Satisfaction of International Students with their Experiences in Kenyan Christian Universities, and their Willingness to Recommend their Institutions

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Abstract

The support of student movement across borders for higher education has seen a rise in intra-regional student mobility in Africa. However, there is still limited feedback on the experiences of international students studying in African universities. A survey done among five private universities in Kenya in the year 2017 sought to establish the relationship between international student experiences and their overall satisfaction and willingness to recommend their institutions. Findings revealed significant relationships between international students' overall satisfaction and their satisfaction with various experiences in their student lifecycle such as application, learning, living and experiences with the usage of support services. A niche contribution of this study to the literature is the association between international students' overall satisfaction and their satisfaction with institutional support services. The study concludes that enhancing student experiences requires a holistic approach, including key support services of teaching staff, registry, library and the chaplaincy.

Key Words: International students' satisfaction, students' experiences, willingness to recommend universities, international students' lifecycle, international student mobility, regionalization, educational quality, open systems

Introduction

There is no doubt that international student mobility is a key aspect in internationalization of education (Healey, 2008; Yemini & Sagie, 2016) and it has received great support in Africa from the African Union as well as the different regions in the continent (Crosier & Parveva, 2013; AU, 2008). The available literature on international student mobility however has little to say on developing countries' contribution to international education as hosts to international students. However, the

potential that is within Africa in promoting international student mobility begs to be tapped. It has been said that African universities are marginalized in the landscape of knowledge production and dissemination mainly due to the financial and infrastructural challenges on the continent (Woldegiorgis & Doevenspeck, 2015). This requires African nations and institutions to deliberately work on promoting quality higher education for their nationals as well as for international students in order to continue safeguarding the region from brain drain. Such efforts would support the initiatives of the African Union (AU) and other regional bodies to build international human capital through education. Much progress has been made to foster harmonization of higher education and promotion of its quality in the region (Arasa & Nkunya, 2010) and all these efforts will continue to promote intra-African student mobility and consequently the quality of higher education.

The focus of this paper is on the overall experiences of international students in their entire student lifecycle. This covers the point of application, arrival, orientation, learning experiences, living experiences as well as experiences in the use of support services in the university. The paper looks at how these experiences relate to students' overall satisfaction and willingness to recommend their universities.

International Student Experiences in the Light of Systems Model

Institutions of higher learning operate in the context of the broader educational context in their countries and in the world. As open systems, which influence and are influenced by what happens in the environment (Palestini, 2002), these institutions have to constantly stay in tune with the happenings in their settings. A broader view of academic and non-academic experiences is important, because most of the literature on international student experiences have focused on learning experiences (Archer, 2015; Breen & Lindsay, 1999).

Within the framework of a systems model, student experiences in the institution such as learning, living and administrative experiences are important processes geared to mold the student to the desired graduate that the institution seeks to release back to the society. When educational administrators consider all aspects of students' experiences, they are more likely to promote effectiveness. The international student lifecycle framework adopted for this study originally came from a project called "Teaching International Students" in the Higher Education Academy of the UK (Ryan, 2011), which utilizes the entire student lifecycle. For our purpose, the student life cycle categories were adapted for this study to cover the experiences during application, arrival, orientation, learning, living and the usage of university support services. Student satisfaction, a key indicator of service quality and a measure of student experiences (Ali et al., 2016; Bedggood & Donovan, 2012), is utilized in this study.

Student Satisfaction and their Willingness to Recommend their Institutions

Most customer satisfaction surveys allude to the fact that customer satisfaction is related to customer loyalty (Shahsavar & Sudzina, 2017). Adoption of the 'student as customer model' in institutions of higher learning has by implication linked student satisfaction to their loyalty. According to Østergaard and Kristensen, student loyalty is expressed in different ways such as students' "willingness to recommend the institution and the programmes to others, considerations whether the student would have chosen the same institution and programme today, and willingness to continue education or participate in conferences at the institution in the future" (2006, 6).

