikas, 2009) all the financial activities conducted should be in support of students and they should be involved as much as possible to avoid conflicts.

vi. *Cooperation of students*

The study evaluated whether there was co-operation from students. It was revealed from the survey that 64.5% of the respondents indicated that, rarely/occasionally students refuse to take advice from student leaders while 21% indicated that, very frequently/frequently students refuse to take advice, 10.1% never and 4.3% had no response. Inadequacy of student leaders' orientation on their roles creates conflicts between them and students hence problems of internal control of discipline.

vii. *Awareness of university policies and statutes*

The research sought to assess whether students were aware of university policies and statutes. It was revealed by 50.8% of the student leaders that, very frequently/frequently the students are ignorant of university policies and statutes while 29.7% indicated rarely/occasionally, 15.2% never and 4.3% had no response. This implies that there is some information that does not get to students as to what goes on in the university and there is need for improvement in dissemination of information. Student leaders should make efforts and use effective channels to circulate information to students. Methods of acquiring and disseminating information should be accessible and effective. According to Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) leadership training, participation in discussions of socio-cultural, economic and political issues affecting the institution may reduce ignorance of statutes.

viii. *Isolation of student leaders*

The study sought to examine whether student leaders are isolated and treated as traitors in the universities. Results by 57.9% of respondents indicated that, rarely/occasionally student leaders are isolated and treated as traitors in the universities while 29% indicated very frequently/frequently, 10.9% never and 2.2% had no response. This implies that there is collegial coexistence between the student leaders and students in university although sometimes there is mistrust. Mistrust is brought about by implementation of government policies that at times are unpopular to students (Sifuna, 2012). University management expects student leaders to be considerate and influence students to put up with the circumstances as it may be. This may make student leaders to be treated as turncoats by comrades.

ix. *False image of students' solidarity*

The study tried to find out if there was deceitful image of students' unity. According to 58.7% of the student leaders, rarely/occasionally students have false image of students' solidarity while 26.8% indicated very frequently/frequently, 12.3% never and 2.2% had no response. This implies that students some of students may no longer speak in one voice for they are alienated along economic constraints. According to Luescher-Mamashela and Mugume (2014) massification of higher education and economic constraints has divided students in public universities into

self-sponsored and government-sponsored students with different priorities and interests.

x. *Conflict between academic pursuits and leadership roles*

In relation to conflict of interest, it was indicated by 56.5% of the respondents that, very frequently/frequently academic endeavours compete for attention with leadership roles while 35.5% stated that rarely/occasionally there is conflict, 5.8% never and 2.2% had no response. Student leaders have to compete for insufficiency learning facilities including accommodation, reading materials, research equipment and computers. According to Ellis (2016), academic life becomes very stressful since leadership roles as well personal study demand attention. These frustrations usually lead to students becoming more ungovernable and taking to the streets in demonstrations against the management of the university.

b) The second objective of the study was to propose the solutions to the challenges faced by student leaders while performing their functions.

Challenges are those things that make it difficult for student leaders to provide effective student affairs services in public universities. In the long run, challenges militate against the achievement of excellence in training, research, publications and community outreach. Challenges such as conflict between academic pursuits and leadership roles, lack of teamwork among student leaders, students' ignorance of university policies and statutes, poor communication just to mention a few, may negatively affect student leaders' effectiveness. The study used an open-ended question to get the proposals as to what should be done to address the challenges faced by student leaders while performing their functions.

Data was analysed using content analysis and the following were the proposed solutions to challenges facing student leaders.

There is need to develop innovative and able student leaders who are skilled in student affairs field and are dedicated to pursuing creative solutions. This can be done by engaging more students in undergraduate research to pursue new knowledge vital to our changing society. Undergraduate research is important in developing critical thinking, leadership and communication skills in students.

Train student leaders on the aspect of delegation, time management and focusing on more areas where one has been assigned responsibility. This can be done through introduction of regular seminars and workshops on leadership training to enhance effectiveness.

Encourage interactive meetings between student leaders and university management for confidence building. Student leaders need to embrace dialogue and negotiation in addressing issues with university management and deploy time-lines to stimulate response.

