
**STRESS EXPERIENCES DUE TO PROGRAMME
STRUCTURE AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS IN
SELECTED CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA**

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: Stress cuts across all humanity and some scholars view it as a kind of pandemic disease. Students are habitually confronted with academic concerns, financial anxieties, assignments, time management, relationship matters, and fear of the unknown among other issues. Balancing the demands of the learning environment with personal life responsibilities is a major challenge faced by students at the graduate level. The results of this imbalance are evident in many students and are related to stress diseases, mental health problems and withdrawal from studies. This study sought to examine the effects of the programme structure on the perceived stress levels among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

Research Methodology: A mixed method approach: quantitative and qualitative was used for the study. A sample of 142 graduate students selected proportionately from four (4) Christian universities in Kenya took part in the study.

Findings: The results of this study showed that programme structure was causing stress among students in selected Christian universities in Kenya by the fact that, the students were worried about the academic workload, examinations, and failing in the examinations. This was manifested by restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feeling irritable, and sleeplessness which are evident signs of stress. On the external front, students faced financial challenges and work obligations that caused stress in their studies.

Conclusion: The results imply that the graduate students have the responsibility to adapt to graduate level workload, and the universities should help students to adequately understand what is expected of them in graduate studies.

Recommendations: Students should also find ways of balancing their workplace obligations and adequate sources of financing their family and study obligations. The findings of this study will be useful in helping students studying in the in Christian universities benefit by understanding how the learning environment contributes to their stress, and hence finding appropriate ways of coping with it. Secondly, the study informs policy makers at the institutional level of actions to take for reviewing their systems to enhance a conducive environment for graduate students to cope with stress.

Keywords: *Stress Experiences, Programme Structure, Graduate Students, Christian Universities, Kenya*

INTRODUCTION

Stress is a common denominator in the human race due to the uncertain world in which we operate. A recent study by Kerr (2020) shows that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, graduate students' stress has increased and some are struggling to manage their mental health because of home quarantine, social distancing, cannot access college libraries for research, while others are worried about their graduation. While the general population faces increased stress levels, the graduate students are facing unique additional challenges during the pandemic period including stress on how to pay their college fees as financial situations change and some are rendered jobless, others have to cope with pay reduction and those depending on scholarship have been canceled from the list. A study done by Flaherty (2018) shows that graduate students are at risk of developing stress-related diseases like a mental health crisis. The survey involved 2,279 students from twenty-six (26) countries enrolled in two hundred and thirty-four (234) institutions in doctoral program studies. The research reports the prevalence of anxiety and depression regardless of gender. A high number from fifty-five (55) to fifty-seven (57) percent were related to stress cases among the graduate students. Therefore, the study shows graduate students have a higher chance of having stress-related cases of depression and anxiety than the general population, urging action on the part of the institution.

Another study done in Asia by Harajyoti (2012) reveals that many students have stress-related cases. Out of a total population of 260 (Two hundred and sixty) students, sixty (60) percent of

the female students and forty (40) percent of the male students have high chance of getting symptoms of stress. Graduate students, in general, are affected by stressful conditions like depression and anxiety because of increased academic workload, issues related to family, and finances more than the general students' population. In terms of gender, female students are more affected by stress than their male counterparts. From the survey, the sources of stress found are frustration, anxiety, being irritated and tired academically, depression, and anger. The study concludes that stress cannot be completely removed from students' lives, therefore, appropriate measures are to be put in place to minimize and control the effects of stress among graduate students. The American Psychological Association (2019) in an article reported that in the past ten years, stress has persistently become burdensome to all humanity regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, faith, role, education, occupation, and economic status. The American Psychological Association (2019) in an article continued to report that there is extreme stress affecting people's health and well-being and that recognizable efforts to minimize the levels of stress are underway by the government.