There are other studies that have shown positive correlations between student satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their institutions (Roy et al., 2016; Garrett, 2014; Lee, 2010; Wiers-Jenssen et al., 2002). Garrett claims that "satisfied international students are great alumni ambassadors" and that students' willingness to recommend their institutions is seen as the ultimate indicator of satisfaction (Garrett, 2014, 9-10). According to Bedggood and Donovan, "measuring and responding to student satisfaction could produce favorable outcomes for universities and students alike, as systems and process can be adjusted to make the university experience more enjoyable for students, which may influence favourable word-of-mouth and enhance university image and reputation" (Bedggood & Donovan, 2012, 839). Considering that "word-of-mouth referral is one of the most powerful forms of promotion that international education institutions can use" (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, 85), it is important to establish from students whether they would be willing to recommend their institutions to others.

Besides measuring international students' level of satisfaction with their experiences, the current study attempts to link student satisfaction with their willingness to recommend their institutions. This is for the purposes of testing the link between these two issues based on previous studies and to also make contribution to the practice of educational administration.

Methodology

This research adopted a correlational quantitative survey design using cross-sectional data of international students studying in selected Christian universities in Kenya in the year 2017. Although most of the data were quantitative, respondents were also allowed to explain their responses through open-ended questions that collected some qualitative data. This mixed data is helpful in interpretation and in filling any gaps that may exist based on the quantitative data alone (Creswell & Clark, 2011; Creswell, 1994). In this paper, there will be more emphasis on the quantitative results.

Five Christian universities that hosted at least 100 international students for full degree programmes were purposively selected. Stratified random sampling drew a probability sample of international students who had completed at least one semester in the university from the international students across the selected universities. This was to facilitate representation of key student characteristics such as programme level, gender and countries of origin.

The main research instrument used was a questionnaire that was distributed to the international students in print or in electronic form, depending on the institutional dynamics. The data collected using the questionnaire sought to answer the following research questions: How satisfied are international students with their university experiences? What are the factors that influence international students' overall level of satisfaction? What is the relationship between international students' satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their institutions? For our purpose, just two of the six null hypotheses tested are reported here: that there is no correlation between the students' overall satisfaction and satisfaction with the various categories of experiences; and that there is no correlation between students' overall satisfaction and their willingness to recommend the institution to others. The student experiences were assessed through an instrument adapted from the International Student Barometer (ISB), popularly used to survey international students' satisfaction with their experiences (Brett, 2013). The ISB was modified and pilot tested to fit the Kenyan educational context. Content validity of the instrument was ascertained through scrutiny by experts, one in the area of international education, another on student services and the other in Educational Administration. Reliability was ascertained through Cronbach's alpha values ranging from 0.86 to 0.93.

Besides the use of frequencies to report descriptive data, Spearman rank order correlation test was used to establish relationships between the hypothesized variables and the strengths of these relationships. Overall, statistical significance was determined by a p-value of less than 0.05 allowing for the rejection of the two null hypotheses tested for purposes of this paper. The open-ended responses generated specific themes, and some feedback is quoted verbatim to represent some of the students' opinions in the form of narrative vignettes.

Findings

Questionnaire returns were 61%. The respondents were from East Africa (61%), West Africa (17%), Central Africa (15%) and Southern Africa (7%). The distribution was as follows: undergraduate Bachelors (78%), Masters (17%), Doctoral and Diploma (3% and 2% respectively). The male students were 54% while the female were 46%. Full-time students were 92% and part-time 8%. The top sending countries were Tanzania (17%), South Sudan (17%), DRC (16%), Nigeria (10%), Rwanda (8%) and Burundi (7%).

Satisfaction Level of International Students with their University Experiences

Student overall satisfaction (the independent variable) and satisfaction with the various student experiences (dependent variables) were correlated. Intervening variables include satisfaction with visa application, institutional size and motivating factors as students seek for an international study destination. The overall satisfaction of international students with their university experiences reveals a generally satisfying experience. Most international students (75%) were satisfied overall. In general, learning experiences were the most satisfying (88%), followed by experiences during the application for admission (83%). Three categories of experiences were generally rated equally satisfying – the overall university experiences, the arrival experiences and the living experiences (75%). The orientation experiences and the support services on the other hand each satisfied 73% of the respondents. The least satisfying experience was visa application (54%).

