

## Programme Leadership and Stress Experiences by Graduate Students in Selected Christian Universities in Kenya

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### Abstract

Stress cuts across all humanity and students are habitually confronted with academic challenges that cause them stress, as manifested by problems such as mental health which often led to withdrawal from studies. This study sought to examine stress experiences due to programme leadership among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. A mixed-method approach was used for the study. A sample of 142 graduate students selected proportionately from four (4) Christian universities in Kenya took part in the study. The study results showed that within the programme leadership, supervision of dissertation was causing stress among graduate students. Supervisors were taking long to give feedback to students, which led to students being anxious and as such was causing perceived stress. However, various underlying external factors, especially negative external work engagement, financial challenges, and lack of teamwork with fellow students which were also being experienced could be other underlying factors aggravating the stress among the students. It is therefore recommended that supervisors need to give timely feedback to students. It is further recommended that students should be prepared to finance their graduate studies right from the onset, and to manage their workplace engagements, as well as being able to work as a team. The findings of this study are useful in helping students understand how the learning environment contributes to their stress, and hence finding appropriate ways of coping with it. Secondly, the study informs policymakers at the institutional level of actions to take for reviewing their systems to enhance a conducive environment for graduate students to cope with stress.

**Keywords:** *Programme leadership, supervision, stress experience, graduate students*

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### 1.0 Introduction

Stress is part of human life because of its inevitability. Human beings exist in an environment that defines their stressing factors in all areas such as spiritual life; emotional; mental and physical life; work function, public behaviour; money issues, among others. At the time of this research, the Coronavirus pandemic was affecting the world and had brought stressful situations in families, schools, colleges, and places of work. Kenya was one of the countries which had been affected by the virus, therefore, becoming unsafe. People get stressed and filled with uncertainty about life for not knowing who they can catch the virus. Diseases like Covid-19 are one of the many stressors. For the smooth running of institutions, the management arranges the leadership into several levels among which is the programme leadership. While

programme leadership is meant for the smooth running of the institution, at times it causes stress among students. And therefore, becomes a stressor. These stressors eventually are likely to lead to detrimental situations. Stress is not a new phenomenon because it has been investigated by several scholars. In the study, the investigator investigated stress experiences due to programme leadership among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

A study done by UNICEF (2021) shows that education was in crisis in the entire world and that nearly 77 million children, the pandemic has taken away their classrooms for the past 18 months and that worldwide have lost 1.8 trillion hours counting of in-person learning due to COVID-19 lockdowns. While the right to go to school and learning is central to every child's development, safety, and well-being, in almost every country in the world classroom remained closed while social gatherings continued to take place. UNICEF (2021) continues to say that the cost of school closures on students' learning, health, and well-being has been devastating and that the repercussions for every child, their family, their community, and their economy will be felt for years to come. The repercussions brought by covid-19 did not affect school-going children alone but also graduate students in universities. This is supported by a most recent study by Tabitha, (2021) which shows that the pandemic has a negative impact on the lives of graduate students in Kenyan universities.

### ***1.1 Stress among Students***

The American Psychological Association (2019) in an article reported that in the past ten years, stress has persistently become burdensome to all humanity regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, faith, role, education, occupation, and economic status. The American Psychological Association (2019) in an article continued to report that there is extreme stress affecting people's health and well-being and that recognizable efforts to minimize the levels of stress are underway by the government.

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 cause stress among graduate students.

