

Influence of Market Focus Planning Strategies on Competitiveness of Private Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya

Nene Nderitu

Mount Kenya University
P.O Box 205-01001 Juja, Kenya

Corresponding Authors: **Dr. Mary Mugwe Chui and Dr. Paul Edabu**

Abstract

In the last three decades, the republic of Kenya has witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of chartered universities and a stiff competition for students. The student enrolment base coupled with the emergence of private university education providers turned the university arena in Kenya into a student enrolment market, leading to intense competition between Public and Private Universities. The researcher realizes that, the existing studies relate competitiveness with performance. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess the influence of market focus planning strategies on competitiveness of private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. Resource Based Theory, Competitive Advantage Theory and Generic Framework Theory guided this study. The study applied mixed method approach and thus adopted concurrent triangulation design. Target population comprised 66 Registrar Academics, 66 Registrar Admissions and 33 Directors of Marketing all totalling to 165. Using the Central Limit Theorem, 36 Registrars of Academics, 36 Registrars of Admissions and 18 Directors of Marketing were purposively sampled. Questionnaires were used to collect data from Registrar Academic and Admissions whereas interview guide was used to gather data from Directors of Marketing. Data analysis began by identifying common themes from the respondents' description of their experiences. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically along the objectives and were presented in narrative forms. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferentially using Chi-Square through Statistical Packages for Social Science and presented using tables. The study established that many private universities have not fully adopted market focus planning strategies to enhance their competitiveness. The study recommends that private universities design and market their academic programmes affordable to students from all socio-economic backgrounds.

Keywords: Market focus planning strategies, competitiveness of private universities, students' enrolment.

Introduction

Cost focus aims at achieving cost advantage while differentiation focus is about seeking differentiation in a target segment. Cost focus exploits differences in cost behavior in some segments, while differentiation focus exploits the special needs of buyers in certain segments (Porter, 1980). This planning strategy targets a narrow segment of a market not served well by cost leadership planning strategy and tailors its products

to the needs of that specific segment to the exclusion of others (Jauch & Glueck, 2010). According to Pearce and Robinson (2012), focused differentiation is the second of two focus planning strategies. Focus planning strategy gives attention to a narrow market segment or niche market, firms pursuing this planning strategy are either focusing on cost advantage or differentiation of product or service (Porter, 1985).

In the context of education institutions which undertake a marketing approach to attract students, media promotion, scholarship and financial aids offering form the basis of focus planning strategy. In this case, universities which seek to attract students should develop marketing plan indicating how they can provide prospective students with innovative programs and services. A focus planning strategy based on low cost depends on there being a student segment whose needs are less costly to satisfy than the rest of the market. In other words, a focus planning strategy based on differentiation depends on there being a student segment that demands unique academic programme attributes. For example, in a study carried out in Kuala Lumpur, Bourgeo (2000) established that a leaning institution can choose to focus on a select student group, product range, geographical area or service line. According to Bourgeo (2000), market focus is also based on adopting a narrow competitive scope within a learning institution. This implies that in universities, market focus aims at growing market share through operating in a niche market or in markets either not attractive to, or overlooked by, larger competitors.

In Sri Lanka, in a service-learning institution, Kumar (2011) found that hospitals follow generic planning strategy groups and concluded that a focused cost leadership planning strategy is the best route to superior competitiveness. This implies that focus planning strategy is quite different from others in that it aims at a narrow competitive scope within the learning institution. In many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, a continued survival of universities in the competitive higher education environment will strictly be pegged on how well they capitalize on marketing activities for strategic positioning. In this race, public universities have competitive advantage in the area of financing and sponsorship by the government.

In Morocco, Hazel (2013) also noted that the both variants of the focus planning strategy rest on differences between a focuser's target segment and other segments in the learning institution. The target segments must either have students with unusual needs or else the production and delivery system that best serves the target segment must differ from that of other learning institution segments (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Cost focus exploits differences in cost behavior in some segments, while differentiation focus exploits the special needs of students in certain segments (Porter, 1985). According to Porter and Kramer (2011), the learning institution focuses its marketing effort on serving a defined, focused market segments with a narrow scope by tailoring its marketing mix to these specialized markets, it can better meet the needs of that target market.

