Strategic Direction as a Determinant on Service Quality of Accredited Universities in Kenya

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Abstract: **Purpose- to determine the effect of strategic direction on service quality of accredited universities in Kenya.This study was guided by the positivist domain which is a major doctrine or theory in social sciences largely used in survey types of research. The study employed both cross-sectional research design and explanatory research design. The target population comprised the 74 public and private universities in Kenya. The sample size was 222 respondents. The main data collection tool was a questionnaire. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Findings revealed that leaders of universities illustrated a high level of agreement on strategic direction. The result further showed that strategic direction has a positive and statistically significant relationship with service quality of accredited universities in Kenya. The practical implication is that the finding that strategic direction impacts service quality in Kenyan universities is in line with the trait leadership theory. The implication of the theory is that university leaders have the responsibility to motivate employees to perform, satisfying their needs and providing them assistance in attaining their goals. These are result oriented and are based on the long term vision and strategies that leaders put in place to provide a significant impact on everyone.**

Key words: **Strategic Direction, Service Quality, Human Capital, Human Capital Development**

I. INTRODUCTION

The quality of higher education as a service is central to a country's development because universities train the professionals who will work as managers in organizations, and manage public and private resources, and care for the health and education of the coming generations (Oliveria, 2009). Higher education environment is a pure service that provides person-to-person interaction Oldfield and Baron (2000), and customer satisfaction in this situation is usually achieved through the quality of personal contacts (Fong & Wai, 2008). Additionally, higher education's focus should be directed on the interests and needs of diverse factions, that includes students, employers, government, alumni, parents and funding agencies, among others (Rosza, 2010). Higher education (HE) institutions have to become more efficient with a view to compete in a global market where client expectations are rising frequently. Quality therefore is critical for success in this new normal. While the economic benefits of quality have been established for long, many HE institutions keep on ignoring them at their own peril. This is true, particularly for service quality (Sharabi, 2013).

Universities face various challenges as they strive to provide and deliver quality services, key among them being financial related issues, equity of access to and during the progression of studies, development of staff, specialized training, and quality teaching maintenance, research and outreach services and relevance of programs. Quality which is dependent on resources and particularly on the ability to attract and retain suitable staff, has suffered in consequence (Sarua, 2009). As a result of the challenges experienced by these institutions, promoters of strategic leadership norms (Hitt, Ireland, & Hoskinsson, 2011) have advanced that leadership in organizations need to create conducive environments for teams to work optimally to the limits of their abilities. Strategic leadership is about understanding the competitive and turbulent environment in which the organization is operating, defining clearly what its competitive advantage is and setting and executing strategies that continue to deliver value to stakeholders. Universities require managers with strategic leadership and managerial skills to coordinate inspire and motivate a team that can deliver.

From the foregoing context, a number of scholars have discerned that strategic direction is essential for any organization's eventual success and performance in the unsteady and complex environment of the 21st century in order to confront the reality of environmental turbulence and the continuous need for proper organizational change in order to achieve performance goals (Jaleha & Machuki, 2018). Additionally, other scholars have stated that strategic direction is a vital component in addressing challenges that impede attainment of performance objectives (Serfontein, 2010; Sifuna, 2012).

Leadership in universities in the contemporary times not only do they need to guide their institutions through the routine leadership styles that focuses on the micro level in terms of creating interactions among the leadership and followers, individualized leadership models, trait and styles of leaders but they need also to anticipate, envision the future, facilitate the needed strategic change, creating conducive atmosphere for others to thrive and sustenance of flexibility (Hitt *et al.,* 2011). They also need to be innovative to ensure their long – term survival (Juma, 2016). The specific problem in universities is that the institutions have the requisite resources but lacking the ability to deploy them innovatively by the leadership affects performance outcomes. Therefore it is contended here that organizations whose top management

team have strategic direction capability demonstrated by their leaders and who also embrace innovative practices in addressing the challenges faced, are expected to perform well by providing quality services (Jaleha & Machuki, 2018).

