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Students' Perceptions of Accountability in Higher Education: A Case Study of one Public University in Kenya

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Abstract

This study explored university students' perceptions in reference to accountability of higher education in Kenya. The study sought to investigate their perceptions on: role of higher education and key issues related to accountability. It also explored their overall views on quality assurance, accreditation and universities self-evaluation. The sample comprised 147 undergraduate students. The questionnaire was used to collect data. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings show that students feel higher education plays a significant role in the development of the country. In relation to accountability, they were of the opinion that the quality of higher education in Kenya is low and that universities need to focus more on the current labor market demands. To promote accountability, majority of students were for the idea that their views be included in universities' self-evaluation reports. In addition, they also want the detailed process of accreditation and self-evaluation of universities to be explained to them.

Keywords: Students' Perceptions, Accountability, Higher Education, Kenya

Introduction

Accountability is the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used and to what effect (Trow, 1996). Romzek (2000) defines accountability as the answerability for performance. Romzek identifies four types of accountability namely: hierarchical, legal, professional and political. According to Huisman and Currie (2004), the last two are the types more often found in higher education.

Several factors contributed to the emergence of the concept of accountability in Higher Education. They include: the changing relationships between governments and universities; efficiency and value for money; internationalization of higher education and globalization; information and communication technology developments (De Boer et al., 2002; World Bank, 2002). On the other hand, other scholars (Henry et al., 2001; Rhoades and Sporn, 2002; Vidovich, 2002) contend that a global model of quality policy in Higher Education emerged through

professional mechanisms such as annual conferences and the international circulation of professionals, as well as through the influence of the international organizations, such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE).

According to Trow (1996), accountability serves three functions in the context of Higher Education. First, it is a constraint on arbitrary power, discourages fraud and manipulation, and strengthens the legitimacy of institutions that are obligated to report to appropriate groups. Secondly, accountability is claimed to sustain or raise the quality of performance by forcing those involved to examine their operations critically and subject them to critical review from outside. Thirdly, accountability can be used as a regulatory device through the kind of reports and the explicit criteria to be met by the reporting institutions. However the role of accountability differs depending on the historical context and the way national governments decide to implement accountability mechanisms and how they are approaching globalization as a neo-liberal economic ideology (Huisman and Currie, 2004).

In 2012, the Government of Kenya (GOK) enacted the Universities Act of 2012 as a response to increased demands for accountability from stakeholders. The move was aimed at increasing accountability in HEIs. This led to the formation of the Commission for University Education (CUE), a constitutional body charged with the responsibility of regulating of higher education in Kenya. The Commission for University Education is the external quality assurance agency of the universities in Kenya. Before then, the higher education legislation was weak and was overseen by the former Commission for Higher Education (CHE).

According to the Universities Act (2012), all accredited universities are required to submit to CUE their books and records of accounts for the income and expenditure and assets. In terms of evaluation of performance and supervision, the university is required to submit a detailed evaluation to CUE every three years of the steps it has taken towards the achievement of the aims and objects for which it was established. In relation to program audit, a university is required by law (Universities Act, 2012) to conduct self-assessment of its programs at regular intervals. Structures shall be put in place for continual assessment of its academic programs for quality and efficiency. Self-assessment is supposed to take into account requirements of stakeholders and learning outcomes. It should also consider quality assurance and stakeholder satisfaction (including opinions of students, alumni, labor market and society). All the above regulations are aimed at promoting accountability in higher education in the country.

University students are the major consumers and also future indicators of accountability of HEIs. In practice, students are not involved in making higher education policies and other guidelines in Kenya. However, it is worthwhile for the government, CUE and the respective management bodies of universities to know how students perceive key issues related to: accountability, role of higher education in the country, accreditation and self-evaluation. Students' understanding of these issues and participation is necessary for the successful implementation of the higher education policies. Accountability should begin with a focus on students and actually benefit them at the end. Despite accountability being an important concept in Higher Education, few studies have been done on this area in Kenya especially from the students' perspective. The current study contributes significantly to Higher Education in Kenya at a time when the education sector is undergoing reforms. The students' voice in relation to the key areas of accountability is

captured. This will be of use to the universities' management, Commission for University Education and other key stakeholders. The study also adds on existing literature about accountability in Higher Education especially in developing countries.

Methodology

This study was carried out at one of the public universities in Kenya. The study used the descriptive survey design. The study was cross sectional in nature. The sample consisted of 147 undergraduate students (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years), female (46.9%) and males (53.1%). Respondents were selected from two faculties: Science (51%) and Social Science (49%). The participants' age ranged from 18 to 30 years. Random sampling was used to select the study sample. Data was collected using a questionnaire with likert scale type of statements. There were two types of items whose scores were, Strongly Agree =5, Agree=4, Neutral=3, Disagree=2, Strongly disagree=1 and Extremely Aware=4, Moderately Aware=3, Slightly Aware=2 and Not Aware=1. Items in the questionnaire were constructed in line with the objectives of the study, literature review and current landscape of higher education in Kenya.

