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Email: ghajhem@uew.edu.gh

Editorial correspondence, including submission of manuscripts should be addressed to:

The Managing Editor  
Ghana Journal of Higher Education Management  
University Printing Press  
University of Education, Winneba  
P.O. Box 25  
Winneba  
Ghana

Email: ghajhem@uew.edu.gh, [gaua@uew.edu.gh](mailto:gaua@uew.edu.gh)

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## **EDITORIAL**

The Ghana Association of University Administrators (GAUA) as part of its mission to promote the advancement of Higher Education in Ghana and around the world provides policy reflective for national development. This is done through research reports, policy analysis, and reflective analysis among others. Mindful of this, the National Executive adopted this Journal from GAUA University of Education, Winneba branch in 2019 to advance this cause. The seventh edition of the journal is thus, the second edition since the adoption.





## Analysis of Students' Role in University Governance: A Case Study of KNUST during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Paul Kwadwo Addo (EdD)<sup>1</sup>, Susana Asamoah<sup>2</sup>, Regina Nuako<sup>3</sup> & Ida Saeed<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Deputy Director-General, IEPA, UCC & Faculty of Educational Studies, KNUST

<sup>2</sup>Senior Assistant Registrar, Faculty of Art, KNUST

<sup>3</sup>Senior Assistant Registrar, General Administration, KNUST

<sup>4</sup>Deputy Registrar, College of Engineering, KNUST

### **Abstract**

*Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) all over the world have developed strategies to minimize the impact of the novel corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic on students. Most HEIs as part of their governance systems involve students in their decision-making processes. This is because students are major stakeholders and must be involved in all decision making that affects them. However, the COVID-19 crisis posed a great challenge of social distancing which has limited the involvement of students in relevant decision-making processes. This study examined how student leadership has been involved in the governance of HEIs, using the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana, as a case study. Using a qualitative approach, five university leaders and five student leaders were sampled to provide their perspectives on the crisis. A content analysis of the appropriate institutional policies was carried out. The study found that there is policy framework to support students' involvement in the university's governance, but these processes are not effectively adhered to during crisis situations. It is recommended that HEIs engage professionals with expertise in student affairs to build capacity of management and student leaders in university governance. Besides, there is the need to professionalise student affairs offices in order to respond to the needs of students, especially, during crisis such as COVID19.*

**Key words:** Educational Administration, Students Affairs, Student Leadership, Decision-Making, COVID-19, Crisis Management

### **Introduction**

The world as of 2015 has about 1.8 billion youth between the ages of 10-24 with close to 90 percent living in developing countries. The population of the youth in Africa is estimated at 65% (below 35 years) and almost half of the population are under 19 years (UN ECOSOC Youth Forum, 2014).

The above notwithstanding, the youth around the world still face various challenges including exclusion from decision-making processes in matters that affect them directly, namely, unemployment, inadequate skills, residual effects of conflicts, with the youth in Africa being the most affected. There has, therefore, been several policies made to address imbalances in development plans. These include the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and the Africa Union's Agenda 2063. All these policies place premium on developing and supporting the youth of Africa for the continent's transformation.

Higher Educational Institutions (HEI) around the world and Africa are established to develop human capacity for development. In pursuit of this objective, governance systems are put in place to ensure effective management and administration of such institutions. Most HEIs as part of their governance systems involve students in the decision-making processes. Students are major stakeholders who must be involved in making all decisions affecting them. Oanda (2016) relates that student participation in African higher education governance started in the 1970s. This was a period of prolonged students' protest against anti-welfare and stern policy of the structural adjustment programmes, the major one being an end to free higher education. What followed was the introduction of cost-sharing, tuition fees and privatisation of various services including student accommodation, catering and support services (Munene, 2003; Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). In the Ghanaian context, student leadership is often spearheaded by the Students Representative Council (SRC) which is an umbrella body for all undergraduate students and Graduate Students Association of Ghana (GRASAG), a representation of all students offering graduate programmes in the university.

However, the COVID-19 Pandemic has posed a great challenge of social distancing which has somehow limited the involvement of students in relevant decision-making processes. The purpose of this study is to examine how student leadership is involved in the governance of HEIs, using the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana, as a case study. The management of the COVID-19 crisis was largely dictated by Presidential directives in consultations with Vice Chancellor Ghana and other major stakeholders in Ghana. **However, management of KNUST were called upon to provide implementation strategies based on the directives.** The emergency nature of decisions making sometimes prevented student leaders from actively participating which needs to be examined and how it affected cooperate governance.

