Research article

Comrades' power: Student representation and activism in universities in Kenya

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Abstract

In the last decade, student politics and governance of universities in Kenya and in other African countries have undergone a tremendous transformation. The unprecedented expansion and massification of public universities, the introduction of 'Module 2' programmes, the admission of private, 'parallel' and 'school-based' students, and the substantial increase in private universities have impacted on the governance of the institutions and student politics in different ways. In this context, this article explores student involvement in university governance and describes the structure of students' unions in Kenyan universities in comparison with students exercising 'comrades' power' in universities in Kenya.
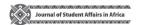
Keywords

Higher education; student politics; student activism; student unionism; university governance; representation.

Background and introduction

According to the Commission for University Education (2014), the higher education sector in Kenya is comprised of 52 universities, including 22 public chartered universities, 17 private chartered universities, and 13 institutions with letters of interim authority. In addition to universities and polytechnics, the higher education system contains a number of teacher training colleges, institutes of science and technology, government-owned and government-supported medical training colleges, and trade and agricultural institutions, which provide three-year vocational training at diploma level and two-year certificate courses. Student enrolment in Kenyan universities rose from 571 at independence in 1963 to a total of 239 362 in the 2012-2013 academic years (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

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Private higher education in Kenya can be traced to the colonial period when missionaries established schools and colleges for their converts. The first private institutions of higher learning were St Paul's United Theological College (1955) and Scott Theological College (1962). In 1970, the United States International University (USIU) established a campus in Nairobi. These early universities offered degrees in the name of parent universities abroad. For a long time, the government did not give accreditation to these private colleges or universities. Thus, the evolution of private higher education and the privatisation of universities were a response to two developments. Firstly, there was the increasing demand for higher education in the face of the financial inability of the government to expand admissions and subsidise students in public universities. This was a key impetus for the growth of private universities. Secondly, there was the desire by the management of public universities to stall the collapse of the institutions and reverse the decline in the quality of their programmes. The increased demand for university education led the government to encourage the establishment and accreditation of private universities in the 1990s. This phenomenal growth has not satisfied the increased need for university education in Kenya. The phenomenal growth has also increased the need for transformation and the restructuring of student governance and representation in order to effectively highlight and address issues affecting the growing number of students.

Over the last few years, there has been a massive expansion characterised mainly by upgrading some middle-level colleges to university status. This has been occasioned by the increasing numbers of students joining the universities through the Joint Admissions Board and the Self-Sponsored Program (SSP). The rising number of students has also been occasioned by the increase in conversion of several middle-level colleges to fully fledged universities (Bosire, Chemnjor & Ngware, 2008). In early 2014, for example, Kenya upgraded 15 such colleges into fully fledged universities in a bid to raise capacity for at least 10 000 extra students annually.

The rapid rise in the student population has raised significant issues regarding student representation and governance in both public and private universities. New data from the government shows that enrolments in state universities rose by 41%, from 195 428 in 2012 to 276 349 by the end of 2014. In contrast, admissions to private universities increased by just 7.1%, from 45 023 in 2012 to 48 211 in 2013. As a result of the admissions jump in public institutions, overall student enrolment shot up by 34.9% nationally to reach 324 560, as against 240 551 in 2012. Kenya's Ministry of Planning attributes the rise to new courses, the upgrading of university colleges to universities, and the expansion of private universities. Enrolments are expected to hit new highs this year as the government starts admitting state-funded students to private universities – currently, state-funded students can only join public universities (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

In this context, this article engages with two specific questions:

- What is the structure of student representation and participation in university governance in public and private universities in Kenya?
- What is the nature of 'comrades' power' and student activism in universities in Kenya, and what may account for changes and different patterns in public and private institutions?

