

Full Length Research Paper

Assessment of corporate management practices in public universities in Kenya

Fuchaka Waswa¹, Charles Ombuki², Joash Migosi^{3*} and Joseph Metet³

¹Kenyatta University, Environmental Studies, Kenya.

²South Eastern University College, Department of Economics, Kenya.

³South Eastern University College, Department of Educational Planning, Kenya.

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In order to continue attracting and retaining high-class intellectual power and hence guarantee quality service delivery, public university management will need to change and adjust in line with increasing local democratisation and globalisation pressures. Scenarios that depict participatory decision-making and respect of divergent viewpoints will have to characterize the relationships among all stakeholders in the routine operations of universities. The purpose of this study was to assess the Corporate Management Practices in Public Universities in Kenya from the academic staff's perspective. A likert-scale approach based on 19 selected items in total quality management (TQM) was used for data collection from a random sample of 45 academic staff drawn from public Universities from August to September 2011. Findings show that university academic staff are generally marginalised when it comes to decision-making even on issues that directly affect them. Subtle top-down management approach is still rife and impacts negatively on service delivery. Deliberate efforts are needed to adopt a people-centred management system built on the tenets of mutual trust, respect and intellectual cum professional symbiosis in pursuit of sustainable quality assurance.

Key words: Academic staff, assessment, corporate management, public universities, TQM, Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Corporate management is a concept mostly associated with the business world and private sector. Traditionally, managers approach focused on profit maximisation with little consideration of the working environment. As a result sustainability of business practice would not be guaranteed due to such factors as high employee turn over and apathy. With increased demand for democratisation worldwide coupled with globalisation and internationalisation of human interactions and relationships, there is growing demand for good corporate management. Today, universities are facing the homogeneity of competition, the uncertain education policies and limited funds from the exchequer, each university is forced to act like a business. These challenges cannot be overcome if

universities are not able to embrace best corporate management practices (Liao et al., 2010). This approach in management recognises respects and taps into the wealth of diversity for the common good, which somehow seems to guarantee the sustainability of business practices and returns. It is also widely acknowledged that project undertakings that involve most stakeholders in decision-making have higher rates of success than those, which do not (McClelland, 1998).

Up to early 1990s, the government fully funded public Universities. However, starting mid 1990s, the government gave in to pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce expenditure on education thus paving way to cost sharing and corporatization in public

*Corresponding author. E-mail: jmigosi@yahoo.co.uk.

Universities (Oanda et al., 2008). Currently, decreased government funding has driven universities to adopt business like management, as they must now generate their own resources, particularly financial capital to operate on a daily basis. This shift in the style of business management seems to have occurred when university managers may not have been ready, trained or equipped with business management skills necessary for managing Universities as corporate entities. However, while considerable success has been recorded in some aspects particularly accumulation of physical capital, it would be untrue to suggest that there have not been challenges that have impacted on system stability, resilience and productivity negatively (Waswa et al., 2004). For Instance, it can be argued that corporate management practices in local universities has focused more in profit making at the expense of the traditional social and public responsibility of Universities. Good examples here include the departure from offering honorary degrees to established academics to business people and the private interests this serves, the adoption of entrepreneurial norms which in most cases are at variance with established academic norms, and emphasis on products as opposed to quality of the process etc.

In order to remain relevant and competitive within the ever-changing global knowledge market, academic administration at the Universities should focus on the future. This calls for the adoption of a framework of strategic management, which generally means the process of decision-making and taking actions that determine whether an enterprise, organisation, firm, company or even government excels, survives or dies (Jauch et al., 2003). By implication, it is possible to extinguish a thriving human institution or lift it to greater levels of performance. The latter scenario for institutions of higher learning is the gist of this paper. According to Jauch et al. (2003) managers must systematically and continuously analyse the business environment, since environmental factors greatly influence strategic changes. If the University were to be viewed as a system, its components would include:

- Students as the main customers
- Academic service providers (Technicians, Lecturers and Professors)
- Administration and support staff
- Senior management (Decision makers)
- Support physical capital (Infrastructure, equipment and technology)
- Government
- Competitors such as other institutions of higher learning
- Local communities
- International linkages and networks.

Ideally environmental analysis should address all the above, but practically only a few can be addressed at a

given time. This paper focuses on the general trends in the quality of corporate management in Kenya's public universities from academic service providers' point of view. It is hoped that this assessment will provide strategic management entry points that would contribute to the on going initiatives to transform these universities into world-class status.

World-class status is sometimes claimed on the basis of certification from the International Organization of Standards (ISO). Kenyan Universities seem to have this belief as each strives to attain ISO certification. However ISO certification has limitations in its tendency to merely look at the adequacy of procedural and management processes and not the actual practice on the ground. Some newspapers and journals such as the UK's Times Higher Education Supplement have also compiled university rankings in the past, but such rankings often differ sharply from one to another because they apply different ranking criteria. It must however be clearly pointed out that in a lot of respects, corporate practices negate the drive towards world-class universities, especially as seen from the rankings which emphasize faculty engagement in research, student teacher ratios, and the citation of the professors in learned journals. By focusing in satisfying the customer-the student and private providers of funds, corporate practices focus on numbers not quality, efficiency of the product as opposed to effectiveness (Oanda et al., 2008). Our argument is that one of the issues with corporate planning in the universities is that it has undermined academic autonomy and freedom and the traditional principles of collegiality. So as institutions emphasize on profits, environments amenable to research and academic enterprise deteriorate. Within diversified institutions of developed countries, this may be ok but in the developing countries, institutions that forsake basic research for entrepreneurial practices perpetuate dependency.