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

### *Student Participation in Educational Governance System*

It is important to examine the concept of participation from the educational perspective. Frost and Roberts (2011) relate that participation as a concept is broadly appealing. It is widely accepted that although schooling is obligatory up to some levels, it is desirable that all concerned, whether teachers or students, are able to participate in the process by being part of decision-making that affects them. KNUST, recognising the importance of students' participation in its governance, has student representation from the lowest to the highest decision-making body of the University, the University Council. The Students Representative Council (SRC) and Graduate Students Association of Ghana (GRASAG) which are the official mouth pieces of students have their presidents as representatives on the University Council. The Academic Board, the supreme academic body of the University and Welfare Services Board under the University Council also have both the SRC and GRASAG presidents serving on them. The Search Committee for a Vice Chancellor has a student representative (KNUST Statute Schedule H). Again, per the structure of the Governing Council of the University, apart from Government, all other constituencies have one representative with the exception of the student body which has two representatives; one for undergraduate students and one for graduate students.

The term "participation" involves actively planning and executing an activity or a programme together based on common understanding to achieve the desired goal(s). This implies voluntary involvement or engagement as a strong sense of belonging. Participation leads to improvements in the quality of relationships and increased commitment to the goals of a school. This is because participation reduces disaffection and enables schools to develop as democratic communities of learning and leadership (Frost and Roberts, 2011).

According to Willms (2000), participation is referred to alongside the term “belonging” as being key dimensions of engagement. Another school of thought has it that student participation is a matter of human rights which may have legal consequences if students perceive that such rights have been infringed upon. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) set the benchmark on this score and other conventions such as the UK Government’s students’ right to be consulted about matters that affect their learning. This reinforces the need for students’ participation in school governance (DCSF, 2008).

Willms (2000) also highlights the importance of student participation as it defines engagement as the extent to which students identify with and value learning outcomes, and participate in academic and non-academic activities. The need to get students heard or involved in the governance system of schools (students’ voice) continues to gain currency and it is sometimes used to mean the provision of opportunities for students to express their views, with the expectation that they be heard. This is also known as “pupil consultation” (Rudduck and McIntyre, 2007).

### *Student Leadership*

The concept of leadership has enjoyed a lot of discourse and various scholars have attempted to define it. “Leadership”, according to Daft (2005: p.5) is an “influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes and outcomes that reflect their shared purpose”. Murage, Njoka and Gachahi (2019) refer to student leadership as education practices that give university students opportunity to participate in decision-making and discharge their responsibilities as active citizens (Murage, Njoka and Gachahi, 2019).

Ann (2010) also defines leadership as the art of motivating a group or team of people to work toward a common goal based on the needs of the organisation or university. Simply put, a leader is the individual who inspires and directs the action to reach an identified goal; be it short, intermediate or long term. The leader is the individual that possesses the ability to motivate, collaborate with others, has the appropriate skills, knowledge and attitude to move an organisation to greatness. The leader’s personality should also be persuasive enough to get others to follow him or her toward fulfilling the goals of the organisation (Ann, 2010). Students in Africa are often motivated to provide “leadership” to solve problems in their respective HEIs affecting students. This makes them offer themselves to “lead” their fellow students.

Leaders today are expected to create and sustain a collaborative, participative/democratic system by demonstrating competence and working well with others in the interest of the organisation. This has several obvious benefits for industrial peace, harmony and productivity. In the university environment, student leaders are an invaluable asset if they are well harnessed and utilised. According to Katana, Fremerey and Amini (2006) student leadership in the form of student governance is an input into the education process and an important component in the university management system.

In this respect, students can be useful agents for academic, social and cultural development of the school environment by creating and maintaining a sense of ownership and responsibility and helping to improve both school and community. Other benefits include serving as important communication link between the students and administration/management. In addition, students’ representation on committees is mostly

statutory requirements (their functions/structure enshrined in the Acts and Statutes of various Universities) which must be satisfied.

In another dimension, Ann (2010) posits that student involved in leadership activities at a university enables them to demonstrate maturity, self-discipline, positive attitude, resilience and are able to stay focused on set goals. Other skills such student leaders acquire include ability to delegate authority and demand accountability, model the behaviour they expect of others, believe in and inspire positive change in others, celebrate others' successes and give credit to others for a job well done. This means that student leadership tends to serve as fertile grounds for grooming and nurturing future great leaders for Africa's transformational agenda as stated in the Africa Union's Agenda 2063.

