

Students' Admission Policies for Quality Assurance: Towards Quality Education in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

The demand for university education in Kenya has significantly increased. Many secondary school graduates and the working class look for opportunities to pursue university education. There are also students from other countries who would like to study in Kenya. This diversity of sources of university student population has posed challenge to student admission policies. The study focused on effectiveness of student admission policies in public and private universities in Kenya. Data was collected from a sample of 502 university students using a structured questionnaire. It was found that public universities did not have the necessary national and ethnic diversity of students; however, majority of students were studying courses of their preferences. Faith based private universities considered religious faith of students before accepting or rejecting applications for admission. It was found that public universities admitted students of higher grades than private universities. It was recommended that the government formulates policies regulating student admissions to guarantee transferability of student grades across universities, acceptable diversity of students and exemption rules for admission in public and private universities.

Key words: Quality, quality assurance, diversity, transfer of grades and exemptions

Introduction

It is not a simple task defining quality education. Difficulty arises from the fact that it is an abstract of a desired end whose attributes are relative. However, the most common terms used to define quality assurance are 'fitness for purpose' and 'conformance to standards'. Fitness for purpose refers to purpose and utility of the product while conformance to standards is standard based approach aligned to the specified standards given by a regulatory agency. Kenya has adopted a hybrid approach of the two. Consequently quality assurance can be said to refer to mechanisms by which an institution assures itself and stakeholders that it shall achieve the standards it has negotiated and agreed on. A significant quality assurance ingredient at regulatory level is quality of students admitted to a university. In Kenya, Joint Admissions Board (JAB) provides central admission services to public universities for its regular (direct entry students). With commercialization and privatization of higher education opening doors to old age (mature) students who are working and others who may not have obtained the minimum cut off grade for direct entry at secondary school level, majority of students are now admitted by the individual universities.

Thus, secondary school certificate is no longer the only admission requirement as it has been in the past. These changes together with increased demand for university education from secondary school graduates pose challenges to Commission for Higher Education and the universities on the regulations for admission of students to universities. Private universities on the other hand do not receive students from JAB. Thus, admission of students to private universities is wholly the responsibility of individual universities. JAB is not a creation of the Universities Act 1985 which guides the higher education sector in Kenya, but an amorphous entity which operates on trust as a friendly organization of Vice Chancellors from the public universities. Since majority of students enrolled in universities are admitted through self-sponsored programmes, the responsibility of JAB as the recognized agent on behalf of the government in student selection for admission to universities is no longer justifiable and calls for re-evaluation.

Methodology

The general objective of this study was to conduct a comparative study to establish effectiveness of student admission policies in selected public and private universities in Kenya.

Specifically, the study had two objectives. First objective was to find out strengths and weaknesses in student admission policies in selected public and private universities. Secondly, to find out if there was significant difference between admission policies in the public and private universities. This study was conducted between May 2010 and November 2010 and utilized descriptive survey design. A survey design involves asking a large group of respondents' questions about a particular issue (Mugenda and Mugenda, 2003). According to Creswell (2003) a survey design provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. Data sources were four universities. The universities were two private universities and two public. The sample population comprised 502 undergraduate students. Students were given questionnaires to fill which asked them to give their background information and education interests. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and chi square tests to establish the nature of relationships between indicators and the type of university.

Student admission challenges

There are four major challenges enrolment officers of universities have to overcome if student admission policies are to be in tandem with the needs of the changing Kenyan society. These are increasing competition for students among public and private universities, increased demand for university education, students' aptitude and motivation and increased student mobility across national borders. Increased mobility of students within and across nations has been found to be crucial in developing highly skilled labour force in order to strengthen a knowledge-based economy. There is also some evidence proving that studying abroad helps a person to cope more successfully with increasing international dimensions at work and helps with career enhancement, in general. It also helps to improve international competences, enabling former students to be placed in visible international professional positions and increases the probability of a person working abroad later in life. This economic discourse, regarding the benefits of studying abroad, also includes an overlapping socio-cultural discourse about integration with the international community and shared national and international cultural values, which underlies the relevance of student mobility as a prime mechanism to foster a sense of national and international identity and citizenship (González, Mesanza & Mariel 2010).

