

Service Quality and Student Retention in Low Cost Private Secondary Schools in Uganda

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Abstract:- This study examines the effect of service quality on student retention in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, using the case of Low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. The SERVQUAL model employed by this study stipulates five dimensions of service quality measurement, but this study specifically focuses on three; notably reliability, empathy and tangibles, leaving out assurance and responsiveness because of the would-be complexity of the study. The study used a cross-sectional survey design, where both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were considered. Both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered, using a sample size of 336, including students, teachers and parents. Collected data was analysed using the statistical package for social scientists (SPSS). The study result was that reliability contributes 28.4% towards student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, whereas empathy contributes only 35.7% and tangibles contributes only 26.7%. Therefore, the current study recommends that management should pay attention to service quality and other factors which may lead to student retention.

Keywords:- Service Quality, Customer Retention, Private Secondary Schools in Uganda.

I. INTRODUCTION

Service Quality is customer perception of the service in relation to their prior expectations. It is the degree to which the service offered can satisfy the expectation of the user (Kasper, Helsdingen, and Vries, 1999). Service quality in education is the difference between the students' and parents' expectations for service performance of educational institutions prior to the service encounter and their perceptions of the service perceived in the institutions

(Ahmad & Garg, 2012; Nell and Cant, 2014). According to Alriddle and Rowley (2001), an expectation that cannot be fulfilled on the institutions is the key factor for students' withdrawal. Student retention could be defined as the extreme commitment to stay in a favorite school continuously until a student finishes all classes at a particular level (Oliver, 1999).

Since 1993, when the government adopted the policy of liberalization of the education sector, thousands of schools and institutions have been set up by private investors. In the secondary sub-sector, the number of private schools, at about 4000, is more than double the number of government-funded schools (MOES Report, 2018). Such schools strive to compete for students through ensuring quality services advertisement and offering bursaries. As such, many students have turned out to be very mobile. Low-cost private secondary schools like; with limited resources, are the most affected by customer retention challenges. Yet a small increase in customer retention can increase their profits by a significant percentage (Singh & Imran, 2012).

Low cost private secondary schools in a way minds about customer perceptions, just like many other low-cost private secondary schools in Uganda. The school has a policy of continuous improvement aimed at reinforcing service quality. However, student defections have been a mainstay in the school irrespective of the school's attempt to offer quality services by employing professional teachers and painting the school to look nice and tidy. According to the 2017 school report, 76 students left the school at the beginning of 2017 and an additional 43 changed in the course of the year. Though the school admits new comers throughout the year and the numbers appear unchanged, a lot of income is lost through advertisement and students who defect strengthen the school competitors.

➤ *Theoretical Framework*

The SERVQUAL model, which underpins the study, is considered to be the most suitable and appropriate method to analyze service quality. It has been described by its creators as a simple and comprehensive multi-dimensional measuring scale that has good reliability and validity in its results (Handrinos, Folinas & Rotsios, 2015). The SERVQUAL model helps to understand the present service quality offered, analyze the performance across different customer groups, analyze the performance across various segments of service, analyze performance across services and assess the impact of improvement initiatives. The SERVQUAL model, with its dimensions of Reliability, Assurance, Tangibility, Empathy and Responsiveness, helped in gauging how customers perceive the school's quality of service.

➤ *Purpose of this Study*

The general objective of this study was to determine the effect of service quality on student retention in private secondary schools in Uganda.

➤ *Study Objective*

To determine the effect of empathy on student retention in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has also been some debate over whether assessing service quality based on the difference between expectations and perceptions of customers is sufficient. Nevertheless, most authors agree that this model is particularly applicable in the education sector and can be used to measure secondary school service quality. The SERVQUAL model has been used all around the world by researchers as a tool for measuring service quality in education.

Hill (1995) discussed aspects of the service quality in higher education and conducted a research in Britain focusing on the role of students as primary consumers measuring their expectations and perceptions. What Hill ignored however were the parents' experience of service quality and their influence on their children's perception of quality. This is something that this study endeavors to address.

Leisyte et. al. (2011) used this model in the education sector to identify the gap between expectations and perceptions of educational services from the point of view of students using the SERVQUAL instrument. Based on this research it was concluded that the negative gap in service dimensions can be used as a guideline for planning and allocating resources in order to improve educational service quality. Leisyte's study however focused on higher education and one would in a way struggle applying those findings in secondary education with precision since there are different dynamics, for example, passing national exams is used as a measure of quality at secondary level which is not the case at university level.

