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**The Role of Leadership in Higher Institutions of Learning in Shaping the Character of Youth in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya**

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**Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has adversely affected our country Kenya and the world at large as no one had predicted the level of distraction the microscopic organism could cause. In the midst of this pandemic is endless confusion and misconceptions affecting the existing social cleavages, social classes and the various life cycle groupings. According to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census Report, majority of the population are the youth thus, one of the majorly affected age groups is the youth in Kenya. The power held by the youth is the common wealth factor for the entire world. The youth are a very resourceful people and the role they play in our society cannot be underestimated. They are the backbone of the community hence they determine the future and destiny of any given society. Therefore, it is in our best interest to invest in the youth through proper character development, instilling integrity and a sense of responsibility, social and economic empowerment, and most importantly, lending a keen listening ear. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of leadership in higher institutions of learning in shaping the character of the youth especially during the pre-existing Covid-19 conditions in Kenya. Data was collected through content analysis from a variety of sources that is, Journals, Newspaper Articles, and Websites. Moreover, this data was subjected to qualitative analysis and the case study approach. The study findings were presented using narratives within themes generated from collected data. The study found out that the pandemic adversely affected the youth in Kenya in numerous ways, threatening their physical, emotional, and mental and livelihood. It was recommended that leaders within higher institutions of learning should secure the future of tomorrow, the youth.

**Key Words:** Kenya, Covid- 19 Pandemic, Empowerment, Social Entrepreneurship, Character Development, Integrity, Talent Development, Creativity and Innovation, Leadership

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## **The Role of Leadership in Higher Institutions of Learning in Shaping the Character of Youth in the Context of Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya**

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Leadership is considered as one of the most important aspects in today's world. In fact, leadership is one of the focus of discussions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century due to the weight it carries and the role it has played in organization and development of humankind since time immemorial. According to Burns (1978) the pioneer of transformational leadership, leadership stands to be one of the most studied and observed phenomenon hence, due to the vast knowledge that exists on the specific topic, leadership can be viewed and approached from numerous dimensions and perspectives. However, there is a current shift and emphasis towards transformational leadership which incorporates respect, trust, admiration and commendation between the leader and the followers (Bass, 1990). Riggio (2008) states that transformational leaders inspire and motivate their followers to perform and achieve maximum results while developing their self-leadership skills. Motivating and growing an individual through leadership happens throughout the life span of the individual and it is of utmost importance to recognize that this journey commences from a very tender age (Christodoulou, 2017). During childhood and teenage hood, some firm and strong foundations are necessary for this particular process to be successful. This emphasizes on the importance of leaders in a young person's life hence, we cannot underestimate the part leaders within institutions of learning play in shaping the character of youth in our society.

With the current Covid-19 pandemic, adverse effects have been observed within our socio-economic environments, and especially on the lives of young persons. A study by International Labour Organization (2020) observes that even before the pandemic hit the world, we still had serious pre-existing issues with regard to youth empowerment and character development. In the presence of Covid-19, these issues are likely to grow in extensive magnitudes, causing irreversible and long-lasting effects on our youth if no urgent action is undertaken. This further emphasizes on the importance of focusing on our youth through leadership within institutions of learning.

Legal Information Institute (2008) defines institutions of learning as technical/vocational training centres, universities and colleges that facilitate studying and the knowledge development process. Hodgkinson (1991) observes that proper leadership within institutions of learning and the education setting is considered a moral activity since it thoroughly engages the youth in understanding their true purpose, which enables them to work towards the advancement of their character development and development of the society at large. The kind of leadership portrayed within the higher institutions should not only involve technical skill advancement, but also development of the humane part of an individual that enables them to be responsible, make

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proper decisions and make a positive impact in the community. However, in the context of Covid-19, it is paramount to recognize that due to measures and regulations established by the Government of Kenya to contain the pandemic, institutions of learning extended into the virtual space and home-schooling techniques therefore, this study also considered the digital institutions of learning and other ‘learning from home’ techniques.

### **1.2 Research Question**

To what extent does leadership in higher institutions of learning shape the character of youth?

