



EXTERNAL FACTORS AND STRESS EXPERIENCES BY GRADUATE STUDENTS IN SELECTED CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the Study: The study sought to examine how factors outside of the university setting contribute to stress among graduate students at certain Christian universities in Kenya.

Methodology: The research utilized a descriptive design where claims regarding perceived cause and effect experiences are assessed. A group of 142 graduate students from four Christian universities in Kenya participated in this study.

Results: The results indicate that external factors, especially financial difficulties, are a significant source of stress for these students.

Conclusion: The study concludes that external factors, particularly financial challenges, are a significant source of stress among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. Financial challenges, as highlighted by the findings, stand out as the primary concern, overshadowing other potential stressors.

Recommendation: The study recommends that students need to be prepared to finance their graduate studies right from the onset.

Keywords: *External factors, financing studies, stress experience*

INTRODUCTION

A study done by Flaherty (2018), shows that graduate students are at risk of developing stress-related diseases like a mental health crisis. The survey involved 2,279 students from twenty-six (26) countries enrolled in two hundred and thirty-four (234) institutions in doctoral programme studies. The research reported the prevalence of anxiety and depression regardless of gender. A high number from fifty-five (55) to fifty-seven (57) percent were related to stress cases among the graduate students. Therefore, the study showed that graduate students have a higher chance of having stress-related cases of depression and anxiety than the general population, urging action on the part of the institution.

Studies done in Africa focusing on issues of stress among students and specifically, in Kenya, noted that the major issues associated with stress among university students include untimely deaths, Wanyoike (2015), abuse of drugs, Ndegwa, Munene & Oladipo, (2017), depression and loneliness, Kasomo, (2013), and dropping out from education (Njoroge, Wangeri & Gichure, 2016). Mbogo et al. (2020) noted that delays in supervision taking too long for students to graduate causes stress among graduate students.

The existing body of research inadequately addresses the significant problem of stress among graduate students in Kenyan universities. Available secondary data indicate that prior research has primarily focused on undergraduate students, largely overlooking those at the master's and doctoral levels (Mwakughu, 2011; Kyalo & Chumba, 2011). A review of the literature highlights a significant gap in information, which this study aims to fill. In Kenya, numerous Christian universities offer graduate programs. Like other higher education institutions, these universities confront various stress-related challenges among their graduate students. To support a conducive learning environment, Christian universities have implemented leadership and program structures, providing students with a range of institutional support, including moral, financial, and spiritual assistance, to help them overcome challenges during their studies. Despite the substantial support provided, stress remains a persistent issue among students, suggesting a need for further investigation into the impact of external factors on stress levels among graduate students in select Christian universities in Kenya.

EMPIRICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

Family Relationships

As individuals grow, family relationships play a central role in shaping an individual's well-being. The quality of family relationships, such as social support and strain can influence well-being through psychosocial, behavioral, and physiological pathways. Thomas et al. (2017) in Pearlin, (1999) argued that stressors and social support are core components of stress process theory, which implies that stress can undermine mental health while social support may serve as a protective resource. Earlier studies such as Thoits (2010) have clearly shown that stress undermines health and the well-being of a person while social support is a coping mechanism that diminish the harmful impact of stressors on well-being. Family social support promotes well-being and increased self-esteem. Those students receiving support from their family members feel a greater sense of self-worth, and this increased self-esteem may be a psychological resource, encouraging optimism, and better mental health (Thomas et al., 2017).

Stress within relationships can prompt individuals to engage in health-compromising behaviors, such as substance abuse, as a way to cope with stress (Thomas et al., 2017). The tension arising from strained relationships can lead to physiological changes that negatively impact immune function, the cardiovascular system, and increase the risk of depression. Conversely, positive relationships have been linked to reduced bodily wear and tear resulting from stress. Additionally, the quality of family relationships significantly influences the well-being of individuals, including students in higher education institutions.

While family relationships play a crucial role in our well-being, families can sometimes experience conflicts and issues that disrupt harmony and cause distress among members. These family-related problems can lead to a range of negative emotions and behaviors, including grief, resentment, anxiety, burnout, confusion, insomnia, loneliness, memory lapses, depression, withdrawal, repetitive mistakes at school or work, and substance abuse as a means of seeking solace. For university students, who are already under significant stress due to academic workload and other demands, family issues can exacerbate their stress levels. Therefore, maintaining healthy family relationships is particularly important for graduate students to manage their stress effectively. This study discovered that graduate students at selected Christian universities generally reported positive relationships with their families and received support from them. Specifically, 42% of the students confirmed

that their academic pursuits did not strain their family relationships, while 21% disagreed, indicating some level of family-related stress.

