

## **Institutional Social Support and Stress Experiences by Graduate Students in Selected Christian Universities in Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

Students are often confronted with academic challenges that cause stress leading to manifestations of mental problems which often cause them to drop out of their studies. This study was aimed at determining the relationship between institutional social support and stress experiences among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. A sample of 142 graduate students was selected proportionately from four Christian universities in Kenya for the study. The results showed that there was lack of enough institutional financial, spiritual and emotional support, as well as lack of a framework to build teamwork among graduate students. These factors were causing stress among the students and negatively affecting them. The study results lead to the recommendation for the need for learning institutions to develop a financial framework through scholarships as well as emotional and spiritual support mechanisms through chaplaincy and other services. The study further recommends that graduate students should be assisted and encouraged to embrace teamwork in their studies.

**Keywords:** *Social support, Scholarships, stress experience, teamwork*

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### **1.0 Introduction**

A recent study by Kerr (2020) shows that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, graduate students' stress has increased and some were struggling to manage their mental health because of home quarantine, social distancing, inability to access college libraries for research, while others were worried about their graduation. While the general population faced increased stress, the graduate students were facing unique additional challenges during the pandemic period including how to pay their college fees as financial situations changed and some were rendered jobless, others had to cope with pay reductions, and those depending on scholarships were no longer provided for.

The American Psychological Association (2019) reported that stress had persistently become burdensome to all humanity regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, faith, role, education, occupation, and economic status. The study further reported that there was extreme stress affecting people's health and well-being and that recognizable efforts to minimize stress were underway by the government. Studies done in Africa focusing on issues of stress among students specifically, in Kenya, noted that the major issues associated with stress among university students included 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 led to students taking long to graduate and this caused stress among graduate students.

This study notes that 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 and ignored 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. The Christian universities often put into place leadership and programme structures to help the students have an enabling environment of learning. Students receive institutional support ranging from moral, financial, and spiritual among others to address the challenges they are faced with during their tenure of studies. However, despite this enormous support, stress among students is like a wound that does not cure. This issue warrants an investigation to determine the effects of institutional social support on stress levels among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

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

The foundation for response theories had been long provided by Walter Cannon (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 that 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 (institutional social 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 rises and the effects are negative. The students' bodies will start raising an alarm because they feel threatened by the environment and in this case institutional social factors. Davidyan (2015) noted that response theories deal with actual physiological changes that affect body systems and organs.

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

#### **2.2.1 Scholarship and Financial Support**

Successful outcome in higher education is defined by a student's tenacity in progression and timely graduation. The financial aid administration to university students has been shown to make such students successful. Higher education financial aid consists of both need- and merit-based aid. This is in the form of grants, loans, tuition remission, and private or institutional scholarships. This study defined institutional scholarships as monies given to a student by the institution without the expectation of repayment.

A study done by Michelle E. Manasse (2016) showed that institutional scholarships (social support) significantly impacted students' success across all measures: hours attempted, hours earned, and graduation within six years of entry. The study further found that the impact of institutional scholarships (social support) was stronger than awards for need-based aid and estimated family contribution. A further study done by Cagasan et al. (2019) showed

that government agencies and institutions have provided scholarships for graduate students to hasten the production of high-level human resources to contribute to the country's global competitiveness and economic development.

Another study by Ganem & Manasse (2011), revealed that there is an association between monetary support and students' success in their studies. Multiple studies provide empirical evidence connecting financial support and student success, yet a lot of inconsistency is seen across research on financial support and students' outcomes (Singell Jr. & Stater, 2006). This study in its finding was able to reveal that financial support positively influences student's retention in college until graduation. This study was supported by Alon (2007) who argued that grants and scholarships have more positive effects on students' support compared to loans.

Economic constraint is a common stressor for students with less income at the university. Adams et al. (2016) defined financial strain as perceived economic stress. The study also reported that economic constraints are among the top stressors affecting students' living which eventually has detrimental effects on academic achievement. Further, it is revealed that students with unsustainable incomes opt to work on a full-time basis off campus. Martinez, (2009) notes that the decision by students to work full-time later leads to student academic attrition.