The questionnaire consisted of five parts. The first part consisted of four statements on the role of higher education in Kenya. They were: a). University education contributes to national economic growth b). Universities produce skilled labor force needed for development of the country c). Universities generate and disseminate new knowledge d). University education is necessary for securing a job. The second section comprised of items on key issues relating to accountability in HEIs. These were: a) Quality of university education should be improved b). Commission for University Education's standards and guidelines should be followed strictly c). The government should not interfere with the running of universities d). Universities should put into consideration requirements of the job market when offering courses d). Universities should guarantee students employment. The third section contained questions on students' overall perceptions of quality assurance. These were: a). Describe your level of awareness about accreditation? b). Describe your level of awareness about university rankings? c). Describe your level of awareness of self-evaluation carried out by your university?

The fourth section of the questionnaire comprised statements on students' perceptions of accreditation. These included: a). Accreditation is an important factor affecting the quality of university education b). Commission for University Education's standards and guidelines should be strictly followed during accreditation c). The Commission for University Education should make public all details and procedures involved in accreditation d). Opinions from students who graduated from universities should be part of the accreditation process.

The fifth section consisted of statements on perceptions of self-evaluation. They were: a). Self-evaluation influences the manner in which universities operate b). Opinions from current students should be part of the university's self-evaluation report d). The university should explain to students the importance and procedures of self-evaluation.

To enhance validity and reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot study was done on fifty university students. The questionnaire was also discussed with two officials working at CUE and two administrators at a local public university. Data was entered into the computer and the means for each question computed. Descriptive statistics (percentages) were used to analyze and present the findings.

Findings

Role of Higher Education in Kenya

The responses to key questions regarding the role of higher education in Kenya are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Role of Higher Education in Kenya

Statement	S.D	D	N	A	S.A	Total
University education contributes to national economic growth.	5.4%	3.4%	6.1%	35.4%	49.7%	100
University produce skilled labor force needed for development of the country	6.8%	6.8%	15.6%	49.7%	21.1%	100
Universities generate and disseminate new knowledge	1.4%	2.0%	8.8%	34.0%	53.7%	100
University education is necessary for securing a job	12.9%	15%	20%	31.3%	20.4%	100

According to the analysis above, majority of the university students (84.9%) agreed that actually university education in Kenya contributes to the economic growth of the country. Another 80.8% agreed that universities in Kenya produce skilled labor force needed for development of the country (realization of the social pillar, 2030). Out of the 147 students sampled, a big proportion (87.7%), were of the idea that universities in Kenya generate and disseminate new knowledge. Views on whether university education is necessary for securing a job were divided, 27.9% disagreed, 20% neutral (undecided) and 51.7% agreed.

Key Issues Relating to Accountability

The students were also asked five general questions on accountability of higher education institutions. The responses are presented in table 2 below. According to the analysis, 81.6% respondents agreed that the quality of university education in Kenya is low. Almost all students were of the opinion that the Commission for University Education's guidelines regarding quality should be strengthened. Only, 1.4% disagreed. Regarding autonomy, 69.9% agreed that universities need to be given autonomy, 12.3% disagreed and 17.8% were undecided. On whether universities should focus on current labor market needs, 78.9% agreed, 8.2% disagreed and 12.9% neutral. Majority of the participants (78.9%) were of the view that universities should guarantee students employment upon successful completion of programs, only 8.9% were of the contrary opinion.

Table 2: Key Issues Relating to Accountability

Statement	S.D	D	N	A	S.A	Total
Quality of university education is low	1.4%	0.7%	16.3%	--	81.6%	100
Commission for University Education's regulations regarding quality should be strengthened	0.7%	0.7%	6.2%	35.6%	56.8%	100
The government should not interfere with running of universities	3.4%	8.9%	17.8%	37.0%	32.9%	100
Universities need to focus more on the current labor market	3.4%	4.8%	12.9%	27.9%	51.0%	100
Universities should guarantee students employment	0.7%	8.2%	12.2%	25.2%	53.7%	100

University Students' Overall Perceptions on Quality Assurance

The researcher also asked participants three general questions in relation to quality assurance to have an overall picture of their level of understanding of the three concepts (accreditation, university ranking and self-evaluation). The responses are summarized in table 3 shown below.