African scholars have dug deep into Parasuraman's SERVQUAL model and have advanced interesting arguments about service quality.

According to Oparah, Amah, A, Ifeanyichukwu, Aghara, and Ndubisi (2018) it is important to understand the consumer's perceptions of service quality from both consumers and service providers' perspectives by establishing that there is a strong positive relationship in all the five dimensions of service quality, notably; Reliability, Assurance, Tangibility, Empathy and Responsiveness. Most literature had traditionally considered only customer perceptions about quality as the sole yardstick in measuring quality. This is something that this study takes into account when it includes teachers in the population.

In the local context, many Ugandan scholars have explored the concept of service quality, and recent research has delved into customer perception about quality as the ultimate indicator of quality.

According to Agaba and Kanyesiime (2019), perceived quality is the extent to which a brand is considered to provide good quality products. They argue that this can be measured by the quality offered by the product, the level of differentiation in relation to competing brands, the price, availability in different sales channels and the number of line extensions. Though Agaba and Kanyesiime's focus was on tangible products, it gives an interesting insight into customer perception of quality.

Tamale, Sekiwu and Naluwemba (2017) investigated an alleged gap between students' expectations and experiences of service quality and recommended that support supervision and administrative support must be targeted as drivers of quality. What such scholars have not done however is to look at service quality in secondary schools and this is where this study comes in.

A study by Nazarious, R., Wilson, M. M., & Micheal, M. (2018) reveals that sometimes the line between quality of service or products strategy approval implementation and execution is very thin and the differences are subtle which may lead to conflicts and thus everyone involved must work conscientiously in tandem with others to achieve the desired results.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a cross-sectional survey design, where both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were considered. Out of the total population of 372 respondents under this study, the sample size targeted was 336 respondents. Out of the 336 questionnaires distributed, response that involved filling and giving appropriate information were 325 respondents, posing a response rate of 96.7%. There was a non-response rate of 3.27% as some few questionnaires were not returned to the researcher. This implies that the outcomes were reliable because they represented an 96.7% response to the study.

IV. DATA QUALITY ANALYSIS

Validity was determined using the Content Validity Index (C.V.I) where; C.V. I = items rated relevant divided by the total number of items in the questionnaire as shown below.

- $C.V.I = \frac{\text{No. of items rated relevant}}{\text{Total number of items}}$
- C.V.I = 45/46
- C.V.I = 0.978

According to Amin (2003), for the instrument to be valid, the C.V.I should be at least 0.7.

Reliability of data was assured through information collected from relevant respondents with specific attention to key issues related to reliability, empathy, tangibles and student retention, proper wording of instructions and logical arrangement of questions that were asked. According to Sekaran & Bourgie (2010), reliability is determined through the interpretation of Cronbach's alpha, which is a reliability coefficient that indicates how well the items in a set are positively correlated to one another. Using the Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 and above, reliability was calculated as below.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics

Item	Cronbach Alpha Value	No of items
Reliability	0.713	10
Empathy	0.754	9
Service Tangibility	0.741	10
Student Retention	0.715	6
Overall	0.893	45

Source: Primary Data

Given the result of 89.3% from the two experts, the average score was 89.3% which made the questionnaire content valid because it is well above the score of 72% recommended by Amin (2003).

➤ Research Findings

The objective of this study was to determine the effect of empathy on student retention in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. To achieve this objective, respondents were asked to react to several statements on empathy. They responded and data on this objective was analysed under the question: "What is the effect of empathy on student retention in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda?" The results of their responses are summarized in table 2 below.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Empathy

Items	Min	Max	Mean	S. D
In low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, there is open communication between students and staff	1	5	4.34	1.061
The school cares about the well-being of the students	1	5	3.79	1.220
There is individual attention in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda	1	5	3.66	1.222
The Administration usually talks to the student to know their needs	1	5	3.87	1.315
The students feel valued by the Administration	1	5	3.69	1.279
The staff encourage students to use suggestion boxes to raise concerns and have issues resolved quickly	1	5	2.42	1.444
The staff is empathetic to the students	1	5	3.81	1.144
Empathy has encouraged students to accept the service encounter provided by the school	1	5	3.80	1.084
Many students want to study their next level in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda because of the empathy of staff	1	5	3.60	1.183
Many students recommend low cost private secondary schools in Uganda to students in other schools because the staff here cares	1	5	3.80	1.204
Average			3.678	

Source: primary data (2019)

The mean average mean score was 3.678 indicates that majority of respondents agreed that empathy significantly contributes to student retention.

