

A Review of Students' Admission Policies for Quality Assurance and Quality Education in Kenyan Universities

Author: Jane Kemunto Nyabuti

University of Eastern Africa, Baraton, PO Box 2500, Eldoret - Kenya
E-mail of the Author: jane.kemunto66@gmail.com

Abstract: *This paper is a review to identify policy interventions that improve education quality. Ultimately, the review is focused on effectiveness of student admission policies in public and private universities in Kenya. The demand for university education in Kenya has significantly increased over the recent times. Many Secondary school leavers and the working class people look for opportunities to pursue University Education. There are also students from other countries who would like to study in Kenya. The diversity of sources for access to university education available to potential student population has posed a challenge to student admission policies. It was found that public universities do not have the requisite national and ethnic diversity of students. However, majority of the students were studying courses of their preference. Faith based and private universities tend to consider the religious faith of students before accepting or rejecting application for admission. Further, public universities admit students with higher grades compared to private universities. It is recommended that the government should continue to review and enforce policies regulating student admission to guarantee transferability of student grades across universities, acceptable diversity of students and higher standards of education in public and private universities.*

Key Words: Quality assurance policies, University admission, University grades transfer, Higher Education

1.0 Introduction

Empirical studies show that education and the policies that facilitate the process of innovation and knowledge creation have profound effects on the quality of long-run economic growth and development patterns. It is not a simple task defining quality due to the fact that it is an abstract of a desired end whose attributes are relative. This is true as what is quality in one university may not be so in another. Quality Assurance can be defined as the mechanism by which an institution assures itself and stakeholders that it shall achieve the standards it has negotiated and agreed on (Gudo, 2011). This is determined by the quality of students admitted to university. According to Vlasceanu et al (2004), quality assurance is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating, monitoring or reviewing, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of higher education system and programmes.

A basic distinction can be made between two conceptions of higher education, that is, standard versus fitness for purpose. The “standards- based approach”, is conformity to set requirements.

In this case, quality is measured against pre-defined standards. It focuses on standards and the extent to which they are being met to avoid closure (CHE handbook, 2008). The “fitness for purpose” approach assumes that quality is equal to goals, purposes and objectives set by the institution. Quality, according to this conception will mean that the set objectives have been achieved but under different traditions of universities and admission policies being followed. Majority of students are now admitted by the individual universities. There are four major challenges enrolment officers of universities have to deal with if student admission policies are to be in tandem with the needs of the changing Kenyan society. These included increased competition for students among public and private universities, increased demand for university education, students' aptitudes and motivation and increased student mobility across national border.

It is true that education is a tool towards enhancing both national and International identity and citizenship by sharing socio-cultural values (Gonzalez, Mesanza and Mariel 2010). Care must be taken to avoid some scrupulous entrepreneurs who have turned a desire to have minimum qualifications to enroll in another university into a money minting business (Wenger and Frey, 2009) in which they manufacture certificates, diplomas and degrees. Aware of this practice, Commission for University Education published a list of institutions facing closure for flouting regulations (Koech & Nyagesiba, 2009) and have been closed leaving a trail of financial losses incurred by students and parents.

The perceived less rigorous admission criteria and preferential treatment of the self-sponsored students may compromise quality, thus leading to imminent threats to higher education in Kenya. A case in point is when the Executive Secretary of the Teachers Service Commission, refused to recognize degrees obtained by P1 teachers who enrolled for a Bachelor of Education degree. He argued that a P1 certificate is not a valid qualification for admission to a degree course. It is absurd for P1 who scored D+ in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) to be enrolled for a degree programme which was done during school holidays and be guaranteed a teaching job in a secondary school (Muindi, 2009). Any practice therefore that, threatens fairness and objectivity in allocating places in universities and courses of study are a threat to meritocracy and quality and should not be allowed. Universities must exercise extra care during student admission process to identify those students with genuine certificates before they are admitted for courses commensurate with their grades. Kenya Certificate Secondary Examination (KSCE) grades have indicated a high predictability of student performance at the university level. Wambua (2003) found that KSCE grade contributed more significantly in predicting university performance in comparison to other predictors. However, exclusive use of KSCE for student admissions may be criticized on the ground that normative and psychomotor skills of the students are completely ignored.

