

## **SURVEY ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTION ON UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP RESPONSIVENESS TO ADDRESSING THEIR CONCERNS**

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### **Abstract**

*Students' experience in institutions of higher learning can be a factor of make or break for the institution. Good students' experience is a great marketer of the institution through referrals of word of mouth by alumni and bad experiences can be great de-marketer. It is important that the universities strive to deliberately improve on students' experience. Research indicates that great students' experience in universities promotes peaceful co-existence, enhances academic performance and minimize disruption to teaching and learning. Enhanced students experience is directly proportional to good handling of students' complaints as they may come up from time to time. The study was guided by the following objectives: What are the major students concerns in the universities in Kenya? Is the University leadership aware of the students concerns? How does the University leadership address the major students concerns? A survey was conducted, data was randomly collected using digital google forms questionnaires. A total of 167 respondents participated in the study. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze data. Quantitative data was analyzed directly using the google forms application as responses were received. Qualitative data was analyzed by creating themes and developing a narration. Results show that the major students concerns are: Stressful/traumatic experiences, academic issues and social issues. The findings also reveal that the university leadership is aware of the concern however there are serious lapses in addressing students' concerns. The lapses are systemic, policy related, legislative, leadership, governance resulting to unsatisfying or no responses. The study recommends that there is need for timely feedback by University leadership on the key students concerns. Further there is need for a structured platform of feedback that is interactive and friendly. These include but not limited to dialogue; constant monitoring of student needs in order to improve the general students' experience in universities.*

## Introduction

DeShields, Kara and Kaynak (2005) opine that Higher Education Institution (HEIs) are increasingly recognizing that higher education is a service, and are therefore putting greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of their key stakeholders, that is, the students. Students are the major stakeholders in a university set up. All University organs; Council, Management and Senate efforts are all geared towards meeting the needs of the main stakeholder, the students. The academic and non-teaching staff are equally expected to give quality services for the smooth running of the university. External stakeholders are also brought on board because of the students.

According to Tull and Kuk (2012), the complexity of issues that students bring with them to the HEIs and the expectations that students and families exhibit in receiving the services, has created new challenge to the knowledge and level of competencies of quality education practitioners. Notably universities are expected to instil in an individual sound moral values, ethos and tolerance for meaningful national development. This can only happen through good understanding of students' expectations. This is because the concerns students raise within their learning environment affect each and everything that happens around them. Failure to address students' issues on time can be detrimental to a university that may include class boycotts and violent strikes that may cause untold damages especially to infrastructure.

## Statement of the Problem

It is certain that universities are currently experiencing major driving forces necessitating a total re-look, a total re-positioning as well as transformed behaviour and outcomes – in order to ensure sustained success in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the recent past university students have become very sensitive and responsive. In the year 2019 universities in Kenya experienced a wave of unrest. Listening keenly to the students it was evident that they were agitated because according to them 'the university leadership' was not listening thus not responding to their concern. Therefore, the study sought to scientifically establish the students' view on how the university leadership responds to their concerns with a view of coming up with recommendation to inform policy in higher learning institutions.

## Objectives of the Study

The primary study objectives were: to establish the major students concerns in the universities in Kenya, to ascertain whether the University leadership is aware of the students concerns, to find out whether the University leadership amicably resolves students concerns. The secondary object was to gather what students recommend to the University leadership as the best way to address their concerns.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Students:** These refers to anyone enrolled in either private or public universities in Kenya from undergraduate level.

**Perception** in this study means views or what students think about what affects them in the university learning environment.

**University leadership** in this study it is synonymous to the University Administration, the extended University Management including the Heads of Departments and Dean of Students.

**Responds** means giving feedback, solutions or addressing what is affecting students.

**Concerns** in this study means things that are challenging to students and require to be addressed by the university leadership to enable smooth study experience. They can also be termed as students complains or issues affecting them directly or indirectly.

## Hypotheses

H 1: Students concerns are amicably resolved by the University leadership

H 0: Students concerns are not amicably resolved by the University leadership

The findings show that the responses given by the University leadership on the students' concerns are not satisfying (see Figure 13) as such the researchers rejected the null hypothesis that students' concerns are amicably resolved by the University leadership thus accepting the alternative hypothesis that students' concerns are not amicably resolved by the

University leadership. This is a challenge to all universities. It is important to take seriously that students are the key stakeholders in the university. Students make a university, therefore all their concerns irrespective of the weight are to be looked into and appropriate responses given.

## **Literature Review**

Most institutions offer training in a variety of major fields. At the same time universities differ in many respects such as size, control (public or private), curriculum emphasis (social sciences, science and technology) and cost of study. In all these, a student is at the center. What happens to the students after they enroll in a HEI is more important than the infra-structural characteristics of the institution they attend (Kuh, Gonyea and Williams, 2005). Universities continue to face challenges related to student enrolment, changing demographics, the shifting and demanding nature of responsibilities, increased expectation related to programmes and services from the greater university community, parents and the other constituents (Tull and Kuk, 2012). More students equate to greater need for services.