Satisfaction with Pre-enrollment Experiences (Application, Arrival and Orientation)

Under the application experiences, students were most satisfied with the duration between application and admission and the quality of services received from university officers towards admission. Many gaps that international students identified were clearly expressed through the open-ended questions. Instances indicate some frustration. A respondent stated, "all of my application documents got lost so I was to start afresh. That was due to carelessness of the responsible people in that office", while another complained of eventually having to personally visit the university to have issues sorted out.

The arrival experience in terms of the welcome received and introduction to a contact person (staff or student) was quite satisfying, but hostel accommodation was not quite, in terms of availability and timeliness. While one noted, "my arrival was good because they welcomed me and I found …they had laid my bed", another said, "it is my prayer for international students to be accommodated in the campus not outside for insecurity purposes". An emerging concern entailed new students' pick up from the airport on arrival. The experiences of some of them seem to suggest that the university should assist new international students to get to the campus safely if they are not doing that.

The least satisfying pre-enrollment experiences were related to student orientation. The universities seem to give more emphasis to orientation on academic studies than orientation on non-academic student life. There was also a wish to extend the support for transition of international students beyond the one week that most universities offered.

This is to also cater for those who often miss to attend the orientation week (approximately 26%) for various reasons. "I arrived a few weeks (*late*) due to passport issues and was not assigned anyone to direct me or orient me so I had to figure out stuff by myself and also there were no rooms for accommodation available. It was stressful figuring out things alone".

Satisfaction with Learning Experiences

Learning experience was the most satisfying of all university experiences, satisfying 88% of the international students. The specific learning experiences that were the most satisfying were studying with people from other cultures, followed by relevance of the academic programme to future career prospects and the size of the classes. The teaching ability of lecturers and the subject area expertise of lecturers were also among the highest satisfying aspects of the learning experiences.

International students appreciated many things about their learning experiences as expressed through the open-ended question including the good learning environment, the sacrifices made by the lecturers to help them and integration of good morals with some saying that it was their best experience so far. One student in comparison with his country of origin stated that "the learning environment here is good compared to my country as I am getting new skills and more confident than before". However, concerns surfaced among some on the need for English proficiency to succeed in an all-English learning environment.

Satisfaction with Living Experiences

Satisfaction with three specific aspects of students' living experiences was assessed. They are accommodation and living costs, students' social life, and their day-to-day life. Student experiences on their day-to-day life were the most satisfying of the three, while the least satisfying category were the accommodation and living costs. The three most satisfying living experiences were making friends with other international students (82.6%), the opportunities and facilities for religious worship (78.8%) and feeling safe and secure (78.3%).

The specific item that attracted the highest number of criticisms from the open-ended question is the quality of university accommodation. Students complained that these facilities were insufficient, overcrowded, not comfortable, needed repairs, were expensive and not flexible. There were also a lot of complaints about food. Most of the complaints revolved around quality, amount and cost. Some students also commented that the sports and recreation facilities were insufficient.

Satisfaction with Support Services

Various institutional departments and student support aspects were assessed under this category and on overall 73% of international students were satisfied with provision of support services. The most satisfying student support section was the Library Support Services followed by the general attitude of the teaching staff (faculty) and the chaplaincy or multi-faith provision. They were also satisfied with the IT and the International Students' support office.

Besides service provision, the attitude of the staff giving these services also matters and students notice the difference in staff attitudes. For instance, on the attitude of the teaching staff, one student observed that "the teaching staff are the most dedicated of all others". This could explain the difference in satisfaction levels between endorsement of the attitude of the teaching staff (83%) and that of the non-teaching staff (69%).

Satisfaction with Visa Application

In Kenya, a student visa, the Kenya Pupils' Pass (KPP), is required for all international students until recently when students from the East African Community (EAC) were exempted. Even though this experience is not entirely a responsibility of the university hosting international students, there is a lot of interaction between the student, the institution and the government department of immigration. That is why it is regarded as an intervening variable in this study. This paper won't give much emphasis on this experience.