2.0 Issues on Student Admission Policies

2.1 Student International diversity

The ratio of foreign to local students is higher in private universities than in public. The researchers concluded that public universities have attracted a negligible number of foreign students and that this has negatively affected the quality of university students in the public universities in Kenya. However, quality is not brought by foreign students but procedures and mechanisms within the institutions of learning in the country. If physical facilities are improved or provided, adequate qualified lecturers employed and admission of qualified students is done using KNEC result or its equivalent, quality will always be improved and maintained. This also had been noted by Eshiwani (2009) and Gudo et al (2011). Kenya has had a serious brain drain because it has produced highly qualified doctors, teachers and engineers to name but a few. I feel the issue should be whether one is qualified to join public university or not, but not whether the student is local or foreign. It is not possible for Kenya to admit foreign students if they have not applied. Again, the ranking of the universities is not only based on the number of foreign students, but on a myriad of factors including physical facilities, modern library with internet services and current sources of reference books by as noted Huemmert (2010).

2.2 Diversity of students by ethnic origin

Most of the students enrolled in private universities come from the immediate surrounding community and from outside Kenya. For example the University of Eastern Africa Baraton draws majority of its students 67.857% from Rift Valley Province where it is located and Nyanza province where it enjoys a large religious following. USIU draws 50 % of its students from parents residing in Nairobi while 67.241% of its students come from Nairobi and Central provinces. The public universities have a mixed picture. Rift Valley, Nairobi and Nyanza are not made of one ethnic group. These are all areas that can be termed as cosmopolitan and draw their population from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic and cultural hence the main reason why there should be a good mixture of students. However, admissions are not based on ethnicity but academic qualification or attainment. The idea which should have been addressed was on the political good will or government's willingness to fund the education of the less privileged ethnic communities or families and enhance social equity right from primary and secondary school levels to university (Keriga, 2009).

2.3 Students' enrolment per preferred course

The aptitudes and motivations of those leaving secondary schools to pursue studies at higher institutions of learning are higher as they peg their employability on courses taken. The review found that 69.65% and 94.95% of students admitted in public universities respectively took their preferred courses, except 48.48% of students taking education courses in being trained as teachers. The 48.48% taking this course as a third choice or worse, raises questions as to whether they are going to be effective teachers as they would lack motivation and passion for the profession (Mario et al, 2003) and Mutisya, 2010). The goodwill of the government in boosting

the morale of lecturers through salary increment and better terms of service should be addressed to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Many of the learners join the preferred courses based on interest and performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Examination.

2.4 Students by Gender

The reviewed findings indicate that less than 39.5% of students admitted in public universities are females whereas more than 52.57% of students admitted in private universities are female students. This means, 60.5% and 47.5% males join public and private universities respectively. The factors attributed to this to this higher are of females joining private universities are, first that parents respond to fear of keeping their daughters at home for long as they wait for public admission that usually takes long, which may culminate into early marriage or pregnancies. Secondly, the demoralization by the frequent public universities' riots and closures make it difficult for a student to graduate within a prescribed period (Mutero 2001 and K'okul, 2010). The low number of female students in public universities is attributed to their lower performance in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) compared to the boys. University environment should not be blamed for low female enrolment and retention. There are other factors that come into play and hamper the girl child enrolment right from primary school to university as noted by Keriga (2009) such as earlier forced marriages and teenage pregnancies. In some Kenyan secondary schools, female students are characterized as lazy and indifferent to studies and with a negative perception about Math and Science subjects which cause poor academic performance and a major reason for not being admitted into public universities and into preferred courses. Gender inequality has to be addressed from the grassroots, that is, from primary and secondary schools for higher enrolment at the public universities.