Another study by Gansemer-Topf & Schuh (2006) revealed that institutional scholarships positively influenced retention of students than those with little or none at all. Alon (2007) continued to argue that students from economically disadvantaged families are more sensitive to the impact of financial support.

Informed by the above studies which have revealed that graduate students suffer stress caused by financial strains, the study found that there is more need for financial support to be availed to graduate students to alleviate stressors among them.

### **2.2.2 Emotional and Spiritual Support**

The term support means to give or aid someone in need while support has the meaning of backing up someone. This study looked into the emotional and spiritual support needed by graduate students in Christian universities. Nutov and Hazzan (2011), elicited the need for emotional support to graduate students since they face a lot of emotional instability during their graduate studies. Various research bodies, government agencies, universities, and colleges have come up with ethical codes to protect the participants as the researcher goes about doing research. However, very little has been done to protect the researcher himself especially those doing research. Nutov and Hazzan (2011), (Blee, 1988; Chong, 2008; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009; Haynes, 2006; Rager, 2005) showed that researchers reported on a variety of emotional stress that they experienced at different stages of the research execution, such as empathy, loneliness, curiosity, sadness, frustration, joy, boredom, and apprehension, which were even sometimes accompanied by physiological or behavioural phenomena.

According to Russ Yocum (2016) need for emotional and spiritual support ranges high among students than getting an education. This is because if the emotional and spiritual needs are met then education becomes easier. Yocum continued to argue that according to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1968), the fulfillment of the social need to feel loved by others and be accepted fulfills a great place in human life. As graduate students work their way up the education pyramid, toward self-actualization, they must have their need for emotional and spiritual support fulfilled. Because according to Maslow everyone is working towards self-actualization, educators and administration in Christian universities should endeavour to

understand the significant role that religion and spirituality play in inspiring students, as these elements could very well be the driving force behind the fulfilment of individual needs. When emotional and spiritual needs are not met, it can be devastating to graduate students and therefore, cause the rise of stress.

Sifuna and Otiende (1992) argued that man's early educational aims were concerned with communal security and survival and therefore without stress in life. Mankind sought to minimize starvation, keep warm, and continue living. This education was mainly concerned with the present and hardly concerned with the past or future. Human beings were mainly concerned with combating the danger of forces within the cruel environment surrounding them, therefore prepared the young to respect and fear the unpredictable surroundings. This type of education was religious based and all students were taught the fear of community gods and the punishment for breaking community taboos. Education ensured that the offspring followed the customs and traditions of the community. This was to give emotional and spiritual support to young people as they grew up and went about community education.

The early man's education was practical as well as theoretical and included aspects of present-day education. The practical was work-oriented, while the theoretical was heavily geared towards religious and supernatural phenomena. Training for young people was fixed, simple, and direct with a religious dimension on how to deal with the unseen forces. The educational methods were clearly in response to the existing environmental circumstances.

This type of education was transmitted by the older family members. Men taught boys male duties while women did the same for girls. This marks the beginning of specialization in courses. The man started to practice trade and vocations, setting the technological revolution. As technology increased tribal and religious leaders took the role of instructing youth in religious matters. In this type of education, classes or standards of instruction were unknown except for rites of passage at puberty with initiatory ceremonies. The examination was foreign to this type of education. There was no examination stress faced as the student did not need to memorize anything. Unlike today's education, early education gave emotional and spiritual support to the students.