Factors that Influence International Students' Overall Level of Satisfaction

For purposes of data analysis, the tests of two hypotheses received the greater attention of this paper –the correlation between student experiences and overall student satisfaction, and the association between student experiences and their willingness to recommend their universities. To test the first null hypothesis that there is no correlation between the students' overall satisfaction and satisfaction with the various categories of experiences, a Spearman correlation test was done. There was no statistically significant correlation between overall satisfaction and satisfaction of students with the arrival experiences, orientation and visa application experiences since the tests generated p-values that are not less than 0.05. However, significant correlations were detected between overall satisfaction and satisfaction with the other four experiences, as seen in Table 1 - application, learning, living and usage of support services. This means that overall; student satisfaction may be associated with how satisfied students are with their application experiences, learning experiences, living experiences and their experiences in the usage of support services.

Table 1. Correlations between Overall Satisfaction and Satisfaction with Various Student Experiences

	Total N (%)	Correlation coefficient (Spearman's Correlation)	p-value (Level of significance)	Effect size (r^2)
Application Experience	177	.252**	.001	0.064
Arrival Experience	177	.123	.103	N/A
Orientation Experience	175	.082	.280	N/A
Learning Experience	174	.256**	.001	0.066
Living Experience	174	.270**	.000	0.073
Support Services	173	.300**	.000	0.09
Visa Application	156	-.090	.262	N/A

For practical implications however, the correlation coefficient results show that only the usage of student support services had a moderate, positive and significant correlation ($r_s = .300$, $p = 0.001$, $r^2 = 0.09$) with a 9% shared variance.

The effect sizes for application experiences, learning and living experiences were however small, although statistically significant. This is an indication that overall, satisfaction with support services is the one experience that can be most associated with overall satisfaction of these international students.

In addition to the general rating of the student experiences, correlations were also sought between specific items under each experience to identify which elements are significantly correlated with overall satisfaction of the international students. The summary of these items that showed statistical significance with overall satisfaction is reflected in Table 2. Even though the effect size was small, these are important aspects that not only explain student satisfaction with their various experiences but are also significantly correlated with overall student satisfaction.

Table 2. Correlations between Overall Satisfaction and Satisfaction with Specific Aspects of Student Experiences

Category of Experience	Item	N	Spearman's Rho (r)	P-value	r^2
Application	Adequacy of pre-arrival information	175	.165[*]	.029	.027
Orientation	Information on the services provided by the university	172	.153	.046	.023
Learning	All teaching experiences put together	177	.163	.030	.027
	The subject area expertise of lecturers	176	.282	.000	.080
	The teaching ability of lecturers	173	.286	.000	.082
(Teaching experiences)	Lecturers' inter-cultural competence	175	.208	.006	.043
	Personal support with learning from the academic staff	174	.170	.025	.029
	Provision for opportunities for students to evaluate courses or teachers	175	.220	.003	.048
(Studies)	Relevance of academic programme to future career prospects	173	.189	.013	.036
	The size of the classes	173	.169	.027	.029
(Facilities)	The quality of the lecture theatres/ classrooms	171	.184	.016	.034
Living	The opportunity to earn money while studying	172	-.199	.009	.040
	Making Kenyan friends	171	.152	.046	.023
	The design and quality of the campus buildings	173	.214	.005	.046
	The quality of the campus environment	173	.160	.036	.026

Support Services	Accounts/ Finance Department	173	.247	.001	.061
	Registrar's office	173	.230	.002	.052
	The General attitude of the teaching staff (faculty)	170	.195	.011	.038
Visa	Time taken to process the student visa	158	-.159	.047	.025
	Ease of receiving a student visa from one's home country.	157	-.225	.005	.051

The Relationship between International Students' Satisfaction and their Willingness to Recommend their Institutions

The findings revealed that 75% of the international students would most likely recommend their institutions to other people from their country. However, there were 11% who said that it would be unlikely for them to do so, and 14% were unsure. A cross tabulation between overall satisfaction and the willingness to recommend was done to reflect the distribution of international students based on their overall satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their university. The findings support the existing literature that satisfied students are more likely to recommend their institutions to others. There was a 48% representation of respondents that were satisfied overall and willing to recommend their institutions, compared with 26% who were satisfied overall, yet unlikely to recommend their institutions.

