Comparative Analysis of Business Students' Perceptions of Service Quality Offered in Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to ascertain business students' perception of quality of service provided by public and private universities in Kenya. As a comparative study, it aimed at understanding how various factors or dimensions of service quality affected their perception within a university setting. The comparison was between two public and two private universities located in rural and urban settings in Kenya. A survey design of cross sectional nature was used to assess business students' perception of service quality. A 7-point likert scale questionnaire was used. It contained 73 statements about university administration, lecture halls, students' cafeteria, library, residential halls, switch board, student support, academic staff, general institution and students' welfare. The questionnaire also contained statements about overall quality of the institution, students' feelings about the institution and their future visits in addition to the background data of the respondents. A total of 424 questionnaires were used for analysis.

Findings indicated that most university students were positive about the quality of service they received in their respective universities with overall mean scores above average. The important dimensions or factors that determined service quality in Kenya universities were administrative quality, academic quality, programs quality, student support, and availability of resources.

The comparative analysis indicated that the Rural Private university perception was most positive leading with an average score of 5.25, followed by Urban Public university (4.42), Urban Private university (4.22) and Rural Public university (4.07) in that order on a scale of 7.0. One of the limitations of this study was in the sample whereby the study measured only business students' perceptions and left out all the other students taking other degree programmes. This limits the generalization of the findings across universities. The managerial implication is that measuring students perceptions of service quality enables a university to prioritize important factors identified as important by the students for effective allocation of resources. Comparing perceptions across the universities is critical for benchmarking and collaborative accreditations.

Keywords: Service quality, Higher education, Perception

1. Introduction

In today's competitive environment, rendering quality service is a key for success, and many experts concur that the most powerful competitive tool currently reshaping marketing and business strategy is service quality. Over the years,

service quality has been linked with increased profitability and is seen as providing an important competitive advantage by generating repeat sales, positive word of mouth feedback, customer loyalty and competitive product and service differentiation.

As Zeithaml, Bitner and Glemler (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Glemler, 2009) point out that the issue of highest priority involves understanding the impact of service quality on profit and other financial outcomes of the organization. Service quality spreads from business to education. Many higher education institutions have been stimulated and influenced by service quality both for teaching and administrative support functions. Focusing on the customer is an essential principle of service quality, and the customers for the services of a higher education institution fall into five groups; the students, the employees, the government and the public sector, and the industry and wider community (Martensen, Gronholdt, Elkildsen, & Kristensen, 2000). The primary customers are the students (Wallace, 1999). Thus, without students to teach there is no business for higher education institutions or service to provide. As if to validate the status of students as the customer, on behalf of the UK government, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) introduces a National Student Survey aiming at final year students, seeking their views on a number of aspects of course teaching, assessment and support provided by their universities. The survey assumes that students are, inter alia, customers of the higher education institution at which they enrolled (HEFCE, 2003 as quoted by Douglas, et.al, 2008). The growth in importance of service quality has been influenced greatly by the changing nature of the world economies and the customers' changing needs, tastes and preferences. The move has also been fueled by the growth in consumerism, world travel and the competitive business environments. Service quality has become a critical factor in enabling firms to achieve a differential advantage over their competitors and thus, it makes a significant contribution to profitability and productivity (Sanchez, et.al, 2007). Indeed, service quality has become a key concept in a competitive corporate strategy. Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1988) identified two major payoffs of quality; quality creates true customers and it leads to efficiencies. Excellent service pays off because it creates true customers who are like annuities. They keep pumping revenues into an organization. Quality improvements lead to operational efficiencies beyond those associated with scale economies. This is because, quality improvements, (both in products and services) lowers defects, service errors and customer complaints. Thus service quality does pay.

1.1. Service Quality in Higher Education

Service quality is a pervasive strategic force and a key strategic issue in any organization. It is no surprise that practitioners and academics alike are keen on accurately measuring and understanding issues affecting service quality delivery. Today, many universities are being driven towards commercial competition imposed by environmental challenges. Tertiary institutions, in general, need to be concerned not only with what the society values in the skills and abilities of their graduates, but also how their students feel about their educational experience (Bemowski, 1991). A survey conducted by Owlia and Aspinwall (1997) examined the views of different professional and practitioners on the quality in higher education. They concluded that customer-orientation in higher education is a generally accepted principle. They construed that from the different customers of higher education, students were given the highest rank. Thus, students' experience in a university should be a key issue of which performance indicators need to address. It therefore becomes important to identify determinant or critical factors affecting students perception of the quality of service that they receive since they are the primary customers. Research in the area of students perception on overall service quality in universities may be scanty. However, student evaluation of teaching quality in higher education is a well organized practice and research on the subject has been conducted for many years (ONeil, 1997). The merits of student evaluation have been well debated, with some academics arguing that students are not suitably qualified to judge quality of teaching (Wallace, 1999). Others have strongly supported use of student evaluation for quality assurance purposes (Oldfield, and Baron, 2000). The increasingly competitive environment has led to a number of higher education institutions to monitor levels of student satisfaction as an indicator of quality. This is consistent with the total quality management (TQM) approach. Wiklud and Wiklud (1999) reported that several universities are now adopting TQM and as a result, a customer focus has become core value for many. While the precept that students are customers is not universally accepted (Wallace, 1999) there has been growing support for the use of student satisfaction surveys as an indicator of teaching quality. Furthermore, Murray (1997) reports that the use of these surveys has led to measurable improvements in teaching quality. As such, student feedback can be used as an effective tool for quality enhancement. Harvey (1995) also advises that student satisfaction goes hand in hand with the development of a culture of continuous quality improvement.