There is a deficiency in the current literature on addressing the critical issue of stress among graduate students in Kenyan universities. The secondary data available show that scholars seem to have paid more attention to undergraduate students ignoring the masters and doctoral students (Mwakughu, 2011; Kyalo & Chumba 2011). A survey of the literature reveals a paucity of relevant information that this research has addressed. Kenya has several Christian universities that offer graduate studies, like any other institutions of higher learning, these institutions are faced with issues that are graduate students' stress-related problems. Christian universities have put into place leadership and program structures to help the students have an enabling environment of learning. Students receive institutional support ranging from moral, finance, and spiritual among others to address whatever challenges they are faced with during their tenure of studies. However, despite this enormous support, stress among graduate students is like a wound that does not cure. This issue warrants an investigation to determine the effects of programme leadership on the stress levels among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

## ***1.2 Study Objective***

The two main components of programme leadership are; thesis supervision and departmental leadership. A conducive learning environment entails that these two areas of the programme support and encourage students in their graduate studies. The objective of this study was to establish how programme leadership leads to stress experiences among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### ***2.1 Theoretical Review***

Davidyan (2015) noted that response theories deal with actual physiological changes that affect body systems and organs. The foundation for response theories had been long provided by Walter Canon (1929) and Selye (1956). According to these psychologists, the body possesses an internal mechanism to fight threats exerted by environmental challenges by adjusting itself to various physical systems which compensate for the bodily gas being exerted. The body raises an alarm reaction after it sounds like a bodily threat from a foreign environment or an enemy. In the threat response, the body either commands a fight or flight and comprises three phases namely: Alarm reaction, Resistance, and Exhaustion. In the case that the learning environment (program leadership, program structure, institutional social factors, and external factors) of selected Christian universities in Kenya exert unnecessary pressure and that the path goal is not clear to the graduate students then the stress level rises and the effects are negative. The students' body will start raising an alarm because it feels threatened by the environment.

### ***2.2 Empirical Review***

Programme design is a central theme of all Learning and Teaching Strategies in any given university. All staff who teach participate in the design of learning and teaching, but for every programme of study there should be someone whose concern is the programme as a whole. This person is called the Programme Leader.

The work of Programme Leaders is to fulfill their role and responsibilities under the oversight of the Board of Management of a given school and its chairperson but are directly managed by the Head of Department of the school. In large universities, there are combined programmes headed by an Associate Programme Leader. The Programme Leader and Associate Programme Leader together are responsible for promoting effective discussion and collaboration to ensure the effective delivery of the combined programme. Heads of Department (HOD) identify Programme Leaders and Associate Programme Leaders from among the academic staff as appropriate for their department. The HOD ensures that the roles are appropriately recognized in the Department's workload allocation model. The term of office for a Programme Leader is normally designed by the university rules and regulations governing the school in the university. Leadership is a key component in any given institution of learning. Different learning institutions face some forces that thrust new problems and challenges at the leadership level. From the early days, scholars proposed leadership theories like the Trait, Behavioural, and Contingency/Situational theories (Cherry, 2016) to try and offer solutions to the problem that leadership institutions were facing. The trait theory assumes that leaders are born not made and these leaders have distinctive characteristics that account for their effectiveness in leadership. The behavioural theory formulated in the 1950s tries to view leadership from the leaders' behaviour and argues that the effectiveness of the leadership of any leader depends on his/her distinctive styles and behaviour. Contingency theory/situational theory was born in the 1960s by Fielder after the trait/ great man and Behavioural theory fails to provide a complete theoretical framework on leadership. This theory argues that the performance of leadership is

dependent upon the interaction of leadership style, the amount of control exercised by the leader, the nature of the environment, and the characteristics of the followers. Leaders are viewed to be autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire. Regarding program leaders, if the leader overstretched one style of leadership the graduate student suffers, and this causes an increase in stress levels.

Programme leadership cannot be separated from the broad goals and aims of the learning environment of a university. It forms part of the learning environment of the university. Programme leadership is founded based on educational aims that are aligned with the vision of the university. To achieve the university's vision and long-term goals, and aims of learning, the university splits its management of the entire program into smaller program leadership. This program leadership falls under a certain school of the university. A learning institution, therefore, is a well-designed educational unit of the university with a leader. Okumbe (1999) likened a school to an "industry which transforms a given quality of inputs into required output". For the school to produce the desired output there must be leaders of certain programs so as for them to run the programs effectively. The function of the program leader is to guarantee that the program in his school runs effectively so that the raw materials (students) are transformed into an appropriate product that is marketable in society which is judged by the way its past students who have graduated from the school perform in society. The programme production function, which is the process by which its inputs (students) are converted into outputs (useful workers after graduation) is important because non-programme variables such as family relationships, workplace, students' prior competency, financial challenges, teamwork, and the institutional size, other social and economic factors all affect the programme leadership outcome.

