Challenges in Fostering National Cohesion within Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

Managing the diverse ethnic identities inherent in multi-ethnic universities is crucial for fostering national cohesion. Ineffective management can lead to ethnic competition and hinder a holistic approach to diversity. This study explored the challenges Kenyan universities face in promoting national cohesion, using Émile Durkheim's Functionalist Theory as a framework. A cross-sectional descriptive survey was conducted across five public universities in Kenya. The study found that many students are unaware of existing platforms for reporting hate speech. There are also delays in addressing prejudice, ethnicity, discrimination, and hate speech which can easily erode trust in the university's commitment to diversity. Additionally, inadequate support for students reporting ethnicity-related issues poses a significant challenge. The study recommends integrating emerging issues like hate speech into university curricula, engaging staff as moderators and mentors in student social network groups, and raising awareness about platforms for reporting hate speech and social media misuse

Keywords: Universities, Ethnicity, Ethnic Identities, Hate Speech, Discrimination, Tolerance, Cohesion

Background

National cohesion is a major challenge facing universities with a multi-ethnic population. This is because every ethnic group carry with it its own culture, language, identity, and values into the universities. As the ethnic diversity of universities continues to grow, there is a rising interest in understanding their social cohesion and mechanisms for fostering interethnic unity.

As Branch *et al.* (2010: 254 –255) point out, if these identities are poorly managed, it can lead to what he refers to as "competitive multiculturalism" which results to a "survival of the fittest" approach to managing ethnic diversity. This corresponds with the 'survival-based worldview' described by Danesh (2011). In this worldview, the main preoccupation of the people is struggling for survival and self-protection. This results in a struggle for power, authoritarianism, blind obedience of law and inequality (Danesh, 2011).

Mismanagement of ethnic identities at the universities can also lead to horizontal inequalities. According to Kester *et al.* (2022), horizontal inequalities are differences and inequalities that exist inside a society or institution. Kester *et al.* (2022) argues, poor management of ethnic identities in universities might worsen already-existing differences in conflict situations. These can exacerbate stereotypes and prejudices, cause intergroup tensions and conflicts inside the university, and even result in some ethnic or cultural groups being excluded or marginalized.

According to Kester, *et al* (2022), population growth, increasing youth populations, and aspirations for better career opportunities in many countries of the Global South has led to increasing demand for higher education. However, due to limited resource constraints and capacity issues the number of available seats are limited. This makes entering universities a competitive process. If one identity group perceives to have been discriminated against it may evoke feelings of injustice and resentment, escalate tensions, create divisions among and may lead to conflict.

Literature Review

Universities are intended to be havens of intellectual expression. They are also supposed to be insulated from the distractions of the outside world. However, many universities fall short of this ideal. Students, faculty, and staff encounter discriminatory behavior and harassment based on their ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation. According to Cole & Harper (2017), this unfortunate situation arises from the influence of societal prejudices and discriminatory attitudes that exist beyond the walls of the universities.

Research shows that many universities around the world are experiencing various forms of verbal and physical harassment based on ethnicity, race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation (Adamu, 2019; Kron, 2010; Kigotho, 2019). This situation not only leads to frustrations on campuses but also poses a threat to the integrity of the institutions and national cohesion. Moreover, it can contribute to intergroup tensions, widen the academic achievement gap among diverse student groups, and create inequitable institutional environments (Cole & Harper (2017). In numerous instances, such tensions have resulted in property damage, disruptions to the teaching and learning process, and even loss of student lives (Adamu, 2019; Kron, 2010; Kigotho, 2019).

In the USA, dozens of universities protested in 2015 due to unresponsiveness of university administrations to issues of racial inequality (Harper and Davis III, 2016). In UK, universities have failed to tackle endemic racism against students and staff. White men continue to dominate the majority of senior positions within universities (Universities UK, 2019). According to Wei (2016), Malaysians universities have witnessed some ethnic conflicts linked to national integration and identity issues. These developments have prompted the introduction of various policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP) and the National Language Policy (NLP). These policies aim to establish a unified curriculum across diverse school systems to foster national cohesion and a shared sense of identity (Wei, 2016). Additionally, they seek to abolish ethnically exclusive admissions policies (Jardine, 2008).