1.2. Service Quality in Africa Higher Education

Many studies have been done in Africa in relation to quality of education. One of these studies was done by Bornman (2004) on programme review guidelines for quality assurance in higher education in South Africa. The research included

an investigation into national and international quality assurance models and the procedures, techniques and strategies relating to quality assurance and quality enhancement. In the literature report on interpretation and definition of quality of education, Bornman (2004) notes that since there are many actors involved (such as the students, lecturers, administration, government, professional bodies, employers and society in general) each with their own and sometimes conflicting interpretation of quality, it becomes difficult to arrive at a standard definition. He cautions that since the concept of quality does not lend itself to a straight forward interpretation, especially within the South African context, an open and flexible approach should be followed when dealing with quality in higher education. He further argues that in South Africa, there should rather be reference to notions of quality instead of a definition. These notions are: quality exemplified in an exceptionally high standard; quality as transformation; quality in terms of fitness for purpose; quality as quest for zero defect; quality as value for money and quality as a product evaluated against customer satisfaction. In addition, Bornman argues convincingly for education for sustainability which is bound to contribute to good quality teaching and learning in higher education. On programme evaluation, Bornman (2004) argues that educational programs should have criteria, standards, methods and measures for determining the level of knowledge, skills and abilities required of lecturers and students. He concluded that quality assurance requires a systematic, structures and continuous attention to quality in terms of quality maintenance and quality enhancement. Manyaga (2008) researched on the standards to assure quality in tertiary education in Tanzania and found out that accreditation standards were useful in instilling best practices in Education and training. However, education and training institutions needed to understand and practice them over time in order to bring about expected results. He concluded that ensuring quality in education is a multifaceted phenomenon that calls for the joint efforts of all stakeholders. Further he noted that the national Council for technical Education is one of the first regulating bodies in Africa to introduce academic quality standards in tertiary technical institutions and that since its inception, notable improvements had been recorded. Over the past the past twenty years, higher education in Kenya has experienced dramatic changes both in funding and in student numbers. Competitive advantage was an alien concept to the Higher education in Kenya before the 1990. The liberalization of the Kenyan economy in the 1990s saw massive expansion of higher education with students doubling with the 1990 intake (double intake of A level group and the 8-4-4- system group). It became clear that the government could no longer shoulder the cost of the system. Thus, from 1990, Kenyan university students were required to pay their fees and cater for their own accommodation. Over the years, this has placed great demand on the value and quality of education. The great expansion has also been witnessed among the private universities in Kenya putting great demand on quality of education under constrained budgets.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Recent years have seen a proliferation of work on the topic of service quality. Many researches have extensively investigated the nature of service quality and customer satisfaction (Sanchez, et.al, 2007; Harry, et al, 2007; Kara, et al, 2005). In addition researchers have explored in detail the antecedents of customer satisfaction (Hensley, and Sulek, 2007); Carmel and Weaven (2007) effects of service quality dimensions on behavioral intentions (Sanchez, et al, 2007), service quality and competitiveness (Rust, et al, 2000) culture and perceived quality (Kong, and Jogaratnam, 2007) and ethnicity and customer satisfaction (Jose, et al, 2007). Research in the area of students perception on overall service quality in universities as indicated earlier is scanty. This is especially so with the Kenyan universities. Many researches related to this have been done outside Africa. For instance, Maureen (Brookes, 2002) evaluated the students experience in UK, using a longitudinal survey. Richardson (2003) examined social presence in online courses in relation to students perceived learning and satisfaction in New York, while James Wisdom (1995) investigated on students views on graduate standards in UK. Firdaus (2006) measured service quality in higher education institutions in Malaysia using three different measuring scales. He suggested that HEdPERF scale was better suited to higher education service setting but recommended its application in other countries with different types of tertiary institutions in order to test whether the results he obtained were general and consistent across different samples. Martensen and Eskildsen (2000) measured student oriented quality in higher education using an adapted model of European Customer satisfaction Index (ECSI). They found out that the model could reliably measure student satisfaction and quality evaluations for many study programs for many higher education institutions. The work of Zeithmal et al. (2009) suggests that one of the prime issues of poor performance in service organizations is not knowing customers expectations. Thus institutions of higher learning are bound to fail if they do not have an accurate understanding of what customers expect of them. In addition, the growing level of competition that can be observed in many Kenyan universities requires an evaluation of factors that can fully explain which aspects of service quality largely determine students' perception of the quality of service that they receive. This study investigated the factors that greatly contribute to students' perception of the entire university environment. In other words, it addressed the question; what factors contribute to overall students' perception of service quality in a university?

