

Institutional Reputation, Service Quality and Students' Satisfaction in Universities in Kenya: A Review of Empirical Evidence

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Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationships between service quality, institutional reputation, and student satisfaction in public universities in Kenya. The aim is to synthesize existing research findings and provide insights into these constructs within the Kenyan higher education context. Service Quality is the independent variable and its elements were human elements, non-human elements, service blue print and core service. Students' satisfaction is the dependent variable and its elements were Quality of teaching facilities; Availability of textbooks in libraries; Administrative service quality; Reliability of university examinations; Perceived learning gains and Quality of students' welfare services. Institutional reputation is a mediating variable and its role is to mediate the relationship between Service Quality and students' satisfaction. Its elements are Institutional character; Academic profile; Public prominence; Employability and Endorsements. Desktop research approach was used to in synthesizing empirical literature to establish the gaps within the literature. The findings reveal that while service quality and institutional reputation independently influence student satisfaction, their interplay remains underexplored. Empirical evidence indicates a significant relationship between service quality and student satisfaction, which emphasize the critical dimensions of service quality in enhancing student experiences. However, the role of institutional reputation as a mediating factor in this relationship is insufficiently addressed in current literature.

Key words: *Service Quality, Institutional Reputation, Students' satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

Background

In the global economy, the significance of the service sector is increasing hence compelling companies to attract new customers. Educational institutions and universities are thus putting greater emphasis on meeting the expectation and needs of their students, who are their customers. Consequently, educational institutions are committing their operations to certain quality criteria that adopts a market orientation strategy which leads them to deliver superior quality services hence, differentiating them from their competitors (Thomas, 2011). According to Mashenene

(2019), institutions of higher learning globally have established quality assurance units or departments so as to monitor and control quality standards. The institutions of higher learning have found it necessary to pay more attention to service quality issues with heightened competition. It is expected that this will attract highly qualified students towards achieving highly qualified graduates.

The higher education sector is one of the fastest growing industries in Kenya. This has been informed by increased student enrolment, reduced government funding of public universities, heightened expectation of service quality by the overly savvy customers, emergence of competitive private universities and acquisition of middle level colleges by public universities to cater for excess demand (Owino 2013). Contrary to the customers' expectations, Ngware, Onsumu, and Manda (2005) observe that existing and projected supply of public education in Kenya continuously falls short of demand for quality education leading to low customer satisfaction. Corporate image or reputation is an antecedent or mediator of constructs regarding the evaluation of organizations, products or services individually or together with satisfaction (Thomas, 2011). Sik, Yuda and Nur (2012) continue to argue that service quality from an institution can give satisfaction to students while Kim (2010) suggests that reputation of an institution is influenced by the service quality provided by an institution. The greater the ability to provide a good quality education service and achieve stakeholder satisfaction, the higher the recruitment rate, reputation and ranking the education institution enjoys (Clarkson, 1998; Singh & Weligamage, 2012; Tetřevová, & Sabolová, 2010).

Service Quality

A service refers to any activity of benefit that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible and does not result in the ownership of anything tangible (Ramya, Kowsalya & Dharanipriya, 2019). Quality is a strategic tool for attaining operational efficiency and better performance of business. Hence, Ramya et al. (2019) argue that service quality is an assessment of how well a delivered service conforms to the client's expectations. Since students are the main stakeholders of institutions of higher learning, their experiences in engaging with different services provided during their student years comprise service quality (Jancey & Burns, 2013). According to Ahmed, Nawaz, Ahmad, Shaukat, Wasim-ul-Rehman and Ahmed (2010), service quality is a key performance measure in educational excellence and is a main strategic variable

for universities to create a strong perception in consumer's mind. Service quality in the field of higher education is an established fact that positive perceptions of service quality have a significant on student satisfaction (Alves and Raposo 2010). In higher education sector, there are four dimensions of service quality as proposed by (Owino 2013) namely human elements, non-human elements, core service and service blueprint. This paper will adopt these dimensions.