Creating and maintaining supportive university environment is essential because students perform generally better and are more satisfied at the institutions where positive working and social relations exist among different groups of persons. Features of supportive university environment include: providing support to enable students succeed academically and socially; supporting students in meeting their co-curricula responsibilities; fostering high quality student relationship with other students, faculty and the institutions' administrative personnel. Educationally effective institutions provide programmes and practices to create supportive environments through transition programmes, advising networks, peer support, safety nets, special students support initiatives, learning communities and living environments organized around educational themes (McClellan, Stringer and Associates, 2011).

When student expectations match their experiences in university, students are more likely to be satisfied and hold on all the way to graduation (Kuh, Gonyea and Williams, 2005). Student learning is in a large part a function of academic effort and the frequency and quality of interaction between students and important agents of socialization: faculty, students, professional peers and others (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Therefore, it is important to determine whether student and faculty culture encourage or discourage student engagement in educationally purposeful activities. Students that feel they belong and are valued as individual are more likely to take advantage of the resources the institution provided for learning. The purpose of this study was to understand the most common nature of student's complaints, their expectation of and from their university experiences and whether their issues of concerns are addressed amicably and how this can influence university policies and practices courtesy of management decisions.

## **Theoretical framework**

The study is grounded on Herzberg's two factor theory as a framework. Herzberg labelled the job satisfiers motivators, and he called job dissatisfies hygiene or maintenance factors. According to the theory good feelings are generally associated with satisfaction, whereas bad feeling with dissatisfaction. In order to ensure good study, experience all students' concerns are to be addressed. A satisfied student has negligible concerns, is peaceful, concentrates in their studies. On the other hand a dissatisfied student is destructive and agitated. It is important for the university leadership to realize that students are motivated when their concerns/issues are addressed. Although the concerns may be academic and non-academic the response given to each is key towards students' satisfaction and motivation.

## **Methodology**

The researchers carried out a survey. Singh & Nath (2007) state that the major purpose of survey method in research is to tell 'what is', the researchers were interested in using the method to collect information of 'what exists', 'what is wanted' and 'how to get there'. It involves random selection of the research subjects, getting their views and generalizing the findings to the entire population. According to Walliman (2010) probability sampling techniques give the most reliable representation of the whole population. Simple random sampling technique was used to get the universities and student respondents to participate in the study. All students were given equal chances of being selected into the sample. Data was collected from student respondents using a questionnaire which was converted into a digital google forms questionnaire. The digital questionnaire contained both open and closed ended questions. The respondents were sent a link randomly through which they were able to respond to the questions online. The quantitative results were automatically analyzed using the google survey system while qualitative results were harvested from the system, grouped and themes generated and a narrative developed.

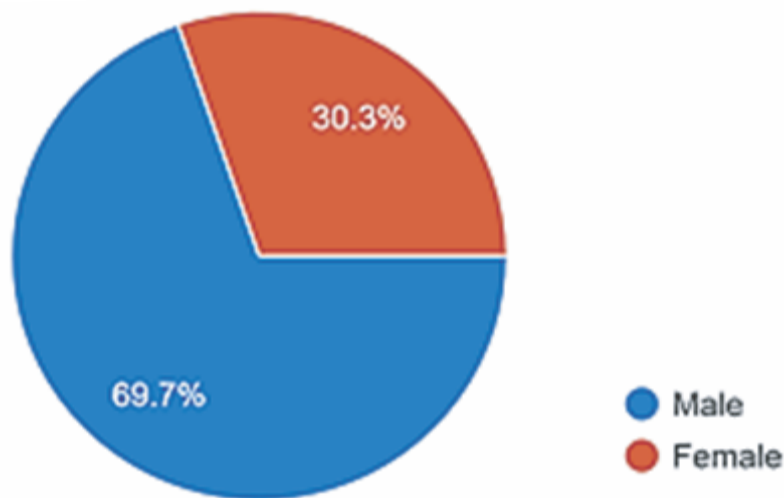
## Results and Discussion

The survey was carried out in five universities randomly selected; three were public and two were private. A total of 167 respondents participated in the study. The research gave all students equal chances of being selected.