Any discussion of emotions and spiritual support must include not only the research subject but also the researcher himself/herself who is the graduate student. The point of departure for this study is that emotional and spiritual support is necessary as the researcher goes about his studies. Due to the emotional pressure graduate students face as researchers, they need emotional and spiritual support from their colleges/universities, friends, spouses, family members, workmates, and society as a whole. Jairam and Kahl (2012), noted that the supervisors play key roles in giving the student emotional and spiritual support without which stress affects the student and drops the study. In relation to this study the supervisors' failure to give required support to graduate students, then they are emotionally affected causing them stress. In support of Sifuna and Otiende's arguments, early education was more practical than theoretical and produced people who were useful to society, the environment of the study was favourable to the students and caused no stress. While Sifuna and Otiende are right in their own capacity, they forgot that early education lacked demands and industrial competition of today. According to Russ Yocum (2016), participants claimed that engaging in spiritual activities relieved stress, with all of the commonly held benefits associated with stress relief. Understanding the correlations between components of emotional and spiritual support allows for a more complete understanding of spiritual development. Accordingly, when a person achieves emotional and spiritual support he or she feels more confident that he/ she can succeed not only academically, but in life.

### **2.2.3 Institutional stability**

Instability is a state of being unstable or lack of stability. Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defined it as uncertainty caused by the possibility of a sudden change in the present situation. It is the condition of being likely to change especially unexpectedly. In this study the term institution is used to mean an educational or academic organization or an institute of learning, school, college, or a university. Institutional instability, therefore, refers to that change that occurs or may occur unexpectedly in a college or university and negatively affects graduate students.

A large number of substantial studies have shown evidence that the quality of formal institutions is an important determinant of economic growth (Berggren, et al., n.d). However, not all types of institutions are conducive to growth, and other factors such as human capacity are important (Glaeser et al., 2004; Acemoglu et al., 2005). Several factors contribute to educational institutions' instability. Devi (2017) identified factors such as socio-economic factors, political factors, and environmental factors as main contributors to educational institutions' instability. Besides these factors, other major challenges and issues are related to growth, quantity, quality, disparities between rural-urban, male-female disparity, regional disparity, the fast-trending process of privatization in higher education institutions, and the impact of globalization on higher education. To a large extent, educational, political, and social institutional instability, causes stress among students and results in negative effects on their academic life.

### **2.2.4 Interpersonal Relationships**

An interpersonal relationship can be defined as an interaction that exists between two or more persons with the aim of fulfilling one or more physical or emotional needs Mugisa, Charles (2017) Cavazos, (2013). It is that strong, deep, or close association or acquaintance between two or more people over a period of time. Different forms of interpersonal relationships include individuals working together in the same organization, same team, relationships between family members, and friends, and relationships between teachers and students which is the interest of this study. If interpersonal relationship is boosted among graduate students and supervisors, it will equally boost their academic performance. Emphasis by lecturers and supervisors of graduate students identifies, evaluates, tracks, and encourages progress in learning and finishing course assignments, but little has been focused on interpersonal relationships. Academic environment where interpersonal relationships of graduate students thrive needs to be emphasized to foster social interaction which leads to improvement in academic performance. The quality of the supervisor-graduate student relationship is important for quality course work, quality grades performance, and timely finishing of the degree course.

Interpersonal relationship can be affected by several factors such as compatibility, communication, and honesty. In relation to graduate students, their relationship with the supervisors is key to completion of their work.

Wubbels et al. (2012) noted that a positive teacher-student relationship strongly contributes to student learning. Educators, parents, and students understand that problematic relationships can be detrimental to students, outcomes, and development in their learning. Productive learning environments are characterized by supportive and warm interactions throughout the class.

Lecturer/supervisor and graduate students' interaction in class and out of classroom settings promote conducive learning environment. Students ask areas they did not clearly understand and lecturers' response contribute to their learning. Lecturers/supervisors need to interact with learners during co-curriculum and extra-activities outside lecture time. These activities boost

relationship and social development between lecturers and students as they interact freely hence fostering a good learning environment for better academic performance of students

Kiesler (1996); and Sadler & Woody (2003) argued on the need for interaction between individuals. This kind of relationship is extended to the teacher-student (supervisor-graduate student) relationship. Since in the work of supervision emotions can be high, it is important to the supervisor not to be harsh with the student. The type of working interrelationship adopted by the supervisor with the student being supervised may cause the graduate stress levels to be on the high or low.

