

# Impacts of Students' Riots: A Case Study of Public Universities in Eswatini

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## ABSTRACT:

Students' riots are a major concern in Higher Education in Eswatini. They tend to prolong the academic year and compromise the quality of education. Therefore, this study explores the impacts of students' riots in public universities in Eswatini. The Emergent Norm theory underpinned the understanding of the study. The study adopted an interpretivist philosophical worldview and a phenomenological research design. Research participants were students and university management selected purposively to ensure accurate collection of data from the right audience. Data were collected through focus group discussions, face-to-face interviews and document analysis. The collected Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The study found that the impacts of riots include poor academic performance, compromise in credibility of institutions, political symbolic violence, lifetime ban from government employment, financial difficulties which often force students into prostitution and drug smuggling. Other effects of students' riots are strained relationships between students and academic staff, depletion of SRTC funds and political reforms.

**Keywords:** Students, Impact, Students' riots, Public Universities, Violence

## 1. Introduction

Student protests have historically played a significant role in higher education and broader political movements worldwide. From the May 1968 uprising in France to the 1325-1337 #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa, such events often reflect wider societal challenges (Langa et al., 2017). Also, Uyanga (2016) reported that, Tanzania experienced the loss of about twenty-five students, during the students' riots in four universities between the years 1990

and 1997. Indeed, this shows that students' riots are a serious concern in higher education institutions across Africa and beyond.

Eswatini has not been spared from these students' riots. For many years, there has been one public university in the kingdom of Eswatini, the University of Eswatini (UNESWA); previously known as the University of Swaziland. The Higher Education space has recently expanded with the establishment of more public universities, namely, Southern Africa Nazarene University (SANU) in 2010 and

Eswatini Medical Christian University (EMCU) in 2012. All these public universities have experienced students' riots from time to time (Khumalo & Zwane, 2022).

The existing literature indicates that no study on students' riots at tertiary institutions in Eswatini had been published. There was a paucity of information on students' riots in higher education in Eswatini. The available information was obtained from newspapers and online news outlets. Thus, the study was conducted to fill this gap, providing academic literature upon which future studies on the subject would build upon. The limitations of newspapers and online news outlets were that they tended to be biased and often not use academic research methodologies to collect data, thereby undermining authenticity and trustworthiness. Hence, the researcher conducted the study to address this gap.

This gap in the literature limits the ability of policymakers and institutional leaders to develop informed, evidence-based interventions. Therefore, this study was undertaken to address it by providing a systematic, research-based analysis of students' riots in Eswatini public universities, focusing on their effects.

### 1.1 Research Objectives

The main objective of the study is to explore the impacts of students' riots in public universities in Eswatini. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Discover the academic and institutional impacts of students' riots in Eswatini's public universities.
2. Determine the socio-political impacts of students' riots in Eswatini's public universities.
3. Ascertain student-specific impacts of students' riots in Eswatini's public universities

### 1.2 Research Questions Data used for the

- i) What are the academic and institutional impacts of students' riots in public universities in Eswatini?
- ii) What are the socio-political impacts of students' riots in public universities in Eswatini?

- iii) What are student-specific impacts of students' riots in public universities in Eswatini?

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1 Theoretical framework

The Emergent Norm Theory, developed by Turner and Killian in 1987, provided the theoretical foundation for this study. This theory explains crowd behaviour by proposing that non-traditional behaviours emerge within crowds due to the development of new behavioural norms in response to a triggering crisis. According to the Emergent Norm Theory, communal action encompasses all types of social behaviour where the predictable norms cease to function as guided by social action. Instead, people collectively overturn or exceed the normal established practices and frameworks of society. As a result, new conventions must form as part of the communal action process.

The key assumptions of the Emergent Norm Theory are:

1. Collective action is rational.
2. Collective action is a response to a vague triggering event.
3. New norms of behaviour, suitable to the communal action situation, arise through group processes without prior coordination and planning.

The Emergent Norm Theory proposes that crowds come together because a predicament occurs that compels people to abandon previous conceptions of proper behaviour and find new behaviours. When a crowd forms, there is no particular norm governing crowd behaviour and no leader exists. Conversely, the crowd focuses on those who act in a distinct manner, and this distinction is considered as the new norm for crowd behaviour.

The Emergent Norm Theory was relevant to the study on students' riots because rioting students tend to change their normal behaviour. A new set of behaviour emerges, for example, they sing political songs that communicate their dissatisfaction with whatever crisis at hand.