1.4. The research questions

The major research questions for this study were;

1. What are the important dimensions/factors that determine service quality in Kenyan universities?

2. What is the nature and strength of relationship between service quality dimensions and perception?

3. Does perceived quality have an impact on student overall satisfaction?

4. Is there a correlation between the underlying dimensions of service quality and other demographic factors?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Perceptions on Service Quality

How customers perceive service quality is critical because it determines how they evaluate the service. Customers evaluate a service based on their expectations. Because expectations are dynamic, evaluations may also shift from time to time. Thus, how customers evaluate what they term as a quality service today, (based on some criterion) may change tomorrow. This calls for continuous monitoring and evaluations of service quality in any service firm. According to Zeithaml et al. (2009), service quality is a focused evaluation that reflects customers perceptions of reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy and tangibles.

2.2. Factors influencing Students' Perceptions

The conceptualization service quality within the institutions of higher learning (HE) is no different from conceptualizations in other service contexts. However, certain variables are found to be more specific to higher education settings. An empirical survey conducted in Japan and Thailand with university students identified a total of 10 factors of service quality which were grouped into three categories of services such as (Gamage, et al, 2008): academic; nonacademic; and facilities categories of service. In terms of the academic category, students considered quality of academic staff, quality of programs, and university reputation as important factors that influenced their perceptions of service quality. In the case of non-academic; financial assistance and tuition fees, counseling and support services, job placement services, and grievance procedures contributed to students' perceptions of service quality. Finally with respect to facilities, students considered physical plants and facilities, library and computing facilities, and student organizations as important factors in their perceptions of service quality. The results of the above study suggest that perceived quality has a positive impact on student overall satisfaction. Thus, students who had high positive perceptions of services being offered at their universities tended to report a higher level of overall satisfaction. This implies that, to maintain students' overall satisfaction, university administrators should enhance students' perceived quality. The results also suggested that academic factor most strongly impacts on students' overall satisfaction followed by the non-academic factors and finally the facilities factors. Another conceptualization of dimensions of service quality in higher education by Oldfield and Baron (2000) suggests that students perceived service quality within three dimensions: requisite elements; acceptable elements; and functional elements. Requisite elements are essential to enable students to fulfill their study obligations. Oldfield and Baron (2000) argue that it is to these items that course management teams must attend in order that students attain satisfaction with their studies. These items relate to duties carried out by non-academic staff, such as administrators or other Faculty support staff over whom the course management team may have no direct control. Further they noted that students are not interested in university organizational hierarchies, and expect all university staff to work together. Although higher education staff fall into discrete categories each undertaking very different tasks, co-ordination and communication between academic and non-academic staff must be managed to ensure appropriate quality of service for students. This raises the point that, in any attempt to deliver a quality service, those who exert control or influence upon any of these groups need to be constantly aware that interaction between students and staff lies at the heart of good service delivery. Oldfield and Baron (2000) also note that functional elements are largely of a practical or utilitarian nature, and are items which depend mainly on faculty or university rules or decisions, which cannot be altered unilaterally by course management teams. Students, although probably aware that front-line staff do not have the authority to change or adapt the rules, will nevertheless express disappointment or even anger if, for example, they regard IT equipment to be old-fashioned, or are not allowed to use the facilities during weekends. It is relatively easy for students to pinpoint these functional elements as inadequate and then question about service quality and value for their fees/money. The challenge is for course teams to persuade the appropriate decision-makers to address the functional issues as a priority. The third elements identified by Oldfield and Baron are the acceptable elements which are desirable, but not necessarily essential for students in their course of study. They relate largely to the way in which academic staff treats the students. With limited resources, Oldfield and Baron (2000) argued that these elements may be of a lower priority than those in the requisite and functional factors. However, an improvement in the student perceptions of these elements can result from management attention to certain details, rather than any investment in additional