The efficiency of the school is divided into programme leadership and programme structure. The programme leadership ensures the overall function of the entire school programme is to transform the inputs into outputs. While many variables contribute to the success of the program leadership, the study chose to deal with those variables that were in line with its study-supervision and advising, department, and schools within the programme leadership and their functions, management of timelines, and coordination of the programme.

### **3.0 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.

### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

#### ***4.1 Programme Leadership (PL) Perceived Effects***

The study sought to determine the stress experience of students from the programme leadership. The programme leadership is defined by the experience of students with their thesis supervisors and the departmental support in terms of ordering the courses that are to be taken

and the supervision process. The respondents were to rate their responses in the research instrument based on the Likert scale.

Within the programme leadership, the design of the graduate programme is a central theme of all learning and teaching strategies in any given university. All staff who teach participated in the design of learning and teaching, but for every programme of study, there should be someone whose concern is the programme as a whole. This person is called the Programme Leader.

The work of Programme Leaders is to fulfill their role and responsibilities under the oversight of the Board of Management of a given school and its chairperson but are directly managed by the Head of Department of the school. Leadership is a key component in any given institution of learning. Different learning institutions face some forces that thrust new problems and challenges at the leadership level.

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Programme leaders play a significant role in academic achievement due to their pivotal roles in guiding graduate students in universities. A good programme leader can create a climate that can foster excellence in teaching and learning that determines students' success in the programme of their study. When the success of the university becomes public knowledge, judgment can be made about the effectiveness of the university. This study suggests that good programme leadership promotes a conducive learning environment that leads to student's success in the programme of their studies and its failure causes stress among students.

The study examined PL based on supervision and departmental leadership to establish if they cause stress to students or not and in what sense. The results of the study show that the students perceived supervisors to be doing enough to assist and advise them with their academic workload. The results further show that students kept thinking about meeting their academic supervisors which was an indication that there could have been some fear which was causing stress to the students. The other fact that supervisors were taking long to respond to the student's thesis work and concerns was enough reason to make the students keep thinking about meeting the supervisor.

However, with all the above issues, there was no strained relationship between students and their supervisors. The students maintained a good relationship with the supervisor. Failure by the supervisors to respond to students timely was enough reason to cause the perceived stress but not to strain the relationship.

On the departmental leadership, the students felt that the leadership was clear, and the department was doing enough to assist them with their academic workload. It was thus clear that students were experiencing stress due to programme Leadership in selected Christian universities in Kenya, majorly as a result of thesis supervision.

Findings by Murphya and Curtis (2013) and Burgess and Moores (2018) found that when programme leaders are stressed by the amount of workload, they later passed it on to the students and that when programme leaders felt overwhelmed by excessive administrative workloads, senior managers undervalued their role, lack of a culture of teamwork, and lack of acknowledgment occurring within a context of invisibility, all this was passed over to the

students' population in general. In this case, Moores (2018) argues that the success of the programme is dependent on men and women in the learning environment, and if the university is going to be assured of its success in the programme leadership, then several components are required. These components include proper skills among the leaders, a well-designed curriculum, quality assurance, good pastoral care, staff mentoring, and close collaboration with academic staff and professional staff. Failure to do all this leads to failed programme leadership and the negative impact is passed over to students Burgess and Moores, (2018).

The results of this study add to the existing literature in that the supervisor taking long to respond to students, caused the students to often keep thinking about meeting their supervisor, and experience stress due to programme leadership, and this caused the perceived stress among the students.