If the assumption is taken that a world-class university is the ideal university, then its characteristics will include but not limited to the following:

- A place of critical inquiry and research covering every conceivable field of human endeavour;
- An environment of academic freedom, freedom of association and exchange of information;
- It attracts and retains competent and internationally reputed professors/lecturers
- Its professors are locally and internationally respected. They are widely cited and known for important discoveries and inventions, their fame attracting talented researchers and students from across the world;
- It generates products and ideas upon which civilisations' progress and survival depend. It also does a splendid job of training all cadres needed for progressive human civilisation;
- It creates a modern citizenry capable of responsible and reasoned decision-making;

- Attains and maintains lecturer: student ratio at 1:20 (Markham, 1997)
- Has a research division at the top management level
- Its graduates complete their studies in time, can think independently and scientifically, have an understanding of history and culture, can create discourses on social and political issues, and are capable of coherent expression in speech and writing. They are in demand everywhere, both in academia and industry, nationally and internationally;
- Government respects it and taps into its wealth of expertise for national development;
- Society depends on it for socio-economic, political and ecological development;
- Quality assurance in pursuit of its mandate is the official culture.
- Has a high degree of student engagement both in their studies and in extra-curricular life of the University community; and
- Has a strong emphasis on equity, access and diversity (Markwell, 2008)

With increased globalisation and commercialisation of knowledge, and hence more competition and pressure to improve system performance, the human resource management (HRM) function will have to play a key role in helping firms and organisations to achieve their strategic aims. In the context of this paper, HRM is the process of acquiring, training, appraising, and compensating employees, and attending to their labour relations, health and safety, and fairness concerns (Dessler, 2005). For institutions of higher learning, the challenge of sustaining spontaneous high performance of key service providers is particularly critical. "Strategic management would have achieved its purpose if such workers worked well because they wanted to and not because they needed to". Failure to address these people aspects is often the root cause of poor performance, which tends to manifest in the form of apathy, falling morale, poor productivity, industrial actions, brain drain and brains in the drain. Losey (1998) noted that rarely do large projects, firms, organisations backed by good ideas, vigour and enthusiasm get stopped (die out) due to a shortage of cash. Money though important, seems to be secondary to good human relations at the work place particularly within the context of sustainability. According to Cole (2002) HRM also implies seeing employees as investments to be nurtured as well as costs to be controlled. If the later goes beyond certain limits, resistance and consequent system malfunction often emerge. Naturally when people know that they are appreciated, the element of controlling them as business costs becomes insignificant.

According to the Peratec Executive Briefing (1994), total quality success is hinged upon the application of such concepts as: recognising customer needs, seeking never ending improvements, controlling processes, and

making the fullest use of people through visible and genuine commitment of chief executives to leadership and teamwork. On this basis and in line with ecosystem theory and participatory decision-making, assessment or evaluation of the business (work) environment should also be a two-way traffic, where managers evaluate their workers and vice versa, without ignoring the statutory chains of command. Voluntary initiatives that lead to self-evaluation and regulation are also potentially useful tools towards attainment of total quality success.

The realisation of these strategic management options would equally depend on ethics, that is deliberate effort to treat stakeholders fairly. Unfairness of any form tends to manifest itself in low morale and commitment, and hence diminished performance. According to Velasquez (1992), ethics refers to the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group. Ethical decisions tend to be morality based (that is society's accepted standards of behaviour) and hence controversial and often at variance with legislation and policy guidelines. For instance a strategic manager is likely to do the right thing and not do things the right way in the interest of the common good of his or her firm or organisation. Such a deviation from retrogressive policy guidelines would then pave way for policy amendments. Regrettably, most traditional managers find it difficult to do the right thing and would rather do things right even when the system gets hurt. This scenario presents one of the challenges of HRM in institutions of higher learning in the current globalisation of knowledge generation and transfer.

The main research question of this study revolved on; what are the academic staff's perception on the Corporate Management Practices in Public Universities in Kenya?

METHODOLOGY

This study applied a descriptive survey research design to capture general opinions on items under examination. The target population comprised 450 academic staff, a targeted sample of 100 was made, a 45% response rate was registered. This yielded a sample of 45 academic staff that was used in this study. A questionnaire survey consisting of 19 items derived from the concept of total quality management (TQM) was sent to respondents via email to be completed in confidence on a scale of 1, 2, 3 and 4 indicating whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed respectively to the statement concerning corporate management that had been raised. Collected data were managed using SPSS (Scientific Package for Social Scientists) for both descriptive and inferential statistical data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

About 60% of the respondents agreed that most stakeholder actions add value to the system (Figure 1). This implies that individual sense of professional purpose and propensity to do well is there. However this attitude could be strengthened through various human resource

management tools. Inability to deliver services on a timely basis was cited to be a major problem by 89% of the respondents. This would obviously delay various activities including graduation of students, a factor that is now critical in international ranking of Universities. Public universities have developed charters and performance benchmarks, which need to be followed through otherwise they risk being paper tigers.