Methodological approach

This article is largely descriptive and exploratory in design (cf. Creswell, 1998; Babbie, 2001; Bogdan & Bilken, 2003). It draws on available literature related to student governance, student politics and activism internationally, as well as in Kenyan universities, which was supplemented with information from the field. For the former, library and Internet searches provided a considerable amount of literature. The documentary sources used included published books, journal articles, magazines, as well as unpublished materials such as dissertations, and conference and seminar proceedings. In particular, they were useful in demonstrating the nature of student politics, representation and organisational characteristics in public and private universities in Kenya, as well as the significant similarities and differences in exercising 'comrades' power' in public and private universities in Kenya.

In addition, the article draws on conversations with student leaders held on the main campuses of four universities: two public universities, that is, Kenyatta University (KU) and Egerton University (EU), and two private universities, that is, the United States International University (USIU) and Mount Kenya University (MKU). The study does not attempt to provide a comparative analysis of student politics between these four institutions; rather, they serve to ensure that the overall discourse provided in this paper is informed by a variety of institutions.

Overall, the article to present a reflective account that raises questions and informally starts making propositions towards a deeper understanding of historical changes and contemporary patterns of student politics in Kenyan public and private universities and their significance.

Governance and universities in Kenya

Governance is a relational concept whose meaning depends on the context in which it is applied. While there is a variety of definitions of 'governance' found in the literature, which makes a single, unanimously comprehensive definition difficult, a common element in conceptualising governance in higher education is the notion of a multifaceted web of interaction and relationships among bodies operating at different levels, depending where, by whom and when the decision is made, and on what aspect (cf. Obiero, 2012). Governance is also viewed as the structure of relationships that authorise policies, plans, and decisions, and account for their probity and responsiveness (Meek in Amaral, Meek & Larsen, 2003). On the same note, it is described as decision-making patterns of authority distribution (Margison & Considine, 2000, p.7; also see: Meek in Amaral et al., 2003).

Higher education governance can be viewed in terms of two levels: institutional or internal governance and external or system governance (De Boer & File, 2003, p.10). External governance encompasses the vast array of macrolevel structures and relationships through which the regulatory frameworks and policies for higher education are developed, funding is allocated to institutions, and institutions are held accountable for the way it is spent. It also includes less formal structures and relationships which steer and influence organisational behaviour across the system. Institutional governance refers to the structures

and processes within individual institutions that establish responsibilities and authority, determine relationships between positions, and thereby define the way through which all stakeholders in a university setting relate to one another (Maassen 2003; de Boer & File, 2003). The relationship between these two levels determines the characteristics of individual higher education institutions, how they relate to the whole systems, the nature of academic work, and, more importantly, the ways the institutions are organised and governed. This article focuses on the institutional level governance.

For a very long time, institutional governance in Africa has been based on a top-down model. This has been challenged frequently in favour of a more inclusive, democratic, and participatory model of governance and leadership in keeping with notions of democratic representation (De Boer & Stensaker, 2007), the more traditional notions of shared governance, or the concept 'distributed leadership' (e.g. Harris, 2004). The latter is a rather new concept where responsibilities and activities are distributed across a wide range of people within each specific context (e.g. Lumby, 2003, p. 283). Thus, Obondo (2000) argues that, in order to effect a democratisation of higher education management in Kenya, existing organisational structures, their composition, operational rules and procedures, have to be modified consistent with the demand for an all-inclusive approach to academic administration. Obondo continues by arguing that democratisation of decision-making is important not only because many conflicts arise from an unequal power relationship, but also because universities are advocates of democratic institutions and should therefore practise what they preach.

The governance of universities typically provides a mechanism through which students can organise themselves in a governance structure that enables them to articulate their views. In considering how student governance is operationalised in private universities and in public universities that are increasingly privatising most of their students, one cannot fail to notice the drastic change from the notions of shared governance that traditionally gave academics and their students greater leeway in the governance of the institutions to the recent introduction of more corporate governance structures. The latter have increasingly diminished the power of students and academics in making binding decisions.