### **1.3 Importance of the Study**

This topic of study is of extreme importance as it enables us to focus on how the novel Covid-19 has affected our youth and discover ways to improve and facilitate character development within institutions of learning. As pointed out earlier, the youth are one of the most important groups in our country and we should not underestimate their **capacity and capability**. As emphasized by Shoaib (2020), ‘The role of the youth is simply to renew, refresh and maintain thus, it is paramount for us to focus on their success and prosperity through self-development skills, investing in their talents, creativity and innovation, empowerment activities and supporting their powerful ideas. The study will also contribute to knowledge advancement with regard to effects of Covid-19 on the youth and importance of leadership within institutions of learning to ensure the development of youth’s disposition and roles within the society.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 What is Leadership?**

Leadership has been defined as the process in which an individual influence a common people to accomplish a given objective (Sharma & Jain, 2017). Leadership involves working with people, through people, to achieve a common set plan. In fact, Eisenhower (2018) categorically states that “Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.” This draws an intentional drift towards transformational leadership which involves more than just giving instructions and directives. According to an article written by Andres (2020), there are four pillars of transformative leadership which: -

- i.) Create an inspiring and futuristic vision.
- ii.) Motivate and give people a valid reason to engage with the vision.
- iii.) Manage and oversight of the vision execution process.
- iv.) Create a team with inclusion of a coach to effectively and efficiently execute the vision.

Our main team focus was the last pillar; - Creation of a team with inclusion of a coach to effectively and efficiently execute the vision. For the purposes of this study, the team on focus were the youth and their coaches who include teachers and lecturers within the various institutions of learning. Lockdown and closure of schools as Covid-19 containment measures has also seen the extension of this team to include parents, guardians, local government administrators and religious leaders.

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## 2.2 Covid-19 and its effects on the youth in Kenya

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic most of the visions developed have come to a standstill. As observed by Odhiambo and Okungu (2020), just like other countries worldwide, Kenya’s socio-economic developments have been adversely affected since the first Covid-19 case was reported on March 13, 2020. Even though this effect has been observed and felt across all age groups and social classes the youth are likely to be the most affected cohorts as this affects the present and the future of the country (Global Child Forum, 2020). In addition, according to the 2019 Kenya Population and Housing Census Reports, majority of the population in Kenya constitutes of the youth. This is depicted by the pyramid display below.

