Full Length Research Paper

University students' perception of lecturer-student relationships: a comparative study of Public and Private Universities in Kenya

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In a university setting, there is a great diversity in terms of socio-cultural, political, religious and racial backgrounds among students and lecturers. This diversity, with the presence of an appropriate lecturer-student relationship creates a campus environment that prepares students and lecturers to live and work amicably in a socio-culturally diverse society. It also equips them to respond to an increasing complex global environment. Besides, interpersonal relations in diversity make it possible for the generation, advancement and dissemination of knowledge, which is one of the key mission characteristics of university education in Kenya and elsewhere. Usually, a healthy relationship between the lecturers and students does influence students' academic, personal and social integration into higher education. This could be attributed to the fact that lecturers contact with students in and out of the classroom is very important in student motivation and involvement in all facets of life. Considering the significance bestowed upon lecture-student relationship, a study was done that involved 30 student leaders from both public and private universities in Kenya. Data was collected through University Student Leaders Interview Schedule (USLIS). The data was analysed to help unravel students' perception of interpersonal relations with their lecturers. Results revealed that, students in private universities seem to positively perceive lecturer- student' relationship more than those in public universities. It also came out clearly that the large classes experienced in public universities had down side effect on the student-lecturer relationship. Thus enrollment in universities should be checked so that there is a low lecturer-student ratio.

Key words: Influence, perceptions, attitude, campus environment, lecturer-student relationships, public university and private university.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is nowadays viewed as business-like enterprise, where the student as a consumer seeks a business-like relationship with the producer (lecturer) that delivers knowledge, skills and competencies he or she wants (Newton, 2002) . In effect, to be able to fulfil their educational, research and informational functions in the 21st Century, tertiary institutions need to recognize the importance of this emerging issue (World Bank, 2002).

Lecturer -student relationship is viewed as a helping hand in which the student perceives that the lecturer has his or her best interest at heart. This usually averts student negative feelings towards the campus thus the student persists in the university.

Research on student persistence or attrition has postulated that a student's decision to withdraw or persist in a university is more a function of what occurs after entry into that institution than what precedes it Peterson et al., 1997. According to Peterson et al. (1997) central to many retention studies have been the concepts of academic and social integration. Academic integration to them means the students' perception about the academic system, which include classroom interactions with lecturers. On the other hand, social integration is defined as

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the students' perception of the social system, which includes interactions with peers and informal contacts with lecturers and other personnel within a learning institution.

Moreover, studies on college impact on students clearly demonstrate that students' interpersonal environment, which include interactions with peers and lecturers have the greatest impact on students' changes in their aspirations, values, attitudes, beliefs and actions (Whitt et al., Nora, 2001; Chepchieng, 2004). In fact, the norms, values, attitudes and ethics that tertiary institutions impart to students, either formally or informally are the foundations of the social capital, necessary for cohesive cultures; the very bedrock of good governance and democratic political systems (World Bank, 2002). Perhaps, this is because when there is appropriate lecturer-student relationship that facilitates both formal and informal interactions, the university lecturer would transmit more than just knowledge and skills of his or her discipline (Ngara, 1995). In such an environment, the student is assisted to develop those qualities that go with good learning skills and leadership. Actually, lecturer-student contact in and out of the classroom is very important in student motivation and involvement in all facets of life (Newton, 2002; Okwilagwe, 2002). This is perhaps due to the students' identification with lecturers as role models, which has been acknowledged as vital to the acquisitions of good learning skills and functional behaviour (Ngara, 1995; Ronning, 1997). But, for learning skills and functional behaviour to be acquired, the students must perceive their relationship with lecturers as confident, meaningful and relevant to them.

According to researchers, there is a general belief that human behaviour and actions are influenced by attitudes, whereby attitudes are seen as the cause and behaviour as the effect (Oskamp, 1991; Mushoriwa, 1998; Holland et al., 2002; Chepchieng, 2004). This implies that if students perceive lecturer-student relationship or interaction as irrelevant to them, they may develop a negative attitude towards the campus environment. This is because interactions between students and campus characteristics that include interactions with their lecturers affect students' physical behaviour, their cognitive filtering of what they are experiencing and in the affective domain, their perceptions and attitudes toward campus environment (Williams, 1986).