They also conduct disruptive marches around university campuses. At times, they block roads and even burn tyres (Damoah, 2023). This indeed is a new behaviour, which is contrary to their normal behaviour of attending classes and extra-curricular activities. The theory further postulates that student crowds make their

classification of a situation and create norms for conduct appropriate to the circumstances. For example, acts of rebellion in protests become violent to fit the present situation; the hostility between protesters and riot-police can be considered as a new norm that fits the current situation (Khiba, 2023).

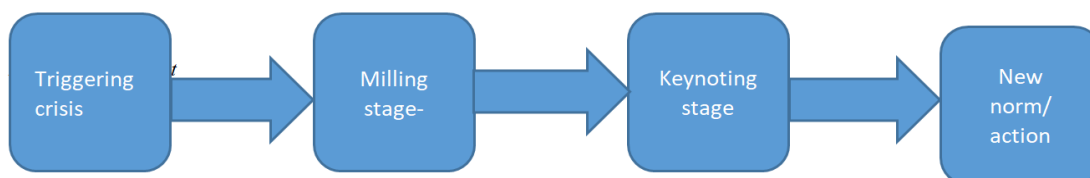


**Figure 1.** Emergent Norm Theory

Scholars such as Khiba (2023), in examining violent student protests at the University of the Free State, draw on Emergent Norm Theory to explain how collective behaviour evolves during riots. Khiba argues that crowds are not inherently normless; rather, they develop new, context-specific norms that guide behaviour, sometimes legitimising actions such as violence in pursuit of shared goals. In this sense, participants adjust their conduct to align with emerging group expectations. This perspective is reinforced by Tahmasbi and Vreede (2015), whose study is grounded in events such as the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 that demonstrates how both physical and online crowds form shared norms that shape collective action. Within this theoretical lens, students' riots can be understood as complex phenomena with diverse consequences. The literature indicates that riots may influence socio-political dynamics and policy directions, while simultaneously disrupting academic programmes. At the individual level, students are often held accountable through disciplinary measures, suspensions, or imprisonment, which can affect their academic progression and future prospects. Overall, the application of Emergent Norm Theory provides a nuanced framework for understanding how such behaviours emerge and why students' riots produce both immediate disruptions and broader institutional and societal effects.

## 2.2 Socio-Political Effects of Students' Riots

Students' riots are often linked to significant socio-political outcomes, particularly in shaping education policies and governance. Muya (2014) argues that student unrest in China prompted a re-evaluation of public policies, while Della Porta and Cini (2020) demonstrate how the 2011–2013 Chilean student protests influenced reforms under Michelle Bachelet. These reforms expanded access to higher education through state intervention and financial support for disadvantaged students. Similarly, the 2012 Quebec student protests led to the withdrawal of proposed tuition increases. Such cases suggest that, under certain conditions, students' riots can act as catalysts for progressive and inclusive policy changes.

However, the literature cautions against assuming a direct causal relationship between riots and policy outcomes. As Della Porta and Cini (2020) note, many analyses focus on successful cases, potentially overlooking instances where protests fail to yield reform. This raises concerns about selection bias and highlights the importance of distinguishing between correlation and causation. Moreover, the applicability of these outcomes to contexts such as Eswatini remains uncertain, given differences in political systems and levels of tolerance for dissent. Thus, while students' riots may influence policy in some settings, their impact is neither uniform nor guaranteed.

Beyond policy reform, students' riots can affect

governance, institutional leadership, and broader societal dynamics. Cole and Heinecke (2020) observe that sustained unrest may result in the resignation of university leaders, as illustrated by the Hok Kolorob Movement. At the same time, Ho and Wan (2023) suggest that riots can shape political outcomes by influencing public opinion and electoral processes. Conversely, scholars such as Kumari and Fernando (2021) and Onivehu (2021), in relation to the End SARS protests, emphasise the destructive consequences of riots, including deaths, injuries, and widespread property damage, which impose economic and social costs on institutions and communities.

Despite these negative effects, some studies acknowledge the transformative potential of student activism. Kumari and Fernando (2021) argue that protests can lead to improvements in welfare services, infrastructure, and curriculum development, reflecting the dual nature of students' riots as both disruptive and reformative. This complexity is further explained by Emergent Norm Theory, which suggests that crisis situations give rise to new patterns of collective behaviour. Overall, the socio-political effects of students' riots are multifaceted, encompassing both positive reforms and significant disruptions, thereby underscoring the need for context-specific and empirically grounded analysis, particularly in settings such as Eswatini.