resources. For example, any student perception that academic staff are too busy to respond to requests for assistance, or to give individual attention to them, may be changed through clear communication of staff availabilities, well-organized and understood appointment systems, and a staff commitment to the agreed systems. It need not involve any extra staff time. Equally, showing courtesy and a sincere interest towards students does not cost anything, but can reap great benefits. A related study was done by Douglas et al. (2008) in the UK at Liverpool John Moores University. The purpose of the study was to identify variables/determinants of student perceived quality and the impact of those variables on student satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with the overall student experience. Their findings indicated that responsiveness, communication and access are the critical areas that education managers need to focus upon. For students, the main sources of dissatisfaction are attitude, responsiveness, tangibles, teamwork, communication, management, access and socialization. Boyd et al. (1998) studied student satisfaction at Curtin University of technology. The study examined distant students' perceptions regarding assignments, turnaround, and tutor availability, feelings of isolation, student workload and use of technology in the learning environment. Their findings as expressed by students, indicated long assignment turnaround time, difficult in contacting tutors, workload, especially readings, feelings of isolation and use of various technologies in their learning. They recommended use of good quality instructional materials, negotiation of reasonable teaching/tutoring load, initiating and maintaining a reasonable level of communication with students, using appropriate technology and maintaining genuine interest in the students. Another conceptual study was done by Benoit et al. (1998) on the emerging contribution of online resources and tools to classroom learning and teaching trends in higher education. They came up with seven themes: the emergence of a new mixed mode of learning (face to face and on-line learning activities); information access is more direct interactive and flexible; social interaction recovers its importance in the learning process; the learning community, supported by networked technologies, is a new collaborative learning arrangement being tested in a great number of ways; computer resources are used to enlarge the notion of performance as regards teaching and learning on university campuses; the university as an institution is invited to adapt its activity to new higher education needs; and finally, the computer linked to other computers constitutes an important element in the modification of academic administrative procedures at both the micro and macro levels. Similarly, Thurmond and Wambach (2004) did a conceptual study towards an understanding of interaction in distance education. They aimed at explaining the interaction activities pertaining to distant education and web based courses. They identified four types of interaction activities: a) learner- content interaction which results from student examining/studying the course contents and participating in class activities- factors that affect student perception of learning the course content included continuous contact with the content, clarity of course design, time, participation in on-line discussion and mode of delivering the course content; b) learner-learner interaction indicates that students who interact more on web based courses may perceive greater learning; c) learner- instructor interaction variables included face to face interaction, timely feedback, course performance and presence while d) learner interface variables included computer experience, perception of technology being used, and access to technology. Petruzzellis et al. (2006) investigated student satisfaction and quality of service in university of Bari in Italy. The university was experiencing a process of repositioning due to various events that had damaged its image. As regards students satisfaction the main factors were good response to the students needs in general along with good level of education and the location of the university. Similarly, Tsinidou et al. (2010) did a study on factors determining quality in higher education in Greece among Business and Economics students. The main variables or factors of importance were: academic staff, administrative service, library service, curriculum structure, location, facilities, and career prospects. He used factor analysis to come up with important factors on each of the above sub-criterion. The findings indicated that on academic staff criterion, students rated communication skills as the most important; on administrative service, clear guidelines and advice was most ranked; on library service, students wanted availability of text books and journals; on curriculum structure, students valued practical or hands on experience; on location, an important factor was cost of transportation; on facilities, students were concerned about quality classrooms and laboratories (infrastructure) while on career prospects, students were keen on perspectives for a professional career.

3. Research Design and Methodology

A cross sectional survey was adopted for this study to evaluate the business students perception of the entire university environment. This design helped to describe the nature of perception that business students have in terms of the various factors that affected their perception. Data was collected by means of a structured questionnaire which was adopted from a modified HedPERF scale developed by Firdaus (2005). Arguably, this scale has the advantage of being more specific in the area of higher education sector. The target population comprised all university business students in public and private universities in Kenya. A sample size (n) of 436 business students was feasible for this study. Only undergraduate full time students were targeted for this study. Table 1 provides an analysis of the target population and the sample size of each of the four universities.

Three- way stratification of students was used based on public/private University, rural/urban setting and the year of study. A survey method using self completion questionnaires was used to collect data from a sample of 436 students. The questionnaire contained instructions to assist students in answering the questions and a statement as to purpose of the study. Data was collected by the researcher using direct contact approach. Using systematic sampling design, questionnaires were distributed to students in their respective classes as they waited for their lecture or at the end of the lecturer. This is in line with other studies such as Prugsamatz, Pentecost and Ofstad (2006) who distributed questionnaires to students at the end of lecture; and Pariseau and McDaniel (1997) who used the first few minutes of class and got 100% response rate; and Gamage et al. (2008) who distributed and collected questionnaires during the particular lecture session. A pre-testing of the questionnaire was done with approximately 30 students of an urban private university. This helped to check for any perceived ambiguity, omissions or errors. Responses indicated that the draft questionnaire was rather lengthy but this coincided with the feedback of Firdaus study of Malysian Mara University of technology in 2005.

4. Findings

Out of 436 questionnaires distributed for the study, 424 come back in good condition for analysis. This gave a response rate of 97%. Information about the age, gender, year of study, sponsorship status and nationality was sought in order to check whether these variables had an impact on perception. Again, out of 424 respondents, 222 were male and 202 were females. Most of these respondents (394) were aged between 18-24. The ratio of male versus female was higher in all universities except the Urban Private university (UPV) where females were more than males (RPB 70:47, UPB 64:44, RPV 13:10 and UPV 75:101). These statistics coincide with the registrars' records provided by the universities. On the year of study, year 1 had 97 respondents, year 2 had 24, year 3 had 91 and year 4 had 112 respondents. Majority of the respondents were self sponsored (307) and only 117 were government sponsored. The 117 were from UPB University. Majority of the students (416) were of Kenyan nationality and only 8 were from other nationalities (RPVRural Private University, UPV- Urban Private University, RPB- Rural Public University, UPB- Urban Public University).

4.1. Dimensions/factors that determine service quality in Kenyan universities

The students identified a number of factors important to them in their perception of service quality in universities. The 5 most important factors arranged in order of importance are (Table 2); Administrative quality, academic quality, program quality, student support and availability of resources in that order. It important to note that summation of eigenvalue (above 0.500) in each factor indicated very close totals of administrative and academic quality.

A further break down of important factors on the following aspects of the universities is described below. Table 3 and Table 4 provide a very comprehensive comparison on perception across the four universities on the dimensions tested in this study.

4.2. Students' perception relating to university administration

The rotated factor scores for the important determinants of service quality within university administration using Varimax with Kaiser normalization resulted in four important factors arranged in order of importance as follows (Table 5);

• Confidence (students agreed that the university administration respected their confidential disclosures and kept their information (transcripts) confidential);

• Empathy (students agreed that administration staff kept their promises, had positive attitude towards them, communicated well with them, dealt with their inquiries /complaints efficiently and promptly; and that the staff were always courteous and polite);

• Speed and accuracy (students agreed that administrative staff kept accurate records and were retrievable; released transcripts on time; and provided prompt services);

• Tangibles (students agreed that physical facilities in relation to administration are visually appealing).