As student mobility increases throughout the world, alongside increased competition for students, the process of evaluating the formal and non-formal educational credentials of local and international student applicants becomes more and more important. Students particularly, want to overcome the obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement, recognition of courses and qualifications. Some scrupulous entrepreneurs have turned the desire to have minimum qualifications to enroll in another university into a money minting business (Wenger & Frey, 2009) in which they manufacture certificates, diplomas and degrees. This is a challenge that universities have to accept to face and overcome. Kenya is currently going through an experience where there are several local organizations pretending to be educational institutions, but sell degrees, diplomas and certificates without requiring applicants to complete any significant academic work. Another emerging trend is where foreign based universities collaborate with local educational institutions in Kenya to offer degrees, diplomas and certificates of the foreign universities.

Some of these arrangements are suspect and fraudulent. Aware of this practice, the Ministry of Higher Education and Commission of Higher Education has published a list institutions facing closure for flouting regulations (Koech & Nyagesiba 2011). Several of these colleges have since been closed leaving a trail of financial losses incurred by students and parents in terms of fees paid to owners of the colleges. Students, who normally, would not be enrolled in recognized institutions for certificate or diploma courses, enroll in the suspect colleges to obtain certificates and diplomas which they later present to the recognized universities to gain admission. This has posed a threat to quality assurance in student admissions. Borrowing from experiences of other countries, according to State of California Commission on Teacher Education (2009), individuals who have completed college or university course work at an institution in a country other than the United States must obtain a complete evaluation of foreign transcripts, degrees, and other relevant documents prior to applying to the Commission for a California credential, permit, or certificate.

A detailed, course-by course, foreign transcript evaluation is required any time foreign course work is used to meet any credential requirement, even if the foreign course work has been accepted by a college or university in the United States. In all instances, original, official documentation will be required when requesting the evaluation. According to UNESCO (1995), the quality of students in higher education depends in the first place on the aptitudes and motivations of those leaving secondary education and wishing to pursue studies at higher level – hence the need for a re-examination of the interface between higher and secondary education, and students counseling and orientation, as well as the need to foster the notion of responsibility towards society among students, particularly those benefitting from public support.

Higher education must develop in students both responsive and pro-active attitudes towards the labour market and the emergence of new areas and forms of employment. Put succinctly, higher education is expected to produce graduates who can be not only job seekers but also successful entrepreneurs and job creators. Thomas (2008), states that apart from personal intellectual and employability skills, there are profound formal and informal interactions with student peers and academic supervisors. He says, for a university to produce quality students, they must be committed to creating a diverse student body – due to evidence from the United States that the more diverse the student body with which you are educated, the better you are educated. Report of The Public Universities Inspection Board (Republic of Kenya, 2006), noted that there was an emerging trend to open access to higher education through assessment of learning and competencies gained through non-formal experiences. This was noted as a positive trend that requires development of diversified admission criteria. The process developed should be fair, transparent and recognize credits and learning gained elsewhere. According to the Inspection Board, the public expressed concern on the quality and fairness in managing Self Sponsored Programme (SSP), especially during the stages of admission, teaching and processing of examinations.

The perceived less rigorous admission criteria and preferential treatment of the self-sponsored may compromise quality, thus leading to imminent threats to higher education in Kenya. A case in point is when the Executive Secretary of the Teachers Service Commission, refused to recognize degrees obtained by P1 teachers who enrolled for Bachelor of Education degrees. He argued that a P1 certificate is not a valid qualification for admission to a degree course. He thought it was absurd for P1 teachers who got grade D+ in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) to be enrolled for a degree programme which was done during school holidays and be guaranteed a teaching job in a secondary school (Muindi, 2009). It is important to note that this argument did not accommodate the learning that takes place through experiences and on job trainings. A large number of Kenyan youth have shown a persistent urge to cheat in national examinations. Every year, several KCSE candidates are victims of examination irregularities (KNEC 2007, 2008, 2009). Performance in the exams is the most critical determinant of students' progression for further studies including university education. Given the very stiff competition for places for employment and further education it is imperative that objectivity and fairness be the overriding concerns in allocation of these places (Wasanga 2009).

Any practice therefore that, threatens fairness and objectivity in allocating students places in universities and the courses of study thereof are a threat to meritocracy and quality and should not be allowed. Universities must exercise extra care during student admission process to identify those students with genuine certificates before they are admitted for courses commensurate with their grades. Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination (KCSE) grades have indicated high predictability of student performance at the university level. Wambua (2003) found that KCSE grade contributed more significantly in predicting university performance in comparison to other predictors. Thus, the examination is useful for identifying admissible university students as well for predicting their most likely performance. However, exclusive use of KCSE for student admissions may be criticized on the ground that normative and psychomotor skills of the students are completely ignored.