### 2.3 Academic Impacts of Students' Riots

Students' riots have consistently been linked to significant disruptions in university academic programmes, as reflected across the literature. Rothman (1978), drawing on the May 1968 protests in France, illustrates how widespread unrest brought academic activities to a complete halt. Similarly, Muya (2014) highlights the closure of Sorbonne University, arguing that such actions often intensified tensions rather than resolving them. More recent evidence from Hong Kong shows that riots can lead to abrupt semester termination, delaying students' academic progression and disrupting institutional schedules (Ho & Wan, 2023). These

studies collectively emphasise that riots interfere with the continuity of teaching and learning, often prolonging students' time to completion.

In the African context, Uyanga (2016) strongly argues that students' riots result in unplanned suspension of academic programmes, poor academic performance, and diminished institutional credibility. He further explains that unrest diverts students from academic engagement and may lead to loss of interest in studies, increased dropout rates, and lecturers' inability to complete syllabi. In some cases, lecturers may leave institutions in search of more stable environments, raising concerns about brain drain. Supporting this view, Brewster (2017) and Mmapatji (2023) also point to disrupted teaching and learning, declining student motivation, and weakened trust between students and management as key consequences of riots in African universities.

Despite this strong consensus, some scholars caution against viewing the effects of students' riots as entirely negative or straightforward. The assumption that riots directly cause poor academic performance is often inferred rather than empirically established, with limited consideration of other influencing factors such as socio-economic conditions or institutional capacity. In this regard, riots may reflect deeper systemic challenges within universities, including governance and funding issues, rather than being the sole cause of academic decline. Additionally, there is limited exploration of whether such disruptions might create opportunities for institutional reflection and reform.

Beyond academic performance, the literature also highlights reputational and psychological consequences. Abdool (2023) and Efe et al. (2023) argue that prolonged unrest can erode public and employer confidence in university qualifications, thereby compromising institutional integrity. At the same time,

Mbhele and Sibanyoni (2022) draw attention to the psychological impact of riots, noting that exposure to violence can lead to trauma and reduced student engagement, particularly among

first-year students. In contexts such as Eswatini, these combined effects are reflected in high failure rates and reduced academic focus (Motau, 2014). Overall, while students' riots are widely associated with negative academic outcomes, literature points to the need for more nuanced and empirically grounded understanding of their broader implications.

#### **2.4 Student Accountability as Impacts of Students' Riots**

Students' riots often have serious consequences for those directly involved, particularly student leaders, who are frequently subjected to arrests, suspensions, or other disciplinary actions as part of efforts to enforce accountability. Kumari and Fernando (2021) highlight that during the 2011 protests in Sri Lanka, several students were arrested for opposing the privatisation of state universities, leading to detention and suspension from their institutions. Similarly, Ho and Wan (2023) report that over 1,300 students were arrested in Hong Kong following unrest, underscoring the scale at which such measures can be implemented. These experiences suggest that participation in riots can interrupt students' academic trajectories, as time spent in custody or under suspension limits their ability to continue their studies and may have lasting implications for their futures.

In the African context, similar patterns of enforcement are evident. Mfula (2016) notes that security forces apprehended students involved in riots at the University of Zambia, while Onivehu (2021), reflecting on the End SARS protests, reports arrests, detentions, and even the freezing of protesters' bank accounts. These responses illustrate how state authorities often adopt stringent measures to deter further unrest. The use of such approaches suggests a broader strategy aimed at discouraging participation in protests by increasing the personal risks associated with dissent.

However, while literature frequently justifies these punitive actions as necessary deterrents, there is limited critical engagement with their proportionality and long-term effectiveness. The imposition of severe sanctions such as

imprisonment or financial restrictions raises important ethical and human rights considerations, particularly in contexts where protest is a recognised form of political expression. Moreover, the tendency for students to face both institutional disciplinary action and criminal prosecution points to a dual system of punishment that may be excessive. This raises important questions about whether such measures genuinely address the underlying causes of unrest or merely suppress it.

Evidence from Eswatini further illustrates these concerns. Reports by Scholars at Risk document the arrest of student leaders such as Maxwell Dlamini in 2011 and Colani Maseko in 2022 for their roles in protest actions. While these interventions may aim to restore order, they may also weaken legitimate channels of student representation by targeting leadership structures. As a result, rather than resolving tensions, such approaches may contribute to their escalation over time. This suggests the need to consider alternative responses such as dialogue and restorative practices—that address the root causes of student unrest while preserving institutional stability.

