Assessment of Student Leaders' Performance of Functions in Managing Student Affairs in Selected Public Universities in Kenya

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Key Words

Performance of functions, Public Universities, Student Affairs, Student Leaders

Abstract

The Universities Act, 2012 outlines the responsibilities of student leaders in the provision of student services in universities in Kenya. Despite the universities having student leaders to oversee and plan the welfare of students, there are still regular complaints over the unsatisfactory students' services provision causing students' protests. The study sought to assess how student leaders performed their functions for effective management of student affairs. Descriptive survey research design was adopted and stratified random sampling was used to select student leaders. Data collection instruments were questionnaires. Data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Results from the study revealed low performance as 52.4% of student leaders did not effectively execute their leadership mandate in managing student affairs and only 47.6% effectively performed their functions. This means that to a greater extent, student leaders are ineffective in management of student affairs. The low performance might have contributed to the constant conflicts between the students and university management in the recent past over the management of student affairs. The study recommends that student leaders should take their leadership responsibility more aggressively by being proactive in organizing welfare activities that address students' concerns.

INTRODUCTION

Student Leaders and Student Affairs

Student leaders are characteristically university students who serves in leadership positions in their campuses or universities. Student leadership positions are often made available through various processes such as an application, election or nomination. These processes vary from institution to institution and position to position, some being highly competitive and selective while others are relatively easy to fill. Some student leadership positions are unpaid while others receive honoraria for their work. Walsh and Black (2011) state that when students are given the opportunity to lead within their campuses, they are empowered to have a real impact on their learning and university environment and are prepared to participate meaningfully in their community.

Universities have student governing councils elected by students' associations whose functions is to: oversee and plan, in consultation with the senate, students' activities for the promotion of academic, spiritual, moral, harmonious communal life and social well-being of all students (Republic of Kenya, 2012). Other than the executive organ of the student leadership, there are other student leaders who include: class representatives, clubs and societies' leaders, religious movement leaders and other informal groups' leaders. Angili and Okibo (2015) state that leaders outside the official formal organizational structure impact to a very great extent on any change implementation process within the formal structures and therefore need to be involved extensively in the process.

Student leadership is typically structured along various functional spheres (Bosire, Chemnjor & Ngware, 2008). There is a central body known as the student governing council which is the formal organisation of student life on campus. Management of student affairs is organized in such a way that there are sub-structures that organise student life in residences, faculties, sport and recreation. Sub-structures focusing on the academic interests of students of a particular programme can include student faculty councils and class representatives (Luescher, 2009). The interests of students in university halls of residence are protected by hall committees. Recreational interests of students may be organised by means of specific clubs and societies.

Student governing councils, clubs and societies, finance their activities from allocations from the university budget, membership fees, business profits and levies on campus business activities

1

and through fund-raising activities. Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2004: 2) found that in the South African case, there are extreme discrepancies in the budget allocations for student government in a sample of South African university. Moreover, it must also be kept in mind that the ability of student governments to supplement their resources by charging for certain services they offer or accessing local sponsorships and engaging in fund-raising activities depends to a great extent on the institutional and national context.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In an effort to streamline the governance of universities, the Ministry of Education Science and Technology has adopted various measures to mitigate the effects of students' unrest. One of such measures is the establishment of the University Act (2012), which outlines the roles of student leaders and gives them supremacy over management of student affairs. Despite the universities having student leaders to oversee and plan the welfare of students, there are still regular complaints over the unsatisfactory students' services provision causing protest among students. The success of student leaders in execution of their designated roles and assisting in provision of the much needed student services has been uncertain, as evidenced from constant students' protests

occurring in higher institutions of learning, hence the proposed study.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to establish the effectiveness of student leaders in managing student affairs in selected public universities in Kenya.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to assess how student leaders perform their functions in managing student affairs in selected public universities in Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Leaders and Provision of Student Services