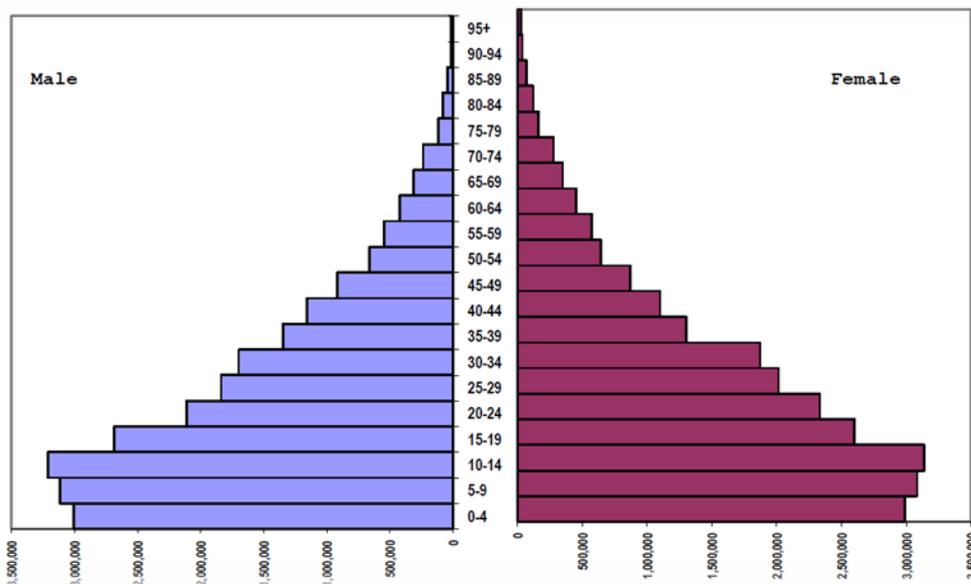


Figure 1: Age-Sex Population Distribution in Kenya

Source: Author

According to International Labour Organization (2020), seventy percent of the youth worldwide have experienced education disruption due to Covid-19. This is as a result of school closure and government measures such as lockdown put in place to contain the pandemic. The same report observed that even though virtual learning has currently been embraced to fast forward the learning process put at a stop due to the lockdown, the state of affairs are even worse especially for low income-earning and third world countries as only 18% of the youth in these countries are able to keep up with virtual learning. Virtual studying proves to be a challenge in these countries due to inaccessibility of internet services especially in the rural regions, inability to access the necessary equipment such as laptops, insufficient IT skills and knowledge and lack of sufficient space to affect the process of learning at home. This ultimately affects the mental being and wellness of the youth affected as most of them are extremely uncertain of the future and what it holds.

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Moreover, according to a survey done by International Labour Organization (2020) on impacts of Covid-19 on jobs, education, rights and well-being amongst the youth, 46.7% of the youth aged 18-34 stopped working after the Covid-19 outbreak. The report further discovered that majority of the job losses amongst the youth resulted from either seizure of business activities during the Covid-19 pandemic or lay off by their employer. Considering some of the youth are breadwinners, this affects the well-being and quality of life of a great many families.

Likewise, Covid-19 has greatly affected the mental wellness of the youth. The same report by International Labour Organization (2020) shows that social isolation, family stress, gender-based violence, disruption of studies, present and future uncertainties and economic difficulties are some of the factors that have greatly contributed to emotional and mental stress among the youth. Most of the youth were reported having severe cases of depression and anxiety with relation to the matters mentioned above. The report also emphasizes the fact that achievement of ambitions and aspirations by the youth is extremely important as it streamlines the process of transition into sustainable and decent work. According to World Health Organization (2015), suicide is the second leading cause of death especially among the youth between the ages of 15 to 29.

The Covid-19 pandemic has also affected the execution and attainment of the youth rights. The 2020 survey by International Labour Organization shows that most youth worldwide are experiencing difficulties in exercising their rights such as affordable housing, right to education, right to proper health care services and rights to civil participation. Measures such as lockdown have resulted to limitation of freedom of movement, right to participate in civil and public affairs and the right to worship. Participation in these activities enhance leadership and decision making skills of an individual. Sheldon, Gordeeva, Leontiev and Lynch (2018) concluded that there is a direct positive relationship between freedom and responsibility. The study explained that freedom provides a breeding ground for character development and personal growth as one is exposed to numerous choices. In this case, a person is taught to choose that which ultimately benefits and serves them.

Even though the youth have been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, extra efforts among the youth in mitigating the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic have been noted (The United Nations Programme on Youth, 2020). The survey portrays that in the midst of the chaos, the youth are turning the threats into opportunities in supporting their communities through donations and volunteering activities. Despite the lockdown measures, most youth have kept in touch with their friends and loved ones through social media. All is not lost despite the current difficult situation, there is still hope. This is why we need to accentuate the importance of proper leadership within institutions of learning to enable the youth to suitably cope with the prevailing situation.

### **2.3 Importance of Leadership in Institutions of learning on the youth in the context of Covid-19**

Since we have elaborated the problems faced by the youth especially during the Covid- 19 pandemic, it is of utmost importance to study the role of leadership in ensuring that the youth develop their character and maintain their integrity. International Labour Organization (2020)

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mentions that it is important to listen to the voices of the youth and incorporate them in the decision-making process. Even though physical learning has now been restricted due to stay-at-home and social distancing measures, the importance of leadership within the learning institutions should not be underestimated. Passarelli (2015) emphasized on the importance of coaching as a leadership development strategy. The study explains that vision-based coaching is now developing into one of the commonly adopted methods of developing leadership skills within the corporate world. In the context of institutions of learning, such coaches/leaders include teachers, lecturers and skill developers. To an extent, parents/guardians and religious leaders are also included in the coaching process especially during the Covid-19 period. As we shall discuss subsequently, teachers and lecturers need to work in conjunction with guardians, religious leaders and community leaders as a team to ensure proper character development of the youth.