Ethiopia, like Kenya, has faced ethnically related conflicts for many years. The country's diverse ethnic composition, combined with historical grievances and political factors, has contributed to the emergence and escalation of ethnically related conflicts over the years. These conflicts have spilt over into Ethiopian universities. As Adamu (2019) observes, of late, these conflicts have been deepening divisions and animosities between different ethnic groups within a society. They are now more susceptible to being used as tools for political agendas and ethnic extremism, even at the risk of students' lives. These developments have led to many parents feeling uneasy about sending their children to colleges located in areas where their ethnic group is not the predominant one. As a result, despite public universities' lower tuition fees, many parents prefer sending their kids to private universities.

In pre-genocide Rwanda, the higher education system has been criticized for potentially contributing to the divisive ideology that culminated in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi (Meghan Sobel and Karen McIntyre, 2019). According to Mbonyinshuti (2021), many individuals who held influential roles during the genocide had connections to the National University of Rwanda (UNR), either as faculty, alumni, or in government positions linked to the institution.

Professor Alexandre Lyambabaje, current vice-chancellor of the University of Rwanda and a UNR graduate, has acknowledged this criticism. He notes that despite the university's motto of being the light and service to the people, it failed to counteract the spread of hate speech and genocide ideology on campus (Mbonyinshuti, 2021).

The role of ethnicity in Rwandan universities remains a complex issue. While the government has implemented policies to promote national unity and reconciliation since the genocide, challenges persist. Some scholars argue that these efforts have not fully addressed underlying tensions between Hutu and Tutsi communities, potentially leaving room for future instability. Observations suggest that ethnic divisions, which played a significant role in the civil war, continue to exist subtly within university environments. The education system itself has been identified as a factor that may have inadvertently deepened these divides in the past (Kron, 2010; Taylor (2022).

University administrators play a crucial role in combating these forms of harassment and discrimination within the academic setting. Cole & Harper (2017) argues that university administration must take a strong leadership stance when incidents of prejudice, ethnicity, racism, or bigotry surface on campus to ensure the integrity, cohesion, and safety of faculty, students, and staff are maintained. A failure to demonstrate strong leadership in addressing these issues can have severe consequences. When such matters are left

unaddressed, it creates an environment where hate-filled rhetoric can spread unchecked, fostering an atmosphere of hostility and intolerance.

Recently, a new body of literature has emerged that examines the role of higher education in conflict-affected contexts (Kester, 2020; Kester et al., 2021; Milton & Barakat, 2016). This literature explores the dual role of higher education in supporting and hindering efforts to build sustainable peace. Three key themes emerge from this literature.

Firstly, higher education has a crucial role to play in promoting peace by incorporating messages of conflict resolution into their curricula and teaching practices. Secondly, higher education can facilitate peace building by encouraging intergroup contact, fostering understanding, and reducing conflict risks. However, higher education can also contribute to the perpetuation of existing social inequalities, undermining efforts to build sustainable peace.

The literature suggests that higher education can play a crucial role in spreading messages of peace or conflict through education. As Phelali (2023) observes, higher education can help create a culture of peace, coexistence, and non-violence through peace messaging. According to Johnson (2013), higher education can foster attitudes and beliefs among groups that support peace building and positive social change. One way of fostering these is through a cross-institutional approach where researchers, practitioners and students from all disciplines work together to address the triggers behind conflicts (Millican, *et al,* 2021). This approach allows for a comprehensive and interdisciplinary approach to conflict resolution, drawing on the expertise and perspectives of individuals from different fields to identify and address the root causes of conflicts.

Ethnic Tensions in Kenyan Universities

There have been several instances of ethnic tensions and conflicts spilling over into university campuses in Kenya over the years. These incidents have disrupted academic activities, led to temporary closures, and, in some cases, resulted in loss of life and property damage. Incidences of ethnic spill-over have been witnessed in some universities in Kenya, highlighting the deeply entrenched nature of ethnic divisions and the challenges faced in promoting true national cohesion and ensuring a stable, inclusive environment for higher education. Table 1 gives a summary of ethnic related conflicts in Kenyan universities and their consequences.