Student leaders are expected to design and participate in approved activities that serve to enhance and ensure quality of student affairs programmes (Republic of Kenya, 2012). Student leaders have the following core functions that include among others: representative function, provision of student services and organizing co-curricular activities. How they deliver these services determine their success or failure in management of student affairs. Student representatives have played a role in social movements since pre-independence times and their leaders frequently became key political figures or elites in other sectors of their respective countries (Luescher-

Mamashela & Mugume 2014). The ties between national student associations and the political structures run deep and the entanglements between student representatives and various political actors are widespread yet not unproblematic. National student unions are a potent political force. They have strong mobilisation potential, which can play decisively in national elections or as oppositional force to government policies. It then does not come as a surprise that governments and political parties at best try to deal with national student unions with caution and at worse try to subject them to their control (Mugume 2015). This is to avoid conflicts of interest.

Bukaliya and Rupande (2012) assert that students are members of the university community and so they have a right to equal representation in matters affecting them directly. Student leaders have a duty to engage the university administration in meaningful dialogue on matters affecting the students' welfare. Wang and Salo (2009) posit that in Chicago, student leaders share with authorities, the responsibility for governing their institutions. They are given the opportunity to take part in the approval of changes and the addition or deletion of some university programs. The research carried out at Spanish universities indicates that with the right measures, participation increases significantly. A clear evidence of this is found in the work of the University of Cantabria Student Council, which consistently implemented measures on different fronts with the aim of achieving real and effective student participation. This was by reviewing regulations, reviewing electoral calendars and processes, recognising dedication to these representative and participative bodies and providing specific training in this respect.

In South Africa, student leaders represent students' interests in the university's senate. According to Bosire et.al (2008) student leaders in Kenya play the following roles: assisting management in determining decisions that affect the student body, serving as a communication link between the student body and management, consulting and debating with the student body on issues of mutual interest and guiding the students responsibly. Whereas student leaders in developed countries are involved in higher levels of university governance, this is lacking in Kenyan situation. While participation fosters a sense of equality and ownership among students, student leaders in Kenya are not given a corresponding opportunity to substantively affect policy and other changes.

On the other hand, it has been argued that formal student representative organisations have gained ground in twenty-first century higher education politics because the underlying argument is that the state serves the capitalist interest and seeks to 'co-opt' student associations into state policymaking organs to make them act as 'states surrogates' and exercise social control over their members. Bianchini (2016) affirms that students' protests in Francophone Sub-Saharan countries are still chronic not to say permanent. In the present day, no matter what the governmental answers either suppression or negotiation, the universities are still battlegrounds for generations coming of age. Alternatively, the mobilizations seem to have a lesser impact on political systems than in the previous decades, especially before the era of massification and pauperization of the student body.

In provision of student services, student leaders have a responsibility of satisfying the students' needs and meeting their expectations in provision of services (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2012). They have the task of ensuring that students' crowded lifestyles do not affect their relationship with the university and affect the quality of education (K'Okulu, 2010). Student leaders supplement the services offered by the university to students. Such services typically include peer counselling, the provision of financial assistance and assistance with academic and administrative problems (Luescher, 2009). Kouzes and Posner (2010) affirm that the ability of student leaders to inspire and motivate other students and transform them into committed contributors to the organization is the function of student leadership. In Australian institutions, student leaders provide eateries, small retail outlets, student media, advocacy and support for a variety of social, arts, political, recreational, special interest and sporting clubs and societies (Clarke, 2007). In Sweden, they provide: counselling services to members, publish their own magazines and newspapers and run shops, restaurants and night clubs.

All the activities conducted are in support of students and they involve them as much as possible (Vikas, 2009). Though Kenya has a complex public university system, more diverse student profile than ever, far greater opportunities for study on- and off-campus and introduction of variable fees; student leaders provide minimal students services as compared to their counter parts in Australia and Sweden. Student leaders also organize and promote non-academic activities of interest to the students such as sports, cultural dances, talent shows and get together parties and festivities (Vikas, 2009).