Kenya is not different and firms and universities have adopted market focus planning strategies as a way of enhancing their competitiveness. For example, Obado (2015) did a study on competitive planning strategies employed by the sugar BOC Kenya and found out that the sugar manufacturing learning institutions have formalized vision and mission statements. They employed competitive planning strategies of cost leadership, differentiation and focus to different degrees. The fact that the number of private universities in Kenya is significantly high, the number of students enrolled in some universities is significantly low. This implies the need for aggressive marketing communication skills by private universities, a situation that has forced them to critically evaluate their marketing approaches in order to

ensure their survival and viability (Omboi & Mutali, 2014). The products of higher education are considered to be both highly fluid and are characterized by aggressive marketing planning strategies meant to increase their market share, both in terms of student numbers and the caliber of those enrolling, the distinct difference between marketing in higher education and in the manufacturing sector (Omboi & Mutali, 2014).

The focuser's basis for competitive advantage is either lower costs than competitors serving that market segment or an ability to offer niche members something different from competitors. However, studies failed to indicate how, with broad market planning strategies, it is still essential to decide whether university will pursue cost leadership or differentiation once university has selected a focus planning strategy as its main approach. Omboi and Mutali (2014) as did other empirical researchers have not articulated how private universities use cost focus or differentiation focus as keys to making a success of a generic focus planning strategy and add something extra as a result of serving only that market niche.

Statement of the Problem

Market focus planning strategies are critical in enhancing competitiveness of private universities. When effectively adopted, private universities register many undergraduate and postgraduate students who complete their academic programmes in time. As stated in the background, Omboi and Mutali (2014) posit that a continued survival of universities in the competitive higher education environment is strictly pegged on how well the universities capitalize on marketing focus activities for strategic positioning. However, in private universities represented in Nairobi County, the number of students enrolled in universities is still low and some still complain of longer periods to complete their academic programmes. For example, enrolment increased from 82,095 students in 2003 to 443,783 in 2015, an increase of 400 per cent, with private universities accounting for 11.5% (2005-2006) academic year, 17.8% for (2007-2008) academic year, 19.7% (2009-2010) academic year, 27.7% (2011-2012) academic year, 19.8% (2013-2014) academic year and 18.1% (2014-2015) academic year (Republic of Kenya, 2015). Despite these statistics, few studies have interrogated the market focus planning strategies adopted by private universities and how such planning strategies influence competitiveness of private universities, hence the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by the Michael Porter's generic framework theory that gives techniques for analyzing industries and competitors. This theory can be used to find the optimum position for private universities within higher education institution and often a determinant of institution's profitability can be said to be the attractiveness of an institution/industry in which it operates. The study was also guided by the Competitive Advantage Theory which was also postulated by Porter (1980). According to Porter (1980) Industries, just like in Higher Education Institution and the individual private universities within the universities

constantly involved in a dynamic interplay in an attempt to build a successful; competitive edge over another. The theories relevant to this study are; the generic framework theory, the competitive advantage theory, and the resource-based theory. The choice of the three theories in this study is motivated by the fact

that the porter’s generic planning strategies are guided by three pillars; cost leadership, differentiation and market focus planning strategies and thus the need to support them. Private universities concentrate on a narrower buyer segment in order to compete with their rivals on the basis of lower cost of operation; while in the differentiation planning strategy the company concentrates on the market niche by offering the customers a product that best suits their tastes, preferences and expectations.

The Conceptual Framework

In this study, the conceptual framework was based on market focus planning strategies reflected through number of academic programmes, completion period, links with communities and students’ status which constituted independent variables whereas competitiveness of private universities whose indicators included; number of students in private universities and those who graduate constituted the dependent variable. The intervening variable for this study included; government policies and staff support as shown in Figure 1;