Table 3: Overall Perceptions on Quality Assurance

Statement	N.A	S.A	M.A	E.A	Total
Describe your level of awareness of accreditation	30.9%	28.2%	31.5%	9.4%	100
Describe your level of awareness of university ranking	9.4%	23.5%	47.0%	20.1%	100
Describe your level of awareness of self-evaluation carried out by your university	53.0%	36.9%	10.1%	--	100

Out of the 147 students sampled, 30.9% were not aware of accreditation, 28.9% slightly aware, 31.5% moderately aware and 9.4% extremely aware. About university ranking, 9.4% were not aware, 23.5% slightly aware, 47.0% moderately aware and 20.1% extremely aware. For self-evaluation conducted by university, a surprisingly big percentage (53.0%) was not aware about it, 36.9% slightly aware and 10.1% moderately aware.

University Students' Perceptions of Accreditation

The study also sought students' perceptions about accreditation of universities in Kenya. The results are presented below.

Table 4: Perceptions of Accreditation

Statement	S.D	D	N	A	S.A	Total
Accreditation influences the quality of university education	3.4%	7.5%	13.6%	27.9%	47.6%	100
Commission for University's Education standards and guidelines should be strictly followed during accreditation.	4.1%	6.1%	10.2%	36.7%	42.9%	100
The Commission for University Education should make public all details and procedures involved in accreditation.	2.7%	3.4%	17.7%	29.9%	46.3%	100
Opinions from students who graduated from universities should be part of the accreditation process	3.4%	5.4%	13.6%	36.6%	40.8%	100

A huge percentage of respondents (85.5%) agreed that accreditation is an important factor affecting the quality of university education, 79.5% CUE's standards and guidelines should be strictly followed during accreditation. On whether CUE should make public the details and procedures involved in accreditation, 86.2% agreed, 6.1% disagreed and 17.7% were neutral. About whether opinions from students who graduated from universities should be part of the accreditation process, 77.4% agreed whereas only 8.8% disagreed.

University Students Perceptions of Self-Evaluation

Table 5: Perceptions of Universities' Self-Evaluation

Statement	S.D	D	N	A	S.A	Total
Self-evaluation influences the manner in which universities are run.	3.4%	7.5%	12.2%	32.7%	44.2%	100
Opinions from current students should be part of the self-evaluation report.	--	0.7%	3.4%	25.2%	70.7%	100
Universities should explain to students the entire process self-evaluation	0.7%	0.7%	6.1%	38.1%	54.4%	

Responses to items on self-evaluation as carried out by universities are shown in table 5 above. Self-evaluation influences the manner in which universities are run: 76.9% agree, 10.9% disagree, 12.2% neutral. Opinions from current students should be part of the self-evaluation report: 0.7%, 3.4% neutral and 95.9% agreed. Universities should explain to students the entire process of self-evaluation: 1.4% disagreed, 6.1% neutral and 92.5%, agreed.

Discussion

Higher education in Kenya is expected to contribute to the overall development of the country both socially and economically. This clearly spelt out by the Universities Act (2012). University education is expected to: first, advance knowledge through teaching, scholarly research and

scientific investigation. Secondly, support and contribute to the realization of national economic and social development. Lastly, promote the highest standards in quality and standards of teaching (Universities Act, 2012). The study respondents acknowledged the first two roles of university education: promoting social and economic development, and creation and dissemination of knowledge.

Majority of the participants (81.6%) were of the view that the quality of university education in Kenya is low. Similar sentiments have been echoed by several stakeholders prompting the Commission for University Education (CUE) to carry out a quality audit between January and February, 2017. Parts of the report were released to the media in a press statement. According to the press statement (Standard newspaper, February 18th), the purpose of the quality audit was to establish the extent to which universities were complying with the Universities Act (2012) and the amendments thereto; (The Universities Regulations, 2014; The Universities Standards and Guidelines, 2014). The Education Cabinet Secretary's recent pronouncement on concerns about the quality of university education in Kenya equally informed the urgency of the exercise. The quality audit exercise was undertaken in line with the procedures spelt out in (The Universities Regulations, 2014).

The report found that universities seriously breached the set guidelines and standards regulating quality. According to the press release by CUE, there were missing marks and transcripts, inadequate quality of school based programs, abuse of executive and honorary degrees, flouting of admission criteria, unstructured application of the Credit Accumulation and Transfer system (CATS) and lack of anti-plagiarism policies and systems by some universities. The audit also established that the authenticity and validity of the process and security of academic documents, including certificates, in some universities was weak. Universities were also found not to be adhering to the set ratios of full time to part time staff as provided for in (The Standards and Guidelines, 2014). Lastly, it was found that some universities had not instituted internal quality assurance policies, systems and mechanisms in line with Universities Regulations. All these factors compromise the quality of higher education and consequently undermine the accountability of HEIs. Students are aware of the falling standards in higher education in Kenya and hence were of the opinion that the CUE's regulations regarding quality should be strengthened.