Assessment of learning that took place in four years of secondary education are available in end term, end year, Continuous Assessment Tests and projects which are not referred to and yet very informative. Since the universities may not have sufficient time and logistics to obtain the Continuous Assessment Tests and projects from previous schools of the students, they can verify individual student ability by conducting entrance examinations for all new students. Due to large number of students currently admitted in universities, the end of first semester examinations can easily play this role. The available literature reveals a number of issues to be considered during the admission process. Most significant is the need to verify authenticity of the certificates and qualifications presented by applicants to the respective universities. The other important attributes to consider include student course preferences and diverse students' body.

Results and Discussions

National Diversity:

For a university to produce quality students, they must be committed to creating a diverse student body since, the more diverse the student body with which one is educated, the better the education received (Thomas 2008). This objective was analysed by finding out diversity in universities in terms of student nationalities and ethnic origin. One aspect of diversity that was analysed was diversity based on local and foreign students studying in Kenyan universities. It was found that the ratio of foreign to local students is higher in private universities. At University of Nairobi, the percentage of foreign against total students enrolled is 0.669%.

At Masinde Muliro, the percentage is at 0.16%, USIU has 12.59% while University of Eastern Africa has 9.906%. This was inferred to mean that public universities have attracted negligible number of foreign students. This negatively affected the quality of university students in the public universities in Kenya. It denied the students skills to cope more successfully with increasing international dimensions at work and career enhancement. An examination of admission rules and regulations showed that there was no policy statement committing the university to student diversity among private and public universities. The ratio of foreign students in private universities in Kenya compared favourably with top ranked universities in the world such as University of Cambridge where 10% of students are from outside United Kingdom (<http://www.cam.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/info/policy.html> extracted on 10th February 2011) while at Harvard University 9% are international students (www.admissionsconsultants.com/college/havard.asp extracted on 10th February 2011).

In view of increased mobility of students across national borders, this negligible number of foreign students in public universities, shows that they have not positioned themselves as centers of excellence that attract student admissions from other countries. It consequently negatively affected the quality of education. The inability to attract sufficient number of foreign students is partly reflected in poor Kenya university rankings. According to 2009 university rankings, Strathmore University was at position 2,795 followed by University of Nairobi at position 4,467. The rankings were based on web popularity of the institutions (www.4icu.org/topAfrica). The rankings do serve the students and parents as an initial indicator at least of the value and perceived quality of education offered in the universities (Huemmert, 2010). According to Oyewole (2008), there is need to embrace the idea of ranking of universities as a way of enhancing quality through promotion of competition, giving adequate information to stakeholders for making informed decisions, public accountability and being a basis for funding.

Diversity of students by ethnic origin

Attempt was made to find out level of student diversity in the selected universities. Results showed that most of the students enrolled in private universities come from the immediate surrounding community. For illustration purposes Baraton University draws majority of its students (67.857%) from Rift Valley province, where it is located and Nyanza province where it enjoys large religious following. USIU draws 50.00% of its students from parents residing in Nairobi while 67.241% of its students come from Nairobi and Central provinces. The public universities have a mixed picture. Masinde Muliro University which is located outside Nairobi draws 62.5% from Western province while University of Nairobi draws 37.383% of its students from Nairobi and Central provinces. This was interpreted to mean that private and public universities draw their students from the immediate surrounding community. The student interactions in these universities have very high chances of producing stereotype ethnic champions rather than nationalists. Majority of the students were likely to have gone through primary, secondary schools and university education within the same ethnic community. Consequently, their nation was the ethnic community.

It showed that apart from University of Nairobi, the university students have no benefit of diversified student population. This defeats the purpose of university education which is to create in learners, a capacity to effectively contribute in terms of work and productivity, towards national and international development (Republic of Kenya, 1999). They are denied opportunity to plant and nurture seeds of nationalism. Diversity helps in cross-fertilization of ideas and upgrading of education standards (Mwaura, 2010b). Kenya's diversity in culture and ethnic heritage is perhaps best demonstrated by her wealth of 42 indigenous tribes, in addition to other multi-racial, multi-lingual and numerous religious groups. Escape from ethnic tragedies that have often bedeviled Kenya in election years underscores the importance of concerted efforts to ensure that social cohesion is maintained as the basis of national unity. As Kenya embraces devolved county governance, there is urgency for concrete efforts to instill the spirit of national cohesion through the education system. This calls for deliberate policies that guarantee sufficient student diversity in private and public universities.