Financial Challenges Among Graduate Students

In many countries in the world, higher education is considered a high priority for economic development. However, public budgets mostly fall far short to support intended levels of expansion in higher education. Hans Vossensteyn (2009) found that while the need to invest in higher education in the developed world is felt, in Africa, Asia and South America there is more funding gap. Filling these needs in developing countries is unrealistic since there are more pressing needs like basic education, infrastructure, health care and defence competing for scarce resources. In practice, this situation which is a fiscal stress to many governments in the developing world, implies that the governments develop different methods in order to meet the growing demand for higher education services from both students and society at large. Of these strategies are private partnership and students' fees payment. This is called "cost sharing" which demands that students pay for their education since it has a direct connection or benefits for the success in their life.

For student success to be attainable, the provision of financial aid to higher education students plays a crucial role. Natasha M. Ganem and Michelle Manasse (2011) note that financial aid in higher education encompasses both need-based and merit-based support, taking various forms such as grants, loans, tuition waivers, and scholarships from private or institutional sources. They further emphasize that financial aid can significantly influence academic motivation, particularly when students perceive the necessity of achieving success to retain short-term scholarships. Furthermore, financial aid can enhance a student's integration into the university or college community, especially when the support mechanism, like work-study programs or athletic scholarships, encourages interactions with a broad spectrum of individuals across campus. Such engagement fosters a sense of loyalty and belonging, which contributes to the student's continued commitment to their studies.

Similarly, financial pressure often causes stress among students. Idzai (2016), in Hijaz & Naqvi (2006) found that there is a notable connection between economic constraints and academic achievement. This eventually leads to poor performance of the student in the class. Economic challenges compel the students to seek alternative ways of getting income alongside their studies. This can either be on part-time or full-time basis which finally deprives them time to focus on their studies. Economic challenges prevent students from

low-income earning or disadvantaged families from accessing vital study resources like electronic devices and internet connection which would support their learning in the virtual space. They also cause prolonged stay in college since the graduate student does not have enough funds to pay full college fees. Multiple studies such as Ganem and Manasse (2011) provided additional empirical evidence documenting the connection between financial aid and student success showing that financial support played a statistically significant role in predicting university/college persistence.

Ganem and Manasse (2011) found out that institutional scholarships significantly impacted student success across all measures. In their study they found out that the impact of institutional scholarships was stronger than all other variables although other awards such as need-based aid and family contribution were also important.

Workplace effects

Stevenson Anne and Harper Sarah (2006) highlight the challenge in comparing different measures of stress, making it difficult to accurately gauge stress levels, particularly in the context of emerging trends in work-related stress. Their research presents conflicting evidence, with some studies suggesting men are more susceptible to work-related stress, while others indicate women are more affected. They propose that an individual's perception plays a critical role in determining the impact of stressors, influencing whether these stressors lead to physical or psychological stress symptoms.

Numerous studies like Stevenson Anne & Harper Sarah (2006) have been able to establish that “people structuring and delivering the learning process” can have a positive or negative effects on learning process and that the student learning experience depends upon stress levels of teaching staff.

A typical example of work-related stress is working long hours at the expense of family/domestic relationships. For graduate students, this may be caused by double working at the place of work and in college. Stevenson Anne & Harper Sarah (2006) in Allan and Lawless (2003) found that online students encounter stress as a result of online collaboration, and that stress associated with e-learning was not limited to students only because “cyberstress” is encountered by online tutors too. They further noted that work-related stress is a serious problem for organizations. Institutions of higher learning like universities are not exceptional to this since they fall in the class of organizations.

Gray (1998) expressed concern that workplace stress is a significant source of individual distress and financial loss for businesses. Echoing this sentiment, the British Psychological Society (1988) ranked occupational stress as a leading health issue in the U.S. workforce. Willcox (1994) added that approximately 25% of employees experience psychological stress at some point in their careers. These findings underscore the critical need for society as a whole to address workplace stress from a health perspective. The impact of stress on workers extends to graduate students, affecting their mental health and overall well-being. Given the clear link between the productivity of graduate students and workplace stress, this study proposes the LEIGO Theory model. This model focuses on four key areas: the learning environment, which includes classroom behavior and interactions with lecturers and supervisors; the level of interaction, emphasizing the importance of commitment from all parties; the graduate student's role, which involves commitment to obedience, hard work, and leading by example; and the outcome, which aims to reduce stress levels among graduate students.