In Kenya, the situation is no different. While for instance an ISO certification espouses continuous quality improvement, Kenya's universities appear to head in the opposite direction. Universities at one time were beacons of intellectual motivation and promise, but have experienced deteriorating decline in government resources for education (Mwiria *et al.,* 2007) and the decline in terms of government resources for education has affected the education quality and left higher education in a precarious situation (Odhiambo, 2011). The University of Nairobi (UON) which is the biggest and oldest university in the country has undergone a cash crisis triggered by low state funding and under-collection of internal revenue that has forced it to survive on commercial bank overdrafts (Mutai, 2017). This situation is replicated in several other universities in Kenya.

Recognition of the aforementioned problems can lead to positive solutions with proper planning and effective leadership (Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Sifuna (2012) contends that the many challenges being faced by higher education in Kenya and other African countries, can be addressed through strategic direction approaches that are required to tap into the individual and collective stakeholder creativities and competencies in pursuit of core university functions. A committed and expert leadership to achieve such a goal requires an environment which guarantees autonomy and academic freedom of the institution to provide for quality service delivery and accountability. Strategic direction approaches encompassing leadership, governance and management are key components in addressing the major challenges that face Kenyan universities in particular and African universities in general.

Universities all over the world are expected to be characterized by quality and excellence, equity, responsiveness, effective and efficient provision of services, good governance and excellent management of resources (Juma, 2016). However, Kenyan universities fall short of these expectations due to a number of challenges that hit them from various fronts. Among the challenges facing universities are lack of strategic direction (Sifuna, 2012). They are struggling to meet their financial obligations and are poorly governed with warped strategies that have driven potentially solid institutions into debt and discomfort of technical insolvency. This worrying trend is responsible for the continued decline in the performance of universities in Kenya (Gudo, 2016).

Stakeholders in Universities have increasingly continued to demand for quality services from these institutions (Smith and Smith, 2007). The problem however remains that they have been unable to offer quality services outcomes. Sifuna (2012) contends that the many challenges being faced by higher education in Kenya and other African countries can be

addressed through strategic leadership direction approaches that are required to tap into the individual and collective stakeholder creativities and competencies in pursuit of core university functions. Most existing studies have dwelt on the direct relationship of these variables independently on quality service with varied findings that have been based on other sectors other than in universities (Elkomy, Murad, & Veleanu, 2020; Satti, Babar, Parveen, Abrar, & Shabir, 2020; Sok & O'Cass., 2015). This study investigate the effect of strategic direction on service quality of accredited universities in Kenya.

Universities all over the world are expected to be characterized by quality and excellence, equity, responsiveness, effective and efficient provision of services, good governance and excellent management of resources (Juma, 2016). However, Kenyan universities fall short of these expectations due to a number of challenges that hit them from various fronts. Among the challenges facing universities are lack of strategic direction, governance and proper management (Sifuna, 2012), environmental challenges like competitive forces from the domestic as well as international education providers, from all education institutions that are either public or private (Mathooko&Ogutu, 2015), have not adapted innovative products and services and continued reduction of government funding (Mbirithi, 2015). They are struggling to meet their financial obligations and are poorly governed with warped strategies that have driven potentially solid institutions into debt and discomfort of technical insolvency. Most universities have been forced to survive on commercial bank overdrafts (Mutai, 2017). In addition, Kenyan universities have ranked lowly internationally compared to universities in other countries in terms of quality standards (Oduor, 2017). This worrying trend is responsible for the continued decline in the performance of universities in Kenya (Gudo, 2016).

These institutions have people with plenty of readily available knowledge and skills who are at the center of service improvements that is made up of self-motivated professors, highly trained administrative staff, middle level managers and other institutional leaders. Stakeholders in Universities have increasingly continued to demand for strategic direction and quality services from these institutions. The problem however remains that they have been unable to offer quality services outcomes (Alzaydi et al., 2018). They also lack strategic direction and leadership that can harness the available resources innovatively in a bid to address the many challenges faced. Sifuna (2012) contends that the many challenges being faced by higher education in Kenya can be addressed through strategic direction in terms of organizational and leadership approaches that are required to tap into the individual and collective stakeholder creativities and competencies in pursuit of core university functions.