The rapid growth and expansion of universities in Kenya have therefore raised contradictory issues of governance in terms of the ways in which both public and private universities are run. In Kenya today, both public and private universities have embraced, in varying degrees, a democratisation of decision-making. On the one hand, the Universities Act of 2012 promotes wider representation and participation of staff and students in key university governing bodies, and allows staff a greater say in selecting senior university administrators. In the past the president of Kenya used to be the chancellor of all public universities, who, in turn, appointed the vice-chancellors and members of a university's council. This meant that the government played a key role in the internal governance of public universities. The Grand Coalition government, which came into power after the post-election violence in 2008, introduced far-reaching reforms in the running of public universities. Today, each university has its own chancellor and the appointment of the vice-chancellors is done through competitive bidding. Moreover, the government interferes very

minimally in the running of private universities, apart from, for example, through the role of the Commission for University Education (CUE) in awarding charters and letters of interim authority. It is arguable that the Universities Act of 2012 has led to the emergence of new governance cultures in institutions. A unique hybrid of two modes of governance, devolved and centralised, seems to have been introduced through the new Act. This model of governance is a kind of 'devolved centralisation' which seems to favour a corporate governance structure. At the same time, it did not seem to do much in enhancing the voice of the students' union.

Student involvement in university governance in Kenya

Student involvement in university governance illustrates students' willingness to participate in the life of the university. As studies of student engagement have shown, it involves additional educational benefits for students. Moreover, Wood (1993 in Obiero, 2012) carried out a study in three colleges regarding faculty, student and support-staff participation in governance in which he found that these groups provided valuable sources of information for decision-making. Other studies have also had positive outcomes concerning student participation and the ability of students to make significant contributions to the quality of decisions (Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999; Menon, 2005). Wood further argued that students may not be in a position to effectively represent the interest of their group if they have no place on university boards (or councils). Provided that a university comprises various internal stakeholders such as administrators, teaching and non-teaching staff, and the students, who interact in everyday activities of the university, their voices should be heard at the same level and the decision-making organs of the university should include all stakeholders in keeping with the 'stakeholder society' (De Boer & Goedegebuure, 2003, in Obiero, 2012, p. 8).

As stated earlier, Kenya has in the recent past experienced unprecedented growth in and expansion and massification of, universities. The introduction of 'Module 2' programmes, the admission of 'private', 'parallel' and 'school-based' students, and the substantial increase in private universities have impacted on the governance of the institutions. With this rapid growth and expansion, issues of governance have presented challenges in terms of the ways in which both public and private universities are run in the country. Most of these challenges affect students directly and indirectly, since they are the key stakeholders in these institutions. Students form the biggest body in the university and, without them, the university would not serve its purpose (Obiero, 2012). Although students have representatives in university councils, senate and faculty management committees, they are sometimes excluded when crucial matters such as examinations are being discussed.

Student representation in Kenyan universities takes place through students' unions and students' associations at institutional level and also through the Kenya National University Students Union at national levels. These levels of representation are necessary in the area of reform if the challenges of governance in the institutions are to be addressed. Each of the public universities in Kenya has a student governing body referred to by different names such as students' union, student government or congress. Whichever designation is used, this is a body that is akin to a student parliament; it has office bearers who are elected after

each academic year (Bosire et al, 2008). The function and structure of the students' unions in Kenya's public university system are more or less similar to those in other universities in the rest of the world. Generally, the students' union is both a student platform for addressing various social, political and corporate issues of the student community and a link between students and university management (Egerton University, 1999a).

Current reforms have increased the number of students elected as representatives. The increase in student enrolments has led to each hall electing representatives to the student unions. There are also representatives of non-resident students; representatives according to mode of study; school-/faculty-based representatives; as well as representatives of special groups based on, for example, gender and disability. This means that the student council of today is a fairly large body. This enlargement of student representation is not, however, proportional to the increase in student enrolment. The increasing student population has not seen a corresponding increase in leaders who can articulate issues of student representation, which implies increasing pressure on those handling student issues. Obiero (2012) argues that student associations and unions represent an important resource in the university's effort to confront current and emergent governance crises, as student representatives have been noted to have the capacity to diffuse potential conflicts. This they can do through regular meetings with their members and the administration, and by designing a mechanism for regular communication, thereby restraining their colleagues from unnecessary conflicts (Obondo, 2000). In addition, there are other benefits of involving students in the running of the university which do not need to be repeated here (e.g. Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Obiero, 2012; Obondo, 2000).

