University Administrative Staff Competence and Quality of Service Delivery in a Ugandan Public University

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Abstract

The declining quality of service delivery in public universities in Uganda is worrying. To what extent are the university staff responsible, other factors remaining constant? This study using Kyambogo University as a case, looked at the extent administrative staff possess the needed general competencies to perform their duties effectively. Data were collected through a questionnaire administered to teaching staff (n = 238) and students (n = 384). The data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The study established that the administrative staff's possession of fourteen general competencies as stipulated by the University Human Resource Department are rated very low and/or low respectively. The study also established that there is a significant relationship between administrative staff competence and quality of service being provided at Kyambogo University. Thus, there is need to put in place contemporary human resource management policies and practices to guide administrative staff competence management and development.

Key words: University Administrative staff, Competence, Public University, Service Delivery, Uganda

1.0 Introduction

Universities are key in championing lifelong learning. Thus, to operate successfully, they need high-quality and well-motivated administrative staff to provide a professional back-up to the dons (Doidge, Hardwick & Wilkinson,1998; Strajeri, 2009). It can be argued that the overall job role of the administrative staff in any university regardless of context is to ensure effective and efficient service delivery to the students and other stakeholders. Quality service is increasingly becoming a pervasive strategic force and a key strategic issue in any organisation (Katamei & Kiprop, 2015). Increasing competition among universities to attract highly qualified students and staff toward achieving high academic profiles is forcing them to pay more attention to service quality issues (Green, 2014). However, this begs the question whether administrative staff in Ugandan public universities are competent enough to provide high quality service that meet the satisfaction and expectations of the students and other stakeholders.

1.1 Problem Statement

The quality of service in a majority of Ugandan public universities is dreadful as they have poor: organisational climate; customer care; educational facilities and equipment; and experience unnecessary delays in the operation of institutional tasks, to mention but a few (Rwothumio, 2010). Consequently, in one way or the other, most of the students and indeed other stakeholders complain of not getting 'value for their money'. However, more often than not, emphasis is put on capacity building for the academic staff and very little attention is paid towards capacity building for the administrative staff. Hitherto, without the work of technical, student affairs planning and management professionals, secretarial, accounting, financial administration, service/maintenance personnel etc., higher education institutions such as universities can hardly succeed (Strajeri, 2009). Apparently, no empirical study has been conducted to examine the relationship between competence levels of administrative staff and quality of service in Ugandan public universities. As such, this study is set to address this literature gap.

2.0 Theoretical Framework

The study was guided by the competence theory (Boyatzis, 1982) and the service quality (SERVQUAL) model (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988). Competence can be perceived as what a person who works in a given occupation should be able to do-actions, behaviours or outcome that the person should be able demonstrate (Mulder, Gulikers, Biemans & Wesselink, 2010; Training Agency, 1988). Competence in general terms can be perceived as the key capability of professionals in work and citizens in society to effectively perform tasks to cope with profound change and to contribute to it (Woldman, Runhaar, Wesselink & Mulder, 2014). In the ever changing global knowledge-based economy, the need for organisations to enable their employees to acquire the competencies they need to face the diversity and complication of their present and future tasks successfully cannot be overstated (Hsieh, Lin & Lee, 2012). Undeniably, there is increasing interest to develop competence profiles for the different professionals in several labour sectors. For instance, Kyambogo University (KyU) Human Resource Department has identified fourteen general competencies both academic and non-academic staff need to perform their duties effectively

(Kyambogo University Performance Appraisal Form 2015). However, there is no empirical data indicating the extent the staff at KyU possess the aforementioned competencies. Accordingly, pragmatic decisions and actions aimed at capacity building for the administrative staff are impaired.

The SERVQUAL model represents service delivery as the discrepancy between a customer's expectations for a service offering and the customer's perceptions of the service received, requiring respondents to answer questions about their expectations and their perceptions (Parasuraman et al., 1988). Moreover, interest in quality of higher education has increased because of the need for greater accountability to accompany the significant increase in the size of the student population and the students' greater expectations because the majority of them pay for their tuition fees (Becket & Brookes, 2005; Naser, 2014). The service delivered in the higher education institution should satisfy and motivate students so that they desire for more and better quality education which makes them worthwhile stakeholders and collaborative partners in both public and private sectors of the economy (Katamei & Kiprop, 2015; McAleese, Bladh, Berger, Bode, Muehlfeit, Petrin, Schiesaro & Tsoukalis, 2013; Tierney,1998).