Students' Enrolments as per preferred course

According to UNESCO (1995), the quality of students in higher education depends in the first place on the aptitudes and motivations of those leaving secondary education and wishing to pursue studies at higher level. Attempt was made to find out whether the students had the right aptitude and motivation to study the courses they were pursuing at the time of study. The results showed 69.655% and 94.955% of students admitted in private and public universities respectively took their preferred courses. This finding meant that most students in both public and private universities were taking courses of their preferred choices. However, of significance was that 48.485% of students taking education course who reported that they were not taking their preferred courses. When 48.485% of the students were taking this course as a third choice or worse, it raised questions as to whether they were going to be effective teachers.

They lacked the motivation and passion for the profession they were preparing themselves for. This was a threat to quality of teachers being produced for the teaching profession and by extension a threat to provision of quality education.

Students by Gender

The findings of this study indicated that that less than 39.5% of students admitted in public universities are female students whereas, more than 52.57% of students admitted in private universities are female students. This was likely to be attributed to many factors such as parents who responded to fear of keeping their female children at home for long as they wait for the public university admission that usually takes almost two years and secondly due to demoralization by the frequent public universities' riots and closures that made it difficult for a student to graduate within the prescribed period (Mutero, 2001). The low number of female students in public universities was also attributed to their lower performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) compared to the boys. In terms of implication on quality education, it was interpreted that universities have to make the university learning environment more conducive to the female gender. Facilities in the washrooms, lecture rooms and sporting facilities have to be gender responsive.

Enrolments by Religious Faith

Attempt was made to identify students by religious faith. Results showed that 93.836% and 94.910% of students in private and public universities respectively were Christians. It was also found out that in public and private universities, students were not identified by their denominations, except in faith based universities. In the faith based universities, majority of students, above 56 % were drawn from members of the sponsoring church. This confirmed earlier reports that faith based institutions, Christian universities in particular; discriminate against potential students on the basis of religion (Mwaura, 2010a). This was an abuse of the freedom of religion and against the Constitution of Kenya. Article 32 of the constitution states that a person may not be denied access to any institution because of the person's belief or religion. Article 27(5) states that no person shall discriminate directly or indirectly against another person on the ground of religion or belief (Republic of Kenya, 2010). Moreover, studies have shown that religion alone does not play a major role in modeling individual behaviour and that some religious groups have certain characteristics that may drive students into participating in deviant behaviours like riots without refraining them (Were 2003, K'Okul 2010). There are complaints that some faith based educational institutions pursue fundamental approach towards religion in their schools. The fundamental approach manifests in a range of issues including abortion, sex education, pro-choice (liberal) policies and mandatory religious activities (rituals) (Garner 2008). Universities are distinct centres of academic excellence and liberation of the mind unlike theological institutions.

Authentication of Students Certificates

The lecturing staff of the universities were asked to respond to a statement, "There is no student in our course with a forged certificate". Responses showed 79% of respondents from private universities agreed that there were no students admitted with forged certificates while 55% of respondents in public universities believed there were no students admitted with forged certificates. This finding indicates that there is higher confidence in how the private universities manage their admission process than in public universities. When the lecturers were asked whether students were required to present their certificates for authentication before admission, the responses showed that 66.667% and 65.854% of staff in private and public universities respectively agreed that certificates of students were verified before admission. In public universities, this verification was done by Joint Admissions Board (JAB) for regular students and the university for parallel students. In private universities, this is done by the universities themselves. Since majority of students enrolled in universities are admitted through self-sponsored programmes, the responsibility of JAB in student selection for admission to universities is no longer justifiable and calls for re-evaluation.

The individual universities need to devise effective mechanisms through which the certificates presented by potential students are authenticated. Entrance examinations can one of such mechanisms. The respondents were asked whether new students sit for an entrance examination before they are admitted. Responses showed that 93.333% and 4.878% of lecturers in private and public universities agreed that the universities administer entrance examinations. It was interpreted to mean that public universities do not conduct entrance examinations for new students, but relies wholly on KCSE grades which could have been obtained fraudulently. The entrance examinations would play a significant role to weed out fraudulent cases.