Most existing studies on strategic direction and innovation have dwelt on the direct relationship of these variables independently on quality service with varied findings that have been based on other sectors other than in universities

(Elkomy, Murad, &Veleanu, 2020; Satti, Babar, Parveen, Abrar, & Shabir, 2020). Moreover, they have looked at the two variables of strategic direction and performance in isolation. This study investigate the effect of strategic direction on service quality of accredited universities in Kenya.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic direction is a long-term roadmap of the organization (Lear, 2012). Ireland and Hitt (2005), have defined it as a journey through which the objectives of an organizations strategy are attained. Strategic leadership entails three interdependent activities of which a strategic leader must continually reassess. Determining the vision and mission, designing the organization and nurturing a culture dedicated to excellence and ethical behavior are three correlated tasks which have a bearing on the strategic direction the organization takes, and which a strategic leader must routinely examine (Dess, 2008). Strategic leaders therefore have the duty of mobilizing stakeholders' commitment, and putting into practice strategies that will achieve the desired outcomes.

Leadership in organizations are entrusted to develop strategic choices that will give their organizations a competitive edge (Lear, 2012). They should be dynamic in developing strategic choices and intensify their efforts in their endeavour to attain the institutions objectives (Taylor *et al.,* 2008). Schilling (2005) stated that as all leaders strive to transform an organization's strategic direction, the CEOs also have an obligation to motivate the employees by inspiring them to appreciate why new ways of doing things is good, explaining candidly what benefits abound for both the organization and the employees. Additionally, information regarding the strategic direction of the organization about the organization should be readily accessible to all at all times. It seems to be clear that the task of enjoining everyone rests on individual leader's flexibility and their moral dependability to mould a strategy that significantly impacts on everyone (Drew, 2010).

In terms of availing quality service, the quality and efficiency of education is an expected outcome of higher education institutions (Archibald & Feldman, 2008). Sultan and Ho (2010) writes that although there is a relationship between services and general tasks in higher education and that education services have some significance on teaching, research and communal services, service and education remain as the two critical aspects of quality management. University educators have a key mandate of providing that which meets the aspirations and requirements of the learners and national needs (Longden, 2006). There is therefore the need to satisfy both the needs of students who are the 'primary consumers' of higher education and the society at large since both are interdependent (Jain, Sinha, & De, 2010).

Realization of favourable institutional outcomes is dependent on the quality of services offered (Landrum, Prybutok, & Zhang, 2007) and this cannot be taken for granted as it can be detrimental to the institution as a whole (Angell, Heffernan, &

Megicks, 2008), since service quality has traditionally been a key determining factor for students when selecting a university of choice. Galloway and Ho (1996) state that quality and services quality are both composite and multiplex in their general state. It's not easy to explain the notion of service quality and quality in education. They are understood differently by the various stakeholders considering that beliefs relates to service delivery that serve as baselines or reference points against which performance is evaluated (Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006).

In higher education fraternity, a particular customer may view a certain class, curriculum or university as high-quality educational experience while the same may not have any significance to another (Cheruiyot & Maru, 2013). They additionally state that leadership traits, top management commitment, an adaptable culture and employee empowerment are key aspects of successful quality implementation. Taylor *et al.* (2008) had earlier advanced that the academic staff qualification ranks (fraction of the staff holding PhDs), graduation proficiency rates of undergraduate and post – graduate (masters and PhDs rewarded) as critical quality indicators in institutions of higher education.

According to Mbuchi (2013), in Kenya, over the years, the issues concerning quality, and quality entrenchment standards in institutions of higher education, is envisioned in terms of quality standards, where elements like enterprise resource planning (ERP), and International Standards Organization (ISO) certification. However, while for instance an ISO certification espouses continuous quality improvement, Kenya's universities appear head in the opposite direction.