2.5 Enrolment by Religious Faith

An attempt was made to identify students by religious association. The review shows that 93.84% and 94.91% of students in private and public universities respectively are Christians. It has to be noted that in public universities, students' are not identified by their denominations, except in faith based universities. Most of the private universities are religious based and students join them out of choice and not compulsion. Many of the students joining them are able to finance their education. In several African countries and especially in Kenya, the capacity to finance and manage the education sector is increasingly under threat (Michael & Anthony, 2007)). This is because the number of students eligible for University each year continues to outstrip the supply of resources. A major concern is the fiscal crisis because of inadequate monetary support being given to education sector particularly at secondary and tertiary levels. This means that only students from well-to-do families will be able to finance their education in public universities as parallel/module II students or join private universities of which poor parents will not afford (Andiwo, 2002).

One challenge the learners face is failing to respect the rules and regulations of private and religious sponsored institutions. The students have the freedom of going to institutions of their faith or abide by the rules of the institution of learning and are not discriminated against as

wrongly implied by Mwaura (2010). Education is supposed to enhance the harmonious development of the physical, mental, spiritual, social, emotional and moral aspects of learners. It is also essential that we realize that university education remains an important enterprise and asset by which any society models and determines its existence. It is a process of propagating desirable survival skills to succeeding generations. Through education, society sets and defines its basic survival needs. Thus, besides other components such as cognitive, creative and dialogical, the overriding significance of education can be summed up in its normative definitions. Religious private universities have excelled in these unlike the public which mainly insist on mental aspect of learners to the detriment of other aspects which does not promote holistic development of learners (Chang'ach, 2014).

2.6 Authentication of Students' Certificates

It has been noted with concern that some students are admitted with forged certificates especially to private and public institutions for parallel studies. However, there is a higher confidence in how private universities manage their admission process than in public Universities. In private and public universities certificates of students are verified before admission. In public universities, the verification is done by the Joint Admissions Board (JAB) for regular degree students. However, for private and parallel degree students it is done by the universities themselves. The individual private and public universities must devise effective mechanisms through which the certificates presented by potential students are authenticated as also advised by Lemaitre (2005) and Levassuer (2005). However, entrance examinations may not be the best mechanism due to corruption which is impeded in most of the systems and may also see some genuine students missing admissions.

It has to be noted that if the examination process is flawed, it can negatively affect the quality of invigilation of examinations even when admission policies have been adhered to. Inadequate invigilation and supervision of examinations, marking and missing grades more especially in public universities and satellite campuses, can negatively affect the quality of education due to cheating in examinations. The prevalence of cheating in examinations is higher in public universities due to inadequate control measures taken against examination cheating and remote chances of detection. A study done by Gudo et al (2011) found out that cheating in examinations was an opportunistic behavior attributed to inadequate student preparation and lack of confidence to face examinations. The same study recommended for adequate control measures to be taken against examination cheating and to have strong detection of those cheating. Eshiwani (2009) and Mutisya (2010) confirmed the view that the quality of education in Kenya's universities has been lowered among other reasons, due to cases of missing marks, sexually transmitted grades and people who write papers and projects for students in return for pay. Birungi (2006) noted that, how the students are assessed for what they have learnt is an important element of quality assurance for the regulatory agencies and for the individual universities.

2.7 Comparison of Students' Entry Qualification

Private university admission criteria is quite different from that of public universities, which means the private universities with their low grade entry is flexible and accommodates many learners who can afford to pay for their education. The modal admission grade in private and public universities is C+ and B respectively. This suggests that private universities start at a lower academic entry behavior. KCSE grade contributes more to university performance in comparison to other predictors as postulated by Wambua (2003). It is mostly assumed that students of public universities are of higher quality, but this may not be the case as quality is multidimensional and cannot be conclusively determined by one factor. The issue that needs to be addressed is why public universities deny admission of some qualified students but later give them admission under self-sponsored programme with lower entry grades compared to the regular students. This is an injustice that causes double standards.

3.0 Conclusions

The government should formulate and clarify policies regulating student admission to guarantee Quality Assurance and education. They should also formulate guidelines for transferring of students among universities and rules for exemption for mature students who have done the courses or acquired work experience equivalent to the knowledge required for admission. Lack of student diversity in universities, if not reversed, will seriously have negative impact of Kenya's nationhood in view of devolved governance.

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