Huisman and Currie (2004) explain the policy rhetoric involved in accountability in higher education. They observe that one interpretation of the subversion of accountability could be that the government failed to implement more severe policies. Secondly, another explanation could be that most attention to accountability (government) policy papers is mere rhetoric. That is governments plead for accountability measures but actually refrain from enforcing specific policy instruments. Thirdly, they explain that the management of HEIs as the weakest link in the accountability chain. They argue that governments may have been successful in putting forward accountability policies, but if institutional leaders do not "translate" the policies into institutional mechanisms, then nothing will change. All these three reasons explain why achieving accountability in higher education remains an elusive endeavor.

There have been complaints from employers that graduates do not have the required skills for the job market. A good number of students (78.9%) felt that universities in Kenya should focus more on the current labor market demands. In the State of University Education in Kenya, a

report prepared for the CUE by Mukhwana et al (2016) observes that the rapid expansion of the university sector in Kenya has provided an opportunity for majority of people to access higher education. Mukhwana and colleagues argue that while having an educated populace is a good indicator for the country, this has also posed a number of challenges e.g. having many graduates who are not adequately prepared for the market or whose qualifications do not much the market demands (p.32). The report further notes that some programs were found not to be market-driven but mounted with expectation of generating revenue for the respective institutions (p.33). In a recent move, universities are partnering with industry in order to bridge the skills mismatch gap. Universities have teamed up with employers to resolve a mismatch between skills impacted in students and the demand in market. The objective is to network and link leaders from industry and universities for sustainability (Wanzala, 2017).

Accreditation in Kenya means public acceptance and confirmation evidenced by grant of charter under section 12 of the Act that a university meets and continues to meet the standards of academic excellence set by the Commission for University Education (Universities Act, 2012). According to Eaton (2010), the fundamental purposes of accreditation are quality assurance and quality improvement in Higher Education. It reflects three core values of Higher Education, all essential to academic quality: institutional autonomy, academic freedom, and peer and professional review. In Kenya, the government oversees accreditation through the CUE. It is one of the ways of achieving accountability. A considerably good percentage of respondents (85.5%) agreed that accreditation influences the quality of university education and that CUE's standards and guidelines should be strictly followed during accreditation.

In 2016, one public university was ordered to close ten of its campuses because of failing to meet the required quality standards. According to Aduda (2017), the university was found to have campuses without adequate facilities and lecturers. It also admitted students irregularly and did not have the means to offer postgraduate studies. Even more worrying, the campuses were set up without the approval of the university council and chancellor. Aduda (2017) further notes that despite the recommendations by a ministerial committee, the university continues to run campuses it had been ordered to close. Incidences have also occurred where universities have offered courses that they are not authorized to. Students usually learn of this when they have completed their courses and cannot be registered by their respective professional bodies. Such cases call for enforcement of existing standards and guidelines regarding quality. Commitment is required from both CUE and the affected universities.

Universities in Kenya are required to carry out self-evaluation at regular intervals (CUE, 2014). During this process, universities are expected to consider: first, requirements of stakeholders and expected learning outcomes. Secondly, quality assurance; including student evaluation, curriculum design, staff development and benchmarking. Thirdly, achievements and graduates including graduates' profiles, pass rates and drop-out rates, average completion time and employability of graduates. Thirdly, stakeholders' satisfaction including opinions of students, alumni, labor market and society (CUE, 2014). This seems to exist in law but not in practice. The recent quality audit report indicated that universities did not fully comply with the set regulations. This implies that self-evaluation reports do not usually reflect what happens at the university. More than half of the study population said they were not aware of self-evaluation conducted by their university. It begs the question, "does the university really involve students

in self-evaluation?" If, yes; to what extent? Almost all respondents (95.5%) felt that their opinions should be reflected in the self-evaluation reports.

Conclusions

Students are key stakeholders in accountability in higher education as described by Burke (2005) accountability triangle theory. In Kenya however, they have been kept at the periphery even though the law (Universities Act, 2012) requires that they be involved. Their participation has been passive, they remain just consumers. The study established that students can make significant contributions towards higher education policy. This was demonstrated through their perceptions on quality assurance in general, accreditation and universities' self-evaluation.

This study makes a number of recommendations. First, the Commission for University Education should raise students' awareness about accreditation and self-evaluation. Detailed information regarding accreditation and self-evaluation should be explained to both parents and students. This will help them make informed decisions when choosing universities. The study found that majority of students did not know about this. This will empower students to demand for accountability in the context of massification of higher education in Kenya.

Secondly, universities should involve students during the self-evaluation process. This would provide room for improvement.

Thirdly, an independent body should be constituted to oversee implementation of the standards and guidelines related to quality of higher education. The current vice-chancellors who have been accused of breaching the regulations should not be involved in order to enhance effectiveness.

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