To test the second null hypothesis that there is no correlation between students' overall satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their institution to others, a Spearman correlation test was done and the results indicate a weak positive but significant correlation between students' overall satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their institutions ($r_s = 0.276$, p = 0.000, $r^2 = 0.076$). There was a shared variance of 8%, meaning that students' willingness to recommend their institution can be accounted for only at 8% by their overall satisfaction with their university experiences (see Table 3).

However, correlations between international students' willingness to recommend their institutions and satisfaction with specific student experiences reveal more. Willingness to recommend is significantly associated with overall satisfaction in all the students' experiences- application, arrival, orientation, learning, living, support services and even visa application. There were moderate, positive and significant correlations between international students' willingness to recommend their university and their satisfaction with the following experiences: application experience ($r_s = 0.309$, p = 0.000, $r^2 = 0.095$) with 10% shared variance, learning experience ($r_s = .351$, p = 0.000, $r^2 = 0.123$) with 12% shared variance, living experience ($r_s = .383$, p = 0.000, $r^2 = 0.147$) with 15% shared variance and support services ($r_s = .415$, p = 0.001, $r^2 = 0.172$) with 17% shared variance. Weak but significant correlations were detected between students' willingness to recommend their universities and the following experiences: arrival experiences ($r_s = .218$, p = 0.004, $r^2 = 0.048$) with 5% shared variance, orientation experiences ($r_s = .215$, p = 0.005, $r^2 = 0.022$) with 2% shared variance and visa experiences ($r_s = .216$, p = 0.006, $r^2 = 0.047$) with 5% shared variance.

These results shed light on the importance of enhancing all international students' experiences to make them satisfying, since doing that has implications on whether the

students would be willing to recommend their institutions or not. International students' satisfaction with the support services that they receive seems to be particularly important to these students. This is because their experience with these support services seems to be the item with the highest correlation with both their overall satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their universities.

In addition, further Spearman correlation tests were done to identify if there are specific items that could be correlated with willingness to recommend. All the items outlined in Table 3 deserve the attention of educational administrators in regards to the management of international students. This is because satisfaction with these aspects that are part of an international student's lifecycle is not just significantly correlated with the students' willingness to recommend their institutions; they all have at least a medium effect size, which warrants attention by institutional policy makers to facilitate their enhancement. For instance, the attitude of the teaching staff has the highest relationship with students' willingness to recommend their university. Besides encouraging faculty to support international students, their facilitation and wellbeing should be given attention. This would enable them to thrive in their role as facilitators of learning and a major support to international students.

Table 3. Correlation between Specific Experience Items and Willingness to Recommend

Student Experience Item	Category	R	Shared variance
General attitude of non-teaching staff	Support	.424**	18%
University registrar's office	Support	.418**	17%
The quality of the campus environment	Living	.401**	16%
Library Support Services	Support	.399**	16%
The online library facilities	Learning	.380**	14%
The quality of the lecture theatres/ classrooms	Learning	.378**	14%
The teaching ability of lecturers	Learning	.367**	13%
The design and quality of the campus buildings	Living	.364**	13%
Chaplaincy or multi-faith provision	Support	.362**	13%
The subject area expertise of lecturers	Learning	.351**	12%
Feedback on formal written submissions	Learning	.345**	12%
The learning technology (computers, internet/ networking, etc.)	Learning	.342**	12%
The opportunities and facilities for religious worship	Living	.336**	11%
The social activities (organized events)	Living	.332**	11%
Digital screens /PowerPoint projection provisions in classrooms	Learning	.328**	11%
Provision for opportunities for students to evaluate courses or teachers	Learning	.326**	11%
The sports and recreation facilities	Living	.323**	10%
Introduction to a contact person (staff or student) to help you adjust (settle down)	Arrival	.315**	10%

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

Out of the 7 items assessed under teaching in this study, only one (*the level of research activity in the university*) did not have a significant correlation with either overall

satisfaction or international student's willingness to recommend, indicating that research may not necessarily be a major focus for the international students in the surveyed universities. This also shows the heavy reliance on teaching for the satisfaction of a student's learning experience and consequently a motivator for recommendation of the university, in contrast to other aspects of learning such as personal studies or learning facilities.