During the pandemic, tutors and teachers have to ensure that their students are engaged in meaningful activities even during the lockdown period. Their responsibility does not end in the physical classroom. The leaders within institutions of learning should constantly remind the youth on their crucial role in addressing problems associated with Covid-19 (Foundation Botnar, 2020). This includes encouraging the youth to participate in volunteering and donation activities whilst following the government directives. A discussion by Global Early Adolescent Study (2020) emphasized the importance of inclusion of the youth in voluntary activities. Most of the citizens especially within the developing countries are unable to afford the basic necessities such as face masks and hand sanitizers. In such situations, institutional leaders should be at the forefront to ensure that the youth are participating in the safe distribution of the necessary equipment mostly among the poor and those living in the rural areas. Leaders should also encourage the youth to partake in campaigns that spread the Covid-19 awareness and the guidelines necessary to contain the pandemic such as wearing of facemasks in public areas, constant and thorough hand washing, use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers etc. Youth engagement in such activities promote their character development on values such as empathy, social responsibility and moral values.

Additionally, institutional leaders should constantly advice the youth on their importance in the digital space and how to utilize the virtual space to positively impact the society during this period. As a result of reduced physical and mental activity due to stay-at-home measures, the youth are likely to fall in to cyber-crimes (United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, 2020). The same study discovered that even though cybercrimes have been there since the birth of the virtual world, these criminal activities have greatly increased during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of anxiety, fear, increased hours spent at home and reliability of the internet to access services during this period. It is upon institutional leaders to follow up and ensure that their students are aware of the present cyber traps. This involves engagement of guardians and parents in ensuring that the youth under their guidance and care are using the internet services responsibly. With efforts from both parties, this ensures that the youth are using the virtual space to spread words of encouragement and carry out virtual mental awareness programmes. Consequently, the youth can responsibly and safely acquire online job opportunities such as forex trading through the internet especially during these economic

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recession times. This keeps them engaged and creates a source of youth empowerment through talent development and embracing innovation and creativity.

Furthermore, it is essential for institutional leaders to not only carry out classroom teachings as per the syllabus, but also identify and develop technical skills of their students. Teachers and lecturers should highly encourage the youth to be creative and innovative through developing and investing in their talents (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020). An article by The Star (2020) describes the story of a youth group in Kiambu County, Kenya, who were involved in making of ICU beds using locally available materials. This pre-eminent idea not only enabled the government acquire hospital beds for the Covid-19 patients, but also created job opportunities for most of the youth around that area. According to Digital Opportunity Trust (2020), the youth in Africa are constantly creating and innovating rapid Covid-19 responses. This not only works for the benefit of the economy, but also develops the character and personality of an individual. This clearly manifests the importance of developing and investing in creative and innovative ideas amongst the youth in Kenya. This way, we encourage development of a sense of responsibility and decision making amongst the youth as they engage in useful and helpful activities. This also empowers the youth socially and economically.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

This study adopted the Qualitative research method. According to Bhandari (2020), qualitative research involves collection and analysis of non-numerical data and involves in-depth understanding of a particular problem through gathering data from observations, interviews, focus groups, surveys and secondary data sources. The study further used the case study approach to analyse data from secondary sources of data such as magazines, books, newspaper reports, journals and articles. This approach is most suitable for this study as this topic discusses an emerging issue i.e. Covid-19 which has raised a lot of concern worldwide therefore, it is appropriate to identify a case(s) in Kenya that will enable us to clearly grasp the problem at hand and design solutions for the same.

#### **3.2 Case Study**

This study examined a case study by Nagireddi (2020) which focused on how the Covid-19 has affected the youth and the initiatives undertaken to ensure the youth participate in containment of the pandemic, particularly within the agricultural sector. Through an interview of one of the youth members of Utoma Youth Group located in Migori County, the article reveals that the youth have been adversely affected by Covid-19. Pre-Covid, this particular youth group was one of the strongest forces to be reckoned with as they assisted their communities in several ways which include agricultural production which increased food supply in the area, rearing of poultry for local and export selling, training of other youth members and community members on farming, farm management and market research. Now with the pre-existing conditions as a result of Covid-19, some of these activities have come to a sudden halt.