Well over half (56%) of the respondents did not believe that mutual trust and confidence exists among university staff members while at work. However, 22% strongly felt that staff members trust each other (Figure 2). Such environment breeds fear, suspicion and undermines team work in pursuit of university vision and mandate. The benefits that would be accrued from latent synergistic partnerships inherent in any university system are effectively lost as the University operates below its potential.

Majority of the respondents (69%) were of the view that conflict resolution skills are lacking within the university. Furthermore, almost one quarter of the respondents felt very strongly about lack of such skills (Figure 3). This scenario is a recipe for such events as industrial actions and student riots, which tend to be countered through authoritarian means with consequent negative impacts to the system. In a progressive University, strategic management would endeavour to predict looming conflicts and pre-empt them amicably.

About 80% felt that insufficient effort is dedicated to resolving vital problems quickly (Figure 4). What tends to follow in such cases is crisis management, which often results into net losses to the system. About 58% generally agreed that staff were not empowered to be responsible (Figure 5). This scenario translates into a "wait and see and or do nothing" attitude, even when value adding interventions from staff are available. Further, the skills of staff remain locked up and not available for system improvement. This may explain why majority of the respondents (80%) did not have a sense of belonging and ownership to the university system (Figure 6). Such attitudes would not allow stakeholders to spontaneously go the extra mile to add value to the system. As it were people would work because they need to and not because they want to.

On acquisition and utilization of appropriate and state of the art technology, 61% suggested that the university lags behind on this aspect, with 37% thinking otherwise (Figure 7).

About 80% of the respondents argued that the university does not make informed decisions (Figure 8). This may mean that respondents perceived the level and extent of participatory decision-making as low. Further most respondents (72%) thought that decisions and actions were not based on 'win-win' scenarios (Figure 9).

This implied existence of a sense of mistrust, antagonism and marginalisation among stakeholders, which tends to breed apathy and low productivity.

Only about 24% of the respondents felt that the management had advance plans for contingencies, with majority having the opposite opinion (Figure 10). Further only 24% of the respondents were convinced that there was zero tolerance to crisis management. To be expected under such circumstance are heavy net losses to the system in the event of an extreme event.

Generally over 80% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction about their needs and those of other customers being met (Figure 11). From a scenarios analysis perspective, the future of the competitiveness of the University in this age of competition would be undermined, particularly due to the negative image the universities stand to acquire. Only one third of the responding individuals felt that mechanisms were in place for continuous system improvement (Figure 12). This observation suggests the need to invest more in strategic management with a more pro-active approach to change management. About one third generally agreed that separation of powers and responsibilities was practiced. Another one third had a generally opposing view while over a quarter strongly felt that there was no separation of powers and responsibilities (Figure 13).

This scenario could result into declining efficiency in system operations and obligations. About 28% were generally satisfied with the staff development policy; 41% were not satisfied, and another 28% strongly disagreed with the suggestion that the staff development policy was progressive (Figure 14).

There were varied opinions on whether staff worked willingly. Up to 46% felt that workers offered their services willingly while 54% did not think so (Figure 15). This feeling should be expected when academic service providers neither feel they belong to the university system nor are appreciated as people first. Despite these varied opinions on TQM items, half the respondents agreed that the vision and mission statements are being implemented (Figure 16).

By implication, the rate of progress in this regard would be unprecedented were academic staff to be spontaneous participants in decision-making and their subsequent implementation.

For purposes of strategic interventions, the significance of the TQM items in pursuit of quality assurance were categorised in three, thus (1): very urgent intervention needed; (2) urgent intervention needed; and (3) fairly urgent intervention needed (Table 1). From this summary priority in strategic management in pursuit of quality assurance is hinged on people-centred factors. These findings agree with many studies on business management as briefly discussed in preceding sections of this paper.

The study identified several critical areas for re-orienting and implementing a people-centred corporate university management (governance) system in pursuit of world-class status (Figure 17).

Creation of an enabling working environment topped

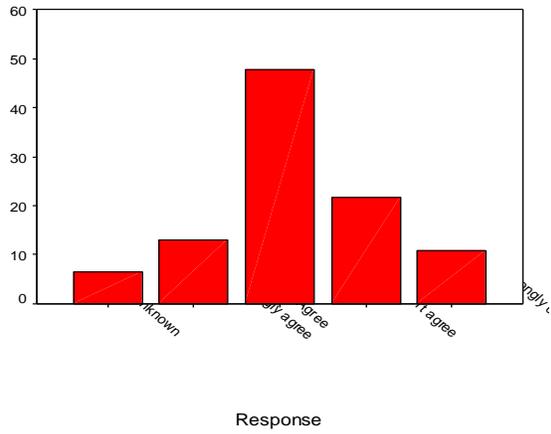


Figure 1. Most stakeholder actions add value to the system.