Studies done in Africa focusing on issues of stress among students and specifically, in Kenya, noted that the major issues associated with stress among university students include untimely deaths, Wanyoike (2015), abuse of drugs, Ndegwa, Munene & Oladipo, (2017), depression and loneliness, Kasomo, (2013), and dropping out from education (Njoroge, Wangeri & Gichure, 2016). (Mbogo et al., 2020) noted that delays in supervision taking too long for students to graduate causes stress among graduate students. There is a deficiency in the current literature on addressing the critical issue of stress among graduate students in Kenyan universities. The secondary data available show that scholars seem to have paid more attention to undergraduate students ignoring the masters and doctoral students (Mwakughu, 2011; Kyalo & Chumba 2011).

A survey of the literature reveals a paucity of relevant information that this research has addressed. Kenya has several Christian universities that offer graduate studies, like any other institutions of higher learning, these institutions are faced with issues that are graduate students' stress-related problems. Christian universities have put into place leadership and program structures to help the students have an enabling environment of learning. Students receive institutional support ranging from moral, finance, and spiritual among others to address whatever challenges they are faced with during their tenure of studies. However, despite this enormous support, stress among students is like a wound that does not cure. This issue warrants

an investigation to determine the effects of programme structure on the stress levels among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

STUDY OBJECTIVE

Programme structure of a university refers to the content of a degree program. It includes the courses within the degree programme, the semesters or terms the courses are offered and finally the courses offered and mode of offer within the degree programme. The programme structure is organized in a manner that can facilitate collaboration between the supervisor and the students at the graduate level. Teaching and Learning Centre (2019) in its manual, suggested that graduate students and supervisors should familiarize themselves with the relevant graduate school rules and regulations, meet regularly to discuss the progress being made by the student in his/her research work, set new deadline dates and correct any submitted work and that both the graduate student and the supervisor should work together to support and provide the collegial environment. City University of New York (2015) stated that a programme structure of any given university consists of its enrolment, financial incentives, staffing, college integration, and program costs.

Every university in its programme structure has a programme mission which is a clear statement of general values and principles guiding the university curriculum. It establishes a clear direction and philosophical position from which the university programme goals and objection follow. It is a road map for the programme. The programme mission statement defines the broad purpose the programmes is aiming to achieve, state values and guiding principles and finally describes the community the programme is designed to serve. Since the programme mission statement is part of the programme structure in a university setup, then it must be consistent and in harmony with goals set forth in the institution's mission and goals statement. This study defines programme structure a broad statement describing the entire programme, what it does and for whom it does it, the contribution it makes to education and to the careers of students graduating from the programme, shows how the teaching and research is used to enhance students' learning, aligning itself to the university departments, schools and colleges within the university and its peculiarity to the programme.

Programme structure is key to the students because when the programme structure is clear, students have less stress and easily identifies themselves to the programme structure of the institution. Clear programme mission statement is key for a smooth working relationship between the supervisors and the students, because failure to be clear creates barriers and

tension, fear is developed on the side of the graduate students which is followed by withdrawal while on the other hand, the supervisor begins to wonder what is happening with the student. This tension results in stress on either part. The objective of this study was to establish stress experience due to the programme structure and its contribution to the institutional stress among graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Person-Environment Theories

The theory of P-E was proposed by French, Rodgers and Cobb in 1974 (Dawis, 1992; French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). According to Vandenberg (2002), there are three occupational theories but for the purpose of this study, the Person-Environment (P-E) theory which sees stress as arising from a misfit between the person and the environment fit well in informing the study. P-E theory has two factors: the person and the environment which are not separated components, but they are related to each other. When a person perceives that their work environment is not satisfactory and not meeting their needs, wants and desires, then a discrepancy creates different strains which affect the health of the work. In the case of the graduate student if one of the four variables within the learning environment (program leadership, program structure, institutional social factors and the external factors) is viewed as a misfit and fails to address the felt needs of the student then a discrepancy which creates a diverse strain is caused and therefore the student is negatively affected causing stress levels to arise.