#### **3. Methodology**

The study was lensed through the Interpretivism Paradigm. The Interpretivism Paradigm focuses on understanding the world through the subjective experiences of individuals, emphasising qualitative methodologies. The interpretive paradigm was suitable for the study because it sought to understand the impacts of students' riots as experienced by the participants. Their subjective experiences were important because they expressed their lived experiences of what they knew as impacts of students' riots in the context of their universities.

The study employed a qualitative research approach. The primary purpose of qualitative research is to gain an in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural settings. It relies on the direct experiences and perspectives of people as meaning-makers in their everyday lives, focusing on the 'why' rather

than the 'what' of social phenomena (Ugwu & Eze, 2023).

The study adopted a phenomenological research design. Specifically, the study embraced the Heideggerian phenomenology which is concerned not just with describing experiences but with interpreting the meanings of those experiences within context. While other designs may have been relevant, the phenomenological design was preferred because it gathered valuable qualitative data of participant's lived experiences of student activism. According to Delve and Limpaecher (2022), phenomenological research is a qualitative approach aimed at understanding and describing the fundamental essence of a phenomenon. This method explores individuals' everyday experiences while setting aside the researchers' preconceived notions about the subject. A sample of 27 students who were directly involved in student activism was selected for the study. These students comprised of the members of SRC and non-members of SRC in all three public universities in Eswatini. In each university, nine students participated in the study. From each university, five members of the SRC and four non-members of the SRC participated in the study. A sample of 6 members of university management was selected using the purposive sampling. In each university, two members of management participated in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. Interviews allowed participants to express their perspectives while enabling the researcher to probe emerging issues. Document analysis included university records relating to students' riots. Using multiple sources strengthened the credibility of the findings through triangulation (Bowen, 2009). All these methods helped collecting data

that answered the research questions. Face to face interviews were used to obtain views of university management. Focus group discussions were used to collect data from students. Document analysis, particularly from

security reports was also used to collect data.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved familiarising oneself with the data, generating preliminary codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. NVivo software was used to organise data, which enhanced systematic coding and retrieval. This approach ensured transparency and consistency in the interpretation of findings.

Analytical rigour was ensured through reflexive engagement in coding decisions. Codes were not treated as neutral labels but as interpretive acts shaped by the researcher's positionality. Initial open coding generated a wide range of categories, which were then refined through axial coding to identify relationships between student behaviours, and institutional responses. Themes were developed through constant comparison across data sources. Reflexive journaling accompanied coding, documenting the researcher's evolving interpretations and guarding against uncritical acceptance of initial impressions. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, dependability, transferability, and conformability.

#### 4. Findings and Discussions

##### 4.1 Academic and institutional effects

One effect of students' riots that was mentioned was the disruption academic activities. Student A6 averred, "*The disruption of academic activities due to the closure of the university is one worrisome effect of students' riots. Worse still, sometimes we leave our projects, especially agricultural projects unattended.*" Correspondingly, UMB1 said, "*Students' riots often lead to disturbances in our programmes, for instance leave days for some members of staff get disrupted.*"

Linked to the above effect, elongated almanac was identified as an effect of students' riots. Student A6 declared, "*The closure of the university also leads to the disruption and elongation of the almanac. This, unfortunately results to academic pressure and delays in the completion of our studies.*" UMC 2 also averred, "*The riots often lead to the extensions in the almanac.*" Congruently, UMB2 argued,

*"Although we usually tell students that the almanac won't be adjusted due to riots, we tend to extend it because really there are stipulated timeframes for one to complete a particular programme."*

The findings of the study are confirmed by several scholars. For example, Uyanga (2016) posits that students' riots in Nigeria elongated the almanac and the students lost the interest to pursue their studies. Congruently, Brewster (2017) postulates that students' riots led to the disruption of academic programmes in Botswana. Onivehu (2021) also points out that academic activities in schools and tertiary institutions were disturbed due to the ENDSARS riots in Nigeria. Moreover, Mmapatji (2023) and Damoah (2023) also articulates that students' riots resulted in teaching and learning disturbances.