Table 1: Incidents of Ethnic Tension in Kenyan Universities (2007-2023)

Year	Institution	Nature of ethnic spill-over	Consequences
2023	Meru University	Students protested VC sacking	Disrupted learning
2016	Moi University	Governors protested new VC appointment	Disrupted graduation prep
2015	Maasai Mara University	Student conflict over football match	Temporary closure
2015	Moi University	Violent ethnic conflicts	Temporary closure
2011	Pokot University Student Association	Protest over perceived discrimination	Road blockages, business closures
2009	Kenyatta University	Ethnically motivated strikes	5 deaths, property damage, closure

| 2007 | Various | Eviction of professors from minority groups | Multiple university |

Source: Author

Examining challenges in fostering national cohesion in universities is therefore crucial because it will bring to the fore strategies that work and those that do not work. This is important in that it will guide university administrators in channeling resources to those strategies that they are sure will work to bring results.

Statement of the Problem

Ethnic tensions in Kenyan universities have been escalating despite the government efforts to promote national cohesion within these institutions. Research shows that these integration efforts have not been effectively mitigating the prevalent influence of ethnicity in university settings. Ethnicity remains a dominant force, at times leading to ethnic tensions and the spillover of local political dynamics into the university sphere, as local leaders vie for control over universities in their regions (Johnson, 2017). These factors have rendered university education vulnerable to political instability. It highlights the challenges faced in promoting true national cohesion and ensuring a stable, inclusive environment for higher education in Kenya. This leaves one worried. Are there integration strategies in place to promote national cohesion in public universities in Kenya? If they are, why are they not working? What is the nature of these strategies? How effective are they in promoting national cohesion? What are the challenges in promoting national cohesion in universities? This paper examines challenges in fostering national cohesion within Kenyan universities. Establishing challenges in fostering national cohesion is important because it would help university administrators identify strategies that require improvements in terms of capacity building, communication or allocation of more resources.

Methodology

The study focused on five public universities in Kenya, selected through purposive sampling. Criteria for selection included being a public university with a charter, existing for over ten years, and having experienced ethnic conflicts that threatened learning. A cross-sectional descriptive survey research design was used to examine challenges in fostering national cohesion. The sample included 384 respondents, with students selected via simple random sampling and deans, department heads, and faculty members selected purposively for interviews. Data collection involved questionnaires with multiple-choice questions for students and semi-structured interviews for faculty. Data gathering and analysis were ongoing, with questionnaire data analyzed using SPSS before conducting interviews. According to Cohen *et.al* (2018), mixed-method approach enhances the strength and reliability of findings.

Results

Platforms to Counter Hate Speech

One of the aspects which was investigated as a possible challenge to promotion of national cohesion was the availability of platforms to counter hate speech. This was important because the rise of the internet and social media has provided a global platform for people to express their opinions and ideas. While this

connectivity has many benefits, it also comes with challenges, such as the spread of hate speech and misinformation. Hate speech on online platforms can be particularly damaging as it can reach a wide audience quickly and can perpetuate divisive narratives, undermine social cohesion, and breed animosity among different communities.

Various scholars have documented cases where students have used social media to organize, mobilize, and spread unrest in universities. According to Chung (2020), university students made a key contribution to the planning and mobilization of protests during the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition bill demonstrations. Numerous protest actions were coordinated, information on protest locations was shared, and protest strategy was communicated using social media platforms, mainly Telegram. Social media was utilized by student-led organizations to organize enormous crowds, including college sit-ins and strikes, which significantly increased citywide unrest.

During the 2019 and 2020 unrest in Iran, students used social media to organize rallies, share videos of protests, and spread information about human rights abuses despite government-imposed internet restrictions. In Uganda, protesters used social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube to denounce Yoweri Museveni's oppressive government and call for Bobi Wine's release. According to Idowu (2022), the Twitter hashtag #FreeBobiWine garnered international attention, generated over 100,000 messages, and received greater publicity.

The aforementioned examples show how social media, and the internet can be powerful tools for organizing people for significant social change initiatives and for disseminating hate speech and inaccurate information. Koross and Kosgei (2016 recommends that universities be equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify hate speech and to counteract hate speech messages. Lukas (2014) describes approaches to monitoring hate speech. He argues, countering hate speech can serve as early warning systems or enable a reaction to incidents as they occur.