### *Managing Students in Crisis*

The need to involve students in decision making has become an accepted norm in every HEI including those in Ghana. In Ghana, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, KNUST issued a communiqué to all students on how students would complete their academic work including their end-of-second-semester examinations. The decision was arrived at after a series of meetings at the various levels of institutional governance i.e. Department/Faculty/College and Academic Board. The University management at its Academic Board meeting planned for the return of final year students to campus based on Government's directives to complete the academic year, received a counter proposal from student leaders (SRC). The student leaders made a strong case to continue academic work online as they had completed about 80% of their course work. They also feared an increase in infection rate as a result of some students not strictly adhering to the COVID-19 protocols. Consequently, Academic Board accepted the students' proposal. Some student unions in Ghana kicked against some decisions of their managements.

However, from the perspective of management in Ghana, COVID-19 affected the manner in which university administrators and managers performed their functions as observed by Anane et al (2020). Therefore, one could empathize with management that the COVID-19 pandemic posed a great challenge of social distancing which somehow limited the involvement of students in relevant decision-making processes. Atuahene and Owusu-Ansah (2013) identified limited participation among minority groups in higher education including students. Also Bingab et al (2016) in examining university governance identified students' participation in governance to be important but was limited in some cases. What is not known which require research is the extent to which students are involved in university governance during crisis. A search conducted by the researchers on the KNUST Dspace (KNUST Repository) provided limited research conducted on student involvement in university management at KNUST. Again, a request to the Registrar's Office to find out about prior study/report on students' involvement in university administration did not yield any results. This shows that there is a knowledge gap which requires investigation to guide policy and practice.

Therefore, there is the need to conduct exploratory study to assess the involvement of student leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on university governance. This was done through these questions:

1. Is there a policy framework to support student involvement in university governance?
2. What is the perception of university management with regards to the involvement of students in university governance and decision making prior and during COVID-19?

3. What is the perception of student leaders with regards to their involvement in university governance and decision making prior and during COVID-19?

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative approach to examine perception of staff and students regarding the COVID19 crisis and how student leaders were involved in decision-making processes and their effects on university governance. The study developed two similar interview guides to compare and contrasts the opinions of the KNUST leadership and the student body on the matter of student union participation in decision making. A purposive sampling was employed to select five (5) university leaders (Provost, Dean, Deputy Registrar/Secretary to Academic Board, Dean of Student Affairs and Head of Department). The same sampling approach was used to select five student leaders (SRC Speaker of Parliament, Women's Commissioner, Students' College President, Students' Faculty President and a Course President). This is because the selected participants had unique positions in the university. Again, their perspective was necessary to enrich the research. This sampling technique was used because it helped to select cases that were likely to be "information rich" with respect to the purpose of the study (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2007). There was careful attempt to select at least a female in each group to ensure balance in gender representation. The purpose of the study was discussed with respondents who gave their full consent for their participation. Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic protocols, most of the participants opted for phone interview which was done from June 29 to July 8, 2020. Again, Documents and Records Analysis was done by doing content analysis of major policies of the university such as the Acts, Statutes and Student Handbook to appreciate the policy intent for effective governance. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) indicates that, to fully understand a document or record, there is the need to study the context in which it was produced, the author's purpose, intended and actual audiences. The responses were transcribed, analysed and discussed under findings of this study.

### **Results and Discussions**

#### *Policy Perspective*

A review of the Acts, Statutes and Students Handbook of KNUST provides the context to appreciate students' involvement in university governance and its administration. The governing structure of KNUST, as it is in many other HEIs in Africa, makes room for a University Council, which is the highest decision-making body responsible for determining the general direction of the institution. The KNUST Act 1961 (Act 80 as amended) in section 7 (1) e and f makes room for two student representatives on Council. Again, the composition of statutory committees and other committees that discuss issues which affect students' welfare (both academic and social) have students' representative(s) on them. In addition, the KNUST Statute also makes provision for student representation as captured below:

<i>Statutes 34</i>	<i>Composition of a College Board</i> (ix) Two student representatives who are not in the same Faculty elected by the students of the College
<i>Statutes 38</i>	<i>Composition of a Faculty Boards</i> (vii) Two student representatives who are not in the same Department elected by the students of the College
<i>Statutes 45</i>	<i>Dean of Students</i> (e) Board of the Dean of Students – Four students appointed by the SRC, one of whom shall be non-resident and one of whom shall be a female
<i>Statutes 46</i>	<i>International Programmes Office</i> (f) Board of the Office of International Programmes – One student, who is not in the first year, appointed by the SRC

*Statutes 62 Halls of Residence*

- (c) Each Hall of Residence or other residential facility shall, where conditions permit, be managed, subject to the Statutes, by a Hall Council – Student representatives of that Hall or facility

Also, the KNUST Students' Guide and Code of Conduct (2018) in Article V: Conduct Policies and Procedures (C) prescribe for students to be involved in any Conduct Board Hearing.