Student leaders compliment the services provided by student affairs professionals. While service provision, facilities and social life of students are matters handled by the dean of students, facilitation and supervision falls under student leaders. From the above student leaders have greater responsibility of student services provision than any other party in university set up.

In France the strength of student leadership can be best measured by their effectiveness in national protests rather than by membership figures. Students' unions are highly politicized bodies and often serve as a training ground for aspiring politicians. Netherlands is also home to a unique case of student representation in which local political parties completely run by students, gained seats during local town hall elections. In Greece, as in Portugal, student leadership organizes and supports numerous activities such as political debates, demonstrations, university occupations, public lectures, cultural and artistic events and conferences (Bukaliya & Rupande, 2012). However, a noticeable activity of student leaders in public universities in Kenya is activism.

Expansion of Higher Education and Effects on Student Affairs

Education reforms in higher education in Kenya such as expansion, lowering of minimum mean grade to B-(Minus) in 2014, introduction of privately self-sponsored programme (PSSP) and opening up of a university in every county has caused a phenomenon growth of students population (MOEST, 2014). The introduction of free primary education in 2003 and subsequent subsidized secondary education in 2008 in Kenya; increased secondary schools enrolment from 879,956 in 2003 to 1,382,211 (57.1% increase) in 2008 (Orodho, 2014). The high number of students who qualified to join universities in Kenya necessitated the government to upgrade the existing middle level colleges into universities (CHE, 2012). A move that has been applauded for it has created opportunities for many Kenyans to further their studies.

Public universities enrolment increased from 81,491 in 2004/2005 to 97,107 (19.1% increase) in 2007/2008 (CHE, 2008; Republic of Kenya, 2010) and 212,664, an increase of 219% in three years from 2009 to 2012 (Waweru, 2013). The number of public universities also increased form seven in 2008 to 31 in 2013 and 35 in 2017 (CUE, 2014; CUE, 2017). The high number of students admitted has not been matched with the provision of teaching/learning resources (Sifuna, 2010; Republic of Kenya, 2015). The above

developments have deep-seated implications on the management of student affairs for it has caused overcrowding in lecture halls, hostels, dining halls and recreation facilities (K'Okul, 2010; MOE, 2015). The government funding towards education is still very low (Aina, 2007). The noticeable shortage of funds available to institutions of higher learning has been responsible for high tuitions, declining library, social and laboratory facilities which culminate into students unrests in most tertiary institutions in the country.

Sporting facilities, laboratories, library space, books journals and office space are all inadequate (Ochuba 2001). According to Adeyemi (2009), the necessary equipment for teaching, research and learning are either lacking or inadequate and in a bad shape to permit the institutions of high learning the freedom to carry out the meaningful functions of teaching, learning and research. This is an indicator that institutions of higher learning are usually vulnerable to students' crises. The scenario may be as a result of different situations in the higher institutions of learning in terms of the nature of students, resources, leadership and student unionism.

Specifically, the study centres on research findings on how student leaders perform their functions on the basis for management of student affairs as well as appreciating their roles in the management of the student body. This is in view of the crucial role the student leadership plays in assisting and oftentimes influencing, directing and guiding university management in making certain decisions on student welfare in matters such areas as catering, accommodation, security, counselling, games and sports and academic issues.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted the Functional leadership theory advocated by Adair (1973). The theory addresses specific leader behaviours expected to contribute to organizational or group effectiveness. The leadership models focus on what the leader has to do and the action areas that a leader must address to be effective. The theory argues that the leader's main task is to see that whatever is necessary to group needs is taken care of. Thus, student leaders can be said to have done their job well when they have contributed to group effectiveness and cohesion. In the functional leadership model, leadership does not rest with one person but rests on a set of behaviours by the group that gets things done. Any member of the group can perform these behaviours, so any member can participate in leadership. The Functional theory of leadership, places greater emphasis on how

an organisation or task is being led rather than who has been formally assigned a leadership role. The proponent of the theory state that the task can only be performed by the team and not by one person; the team can only achieve excellent task performance if all the individuals are fully developed and the individuals need the task to be challenged and motivated. He showed that leadership could be taught and did not depend on the traits a person had.

METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey research design was adopted (Creswell, 2003). The study employed epistemological research philosophy and was guided by positivism paradigm (Creswell, 2012). Stratified random sampling was used to select student leaders and four public universities while purposive sampling was used to select universities administrators in the academic division. The sample size comprised 142 student leaders. Data collection instruments were questionnaires (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003). The reliability coefficient was calculated using Cronbach coefficient alpha and a reliability coefficient of 0.7 was obtained. This means that instrument was reliable. Quantitative data was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics such as percentage, means, standard deviation and correlation coefficient while qualitative data was analysed

descriptively using content analysis. Different forms of data presentation techniques were employed such as narration and frequency tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research examined how student leaders performed their functions for effective management of student affairs in selected public universities in Kenya. The main respondents were 142 student leaders who comprised members of student governing council at 13.4%, class representative at 35.2%, clubs and society leaders at 51.4% who filled in the questionnaires. From the study results 63.8% of the student leaders were male while 36.2% were female. According to the survey results most of the respondents 86.2% were aged between 21-25 years, while 11.6% were aged between the ages of 15-20 years old and 2.2 % were aged between 26-35 years. The study found that respondents were drawn from all the levels of students, for example, 29.7% were in third year, 27.5% fourth, 26.1% second, 10.9% first years and 1.4% were fifth years. From survey 74.6% of the respondents were elected while 23.2% were nominated. According to the study 47.1% of student leaders had served for one year, 3323.9% two years, 13.8% three years while 10.9% four with only 2.2% five years.

Functions of Student Leaders

The study sought to get responses from student leaders regarding how they performed their functions in the management of student affairs. The responses to these questions were averaged, with higher scores indicating how one strongly agrees or disagree with key dimensions. Percentage and standard deviation were used to analyze the data. The survey results are presented on table 1 below.

Table 1: Functions of Student Leaders

	Freq & %	Very small extent	Small extent	Not sure	High extent	Very high extent	NR	Mean	Stdv
Student leaders set up welfare committee to seek out student problems	Freq	41	31	11	34	18	3	2.682	1.464
	%	29.7	22.5	8	24.6	13	2.2		
Participating in university committees that discuss students' welfare	Freq	35	47	6	30	17	3	2.607	1.404
	%	25.4	34.1	4.3	21.7	12.3	2.2		
Influence change and takes action on such matters as campus safety and security	Freq	25	38	8	43	24		3.022	1.422
	%	18.1	27.5	5.8	31.2	17.4			
Student leaders encourage colleagues to participate actively in games and sports	Freq	35	43	3	23	34		3.297	1.530
	%	25.4	31.2	2.2	16.7	24.6			
Student leaders regularly give feedback on success and drawbacks of students welfare activities	Freq	24	42	9	46	17		2.928	1.354
	%	17.4	30.4	6.5	33.3	12.3			
Student leaders monitor maintenance of accommodation and catering facilities	Freq	46	9	10	28	42	3	2.748	1.303
	%	33.3	6.5	7.2	20.3	30.4	2.2		
Student leaders inspire students to pursue excellence in academic work	Freq	39	31	10	18	40		3.181	1.405
	%	28.3	22.5	7.2	13	29			
Student leaders interpret proposed changes to students and put pressure on management through dialogue to effect positive changes	Freq	39	34	16	34	15		3.174	1.533
	%	28.3	24.6	11.6	24.6	10.9			
There is transparency and sound management of students' finances	Freq	21	25	27	41	24		2.746	1.480
	%	15.2	18.1	19.6	29.7	17.4			
Effectively resolve conflict within students and between students and university management	Freq	44	32	12	10	40		3.348	1.311
	%	31.9	23.2	8.7	7.2	29			