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Lockdown and Social distancing measures by the Government of Kenya has led to a decrease in agricultural produce hence, affecting local and export selling activities. This directly affects families that solely depend on the agricultural produce sales for survival.

So as to keep the business activities going, Utoma Youth Group has accepted assistance from other educated youth who lost their job during the crisis. These youth volunteered to assist in cultivating and harvesting of the agricultural produce. This enabled the supply of food within their local communities especially during these difficult times. Institutional leaders within that area also encouraged the youth to get involved in agricultural activities and this has consequently changed the youth's attitude with relation to agriculture as they now know the importance of agribusiness. The study also reveals that despite many young people getting into agriculture as a way of survival during the pandemic, most of them do not have the technical skills and capabilities to effectively practice farming.

The study emphasizes on the importance of training programs among the youth in Kenya on food production and distribution chains. One of the interviewees revealed that he had an opportunity to learn about crop and farm development through a program supported by USAID (Training of Trainers program). This training enabled him to cope with effects of Covid-19 due to the current disruption experienced within the agricultural sector. Ultimately, through this case study, we witness how investing in the youth creates a visible effect on their character, personality and well-being. According to an article by Youth First (2019), investing in training and nurturing the youth results to development of values such as social awareness and responsibilities, integrity, innovation and creativity, respect, positive attitude, sense of true purpose and empathy.

Another study by Kathula (2020) reveals that Covid-19 disrupted the education sector in Kenya as most, if not all institutions of learning had to close down. As a result, it is important for all educational institutions and educators to develop alternative ways of learning, with the involvement of the learners of course. The study emphasises the importance of leaders within institutions of learning in ensuring that their students are coping with the current situation. Largely due to the closure of institutions of learning, most youth are relying on online learning techniques or home-schooling techniques. Whichever the circumstances, the study emphasises on the importance of parent-teacher relationship in ensuring seamless learning and proper character development of the youth. During this period, the guardians play a very significant role in the youth's life in ensuring that the youth are engaged in useful activities such as volunteering, donation, proper engagement with technological devices, emphasis on importance of respect within the family, development of youth talents and skills and encouraging the youth to be innovative and creative.

Consequently, a study by Joaquin, Biana and Dacela (2020) carried out a study on the Philippine higher education sector in the time of Covid-19. The study explores the policies put in place in terms of technological advancement with the main aim of delivering education. However, despite the policies adopted, the study challenges the system as it emphasises on the importance of the 'learning innovations being grounded on a deeper level' and tapping into character and personality development of the learners. Another study by The Youth Café (2020) also noticed that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the youth have been quick and adamant in

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mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic. The youth have been in the forefront in raising awareness and educating the members of the community on how to prevent contacting Covid-19, measures to take once you have Covid-19 symptoms and the importance of eradicating stigma and discrimination with regard to Covid-19 patients.

The youth have also been in the forefront in promoting and spreading the World Health Organization guidelines with regard to persons with disabilities, the most vulnerable and those living in slum areas with no exposure to Covid-19 information. In reference to the article, the youth across the world are also volunteering in activities that assist the vulnerable in accessing food and medication supplies. The youth specialists and researchers are also in the forefront to ensure that they innovate and invent medical equipment and ventilators at low costs to ensure that Covid-19 treatment and containment is available at affordable cost. The article concludes that the youth are part of the solution to this pandemic and we need to involve and encourage our youth to take up responsibilities within their social settings to ensure that we curb and fight the pandemic together.

An article released by the Office of the President in 2020 states that as a nation we need to leverage on the power and strength of the youth in our country in fighting Covid-19. The article emphasized on utilizing the biggest resource that we have as a country, the youth. Another study by Singh and Kavell (2020) also reveals that youth education and employment are not taking on the Covid-19 challenges. The study shows that measures put in place to encourage active youth involvement in curbing Covid-19 include encouraging and facilitating remote learning, encouraging virtual operations, sourcing ideas and innovations from the youth, encouraging the youth to speak up and identification of new job opportunities. Another interview by Kabungi (2020) also reveals that higher institutions of learning have empowered the youth in sparking innovations.