### a. Demographics

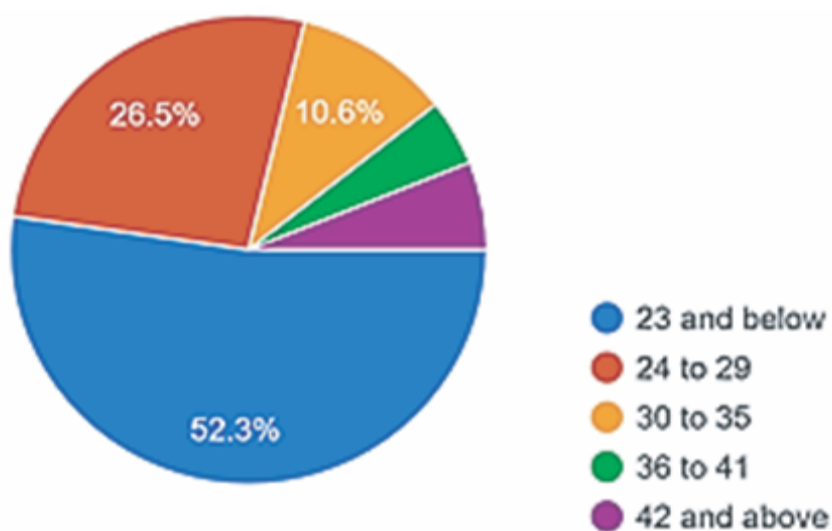
Demographically and as shown in **Figure 1**, the respondents were distributed in terms of gender as 30.3% females and 69.7% males. This was a mirror reflection of the general university statistics where the females are a third of the total students' population. Courtesy of the Kenya Constitution 2010 and the Universities Act 2012 [Revised in 2016], there is more female representation in the students' leadership position which has brought a voice of reason in the Student Governing Council (SGC) hence less students' unrest in the recent past.

**Figure 1: Student respondents' distribution by Gender**



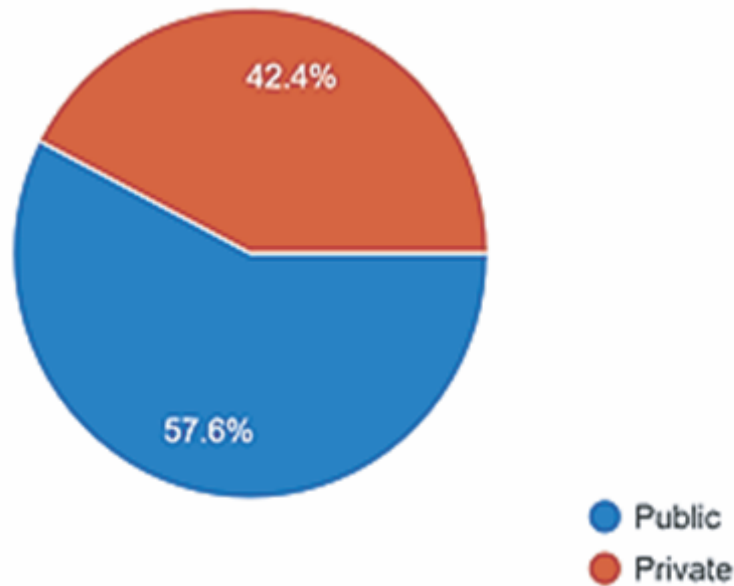
Majority of respondents were below 29 years of age. More than 50% of the respondents were 23 years and below. This gives an indication of how young and inexperienced the majority of students are on life skills and lack of leadership skills. However, there were a few respondents above 36 years of age who could be self-sponsored, mature students on part-time programmes or postgraduates. Details are as depicted in **Figure 2**. It may be imperative for the Universities Act, Regulations and Policies to bring in an affirmative action that insists on postgraduate representation that will go a long way in introducing wisdom and sobriety that comes with maturity (age).

**Figure 2: Student respondents' distribution by Age**



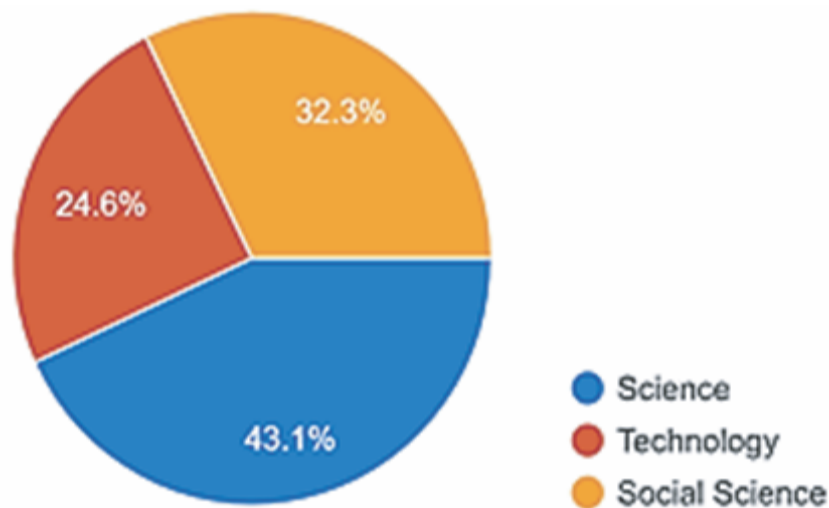
Slightly more in number of respondents were from public institutions but comparatively reasonable number were from private institution as shown in **Figure 3**. Generally, there are more students in Public than in Private institutions.