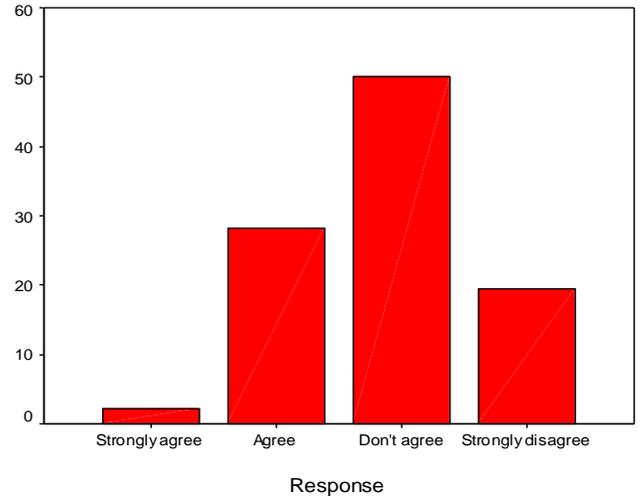


Figure 4. Most effort is used to resolve vital problems first.

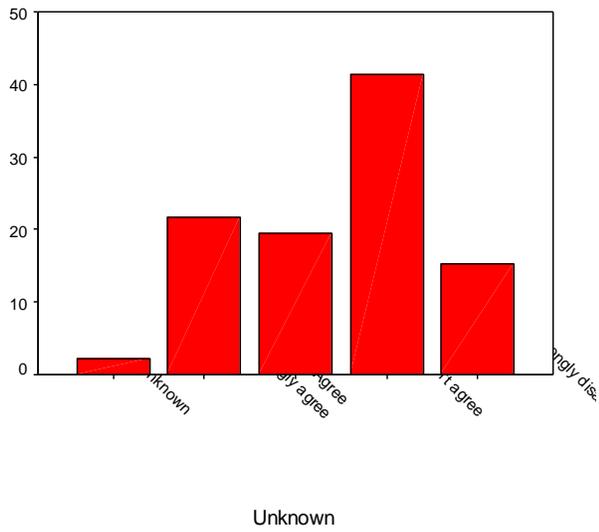


Figure 2. Mutual trust and confidence exists among university staff members.

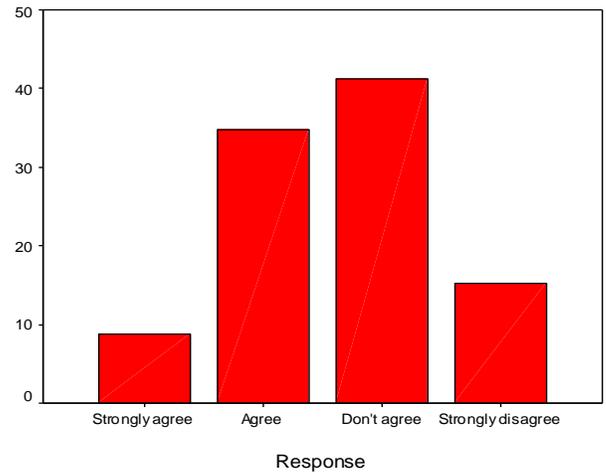


Figure 5. Employees are empowered to be responsible.

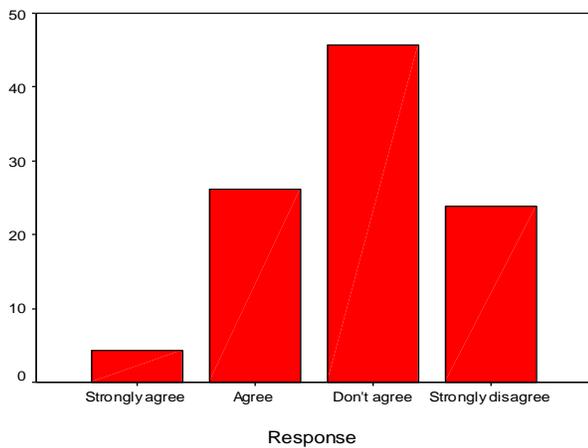


Figure 3. Conflict resolution skills are lacking within the university.

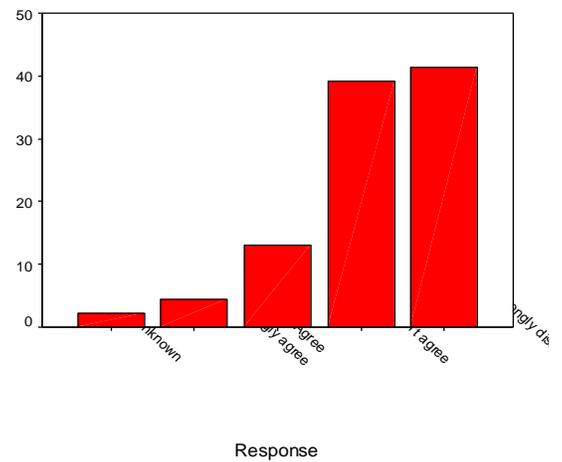


Figure 6. Employees feel they belong and own the system and processes.