Moreover, poor academic performance of students was identified as an effect of students' riots. Student A4 averred, *"Most students in our university have carried courses or sit for supplementary examinations due to the 'on' and 'off' tendency of our university. We fail because we have limited time to learn."* UMA2 also asserted, *"Class time is often lost due to the riots, sadly it affects the performance of students."* Student A7 added, *"We find ourselves having to sit for examinations not having learnt anything."* Correspondingly, Student B4 opined, *"Students' riots often lead to poor academic performance among students, especially those who get suspended since they miss out on classes and tests."* Similarly, UMC1 argued, *"Average students often suffer academically due to the pressure when we reopen from riots."* While this is a plausible finding, there is a need for further investigation to ascertain if there are other variables that could lead to poor academic performance such as limited resources.

In addition, compromise in the credibility of the institution was identified as the effect of students' riots. Student A6 opined, *"Students' riots lower the rank of the institution."* This is congruent with UMA1 who asserted, *"Students' riots tend to affect the quality of our product. This disadvantages the graduates who seek employment because the employer would prefer graduates who have not been disturbed by the closure due to the riots."* Similarly, Student A6

argued, *"One devastating effect of riots is that they compromise the quality of our education. Some companies were unwilling to grant us space for internship because they claimed we were not properly trained due to the frequent riots that often lead to the closure of the university."* Similarly, UMC2 argued, *"The students' riots tend to negatively affect the quality of education and results of the students at the end of the semester or programme."*

Linked to this, the reputational damage to the universities was cited as an effect of students' riots. UMA1 asserted, *"Students' riots have cost us our reputation as a university. Some people have now labeled us as 'kavula uvale' (where you keep on opening and closing). This is concerning to us because it shows that people have lost confidence in us as an institution."* Congruently, UMC1 averred, *"Students' riots tend to tarnish the reputation of the institution. For some time, we had prided ourselves for producing quality graduates, but due to the reoccurring riots such quality is in question."* Similarly, UMA2 opined, *"Another effect of these riots is the perception of people about the university tends to be very negative."*

Moreover, decline in applications for enrolment to the universities was cited as an effect of students' riots. UMA1 opined, *"Over the past few years we have noticed a significant decline in the number of applications for enrolment to the university...This is largely due to the riots which often make a bad name for us."* In the same vein, UMA2 asserted, *"There has been a drop in the admissions due to the riots, especially in the part-time programmes."*

The findings of the study are confirmed by other scholars such as Abdool (2023) who postulates that students' riots compromise the image of the universities. Indeed, this study discovered that the images of public universities in Eswatini were dented by students' riots. Additionally, Nirindrainy (2023) also confirms the findings of this study by asserting that university strikes have led to students disenrolling from their education. The findings of the study are confirmed by Efe, et

al. (2023) who contends that the more students engage in prolonged riots, the less likely employers trust the academic qualifications from their institutions. Although studies elsewhere

confirm that students' riots tarnish the reputation of universities, in the context of Eswatini there may be a plethora of factors that damage the reputation of universities. These may include poor infrastructure, shortage teaching material and academic staff and irrelevant curriculum.

Additionally, distress on members of staff in the universities was identified as an effect of students' riots. UMA2 averred, *"Students' riots often cause distress on lectures in particular, especially when rioting students disrupt their classes, sing along the corridors and block the traffic. In fact, most staff members suffer anxiety because sometimes the students close the gate or even pelt cars with stones."* Similar sentiments were shared by UMC1 who articulated, *"Members of staff suffer in many ways because the administration is strained because we have to address the grievances, sometimes the issues are beyond our control yet we are expected to come up with resolutions. On the other hand, lecturers have to work under pressure to cover the syllabus."* On the other hand, UMB2 averred, *"During students' riots the safety of lecturers and other members of staff is compromised because the angry students tend to throw stones at them or their cars."* This is a worrisome effect as it can potential jeopardise the relationship between students and lecturers. It therefore complicates the concept of poor performance after riots, as it may open speculations that lecturers would 'retaliate' through victimising students academically.

On another note, positive institutional changes were accrued because of students' riots. Student A3 argued, *"Students are able to send their messages to the university management through the riots. We often get what we demand after several attempts of negotiation over the round table to no avail."* Student A5 added, *"Our university management understands the language of riots. Until you take to the streets, your genuine concerns fall on deaf ears."* Correspondingly, Student B2 argued, *"The riots help us get the recognition from university management because they tend to give us what we want."* Student B1 added, *"Our riots are very effective because they draw the attention of the public, as such the university management acts fast in addressing our grievances."* Student B4 also opined, *"Our university administration often responds positively to our*

*grievances when we engage in riots because they try by all means to avoid bad publicity."*

The findings of the study are confirmed by Muya, 2014; Della Porta & Cini, 2020 and Kumari & Fernando, 2021). However, the prevalence of the students' riots in the public universities in Eswatini raises concerns of the effectiveness of the riots in bringing positive institutional changes. Moreover, there is a need to further investigate if such positive institutional changes are consequences of student activism or mere coincidences, especially where the changes would require financial input. The pertinent question is, "how do university management immediately source funds when students have engaged in riots?"