Stress is an unpleasant psychological process that may happen as a response to environmental pressures. Robbins & Judge, (2013) saw stress the outcome of demands on the body during experiences of fight or flight. Seaward (2002) argued that stress is the inability to cope with a perceived (real or imaginary) threat to one's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being which results in a series of physiological responses and adaptations. The threat is considered in two ways: first, positive stress (eustress) like passing an examination or graduation. Second threat is negative stress which is also referred to as distress. Graduate students at the university encounter both eustress and distress in "chronic or life event forms". Life events may include anxiety of starting studies in a challenging environment. Chronic stress entails challenges in their residences, academic concerns, and economic concerns. Kosslyn & Rosenberg (2001) saw stress as that psychological and bodily response to a stimulus that changes a person's balance of life. The stimuli that cause the body or psychological imbalance

is called a “Stressor”. Stressors are many in life. A student who is overwhelmed by an examination, the examination is the stressor or for a PhD student pushed by his supervisor to finish a proposal may refer to his supervisor as a stressor. There are three types of stressors: physical stressor, psychological stressor, and social stressor. Stressors differ from person to person, even among graduate students what is considered stressful differs.

This study as mentioned above adopts and modifies the Response theory by Walter Cannon (1929) which states that “the body raises an alarm reaction after it sounds a bodily threat from a foreign environment or enemy.” In addition, the study adopts the P-E theory which sees stress as arising from a misfit “between a person and the environment where the person and the environment are not separated but relate to each other.” This informs the study that stress is as a result of the response from physical force exerted by any unfavourable environment that the graduate student encounters from the four variables which form program leadership, program structure, institutional social factors and student related factors commonly referred to in this study as external factors. This further helps the research to understand the phenomenon which in this case is the effects of the learning environment on stress levels among the graduate students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. Moreover, this helps the researcher to predict that stress is the outcome of an unpleasant learning environment. Because graduate students face pressure from program structure, the results are the rise of stress levels.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Programme structure of a university refers to the content of a degree. It includes the courses within the degree programme, the semesters or terms the courses are offered and finally the course offered within the degree programme. The programme structure needs to be organized in a manner that can facilitate collaboration between the supervisor and the students at the graduate level. Teaching and Learning Centre (2019) in its manual, suggested that graduate students and supervisors should familiarize themselves with the relevant graduate school rules and regulations, meet regularly to discuss the progress being made by the student in his/her research work, set new deadline dates and correct any submitted work and that both the graduate student and the supervisor should work together to support and provide the collegial environment. City University of New York (2015) stated that a programme structure of any given college/university consists of its enrolment, financial incentives, staffing, college integration, and program costs.

The programme mission statement defines the broad purpose the programmes is aiming to achieve, state values and guiding principles and finally describes the community the programme is designed to serve. Since the programme mission statement is part of the programme structure in a university setup, then it must be consistent and in harmony with goals set forth in the institution's mission and goals statement.

Because the Programme mission statement supports the institution's programme structure, this study understood programme mission statement to be: A broad statement describing the entire programme, what it does and for whom it does it; it describes the purpose of the programme and the learning environment; need to reflect how the programme makes contribution to education and to the careers of students graduating from the programme; shows how the teaching and research is used to enhance student learning; must be aligned to the university departments, schools and colleges within the university; and should be peculiar to the programme. When the programme mission statement is clear the students have less stress and easily identifies themselves to the programme structure of the institution. Clear programme mission statement is key for a smooth working relationship between the supervisors and the students, failure to be clear creates barriers and tension, fear is developed on the side of the graduate student which is followed by withdrawal while on the other hand, the supervisor begins to wonder what is happening with the student.

Educational Programmes

An educational programme is a collection of educational activities organized to accomplish a pre-determined objective in an educational setup. The term educational activities have a broader meaning than a "course" or "class". Educational activities are courses organized into programmes as well as freestanding courses. They also include a variety of components not normally characterized as courses, such as intervals of work experience, research projects, and preparation of dissertations. An educational programme is therefore the study of a single subject leading to a recognized qualification or the study of a collection of subjects, alongside a period of work experience, contributing towards the same qualification goal. The different national programme or paths of study that differ with one or more of the criteria that are used to classify educational programmes. In relation to this study, the graduate students in the selected Christian universities in Kenya are placed under different course in the national educational programme.