A comparison of the four universities on the students perception of administrative staff showed that the RPV university was leading with a average mean score of 4.54, followed by the UPB university (3.83), RPB University (3.60) and UPV university (3.56) in that order. All the four universities were above average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.3. Students perception relating to university lecture halls

Data analysis in relation to university lecture halls showed that students rated well lit and conducive for learning, are clean and neatly arranged and the university has up to date equipment as numbers 1, 2, and 3 most satisfactory aspects. The first two factors in relation to lecturer halls are in line with Gamage et al. (2008) findings on Japanese and Thai

students perception of university facilities where the cleanliness and tidiness of the lecture rooms was rated as number two. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the RPV Universitys lecture halls were ranked highest with an average score of 5.49, UPV University (4.77), UPB (4.43) and RPB (3.21). The RPB University was below average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.4. Students' perception relating to students' cafeteria

Generally students agreed that university cafeteria is always tidy and clean (4.12), provided variety of foods (3.74), charged fair prices (3.32), provided quick and courteous service (3.32) and food was always good and of right amount (2.67). Thus out of 5 variables, 2 scored above average while 3 scored below average. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the RPV University was rated highest with average score of 4.65, UPB (4.17), RPB (3.73) and UPV (3.21). The UPV university was below average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.5. Students perception towards the library

Generally students indicated that their university libraries provided convenient hours of operating (5.68), was clean and quiet (5.39), quick library service (4.25), friendly and courteous staff (4.13) and had available resource materials (3.80). Thus the library score was above average in all the five factors. However, the availability of resource materials should be improved. These findings are related to Gamage et al. (2008) whereby Thai students rated library provides quite study area as the most satisfying aspect. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the RPV university was rated highest with average score of 5.58, UPV (4.41), UPB (4.43), and RPB (4.22). All universities were above average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.6. Students perception relating to the residential halls

Students generally agreed that the halls of residence were conducive for socialization (4.42), were always clean (4.20), had courteous staff (3.98) and the residential halls facilities and equipment were adequate (3.66). Thus the general perception towards the residential halls was positive and above average. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the RPV university was rated highest with average score of 4.61, UPV (4.20), UPB (4.17), and RPB (3.55). All universities were above average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.7. Students perception relating to the switch board

The general perception was that calls were quickly answered (3.87) and that the staff had friendly and helpful tone (3.84). Comparing this aspect across the four universities, RPV university was rated highest with average score of 4.54, UPV (3.93), UPB(3.80), and RPB(3.60). All universities were above average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.8. Students perception relating to student support

The general agreement was that universities offered grants/scholarships to their students (4.22), supported them with work study when needed (4.21) and offered employment to their graduates (3.44). Comparing this aspect across the four universities, RPV University was rated highest with average score of 4.49, UPV (4.45), UPB (3.65), and RPB (3.35). The RPB University was rated below average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.9. Students' perception relating to academic staff

Examination of students satisfaction with academic staff revealed that academic staff (Table 6) were professional had knowledge relating to course, were highly educated and experienced in their respective fields, were caring and courteous, had positive attitude towards students, communicated well in class and were always ready to help and were available for students by allocating sufficient and convenient time for consultation, were easily contacted by phone, respected students confidentiality and provided feedback on time. These findings are in line with Gamage et al.(2008) findings whereby Thai students rated my lecturers have appropriate credentials and my lecturer treat student with respect as the two most satisfactory aspects. The Japanese students rated my lecturers are approachable and display a friendly demeanor as the third most satisfactory aspects. These results support Lowmans (1994) study of award winning teachers whereby Lowman notes that interpersonal rapport is a critical aspect in the classroom. Thus administrators need to be aware that relationships and interactions between student and academic staff lies at the heart of good service delivery. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the RPV University was rated highest with average score of 5.45, UPV (4.93), UPB (4.43), and RPB (4.20). All universities were rated above average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.10. Students' perception relating to institution

Factor analysis (Table 7) of statements relating to institution condensed 16 statements into only three factors which were generally named reliability students felt secure and confident while dealing with their institutions, agreed that graduates were easily employed and provided services within expected time frame, flexibility institutions offered wide range of

programs with various specialization, offered programs with flexible syllabus and structure, classes were kept to minimum to allow for personal attention, had ideal location with excellent campus layout and appearance ; and offered highly reputable programs and adequate facilities had standardized and simple service delivery procedures, hostel facilities and equipment were adequate, health services were adequate, recreational facilities and equipment were adequate, academic facilities and equipment were adequate and their institutions promoted excellent counseling services. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the RPV university was rated highest with average score of 5.20, UPB (4.31), UPV (4.17), , and RPB (3.60). All universities were rated above average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.11. Students' perception relating to student concern

