Student Preference on Choice of Higher Education Institutions: A Case Study of Laikipia University, Kenya

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Abstract—In the recent past, unprecedented competition has been witnessed among universities in Kenya aimed at attracting qualified students. This competition comes against a backdrop of a thinning pool of qualified students joining universities as a result of the reforms in the examination system of 2015. In view of this, universities across the nation have devised unique strategies aimed at attracting more students into joining them. Since the enactment of the university act No 42 of 2012 which created the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Services (KUCCPS), university admissions have been more flexible than it was under the Joint Admissions Board (JAB), the predecessor of KUCCPS. Nowadays, students who qualify to join university under government sponsored programmes are only placed into the courses and universities of their choice albeit competitively. There is more flexibility in this admission process in the sense that students who do not get placed based on their first choice of selection are given first and second chances to revise the choice of courses and/ or university where they can be admitted to pursue university education. Extant literature reveals that universities do not get students based on their declared capacity. Statistics show that some universities are allocated more students than others thus leading to the question; why do some universities get allocated more students than others? This study therefore aimed at establishing factors influencing potential students in selecting a university as their academic destination of study taking the first-year students admitted during the 2019/2020 academic year of Laikipia University as a case study. Anchored on William Glasser's Choice Theory, the study targeted a population of first year students admitted during the 2019/2020 academic year (N = 1311) from which a questionnaire was administered to a sample of 500 students who were randomly selected during the orientation week. The findings of the study revealed among others that the main channels through which the first-year students got to know about the university were through the university website (46%), colleagues (43%) high school teachers (31%), social media (30%), parents/guardians (28%). Notably, newspapers (8%) and television (10%) had little contribution towards enhancing visibility of the university. Further, it was established that quality of education services (34%) and a conducive study environment (27%) were the main factors that influenced students in selecting Laikipia University. This study concludes that universities that have a competitive edge over others are those that have strategically positioned themselves in the global education space through quality research output, quality faculty, good reputation, niche programmes, quality of graduates, general ambience of the study atmosphere, quality of education offered and have enhanced visibility through use of online and offline marketing strategies in reaching prospective students

Index Terms— Admission; Competition; University; Student.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Kenya plays a significant role towards enabling the country achieve its goals as stipulated in Kenya's vision 2030 blueprint. The underlying thread in this vision is to make Kenya, a knowledge-based economy by the year 2030 [1] The significance of Higher education in a knowledge based economy therefore, cannot be gainsaid. Indeed, the social pillar under vision 2030 underscores the significant role education and training plays towards the realization of this vision [2]. The training and development of the human resources required for this kind of economy implies that universities and colleges, as institutions of higher learning, play an integral role towards the realization of this vision. It is upon this realization that every Kenyan child aspires to build and advance their careers by being admitted into these higher education institutions.

Admissions into universities and colleges in Kenya can be done either independently through the individual universities/colleges or through the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Services (KUCCPS) as per university act No.42 of 2012 [3]. This paper however will mainly focus on the admissions to universities under the umbrella of the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Services (KUCCPS).

The Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) is a State Corporation that provides career guidance and selects students for admission to universities, national polytechnics, technical training institutes and other accredited higher learning institutions for Government of Kenya-sponsored programmes (KUCCPS, 2020). This mandate is derived from the Universities Act No. 42 of 2012 which gives power to the corporation to coordinate placement of government sponsored students to universities and colleges among other functions. The Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS) replaced the Joint Admission Board (JAB) upon the enactment of the universities act in 2012. The Joint Admissions Board (JAB) is the body that was mandated to conduct joint admissions of students who had cleared secondary school into Universities. The main aim was to ensure that only those students who had attained a certain

number of points were given priority to join the universities on government sponsorship. The JAB had three levels of authority consisting of Vice Chancellors committee for policy formulation, the Deans committee for selection of students to faculties and the JAB secretariat [5].