Academic Workload: A Stressor among Graduate Students in Universities

Defining the term academic workload is tricky. Tricky in the sense that what might be a workload to one individual might not be to another but for the sake of this study, the researcher defines academic workload as the amount of work that is expected to be done by the graduate student or any student in a given institution of higher learning. Las Encinas behavioural Health Hospital (2018) revealed that half of all graduate students were suffering from psychological distress and that finishing graduate work was no easy task but was taking a lot of hard work, dedication, and mental focus. A careful observation from the above study suggests that there is a correlation on graduate workload and stress among students in graduate programmes. This arises from the pressure to succeed and can take toll any student resulting in mental problems such as depression and anxiety.

A study by Benton, et al. (2003) found that a significant number of graduate students with depression had increased significantly between the years 1989 to 2001, as did the percentage of students who were suicidal. A national study done by American College Health Association (2006) showed that 10.7% of college students surveyed had seriously considered attempting suicide. Some common psychological symptoms reported by graduate students included experiencing constant stress, feeling consistently unhappy and depressed, losing sleep, anxiety, trouble overcoming challenges and lack of enjoyment in daily activities due to large academic workload and imposter syndrome. A study by Pyhältö (2012) suggested that graduate students face a variety of difficulties during their studies. The study also found that about one third of the doctoral students felt isolated from their academic community or the relationship between themselves and the community problematic. Three common challenges of learning environment reported to be causing graduate students stress level increase are: institutional leadership, academics, and culture orientation in the universities.

A study by (Katia et al., 2017) found that more than 30% of graduate students are at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder, especially depression and that the prevalence of psychological distress is much higher in doctoral students compared to other highly educated individuals and higher education students. The result of this study revealed that there is a relationship between stress and graduate students in Christian universities in Kenya. This confirmed that the situation in developing countries on graduate students' stress levels being as a result of the learning environment is not different from those from developed countries.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed method approach: quantitative and qualitative was used for the study. A total of 242 graduate students selected proportionately from four (4) Christian universities in Kenya were recruited to take part in the study. A sample of 142 students was selected using *stratified* random sampling technique. The research utilized a descriptive correlational design. In descriptive correlational design the researcher explains the relationship between two or more variable with making claims about cause and effect. The collection of data was done using questionnaires, and 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.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Programme Structure (PS) Perceived stress

The study sought to establish stress experience due to the programme structure and its contribution to 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 responses were based on the Likert scale. The results show that although the programme structure, content of course workload, the teaching style of the lecturers, as well as the process of writing the dissertation were clear to the students, the examination requirements, assignments, and the overall academic workload were causing restlessness and anxiety, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, irritability, and sleeplessness. These are all signs of stress that can be ascribed to the academic workload in the programme. A consequence of this is manifested by late handing in of assignments, hesitation to start on the thesis work, and fear of examination failure.

This study divided Programme Structure into two sections: Questions dealing directly with administrative aspect of the Programme Structure, and questions from the students' perceptions of the impact of the programme structure on the perceived stress. The results of this study shows that the programme structure per se was perceived not to cause stress among graduate students therefore students did not experience stress due to programme structure. The second

section in the programme structure dealt with response questions presented to the students regarding their perceived stress.

Stress experience of Academic Workload on Students

The study results show that graduate students were stressed due to academic workload because they kept worrying about their academic workload. Stress experiences often manifest in mental health problems. Mental health problem is the term generally used to describe a maladjustment which is serious enough to handicap the maladjusted person himself and to burden other people (Morgan, 1961). Mental Health Foundation (2019) noted that mental health problems range from the worries people experience as part of everyday life to serious long-term conditions. The effects of the academic workload were manifested by restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feeling irritable, and sleeplessness which are evident signs of stress. The students felt inadequate in their studies. This feeling of inadequacy in academic work could be as a result of insufficient prior training or personal unpreparedness to handle the amount of workload expected at the graduate level.