Hitt *et al.* (2011) proposed that qualities and behaviour of academic staff have an effect on how students view quality in higher education. Equally, the administrative division apart from being proactive in service delivery, they ought to be efficient and prompt in offering adequate information and other requisite services (Sultan & Tarafder, 2007). Quality scales based on the values of the society in total are determined by the students, academic and administrative staff who are the main players in higher education level (Sultan & Ho, 2010). SERVQUAL model, which is a vital tool for evaluating the quality of services offered to consumers by various institutions was advanced by Parasuraman et al. (1988). Tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, empathy and assurance are the key aspects of this model used in data collection. These aspects are further linked and discussed under theoretical framework in the next section.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is rooted on Trait Leadership Theory emerged as a result of the studies by Bernard (1926), Stogdill (1948), Mann (1959), McCall and Lombardo (1983), Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991). This essentially makes the trait theory one of the oldest approaches in the leadership trait paradigm and has dominated the initial decades of scientific leadership research in the early 20th century. This theory is anchored on the traits or the individual characteristics of leaders, centering on what

a strong leader is than what a strong leader does (Kitonga, 2017). The trait approach, which originated from the 'great man' theories, argued that certain personality characteristics distinguish leaders from non-leaders (Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio & Johnson, 2011).

Hernandez, Eberly, Avolio & Johnson (2011) have postulated that trait theory helps in identifying traits and qualities that are instrumental when leading others. Such traits may include honesty, responsiveness, decisiveness, good decision-making skills, and likability. Extant literature pertaining to trait theory has established that certain traits significantly influence organizations performance and effectiveness (Northouse, 2013). Equally, several studies on leadership traits have highlighted criticisms on this theory. For instance, a study performed on failure and achievement by McCall and Lombardo (1983) recognized four main traits through which one can fail or thrive: how one is composed or stable emotionally: how confident or calm one is under a stressful challenge, how one agrees to mistakes, how one takes up responsibility for mistakes, adequate relational skills: excellent communication and persuasion skills: masterly of extensive range of disciplines instead of a narrow focused expertise.

In a bid to address this debate on traits, five traits notably intelligence, self-assurance, determination, integrity and sociability have been identified as key to transforming organizations (Northouse, 2013).They make leaders to discharge and perform their duties effectively. Additionally, Derue (2011) argues that even if many of these traits have been researched by many scholars, majority of them categorizes these qualities as: intellect, diligence, appetite for risk, and emotional maturity. Key among the traits is to be a good communicator, ability to make excellent decisions and empathy in various situations.

This theory is relevant to this study to the extent that the key leadership traits which various scholars have identified as critical for effective leaders bond well and complement strategic leadership practices. Leader effectiveness is the extent of inspiration a leader has on how an employee or employees perform, how they are satisfied, and how effective they are (Derue, 2011). Similarly, strategic leadership has the ability to influence the opinions, attitudes andbehaviours of others (Hitt& Ireland, 2002). Both these definitions harbor an element of inspiring and influencing employees, essentially guiding the organization to the correct strategic direction path. Therefore this theory helps in underpinning organizational performance in terms of achieving desired service quality to the stakeholders.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study employed both cross-sectional research design and explanatory research design. Data was collected for a period of 4 months from April 2021 to July 2021 and yielded a return rate of 160 questionnaires out of 222 questionnaires that were issued. This represented a response rate of 72.1% and 78.4% in terms of respondents,

and on the basis of the universities that were targeted and subsequently responded respectively for this study. The data collection exercise faced delays due to Covid 19 pandemic ans subsequent restrictions in Kenya. to select the sample size, a census of all 74 universities in Kenya was done. The respondents consisted of the registrars in administrative and academic divisions, and finance officers/managers. Data was collected using self-administered questionnaires from 222 respondents in 74 universities, and was analyzed using the Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to establish the causal relationships between these variables. The questionnaire was tested for reliability and validity. Census approach was used in the study. Data analysis was done using both qualitative and quantitative methods aided by Analysis of Moment structures (AMOS). This method was necessary since it supported analysis of bothe quantitative and qualitative data. Analysis was done using a two-step process consisting of confirmatory measurement model and confirmatory structural model.

V. FINDINGS

Likert scale was used to measure developed strategic direction, and the results, conveyed as percentages. Table 1 displays the statistics for strategic direction composite scores. Strategic direction recorded a mean score value (Mean=4.026, SD=0.715, n=160). This showed high level of agreement by the study respondent on strategic direction.