The interviewee, Daniel Kabungi, a twenty four year old Kenyan citizen studying Biomedical Engineering at Kenyatta University, is in a team of 16 people who are actively working on a mechanical ventilator, Tiba Vent that is enabled to support Covid-19 patients with breathing problems. The group has been supplying the ventilators to the public since the break of the pandemic. Daniel also stated that at his home county in Kajiado, he is a youth leader involved in volunteering services such as community health training and health awareness campaigns among young people. As much as this is on a technical level, it also facilitates character development through social responsibilities, developing a caring and empathetic community, developing leadership values among the youth and curbing social crimes associated with idleness.

#### **4. Presentation Discussion of Findings**

The study aimed at examining the Role of Leadership in Institutions of Learning in Shaping the Character of Youth in context of Covid-19 Pandemic in Kenya. From the case studies examined above, it is explicit that no one anticipated for the effects of the novel Covid-19 virus especially on the youth. It is evident that the pandemic has adversely affected the youth in Kenya in numerous ways, threatening their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. The study found out that it is important for leaders within higher institutions of learning to secure the future

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of tomorrow, the youth. The study also found out that government directives such as lockdown and curfew has limited the physical integration between teachers/lecturers and students, further threatening the character and moral development of the youth. Despite the challenges observed, the study discusses ways in which the leaders within institutions of learning could still mentor the youth and ensure that they contribute positively to the well-being of members of the society. The study discovered that it is important not only to teach and transfer technical knowledge to the students, but also emphasize on the youth partaking in social activities that will enable growth and development of character. The study found out that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the youth in Kenya have been actively involved in social activities such as volunteering services to offer food and medical services to the vulnerable within the society, offering health training and campaigns to create awareness of the virus, innovating and creating affordable medical equipment for the benefit of the citizens of this country hence, creating and expanding job opportunities. The study also found out that through these activities, the youth grow and develop their character and personalities, enhancing virtues such as empathy, compassion, creating a sense of social responsibility, enhancing self-skills and talent, self-determination, enhancing integrity and loyalty, enhancing decision-making and time-management skills.

The findings of this study are of utmost importance especially during such dire times as it offers solutions on how we as a country can still develop and motivate our youth. The study will contribute towards the current study shift on the novel Covid-19 and add literature knowledge on the importance of leaders within institutions of learning in shaping the character of youth in the context of the pandemic in Kenya. The study also benefits stakeholders such as the youth, parents/guardians, teachers, lecturers and the government in understanding the challenges faced by the youth as a result of Covid-19 and the steps that can be taken to ensure that our youth are physically, emotionally and mentally safe and secure.

The study has its limitations as it only focuses on the youth in Kenya. Furthermore, the approach used (Case study) generalizes the results to a wider population. For further research, other studies can focus on the effects of Covid-19 on other age groups. In addition, other studies can adopt quantitative research methods to scientifically analyse data and draw findings.

## **5. Conclusion and Recommendations**

In conclusion, it is crucial to recognize the role of leadership within institutions of learning in character development among the youth especially during these difficult times as leaders play a significant role in role modelling. Indeed, the youth are a ‘mirror’ of today’s leaders and a replica of a society as the role played by leaders in influencing them cannot be underestimated. The youth are an investment to a country as they are the future leaders, the leaders of tomorrow. Despite the many challenges we face as a country especially during the Covid-19 period, we still see enormous efforts of the youth salvaging the situation and giving a helping hand. Higher Institutions of Learning should not only teach the technical skills required, but also emphasize on social work and activities that the youth can engage in during this time. This not only benefits the country at large, but also contributed to the character development of the individual. Therefore, investing in their character development means securing the future of Kenya for a better and prosperous society. Covid-19 should not wear us down as a country. Instead, it should be a

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stepping-stone towards improving and streamlining processes and procedures for the benefit of our country, Kenya.

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