Similarly, the institutions may not have well prepared the students to understand what was expected of them in their academic programme. Muthuuri, Julia. Gakii (2021) in her study noted that first-year students in the university experienced various relational challenges. The social environment at university was nerve-racking at times, especially for the first-year students. She also found that some students are inherently extroverted, and that majority of them must work hard to form social bonds. Some students for fear being ridiculed, criticized, or rejected, withdraw themselves or withdraw from activities. This works for their disadvantage affecting their studies. Students who are able to overcome the feeling of inadequacy often require assistance during the period of transition into graduate studies. This lessens the stress involved with transitioning into a demanding setting offered in the graduate schools. A study done by Sumari. M (2005), found some challenges that make graduate students feel inadequate in their academic work. These were the structure of graduate programmes, lack of research resources, limited research opportunities, lack of opportunity to involve in professional organizations, shortage of qualified academic staffs, and lack of financial aid.

A recent study by Elizabeth Pain (2017) showed that graduate students face significant mental health challenges and suggested that approximately one-third of graduate students are at risk of having or developing common psychiatric disorders like depression. She further argued that stress related problems can develop into serious threats to one's wellbeing and career and can

have detrimental consequences in the long-term. The Australian (2017) in their study showed that graduate students are particularly vulnerable to common psychological disorders, especially depression. The study continued to argue that the high prevalence of mental health problems in doctoral students is critical in terms of individual suffering, organizational and societal costs. In the long run, however, it will also impact on research itself.

Katia, et al. (2017) in their study noted that universities were traditionally regarded as low stress environments, but with time this has changed making stress among academics an alarming issue (Idzai 2016). (Idzai 2016) in Sawir et al., (2005) was able to reveal that persistent stress among graduate students had some links to mental health problems including anxiety, depression, headaches and ulcers. Keller (2012) founded that stress among students result in withdraw from social circles leading to loneliness. Misigo (2015) in his study showed that college experience is the most stressful years in student's life. This is because the students have to adjust to a new social environment and deal with leaving away from parents.

In his study Markrides et.al. (1998) in Misigo (2015) noted that college students have high level of stress. Studies by (Jones, 2003; Kemmeny, 2007; Rafidah, Azizah, Norzaid, Chang, Salwani & Noraini, 2009, Adams, Meyers & Beidas, 2016) have shown that stressful conditions in the university lead to poor psychological, poor physical and mental health among students. Other negative habits found among students are high dropout rates, increment in suicidal tendencies (Wanyoike, 2015), alcohol and drug abuse being reported at 63.2% among the students in the University of Nairobi (Njare (2013). Amutabi (2017) lamented that the long period taken by graduate students to finish their studies is worrying and leads to stressful and frustrating life amongst them. He cited high fees and frustration by supervisors as some reason for stress among graduate students.

Examinations

The study also showed that students were worried of examinations, and this was causing them stress. The worry about examination would persist for more than a month and resulted in them showing symptoms of stress which they were also manifested by restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feeling irritable, difficulty falling asleep, oversleeping, restless, due to assignments and course load and difficulty controlling negative feelings. As a result of stress, the students were submitting some assignments late. The study also shows that the students were not just worried about failing some major course but had actually failed in some courses. The problem as to why the students were worried or failed some major courses is that they

were not confident with their academic work in the programme of their study. This was a major problem and was causing stress among them and resulted in occurrences of excessive anxiety and worry in their lives. This was an indication that the students were negatively impacted by programme structure. The overall results of this study shows that the programme structure, due to academic workload, examinations, and fear of failing in the examinations, is a cause of the perceived stress among graduate students in selected Universities in Kenya.

Examination is an integral part of learning in any given university, but it is known to be a main cause of students' stress. Examinations help to bring an improvement in the students' knowledge and provide feedback to the students as well as the lecturers. It helps the students to acknowledge their shortcoming and work on them to improve their learning. It has an advantage of promoting competition among students and by doing so, helps them to work harder to improve their learning skills. However, examinations have their disadvantages. First, they have a poor predictive quality as they only judge a student's ability under set conditions and limited time. Many times bright students panic, get stressed and get confused during the examination hour because they are under strict examination conditions, leading to poor performance.