To establish whether there are platforms to counter hate speech in the universities, statements were given to students to measure whether lack of platforms to counter hate speech in the universities was a challenge when it comes to promotion of national integration. Data on this factor is presented in Figure 1 below.
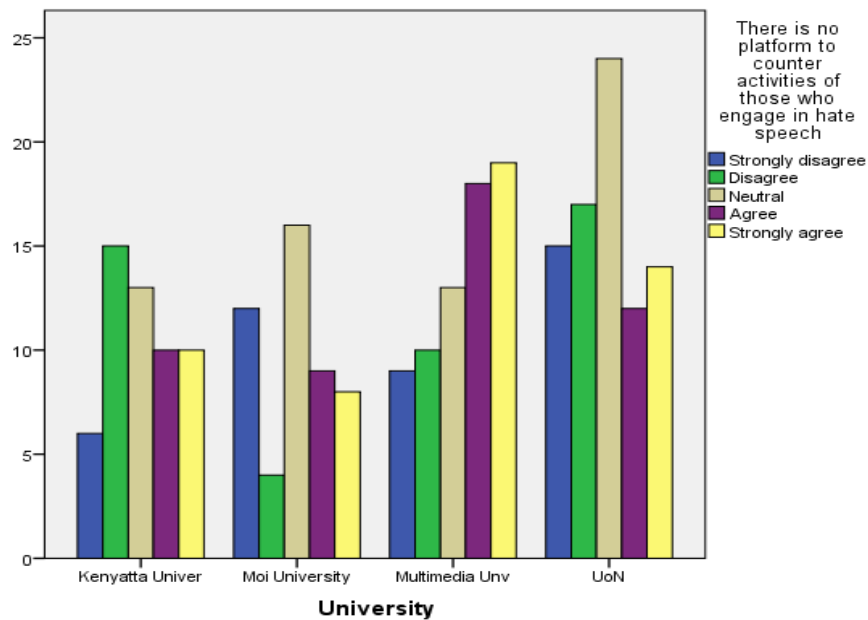
Figure 1: There is no platform to counter activities of those who engage in hate speech

Figure 1 shows mixed perception regarding availability of platforms to counter activities of those who engage in hate speech. At Kenyatta University, twenty (20) respondents chose to agree/strongly agree followed by disagree (15). A significant number of respondents (3) chose neutral. This was interpreted to mean that the available platforms for countering hate speech are not impactful enough for students to disagree with the statement. The significant number of respondents who chose to disagree/strongly disagree indicated availability of these platforms. However, the significant number of respondents who chose neutral (13) and agree and strongly agree (20) indicated that they may not be aware of existence of such platforms hence the need for to create more awareness about the platforms.

At Moi University, the majority of respondents chose neutral followed by strongly disagreeing. Those who chose to agree and strongly agree were significant. The significant number of respondents who chose strongly to disagree/disagree indicated availability of platforms. However, the significant number of respondents who chose neutral (13) and agree and strongly agree (17) indicated lack of awareness by some students hence the need to create more awareness about the platforms.

At Multimedia University, the majority of respondents chose to strongly agree followed by agree. A significant number of respondents chose neutral. 19 students chose to disagree and strongly disagree. This indicates there are platforms to deal with hate speech. However, the highest number of respondents who chose neutral (13) and agree (18) and strongly agree (19) indicated lack of awareness by some students hence the need to create more awareness about the platforms.

At the University of Nairobi (UoN), majority of respondents chose to disagree and strongly disagree (32) while twenty-four (24) chose neutral. 50 respondents chose strongly to agree/agree. The highest number of respondents that chose disagree and strongly disagree (32) indicated availability of platforms to report hate speech while those who chose neutral and strongly agree indicated lack of awareness about availability of

such platforms. This was also interpreted to mean that there is either a high degree of tolerance in these universities such that students do not bother reporting incidents of hate speech or there is fear of negative consequences on reporting such incidents. Thus, very few incidents are reported.

The researcher went further to explore whether there was information on universities websites on how to report hate speech. A search on university websites confirmed this. The search showed that only one university has a publication on how to report hate speech. This indicates the need for creation of platforms and awareness creation about channels that students can use to report incidents of hate speech and misuse of social media.