#### ***4.2 PL Stress Experience as Related to Other Factors***

The study raised other questions as to whether the perceived stress differs by gender, age group, marital status, academic level of study, and academic programme of study. To answer these questions, a one-way ANOVA was carried out.

##### **4.2.1 Perception of Stress Experience by Gender**

The results show that there was no significant differences in PL stress by gender and this implies that stress experiences of graduate students are the same for males as for females. Anbumalr et al. (2017) showed that men were more affected by stressors such as finances and work-related events than women. Kai-Wen (2009) findings suggested that, unlike female students, the main problem of males is family problems issues.

##### **4.2.2 Perception of Stress Experience by Age and by marital status**

It was observed that older students agreed to being on average more stressed than younger ones. This is expected since older students have more responsibilities possibly at work or a family level.

The results also show that there are significant differences in marital status in the perceived stress for the programme leadership. Married students experienced more stress in their studies, as relates to the programme leadership than single students. This is similarly expected since married students often have more family responsibilities in addition to their studies.

Ghafoor, Sarah et al. (2019) showed that married students reported higher stress compared to single students in two areas, those related to academics and research performance. However, Marriage brought massive social support that mediated positive influences toward an academic career and acted as a buffer during times of stress. She continued to note that while single students were more stressed about items related to future goals, married ones were stressed about items related to immediate goals within their degree programme.

##### **4.2.3 Perception of Stress Experience by Academic Level of Study**

This study sought to find out the perception of stress experience on academic level of study and how the perceived stress affected graduate students positively or negatively. The respondents in the study were either 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, or 4<sup>th</sup>-year students.

The findings of this study show that in Programme Leadership, fourth-year doctoral students agreed to be affected by stress more and were followed by third, second, and first-year students.

##### **4.2.4 Perception of Stress Experience by Academic Programme of Study**

This study sought to find out the perception of stress experienced on a programme of study and how the perceived stress affected graduate students positively or negatively. The respondents in the study were either master's or Doctoral students. The results show that there are significant differences in academic programme of study in the perceived stress for the program leadership.

On average, Doctoral students agreed that they were more stressed than Master students.

The findings of this study show that in External Factors, the doctoral students agreed that they experienced stress more than Master students. The findings of this study further, indicate that stress was being experienced by all students irrespective of their academic programme. However, the study notes that the Doctoral student experienced more stress than the Master students. The reason for this could only be attributed to the fact that there is more workload in the Doctoral programme than in Master programmes.

#### ***4.3 Student-Related External Factors***

Apart from the programme leadership, external factors could contribute to stress among graduate students. The study examined various external factors that have the potential to cause stress among students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. The respondents were to rate their responses through several items in the research instrument based on the Likert scale.

Family relations and obligations are often major external factor that has the potential to cause stress among graduate students. If the family environment is not conducive, it can cause stress to students. In the particular case of students having their own families, the obligations within can be a source of stress. However, from this study, the students felt that their family relationships were not strained, and were thus not causing them stress.

Graduate students often have to work to raise money for their studies and possibly for their families. This can be a source of stress to them and would be manifested in their response to their supervisors and studies in general. From this study, the students felt that their workplace obligations were negatively affecting their engagement in graduate studies. This would certainly lead to stress in life and would negatively affect their studies and perception of their supervisors. Any delays by the supervisors to give feedback on the thesis would make worse a situation from the workplace obligations, and thus manifest in stress. The results of this study show that family members supported their loved ones who were in college and this case, the family relationship was not strained.

The study also found that teamwork among graduate students was not good and therefore caused stress among them. This study concludes that financial challenges as well as a lack of teamwork among graduate students were causing them external stress that could negatively impact their graduate studies.

The study further shows that external factors affected the younger age group more than the old ones. This could be because the young age groups were struggling with adopting the environment teaching and learning methodology, the different views of teachers, emphasis on the weakness of students rather than their strength points (Masih & Gulrez, 2006). In terms of the stress experience, the older group experienced more stress than the young group. This could be attributed to the fact that the older group had more family issues to deal with than the young group.