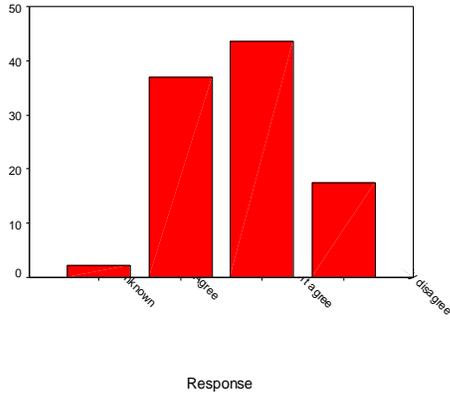


Figure 7. New and appropriate technology is sourced and used.

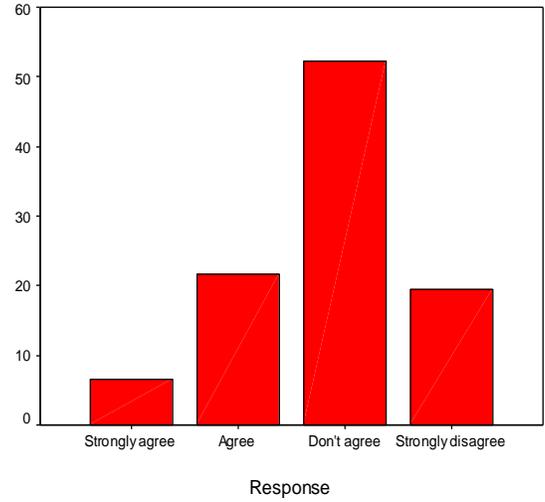


Figure 10. Actions are based on good pre-designed master plans.

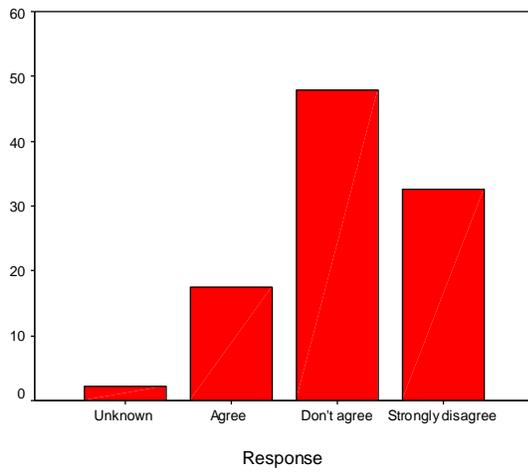


Figure 8. Decisions are made based on authentic data and information.

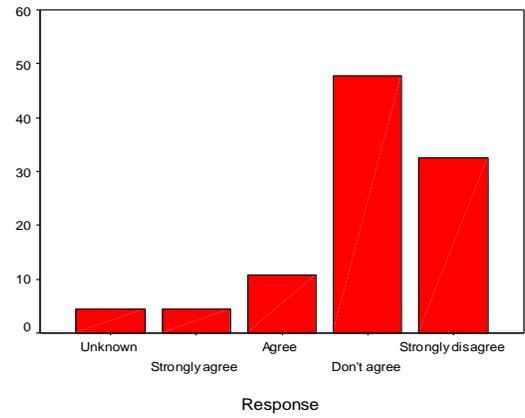


Figure 11. Needs of staff and other customers are met.

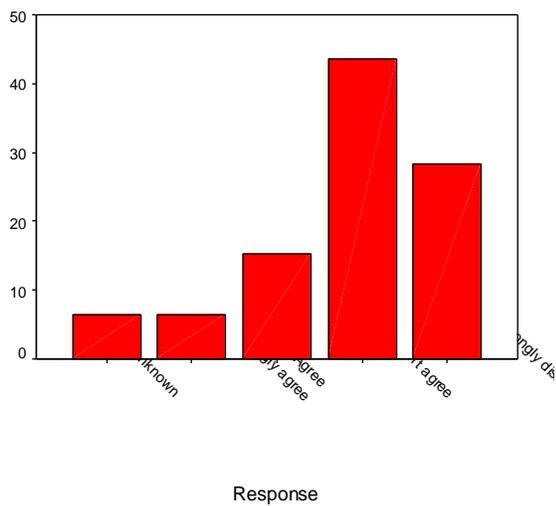


Figure 9. Decisions and actions are based on 'win-win' scenarios.

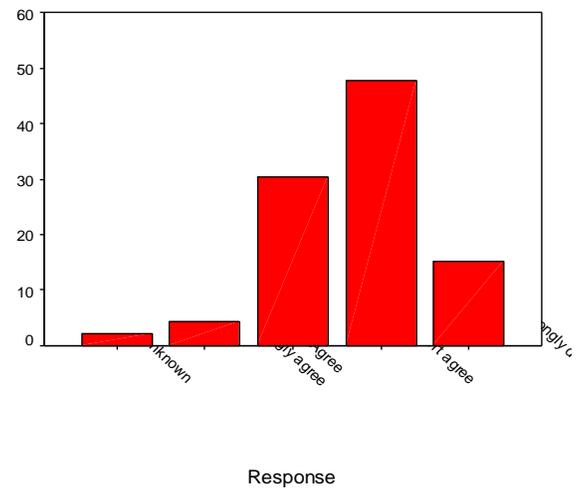


Figure 12. Mechanisms for continuous system improvement exist.