This concurred with an observation by a key respondent from the NCIC who said during an interview that:

Social media amplifies hate speech, misinformation and disinformation. It is challenging to track, monitor and contain the use and misuse of social media because most of the social media users remain anonymous and cannot be easily traced.

Koross and Kosgei (2016) proposes strategies through which university management can handle students' behaviors and interaction in social media networks. One of the strategies they have proposed is the review of the university curriculum so as to integrate emerging issues such as hate speech. The other is that members of staff should join student social network groups and act as moderators and mentors to the youth since this may help to avert these strikes at the planning stage.

During the interview, one key respondent, and a lecturer in one of the universities gave an example of how lecturers can control social media participation. He said that in one of his classes, a student shared a clip that appeared to favour a particular politician in one of the groups to which he had been added by students. The student wanted other students to publicly disseminate the clip via social media. A staff member kindly advised the student against using the forum to post political statements because they might stoke conflict. A succession of messages from students followed, some of whom agreed with their lecturer and others of whom did not. One of the messages said:

It is divisive politics that break national cohesion but not politics in general. It is religious conflicts that break cohesion but not religion.

Another student suggested starting a new political discussion group. The responses above demonstrated that lecturers can be crucial in regulating conversation on social media.

It can therefore be concluded that there are platforms to report hate speech in Kenyan universities. However, many students are not aware of these platforms. There are three reasons for this. One lacks awareness as indicated by the highest number of respondents choosing neutral responses. There is a need to create more awareness about platforms that students can use to report incidents of hate speech and misuse of social media. The other reason for this could be that there is either a high degree of tolerance in these universities such that students do not bother reporting incidents of hate speech or there is fear of negative consequences on reporting such incidents. Thus, very few incidents are reported. Further research therefore should be conducted to establish why students do not make use of these platforms to report incidents that could

jeopardize learning in their institutions. This indicates the need for creation of platforms and awareness creation about channels that students can use to report incidents of hate speech and misuse of social media.

Delay in Responding to Issues of Ethnicity

The time taken to respond to issues of ethnicity was also identified as a challenge in the promotion of national cohesion at the universities. This is a critical challenge because the speed and effectiveness of the response can significantly impact the outcome and the overall climate on campus. Delayed responses to incidents involving ethnicity can fuel tensions further, erode people's faith in the university's dedication to diversity and inclusion, reinforce unfavorable stereotypes about particular ethnic or cultural groups, and worsen the cycle of prejudice and misunderstanding. They can also damage the university's reputation and image.

To establish whether time taken to respond to issues of ethnicity was a challenge, students were asked to indicate the extent to which they disagree or agreed with the statement that "Some responses to issues of ethnicity, prejudice and discrimination are delayed, coming only after pressure from students." Where the respondents indicated they strongly agreed, it was interpreted that the delay in response was a challenge in promotion of national cohesion. The findings are presented in figure 2 below.
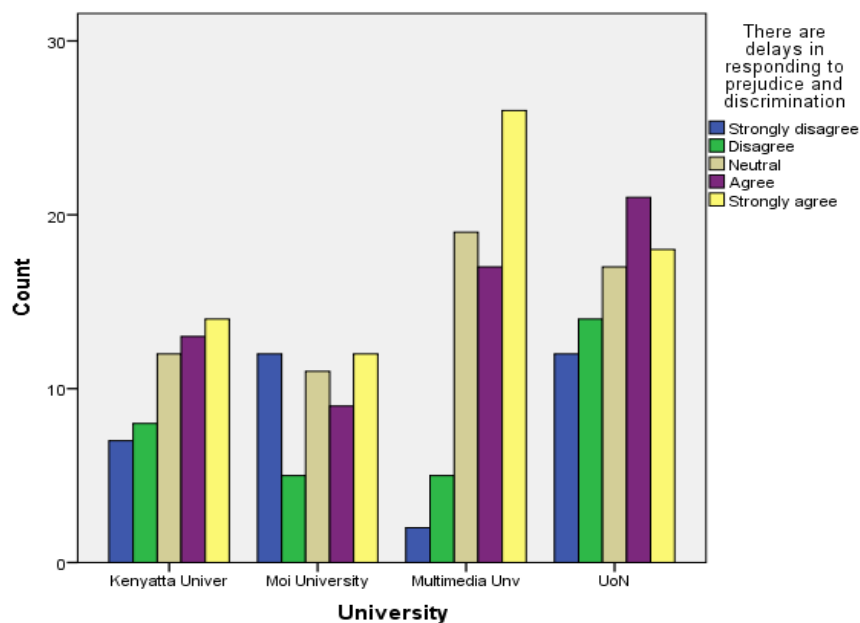