Unlike its predecessor (JAB), the KUCCPS has been given an expanded mandate by the universities act of 2012 including: coordinating the placement of government sponsored students to universities and colleges; disseminating information on available programmes, their costs and the areas of study prioritized by the government; collecting and retaining data relating to university and college placement; advising the government on matters relating to university and college placement and developing career guidance programmes for the benefit of students [3].

In the recent past, unprecedented competition has been witnessed among universities in Kenya aimed at attracting qualified students. This competition comes against a backdrop of a thinning pool of qualified students joining universities as a result of the reforms in the basic education sector which overhauled the national examination system in 2016 [10]. The minimum entry grade for admission to any university in Kenya is a KCSE mean grade of C+ (plus) for undergraduate degree programmes [6]. Before the 2016 examination reforms, there used to be a pool of students who had attained the minimum requirements of C+ but could not get placement to the universities. Admission then was based on the minimum cut off point for university admission as could be set each year by either the KUCCPS or its predecessor the JAB. Most universities could tap into the masses of students left out of the cutoff point and admit them through the popular module II programmes also known as parallel programmes. However, with the stringent regulations occasioned by the reforms of the examination system in 2016, majority of the students could not meet the minimum entry grade for university admission. For instance, since the reforms were instituted, the qualifying number of students admitted to universities from the years 2016/17/18 and 2019 was 88 929; 88 457; 90755; and 125 449 respectively; [8], [11], [12], [13]. These numbers are far much lower than the near 200, 000 capacity declared by the 69 public and private universities in Kenya [4], [7].

One of the fundamental aspects in the KUCCPS admission process which is a departure from its predecessor JAB is that before one is admitted to either a university or a college, they are given an opportunity to choose for themselves their preferred university/college of choice. In addition, if a student is not satisfied with the university that they have been admitted to, KUCCPS has given a provision for them to change the admission through the process of inter-university transfer. In sum, the KUCCPS admission process gives students the flexibility to choose programmes and universities of their choice. In essence therefore, students have more freedom regarding the university where they can pursue their studies from.

Placement to universities in the wake of this admission process has resulted in some universities getting more students than others. In the 2019/20 academic year, the minister for education while releasing admission results of students joining universities noted that 12 universities out of 69 public and private universities received 36,687

Government-sponsored students out of 89,486 candidates who secured placement to degree courses thus representing 41 percent of the total placement to universities [7]. This therefore implies that not all universities got students as per their declared capacity. For instance, in 2019 Kisii University had a declared capacity of 6,860 but was allocated 2,722 students representing 40 percent of the declared capacity. In the same year also, Maseno University declared a capacity of 6,765 but was allocated 4,673 students representing 69 percent of the declared capacity. Furthermore, JKUAT got 5,901 out of a declared capacity of 6,326 representing 93 percent and Kenyatta University got allocated 5,289 students out of a declared capacity of 5,638 thus representing 93.8 percent of the declared capacity among others [7].

Even though, no single university got allocated all the declared capacities, it is clear some universities got allocated more students than others. For instance, JKUAT emerged as the most preferred university in 2017 and 2018 admissions respectively [7]. A 2017 study commissioned by Madison insurance revealed that the university was ranked the best by employers and parents [8]. According to newblaze.co.ke reasons as to why some universities can be attractive to prospective students include: quality faculty, modern teaching and research facilities as well as impressive and functional collaborations with industry [8]. The Commission for University Education (CUE) on the other hand avers that attraction and placement to universities can be influenced by the nature of programmes offered, market forces, availability of resources, controls by professional bodies, availability and adequacy of space, facilities and teaching staff among others [7]. In addition, students' preferences play a crucial factor as they choose programmes offered in universities of their choice. Indeed, in 2019 while releasing the placement results for universities, the Cabinet Secretary for Education alluded to this fact by remarking that 92.2 per cent of the students got placed based on their choices [7]. It is therefore against this backdrop that most universities have come up with strategies aimed at attracting the thinning pool of students into joining them. Efforts by universities in luring potential students are on the rise with each passing day. Individual universities are trying to uniquely present themselves as the most preferred academic destinations for students looking to pursue university education in the country and Laikipia University is not an exception.

II. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

This study is predicated on the premise that during the academic year 2019/20, Laikipia University was allocated 1259 Government sponsored students to pursue various degree programmes. During the period under review, 74 students out of the 1259 who were allocated to the university sought to transfer out of the university while at the same time the university received 126 applications from students who sought to be transferred-in to the university through the KUCCPS' inter-university transfer system. Consequently, the total number of students placed to the university increased to 1311 representing a four (4) percentage increase from the original allocation. These statistics therefore imply that a significant majority of the students were contended by their placement to Laikipia University as the University of their choice. Further, from the inter-university transfers, it can be observed that the University ended up admitting more

students than were originally allocated by KUCCPS hence increasing overall admission by about four (4) percent. It is against this backdrop, that the current study was undertaken with an aim of establishing factors that influence potential students to select Laikipia University as their preferred academic destination, taking the cohort admitted in the 2019/20 academic year as a case study. Consequently, the study aimed at establishing the main channels through which the students got to know about Laikipia University and the factors that influenced the students to choose the University for undertaking their studies.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Choice theory by Dr William Glasser [9]. The theory posits that the behaviours people choose are central to their existence. According to Glasser, human behaviour is driven by five genetically driven needs: survival, love and belonging, freedom, fun, and power. Choice theory also suggests the existence of a "Quality World". Our "Quality World" images are our role models of an individual's "perfect" world of parents, relations, possessions, beliefs, etc. According to Glasser, the world of choice starts from birth and continues throughout our lives and each person places significant role models, significant possessions and significant systems of belief (religion, cultural values, and icons, etc.) into a mostly unconscious framework called the "Quality World". Glasser avers that we tend to compare and contrast our perception of people, places, and things immediately in front of us against our ideal images (archetypes) of those in our Quality World framework once choices have been made. In sum, Glasser contends that Total Behavior is made up of four components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. Glasser suggests that human beings have considerable control or choice over the first two of these; yet, little ability to directly choose the latter two as they are more deeply sub- and unconscious. These four components remain closely intertwined; the choices we make in our thinking and acting greatly affect our feeling and physiology [9]**.** This theory was deemed to be relevant for this study since it was premised on the choices that students make to study at any given university. Based on Glassers' postulates, the study assumed that there is the ache-type of the quality world (university) that a prospective student compares with before setting on a particular choice of university. The role played by significant others was also critical in this study as the view of "quality world" by the student is normally shaped by the students' role models including colleagues, parents and teachers. It is therefore important to note that by choosing the right institution of study based on their realm of quality world, the student will have inner satisfaction which will eventually lead to success in life and career.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The study participants included all first years admitted during the 2019/20 academic year thus constituting the target population of (N = 1311) from which a sample size (n= 500) of first years were randomly selected during orientation period based on the Yamane formula for determining sample size at 96 % level of confidence [14]. A questionnaire was administered to the respondents during the orientation week after which 425 out of the 500 questionnaires issued were

returned representing a questionnaire return rate of 85 percent.

V. RESULTS

Results of the study are presented according to demographic characteristics of the students which includes gender, regional representation and programme of study; Channels of Knowing about the University and Factors that influenced students to choose Laikipia University

A. Demographic Characteristics of Students

Analysis of the characteristics of respondents in terms of gender, regional representation and programme of study are as shown in table I