In most universities in Kenya, the students' unions also supplement the services that are offered by the university. These include services such as assistance with academic and administrative problems, peer counselling, the provision of financial assistance for needy colleagues, offering study facilities and services, and running businesses such as bookstores, Internet cafes, tuck shops and restaurants (Luescher, 2009). In this case, they have to work together with senior managers such as the dean of students or the director of student affairs (Luescher, 2009).

At Egerton University, for example, as is likely the case in other public universities, the students' union was established by the University Act and Statutes (Egerton University, 1999a; 1999b). With the enactment of the new Universities Act of 2012, the university developed new statutes that recognised the students' union. The union is recognised under the dean of students and the Directorate of Student Welfare. The union plays an integral role in the university in line with the the University Act, which provides that the student body must oversee and plan students' activities for the promotion of academic, spiritual, moral and harmonious communal life and social well-being. It is registered in the office of the dean of students and approved by the university senate and management. The students' union is represented in the senate (but is excluded when the senate is discussing examinations) and congress and on faculty committees. The student government comprises the following nine key offices and office bearers with their designated functions (SUEU, 2002): the executive chairperson, the executive vice-chairperson, the secretary-general, the organising secretary,

the treasurer, the director: welfare, the director: academics, the executive secretary, and the director: sport and entertainment. These titles may differ from one university to another, but generally indicate the main offices, which also make up the executive organ of the union, or Students' Representative Council. The other two organs are the Students' Governing Council and the Committees of the Union. The former consists of the executive, constituency representatives, year representatives, religious representatives, representatives of clubs and associations, representatives of non-resident students, sports and entertainment representatives and corporate members. The latter are a creation of the executive and consist of, but are not limited to, the Academic Affairs Committee, Welfare Committee, Finance Committee, Students' Centre Committee, External Affairs Committee, Sports and Entertainment Committee, Editorial Committee and Discipline Committee (Barasa, 2002).

The students' union is therefore a legal entity recognisable in university administration and governance. It has a guiding constitution that determines and controls the activities of student leaders and their responsibilities to the student body and to the university as defined by the various organs. As a legal entity, the students' union has various rights and obligations, such as holding term elections, collecting funds, organising meetings, and disciplining its members. All students of Egerton University are automatically members of the Students' Union, for which they pay union fees as part of their university fees. This is the source of funding for the union.

At Kenyatta University, students are represented by the officials of the Kenyatta University Students' Association (KUSA). The association was established in 1995. All bona fide students of KU are automatically members of the association upon registration. It was formed so as to take into consideration the needs and views of students. Like those associations at other universities in Kenya, KUSA was banned owing to the uprisings in support of multiparty democracy in the country in the late 1990s. It is now ten years since the re-establishment of KUSA with the aim of being involved in matters affecting students within the university (Obiero, 2012).

KUSA is run by an executive body and a congress made up of students elected through democratically run elections. The Congress is made up of the Executive Council and other ex officio and elected members. The Executive consists of the president, vice-president, secretary-general, deputy secretary-general, finance secretary, academic secretary, organising secretary, gender and social welfare secretary, special needs secretary, and the chairperson of each of the satellite campuses (as provided for in the constitution). The speaker of the congress is an ex officio member of the Executive.

Student involvement in governance in private universities in Kenya seems to be based on the South African model of a Students' Representative Council (SRC). Yet, like elsewhere, student governments in private universities and colleges typically fulfil the functions of student governments: (1) representing students' interests in institutional (and national) governance structures (and related media work); (2) overseeing social activities of students and student organisations on campus, along with student involvement in the running of residences, and sports facilities; and (3) providing supplemental services for students (Hall & Symes, 2000; also see: Ojo, 1995).

