

Full Length Research Paper

Faculty opinions on emerging corporatization in public Universities in Kenya

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In order to independently and sustainably implement their functions in response to reduced capitation from government, public university management is embracing corporate culture, which has been traditionally associated with the private sector. Given the complexity of the university system, this paradigm shift may find itself at variance with increasing intra-democratisation and quality assurance requirements. This article discusses faculty opinions on corporate management of public universities in Kenya bearing in mind their quest for world-class status. A survey design was used to collect data between 2009 and 2010 based on 16 total quality management indicators derived from literature review and corroborated by faculty who teach in the School of Business at Kenyatta University. From a target population of 300 registered alumni of the Kenya DAAD Scholars Association, 45 questionnaires were completed and received back. Findings show that academic faculty generally lack the sense of belonging and feel marginalised when it comes to key decisions that directly affect them. As such they work for survival's sake and not out of passion. Such work culture would inevitably undermine quality assurance in service delivery. This article argues for deliberate investment into symbiotic relationships between university management and faculty, as a way of reversing this trend in work ethics.

Keywords: Change and Corporate Management, Higher Education, Kenya

INTRODUCTION

Emerging Trends in Higher Education

Up to early 1990s, public Universities in Kenya were fully funded by government. Since then 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 of public Universities (Oanda *et al.*, 2008). These universities are thus endeavouring to generate their own finances in order to remain operational in the emerging regional and global education market. 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 since 2009, particularly in the development of physical infrastructure,

challenges in human resource management have periodically impacted the university system stability and productivity negatively. A recent example in this regard is the November 2011 strike in public universities in Kenya that was meant to jump-start stalled negotiations on the collective bargaining agreement with government on better remuneration (<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/>). Inequitable sharing of income generated from self-sponsored (parallel) programs was a silent internal reason for this industrial action. The ultimate effect of this scenario on quality assurance is often reflected in the notion of "brains in the drain", which is characterised by apathy and deliberate poor service delivery on the part of employees (Waswa and Katana, 2008).

Corporate management is a concept mostly associated with the industry and private sector. Traditionally, the focus is on profit maximisation and not employee welfare. As a result sustainability of business practice tends to be undermined through such factors as high employee mobility and turnover. With increased demand for democratisation coupled with globalisation

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and internationalisation of higher education, there is growing demand for good corporate management in universities. This approach in management recognises and taps into available wealth of diversity within the human resource for the common good. This somehow seems to promote institutional stability in the long run. 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).

In order to remain relevant and competitive in the dynamic global knowledge market, management of public universities in Kenya needs to focus on emerging trends based on routine scenarios analyses. Jauch *et al.*, (2003) noted that the ensuing strategic management should drive decision-making and actions that determine whether an enterprise, organisation, or even government excels, survives or dies. By implication, it is possible to extinguish a thriving human institution or lift it to greater levels of performance.

In this paper, a university's business environment is adopted from the framework of the Inter-University Council of East Africa (IUCEA, 2010) and will be assumed to constitute the following key components: Students (main customers), Faculty and laboratory technicians (key academic service providers), non-academic personnel (general support staff), top management (key policy makers), parents, Government (main donor), surrounding local communities (immediate external mirrors of university impact), and other external actors like industry and international linkages. IUCEA aptly acknowledges the complexity of such a system and hence the effort needed in pursuit of quality assurance. Although an ideal environmental analysis should address all the above, this pilot study focused on the general trends in the quality of corporate management from perspectives of academic staff. It is hoped that this assessment will add to the "number of building blocks" necessary for transforming Kenyan and regional Anglo-phone universities into viable world-class corporate entities.

University Ranking and World Class Status

Although there is no standard definition of a world class university (also called elite or flagship university), academic and research indicators are often used to provide the reputational status of such universities (Levin *et al.*, 2006). The role of research universities in training high-level innovative professionals (scientists and researchers) needed for national development seems to be a key indicator (Salmi, 2009). This explains the increasingly quest of university managers and their political governments for their top universities to operate at the cutting edge of intellectual and scientific development. In this paper a world-class university shall

be assumed to possess among others the following key characteristics:

- It is known for engaging in critical inquiry covering every conceivable field of human endeavour and powered by a culture of academic freedom, association and expression.
- It attracts and retains competent and internationally reputed professors, who are widely cited and known for important discoveries and inventions, their fame attracting talented researchers and students from across the world.
- 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.
- Government respects it and taps into its wealth of expertise for national development.
- Society holds it in high esteem and depends on it for socio-economic, political role modelling and ecological development.
- Its quality assurance culture is not just in name. It can be measured and verified.

Although financial resources are necessary for creating such universities, it is widely acknowledged that rarely do large projects or organisations supported by good ideas, vigour and enthusiasm get stopped due to a shortage of cash (Dessler, 2003). Though important, money seems to be secondary to good human relations, hence good human resources management (HRM). Human resources management 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 emerges. 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.

Strategic management equally depends on ethics (Velasquez, 1992). Ethical decisions however tend to be morality-based. Since societies' accepted standards of behaviour differ widely, ethical decisions could be controversial and often at variance with legislation and policy guidelines. For instance based on personal ethical values, a strategic manager could "do the right thing" (going against institutional policy) and not "do things the right way" (sticking to institutional policy). Regrettably, most conventional managers find it difficult to "do the right thing" and would rather do things the right way even when the system gets hurt.