In external factors, the first-year students experienced more stress than the other academic-level students. This could be attributed to the fact that the 1<sup>st</sup> year students were struggling to adjust to the new learning environment and therefore external factors, especially financing their studies overwhelmed them.

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) support the findings of this study.

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

The findings of this study on the external factors' impact show that students were able to cope with important issues in their lives. The graduate students' perceptions agreed that they were able to successfully handle their life hassles, had confidence to overcome problems and difficulties affecting their lives, and had confidence or enough ability to handle their personal problems. The findings led to the conclusion that while the respondents' perceptions were that external issues (Factors) did cause stress among the students, the impact was less felt. Students' perceptions also showed that they were not experiencing emotional distress, or impairment in social and occupational areas as a result of work-related pressure.

The study in its conclusion shows that workplace obligations were negatively affecting graduate students, the respondents were facing financial challenges, and teamwork lacked among the graduate students in selected Christian universities. The findings also show that external factors were perceived by the graduate students to be causing stress in selected Christian universities in Kenya. Studies like Sulaiman, Hassan, Sopian, and Abdullah (2009) suggest that young people always face problems in adapting to various stresses and that older people struggle with the programme structure, financial issues, and family issues among many other issues.

#### ***4.4 Correlation of PL and External factors stress perceptions***

The study further, shows that programme leadership correlated with external factors to cause stress among graduate students in Kenya. The results indicate a positive and significant relationship ( $p < 5\%$ ) between programme leadership and external stress. The results show that change in programme leadership is accompanied by a significant change in external stress in the same direction. The study, therefore, concludes that graduate students experienced stress due to programme leadership, with significant contributions from external factors.

#### ***4.5 Qualitative Study***

The respondents' perceptions in the focus group discussion pointed to experiences of stress in the students' lives as manifested by sleepless nights, excessive workload, loss of sleep, anxiety, frequent headaches, and worry about meeting deadlines. A study done by Misigo (2015) showed that college experience is the most stressful period in a student's life. This is because students have to adjust to a new social environment and deal with living away from parents or a familiar environment.

This is also confirmed by Markrides et al. (1998) in Misigo (2015) who noted that college students have high levels of stress. The findings of this qualitative study concur with the findings of the quantitative study which shows that students experienced stress due to programme leadership. The findings of the focus groups in this study show that students were



faced with a lot of uncertainty, did not know a lot about graduate programme of their study, that lecturers did not give enough guidance, and that the department did not give guidelines for supervision and leadership. All this caused the perceived stress among students.

### **5.0 Conclusion**

The study concluded that supervision as part of programme leadership was causing stress among graduate students in the selected Christian universities in Kenya. Supervisors were taking long to give feedback to students, and this was leading students to be anxious about meeting their supervisors and as such was causing the perceived stress.

However, this could have been made worse by the various underlying external factors, especially negative work effects, financial challenges to finance their studies, and lack of teamwork with fellow students.

This study, therefore, implies that supervisors need to give timely feedback to students to alleviate stress. Furthermore, the institutions need to develop a supervision working framework to make sure that supervisors adhere to it. The fact that students were facing financial challenges, workplace obligations, and lack of teamwork in their studies implies that students need to be prepared to finance their graduate studies right from the onset, and also to manage workplace engagements together with their studies. Students further need to learn to work as a team.

### **6.0 Recommendations**

Considering the central role that the programme leadership plays among graduate students, through supervision and departmental leadership, an enabling environment must be created. The conclusion from the results that PL contributes to stress experiences among graduate students in Christian universities in Kenya leads to the following recommendations:

- a) The supervisors' roles and responsibilities and those of the students need to be clearly defined and enforced so that supervisors give timely feedback to students, and students adhere to the timelines.
- b) The graduate students have to realize that graduate-level academic workload is heavy, and they have to adapt to it.
- c) Need to look for scholarships or other ways to finance their graduate studies and finance their family obligations.
- d) Students need to work as a team for smooth learning and support of each other.

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