Table I: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Gender	Percentage
Male	51
Female	49
Region of origin	**Percentage**
Rift Valley	42.51
Eastern	15.95
Central	14.71
Nyanza	10.06
Western	9.82
Nairobi	3.68
Coast	3.20
North Eastern	0.25
Programme of study	**Percentage**
Bachelor of education (Arts)	42.3
Bachelor of education (Science)	11.06
of Science (Economics and statistics)	7.45
Bachelor of Arts (Communication and media)	6.49
Bachelor of Arts (Criminology and Security studies)	5.77
Bachelor of Science (Statistics)	5.53
Bachelor of Science (Computer Science)	5.05
Bachelor of Commerce	4.09
Bachelor of Science (Information and Communication Technology)	3.37
Bachelor of Arts (Kiswahili and communication)	1.92
Bachelor of arts (Psychology)	1.68
Bachelor of Arts (Economics and Sociology)	1.44
Others	< 1

The gender of the respondents constituted 51 percent males and 49 percent females. Regionally, Majority of the first years were drawn from Rift Valley constituting 42.51 percent followed by Eastern (15.95%), Central (14.71%), Nyanza (10.06%), Western (9.82%), Nairobi (3.68%), Coast (3.20%) and North Eastern (25%) in that order. Most of the students constituting 42.3 percent were admitted to pursue Bachelor of Education (Arts) followed by Bachelor of Education (Science) with 11.06 percent representation while other programmes had a representation of less than 10 percent including Bachelor of Science (Economics and Statistics) = 7.45%, Bachelor of Arts (Communication and Media) = 6.49%; Bachelor of Arts (Criminology and Security Studies) = 5.77%; Bachelor of Science (Statistics) = 5.53%; Bachelor of Science (Computer Science) = 5.05%; Bachelor of Commerce = 4.09%; Bachelor of Science (Information and Communication Technology) = 3.37%; Bachelor of Arts

(Kiswahili and Communication) = 1.92%; Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) = 1.68% and Bachelor of Arts (Economics and Sociology) = 1.44%. The rest of the programmes offered at the university had a representation of less than one (1) percent.

B. Channels of Knowing about the University

The first objective of the study sought to establish the main channels through which the students gained knowledge about the university. It is clear from the analysis that the channels through which the students got to know about the university include: university website, parents/guardians, colleagues, teachers, social media, television and newspapers as shown in table II

Table II: Main Channels through which students knew about the university

Channel	Percentage (%)	Rank
University website	46	1
Colleagues	43	2
High school teacher	31	3
Social media (face book, tweeter)	30	4
Parents/guardian	28	5
Television	10	6
Newspapers	8	7

As can be seen from table II, about 46 percent of the students got to know about the university through the university website (www.laikipiauniversity.ac.ke), about 43 percent got to know about the university through their colleagues, 31 percent of the students knew the university through their high school teachers and about 30 percent got to know the university through the social media such as face book and twitter and 28 percent others got to know the university through their parent or guardian. Interestingly though, students' knowledge about the university through television (10%) and newspapers (8%) was minimal. In terms of rank, it can be seen that the main channel through which majority of the students got information about the university was through the university website, followed by colleagues to high school teachers then social media and parents/guardians. The lowest ranked channels of information about the university to the students were television and newspapers.

C. Factors that influenced students to choose Laikipia University

The study further sought to establish the factors that made the students prefer Laikipia University as an academic destination for their studies. Results of this analysis are as shown in table III

Table III: Factors that influenced students to choose Laikipia University for their studies

Factor influencing choice of Laikipia University	Percentage (%age)	Rank
Parents/guardians/high school teachers	6.84	6
Programme of study	10.38	3
Quality of education/service	33.96	1
Quality of graduates	7.31	5
Colleagues	8.35	4
Government (KUCCPS)	4.01	7
Security	2.36	8
Conducive environment	26.42	2
Others	0.47	9

Table III summarizes the factors that influenced students admitted during the 2019/20 academic year to choose Laikipia university as the academic institution of choice. Observations from table 3 reveal that about 7 percent of the students were influenced by their parents/ guardians and teachers to choose the university. Ten (10) percent of the students chose the university because of the programme of study and 34 percent of the students chose the university because of quality of education/service. About 7 percent chose the university because of the quality of graduates while over 8 percent of the students chose the university because of the pressure from colleagues. There is however about 4 percent of students who did not choose the university but according to them they were placed by the government through KUCCPS. Other students constituting over 2 percent chose the university because of security reasons while about 27 percent of them chose because of the conducive learning environment. Overall, majority of the students chose the university because of the quality of education/ service (rank =1) and the conducive learning environment (rank =2), programme of study (rank = 3) and colleagues (rank =4) among other factors.