Student activism in universities in Kenya

Student involvement and formal representation in university governance in Kenya have not eliminated student activism in the institutions. This may be due to the complications arising from huge student enrolments, the expansion of universities and a lack of corresponding levels and numbers of representation. Student activism may be defined as 'the informal or extraordinary political activities of students' and 'the public expression of new ideas, about shaping public debate on a topic' which is typically political in nature (Luescher-Mamashela, 2015). Student activism is not limited to higher education institutions; it has even influenced national issues in the country. In cases where students feel underrepresented, misrepresented or not represented at all in the formal decision-making processes of university governance, the likelihood of student activism increases. In most universities in Kenya, student activism has been blamed for the numerous strikes and closures over the past decade, thus prolonging the time required by students for completing their studies, disrupting academic life, and driving prospective students and staff to private and overseas institutions (Mwiria et al., 2007).

Bakke (1966), after studying student activism in six different countries, has proposed a set of insights or hypotheses about the roots and soil of student activism. Firstly, student activism is a product of a stage of youth in the maturation process. Student activism is a function of the universal search of adolescent youth for an adult role in society, for self-identity and for social integration, and of their self-assertion at this stage of their maturation process. Secondly, student activism is said to be an actualisation of the image of the 'student'. Here, he argues that there are varying images of a 'student' that play a role in why students engage in student activism. Thirdly, student activism is a result of the youth's involvement in societal problems. Lastly, student activism is a result of students' relations wit other action groups. This highly influences the minds and attitudes of radical students, thus shaping their focus in interacting with such groups and encouraging them all the more to participate in student movements.

In Kenya, student activism has been closely associated with the slogan 'Comrades' Power!'. Bakke's idea of the roots of student activism being found in an activist, youthful, emancipatory student identity yearning for, and forged, in unity with other groups which struggle for democratisation, social justice, and human rights seems to capture that relation. The call for 'Comrades' Power!' in Kenya has its roots in the independence struggle; it has been heard chanted during the democratisation process of the 1990s, during recent student protests, and even during campaigns for students' union elections.

The nature of students' politics, representation and organisation in public and private universities

Student activism or 'comrades' power' has undergone several transformations in the history of Kenya. University students of the 1960s were not involved in politics. This is because they were supplied with the basic necessities during their studies and had guaranteed positions in the ranks of the emerging national bourgeoisie upon graduation. However, after 1970, changes occurred that made university students abandon their ivory-tower mentality

and begin a systematic engagement in political action, including violent confrontation. The political apex of student activism was reached in the mid-1970s and lasted to the mid-1990s, by which point student action was more likely to be accompanied by demands for democratic reform. In Kenya, university students have been leaders of protest, activism and dissent, strikes, and demonstrations – as in many other countries (Altbach, 1989; Brickman & Lehrer, 1980; Light & Spiegel, 1977; Miser, 1988). Mazrui (1995) says that, in the 1960s and 1970s, African students were often the vanguard of democratic defiance in many African countries. It may well be that Kenya would still be wallowing in dictatorship today were it not for the orchestrated street demonstrations by University of Nairobi students in the period leading up to multiparty politics.

The university students, through their leaders, have presented to Kenyans and to the democratisation process the power to riot, to protest, and to stand up for their rights, commonly referred to as 'comrade power'. Street demonstrations in Nairobi and other towns are almost synonymous with university students. Mazrui (19995, p.165) says:

> The relationship between the government and students is often the most difficult… Since government relations with students are often the most difficult, they are the main cause of political confrontations on Third World campuses.

This is certainly true of the campuses of Kenyan public universities. Kenyan public universities face a strained relationship with university management because of decisions and actions that management takes without prior consultation with the student body. For example, in 2009, Kenyatta University students rioted violently in protest at 2 000 students not being given ample time to clear their university fee arrears in order to register. Conversely, the relationship at private universities in Kenya, between management and student body is different. It appears that, at private universities, there is proper prior consultation on important issues affecting students. This may be one of the reasons why student activism in these institutions is absent or only minimal.