#### 4.2 Socio-Political Effects

Vandalism of university and public property, including symbolic political violence was identified as an effect of students' riots. UMC1 argued, *"During students' riots, the property of the institution gets damaged, for example, windows get broken and other university infrastructure is vandalised by students."* UMC2 also declared, *"Students tend to burn tyres on the road and in the process, they damage it. The local municipality has raised the concern, and we will have to pay for the maintenance of such public property."* UMB2 also argued, *"Students' riots lead to destruction of university property. Students tend to vandalise windows, doors and many more of university property."*

Additionally, security report from University A, dated 3 December 2021 has the following contents:

*On Friday 3 December 2021 ... At about 08:30hrs, they marched to IDE where the students removed a plaque written "The Institute of Distance Education was officially opened by His Majesty King Mswati 111 Chancellor of University on 1 August 2003" and also disturbed classes.*

*After the meeting a about 2050hrs, they went to the Admin Block where they broke the main*

*entrance door glass, the King's portrait frame and took the portrait. According to Security the portrait was taken by xxx and others who could not be clearly identified as it was dark. At about 2105hrs, they moved towards the*

*Main Gate still carrying pieces of the portrait and went out into the main road where they burnt it.*

*At about 21:45hrs, they went back into campus where they went straight to the Bookshop where they broke the front windows with rocks but they did not enter.*

*On Monday 6 June 2022...The students from the three campuses joined forces and danced at the Main Gate for a few minutes and then proceeded to the MPH where they held a meeting...From the meeting, the students marched from the MPH through the main corridors that lead straight to the Administration block. At the administration block, the students continued singing and dancing while the Senate meeting was in progress discussing a way forward regarding the students demands. While the students were toy-toying, they pulled and burnt the National Flag.*

*On Friday 30 September 2022 at about 10:00hrs...other security officers saw 3 unknown males wearing red T-shirts written CPS coming from within the Campus towards the main gate carrying the Eswatini National Flag and cutting it with a knife. They hung the flag on the gate as one of them, who was carrying a knife came to the guard house and demanded for a sanitizer. The man sprinkled the flag with the sanitizer and burned it while others were throwing stones to the OSSU personnel.*

A report from the stores department, dated 18 August 2021 at University C has the following contents: *The stores department hereby reports about the burnt dustbins and lids during student strikes at the college. There were 20 dustbins in total and only 5 were left, which means 15 dustbins were burnt during the strike. The stores office also discovered that at Lubombo hostels dormitory 7D one single bed was destroyed and the blanks were used to start the fire they used to burn the dustbins.*

Another security report from University A, dated 25 January 2022 has the following contents:

*On Monday 24 January 2022 ... After the discussions, they decided to go down to the Farm area where they looted chickens and eggs from the Poultry Farm. On investigation on the damage caused at the Farm, the Farm Attendant at the egg production unit Mr xxx confirmed to have lost 10 X trays of eggs which had been stacked in trays on top of pallets inside the building and*

*several others which were looted from inside the egg production shed which had not been collected by then. At the Indigenous chicken section, the Attendant Mr xxx confirmed to have lost 15 indigenous chickens which were looted from 2 semi-intensive care chicken sheds.*

Another report in University A, dated 28 September 2022 has the following contents:

*On Wednesday 28 September 2022 at about 06:50hrs ... There after they went to the Boys' Hostel and that is when they broke one glass panel of the door in room 112 and poured water that was in condoms into that room. A cell phone HTC worth E2000.00 and a Deli Laptop worth E5500.00 belonging to xxx doing EHS year 2 and a Connex Lap top worth E5500.00 belonging to xxx doing EHS year 2 were damaged due to the water that was poured by the students. Their bedding was also soaked in water and had to be taken to the washing line to dry... They broke 2 glass panels in the Girls' Hostel room 312 and poured some water into that room which caused damage to a cellphone Huawei Worth E3900.00 belonging to xxx doing EHS year 3 and staying in room 312 in the Girls' Hostel.*