Students agreed that their universities encouraged and promoted student union (4.28), are given fair amount of freedom (4.02), are treated equally and with respect by staff (3.67) and their institutions value their feedback to improve service performance (3.39). The aspect of student feedback seemed less valued by the universities. A lot of weight needs to be given to students' feedback because they are the main stakeholders of these institutions. Comparing this aspect across the four universities, the UPB University was rated highest with average score of 4.28, RPB (4.01), RPV(3.86) and UPV (3.45). The UPV University was rated below average (3.5) (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.12. Students' overall satisfaction

The overall quality of the institutions' service was rated highly with the RPV university leading with an average score of 5.25, followed by UPB (4.42), UPV (4.22) and RPB (4.07). Students' feelings about their institutions were positive with RPV leading (4.80), UPB (4.54), RPB(4.05) and UPV (3.89). Students visit to their institutions in the future was positive with RPV University leading (4.95), UPB (4.91), RPB (4.69) and UPV (4.42). These findings contradict Holm-Nielsen ((2001) who contended that the quality and relevance of research, teaching and learning has continued to decline in public tertiary education institutions, citing that many universities operate with overcrowded and deteriorating physical facilities, limited and obsolete library resources, insufficient equipment and instructional materials, outdated curricula, unqualified teaching staff, poorly prepared secondary students and an absence of academic rigor and systematic evaluation of performance (Table 3 and Table 4).

4.13. Nature and strength of relations between service quality dimensions and perception

The correlation analysis showed no relationship between service quality dimensions and perception. Neither was there a correlation between the various demographic variables and perception. Jennifer Richardson (2003) found a significant correlation between gender and students' overall perception of social presence while correlations between both age and number of college credits earned were not statistically significant. Thus, it can be concluded that these factors of service quality have a cumulative effect on perception and are therefore complementary factors which cannot be treated solely.

4.14. Impact of perceived quality on student overall satisfaction

The findings (Table 3 and Table 4) indicate that perceived service quality has a positive impact on student overall satisfaction. Students' perception of the various aspects of service quality within the universities correlated highly with overall satisfaction. This implies that to maintain students overall satisfaction, university administrators should pay attention to the various aspects of service quality and how they have been rated. These aspects are the quality of administrative staff, academic staff, facilities (library, classrooms, and computing facilities) and student support.

4.15. Correlation between the underlying dimensions of service quality and other demographic factors

The findings showed no correlation between perception and the demographic variables. As indicated earlier, these factors of service quality have a cumulative effect on perception and are therefore complementary factors which cannot be treated solely. The managerial implication is that service quality dimensions should not be treated in isolation since they have a cumulative effect on perception and overall satisfaction. These findings contradict Abouchedid and Nasser (2002) study that found significant differences in a Lebanon private university's students' attitudes among different faculties as well as by gender and status (old, new students).

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of this study suggest that students are positive about their perception of the quality of service they receive in their respective universities. Their most important determinant of service quality is administrative quality. In other words, students perceive administrative quality to be more important than other dimensions in determining quality of service they receive. Administrative quality is concerned with such elements as keeping accurate records, providing prompt service, courtesy, providing individualized attention, showing sincere interest to students, proper communication and having good knowledge of systems and procedures.

5.1. Managerial implications/ recommendations

5.1.1. Prioritizing service quality dimensions

While the idea of providing superior service on all dimensions identified by students may seem attractive to university management, failure to prioritize the important attributes may result in inefficient allocation of resources. Crosby (1984) defined quality as conforming to requirements. This implies that universities must continuously establish requirements and specifications which their primary customers (students) want and try to meet those requirements. Students identified many factors that affect their perception. The managerial implication is that service quality dimensions should not be treated in isolation since they have a cumulative effect on perception and overall satisfaction. Thus, concentrating on perfecting one factor, say administrative quality and ignoring other factors such as student support or academic staff availability, may result to poor overall perception of service quality.

5.1.2. Benchmarking

The rank ordering of the four universities has a lot of implications on benchmarking against their own performance and against the best in each category. The four universities can learn a lot from each other on the various dimensions of service quality in reference to how they were perceived. Table 3 and Table 4 provide a very comprehensive comparison on perception across the four universities on all dimensions tested in this study.

5.1.3. Continuous improvement

In order to continuously improve on service quality, universities must continuously facilitate service quality and customer care training within different departments in the faculty/departments of commerce.

5.1.4. Service quality as a competitive tool

As competition for students has escalated among colleges and universities, student attraction and retention should be given great attention. Since service quality and student satisfaction are important factors in attraction and retention, it is important that faculties/business schools continuously measure service quality. In describing the TQM implementation at Oregon State University, Coate (1990) noted that quality is what our customers tell us it is, not what we say it is.

6. Future Studies

This study is limited to results from only four universities in Kenya. In order to provide benchmarking data more effectively, it would be helpful to collect data from all universities offering business studies in Kenya. This would provide business schools with the ability to benchmark themselves against their own performance and those of the best school. Business students' perceptions' alone is not enough for any university. Further research is needed with broader and more randomized samples across the various degree programs of Kenyan universities. In addition, students are one of the major stakeholders of any university. Education quality is not defined by a single group of customers. It is important to study the perceptions of other stakeholders such as the staff, employers, sponsors, alumni, and the government among others.