Therefore, since there is a general belief that human behaviour and actions are influenced by attitudes, there is need for a systematic empirical study to establish the effect of students' perception of their relationships with their lecturers on their attitudes toward campus environment in both public and private universities in Kenya. This is crucial, considering the persistent student disturbances in public universities in the country. The consequences of these disturbances have been frequent and long closures of public universities, deaths of students and wanton destruction of university and private property. In contrast, this behaviour is not observed in the case of private universities. In fact, according to the Vice-chancellors' Committee Report (2000), private universities in Kenya have had a reputation of having very few incidences of student disturbances and are known to have had a good record of students' conduct. The study, therefore, intended to determine whether a relationship exists between students' perception of lecturer- student relationship and their attitudes toward campus environment and whether these perceptions differentially influence students' attitudes toward campus environments in public and private universities in Kenya. The findings are significant because they may help understand student's behaviour witnessed in Kenya's institutions of higher learning.

Theoretical framework

The cognitive response theory was considered the most relevant to the study. This theory seeks to understand the thoughts people generate as a result of being given some information about something. The key assumption of the cognitive response view is that people are active processors of information which generate cognitive responses to messages but not just passive recipients of the messages that they happen to be exposed to (Taylor et al., 1997). This implies that when students, especially those who have had no opportunity to interact with their lecturers receive information concerning relations with them, they cognitively process and perceive it as either good or bad. This will eventually make them to either like or dislike their relations with the lecturers, which further influence their perceptions.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study employed the causal -comparative study design. This was found appropriate because the investigation compared the perceptions of two different independent groups, which were students enrolled in public and those enrolled in private universities. In the study, the perceptions of students enrolled in public and those enrolled in private universities about their lecturer-student relationships were compared. The design was further considered appropriate because it was non-experimental in that no manipulation of the independent variables was done because their manifestations had already occurred (Cohen and Manion, 1974; Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996; Kerlinger, 2000). In effect, observation of an already existing phenomenon was made.

Sample

Thirty (30) student leaders, five (5) from each of the six universities studied, were purposively selected. Those who held key positions in the student leadership that included Chairpersons, Secretary-Generals, Directors of Academics, Directors of Sports and Entertainment and Directors of Student welfare were interviewed. The student leaders holding such key positions were considered because such persons are the ones charged with the responsibility

of first handling student grievances and making decisions on the campus related issues presented to them that include lecturer-student relationships and interaction.

Instrumentation

Data was collected through a University Student Leaders Interview Schedule (USLIS). The researcher used an interview schedule because it usually helps in studying a phenomenon in depth (Sindabi. 1992; Kerlinger, 2000). The interview schedule was piloted before being used. This was for the purpose of establishing the content and construct validity of the schedule.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The qualitative descriptions given in this section are based on the interviews that were conducted on student leaders in both public and private universities. The student leaders involved in the study were those who held key positions in the student leadership on campus thus they easily get access to student views on campus aspects that negatively affect them. Data from student leaders enrolled in both public and private universities was compared in order to help understand the perceptions the students hold of their relationships with their lecturers. The following excerpt is indicative of how students perceive their relations with lecturers in the public universities.

Excerpt 1

Researcher: As a student leader in this university, are you satisfied with the lecturer-Student relationship /interaction? Are professors /lecturers approachable? Are they present in their offices when students would like to see them?
Samuel: Lecturer-student relationship depends on whom you are relating to and in which situation. In small classes, especially science classes, interaction is very good. Lecturers are approachable and students get to know lecturers better. However, most lecturers are staying off-campus and so are only available in some few days per week when they have their classes *(Public university student leader interview).*
Omolo: It is good! Some lecturers are approachable and others are not. Due to large size of student population, it is hard to interact with lecturers. Some provide time for consultation and others do not because they would want to lecture in many campuses, teaching parallel students. Most of them are under paid; hence move around to look for extra pay. Professors are rarely available because they are marketable and they also hold administrative posts hence have no time to interact with students as compared to the junior lecturers who are always available *(Public university student leader interview).*
Mercy: The relationship is cordial. They are approachable except a few lecturers who don't understand special student needs. They are present and offer consultation time with appoinment. In fact, most of them are administ-

rators, so they are always in their offices *(Public university student leader interview).*

From this excerpt, it is evident that generally, the lecturer-student relationship is good in public universities. There are clear indicators of student satisfaction with relations with lecturers. However, some glaring factors emerged that may have hindered better relations between lecturers and students. One of the factors is the large class sizes. This finding corroborate with World Bank reports (2000; 2002) which noted that in developing countries' universities, students face difficult conditions of study which include overcrowded classes. In large classes, students often experience social isolation that do not only distress them but also adversely affect their academic life (Habeshaw et al., 1992; Ronning, 1997). This is in contrast to small classes where students have opportunities for interaction with their lecturers and peers (Matiru, 1989). Thus, in such classes, learning is not only fostered through classroom discussion but also students are helped to be less isolated.

In earlier studies, students in small institutions of higher learning were found to feel more satisfied with lecturer-student relations and classroom instruction than in large institutions (Sandford, 1964; Knox et al., 1992). Perhaps, this is because in a small university, students are likely to come into contact with lecturers outside the classroom.