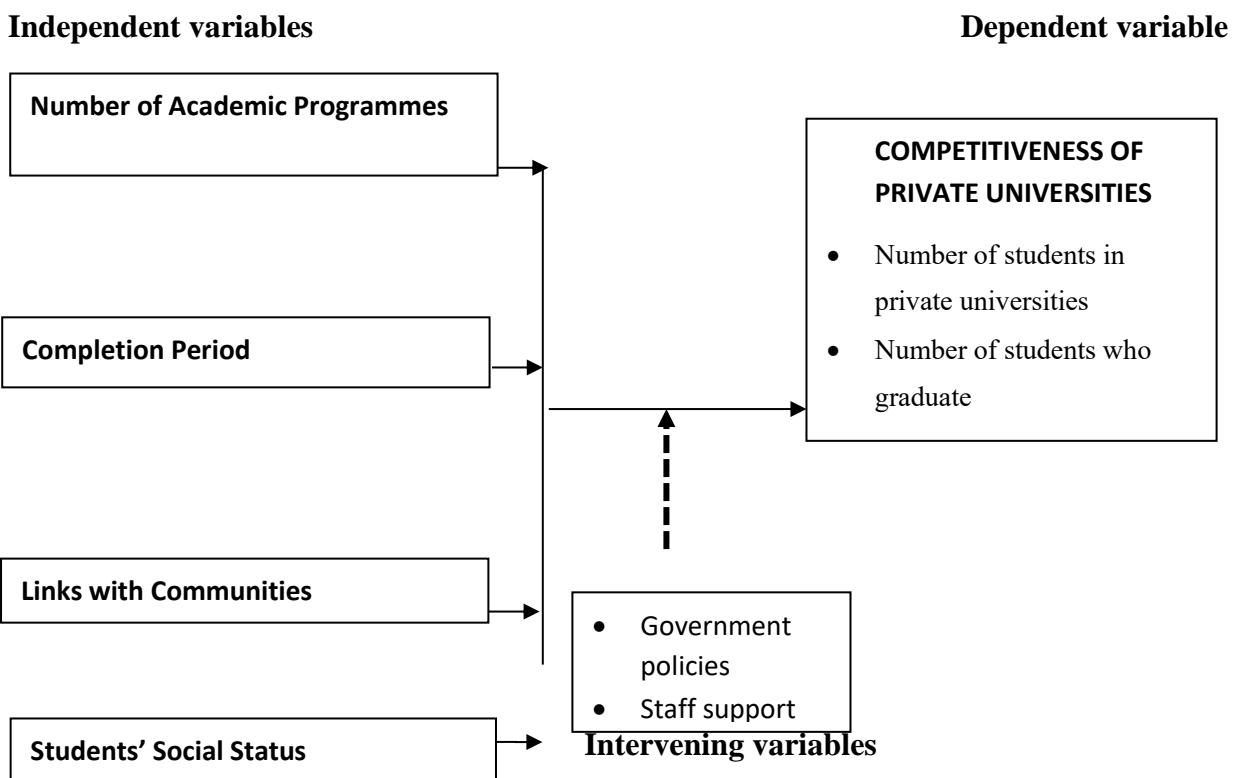


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework
Source: Researcher (2020)

Research Methodology

The study applied mixed methods approach, that is, quantitative and qualitative methods. The study applied concurrent triangulation research design since this is a single-phase design in which the researcher applied quantitative and qualitative methods at the same time and with equal weight. Target population for this study was 165 respondents. This consisted of 66 Registrar Academics, 66 Registrar Admissions and 33

Directors of Marketing. The sample for the study was eighteen universities, that is, 54.5% of 33 that was slightly but within the threshold. The choice of eighteen universities was motivated by the fact that they are firmly established in Nairobi County. Using the Central Limit Theorem, all the Registrars in charge of Administration and Registrars in charge of Academic Affairs, their Assistants and Director marketing in all Private Universities were selected purposefully.

Purposive sampling was used to select 18 private universities in Nairobi County to act as research sites due to their establishment in terms of period of operation and their magnitude in terms of courses offered. Eighteen Directors of Marketing, 36 Registrar Academics and 36 Registrar Admissions were selected using purposive sampling. This procedure enabled the researcher to realize a sample of 18 Directors of Marketing, 36 Registrar Academics 36 Registrar Admissions. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically along the objectives and presented in narrative forms whereas the quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages and inferentially using Chi-Square Test Analysis with the help of SPSS Version 23 and presented using tables.