Figure 2: There are delays in responding to issues of ethnicity, prejudice and discrimination

From the above findings, the majority of respondents were in agreement that delays in responding to issues of ethnicity, prejudice, and discrimination are prevalent. At Kenyatta University, twenty-seven (27) respondents strongly agreed or agreed. This was interpreted to mean there are delays in responding to these issues. Twelve (12) respondents remained neutral, while fifteen (15) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This

was interpreted to mean that only a few incidents are reported and resolved without raising much attention among students. The few cases reported could be due to fear of personal consequences or the lack of a platform to report incidents, as previously noted. The lack of support on how to report these issues could also contribute to this trend. Similar patterns were observed at Moi University, Multimedia University, and the University of Nairobi (UoN).

The above findings were confirmed during the interview. It was noted by some respondents that responses are given only after pressure from students. One respondent indicated that the university responds only after an issue has gone viral. This was further confirmed by a key respondent who admitted that it is difficult for everything happening among the students to be known. Most of the time, the administration becomes aware of an issue when it is already trending online. These observations concur with Johnson (2017), who sees higher education's responses to conflict as reactive rather than responsive.

According to Cole & Harper (2017), the most important action an administrator can take following a hate crime or bias incident is to release a statement condemning that act immediately after the crime is committed. The response should be clear, timely, unambiguous and public. Sending a mixed or unclear message may appear as tacit approval. The findings above show that this is lacking in many universities.

Cole & Harper (2017) proposes strategies that universities can deploy in order to deal effectively with hate crime incidents and other emergencies. One of the strategies is to establish university response protocols. These protocols should be communicated through student policy manuals, orientation materials, the institution's Web site and clear, step-by-step instructions placed in every campus building. The university should also demonstrate its commitment to addressing hate in all forms. This is because hateful attitudes and behaviors can escalate if left unchecked.

It can be concluded that there are delays in dealing with prejudice, ethnicity, discrimination and hate speech in universities. This could fuel tensions further, erode people's faith in the university's commitment to diversity and inclusion, reinforce unfavorable stereotypes about particular ethnic or cultural groups, and worsen the cycle of prejudice and misunderstanding. It can also damage the university's reputation and image. This study recommends that further studies be conducted to establish why there are delays in responding to issues.

Support for Students Who Report Issues of Ethnicity, Hate Speech or Discrimination

Lack of support for students who report issues of ethnicity, hate speech or discrimination was also investigated as a possible challenge to promotion of national cohesion in universities. This was crucial because, in a number of ways, the promotion of national cohesiveness in universities can be hampered by a lack of support. In particular, if the perpetrators are powerful or have connections inside the campus community, students may worry about facing reprisals or being victimized if they report occurrences.

Students may also lose faith in the university's support mechanisms and be less likely to report such situations in the future if they believe that their concerns are not taken seriously or dealt with efficiently. Lack of assistance for victims may unintentionally mainstream discriminatory behavior by conveying to the campus community that such acts are not taken seriously or are accepted.

To promote national cohesion, institutional support is required. According to Sorum (2011), institutional support promotes opportunities for new friendships and peaceful co-existence between conflicting groups. University leadership is therefore crucial since it creates and enforces laws that give equal opportunities that can promote national cohesion. According to Sorum (2011), if authorities guarantee an enabling environment with institutionalized rules and laws, there is the likelihood that a new social climate that encourages dialogue among members of the conflicting groups can be cultivated.