### 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 Perception of Institutional Social Support Factors (ISSF)

The study sought to answer the question on the effects of institutional social support factors on the perceived stress 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 are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Perception of Institutional Social Support Factor (ISSF)**

	Institutional Social Support Factors	Mean Score
1	The institution does not have enough financial support	3.5
2	The institution does not have enough spiritual and emotional support	3.7
3	The institution does not seem to be financially stable.	2.3
	<b>Mean Institutional Social Support</b>	<b>3.2</b>
	Negative Impact	
4	In the last few months, I have often felt nervous and stressed.	3.1
	<b>Overall mean</b>	<b>3.2</b>

Four questions were presented to the participants. Three of the questions dealt with Institutional Social Support Factors (ISSF) while the fourth question dealt with personal feelings that affected graduate students.

The findings of this study show that graduate students were in agreement that institutional social support was affecting them. The inability of the institution to provide enough financial support would have affected students and caused stress to them. This is shown by a mean score of 3.5 (The institution does not have enough financial support) a clear indication that the students were agreeing that the institution was not providing enough financial support. The

respondents' perception agreed that the institution did not have enough financial support. According to the respondents' perception, failure of the institution to provide spiritual and emotional support was also an issue causing perceived stress among the students. This had a mean score of 3.7 an indication that they agreed with the statement that the institution did not have enough spiritual and emotional support. The students' spiritual and emotional needs were not being met. However, a mean score of 2.3 shows the respondents' perception that the institution was financially stable and therefore, not causing stress among them. The financial stability of the institution was a not a bother to the students and therefore not causing them stress.

The overall mean score of 3.2 shows a clear indication that social support factors were important issues to the students and were perceived to be causing stress among them. The students were nervous and stressed and this is an indication that the students needed social support from the institution. The study, therefore, leads to the conclusion that institutional social support factors were perceived to be causing stress among students.

Question number four (4) was a response impact question that was meant to measure the negative or positive perception impact of the respondents as a result of the variable (Institutional Social Support Factors). The respondents agreed with the statement (In the last few months, I have often felt nervous and stressed) an indication that they were feeling nervous and stressed and is shown by a mean score of 3.1 The overall means score for institutional social support factors was 3.2 indicating that the variable was perceived to be causing stress among students. Students could have been nervous due to several factors that are not indicated in this study but three institutional stress indicators were clear from this study. These were lack of enough financial support, spiritual, and emotional support. This study was able to conclude that if students did not receive enough financial, spiritual, and emotional support then, this would cause them stress.

The finding of this study is supported by studies by Idzai (2016), and Hijaz & Naqvi (2006) who were able to make a connection between economic constraints and academic achievement. They showed that economic challenges compel the students to seek alternative ways of getting income alongside their studies which causes prolonged stay in college. Other multiple studies like Ganem and Manasse (2011) provide 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.

#### ***4.2 Correlation between institutional social support and stress experience***

A correlational test was done to test if there is any statistical relationship between institutional social support factors and stress indicating that there is a positive and significant relationship between institutional social support factors and graduate students' stress. This is showed by a positive correlation coefficient of 0.454 and p -value of 0.000, which is lesser than the conventional p-value of 0.05 used in this the study. The results of the study showed that those students who received financial aid/support were able to be retained in college and finished their studies fast than those who did not receive any aid/support.

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

Institutional social support factors were causing stress among students due to the fact that there was a lack of enough financial, spiritual, and emotional support. The study implies that if students did not receive enough financial support and there was a lack of enough spiritual and emotional support, then this caused stress among the students.

## 6.0 Recommendations

The study recommends the need for learning institutions to develop a financial framework through scholarship as well as emotionally and spiritually through chaplaincy and other services. The study further recommends that graduate students should learn to work on their studies in teams and that graduate students should be ready to finance their graduate studies right from the start.

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