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Table. 1. An analysis of the target population and the sample size of each of the four universities

Public/private	Public		Public		Private		Private	
Rural/urban	Rural		Urban		Rural		Urban	
	RPB		UPB		RPV		UPV	
	N	n	N	n	N	n	N	n
Year 1	386	39	312	31	60	6	352	35
Year 2	383	38	268	27	37	4	501	50
Year 3	140	14	287	29	70	7	483	48
Year 4	265	27	291	29	93	9	438	44
Total	1174	117	1158	116	260	26	1774	177
Key N- Population n- sample RPB- Rural Public University UPB- Urban Public University RPV- Rural Private University UPV- Urban Private University								

Table 2. Factor Analysis

Factor	Factor loadings
Administrative quality	6.72
Academic quality	6.58
Program quality	5.68
Student support	4.15
Availability of resources	3.48

Table 3. Comparison of mean scores across universities

University Administration	UPV	RPB	UPB	RPV	Total Mean
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
A1. The university administration has up to date equipment	2.95	3.04	3.86	4.74	3.31
A2. The university's physical facilities are visually appealing	3.86	3.04	3.98	5.13	3.74
A3. The university's admin. employees are normally well dressed and appear neat	4.81	4.48	4.58	5.00	4.67
A4. The Admin offices keep its records accurately and retrievable	2.58	4.34	4.10	4.50	3.55
A5. Admin. Staff provides prompt services	2.70	3.36	3.07	4.39	3.07
A6. Admin. Staff are always courteous and polite	3.48	3.31	3.46	4.43	3.48
A7. My information/transcripts are kept confidential	4.73	4.48	4.88	5.17	4.72
A8. Provide caring and individualized attention	3.60	2.94	3.32	4.87	3.42
A9. The operating hours are convenient for me	4.54	4.33	4.56	4.91	4.51
A10. The certificates/transcripts are released on time	1.97	3.00	3.67	3.77	2.78
A11. Admin staff show a sincere interest in solving my problem	3.15	3.31	3.44	4.13	3.32
A12. Deal with inquires/complaints efficiently and promptly	2.79	3.00	3.16	3.83	3.00
A13. Are never too busy to respond to a request for assistance	3.33	3.17	3.33	3.78	3.31
A14. Admin. staff keep their promises	3.08	2.98	3.38	3.91	3.18

A15. Admin. staff show positive work attitude towards students	3.84	3.52	3.83	4.70	3.80
A16. Admin. staff communicate well with Students	3.83	3.66	4.04	4.95	3.90
A17. Admin. staff have good knowledge of Systems/procedures	3.83	4.38	4.32	4.57	4.15
A18. Are easily contacted by telephone	3.80	3.79	3.45	5.05	3.77
A19. Respect my confidentiality when I disclose information to them	4.67	4.19	4.39	4.38	4.45
Average	**3.56**	**3.60**	**3.83**	**4.54**	**3.69**
University Lecture Halls	**UPV**	**RPB**	**UPB**	**RPV**	**Total Mean**
	Mean	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	
A20. The university has up to date equipment	3.60	2.46	3.69	4.90	3.37
A21. The lecture halls are always clean and Neatly arranged	4.96	3.50	4.42	5.38	4.44
A22. The lecture halls are well lit for Conducive for learning	5.75	3.65	5.18	6.18	5.04
Average	**4.77**	**3.21**	**4.43**	**5.49**	**4.28**
University Cafeteria	**UPV**	**RPB**	**UPB**	**RPV**	**Total Mean**
	Mean	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	
A23. I get quick and courteous service	2.87	3.28	3.86	4.52	3.32
A24. The food is always good and of right Amount	2.07	2.99	3.01	4.23	2.67
A25. The operating hours are convenient for me	4.49	4.25	3.72	5.50	4.28
A26. Provides variety of foods to choose from	3.36	4.09	3.79	4.64	3.74
A27. The prices charged are fair	1.91	3.83	5.13	3.27	3.32
A28. The staff are neat and clean	3.92	3.92	4.84	5.27	4.23
A29. Cafeteria is always tidy and clean	3.85	3.72	4.80	5.09	4.12
Average	**3.21**	**3.73**	**4.17**	**4.65**	**3.67**
University Library	**UPV**	**RPB**	**UPB**	**RPV**	**Total Mean**
	Mean	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	
A30. The library staff are friendly and courteous	4.06	3.82	4.32	5.35	4.13
A31. The library services are quick/fast	4.15	4.15	4.28	5.39	4.25
A32. It is easy to access online journals	3.23	3.18	3.17	5.05	3.30
A33. The library is always clean and quite	5.66	5.14	5.08	6.00	5.39
A34. It has available resource materials	3.18	4.10	4.07	5.74	3.80
A35. The operating hours are convenient for me	6.16	4.91	5.67	5.96	5.68
Average	**4.41**	**4.22**	**4.43**	**5.58**	**4.43**
University Residential Halls	**UPV**	**RPB**	**UPB**	**RPV**	**Total Mean**
	Mean	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	
A36. They are always clean	4.52	3.62	3.98	5.18	4.20
A37. The staff are always courteous	4.04	3.46	4.20	4.55	3.98
A38. Are conducive for socialization	4.38	3.88	5.05	3.95	4.42
A39. The facilities and equipment are adequate	3.85	3.24	3.47	4.77	3.66
Average	**4.20**	**3.55**	**4.17**	**4.61**	**4.06**
University Switch Board	**UPV**	**RPB**	**UPB**	**RPV**	**Total Mean**
	Mean	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	
A40. Have a friendly and helpful tone	3.92	3.60	3.77	4.48	3.84
A41. Answers calls quickly	3.94	3.61	3.82	4.61	3.87
Average	**3.93**	**3.60**	**3.80**	**4.54**	**3.86**
Student Support	**UPV**	**RPB**	**UPB**	**RPV**	**Total Mean**
	Mean	**Mean**	**Mean**	**Mean**	
A42. Supports me with work study when needed	4.40	4.02	3.97	4.83	4.21
A43. Offers employment to its graduates	3.76	2.91	3.38	3.87	3.44
A44. Offers grants/scholarships to students	5.19	3.13	3.60	4.78	4.22
Average	**4.45**	**3.35**	**3.65**	**4.49**	**3.96**