**Figure 3:** Student respondents' distribution by Type of Institution



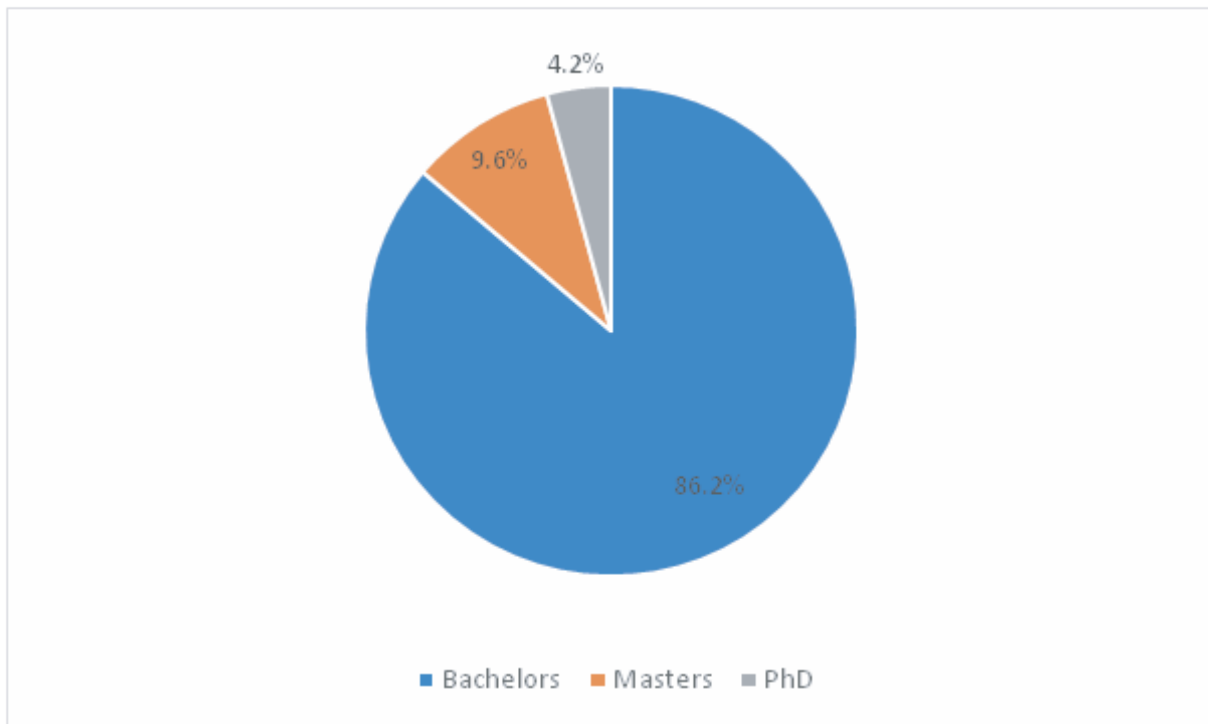
As shown in **Figure 4**, there was no bias based on Program classification. The distribution was a reflection of the proportion of students in various programmes. Hence there were more social science programmes in comparison to the rest.