Institutional Reputation

Reputation refers to the observers' collective judgement of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time (Barnett, Jermier and Lafferty (2006). A university's reputation is a collective representations that the university's multiple constituents, that is internal and external constituents including the media hold of the university over time (Yang, Alessandri and Kinsey (2008). This study will regard corporate reputation from the students' perspective. Hence the study will adopt Wartick (1992) definition of corporate reputation thus: it is the aggregation of a single stakeholder's perception of how well organizational responses are meeting the demand and expectations of many stakeholders. The students' perspective is considered because service quality and satisfaction directly affect the students in line with institutional reputation. According to Simpson (2011), there are five elements that are important in higher education from the students' point of view including institutional character, academic profile, public prominence, employability and endorsements. This study will be based on these measurements. These elements will be used in this study as indicators of institutional reputation.

Students' Satisfaction

Customer satisfaction is the pleasure or disappointment that one feels after comparing the performance (outcome) of a product or perceived service quality in relation to the buyer's expectation (Kotler, 2001). Kotler and Keller (2012) state that customer satisfaction is achieved when the overall performance of the product comes across or reaches the customer's expectations and vice versa. In the context of higher education, students are the primary customers because they consciously choose and buy services (Kuh and Hu 2001; Sultan and Wong 2013). Furthermore, Elliott and Healy (2001) argued that student satisfaction is a short-term attitude, the result of their experience with the education services received. Sapri, Kaka and Finch (2009) posit that student satisfaction plays an important role in determining the accuracy

and authenticity of the services being provided. In support of this, (Barnett, 2011) stated that students' satisfaction is important as it is the only performance indicator of service quality for service providers of higher education. According Kara, Tanui and Kalai (2016), the dimensions of students satisfaction include quality of teaching facilities, availability of textbooks in libraries, administrative service quality, reliability of university examinations, perceived learning gains and quality of students' welfare services. These dimensions have been used in this paper as a measure of students' satisfaction.

Statement of the Problem

The increase in the significance of the service sector in the global economy is forcing educational institutions and universities to place a greater emphasis on meeting the expectation and needs of their customers "students". This has led educational institutions to commit themselves to certain quality criteria and adopt a market orientation strategy to differentiate themselves from their competitors by delivering superior quality services (Thomas, 2011). Poole, Harman, Snell, Deden and Murray (2000) contend that universities facing high competitive and commercial environment often turn to the strategy of addressing the quality of services delivered and related factors as a means of achieving a competitive advantage in this increasingly challenging environment. Oliver (1997) mentioned that satisfaction with the entity, for example a product or a service, is based on experience. On the other hand, (Ravald & Grönroos, 1996) stated that customers' appreciation is not only the focal product, but is the organization supplying the product or services.

Studies that have been done globally, regionally and locally have not brought out the integrated relationship between service quality, institutional reputation and students' satisfaction. They have only shown partial relationships on either one or two variables that this paper is focusing on. For instance, Hassan and Shamsudin (2019) carried out a study on measuring the effect of service quality and corporate image on student satisfaction and loyalty in higher learning institutes of technical and vocational education and training. The findings indicated that there is a significant and direct effects of service quality and corporate image on student satisfaction and student loyalty. Mansori, Vaz and Ismail (2014) investigated the relationship between service quality, satisfaction and student loyalty in Malaysian private Education. Their findings indicated that the

level of students' overall satisfaction is mostly affected by tangibility. In yet another study, Wong, Woo and Tong (2012) sought to determine the moderating role of student loyalty and school image on the relationship between student satisfaction and school reputation. The results found out that student loyalty and school image had full moderating influence on the relationship between student satisfaction and school reputation.

In addition, Bakrie, Sujanto and Rugaiyah (2019) assessed the influence of service quality, institutional reputation, students' satisfaction on students' loyalty in higher education institution. This was a case study since the researchers focused on only one university. The study results showed that service quality has a significant effect on reputation and student satisfaction but service quality and student satisfaction have no significant effect on student loyalty. However, institutional reputation was found to have a very significant direct effect on loyalty while service quality has a significant indirect effect on student loyalty through institutional reputation.