Quality in higher education refers to a set of attributes, dimensions and characteristics that relate to higher education institution services. If quality is embedded in the higher education system, then the higher education institution can be in position to fulfill students' needs based on students' traits and desires as well as meeting the needs and demands of the other internal and external stakeholders (Green, 2014). The concept of service can be defined as an intangible product that cannot be owned or stored, but it comes to existence at the time and place it is delivered for consumption (Jain, Sinha & De, 2010). Service quality can be conceptualised as the extent to which a service meets or exceeds the expectations of clients (Jain et al., 2010). Management researchers agree that there is no single dimension which can be applicable for all the service sectors. They also agree that clients must be the determinant of service quality dimensions rather than the management (Brown, Churchill & Peter, 1993; Carman, 1990; Cronin & Taylor, 1994). Developing a service quality model to measure the teaching staff and student's perception on quality in higher education institutions is no simple task because the service quality dimensions cover many areas.

Consequently, this study only included important elements of service quality dimensions. The ten service quality dimensions include:-i) Reliability: the service is carried out in the way it is promised; ii) Responsiveness: services are carried out promptly according to the needs of the customers; iii) Competence: the staff of the service provider have the knowledge and skills required for delivering the service in a proper way; iv) Access: concerns, e.g. opening hours, physical location, etc.; v) Courtesy: the staff are polite, friendly, respectful, etc.; vi) Communication: keeping the customers informed in a language that they can understand and listening to them; vii) Credibility: the service provider is trustworthy, believable and honest; viii) Security: freedom from danger, risk or doubt; ix) Understanding the customer: the service provider makes an effort to understand the needs and wants of the individual customers; and x) Tangibles: physical objects that are needed for carrying out the service such as facilities, equipment, etc. (Parasuraman et al., 1988; Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithaml, 1991; 1993).

This study was guided by the following research questions: *1. To what extent do Kyambogo University administrative staff possess general competencies needed to execute university tasks?; 2. What is the perception of teaching staff and students regarding the quality of service at Kyambogo University?; and 3. What is the relationship between administrative staff competence and quality of service at Kyambogo University ?*

3.0 Methods
3.1 Design of the Study
The study used an exploratory research design through a cross-sectional survey. This design is considered suitable because it makes it possible to gain basic insights about the existence of a phenomena, situation, problem, attitude or issue (Creswell, 2013; Kumar, 2011).

3.2 Context and Participants
This study was conducted at Kyambogo University. The University is one of the leading public higher education institution in Uganda that experience frequent staff and student strikes related to poor service delivery (Kasule, 2015). The study involved teaching staff (n = 238) and bachelor of education degree final year students (n = 384) at Kyambogo University obtained through simple random sampling technique. The teaching staff and the bachelor of education degree final year students were selected for this study because they possesses key information regarding the competence levels of administrative staff and the quality of service delivery at the University.

3.3 Instrument
The teaching staff and the students responded to 25 close-ended questionnaire items along a five-point Likert scale. Fourteen of the questionnaire items aimed at establishing the extent Kyambogo University administrative staff possess the general competencies required to effectively perform duties under their jurisdiction. Meanwhile, eleven of the questionnaire items aimed at establishing the quality of service at Kyambogo University as perceived by the teaching staff and students. The overall purpose of the questionnaire was to establish whether there was a significant relationship between administrative staff competence and quality of service at Kyambogo University.

3.4 Data Analysis
Descriptive statistics were used to summarise and describe the participants' responses regarding the extent Kyambogo University administrative staff possess general competencies needed to execute university tasks (Table 1). The descriptive statistic values regarding extent Kyambogo University administrative staff possess general competencies needed to perform their work, in this study, were interpreted as follows: 1.00-1.99 = Very low extent; 2.00-2.99 = Low extent; 3.00-3.99 = Moderate extent; 4.00-4.99 = High extent; 5.00 = Very high extent. Meanwhile, the descriptive statistic values about the degree of disagreement or agreement regarding whether Kyambogo University provides quality service (Table 2), were construed as follows: 1.00-1.99 = Strongly disagree; 2.00-2.99 = Disagree; 3.00-3.99 = Undecided; 4.00-4.99 = Agree; 5.00 = Strongly agree. Subsequently, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test was conducted. The correlation results were interpreted as follows: Very weak = 0-.19; Weak = .20-.39; Moderate = .40-.59; Strong = .60-.79;

and Very strong = .80-1.00 (Evans, 1996). This aimed at establishing whether there was a significant relationship between administrative staff competence and quality of service at Kyambogo University (Table 3).