The findings of the study are confirmed by several scholars who also concur that destruction of property is an effect of students' riots (Mfula, 2016; Brewster, 2017; Kumari & Fernando, 2021; Onivehu, 2021; Damoah, 2023 and Mzenzi & Kang'ethe, 2025). While literature confirms vandalism as an effect of students' riots, political symbolic violence is presented as a unique finding in the context of Eswatini. The findings from document analysis reveal specific acts of symbolic defiance, such as burning the King's portrait and the National Flag as well as destruction of inscriptions showing that institutional buildings were officially opened by the king. This finding is context-specific to Eswatini where the king has absolute power and his portrait is treated with utmost respect. Thus, damaging it is suggestive of resisting his reign. Moreover, this finding is context-specific as it portrays students looting eggs and chicken, demonstrating that students do not only vandalise property as an act of protest but also as means of finding source of food. This depicts the dire economic struggles students in Eswatini may experience. This is suggestive of the fact

that students view riots as a means of survival, notwithstanding it being criminal.

Additionally, the study discovered that students' riots often serve as catalysts for political forum. Student A5 argued, *"Students' riots tend to be publicised through the media. This draws political players to the gallery and students get support from political formations and the civil society. International spectators are also drawn to such riots and they often sympathise with students."* Student A7 added, *"This often chase away foreign funding to the university because they lose confidence in the institution."*

The findings of the study are confirmed by Della Porta & Cini, 2020; Damoah, 2023 and Ho & Wan, 2023) who posit that students' riots had an influence in the national politics, especially in overthrowing the ruling regime. However, in the context of Eswatini, the frequency of the students' riots are not proportional to the expected political reforms. On the contrary, dissenting voices are suppressed. There is no empirical evidence of political destabilisation that results from students' riots. Further investigation is required to ascertain if the students' riots have an impact on the political situation of the country.

### 4.3 Student –Specific Effects

Financial difficulties experienced by students were mentioned as an effect of students' riots. Student A4 argued, *"Our finances get depleted due to the extended almanac. We exhaust our finances through the unplanned travelling caused by the abrupt closure of the university. For off campus students, the months for paying rent get extended."* Student A8 added, *"Another cause of the financial strain is that we have a 10 months contract with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to provide us with allowances. Once the almanac is extended beyond the 10 months, we are on our own because the allowance is no longer disbursed to us."* Student C5 shared the same sentiments and said, *"Life becomes very difficult once the Ministry of Labour and Social Security cuts the allowances."* Nirindrainy (2023) also affirmed that students' riots have a negative effect on students financially.

Related to this, emotional depression, often coupled with anti-social behaviours among

students was cited as a consequence of students' riots. Student A4 decried, *"Cases of suicidal students are often on the rise due to the financial trouble that students go through."* Student A6 added, *"Even cases of drug abuse escalate because of the financial stress that students endure."* Student A8 opined, *"In fact some students prefer to drop out because of the pressure that come with financial challenges. Sadly some students resort to prostitution or drug smuggling just so that they may survive."*

The findings of the study are confirmed by Mbhele and Sibanyoni (2022) who also mention trauma as an effect of students' riots in South Africa. The findings of the study suggest that students' riots lead to students engaging in illicit activities such as prostitution and smuggling of drugs. This is a new finding as there is no literature in other contexts that identify prostitution and smuggling of drugs as an effect of riots. This finding can be linked with the Relative Deprivation Theory whereby when students feel deprived of financial resources resort to illicit trades. There is need to further explore this theme to ascertain if there are no other variables that could cause students to resort to prostitution and smuggling besides riots.

Another effect of students' riots that was cited by participants was the strained relationship between lecturers and students. Student C3 stated, *"When we are back to class after riots, lecturers tend to victimise us, ridiculing us that all we know is toying."* Student A7 opined, *"Lecturers are unwilling to teach us, they blame us for the disruption in the almanac."* Student A2 added, *"Sadly the riots lead to a strained relationship with lecturers and university management."* This finding is in line with Uyanga (2016) who also pointed to strained relationship between students and university management. However, it raises questions of professionalism among lecturers and university management. It also depicts that the political system has an influence of how university management handles dissenting views.