Table 1: Measurement of strategic direction

	SD (%)	D (%)	Un (%)	A (%)	SA (%)	Mean	Std. Deviation
DSD1	0.0	1.3	17.5	50.0	31.3	4.113	0.727
DSD2	0.6	1.9	18.1	60.0	19.4	3.956	0.712
DSD3	0.0	2.5	11.9	60.0	25.6	4.088	0.686
DSD4	0.625	4.4	15.0	59.4	20.6	3.950	0.767
DSD5	0.0	2.5	14.4	61.3	21.9	4.025	0.682
composite						4.026	0.715

Influence of strategic direction on service quality of accredited universities in Kenya

The hypothesis that tested for this specific objective was:

H01: Strategic direction does not have significant effect on service quality of accredited universities in Kenya.
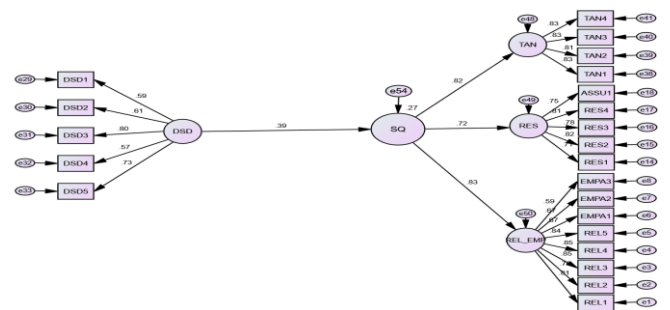
$$\chi^2 = 518.825 \; ; df = 205 \; ; \; \chi^2/df = 2.531 \; ; \; CFI = .953; \; GFI = .972; \; RMSEA = 0.032$$

Figure 1: Structural Model for relationship between Strategic Direction and service quality

The model fit statistics indices were within the appropriate range, and this implies the structural model fit the data adequately.

It was found from the study that there was a positive path coefficient (beta = 0.394) between Strategic Direction and service quality, as it's shown in figure 1. In this regard, the relationship between Strategic Direction and service quality was significant, Since the T value was 3.619 (p<0.05) as shown on table 2, the null hypothesis is rejected and the alternative hypothesis is accepted and concludes that strategic direction significantly affect service quality of accredited Kenyan universities. 27% (R^2=0.27) of the variance in service quality of accredited universities in Kenya is explained by strategic direction. The findings are in agreement with Nthini (2013) who in her study, the influence of strategic leadership on the outcome of commercial and financial state corporations in Kenya, established that there is a significant and positive relationship between corporate strategic direction and high customer satisfaction. Kitonga (2017) in his study also, established that there was a strong relationship between corporate strategic direction and high customer satisfaction.

Table 2: Regression analysis for the relationship between strategic direction and service quality

Path			B	Beta	S.E.	T-Value	P
Strategic Direction	<---	Service Quality	0.471	0.394	0.130	3.619	0.000

VI. DISCUSSION

The results of the descriptive analysis revealed that leaders of universities illustrated high level of agreement of strategic direction. The result of the hypothetical testing showed that strategic direction has a positive and statistically significant relationship with service quality of accredited universities in Kenya as shown by *beta* value of 0.394. This means that in every one unit change in strategic direction, service quality increases by 0.394 hence implying a positive impact of human capital development on service quality. The *r*-value of 0.27 implies that strategic direction explains about 27% of the variation in service quality of accredited universities in Kenya. The T value of 3.619 (p<0.05) shows that the null hypothesis Ho3 was rejected and the alternate hypothesis that stated there is a relationship between strategic direction and service quality of accredited universities in Kenya was supported.   The result of the hypothetical testing showed that strategic direction has a positive and statistically significant relationship with service quality of accredited universities in Kenya. All the five factors of strategic direction were found to contribute significantly to service quality.

VII. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that strategic direction contributes significantly in enhancing service quality in accredited universities in Kenya. Strategic direction had a significantly positive contribution on service quality. Strategic direction explained a significant proportion of variance in service quality. The analysis of variance results show that determining strategic direction is a critical predictor in strategic leadership of accredited universities in Kenya. These findings suggest that strategic leaders should put more on determining strategic direction in order to improve service quality of accredited universities in Kenya.

VIII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The results reveal that strategic direction had a significant impact on quality service. The leadership of accredited Kenyan universities should embrace strategic direction development aspects that have a strong predictive influence on service quality. Leaders should pay attention to all strategic direction development drivers by making rational choices, helping develop mission and vision statements, and putting in place strategic processes in these institution.

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