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Extent Administrative Staff Possess General Competencies Needed to Perform University Tasks

As it can be observed in Table 1, the descriptive statistics showed that the means of both the teaching staff and students were more or less the same regarding the extent administrative staff possess general competencies needed to perform university tasks. It can also be observed in Table 1, that the administrative staff to a very low extent possess ten general competencies and to a low extent possess four general competencies respectively out of the fourteen general competencies stipulated by the Kyambogo University Human Resource Department.

Table 1: Means, and standard deviations regarding the extent administrative staff possess general competencies (N = 622) (N = number of respondents; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; Range of importance scale: 1 = Very low extent; 5 = Very high extent)

General competency items	Respondent category	N	M	SD
Most administrative staff draw on their own experience, knowledge and expertise to ...	Teaching staff	238	2.26	.85
	Students	384	2.66	1.46
	Total	622	2.51	1.27
Most administrative staff prioritise their own work, develop and implement plans ...	Teaching staff	238	1.91	.78
	Students	384	2.50	1.24
	Total	622	2.27	1.12
Most administrative staff Keep people informed ...	Teaching staff	238	2.11	1.05
	Students	384	2.47	1.19
	Total	622	2.34	1.15
Most administrative staff make logical analysis of relevant information and factors; develop appropriate solutions and take action ...	Teaching staff	238	1.97	.78
	Students	384	2.43	1.13
	Total	622	2.25	1.04
Most administrative staff work cooperatively and collaboratively ...	Teaching staff	238	1.79	.67
	Students	384	2.06	1.08
	Total	622	1.95	.96
Most administrative staff show persistence by addressing current problems; act proactively ...	Teaching staff	238	1.94	.76
	Students	384	2.06	1.05
	Total	622	2.01	.95
Most administrative staff actively listen and speak respectfully ...	Teaching staff	238	1.91	.85
	Students	384	2.14	1.22
	Total	622	2.05	1.10
Most administrative staff take up duty willingly and produce results ...	Teaching staff	238	1.76	.77
	Students	384	2.20	1.22
	Total	622	2.03	1.09
Most administrative staff communicate values to others, monitor own actions for consistency with values and beliefs ...	Teaching staff	238	1.82	.61
	Students	384	2.18	1.09
	Total	622	2.04	.95
Most administrative staff work well with other to achieve institutional goals ...	Teaching staff	238	1.85	.88
	Students	384	2.08	1.07
	Total	622	1.99	1.01
Most administrative staff effectively and efficiently uses equipment and facilities to accomplish tasks ...	Teaching staff	238	2.00	.97
	Students	384	1.93	1.03
	Total	622	1.96	1.00

Most administrative staff are always in time and accomplish tasks in time required as well as maximises the use of time to achieve set targets.	Teaching staff	238	1.85	.84
	Students	384	2.16	1.18
	Total	622	2.04	1.07
Most administrative staff respond well and attend to clients as well as reflect a good image for the University.	Teaching staff	238	1.88	.75
	Students	384	1.87	.97
	Total	622	1.87	.89
Most administrative staff comply with lawful instructions of supervisor and are able to provide on-going support to supervisors.	Teaching staff	238	1.79	.76
	Students	384	2.22	1.14
	Total	622	2.06	1.03

The findings in Table 1, are similar to previous research which indicates that most of the higher education institutions in Africa have a chronicle lack of competent academic and non-academic staff (Sanyal & Martin, 1991). This more often than not is attributed to the lack of: appropriate planning of staff needs in both qualitative and quantitative terms; appropriate staff management system which lead to misallocation of staff for different functions; appropriate staff management which result in under-utilisation of staff time; suitable management system which results in poor promotion and retention policies of good staff; and viable staff development policies and programmes (Sanyal & Martin, 1991). Moreover, to improve quality of higher education, better management of both academic and non-academic staff is essential. Some of the measures advanced include: identification of needs/requirements in quantitative and qualitative terms; merit-based recruitment of academic and non-academic staff; delegation and allocation of responsibilities; provision of conducive working conditions; regular assessment of staff performance; and facilitating development of staff through in-service training and competence development programmes etc. (Kasule, 2015; Sanyal & Martin, 1991).