Table 4. Comparison of mean scores across universities continued

University Academic Staff	UPV	RPB	UPB	RPV	Total Mean
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
B1. Have the knowledge relating to the course content	5.55	4.71	5.33	5.77	5.28
B2. Deal with me in a caring and courteous manner	4.89	4.08	4.37	5.23	4.56
B3. Always ready to help	5.11	4.25	4.33	5.73	4.71
B4. Highly educated and experienced in their respective fields	5.35	4.88	5.46	5.90	5.28
B5. Have a sincere interest to solve my problems	4.99	4.01	4.21	5.52	4.55
B6. Show positive attitude towards students	5.03	4.11	4.36	5.05	4.61
B7. Communicate well in class	5.10	4.46	4.76	5.09	4.83
B8. Provide feedback on time	4.50	3.83	4.27	5.09	4.29
B9. Allocate sufficient and convenient time for consultation	4.02	3.56	3.37	5.27	3.79
B10. Are easily contacted by telephone	4.60	4.15	3.80	5.73	4.33
B11. Respect my confidentiality when I disclose information to them	5.12	4.18	4.45	5.59	4.72
Average	**4.93**	**4.20**	**4.43**	**5.45**	**4.63**
University/Institution	UPV	RPB	UPB	RPV	Total Mean
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
B12. Has professional appearance/image	4.98	4.10	4.91	5.71	4.76
B13. Hotel facilities and equipment are adequate and necessary	2.97	3.12	3.81	4.85	3.32
B14. Academic facilities and equipment are adequate and necessary	3.61	3.29	3.86	5.50	3.68
B15. Runs excellent quality programmes	4.28	4.12	4.30	5.30	4.29
B16. Recreation facilities and equipment are adequate and necessary	2.70	2.68	3.01	4.50	2.86
B17. Class sizes are kept to minimum to allow personal attention	4.30	2.54	2.82	5.05	3.48
B18. Offers wide range of programmes with various specialization	4.70	3.93	4.51	4.76	4.44
B19. Offers programmes with flexible syllabus and structure	4.68	3.84	4.30	5.00	4.37
B20. Has an ideal location with excellent campus layout and appearance	5.07	3.23	4.79	5.48	4.52
B21. Offers highly reputable programmes	5.12	4.42	5.21	5.14	4.95
B22. Its graduates are easily employable	4.95	4.28	5.25	5.18	4.86
B23. I feel secure and confident while dealing with this institution	4.81	4.53	5.29	5.18	4.88
B24. It provides services within reasonable/expected time frame	4.22	3.99	4.69	5.05	4.32
B25. Promotes excellent counseling services	4.16	3.84	3.83	5.29	4.05
B26. Health services are adequate and necessary	2.71	2.39	4.42	5.90	3.23
B27. Has standardized and simple service delivery procedures	3.38	3.32	4.05	5.24	3.63
Average	**4.17**	**3.60**	**4.31**	**5.20**	**4.10**
University Students' Concerns	UPV	RPB	UPB	RPV	Total Mean
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
B28. Are treated equally and with respect by Staff	3.57	3.48	3.96	4.09	3.67
B29. Are given fair amount of freedom	3.37	4.34	4.85	3.50	4.02
B30. Institution values feedback from students to improve service performance	2.77	3.79	3.94	3.45	3.39
B31. Institution encourages and promotes student union	4.09	4.44	4.38	4.38	4.28
B28. Are treated equally and with respect by Staff	3.62	3.93	4.09	4.05	3.84
B29. Are given fair amount of freedom	3.33	4.38	4.87	3.62	4.01
Average	**3.46**	**4.06**	**4.35**	**3.85**	**3.87**
University Overall Evaluation	UPV	RPB	UPB	RPV	Total Mean
	Mean	Mean	Mean	Mean	
C1. The quality of the institution's service is	4.22	4.07	4.42	5.25	4.29
C2. My feeling towards the institution's service can be described as	3.89	4.05	4.54	4.80	4.15
C3. My visit to the institution in future will be	4.32	4.69	4.91	4.95	4.61

Table 5. University Administration

Factor	Factor loading
Confidence	5.17
Empathy	2.58
Speed and accuracy	2.55
Tangibles	0.78

Table 6. Academic Staff

Factor	Factor loading
Professional	4.97
Availability	2.85

Table 7. Factor analysis on institution

Factor	Factor loading
Reliability	3.42
Flexibility	3.36
Adequate facilities	2.3