The above review of the policies of KNUST indicates that adequate provision has been made for student's involvement in decision-making processes at all levels of the governance structure of the University. This provision aligns with Ann (2010) who stressed that students' participation in decision-making processes that affect them prepares them for future leadership roles. Acknowledging that the world is now enduring abnormal times, it is imperative to examine whether or not these processes were adhered to during the COVID-19 Pandemic from both management and students' perspectives.

*Management Perspective*

The selected members of the University management were satisfied with the way students are involved with decision making prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The following submission essentially summaries the opinions of all five management members who served as respondents for the present study:

*“For me, before COVID-19 the structures as we know them, incorporated students' views in decision making. At the College levels, we have representations of students' leadership at the College Board and other Committees that are set up to investigate issues that affect students to the extent that at the wider University level, when a student is affected by an issue, SRC representation is required. So, on that basis, I think that the incorporation of students' views in decision making processes prior to COVID-19 has not been bad at all. It has been good.”*

The view above was supported by another respondent who opined that:

*“Students are represented on the Departmental Board when taking decisions of policy which affect them. The Department also has an electronic platform which includes all the class representatives of the various years for quick discussions and comments on issues pertaining to student affairs. As Head of Department, I meet with all student leaders once a month to deliberate on student affairs as well. There is also a weekly meeting of all class representatives to get feedback on their teaching and learning experience.”*

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, however, some management members expressed mixed reaction to the level of students' involvement in decision making. One respondent observed that the following:

*“Prior to COVID-19, I am positive of the fact that students' input in decision making was a good one but during this period of COVID-19, their involvement in the decision-making process had not been as good as that good. We made attempts to contact students but then, by virtue of the fact that they were not on campus, they were not easily accessible. At the last Academic Board meeting, for example, the SRC was represented and they were of the strong view that we should continue with the on-line academic work and that is what is currently being done. Nevertheless, they made it very clear the challenges some of their rank and file were confronted with.”*

Another respondent also submitted:

*"All class representatives were met to discuss the modalities for implementation of the online learning directives. I also held weekly meetings with class representatives to get feedback on the implementation process. Reports from such meetings were passed on to management for fine-tuning."*

The interview further assessed whether COVID-19 has changed the perceptions and attitudes of some management members towards students' involvement in the decision-making process in the University. Three respondents said it has not. Two respondents, however, expressed their views as follows:

*"As an individual, I wouldn't say that it has changed my perception because, I have always been of the view that we should have students' involvement in decision making. So, if COVID-19 has brought the need to the fore, then, it is what I believed in that is now being brought to the lime light. So my principle is to strongly encourage student participation."*

Another said:

*"Not much. I have always involved them. However, lessons from institutions which did little or no engagement enforce the need for such inclusion."*

Lastly, the following were shared as recommendations for improving students' involvement in university governance:

*"I would want management to also appreciate the view that when managing students, you don't necessarily have to see them as kids at the university level. They are grown-ups and, therefore, the level of their engagement should be one that actually shows respect to one another. If students are given the due respect that they deserve, they definitely, would also give back to you the due respect you deserve even to the level they are taking you, as a father figure.*

*"Students should learn to have deeper understanding of the workings of academia and its ideals. This would go a long way to improve their dealings with both the management of the University and its stakeholders (Politicians, Civil Society, Local and International Partners) etc."*

*"Student Leaders should be consulted in major decisions which directly affect students"*

*"It will therefore be helpful if management uses surveys or other electronic means of engaging students where their identities could be protected to create the atmosphere for genuine feedback. Such situations will provide data for management to make objective decisions on matters which affect students' welfare."*

*"Stakeholder involvement in decision-making is vital for smooth implementation of policies and programmes. Consequently, any relevant stakeholder whom the decision would affect should participate in the decision-making process."*

The above responses indicate that management is conscious of the need to involve students in decision making and its impact on university governance. This position is supported by Frost and Roberts (2011) who stressed the need for effective engagement with students.