4.2 Quality of Service at Kyambogo University as Perceived by the Teaching Staff and Students

From Table 2, the descriptive statistics revealed that the means of both the teaching staff and students were more or less the same regarding how they perceive the quality of service at the University. It can also be seen in Table 2, that the respondents only strongly disagreed and disagreed respectively that Kyambogo University quality of service of the various aspects is adequate.

Table 2: Means, and standard deviations regarding the quality of service at Kyambogo University (N = 294) (N = number of respondents; M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; Range of importance scale: 1 = Very low existence; 5 = Very high existence)

Quality of service of various aspects at Kyambogo University	Respondent category	N	M	SD
Administrative staff make due to effort to ensure that the University has modern educational facilities and equipment	Teaching staff	238	1.67	.71
	Students	384	1.70	.86
	Total	622	1.69	.81
Administrative staff make due to effort to ensure that the physical environment of University is clean	Teaching staff	238	1.79	.83
	Students	384	1.60	.95
	Total	622	1.67	.91
When administrative staff promise to do something by a certain time, they do it	Teaching staff	238	1.67	.79
	Students	384	1.85	1.06
	Total	622	1.78	.97

When a clients has a problem, administrative staff show a sincere interest in solving it	Teaching staff	238	1.76	.84
	Students	384	2.08	1.24
	Total	622	1.96	1.11
Administrative staff keep records accurately	Teaching staff	238	1.88	.96
	Students	384	2.52	1.40
	Total	622	2.27	1.28
Administrative staff make information easily obtainable by clients	Teaching staff	238	1.85	.81
	Students	384	2.64	1.39
	Total	622	2.34	1.26
Administrative staff give prompt service to clients	Teaching staff	238	1.79	.90
	Students	384	2.25	1.30
	Total	622	2.07	1.18
Administrative staff are always willing to help clients	Teaching staff	238	1.73	.78
	Students	384	2.20	1.24
	Total	622	2.02	1.11
The behaviour of administrative staff instil confidence in clients	Teaching staff	238	1.85	.77
	Students	384	2.06	1.12
	Total	622	1.98	1.01
Administrative staff understand the specific need of their clients	Teaching staff	238	1.88	.99
	Students	384	2.35	1.30
	Total	622	2.17	1.21
On the whole, quality of service at Kyambogo University is satisfactory	Teaching staff	238	1.76	.94
	Students	384	2.00	1.08
	Total	622	1.91	1.03

The findings in Table 2, correspond with available literature which indicates that most higher education institutions in Africa, Uganda being no exception, lower recruitment conditions of staff (particularly the administrative staff), have dilapidated infrastructure, and poorly remunerate staff (Idogho, 2011). Consequently, the quality of service provided by the higher education institutions in question leaves a lot to be desired.

4.3 Relationship Between Administrative Staff Competence and Quality of Service at Kyambogo University

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient test results in Table 3, indicate that there is a significant relationship between administrative staff competence and quality of service at Kyambogo University . The $r = .82**$, $n = 622$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = .67$, can be perceived as a strong relationship (Evans, 1996). This therefore tend to suggest that if we want to provide high quality service in institutions like Kyambogo University, it is paramount, that due attention is put on competence management and development of all the categories of staff that work in the higher education institutions.

Table 3: Correlation results between the administrative staff competence and quality of service at Kyambogo University (N = 622)

		Administrative staff competence	Quality of service
Administrative staff competence	Pearson Correlation	1	.820[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	622	622
Quality of service	Pearson Correlation	.820[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	622	622

[**]. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings in Table 3, are in line with the supposition that higher education institutions, such as universities, colleges and polytechnics, are labour intensive organisations; as they depend on people for the delivery of their services (Fielden, 1998). The results of this study also confirm that the quality of administrative staff in institutions of tertiary education is central to their effectiveness just as it is the case with all people-centred organisations (Fielden, 1998).

5.0 Conclusion

This study using multiple data sources has established that the administrative staff of KyU do not sufficiently possess the fourteen general competencies considered essential in executing university tasks as stipulated by Human Resource Department of the University. Consequently, Kyambogo University 's quality of service is rated very low by both the teaching staff and students. Thus, as a matter of urgency, University management, should make due efforts to put in place contemporary human resource management and development policies and practices for both the academic and non-academic staff, if they want the institution to be 'a centre of professional and academic excellence', as it its Vision, seems to suggest.

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