Participation for What? A Policy-Motivated Approach to Student's Activism in Higher Education in Kenya.

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ABSTRACT

Students activism has been one of the major issue affecting schooling and students' progression in higher education. Although research has been done to address students' riots in institutions of higher learning, there is concurrence that this should be aligned to a sound policy framework in order to explicitly enhance an action perspective on education. Taking the different manifestations of student's activism, this paper attempts to highlight circumstances that students use to raise grievances about their welfare and how this contributes to an ongoing academic and political debate about the role of students in higher education.
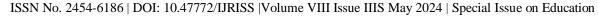
INTRODUCTION

Globally, student activism has been closely associated with an existence of hostile environment between students, government and faculty (Ngesu, 2011, Hirst, 1974). According to Hirst (1974), historically, there has been student-teacher- animosity in universities since time in memorial and as such, the circumstances in which these activities occur cannot be resolved at once. To bridge the gap, Hirst (1974) points out that, faced, on the one hand, with the militant to whom such role is anathema, and, on the other with administrators whose authority had been put into question, a mediator has a rough rise I trying to understand the students and to conceive the inconceivable.

For many decades, student's activism has played a pivotal role in redefining higher education and state governance. According to Solevid (2009), the foundation of knowledge can be found in the transformation of power that has been experienced in most countries where power has been simultaneously shifted upwards, downward and outwards from the nation state. To mitigate this, reforms that have followed have incorporated management by objectives and performance-orientations and consequently the legitimization of the political output and action plans have become a central voice or else tool for decision makers (Scharpf, 1997). To support this argument, Hirst (1974) argues that, "these groups are more likely to be prepared to discuss, question and reason with the enemy than one might imagine and the silent majority dissolves into the real diversity of backgrounds, interest, academic and social status which make up the student population of universities.

EMPHASIZING THE OUTPUT SIDE OF POLITICS AND ACADEMIA

In the 1960s, student militancy and activism was a common phenomenon. According to Ishumi (1976), the student activism in the United States of America and Britain must be understood in relation to the political system at that time. Ishumi (1976) points out that the political regime, having betrayed the national social revolution, and the education system being elitist by various means, such as rigid and discriminatory examinations, helped to perpetuate the existing social political structure. Earlier, Christman (1966), had

noted that as workers' revolution was being organized in Vienna, students in their thousands strongly opposed and disregarded the governing organ of the revolution therefore demonstrating their unwillingness to act as a mere instrument in the act of the committee of safety.
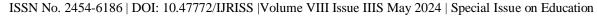
The Seventeenth Century witnessed a fierce political movement and propaganda orchestrated by the students in Universities (Ishumi, 1976). In particular, Thomas Hobbes, the Oxford philosopher who advocated unquestioning loyalty to the Monarch, was quick to locate one of the sources of tension. The Universities have been to this nation, as the wooden horse was to the Trojans…I despair of any lasting peace among ourselves, till University here shall bend and direct their studies to the settling of it, that is, to the teaching of absolute obedience to the laws of the King…The core of the rebellion, as you have seen by this, and read of other rebellions, are the universities; which nevertheless are not to be cast away but to be better disciplined…(quoted in S.M Lisbet and P.G Altbach 1969: V).

The above sentiments seem to suggest that since time in memorial, the unprecedented expansion of educational opportunities has out-run the possibilities of social mobility. In this context, the student assume that the government and administrators have failed and consequently ignored the political and social function of the University as the guardian of civilization (Hirst, 1974). A study done by Ishumi (1976) avers that part of the explanation may be that once they have certain apparent ideals or objectives "in sight". the students press their absolute demands in the same direction of the apparent (not necessarily real or easy) target, closing their eyes and minds to several alternatives of action or strategy available. They see no other way than what they perceive at the moment and what they must instantly and irreversibly follow. The consequent accompaniments of this are intellectual (and decisional) narrowness, anti-intellectualism. forcefulness in the absence of genuine mass discussion, and sometimes only false or piecemeal concessions gained. Supporting this argument (Ngesu, 2017) in research on the evolution of students' militancy in globalizing world: Trends and patterns in Kenya established that while there are specific needs that cause students violence, factors such as location of the university, age and attitudes play a leading role in explaining who participates and how, and possible repercussions.

Ngesu (2017) in analyzing the relationship between politics and student activism in secondary schools in Kenya established that the militant students do not exhaust the range of students' attitudes. According to the findings, student militancy is spasmodic and normally take a less limited duration. Most educators, however, attribute student militancy more to changes in the society and to the fact that teenagers no longer automatically respond to conventional values. Students, on the other hand, have perceived the adult society to be slow or else reluctant to accept their views and even slower and more reluctant to accommodate them in critical discussions and decisions of consequence to the organization and future of society. The enigma of student militancy according to Ishumi (1976) is that frequently the strikes gain no benefit or advantage even if they win; the protests are presumably for the benefit of someone else. But even when they do stand to gain. or when the strike is against a specific grievance. the violence is out of all proportion to the benefit to be derived or the grievance suffered:' Thus, at a minimum, the presence of student voice may empower comrades to voice grievances externally, through means of a political action.

According to Ishumi (1976), College life in the 1920's and 1930's was glamourized by novels, magazines and movies, emphasizing the eccentricities of college life and omitting almost any mention of its serious side (Horbes, 1969). A stereotype emerged in America of a "rah-rah" Joe college, brainless but lovable. Such distortions of campus activities were generally harmless because they were unbelievable. In colleges outside North America, there were often forms of behaviour that were acceptable for students but frowned on in anyone else. Dueling clubs in continental Universities, a social life of extraordinary dimensions in British Universities, and political commitment often leading to street brawls and riots existed in many European college towns.