Imprisonment and blacklisting of students was also identified as an effect of students' riots. Student A3 opined, *"One of the unfortunate effects of*

*students' riots is the incarceration of students. Police often abduct them and imprison them, mainly because they affiliate to political parties."* This is congruent to Student C5 who argued, *"Imprisonment of some students is a common effect of students' riots. I have received numerous threatening calls from the police; the intelligence unit whenever we have a student riot."* Congruently, UMB 1 stated, *"If students have damaged property outside the university campus, they get apprehended by the police."* Related to this, Student A5 mentioned that students who often lead students' riots are victimised when they seek employment in government establishments. He said, *"We are labeled as pro-democracy activists and are blacklisted. They often threaten us that we will never be employed in any government establishment because we are rebels."*

The findings of the study are confirmed by various scholars who also discovered that students were incarcerated for their involvement in students' riots (Kumari & Fernando, 2021; Ho & Wan, 2023; Mfula, 2016 Onivehu, 2021). Although literature in other contexts confirm victimisation of students as effects of students' riots, this study brings in new knowledge whereby students suffer "double punishment". The study reveals a unique long-term effect of students' riots, which is the "blacklisting" of activists, who are labeled as "rebels" and threatened with a lifetime ban from government employment. This depicts a context-specific finding of

students' riots where dissenting voices are suppressed.

Moreover, suspension of student leaders was identified as another effect of students' riots. Student B5 asserted, *"The sad part about students' riots is that the university management tend to suspend students who were in the forefront of the riots."* Correspondingly, UMB1 argued, *"Some students get punished through suspension if they have been found guilty of vandalising university property or broken any of the university regulations. However, we know that sometimes suspending the students may also trigger another riot."* The findings of the study confirm Kumari and Fernando (2021) and Onivehu (2021) who also identify suspension of students

as an effect of students' riots. Although students must be accountable for their actions, it is concerning that suspensions are often abused as tools for silence genuine student concerns.

Additionally, depletion of SRC funds was identified as an effect of students' riots. Student C4 argued, *"The SRC fund gets depleted due to students' riots because we are forced to pay for the damages that result from the riots."* Although literature indicate financial strain to students as individuals, the findings of the study reveals that students' riots also lead to financial burdens to the SRC funds, implying that the student body as a collective incur financial strain due to students' riots. This finding appear to be uncommon in other contexts as no literature depicts it.

The findings of the study reveal the suitability and deficiencies of the Emergent Norm Theory. For example, ENT is highly suitable for explaining the sudden behavioural shifts seen in Eswatini, where a "predicament" compels students to abandon "proper behaviour" and adopt "non-traditional behaviours". Findings corroborate this through security reports detailing students "looting chickens and eggs", "burning the National Flag", and pouring water into rooms using condoms. However, ENT's focus on spontaneity is a major shortfall. Document analysis and interviews reveal that Eswatini riots are often far from spontaneous; they are "politically motivated and engineered by opposition parties" and student unions like SNUS. For example, management noted that "students are actually active members of political parties" and receive mandates to "engage in some riots at some point". This suggests that the norms do not merely emerge from a crisis but are pre-planned ideological imports, a nuance ENT fails to capture fully.

## 5. Conclusion

Riots can serve as catalysts for policy reform; literature cites instances in Chile and Quebec where student action forced the state to withdraw tuition hikes or introduce state-funded scholarships. However, in Eswatini, the impacts are often more destructive, involving the

vandalism of university and public property, which strains an already deteriorating national economy. Security reports detailed symbolic acts of defiance, such as burning the National Flag and the King's portrait. Environmental impacts were also noted, with the burning of tyres contributing to pollution and global warming. Academic programs suffer through the elongation and disruption of the almanac. Frequent closures lead to "academic pressure" as lecturers attempt to compress syllabi, often resulting in poor examination performance and higher failure rates.

Long-term, these riots compromise the credibility and integrity of institutions, leading to a "negative image" that discourages prospective students and creates a "brain-drain" as experienced faculty seek more stable environments. A recurring effect is the apprehension and incarceration of student leaders. In Eswatini, students often face "double punishment", institutional expulsion combined

with state-led criminal prosecution, which may inadvertently radicalise student movements by closing off legitimate channels for dissent. The excessive punitive measures such as lifetime ban from government employment are concerning as they escalate tensions.

Therefore, this study recommends that Universities must establish clear early warning systems that can help detect student discontent. Such systems may include deploying students such as peer counsellors who may be on the lookout for student concerns and report them to the Student Affairs officers. Also, students, through the SRC should collaborate with university management and government in addressing student welfare problems. Finally, given that there is paucity of studies on students' riots in Eswatini tertiary institutions; there is a need for further research to gather more empirical data on students' riots in public HEIs in Eswatini.

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