### *Students Perspective*

The perspective of students was sought to appreciate their understanding of KNUST's policies on students' involvement in the University's governance. Three out of the five answered in the affirmative with two giving the following responses:

**Student1:** *"Not entirely. I have ideas of fractions of it. I know that students form part of university governance. In terms of GRASAG, SRC, NUGS who represent the student body."*

**Student 2:** *"I can say partially because the reason is that we learn on the job. Through going to meetings, you come to learn how decisions are made and the order of authority."*

The researchers further sought the opinion of student leaders as to whether they were involved in decision-making in the university prior to COVID-19. All of them answered in the affirmative summarised in the following response:

*"Yes, I have been involved but it is not very effective for instance, when you go to the Welfare Board, you have four (4) students against thirty (30) lecturers. They do listen to us but when it comes to voting we just have two (2) votes against thirty (30) others."*

However, when the student leaders were asked if they were satisfied with their involvement, three said "No", one said "Partially" and the only person who said "Yes" gave the following response:

*"Most of the time, it is one student speaking for 50 students, so it becomes difficult for management to understand us."*

Again, the researchers sought to understand how well student leaders were involved in decision-making process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Three said they were not involved, one said "Yes" and another gave the following response:

*"Not personally but the SRC President sought our opinions on our WhatsApp page before he went for the meeting with management so in the end, we were involved."*

The student leaders were asked to make suggestions for improving students' involvement in university governance and the following suggestions were made:

**Student 1:** *"No matter what decisions that management takes, whether minute or big, they should still involve the student leaders. Because if they do not involve the students and they implement decisions and there are negative consequences, management should be blamed. If they involve the student body then the student leaders would have to take the blame."*

**Student 2:** *"I think our petitions from the lower constituencies should be considered. We gather information from the students and we are closer to them. Again, my office is a department office but the lecturers want to take it from me."*

**Student 3:** *"I think what I can say now is that management should put in a structure for students to follow to ensure that the right people occupy the leadership position. There should be leadership training set aside for students to go through a year before they run for the position in terms of integrity, service to community, etc."*

**Student 4:** *"Students should not just be on the Council or serve on boards, they should be heard since they serve the interest of the students."*

**Student 5:** *"Whenever we go for university meetings and the decision is going to affect students more than any other member of the university community, then students should be invited and listened to the more. Where there are issues that would directly affect students, more students should be invited to the meeting to*

*listen to their perspective so that when decisions are taken, its implementation becomes smooth."*

From students' perspective, there appears to be some engagement with management but students want more and effective engagement as suggested by Katana, Fremerey and Amini (2006) who see student leadership as an important component in the university management system. The need to have student "participate" in decision making is important. Engagement must involve conscious effort to purposefully plan with students at all times including crisis to achieve the desired goal(s). Effective planning with students leads to improvements in the quality of relationships which reduces disaffection and enables HEIs to develop as democratic communities of learning and leadership (Frost and Roberts, 2011). As observed by Willms (2000), the importance of student participation in academic and non-academic activities is more than important to get students heard or involved in the governance system. Student leaders (students' voice) continue to gain currency and it is sometimes used to mean the provision of opportunities for students to express their views, with the expectation that they be heard. African with fast growing youthful population must examine its cultural norms and systematically appreciate the voices of its youth as we aspire to achieve the UN SDGs and the Africa Union's Agenda 2063.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Practice**

From the study, it could be concluded that KNUST has the necessary policy framework for students' involvement in the governance of the University. In addition, students have been involved in decision making and governance system as prescribed by the University's relevant policies. Furthermore, student leaders prefer to have more and open engagement with management at all times to improve their understanding of the University system. Finally, university management needs adequate understanding and appreciation of changing trends in managing student affairs, especially during crisis.

The implication of this study for policy and practice is that university management must constantly update their knowledge in current and emerging trends in managing student affairs. Continuous professional training must be organised for all those in university administration.

HEIs in Africa and around the world should view the student affairs office as a professional unit which requires professionals with requisite academic and professional knowledge in student affairs.

HEIs should as part of their quality assurance processes institute satisfaction and exit surveys to sample students' views on important issues that affect them. Reports from such surveys must be used in taking decisions affecting students. Besides, crisis management skills must be developed through continuous and specialized training for all staff in the university. Crisis response teams should be formed in the student affairs offices. Effective communication strategies should be developed, especially by use of modern media to inform students about what they need to know at appropriate times.

Orientation and capacity training programmes should be continuously offered to student leaders, especially in a university governance system and its structures to assist them to effectively participate in decision-making processes.

All policies of any HEI should be made easily accessible to all students. The policies should have abridged versions for easy reading and understanding. Also, effective support systems such as psychosocial counselling, financial aid and academic counselling must be put in place for students to access, especially during crisis such as this COVID19 pandemic

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