**Figure 4:** Student respondents' distribution by Programme classification



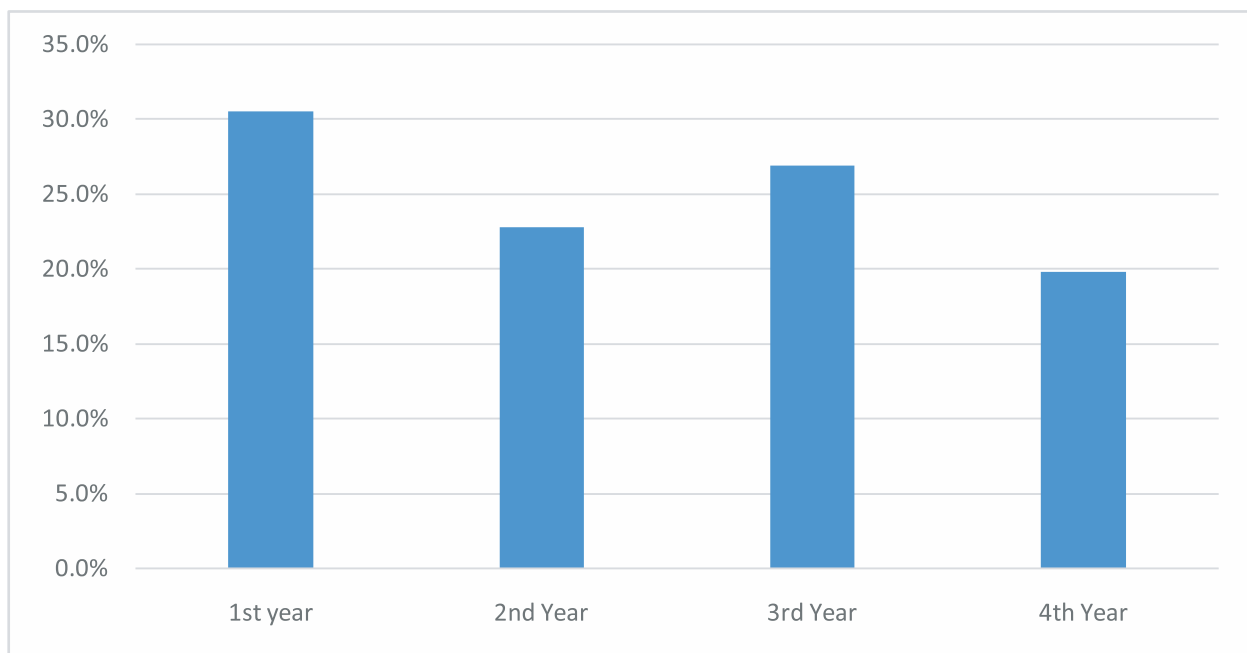
**Figure 5** shows that only a small number of Postgraduate respondents took part in this survey as compared to Undergraduates. Most Postgraduate students tend to be full-time students only during their coursework and transform to Part-time students during their project years. It is worth noting that rarely do Postgraduates take part in students' leadership activities in the Kenyan Universities owing to the minority nature of the group that they come from and that most are also working class with family responsibilities with no time for students' politics. Additionally, postgraduates are usually only about 10% of total students' population.

**Figure 5: Student respondents' distribution by Programme Level**



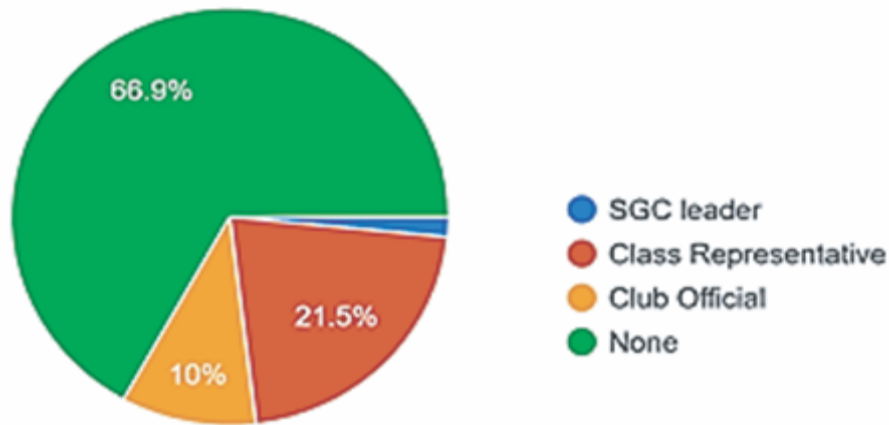
There was a good distribution spectrum and even representation of the year of study for respondents as indicated in **Figure 6**.

**Figure 6: Student respondents' distribution by Year of Study**



Majority of the respondents did not hold any leadership position in the university (**Figure 7**). Only about 30% are involved in some form of leadership in the Universities, past and present. An extremely small number (1.5%) was at the helm of Students Governing Council leaders. Probably this could be the reason why they are never felt by the University administration. Probably there is need to expand the SGC leadership to include class representatives and club officials to give the SGC the better bargaining power for effectiveness.