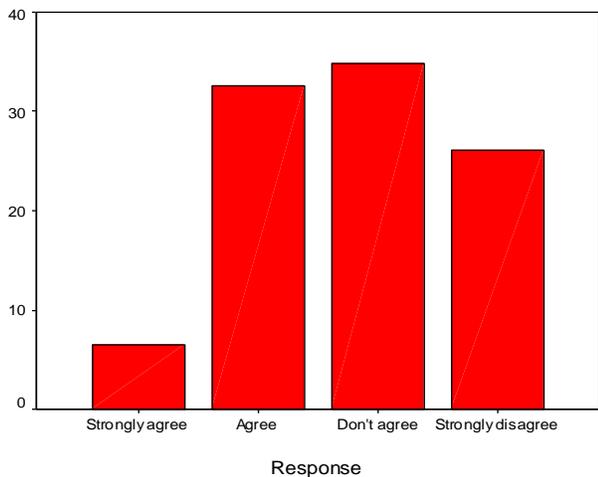


Figure 13. Separation of powers and responsibilities is practiced.

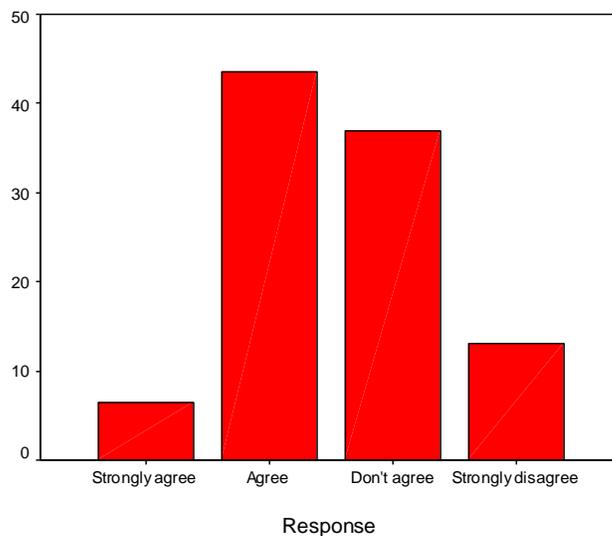


Figure 16. Vision and mission statements are implemented.

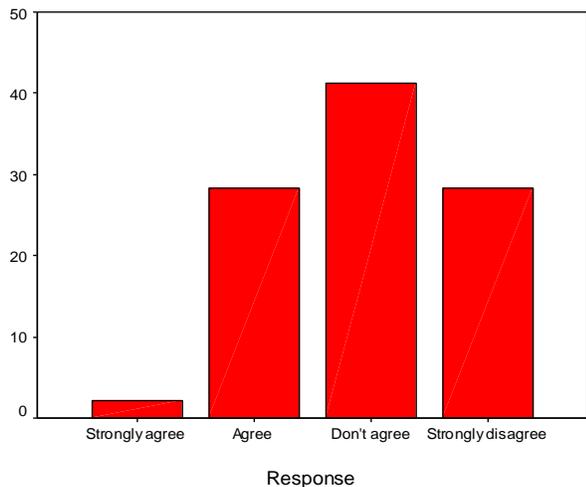


Figure 14. Staff development policy is progressive.

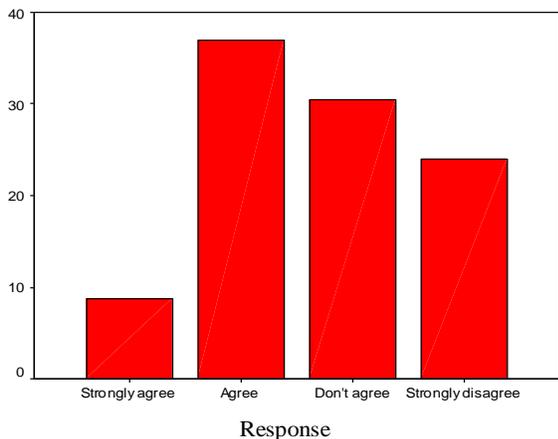


Figure 15. Workers offer their expertise and services willingly.

the list of concerns. A positive working environment has strong correlation with worker productivity in any organisation (Woodman et al., 1993; Van de Ven and Ferry, 1980). In particular respondents indicated that staff welfare and learning infrastructure and technology be given the importance they deserve. Divergent opinion or positive criticism should not be criminalized, as this would undermine people’s basic rights of association, assembly and exchange of ideas, contrary to the ideals of a world-class university. To encourage spontaneous participation more needs to be done to improve staff development and remuneration policy. In particular scholarship opportunities, re-tooling of staff in emerging specialized skills and fair compensation of good work and status should be given priority.

On promotions and appointments respondents felt that for mutual respect to be developed upward mobility should be fair and based on merit that directly hinges on the core functions of the university thus; teaching, research and community service. Further, appointment of top University management should have the input of academic staff, while all top administrative positions should be professionalized.