Second, examinations encourage limitation of teaching. They are fixed to certain curriculum goals and objectives which focuses on passing examination. This method does not provide many educational benefits. Whelan, et al., (n.d) notes that the purpose of examination in an educational context is to enable judgment about levels of skills or knowledge, measuring improvement of students over a period of time, evaluating their strength and weakness, and ranking them for selection or exclusion. In graduate school programme, the graduate students are confronted with the necessity of successfully completing various forms of assessment if they are going to achieve personal and professional goals. This study argues that while assessment in form of examination is an important too, it should be considered to be more than just a tool to measure the students' ability, this is because examination can dominate the students' experience of learning and becomes more influential than the learning itself. The findings of this study shows that examinations have drawbacks that have some bearings on the rise of students' stress levels.

Academic achievement is important in a student's life and affect his or her life. Academic achievement is used to measures the quality of learning in learning institutions. The better the examination grades from the students, the public judges the institution by the quality grades.

However, does passing written examination the only best way to judge the life of a person? The society have measured life success to good examination performance and those with good grades are rewarded in the society while those with poor grades are ridiculed by the same society.

PS Stress Experience as Related to Other Factors

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

PS Stress Experience by Gender and by Age

The results show that there were no significant differences in PS stress by gender and this implies that stress experiences of graduate students are the same for males as for females. Anbumalr et al. (2017) who showed that men were more affected by stressors such as finances and work-related events than women. Kai-Wen (2009) findings suggested that unlike the female students, the main problem of male is the family problems issues. However, it was observed that older students agreed to being on average more stressed than younger ones. This is expected since older students have more responsibilities possibly at work or at family level.

Program Structure Stress Experience by Marital Status

The results show that there are no significant differences in marital status in the perceived stress for the programme structure. However, married students experienced relatively more stress in their studies, as relates to the programme structure than single students. This is similarly expected since married students often have more family responsibilities in addition to their studies. Ghafoor, Sarah et al. (2019) showed that married students reported higher stress compared to single students in two areas, those related to academics and to research performance. However, Marriage brought massive social support that mediated positive influences towards an academic career and acted as a buffer during times of stress. She continued to note that while single students were more stressed about items related to future goals, the married ones were stressed on items related to immediate goals within their degree programme.

PS Stress Experience by Academic Level of Study

This study sought to find out the perception of stress experience on academic level of study and how the perceived stress affected graduate students positively or negatively. The respondents in the study were either 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th year students. The findings of this study showed that in programme structure, the levels of study were not significantly different. However, fourth year doctoral students relatively affected by stress more, followed by third, second- and first-year students. This could be attributed to higher level students having a heavier academic workload.

Perception for Stress Experience by Academic Programme of Study

This study sought to find out the perception of stress experience on programme of study and how the perceived stress affected graduate students positively or negatively. The respondents in the study were either masters or doctoral students. The results show that there are no significant differences in academic programme of study in the perceived stress for the program leadership. On average, doctoral students agreed that they were more stressed than masters' students.

Student Related Factors (External Factors) Perceived Effects

Apart from the programme structure, external factors could contribute to stress among graduate students. The study examined various external factors that have the potential to cause stress among students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. The respondents were to rate their responses through several items in the research instrument based on the Likert scale. Family relations and obligations are often a major external factor that has the potential to cause stress among graduate students. If the family environment is not conducive, it can cause stress to students. In the particular case of students having their own families, the obligations within can be a source of stress. However, from this study, the students felt that their family relationships have not strained, and were thus not causing them stress.

Graduate students often have to work to raise money for their studies and possibly for their families. This can be a source of stress to them and would be manifested by their response to their supervisors and studies in general. From this study, the students felt that their work place obligations were negatively affected by their engagement in graduate studies. This would certainly lead to stress in life and would negatively affect their studies and perception of their supervisors. Any delays by the supervisors to give feedback on the dissertation would make

worse a situation from the workplace obligations, and thus manifest in stress. The results of this study shows that family members supported their loved ones who were in colleges and in this case the family relationship was not strained. The study also found that teamwork among graduate students was not good and therefore causing stress among them. This study concludes that financial challenges as well as lack of teamwork among graduate students were causing them stress in selected Christian universities in Kenya.