Summary, Discussion and Recommendations

This research sought to find out the holistic experiences of international students in selected Christian universities in Kenya, considering their entire student lifecycle. A relationship between the satisfaction of students with the various categories of student experiences and their overall student satisfaction was also pursued as well as the correlation between students' satisfaction and their willingness to recommend their institutions. The findings indicate that international students in the selected universities were generally satisfied, their learning experiences being the most satisfying and the application for student visa the least satisfying. However, students' overall satisfaction with their university experiences can mostly be associated with their satisfaction with student support services. Similarly, students' willingness to recommend is mainly associated with satisfaction with the use of university support services.

Even though learning experiences were generally the most satisfying, it is interesting to note the contrast with other studies in different parts of the world such as Australia, USA and the UK, which indicates that learning experiences have the highest correlation with overall satisfaction (Ammigan & Jones, 2018) and indeed students' willingness to recommend their institutions (Garrett, 2014). Most studies on student experiences anyway focus on the learning experiences, yet aspects of student service support in order to succeed academically are central to these international students' overall satisfaction, as discovered in this study.

Why might this finding be particularly suited to an African context? We surmise that employing the 'Open systems model', these institutions are a microcosm of their society. It is generally observed that African societies suffer under weak institutions – social, political, judicial and economic, etc. (Akintola 2017; Wasilwa, 2017; Kruger & Klerk de 2016, 47; Baijnath &James 2015, 62; Aron 2000). As such, support services are generally found wanting. It should therefore be of little surprise that these students place premium on institutional support services. In the Kenyan context, there is little literature on student services (Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013), especially in the private universities, where many international students are hosted.

Considering the correlation between international students' overall satisfaction and their satisfaction with the use of support services, findings from this study therefore suggest that these universities need to invest in aspects that would enhance the performance of institutional support services in general. However, since overall student satisfaction is not an end in itself, other associations such as international students' willingness to recommend their institutions and their satisfaction with the various student experiences come into play. Based on the latter consideration, findings from this study reveal the importance of ensuring that student experiences are holistically enhanced.

Students' willingness to recommend their university may not be associated with their overall satisfaction as it would with satisfying experiences in the various categories of student experiences. Although overall satisfaction with student support services has a stronger correlation with their willingness to recommend their university, satisfaction with living experiences, learning and application for admission are also moderately correlated

with willingness to recommend. This is to say that students' confidence to recommend their university starts with their satisfaction at the point of application for admission and continues to be entrenched as they experience satisfying learning experiences, living experiences and support services.

There are some specific aspects of student experiences that were identified as boosters to international students' confidence in their universities, the first one is the general attitude of the academic staff towards students. These international students expressed their appreciation of the teaching faculty through the open-ended responses, noting their patience in explaining concepts for students' understanding, their willingness to understand students regardless of their different educational backgrounds, and the sacrifices they made to support the students. Learning experiences related to the teaching faculty such as their subject area expertise and their teaching ability also have significant associations with student willingness to recommend their universities. When these are accompanied by the right attitude towards students and a supportive learning environment that includes feedback on assignments, online library facilities, quality classrooms with provisions for digital screens or PowerPoint projection, efficient learning technology such as computers and internet facilities and provision for teacher evaluation, these international students tend to gain more confidence to recommend their institutions.

Some of the aspects of student support services positively associated with the international students' willingness to recommend their universities are the services of the university registrar's office, library and provision of spiritual support through the chaplaincy or the equivalent. The chaplaincy should be complemented by adequate opportunities and facilities for religious worship such as the chapel, prayer room and worship services. In addition, good living experiences such as a conducive and beautiful campus environment with well-designed and quality buildings, facilities for sports and recreation and good social events are also associated with willingness to recommend these universities. The interaction of these aspects in the lives of the international students reflects the need for a holistic approach, while attempting to enhance their university experiences, and they facilitate positive recommendations from the students.

Quality services are demanded from the onset as students apply for admission and should continue in their entire student lifecycle. As institutions focus on academic success of the students, these efforts should be complemented by supportive student services and good living conditions. The universities therefore have to make investments in services, not just to satisfy and retain their international students, but also to earn their confidence in recommending the institutions to others. This way, a continuous flow of international students becomes possible, and the quality of learning in the universities is enhanced.

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