In relation to students leaders performance of functions a significant number of respondents 52.4% were for opinion that student leaders did not effectively execute their leadership mandate and only 47.6% were effective. Most of student leaders exhibited inadequate knowledge of their responsibilities as student representatives. The results on the table revealed a dismal performance as most of the high scores on the key dimension were to a small extent. For example, 52.2% of respondents to a small extent had set up welfare committees to seek the students' problems. A number of respondents 59.2% to small extent participated in committees that discussed student welfare. Further, 56.6% of the respondents to small extent encourage colleagues to participate actively in games and sports in the university. Results also indicated that 52.9% of respondents to a small extent interpret proposed changes to students and put pressure on management through dialogue to effect positive changes. Also, 47.8% of respondents to a small extent give feedback on success and drawbacks of students' welfare activities and 55.1% of respondent to a small extent effectively resolve conflict within students and between students and university management.

This implies that some of student leaders have not been properly orientated on their roles hence to a greater extent, they were ineffective in managing student affairs in public universities. The study showed that there was lack of initiative from the student leaders to proactively create and change the environment in which learning can take place with minimal interruptions within an academic year. Obiero (2012) point out that institution of higher learning experience conflicts between the students and the administrators, especially when demands of the students are not met. The result of this research attributes the low student leaders' performance of task in the university to inadequate information and ignorance with regard to how the university functions. There are inadequate strategies for understanding and connecting with this new type of students there are in universities. It is not only the students, who are different and more diverse but also the academic staff and faculties. Also diverse is the systems that comprise higher education, with the internationalisation of students, new technology development and intensified competition between universities as supported by Johnson and Deem (2003). It is important to consider carefully about how the university could adapt to this new emerging profile of both students and society. Moreover, making a commitment to more student leaders' participation in decision-making and functioning processes doubtless requires a change in

behaviour and perception from academic staff and management teams. Temple and Ylitalo (2009) concurs that this may require a greater distribution of power and the promotion of participative mechanisms to ensure the representation of all voices. For example, increase the quotas of student representation and decentralise decision-making processes. As a result, this will create a definitive culture that promotes cross cultural alliances and collaboration.

On the other hand, student leaders seem to be doing well in some areas as most of the high scores on the key dimensions were to a high extent. However, the high scores were in a few areas which show that student leaders to small extent were effective in rendering the services for which they were elected for. For instance, 50.8% of respondents to a high extent agreed that student leaders inspired students to pursue excellence in their academic. Another 48.6% of respondents indicated to a high extent that student leaders influenced change and took action on matters of campus safety and security. Further, 50.7% of respondents indicated that student leaders monitored maintenance of accommodation and catering facilities to very high extent. Finally, 47.1% of respondents indicated to a high extent that student leaders

have transparency and sound management of students' finances.

There should be meaningful engagement between the student leaders and the university management on the issue of student welfare and where possible a committee composed of student governing councils, class representatives and clubs and society leaders be constituted to manage student welfare. This will create wide base and source of information concerning the issues that affect students; from the lecture room to dining hall, hostels and out of campus. Student leaders should play a major role in creating an environment that is conducive to student learning through holding regular meetings with the university administration during which, issues of concern to student problems are resolved. The present generation of student leadership does not seem to have established themselves fully as the student representatives and as such time run out as they approach the end of their tenure in office without having effectively justified their existence.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show a low performance of functions of student leaders. Thus students appear to be weakly represented by their elected and nominated leaders. Due to the fact that most of student leaders did not effectively

execute their leadership mandate and majority of them exhibited inadequate knowledge of their responsibilities as student representatives, these have hindered attempts to address the concerns of their electorate effectively. Measures have to be put in place to have student leaders properly inducted on their role and equipped with adequate knowledge related to their responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATION

Arising from the findings of the study, a recommendations is proposed;

Student leaders should take their leadership responsibility more aggressively by being proactive in organizing welfare activities that address students' problems. They should seek opportunities to represent students concerns to the relevant authorities on time to avoid clash between the students and management. This because the study established that most of student leaders exhibited inadequate knowledge of their responsibilities as student representatives as only 47.8% of respondents had set up welfare committees to seek the students' problems.

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