The study further shows that external factors affected the younger age group more than the old ones. This could be that the young age groups were struggling with adopting with the environment teaching and learning methodology, the different views of teachers, emphasis on the weakness of student rather than their strength points (Masih & Gulrez, 2006). In terms of the stress experience, the older group experienced more stress than the young group. This could be attributed to the fact that older group had more family issues to deal with than the young group. Findings by Hans Vossensteyn (2009) revealed that institutions in developing countries were facing financial challenges. Idzai (2016), in Hijaz & Naqvi (2006) found that there is a notable connection between economic constraints and academic achievement leading to poor performance of the student in the class. Reevy et al. (2013) and Bishop (2018) showed that team-work brings success in all areas of human life and that in sharing the burdens, students are able to help each other in doing the class assignments, field assignments, reading tasks as well as dividing and conquering many other tasks assigned to them. Failure of team-work led to students working individually and this could cause stress among students. The overall findings of this study shows that external factors were a major source of stress among graduate students.

The findings of this study on the external factors impact shows that students were able to cope with important issues in their lives. The graduate students' perceptions agreed that they were able to successfully handle their life hassles, had confident to overcome problems and difficulties affecting their lives, and had confident or enough ability to handle their personal problem. The study thus shows that external factors such as work place obligations, financial challenges, and lack of teamwork lacked among the graduate students were negatively affecting students. Studies by Sulaiman, Hassan, Sopian, and Abdullah (2009) suggest that young people always face problems in adapting with various stresses, and that older people struggle with the programme structure, financial issues and family issues among many other issues. The findings of this study shows that programme structure especially the academic workload and

examinations, as well as external factors were causing stress among students and could have influenced the stress experience of students in the programme structure.

Qualitative Study

The respondents' perceptions in the focus group discussion that included a group of eight graduate students pointed to experiences of stress in the students' lives as manifested by sleepless nights, excessive workload, loss of sleep, anxiety, frequent headaches, and worry of meeting deadlines. A study done by Misigo (2015) showed that college experience is the most stressful period in student's life. This is because students have to adjust to a new social environment and deal with living away from parents or familiar environment. Markrides et al. (1998) in Misigo (2015) noted that college students have high level of stress. The findings of this qualitative study concur with the findings of the quantitative study which shows that students experienced stress due to programme structure. The findings of the focus groups in this study shows that students were faced with a lot of uncertainty, did not know a lot about graduate programme of their study, that lecturers did not give enough guidance and that the department did not give guidelines for the supervision and leadership. All this caused the perceived stress among students.

CONCLUSION

The findings in this study show that programme structure was causing stress among students in selected Christian universities in Kenya. Students were worried about the academic workload, examinations, and failing in the examinations. This was manifested by restlessness, fatigue, difficulty concentrating, feeling irritable, and sleeplessness which are evident signs of stress. As a result of this, they were submitting their assignments late. This seems to be caused by the students' sense of inadequacy in undertaking their academic work.

The students also felt inadequate in academic work which could be as a result of insufficient prior training or personal unpreparedness to handle the amount of workload expected. Similarly, the institutions may not have well prepared the students of what was expected of them in their academic programmes.

The study also shows that work place obligations were negatively affecting the students, they were facing financial challenges, and that teamwork lacked among the graduate students in selected Christian universities. The findings also show that external factors were perceived by the graduate students to be contributing to their stress. The study also shows that Stress was

experienced by students irrespective of their academic level of study, programme of study, gender or marital status.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the central role that the programme structure plays among graduate students, through structuring the programme of study, it is vital that an enabling environment is created. The conclusion from the results that PS contributes to stress experiences among graduate students in Christian universities in Kenya leads to the following recommendations:

The programme structure was causing stress among graduate students in selected Universities in Kenya due to excessive workload. In this case, graduate students have to realize that graduate level academic workload is heavy, and they have to adapt to it and work hard.

It is recommended from this study that graduate students should make adequate plans to finance their studies on the onset and they should espouse team-work in their studies.

Institutions need to seek for scholarships or other ways to support graduate students in financing their studies.

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