Results and Discussions

In this section, the data analysis, presentation and interpretation are reported. The following main question guided the study:

- i. What is the influence of market focus planning strategies on competitiveness in private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya?

Response Rates

In this study, 36 questionnaires for Registrar Academics and 36 questionnaires for Registrar Admissions were administered. In return, 32-Registrar Academics’ and 32-Registrar Admissions’ questionnaires were filled and returned. The researcher also conducted interviews amongst 16 Director of Marketing. This yielded response rates shown in Table 1;

Table 1: Response Rates

Respondents	Sampled Respondents	Those Who Participated	Achieved Return Rate (%)
Directors of Marketing	18	16	88.9
Registrar Academics	36	32	88.9
Registrar Admissions	36	32	88.9
Total	90	80	88.9

Source: Field Data (2020)

From Table 1, Director of Marketing, Registrar Academics and Registrar Admissions registered a response rate of 88.9%. This confirmed the findings of Creswell (2009) that a response rate above 75.0% is adequate and of suitable levels to allow for generalization of the outcomes to the target population.

Influence of Market Focus Planning Strategies on Competitiveness of Private Universities

The study sought to establish how market focus planning strategies adopted by registered private universities to influence their competitiveness. Descriptive data were collected from Registrar Academics and Registrar Admissions and results are shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Views of Registrar Academics and Registrar Admissions on the Influence of Market Focus on Competitiveness of Private Universities

Test Items	RESP.	SA	A	U	D	SD
		%	%	%	%	%
The programmes offered in private universities make them enroll more students and complete courses in time	RAC	59.5	15.5	4.5	11.5	9.0
	RAA	66.3	9.7	3.9	12.3	7.8
Private universities develop links with communities in order to tap students and thus increase their enrollment	RAC	56.5	23.5	2.5	9.5	8.0
	RAA	63.9	11.5	1.3	13.7	9.6
Developing academic programmes which caters for students from all social classes has increased enrollment and enabled students to complete their courses in time	RAC	51.5	8.5	7.0	22.5	10.5
	RAA	58.3	7.6	4.4	21.8	7.9
Private universities which admit students regardless of their families' income levels enroll many students	RAC	68.5	15.5	3.5	8.5	4.0
	RAA	72.6	10.5	2.4	7.9	6.6
Private universities which offer different programmes which meet students' preferences enroll many students	RAC	78.5	14.5	2.5	3.0	1.5
	RAA	77.2	13.3	1.5	6.3	1.7
Campaigning for concerted efforts on research and innovation and providing funds for the same has enabled private universities to have competitive edge	RAC	68.5	13.5	3.5	3.5	11.0
	RAA	70.5	15.3	4.5	6.7	3.0
Private universities accept invitations from students in social gatherings in their places of residence, harambees and burial ceremonies of students to enrol students	RAC	59.9	16.7	4.5	3.7	15.2
	RAA	70.4	17.2	2.2	6.1	4.1
Linkages between students' sponsors and the private universities through mentorship programmes and feedback on performance	RAC	66.7	16.4	3.5	3.4	10.0
	RAA	68.3	11.9	2.8	5.1	11.9

have acted as a means of increasing students						
in the universities						
Private universities have adopted sponsorship	RAC	58.9	17.5	4.9	4.2	14.5
of students for exchange programmes through	RAA	67.1	20.1	3.7	5.4	3.7
religious missions, crusades and sporting						
activities to increase enrollment						

Key: RESP-Respondents; RAC-Registrar Academics; RAA-Registrar Admissions

Table 2 reveals that 19(59.5%RAC) and 21(66.3%RAA) of the Registrar Academics and Registrar Admissions strongly agreed with the view that the programmes offered in private universities make them enroll more students and complete their courses in time, 5(15.5%) of the Registrar Academics agreed as did 3(9.7%) of the Registrar Admissions. However, only a paltry 1(4.5%) of the Registrar Academics as well as 1(3.9%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, 4(11.5%) of Registrar Academics as did 4(12.3%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 3(9.0%) of Registrar Academics and 2(7.8%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. 18(56.5%RAC) and 20(63.9%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that private universities develop links with communities in order to tap students and thus increase their enrollment. 8(23.5%) of the Registrar Academics as did 4(11.5%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed. 1(2.5%) of Registrar Academics and 1(1.3%) of the Registrar Admissions were undecided, 3(9.5%) of Registrar Academics and 4(13.7%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 3(8.0%) of the Registrar Academics as did 3(9.6%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed.