During democratisation process of the 1990s, the term 'university students' was associated with fights, riots, stone-throwing, and so forth, all in utter rebellion at unpopular government moves. 'Comrades power' was a household term at the time. Students joined civil society groups and the National Convention Executive Council (NCEC) in making Kenya almost ungovernable through protests, eventually forcing President Moi and the then ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), to concede to multiparty elections and establish other democratic institutions and structures (Mazrui, 1995). Even before Moi, during Kenyatta's era, the regime had crushed all opposition, with only one real threat left: university students and the university community. The universities were part and parcel of the national political discourse; opposition politics in Kenya would not be complete without student activism. The students were proactive in campaigning for their rights and those of their fellow citizens, in spite of the unsympathetic and repressive political climate that prevailed. Student leaders could get arrested, beaten up, jailed at the infamous Nyayo House, or even be murdered in cold blood.

Student leaders were powerful figures in the country then. The government of the day kept vigil over student activism to the extent of placing spies in major universities. The former presidents Jomo Kenyatta and Moi knew the student leaders of all the major campuses by name, and especially those of the University of Nairobi. Comrades, as they would popularly refer to one another, would proceed without fear of subjugation or intimidation to challenge the government on unpopular moves. Student activism was a public watchdog. In 1992, when the fight for multiparty democracy in Africa was at its peak, university students joined notable 'second-liberation' figures such as Kenneth Matiba, Charles Rubia, Paul Muite, and Raila Odinga, among others. The struggle successfully saw the repeal of the famous Section 2A of the Kenyan Constitution, thus ushering in a new era of multiparty democracy. Moreover, thanks to the student activism of the 1980s and 1990s, a crop of vibrant national leaders emerged. The likes of current senator for Siaya County, lawyer James Orengo, former senior adviser of Raila Odinga, Miguna Miguna, the current member of parliament for Budalangi, Ababu Namwamba, and Kenyan chief justice and president of the Supreme Court, Dr. Willy Mutunga, are but a few of the current leadership in Kenya that cut their teeth on student leadership.

In the contemporary phase, student apathy to student activism has become quite prevalent. Several issues have brought about the phenomenon. Firstly, the apathy is due to a certain 'nonchalance': Students feel they lack issues affecting them as one and they only mind about what affects them − blame it on individualism and anomie (Mwiria et al., 2007). Hence, students may ask: Why the activism? Secondly, the academicians of the 1980s were filled with radicalism, which they taught right into their lecture halls; thus lecture halls became bubbling pots of activism. Academics taught emancipation from repression without paranoia or selfishness. Meanwhile, contemporary students focus on reading, passing examinations, graduating, and getting out into the highly competitive job market. To them, a student is intelligent as long as he or she grasps the reading, passes examination and graduates exemplarily (Mwiria et al., 2007). The result is 'academic robots' who blindly conform to the repressive capitalistic system and politics. Can a student without a critical mind and ideals, agree to activism? Student apathy to politics has now become an obstacle to student activism, whereas a critical perspective on the bad politics of the day used to be the main thrust for student activism of previous student generations in the 1980s. It thus appears that the students do not mind any longer how their student organisations, and the country's politics at large, are run. Given that the vibrancy of 'comrades' power' has mainly been restricted to public universities, and students in private universities have shied away from such activism and instead focused on getting their education and qualification, do we see a convergence between public and private universities' student politics?

Exercising comrades' power in public and private universities in Kenya

Universities are unique institutions in many ways, not the least because they have a degree of autonomy rare among large social institutions, and, even if this autonomy has been under attack for many years, it is important nonetheless. This is a fertile condition for exercising 'comrades' power'. Given that universities in Kenya are autonomous and provide a more

liberal environment than the surrounding society, they tend to provide the conditions for exercising political activist attitudes and be the boiling pot of 'comrades' power'. Student newspapers, social media, and radio and television programmes are able to ensure that students are quickly informed of events and are able to create an atmosphere that stimulates student activism and political consciousness. Moreover, in Kenya, universities – especially public universities – are geographically located in major towns and cities. As a result, demonstors are easily mobilised at very short notice and demonstrations are huge in scope. Furthermore, these public universities normally have a large population of students involved in protests. The damage caused by the riots is often considerable, as in the case of the Kenyatta University riots of 2009. In contrast, riots in private universities are rare. One reason may be that private universities do not have the large student populations that public universities have. As a result, management is closer to the issues that affect the students, and thus these issues are easily discussed and enough information is given to the students.