Locally, Owino (2013) investigated the influence of service quality and corporate image on customer satisfaction among university students in Kenya. The findings of the study concluded that there is a strong influence on customer satisfaction by service quality even though there may be other factors that affect customer satisfaction. On the other hand, Kara, Tanui and Kalai (2016) assessed the relationship between educational service quality and students' satisfaction in public universities in Kenya. The study findings concluded that the educational service quality dimensions had a significant combined effect on students' satisfaction. In yet another study, Maore (2019) sought to establish the influence of brand management attributes, corporate image, customer characteristics and customer satisfaction among undergraduate university students in Kenya. The study results indicated that brand management attributes have a significant influence on customer satisfaction among university students in Kenya. In addition, Nteere (2021) sought to establish the influence of quality service on customer satisfaction among the students of institutions of higher learning. This was a case study of the co-operative university of Kenya. The study results show that there exists a significant relationship between quality service and customer satisfaction.

The above literature shows that there lacks an adequate integrated framework of service quality, institutional reputation and students' satisfaction in a university context. Conceptual frameworks

that involve service quality and institutional reputation as variables affecting students' satisfaction have partial explanations. Moreover, there are contradicting findings in some studies whereby service quality was found not have a significant influence of customer satisfaction. This paper focuses on the influence of service quality and institutional reputation on students' satisfaction in public universities in Kenya.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs a systematic literature review approach which allows for a comprehensive analysis of existing empirical studies. The design focuses on collating and synthesizing findings related to Institutional Reputation, Service Quality Student Satisfaction. The literature search strategy that was employed entailed use of multiple databases such as google scholar, JSTOR, Scopus and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). The search used keywords and phrases such as “institutional reputation,” “service quality,” student satisfaction,” “Kenya universities,” and “higher education.” The inclusion criteria entailed studies published between 2000 and 2024; empirical studies focusing on universities; peer reviewed articles, theses and conference papers; studies that explicitly address the relationships among institution reputation, service quality and student satisfaction. Studies that were not focusing on universities were excluded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Service Quality and Student Satisfaction

The relationship between service quality and student satisfaction is well-established in the literature. For instance, Owino (2013) demonstrated a statistically significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction among university students in Kenya, indicating that better service quality directly enhances student satisfaction. The study identified a partial mediating effect of corporate image on this relationship, suggesting that while service quality is crucial, perceptions of the institution also play a significant role in shaping student experiences. Similarly, Kara *et al.* (2016) emphasized the importance of educational service quality dimensions such as the quality of teaching facilities, administrative services, and students' welfare services on student satisfaction in public universities. Their findings corroborate the idea

that high-quality educational services contribute significantly to positive student experiences. However, the studies reviewed also highlight a gap regarding the role of institutional reputation in mediating the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction. While the existing research confirms the direct impact of service quality on satisfaction, it leaves unanswered questions about how institutional reputation might further influence this dynamic. For example, Kim (2010) established that both aspects of corporate reputation are influenced by service quality but did not explicitly connect these to student satisfaction, leaving a critical area for future exploration.

Institutional Reputation Students Satisfaction

The literature on institutional reputation underscores its significance in shaping student perceptions and behaviors. Iwu-Egwuonwu (2011) articulated that a strong corporate reputation is foundational for achieving competitive advantage, and this holds true in higher education settings as well. Eryilmaz (2016) found that the reputation of higher education institutions significantly affects students' intentions for future collaboration, highlighting the long-term implications of a positive institutional reputation. Awang and Jusoff (2009) further contributed to this discourse by illustrating that corporate reputation impacts competitive advantage through perceived value and quality of services. This finding suggests that institutional reputation could indirectly affect student satisfaction by influencing how students perceive the quality of the educational services offered. However, gaps remain in understanding the direct relationship between institutional reputation and student satisfaction. Most studies, such as those conducted by Lee and Roh (2012) focus on reputation's influence on performance metrics rather than directly linking it to student satisfaction outcomes. This oversight suggests an area ripe for further investigation.