From Table 2, 16(51.5%RAC) and 19(58.3%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that developing academic programmes which caters for students from all social classes has increased enrollment and enabled students to complete their courses in time. 13(8.5%) of the Registrar Academics as did 2(7.6%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed. 2(7.0%) of Registrar Academics and 8(4.4%) of the Registrar Admissions were undecided, 7(22.5%) of Registrar Academics and 7(21.8%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 3(10.5%) of the Registrar Academics as did 3(7.9%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. These findings are consistent with the assertions of Nangila (2014) that market focus aims at growing market share through operating in a niche market or in markets either not attractive to, or overlooked by, larger competitors. These findings attest to the fact that a continued survival of universities in the competitive higher education environment will strictly be pegged on how well they capitalize on marketing activities for strategic positioning.

Table 2 shows that 22(68.5%RAC) and 23(72.6%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that private universities which admit students regardless of their families' income levels enroll many students. Meanwhile a small proportion of 5(15.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 3(10.5%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed. 1(3.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 1(2.4%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, 3(8.5%) of Registrar Academics and 3(7.9%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 1(4.0%) of the Registrar Academics as did 2(6.6%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. 25(78.5%RAC) and 25(77.2%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that private universities which offer different programmes which meet students' preferences enroll many students. Meanwhile a small proportion of 5(14.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 4(13.3%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed.

1(2.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 1(1.5%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, 1(3.0%) of Registrar Academics and 2(6.3%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 1(1.5%) of the Registrar Academics as did 1(1.7%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. These findings corroborate the assertions of Omboi and Mutali (2014) that higher education products are considered to be both highly fluid and are characterized by aggressive marketing planning strategies meant to increase their market share, both in terms of student numbers and the caliber of those enrolling, the distinct difference between marketing in HE and in the manufacturing sector. Hence, these findings affirm the fact that market focus planning strategy aims to achieve competitive advantage by either offering lower costs than competitors or offering members something different from competitors.

Majority, 22(68.5%RAC) and 23(70.5%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that campaigning for concerted efforts on research and innovation and providing funds for the same has enabled private universities to have competitive edge. 5(13.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 5(15.3%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed, 1(3.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 2(4.5%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, 1(3.5%) of Registrar Academics and 2(6.7%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 4(11.0%) of the Registrar Academics as did 1(3.0%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. These findings lend credence to the assertions of Weingarten and Deller (2010) that a suite of benefits that flow from increased differentiation includes higher-quality teaching and research programs, more student choice, a globally competitive system and increased financial sustainability.

These findings further corroborate the findings of a study conducted in the Netherlands in which Luliya et al (2013) established that, to maintain this planning strategy the institution of higher learning should have: strong research and development skills, strong academic programme engineering skills, strong creativity skills, good cooperation with distribution channels, strong marketing skills, and incentives based largely on subjective measures, be able to communicate the importance of the differentiating academic programme characteristics, stress continuous improvement and innovation and attract highly skilled, creative people. Thus, these findings affirm the fact that differentiation planning strategy aims to build up competitive advantage by offering unique academic programmes which are characterized by valuable features, such as quality, innovation and student service. In other words, the essential success factor of differentiation in terms of planning strategy implementation is to develop and maintain innovativeness, creativeness, and organizational learning within an institution of higher learning. 19(59.9%RAC) and 23(70.4%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that private universities accept invitations from students in social gatherings in their places of residence, harambees and burial ceremonies of students to enrol students. 6(16.7%) of the Registrar Academics and 6(17.2%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed, 2(4.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 1(2.2%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, 1(3.7%) of Registrar Academics and 2(6.1%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 5(15.2%) of the Registrar Academics as did 2(4.1%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. These findings are consistent with the assertions of Ramsaran-Fowdar (2007) that unusual features, responsive student service, perceived prestige and status are critical in enhancing enrollment of more students. This implies that rather than cost reduction, an institution of higher learning using the differentiation needs to concentrate on investing in and developing such things that are distinguishable and students will perceive and are meant to leave a permanent imprint on students' memory such as social events.

