ABSTRACT
This project paper is an in-depth study on student activism and democratic space in the University of Nairobi between 1970 and 1992. It examines the relationship of students, in their activism, to the University administration and the state. It also looks at the tactics the students used in their activism. The objectives of this study were to explain the causes of student activism in the University of Nairobi between 1970 and 1992, the impact of the students’ activism and the challenges that were faced by students in their activism. Generational revolt theory and Marxist theory were used in the study. These theories were useful in assessing the various dimensions that confrontations would take between students, on one hand, and the government and the University administration on the other. The study was conducted using secondary sources and primary sources which mainly involved fieldwork and library research. The study argues that student activism in the University of Nairobi was caused and heightened by the opening and closing of democratic space within and outside the University. Different events between 1970 and 1992 which caused closures or expansions of democratic space were discussed in the study and were used to validate this argument.
The study also revealed that the students, in their activism, influenced sections of the Kenyan public to weigh in on political discourses. The church, trade unions and a number of politicians weighed in on discourses concerning issues the students had raised in their protests or issues that the student demonstrations resulted to. In doing so, the students played a conscientising role by influencing Kenya’s social fabric. Challenges that student activists faced are also examined in this study, which are argued to have influenced the tactics that the students employed in their activism. The study further argues that student activism of the 1960’s was generally concerned with issues particular to the University but became increasingly involved with Kenya’s national politics with the murder of J.M Kariuki in 1975. The students’ relationship with President Daniel Arap Moi is also examined in the study and is explained to be an additional factor in making national politics a major concern of their activism between 1978 and 1992. The study further argues that student activism was instrumental in expanding the national democratic space in the early 1990s by taking part in the clamour for multipartyism.