Moreover, the rhythm of academic life is both a help and a hindrance to student activism (cf. Luescher-Mamashela, 2015). The amount of free time available and the volume of academic work to be done all affect student participation in activism. Student life in most public academic systems permits a good deal of free time. Many students in Kenyan public universities have a lot of free time on their hands after they have attended scheduled lectures. The sense of constant responsibility for academic work is not strong and, in general, lectures and other assignments are not compulsory in these public universities. In contrast, at private universities in Kenya, students are examined regularly by their lecturers, which seems to instil a greater sense of responsibility and leaves little time to engage in activism. There is, therefore, less time for extra-curricular activities of all kinds because of the constant assessment of work. These may be some of the reasons why student activism is more prevalent in public than in private universities in Kenya. Future studies could attempt to systematically test these propositions.

Conclusions

The basic concern of this study was to explore and describe how students are represented in the governance of universities in Kenya and how student activism has changed, particularly given the current era of multiparty democracy, and greater openness and inclusivity in the governance of the institutions. Generally, student representation and formal participation in the governance of universities have increased over time, especially compared with the 1980s and 1990s. This may be due to the sociopolitical and economic changes that have occurred in the country since the democratisation process of the 1990s. In particular, student leaders have become involved in decision-making in the university through participation in the various governance structures, boards and committees. This was found to be beneficial: student leaders now formally acted as the link between the student body and university administrators and there was satisfaction among students when their ideas were implemented. This led to a more peaceful university climate. However, the study also found that most of the decisions that students made had to be vetted by the university authorities, as students were seen to lack the qualifications to have a final say in decisions. Conversely, whenever there was lack of adequate

consultation and involvement of students in decision-making, there was a high possibility of student unrest and activism in the universities.

Currently, in both public and private universities, the democratisation of decision-making within the universities has been enhanced by promoting wider representation of staff and students in key university governing bodies and by allowing staff a greater say in selecting senior university administrators. However, for democracy to flourish, and for student activism to be minimised, students, through their leaders, should be given more representation in governing organs of the university. The university management and administrators should make deliberate efforts to strengthen the students' unions and associations. It is important for power and authority to be shared and distributed fairly and decentralised effectively among all the dominant groups within the campus community.

In line with the argument of Obondo (2000), it has been proposed that democratisation of decision-making is important not only because many conflicts arise from such an unequal power relationship, but also because universities are advocates of democratic institutions, and should therefore practise what they preach. Students as stakeholders in the university should have a say in issues affecting them. Through involvement in governance, the student leaders arrive at a self-concept and divergent thinking. The skills they acquire enable them to contribute to society. It is therefore important for university administrators to give student leaders adequate opportunity to play their roles in university governance.

Finally, the article has argued that student activism and the call to 'comrades' power' have undergone changes over the years which may be associated with the changes in national politics in Kenya, the expansion of university education, and changes in the reach and general political attitudes of student bodies. In addition, student activism is more prevalent in public than in private universities. A number of propositions have been advanced in this respect, relating to the size of institutions, changes in teaching content and pedagogy, changes in the size and composition of student bodies, and the status of students and graduates in society. It would be interesting for scholars to undertake a more detailed analysis of student representation and activism in public and private universities in the East African region. Furthermore, university managers should re-examine the suitability of their governance and management models vis-à-vis the orientation of the contemporary university student. Representation and formal participation of students in the governance of universities should be an integral part of each and every aspect of university governance.

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