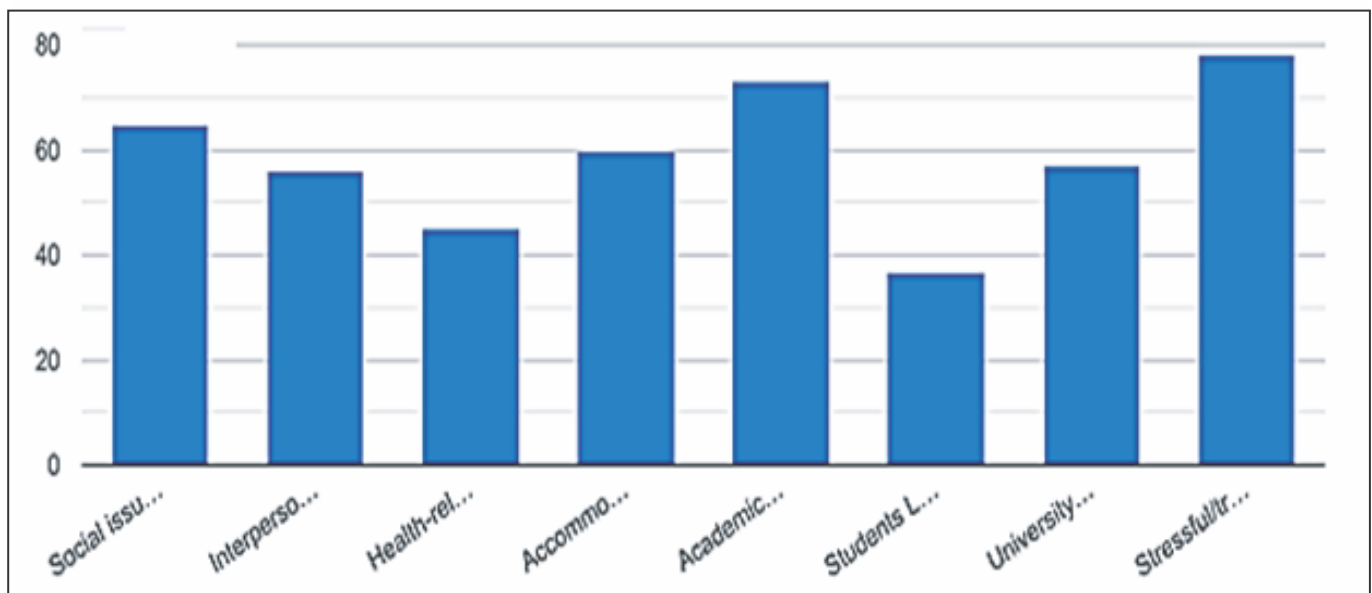
Figure 7: Student respondents' leadership position held present and pas



a. Students Major Concerns

Stressful/traumatic experiences (e.g. financial problems, assault, harassment), Academic issues (e.g. poor motivation, concentration problems, test anxiety) and Social issues (coping with emotions e.g. depression, anxiety, anger) rate as the first three major concerns of the students. Accommodation and catering (problems with eating or sleeping) comes as the fourth. This agrees with Kiboiy (2013) whose study noted that there is serious concern about the welfare of students and that there is lack of adequate accommodation facilities resulting in students being forced to seek alternative accommodation elsewhere which is often more expensive and cumbersome. Interpersonal and relationship difficulties (e.g. love related) and University Administration (e.g. unsupportive university staff, tough rules) rated at the same level. Health-related concerns (pregnancy, alcohol, drugs, sexual diseases) and Students Leaders (e.g. Poorly equipped student leaders that lack capacity) at the tail end as indicated in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8: Students concerns

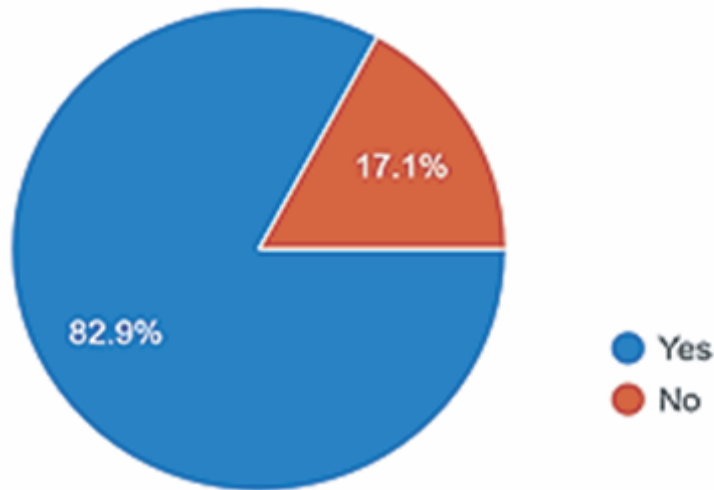


Specific concerns raised by the students include; poor ICT and internet facilities, lack of updated books in the library, insufficient of science equipment, poor lecture attendance by staff (some just come for 45 minutes in a three-hour lecture), poverty (inability for students to raise funds for fees), lack of information (poor dissemination of information-the administration does not release vital information to students on time e.g. supplementary examinations timetable) and the gap between the administration and the students. There is need for University Administration to deliberately address these areas of concern for better student experience.