Adoption of this theory will lead to minimized stress among graduate students as well as the lecturers and supervisors. The theory not only is applicable to institution but to any organization using human activities. The managers/ supervisors in organization are to play their role in proper situational leadership. They will interact with any class of workers or their supervisee (this happens in the interaction level). The worker will actively play their role and interacts with their supervisors. The outcome is minimized stress and the organization reaps the benefits of motivated workers.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A mixed method approach: quantitative and qualitative was used for the study. A total of 242 graduate students randomly selected proportionately from four (4) Christian universities in Kenya were recruited to take part in the study. A total of 142 students responded to the questionnaire. The research utilized a descriptive design where claims regarding perceived cause and effect experiences are assessed. The collection of data was done using questionnaires, as well as focus group discussions. The responses were based on the Likert scale assigned values as follows: Strongly Agree (SA) given the value = 5, Agree (A) = 4, Neutral (N) = 3 Disagree (D) = 2, Strongly Disagree (DA) = 1 Interviews schedules, and focus group discussions were also applied. The data obtained was analyzed using descriptive and inferential methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented per objective.

Perception for Student related Factors (External Factors)

The study sought to answer the question regarding the effects of external factors on the perceived stress levels among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. The respondents were asked to rate their responses through several items in the research instrument.

The results showed that the graduate students in universities were supported by their family members and thus family relationships were not strained. The study also found that teamwork was not good and therefore causing stress among students. With a mean score of 4.3, the item was rated the highest showing that in selected Christian universities in Kenya, students did not have team-work. From this study we can conclude that financial challenges as well as lack of team work among graduate students were causing them stress in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

Findings by Hans Vossensteyn (2009) showed that institutions in developing countries were facing financial challenges. Idzai (2016), in Hijaz & Naqvi (2006) found that there is a notable connection between economic constraints and academic achievement leading to poor performance of the student in the class. These two findings' Hans Vossensteyn (2009) and Idzai (2016) supports the findings of this study.

The findings of this study are supported by Reevy et al. (2013) and Bishop (2018) who showed that team-work brings success in all areas of human life and that in sharing the burdens, students are able to help each other in doing the class assignments, field assignments, reading tasks as well as dividing and conquering many other tasks assigned to them. Failure of team-work led to students working individually and this could cause stress among students. The overall mean score for external factor was 3.7, which was a clear indication that external factors were a major source of stress among graduate students.

The results of this study reveal that graduate students feel capable of managing significant issues in their lives. Across all five questions, the students consistently indicated that they were adept at navigating life's challenges, confident in their ability to overcome difficulties, and possessed sufficient skills to address personal problems. Despite acknowledging that external factors did contribute to stress, the students reported a relatively minor impact. This is supported by the data, where the mean scores for the five questions were 2.6, 2.5,

2.7, 2.5, and 2.6, resulting in an overall mean score of 2.6. Furthermore, the students did not perceive these stressors as causing significant emotional distress or impairing their social and occupational functioning.

However, the study also highlights some areas of concern. It found that workplace responsibilities were adversely impacted, students faced financial difficulties, and there was a lack of teamwork among graduate students in the selected Christian universities in Kenya. Additionally, the study confirms that external factors were viewed by the students as stress-inducing within the context of their academic environment.

Stress Experiences

The study sought to assess stress experiences among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. The respondents were asked to rate their responses through several items in the research instrument. Seven (7) questions were presented to the participants. The results of the study show that students did not face fear and anxiety in their studies. This had a mean score of 2.1 an indication that students did not experience institutional induced stress during their studies. The study also shows that students were not upset because of those things that happened unexpectedly, did not show feelings of anger and did not have negative attitude towards the university but they were on top of the things in their lives. The items had a mean score of 3.0 and below measured on the Likert scale. However, students showed signs of worry and anxiety due to learning environment. These two items had a mean score of 3.6 and 3.2 respectively. This was an indication that the learning environment was causing stress among graduate students. The overall mean showed that institutional induced stress was not a factor felt by graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

Correlation Analysis

A correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationship between various variables. The results indicated a significant negative correlation between external factors and stress levels, as evidenced by a correlation coefficient of -0.303 and a p-value of 0.0002, which is below the threshold of 0.05. This suggests that as external factors vary, there is a corresponding and significant change in stress levels in the opposite direction.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that external factors, particularly financial challenges, are a significant source of stress among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. This

conclusion emerges from an extensive examination of the relationship between various external stressors and their impact on the well-being of graduate students. Financial challenges, as highlighted by the findings, stand out as the primary concern, overshadowing other potential stressors. This revelation points to the intricate link between economic stability and mental health, especially in the context of higher education where financial pressures can significantly hinder academic performance and overall student experience. The implications of this conclusion extend beyond the individual, suggesting that institutions and policymakers must consider more robust support systems and financial aid mechanisms. Addressing this key stressor could lead to improved academic outcomes, lower dropout rates, and a more positive educational environment, ultimately contributing to the holistic development of students and preparing them more effectively for their future careers.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that students need to be prepared to finance their graduate studies right from the onset. The institutions have to develop a financial framework through scholarship as well as emotionally and spiritually through chaplaincy and other services.

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