Another factor that students in public universities perceived to have negatively affected their lecturer-student relationship is the availability of lecturers. Some lecturers in this category of institutions do not provide consultation hours to students because they teach self-sponsored students in other universities where they get an extra pay because of underpayment. In effect, they are on their parent campuses for a short time in the day. In fact, according to World Bank (2002) report, there is internal brain drain in university education in developing countries. This, as the report indicated, is because the low paid lecturers at public tertiary institutions seek second and third jobs in extra-mural positions such as teaching at better paying private institutions and colleges.

The following is an excerpt of the perceptions students hold about their lecturer-student relations in Private universities.

Excerpt 2

Researcher: As a student leader in this university, are you satisfied with the lecturer-Student relationship-/interaction? Are professors/lecturers approachable? Are they present in their offices when students would like to see them?
Matu: It is good. They are always available for consultations. Times for consultations or office hours are indicated by lecturers on their office doors. Lecturers are evaluated by students and students have a right to say anything and provide any grievances about the lecturer *(Private university student leader interview).*

Cherono: It is cordial. They are approachable though some are not. This is clearly seen in the way students choose courses. Due to small classes averaging fifty students, lecturers can have one to one interaction. Consultation times are available for students. Students can also contact lecturers through phones or emails. Evaluation forms are available at the end of every quarter which encourages lecturers to know their weakest points *(Private university student leader interview).*

Kilonzo: Quite O.K! Most lecturers are friendly and interact freely with students. They are always available in their offices. You can meet with them outside their offices. They are Christians and disciplined especially the full-time lecturers. Lecturers are fair and have no cases of negative attitude towards students *(Private university student leader interview).*

This episode clearly indicates that as it was with the case of the public universities, in private universities, the class size also featured as a factor influencing students' perception of the lecturer-student relationships. In private universities as opposed to public universities, there are small classes averaging fifty students per class. Thus lecturers get the opportunity to interact at one to one basis with students. In fact, according to the Vice-Chancellors' Committee Report (2000), the lecturer-student ratio in private universities is approximately 1:20 for tutorial groups. This, therefore, enables lecturers in private universities to be close to students and to care for them, thus promoting lecturer-student relations. The low student population is attributed to the observation that private universities unlike public universities in Kenya are in a better position to control their student enrollment to a level they can cope with in terms of the essential facilities and educational equipment (Nguru, 1990). This may not be possible for public universities because the Joint Admission Board (JAB) usually controls their student enrollment.

Another factor that explicitly came out is that lecturers in private universities are usually evaluated by their students at the end of each teaching-learning session, something that seems not to have been embraced in the public universities in the country. In these evaluations, students often point out areas of weakness of their lecturers. This practice in a way gives the lecturers an opportunity to improve especially in their classroom interactions with their students.

According to Dia (1998), students' evaluation of lecturers is one of the most important ways of generating vital information for course improvements and also useful for making lecturers aware of their strengths and weaknesses of their teaching and interactions with students. In fact, in highlighting the vision for higher education for a new Africa, the Forum of Students Association in Africa on Higher Education in the 21st Century recommended that higher institutions of learning set up mechanisms for the assessment of the academic staff by students (UNESCO, 1998).

Something else that was noted by student leaders in private universities is that lecturers in such institutions post their consultation times on their office doors and even in some of these universities, internal phones and Internet facilities are available for students to communicate with their lecturers. This is a mechanism that was not pointed out by students in the public universities and this may have limited student interactions with their lecturers. Therefore, from the excerpts it can be observed that in general terms students in private universities positively perceive lecturer–students' relationships more than those enrolled in public universities.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Since studies on College impact on students clearly demonstrate that students' interpersonal environment, which include interactions with peers and lecturers, have the greatest impact on students' changes in their aspirations, values, attitudes, beliefs and actions (Whitt et al., 2001; Chepchieng, 2004), lecturer -student relationships should be enhanced in higher education. It is recommended that lecturers be provided with an enabling working environment that includes the provision of offices, teaching facilities and better pay among other things. The better pay make the lecturers/professors become committed to their parent institutions thus they become available to their students during working time.

Size of classes clearly showed that it has an impact on lecturer-student relationship, with small classes enhancing whereas large ones curtailing it. Thus, institutions of higher learning need to check on their student enrollment policies with the view of reducing their class sizes.

Public universities in Kenya need to embrace the culture of academic staff evaluations by students at the end of every teaching-learning session and use the reports to make personnel decisions such as promotions, retention and salary increases for staff. This may make lecturers in such institutions become committed to their parent institutions.

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