A vast majority 82.9% of the respondents indicated that the student leaders were aware of the concerns raised. A very small number 17.1% stated that the student leadership did not know the concerns of the students (**Figure 9**). This is a

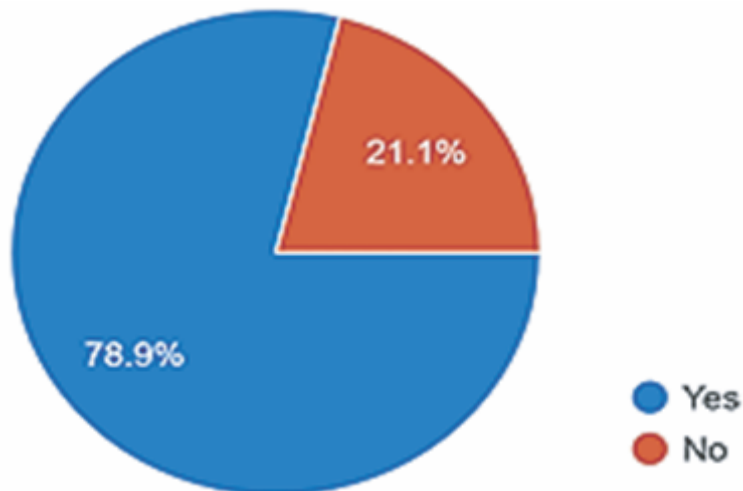
clear indicator that the student leaders are connected to their constituents and that if not addressed it is a failure on the SGC to articulate the same to the administration or the University administration are insensitive and non-responsive to the students' issues. There is need to identify where the problem is and address the same.

**Figure 9:** Students' concerns awareness by the University leadership as perceived by the general students' population



Majority of the respondent were convinced that the University Administration was aware of the students concerns (**Figure 10**). To a large extent therefore it implied that the University administration might be insensitive or non-responsive to students' issues.

**Figure 10:** Students' concerns awareness by University administration as perceived by the general students' population



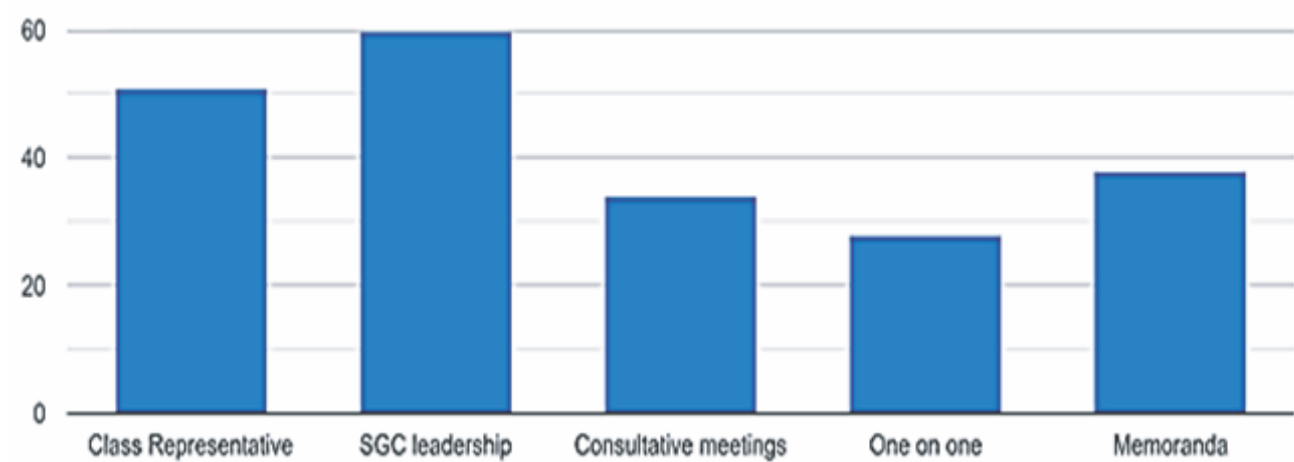
Specific findings from the same respondents revealed that most university administrators are not available to listen to students' issues, they never interact with students and are only visible virtually in the media. It is therefore possible that University Administrations have neglected their key duty of improving students' experience in their respective institutions.

This research shows that students have to a very large extend adhered to protocol and adopted proper channels of communication when reaching the University Administration with Students' issues (**Figures 11 and 12**). It is likely that failure by University Administrations to give timely feedback or total failure to address students' issues or failure by students' leadership to give feedback to their constituents, the students, once communicated to them by University administration, is what builds impatience in students and pushes them to unrests.