As concerns communication and decision-making, respondents pointed out the need for open, democratic, inclusive and consultative decision-making involving staff, senate and the academic staff union based on mutual trust and respect. It is such free environment that promotes intellectual engagement and innovation, which are also articulated in various university vision and mission statements. When it comes to management style and relationship with academic staff, respondents felt that mutual respect and consultation be the guiding principle. This would allow for tolerance in view of divergent opinions, instead of holders of such opinions being

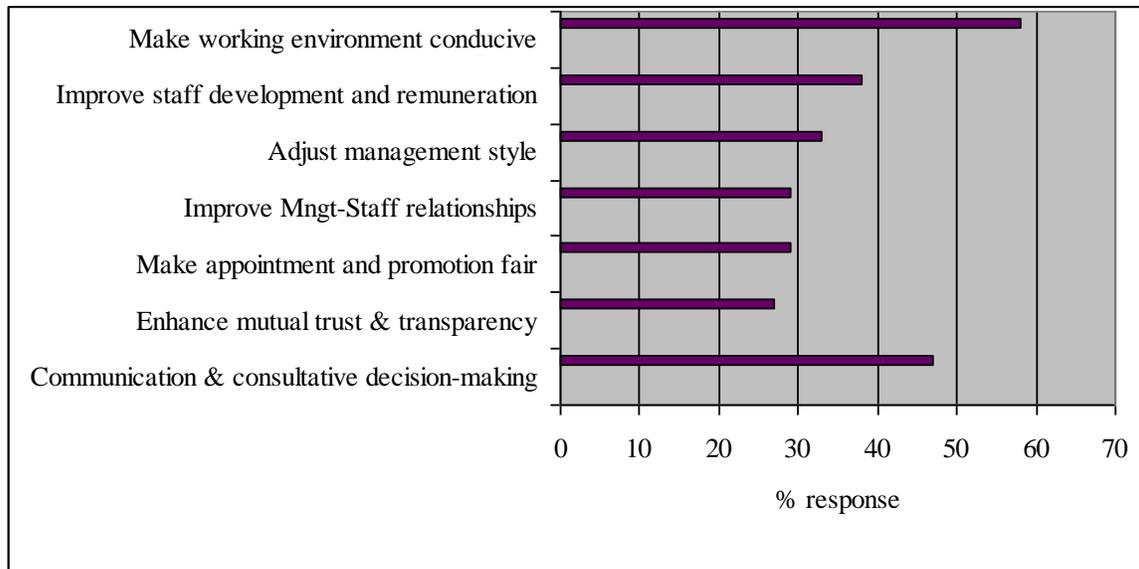


Figure 17. Staff opinion on way forward towards quality management.

Table 1. Selected items of TQM used for data collection.

No.	Total quality management item	1	2	3
1	Most stakeholder actions add value to the system			+
2	There is timely delivery of services all the time	+		
3	Working relationships are based on mutual trust and confidence	+		
4	Individuals and teams are trained to always solve problems		+	
5	Employees are empowered to be responsible		+	
6	Employees feel they belong and own the system and processes	+		
7	New and appropriate technology is sourced and used		+	
8	Decisions are made based on authentic data and information	+		
9	Most effort is used to resolve vital problems first	+		
10	Decisions and actions are based on 'win-win' scenarios		+	
11	Actions are based on good pre-designed Master Plans	+		
12	Contingencies are planned for in advance		+	
13	There is zero tolerance for crisis management		+	
14	The needs of staff and other stakeholders and customers are met	+		
15	Mechanisms for continuous system improvement exist		+	
16	Separation of powers and responsibilities is practised			+
17	Staff development policy is progressive		+	
18	Workers offer their expertise and services willingly		+	
19	Vision and mission statements are implemented		+	

Where: (1): very urgent intervention needed; (2) urgent intervention needed; and (3) fairly urgent intervention needed.

perceived as anti-establishment. Instead of policing people, employees should be empowered to be responsible managers of their own.

Table 2 indicates that three TQM items play an integral part in corporate management of public universities in

Kenya. These items were listed as; stakeholder actions, Workers expertise and implementation of the Vision and mission statements of the organization.

Table 3 confirms that there is no significant relationship between the TQM items identified in this study and the

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of TQM items in corporate management.

Statistics	N	Mean	Std. deviation
Most stakeholder actions add value to the system	45	3.49	.589
There is timely delivery of services all the time	45	2.13	.842
Working relationships are based on mutual trust and confidence	45	2.22	.902
Individuals and teams are trained to always solve problems	45	2.20	.894
Employees are empowered to be responsible	45	2.20	.894
Employees feel they belong and own the system and processes	45	2.60	1.009
New and appropriate technology is sourced and used	45	2.60	1.009
Decisions are made based on authentic data and information	45	2.22	.927
Most effort is used to resolve vital problems first	45	2.27	.915
Decisions and actions are based on 'win-win' scenarios	45	2.33	.953
Actions are based on good pre-designed Master Plans	45	2.44	1.078
Contingencies are planned for in advance	45	2.16	.999
There is zero tolerance for crisis management	45	2.76	1.209
The needs of staff and other stakeholders and customers are met	45	2.24	.830
Mechanisms for continuous system improvement exist	45	2.67	1.066
Separation of powers and responsibilities is practised	45	2.31	.900
Staff development policy is progressive	45	2.24	.957
Workers offer their expertise and services willingly	45	3.13	.588
Vision and mission statements are implemented	45	3.33	.798
Valid N (listwise)	45		

Table 3. ANOVA results.