In Africa, University College of Dar-es-Salaam students went on strike in 1966 due to Nyerere's insistence

that they be involved in nation building by serving in the National Youth Service for six months. Following the strike, the then President sent all the students away and made National Youth Service compulsory for all Tanzanians with Form Four level of education and above, including those who had college education at certificate or diploma levels (Nyerere, 1968). In their paper, *New reflection on violence*, Paul and Francis (in Martin 1969) asserted that students had become dangerous subversive hence politicizing education.
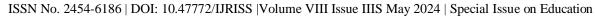
Violence according to Hirst (1974), as a negative symbol applied to others political action and enabled them to raise the spectre of irresponsibility without making one self-responsible for countering that action at the level of its goals and responsibility. Ishumi (1974) points out that down below the bureaucratic structure, the administrators became a threat as they believed (and have believed) themselves to be the actual runners of the institution, while a sharper challenge issued from the faculty, who claimed to be the actual backbone of the academic life on the campus. The tug-of-war has thus existed between the three traditional pillars of the institution-the "political" boards, the administration and the faculty. The institutional clients, the students, were an "inert" force at the bottom of the pyramid and this has been a major cause of student activism.

A close analysis of the outbreaks of student militancy in African countries from the mid- 1960s to 1990s already referred to, the things that triggered them varied and were frequently shaped by local situations, but a closer examination reveals a basic struggle for "power" to influence and/ or actually participate in the affairs of national politics and education, ranging from the formulation of national goals and policies and the formulation of school /college curricula, to the internal and external administration of the educational and cultural institutions.

In Kenya, the causes of student activism in universities were varied and complex. A combination of factors ranging from the rejection of the traditional roles of universities, labour movements, elitism and political power have had far reaching impact on student academic progression in higher institutions. The causes of the unrest in the early 1970's were either based on issues of principle, such as academic freedom, justice within and outside the university programmes or inadequate infrastructure for the security and welfare of the students. Between 1970 and 16th November 1971 for instance, the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University (College) were closed 17 times because of student unrest (*The Daily Nation,* November 17, 1987). Between 1961 and 1980, the focus of the unrest majored on issues of a national, regional and international nature. But this very reasonableness became a serious block to the interpretation of the problem. In an examination of changing evaluations of students' behavior, Valley (1999) claimed that the expansion of poor quality education in higher institutions resulted in massive political resistance and open by the youth. Consequently, the student movement in Kenya must be understood in relation to the political system.

A study done by Ngesu (2011) on student militancy in Kenyan secondary schools established that the impression that only male students perpetrate militant acts, as has previously been posited, is outdated, as many female students were reported to have participated in strikes and other forms of indiscipline, just like their male counterparts. The wider concern in this discourse is the failure by the political class to deliver the "goods" and to live up to their own objectives. Such gaps have been utilized by university students to advance their political agenda. Thus, one can see the context of the revolution of rising expectations among the militants, and one the reasons why they are never satisfied with the concessions of formal representations offered by the university authorities.

While, truly, the student eruptions have been "scattered"-though, significantly almost uniformly distributed-throughout the continent, they reflect the different pressures and strains, frequently of a local nature but also of a continental or international character, which many times emerge from social, economic and political problems and policies beyond the control of the national government, although not infrequently created within (Ishumi, 1974). Sociologically, and according to Burns (1968), the role of the student is one of the few total role situations in the society but the total character of the student's role is an ambiguous one in

respect of political action. But in what sense do students have a consciousness of relative deprivation? Ishumi (1974) points out that often, the most convenient means to this, at least "guaranteed" by "academic freedom", is student demonstrations, revolts, pickets, etc., on campus or outside in the immediate vicinity. Naturally, they cause electrical shocks and awakening in the general public, sometimes to their dismay, although at other times they strengthen the general demands and sentiments of the sympathizing general population.

POLICY GUIDELINES AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN KENYA.

The Government of Kenya through its policy guidelines postulates the students' activism and its repercussion is a complex phenomenon, involve a number of actors and is driven by both external and internal factors. Consequently, the study of students' activism in Kenya must be understood in the context of political system in respect of their demands to social justice, equity, equality and "comradeship". To address this, the government has instituted policies with regard to management of higher institutions in Kenya with key players dominating policy-making. Although there are changes, the mandate given to the University management to deal with student's indiscipline has to some extent become more interventionist. The role of the other arms of the government have begun to use their powers enshrined in the Constitution of Kenya to rein on rowdy students. Some students have been arrested and arraigned in court over murder, illegal demonstrations among other vices in line with the Kenya policy on the administration of justice.

Further, the creation of the department of guidance and counselling and policy guidelines domiciled in higher institutions that had once been ignored indicates some hardening of the stances towards students' activism. The style of management at higher institutions has been very effective in many ways. According to Hirst (1974), whether or not this particular explanation is satisfactory, the rule of law is a concept fundamentally alien to students. According to this author, they do not have a world to gain or lose. They have only the status of student and its potential reward to lose if they overstep the mark. Policies do not make sense as long as they advance their course. Promotion of good governance and consultation have played a crucial role in addressing students activism within the institutional framework and it is of great importance. Turning our attention to Kenya, the use of social media platform has figured significantly in mobilizing students to reason together with favorable results.

CONCLUSION.

The involvement of students in University affairs and most importantly in decision making has a strong bearing in building a positive management-lecturer-students relation in universities. Rules and regulations according to some students serve the interest of the university management and are voiceless in terms of articulating their grievances. The intelligentsia, normally associated with University students is a major breeding-ground for radical ideologies. The paper concludes that the policy guidelines in place have a significant role in addressing some of the issues that thrust students in higher institutions to acts of hooliganism and militancy.

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