To establish whether support for students who report issues of ethnicity was a challenge, students were asked to indicate the extent to which they disagree or agreed with the statement that "There is no support for students who report issues of ethnicity, hate speech or discrimination." Where the respondents indicated they strongly agreed, it was interpreted that lack of guidance on behavior that university considers valuable was a challenge in promotion of national cohesion. The findings are presented in figure 3 below.
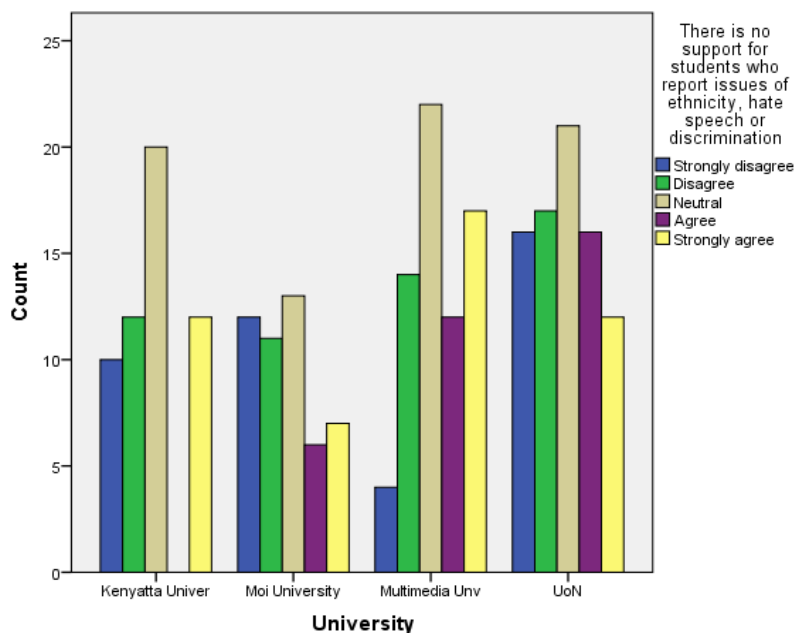

Figure 3: There is no support for students who report issues of ethnicity, hate speech or discrimination

From the above findings, it emerged that the majority of respondents (74) were uncertain on the support given to students when they report issues of ethnicity, hate speech or discrimination. At Kenyatta University, the majority of respondents (20) chose neutral followed by agree (12) and disagree (12). At Moi University, the responses were more mixed, with a significant number choosing neutral (13) or strongly disagreeing (12). At Multimedia University, the highest number of respondents chose neutral (22) followed by strongly agree (12). Those who disagreed/strongly disagreed were eighteen (18). At the University of Nairobi (UoN), the responses were more mixed, with a significant number choosing neutral (21) or strongly disagreeing (17) and disagreeing (16). Those who agreed/strongly agreed were twenty eight (28).This was interpreted to mean that the support could be there but it is not well communicated to the wider community or it is not impactful enough for the respondents to either agree or disagree with the statement.

From the above findings, it can be concluded that there is lack of clarity and consensus regarding the support provided to students who report issues of ethnicity, hate speech, or discrimination across the universities surveyed. The high number of neutral responses suggests that many respondents are uncertain or unaware of the existing support mechanisms, which could stem from a lack of transparency or effective communication from the institutions. Additionally, the mixed responses highlight the varying perceptions and potential inconsistencies in the implementation and efficacy of these support systems. The neutrality of responses implies that these efforts are not perceived as impactful or well-communicated to the broader university community. Addressing this discrepancy between the intended support and the perceived lack thereof is crucial to fostering an inclusive and safe environment for all students, regardless of their background or identity.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study established that there is a lack of platforms to counter hate speech within universities. This sentiment was supported by the limited evidence found on university websites regarding hate speech reporting mechanisms. This study recommends integrating emerging issues like hate speech into university curricula and having staff members act as moderators and mentors in student social network groups. It is also noted that time taken to respond to issues of ethnicity is a significant challenge in promoting national cohesion within universities. This study recommends that further studies be conducted to establish why there are delays in responding to issues. The study has also revealed a lack of clarity and consensus regarding the level of support provided across surveyed universities. Many respondents expressed uncertainty or unawareness of existing mechanisms. While some universities may have support measures in place, the neutrality of responses suggests these efforts are perceived as ineffective or poorly communicated. Addressing this discrepancy is crucial for fostering an inclusive and safe environment for all students, regardless of background or identity.

Conflict of Interest Statement

No conflict of interest

Ethics Statement

Not applicable

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