Model		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	3.100	18	.172	.729	.754 ^a
	Residual	6.144	26	.236		
	Total	9.244	44			

Table 4. Multiple correlation coefficients.

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R ²	Std. error of the estimate
1	.579 ^a	.335	-.125	.486

corporate management practices initiated and implemented by the university administration $F(18, 26) = .729$, $p > 0.05$. The corporate management practices at the university level in Kenya were independent of the existing corporate management best practices.

Table 4 shows that the Multiple Correlation Coefficient R indicates a linear relationship between observed and model-predicted values of the dependent variable (TQM). The R squared (R^2) (the coefficient of determination) shows that the model explains 33.5% of the variations. This basically means that the best practices model explains only 33.5% while more than 60% of the variation is explained by other factors. There is need to explore on these other factors contributing to this model.

Nineteen variables influencing university corporate management principles were collected and selected for further analysis and they were subjected to principal component factor analysis. The results yielded three factors affecting university corporate management.

The first component can be interpreted as employee satisfaction and motivation factors. The employees play a critical role in the achievement of the corporate management best practices in any organization and should therefore be motivated and provided with the necessary tools and skills to perform their duties. This component explained the highest variance of 43% in the data. Employees' empowerment is a concept that links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping

Table 5. Principal component analysis rotated component matrix^a.

	Component		
	1	2	3
There is timely delivery of services all the time	.664	.107	.373
Working relationships are based on mutual trust and confidence	.973	.098	.064
Individuals and teams are trained to always solve problems	.953	.123	.039
Employees are empowered to be responsible	.960	.007	.072
Employees feel they belong and own the system and processes	-.037	.965	.035
New and appropriate technology is sourced and used	-.037	.965	.035
Decisions are made based on authentic data and information	.055	.164	.858
Most effort is used to resolve vital problems first	.096	.065	.806
Decisions and actions are based on 'win-win' scenarios	.231	.513	.523
The needs of staff and other stakeholders and customers are met	.254	.655	.411
Staff development policy is progressive	.393	.652	.338

Extraction method: Principal component analysis.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. ^aRotation converged in 5 iterations.

systems and proactive behaviour to social policy and social change. In the other words, empowerment links individual and his or her well being to wider social and political environment in which he or she functions for the betterment of the organization (Ramasamy, 2005; Hamburger et al., 2008; Kennedy and Schleifer, 2006).

The second component, contributing 23%, can be interpreted as the application and use of new and appropriate technologies in the corporate management of the university. Indeed technology in this age is critical in attaining organizational goals. IT is a very important factor in increasing productivity and reducing costs in any organization (Bessen, 2002; Kagan, 1994; Kotha and Swamidass, 2000).

Third and last factor, contributing 12% can be interpreted as the role of the management in decision making process.

The three components explained a total of 79% of the variance in the data with the first, second and third components contributing 43, 23 and 12% respectively. The factor loadings of the variables of the three components are presented in Table 5.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that principles of total quality management and strategic corporate management will continue to play a leading role in quality service delivery within public universities. Although academic staffs are a key asset in this process and also in the eventual transformation of universities into world-class status, top management has generally tended to marginalize them through subtle top-down management approaches. Of the 19 TQM items in this study, respondents were fairly positive on three, namely (1) most stakeholders add value to the system, (2) most workers offer their expertise

and services willingly, and (3) vision and mission statements are being implemented. These findings show that academic staff is inherently willing to add more value through their respective responsibilities if they would feel appreciated as people first and not just as mere tools to do work. Similarly, the efforts of senior management alone geared towards creating world-class university status would perform dimly without honest teamwork and objective involvement of stakeholders, particularly the academic staff. Conventional managers are generally averse to risks of change. They tend to stick to policy and legal expediences, often at the expense of the common good in the system. A critical challenge and yet opportunity in corporate management is to invest in strategic and adaptive management in line with the dynamic nature of the total university environment. Pro-active efforts can trigger the amendment of policies and practices that undermine system stability and hence quality performance. Creating world-class university status thus requires deliberate efforts to invest in a people-centred management system build on the tenets of mutual trust, mutual respect and intellectual cum professional symbiosis towards the common good. This is a cardinal management reform needed in Kenya's public universities. Current efforts underway such as the Rapid Results Initiative (RRI) and development of service charters in some universities are interventions in the right direction. Continuous and total system improvements also call for institutionalising both vertical and horizontal evaluation, where students evaluate academic staff on behalf of management, while academic staff likewise evaluates management practices. In this way the potential locked up in individual stakeholders could be released through synergistic partnership as people work because they want to and not because they need to. System stability would be guaranteed, which would translate into sustainable quality assurance.

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