Comparison of students' entry qualifications

Attempt was made to find if there is a relationship between grade attained at KCSE level and admission to university. Results are shown in the table below:

Table 1.1: Grades obtained by students

		Grades obtained								Total
		C Minus	C	C Plus	B Minus	B	B Plus	A Minus	A	
Type of your institution	Public	4	7	34	29	68	95	60	23	320
	Private	0	1	21	25	41	20	4	2	114
Total		4	8	55	54	109	115	64	25	434

Table 1.1 shows that the modal students' admission grade in private and public universities is B and B Plus respectively. This suggests that private universities start at a lower academic entry behavior compared to public universities.

Chi-square test was done to test the null hypothesis which read that, "There is no significant difference between the students' admission grades in private and public universities". Results showed that the p-value related to the Chi square test was 0.000 which is less than 0.05, hence we reject the null hypothesis that there is no relationship between grade attained and admission to university (private or public). Therefore we conclude that the admission qualifications in public and private universities are significantly different. This is supported in table 1.1 above in which the percentage of students with grade B and above enrolled in public universities was 76.875% while for private universities it was 61.404%. It was therefore inferred that public universities admitted students of higher entry qualifications than private universities. It has been established that KCSE grade contributes more to university performance in comparison to other predictors (Wambua 2003). Consequently, assuming all other factors being equal, students from public universities should be of higher quality than students from private universities. However, quality is multidimensional and cannot be conclusively determined by one factor.

During the JAB admission of students to public universities, the cut-off point (lowest admissible point) has been KCSE grade B of 65 points for the last many years. However, table 1.1 above shows that 19.688% of the students were admitted in public universities with grades below grade B (plain). First, all these are SSP students in public universities. The challenge is that since they apply directly to individual universities, they gain admission to courses that the regular students were denied in the JAB admission process. It was found that in all courses, SSP students had lower entry grade compared to regular students. These double standards in student admissions in public universities raise issues of fairness and accountability on the part of university administration. What is the rationale?

Conclusions and recommendations

It was concluded that the composition of students admitted in public universities lacked required diversity in terms of foreign students. Both public and private universities admitted students mainly from the local communities with limited mix of students from different regions of the country. Faith based private universities did not have adequate mix of students from different faiths. It was concluded that lack student diversity was an obstacle to effective learning among students and lowered the quality of students. Lack of student diversity in universities, if not reversed, will have serious negative impact on Kenya's nationhood in view of devolved county governance. Currently there are no rules issued by the Ministry of Education or Commission for Higher Education governing transferability of courses among universities and rules for exemptions for mature students who have done other courses or acquired work experience equivalent to the knowledge required for submission.

Most students in private and public universities in Kenya were studying courses they applied for. It was therefore concluded that university students had the right aptitudes and motivations to pursue studies at this level. The researchers found that the admission qualifications in public and private were significantly different in favour of public universities. It was therefore concluded that public universities admitted students of higher entry qualifications than private universities.

Authentication of student certificates was inadequate. Results showed that universities risked admitting students with forged certificates. There were no entrance examinations conducted in public universities. This gave room for potential learners with certificates from suspect colleges to gain admission for courses they have not qualified for. It was not clear how effective foreign students were vetted before they were admitted.

It was recommended that:

1. The government formulates policies regulating student admissions to guarantee acceptable diversity of students in public and private universities. The national goals deserve an equal, if not higher preference than county goals on university education agenda.

2. Faith based universities should be engaged in discussions to enable them understand the goals of university education beyond centres of religious doctrines. There should be a threshold of student religious diversity to be achieved in these institutions.
3. JAB should be replaced by the Central Universities Admissions Committee (CUAC) as spelt out in section 8 of the Universities Act 1985. The section states that CUAC shall coordinate admission to public universities on national basis. CUAC is further mandated to establish and maintain standards by such means it considers appropriate of equivalent educational standards as a prerequisite for university admission (Republic of Kenya, 1985).
4. There is need to consider inclusion of an entrance examination as part of the admission requirements. Entrance examination will capture hidden competencies that are not reflected in the certificates presented for admission. It identify KCSE students who obtained through cheating in the national examinations.
5. Certificates obtained from local and foreign colleges other than those recognized by government agencies should be carefully vetted. Up to now only the certificates obtained from institutions outside Kenya go through rigorous vetting process. We recommend complete evaluation of transcripts, degrees, and other relevant documents.
6. The Commission for Higher Education should formulate guidelines for transferability of courses among universities and rules for exemptions for mature students who have done other courses or acquired work experience equivalent to the knowledge required for submission.

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