Student Satisfaction Constructs

The studies reviewed also explore various constructs that predict student satisfaction. Arambewela and Hall (2007) identified multiple factors influencing satisfaction, such as education quality, social interactions, and prestige. Their mixed-method approach provided an understanding of how diverse elements interact to shape student experiences, yet it did not isolate the impacts of service quality and institutional reputation as distinct variables. Furthermore, it was found out that students' satisfaction is influenced by the overall quality of

services, reinforcing the notion that improving both academic and non-academic services is crucial for enhancing satisfaction levels (Gruber *et al.* 2010; Petruzzellis, D’Uggento, and Romanazzi 2006). However, these studies predominantly examined satisfaction without delving deeply into how reputation and service quality interact, leaving a gap in understanding the holistic picture.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The empirical evidence indicates that while service quality and institutional reputation independently influence student satisfaction, their interrelationships remain underexplored. For instance, Mansori *et al.* (2014) illustrated that service quality directly impacts student loyalty and satisfaction, but they did not consider how reputation mediates this relationship. This gap is echoed across several studies that focus primarily on one aspect without addressing the broader context of the other two. The findings suggest that universities aiming to enhance student satisfaction should not only focus on improving service quality but also actively cultivate a positive institutional reputation. The interplay between these factors could lead to better student outcomes, but current research does not fully explain this relationship.

In conclusion, the empirical review highlights significant findings regarding the independent effects of service quality and institutional reputation on student satisfaction while revealing gaps in understanding their interdependencies. Future research should aim to explore these relationships more comprehensively, particularly focusing on the mediating effects of institutional reputation. Addressing these gaps will provide valuable insights for educational institutions seeking to improve student experiences and satisfaction in the Kenyan higher education context.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical review of literature concerning service quality, institutional reputation, and student satisfaction in universities, several recommendations emerge that can guide future research and practice in this area as follows:

Further exploration of interrelationships should be done hence future studies should focus on the interrelationships between service quality, institutional reputation, and student satisfaction. Research should explicitly investigate the mediating role of institutional reputation in the relationship between service quality and student satisfaction, as suggested by gaps identified in previous studies. Understanding these interconnections will provide a more comprehensive framework for universities to enhance their services and reputation, leading to increased student satisfaction. Future research should incorporate a broader range of variables that influence student satisfaction, such as demographic factors, socio-economic status, and cultural background. This could help to identify specific student needs and preferences in different contexts. Diverse variables can yield more insights into what drives student satisfaction and how service quality and institutional reputation can be tailored to meet these varied needs.

Longitudinal studies should be conducted to assess how changes in service quality and institutional reputation over time affect student satisfaction and loyalty. This approach could provide insights into how sustained efforts in improving these areas impact student perceptions and experiences. Longitudinal studies can capture the dynamic nature of student satisfaction and help institutions to track the effectiveness of interventions over time. Additionally, researchers should develop and validate comprehensive measurement tools that can accurately assess service quality, institutional reputation, and student satisfaction. The SERVQUAL model, while useful, may need adaptation to fit the specific context of higher education in Kenya. Reliable measurement tools will enhance the validity of findings and enable more effective comparisons across different studies and contexts.

Universities should actively engage various stakeholders, including students, faculty, and alumni, in discussions about service quality and institutional reputation. Regular feedback mechanisms, such as surveys and focus groups, should be implemented to gather insights and suggestions. Engaging stakeholders ensures that improvements in service quality and reputation are aligned with the actual needs and expectations of the university community, leading to higher satisfaction levels. Universities should further develop strategic marketing and communication plans that emphasize their unique strengths and reputational attributes. This includes showcasing quality services, successful alumni, and collaborative initiatives. A strong marketing strategy can enhance institutional reputation, attract prospective students, and improve current student satisfaction by reinforcing positive perceptions of the university.

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