Student leaders need to know the confines of their powers and cooperate with management towards achieving institutional goals without compromising standards and the welfare of students.

Universities should design a curriculum to teach social problem solving skills and incorporate problem-solving instruction in all subject areas.

c) The third objective was to examine the relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their provision of student services.

- i. Results are presented in accordance with the items listed in the Likert scale analysed in Table 2 below
- ii. It had been hypothesized that there was no significant relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their effective provision of student services. The results of the hypothesis testing are presented in Table 3.

The results show that $R=0.789$ which implies that that unit change in the challenges that student leaders face caus-

Table 2. Relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their effective provision of services

Item	Frequency & %	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree	NR	M	SD
There are no clear channels of communication on welfare concerns and therefore security and health problems take long to be resolved	<i>f</i> %	37 26.8	43 31.2	3 2.2	38 27.5	17 12.3		2.82	1.42
Academic workload and social life do not allow proper planning for student welfare activities and therefore there are few strategic communal activities	<i>f</i> %	35 25.4	23 16.7	7 5.1	30 21.6	40 29	3 2.2	2.92	1.23
Student leaders are not involved in formulation of policies governing management of student affairs and therefore do not enforce policies' implementation	<i>f</i> %	27 19.6	38 27.5	4 2.9	45 32.6	24 17.4		3.12	1.42
Poor coordination has hindered regular meetings between student leaders and students and therefore problems that may cause riots are not identified on time	<i>f</i> %	23 16.7	34 24.6	3 2.2	35 25.4	43 31.2		3.29	1.53
Student leaders do not regularly attend welfare committee meetings that discuss safety, accommodation and catering issues and therefore lack adequate management capability to govern the above support services	<i>f</i> %	28 20.3	42 30.4	10 7.2	46 33.3	9 6.5	3 2.2	2.75	1.31

Key: NR = No response

Table 3. Results of relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their effective provision of services

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R square	Std. error of the estimate	Change statistics				
					R square change	F change	df1	df2	Sig. F change
1	0.789 ^a	0.622	0.599	0.081259	0.599	38.121	1	136	0.000

Predictors: (Constant), Challenges facing student leaders, NR = No response

es 59.9% change in the provision of student services. The results of $\alpha=0.05$ and $p=0.000$ show that there is significant relationship. This relationship is positive and statistically significant at 0.05 levels of significant with a Pearson Correlation Coefficient of 0.789 as shown in Table 3 above. The null hypothesis which stated that, there was no significant relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their effective provision student services is rejected and the alternative accepted. Thus, there is a significant relationship between challenges faced by student leaders and their effective provision of student services.

CONCLUSION

The major challenges facing the student leaders were identified to be conflict between academic pursuits and leadership roles, lack of teamwork among student leaders and students' inadequate knowledge of university policies and statutes. The above challenges are further compounded by high number of diverse students with enormous demands. Universities are endowed with highly educated and talented students in one place which may be a potential threat to participatory leadership due divergence views. The complexity nature of student services are also a challenges to student leaders who may have to devote much of their time to academic issues more than addressing students' concerns. Nevertheless, student leaders have the greater share of contribution toward these challenges, as they have the responsibility to embrace teamwork in discharge of duties, enhance communication and sensitize students on new university's policies and statutes. Students expect them to deliver the services they promised during elections regardless of the prevailing circumstances. If student leaders can play their role effectively, calmness and stability will be guaranteed in public universities. However the university management should also organize regular meetings with student leaders to discuss issues that may lead to protests. University management also need to utilize suggestions from student leaders so as to improve performance.

It is recommended that university management assist student leaders to solve internal problems that affect discharge of duties such as teamwork. Student leaders should design mechanisms such as organizing formal meeting once or twice a semester with an aim of sensitizing students on university's policies and government statutes that guide the operations of student affairs. Also, train student leaders on time management so as to effectively balance between academic pursuit and leadership roles. Finally, university management should sufficiently address students' concern because the management of student affairs is a shared responsibility.

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