**Figure 11: Students' concerns communication channels to University leadership**

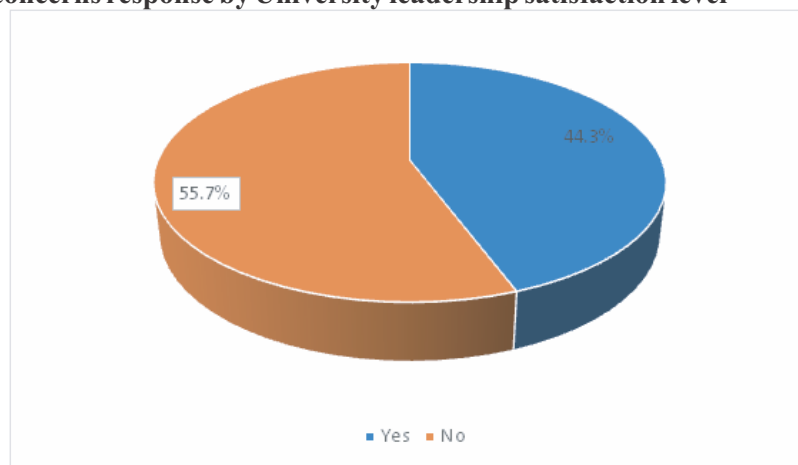


**Figure 12: Students' concerns communication medium by University leadership**



Although the findings show that the University leadership is aware of the students concerns. It is surprising that the findings further revealed that the responses given or actions taken on the raised concerns were majorly not satisfying as in **Figure 13** below.

**Figure 13: Students' concerns response by University leadership satisfaction level**



It is however clear from the specifics that students who polled negative on the responses were driven by personal challenges which were their responsibilities in this dual relation. Some of the reasons given by students as to why the authorities' responses on students' concerns were not satisfying include:- not taking into consideration the financial difficulties of students which leads to some students being barred from taking exams thus forcing them to defer; student leadership is not recognized nor respected by the administration, the administration operate dictatorship leadership; poor communication, too much bureaucracy; no good communication channels; poor management e.g. the University not being able to fuel a bus to take students for academic trips due to lack of funds yet fees paid lack of a listening ear and threats, unfulfilled promises; lack of leadership capacity; lack of disciplining of errand staff e.g. lecturers who do not teach etc.

### **a. Proposed ways to address/respond to Students Concerns**

Respondents proposed the following potential best ways to address students concerns:- dialogue; continuous improvement of services by universities; constant monitoring of student needs; creation of a democratic environment; listen to students; effective communication as well as timely action on the concerns raised by the students to avoid unrest; the management to closely interact with student to know what they are going through; ensure students' matters are key agenda items in all meetings of the university; lecturers should be friendly this will enable students improve in their studies and will encourage them to be aggressive in their studies; university management to engage with students and staff; empower the customer care office to listen to students concerns; the Office of the Registrar (Academic) to respond in time to the inquiry from new students; Deans of Schools and Heads of Departments to establish good relationship with students and be always available to respond to the needs of the students; lecturers should be faithful to their teaching and student schedule; Deans of students to attend to academic concerns and complaints from students; VCs and DVCs to provide overall and competent leadership for the University; link the university to other higher education institutions for benchmarking purposes; attend to the concerns of the students amicably and on time; release of information on time through departments; bridge the current big gap between students and the administration; friendly staff; improve ICT services; enhance communication system; employ more skillful persons in the university to improve efficiency

## **Conclusion**

The major students concern revolves around stressful/traumatic experiences, academic issues, social issues and the university administration lack of support on a variety of issues. It is evident that the university leadership and the student governing council (SGC) are in most cases aware of the concerns raised by the students however the responses given are not satisfying. The study was able to expose some possible root causes of the problem regarding the handling of students' concerns/complaints/issues. There is general lapse in addressing students' concerns within universities occasioned by laxity of the University administration, communication gaps between the University administration and the students as well as lack of feedback by the SGC leaders to their constituents.

## **Recommendations**

University leadership to strive to give timely feedback, create a structured platform of feedback that is interactive and friendly. These include but not limited to dialogue; constant monitoring of student needs; consultative meetings between management and SGC and occasional open communication fora between the administration and general studentship. This is because student engagement in university governance and at all levels of decision making through representation can be instrumental in serving as a source improved trust and understanding in the university community while it's lack could lead to student unrest and apathy (Kuriakose, 2018).

A communication policy should be an important resource for all universities. The improvement of student experience in the university and good customer relation being a concern of every staff can go a long way in reducing the students' concerns.

Continuously motivating students creates a conducive learning environment. Actions speak louder than word. It is not enough to be aware it is important to act on the awareness and give fruitful results. Klemencic (2014) argues that students' interest should be given some place in the governance structures and institutional agenda of universities since what happens in the institution in general and in such specific areas like academic, welfare support services and student facilities can directly affect their interest. Therefore, making students' issues/concerns a standing agenda of all University leadership meetings can be productive by filtering off most of the issues while giving lasting solutions to

recurrent concerns. Nevertheless, there is need for students to meet their part of personal responsibilities e.g. payment of fees on time, staying on the right side of the rules and regulations of the University as well as making realistic demands.

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