Majority, 21(66.7%RAC) and 21(68.3%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that linkages between students’ sponsors and the private universities through mentorship programmes and feedback on performance have acted as a means of increasing students in the universities. A small proportion of 5(16.4%) of the Registrar Academics and 4(11.9%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed, 1(3.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 1(2.8%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, at the same time 1(3.4%) of Registrar Academics and 2(5.1%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 1(10.0%) of the Registrar Academics as did 4(11.9%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. This is a good pointer to the fact that students want to know if the institution undertake strategic partnerships with related higher education which is valuable in cases of using outside research facilities or for their attachment and related training.

Majority of the respondents 19(58.9%RAC) and 22(67.1%RAA) strongly agreed with the view that private universities have adopted sponsorship of students for exchange programmes through religious missions, crusades and sporting activities to increase enrollment. 6(17.5%) of the Registrar Academics and 7(20.1%) of the Registrar Admissions agreed, 2(4.9%) of the Registrar Academics and 1(3.7%) of Registrar Admissions were undecided, at the same time, 2(4.2%) of Registrar Academics and 2(5.4%) of the Registrar Admissions disagreed whereas 5(14.5%) of the Registrar Academics as did 1(3.7%) of the Registrar Admissions strongly disagreed. These findings are consistent with the assertions of Jongbloed, Jürgen and Salerno (2007) that the legitimacy of higher education to society is increasingly evaluated by the level and quality of the private universities’ commitment to its community of stakeholders and is inherently of greater depth than any simple maintenance of contacts. In other words, organizations should find ways and the means of involving the stakeholders so as to best perceive how the latter value the services provided and how best to improve them. Thus, these findings point to the fact that differentiation tends to reduce rivalry, increasing the possibility of building competitive advantages, whereas conformity improves the social support of stakeholders and therefore the legitimacy of the institution of higher learning. Hence, participation of students in off-campus activities is another key attraction for prospective students. To further ascertain the relationship between market focus and competitiveness of private universities, data were collected on the number of academic programmes and the number of students in private universities and results are shown in Table 3:

Table 3: Results of Number of Academic Programmes and the Number of Students in Private Universities

Number of Academic Programmes	Number of Students in Private Universities
55	13000
65	23000
77	28000
89	50000

Source: Field Data (2020)

Table 3 indicates that registered private universities which offer several academic programmes have a greater number of postgraduate and undergraduate students. These findings are also consistent with the findings of Omboi and Mutali (2014) that the number of higher education products are considered to be

both highly fluid and are characterized by aggressive marketing planning strategies meant to increase their market share, both in terms of student numbers and the caliber of those enrolling, the distinct difference between marketing in HE and in the manufacturing sector.

Inferential Findings on the Influence of Market Focus Planning Strategies on Competitiveness of Private Universities

These results in Table 3 were subjected to Chi-Square (χ^2) Test Analysis and results were as indicated in Table 4:

Table 4: Chi-Square (χ^2) Analysis of the Relationship Between the Number of Academic Programmes and the Number of Students in Private Universities

	Value	df	Asym p. Sig. (2- sided)	Monte Carlo Sig. (2-sided)		Monte Carlo Sig. (1- sided)	
				Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Pearson Chi-Square	12.000 ^a	9	.213	1.000 ^b	1.000	1.000	
Likelihood Ratio	11.090	9	.270	1.000 ^b	1.000	1.000	
Fisher's Exact Test	10.610			1.000 ^b	1.000	1.000	
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.780 ^c	1	.095	.041 ^b	.037	.045	.041 ^b .037 .045
N of Valid Cases		4					

Source: SPSS Generated (2020)

From the Chi-Square (χ^2) Statistics in Table 4, the processed data, generated a significance level of 0.041^b which shows that the data is ideal for making a conclusion on the population’s parameter as the value of significance (p-value of 0.041^b) is less than 5%, that is, p-value=0.041^b<0.05. It also indicates that the results were statistically significant and that there is significant relationship between the number of academic programmes and the number of students in private universities. These findings thus affirm the fact that the number of higher education programmes offered by private universities are meant to increase their market share both in terms of student numbers and the caliber of those enrolling.