VI. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study has established that there are two main channels through which students got to know about the university. These two channels include use of online platforms and referrals. The online platform employs the use of university website and social media e.g. face book and twitter. Referrals on the other hand are done especially through the use of colleagues, parents and teachers. These channels can be argued to be the main methods through which the university markets itself. Ivan advises that social channels can be effective in higher education marketing [15]. He opines that, strategies for maximizing the use of social media platform should include: Featuring successful alumni – especially in regard to their employment track record; Featuring student and faculty achievements by showing off their innovative works and groundbreaking research and Featuring campus beauty by showcasing it on social media since many students view that campus environment as an important part of the decision making process. Other social media strategies that can be leveraged according to Ivan include building a social media directory, developing Facebook interest groups, creating Social media ambassadors and having dedicated Hashtags that can market the university. Montull avers that in the current digital world where information travels as fast as light, universities can leverage on either offline or online channels of communicating with potential clients [16]. Some of the strategies he advocates for use include: use of strategic social media, running a responsive website with good Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and use of advertising through banners, posters, universities journals, and flyers [16].

Regarding factors influencing students to choose Laikipia University, it can be argued that the university has positioned itself as an academic destination for students owing to factors such as Quality of education offered and its conducive environment for learning in addition to the Programmes of study and Quality of graduates it produces. The findings of this study are in agreement with those of Yusof, Ahmad, Tajudin, and Ravindran who found that availability of the

required programmes can influence decisions of prospective students to choose a university of study [18]. The Commission for University Education (CUE) on the other hand avers that attraction and placement to universities can be influenced by the nature of programmes offered, market forces, availability of resources, controls by professional bodies, availability and adequacy of space, facilities and teaching staff among others [7]. Rudhumbu, Tirumalai, and Kumari also established that academic programmes offered, image and reputation of the institution, advertising, career fairs, quality of staff, and employment prospects of graduates from the institution had a very high influence on the decision by students to choose an institution of study [17]. Hsieh on the other hand found that the importance of quality, type and variety of academic programmes as well as the presence of distinguished teaching staff were factors that had a moderating effect on students' decisions to choose a university [19]. Similarly, [20] as well as [21] found that marketing strategies were influential in choosing an institution of study. Moreover, a study by Ismail found out those academic programmes, reputation and instructional image had a high influence on students' decision with regard to the University of Study [22].

VII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a compendium of factors which can attract a potential student to study in a university. Some of these factors include the general strategic positioning of the university in the global education space on the basis of quality research output, quality of faculty, type of programmes (niche), reputation, quality of graduates and the general study atmosphere. The study findings have also alluded to the fact that the use of website, social media and referrals can be important media in marketing a university to potential students. In the wake of the declining number of students seeking university admissions, it behoves universities to find out strategies of increasing their visibility and attracting potential students. This as the findings from the current study suggest, will require universities to enhance their visibility by employing a variety of competitive media strategies in both offline and online forms. In particular, universities should increase their social media presence by employing social media platforms such as face book, instagram, and twitter besides having social media ambassadors considering the current generations of students whom they serve are tech-savvy. Employing the use of TV and newspaper adverts will also go a long way in enhancing the visibility and creating awareness about the university to the public. Universities should also have very interactive websites which can be accessed through mobile devises with strong search engine optimization for ease of information accessibility and retrieval. It is also worth noting that programmes of study play a significant role in attracting students to study in a particular university. Therefore, universities should be able to identify niche areas where they can be able to leverage on their strength and build a reputation through training and research which eventually will become a source of attraction to potential students.

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