Table 3 Correlations between Empathy and Student Retention

Variable	Measure	Empathy	Student Retention
Empathy	Pearson Correlation	1	.597**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	325	325
Student Retention	Pearson Correlation	.597**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	325	325

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

Source: Primary Data (2019)

Table 3 above showed that there is a moderate positive relationship between empathy and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, with a correlation coefficient, $r = 0.597$ and $p = 0.01$. Since $r > 0.01$, it implies that a unit increase in student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda is influenced by a unit increase in empathy, but the findings are not predictive. Empathy should therefore be emphasized low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

Table 4 Model Summary of regression of Empathy and Student Retention

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.597 ^a	.357	.355	.69486

a. Predictors: (Constant), Empathy

Source: Primary Data (2019)

Table 4 above showed the adjusted R square value of 0.357, which indicates that empathy contributes only 35.7% towards student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. The remaining 64.3% of student retention is influenced by other factors. This thus showed that there is a relationship between empathy and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. Administrators should be more empathetic to students.

Table 5 ANOVA^a for Empathy and Student Retention

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	86.499	1	86.499	179.150	.000 ^b
	Residual	155.954	323	.483		
	Total	242.454	324			

a. Dependent Variable: Student Retention

Predictors: (Constant), Empathy

Source: Primary Data (2019)

Results of the study in table 5 above indicate that the regression model predicts the dependent variable significantly well. There is a statistical significance of the regression model indicated by $F = 179.150$ and $sig = 0.000$ which is less than 0.01. This is also supported by the regression mean square value of 86.499 compared to the residual mean square of 0.483 which is significant to zero. This thus confirms that there is a significant relationship between empathy and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

Table 6 Coefficients^a for Empathy and Student Retention

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.111	.204		5.446	.000
	Empathy	.729	.054	.597	13.385	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Student Retention

Source: Primary Data (2019)

The t-values in table 6 above test the hypothesis that the coefficient is different from zero. To reject this, you need a t-value greater than 1.96 (for 95% confidence). The t-value for empathy is 5.446, which is greater than 1.96. This implies that low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, empathy is a significant factor ($P=0.00$) influencing student retention. Also the standardized beta coefficient of 0.597 implies that one unit increase in student retention is caused by 0.597 units increase in empathy based on the equation $Y=\beta x+C$, where Y= Student retention (Dependent variable),

$x=$ empathy (Independent variable), $\beta= 0.597$ and $C=$ constant, when reliability is zero. This hence shows that there is a relationship between empathy and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. Teachers should be more empathetic to improve student retention.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study was carried out to establish the relationship between tangibles of service and student retention in low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. According to the research findings as presented in table 6.2, there is a moderate positive relationship between tangibles of service and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, with a correlation coefficient, $r = 0.518$ and $p = 0.01$. Since $r > 0.01$, it implies that a unit increase in student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda is influenced by a unit increase in tangibles of service, but the findings are not predictive.

The adjusted R square value of 0.267 indicates that empathy contributes only 26.7% towards student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. The remaining 73.3% of student retention is influenced by other factors. This thus shows that there is a relationship between tangibles of service and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

The regression model predicts the dependent variable significantly well, as illustrated in table 6.4. There is a statistical significance of the regression model indicated by $F = 118.720$ and $sig = 0.000$ which is less than 0.01. This is also supported by the regression mean square value of 65.164 compared to the residual mean square of 0.549 which is significant to zero. This thus confirms that there is a significant relationship between service tangibility and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

The t-values in table 6.5 above test the hypothesis that the coefficient is different from zero. To reject this, you need a t-value greater than 1.96 (for 95% confidence). The t-value for service tangibility is 8.220, which is greater than 1.96. This implies that low cost private secondary schools in Uganda, service tangibility is a significant factor ($P=0.00$) influencing student retention. Also the standardized beta coefficient of 0.518 implies that one unit increase in student retention is caused by 0.518 units increase in service tangibility based on the equation $Y = \beta x + C$, where $Y =$ Student retention (Dependent variable), $x =$ service tangibility (Independent variable), $\beta = 0.518$ and $C =$ constant, when reliability is zero. This hence shows that there is a relationship between service tangibility and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From the study findings and specifically basing on the adjusted R square value of 0.357, the study concludes that empathy contributes only 35.7% towards student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda. The remaining 64.3% of student retention is influenced by other factors. This thus shows that there is a relationship between empathy and student retention low cost private secondary schools in Uganda.

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