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Findings on the Influence of Cost Leadership Planning Strategies on Competitiveness of Private Universities

During the interviews, Director of Marketing responded in favor of the view that the programmes offered in private universities make them enroll more students and complete their courses in time. Director of Marketing, DM1, noted,

“In our university, we offer quite a number of academic programmes which cater for the interests of every student from different social backgrounds. This has witnessed enrollment of students in every programme and thus improving our university’s competitive edge”.

The interviewees also noted that, besides the number of academic programmes, private universities develop links with communities in order to tap students and thus increase their enrollment. Just like quantitative findings, these views lend credence to the views expressed by Nangila (2014) that market focus aims at growing market share through operating in a niche market or in markets either not attractive to, or overlooked by, larger competitors. This implies that continued survival of private universities in the competitive higher education environment is strictly pegged on how well they capitalize on marketing activities for strategic positioning. On students’ preferences, Directors of Marketing also noted that private universities which offer different programmes which meet students’ preferences enroll many students. This further implies that higher education products are considered to be both highly fluid and are characterized by aggressive marketing planning strategies meant to increase their market share, both in terms of student numbers and the caliber of those enrolling. On research and innovation, the Directors of Marketing in private universities also indicated that campaigning for concerted efforts on research and innovation and providing funds for the same has enabled private universities to have competitive edge. When probed further, Director Marketing, DM2, noted,

“Our university has embarked on serious research and innovation programmes which involves affiliation with research bodies and ethical review committees to enhance our student research activities and undertakings. Our university views research as the backbone of every academic programme. Through this initiative, we have witnessed an increased number of postgraduate students in different academic disciplines”.

These views further corroborate the views expressed by Weingarten and Deller (2010) that a suite of benefits that flow from increased differentiation includes higher-quality teaching and research programs, more student choice, a globally competitive system and increased financial sustainability. The Directors of marketing in private universities also responded in favor of the view that their private universities have always accepted invitations from students in social gatherings in their places of residence, harambees and burial ceremonies of students. Directors of marketing noted that, through this initiative, their universities have been able to enroll more students. Thus, private universities which differentiation needs to concentrate on investing in and developing such things that are distinguishable and students will perceive and are meant to leave a permanent imprint on students’ memory such as social events. On university linkages, Director of Marketing, DM2, noted,

“Our university has embarked on creating linkages between students’ sponsors, parents and guardians in order to sensitize their neighborhoods of our existence. This has involved undertaking

mentorship programmes and feedback on performance which has acted as a means of increasing students in our university. Activities such as sports, religious crusades and community charity programmes have also been fronted ways of attracting potential students to our university”.

These views further corroborate the views expressed by Jongbloed et al (2007) that the legitimacy of higher education to society is increasingly evaluated by the level and quality of the private universities' commitment to its community of stakeholders and is inherently of greater depth than any simple maintenance of contacts. This indicates that community of stakeholders are increasingly playing an active role in the validation process of the products service coming out the higher education institutions, in this case students and research findings, and which does consequently influence on their operations. This points to the fact that differentiation planning strategies tend to reduce rivalry, increasing the possibility of building competitive advantages.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

From the study findings, it is also evident that market focus planning strategies influence competitiveness of private universities. That is, many private universities have enrolled and continue to enrol more undergraduate and postgraduate students due to the number of academic programmes they offer. These programmes are tailor-made to cater for the interests of every student from different social backgrounds. Hence, these findings point to the fact that market focus planning strategies aim at growing market share through operating in a niche market or in markets either not attractive to, or overlooked by, larger competitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the study findings, the study recommends that universities should ensure that they offer many, but quality, academic programmes in order to attract many postgraduate and undergraduate students. Private universities should further increase and improve the number of linkages with communities from where students hail from. The Ministry of Education through Commission for University Education should formulate policies which ensure that universities offer quality and affordable academic programmes for students from different socio-economic backgrounds in order to admit the 40% of KCSE candidates who miss placement after public and private universities.

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