Currently all Universities in Kenya are vigorously pursuing the International Organization of Standards

Table 1. The 16 Indicators of Total Quality Management Used in this study

1. Most stakeholder actions add value to the system	2. Decisions are made based on factual data and information
3. Working relationships are based on mutual trust & confidence	4. Most effort is used to resolve vital problems first
5. Employees are empowered to be responsible (pro-active managers)	6. Decisions and actions are based on 'win-win' scenarios
7. Workers offer their expertise and services willingly	8. Actions are based on good pre-designed Master Plans
9. Conflict resolution skills are high	10. Mechanisms for continuous system improvement exist
11. Employees feel they belong and own the system & processes	12. The needs of staff and other system stakeholders are met
13. New and appropriate technology is sourced and used	14. Separation of powers & responsibilities is practised
15. Staff development policy is progressive	16. Institution's vision and mission statements are implemented

(ISO) (<http://www.iso.org/iso/about.htm>) certification as a proof of their quality management systems. While this has its advantages from corporate-political governance perspective, ISO certification is not normally used as a criteria in existing university ranking systems. It has limitations in its tendency to merely look at the adequacy of procedural and management processes and not the actual practice on the ground with respect to core university functions, namely teaching, research and community outreach. The status of Kenya's public universities can be found in the official web page of the Commission for Higher Education (<http://www.che.or.ke/status.html>).

Although other varying ranking systems for universities exist, scientometrics criteria, which emphasize faculty engagement in research, publications and the citation of faculty in refereed journals remains the most popular globally (Reuters, 2010). According to the Ranking Web of World Universities (2011), poor web performance (measured in terms of volume and quality of their electronic publications) should be a cause of concern about universities' web policies (http://www.webometrics.info/about_rank.html/). Unfortunately, for most universities in Kenya, the web policy may not be the problem. Low research output is often the problem because faculty members use much of their time teaching and hardly engage in meaningful research.

Therefore, despite being ISO certified, most universities in Kenya, general rank very poorly within the scientometrics scales. This raises questions on quality of research in particular and whether African universities should be evaluated solely on quality of teaching, which is emerging as the single most important function in response to corporate survivability. By focusing on financial independency, corporate practices in public universities are increasingly leaning towards massification in enrolment as this translates into more

income. The implication of this shift on the quality of the products as they join the job market cannot be overemphasised (Oanda *et al.*, 2008). Further, it is yet to be seen whether corporatization of public university management will address innovation gaps for national development.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a survey design to capture general opinions from respondents on 16 total quality management indicators (Table 1) synthesised by the authors from reviewed literature and corroborated by expert opinion from colleagues who teach in the school of Business at Kenyatta University (Peratec Executive Briefing, 1994; Oakland and Porter, 1994; Kehoe, 1996; Ahire, 1997; Dessler, 2003; Snell and Bohlander, 2007). As such TQM in this article means a set of principles and practices whose core ideas include understanding customer needs, doing things the right way and striving for continuous improvement through team work. The choice of these 16 TQMs indicators does not exclude existence of other indicators that could be the basis of further research on this theme. A questionnaire addressing these 16 indicators was availed to the respondents on-line to be completed on a scale of 1 to 4 indicating whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed respectively with the opinion given.

The target population comprised academic staff from public universities who are registered members of the Kenya DAAD Scholars Association. From a registered on-line membership of 300 alumni, 45 questionnaires were completed and received back. Since 10% of a target population is normally considered satisfactory for an opinion survey, 45 responses (i.e. 15% of target population) was deemed adequate for the discussion of

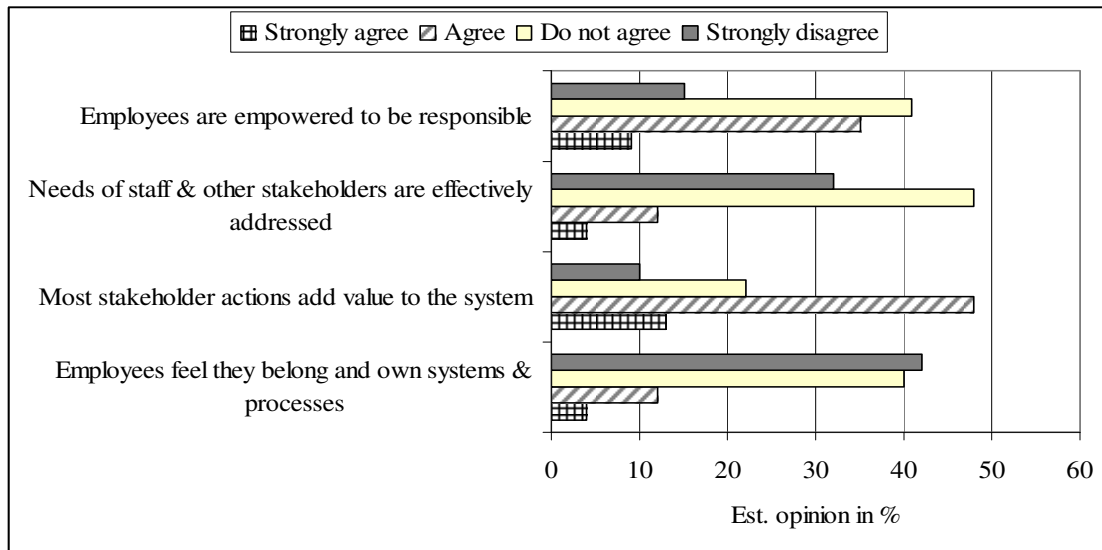


Figure 1. Respondents' opinions on TQM indicators 5, 12, 1 and 11 respectively

results in this article. Although these 45 respondents included lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors and full professors, having a PhD as the highest qualification was their common denominator and hence the only basis of analysis adopted in this study. Future research would benefit most from a bigger and proportion-representative sample size from faculty members.

Data were subjected to descriptive statistics and the responses to the indicators discussed and collectively captured in four graphs, whose indicators had in our opinion a high degree of overlap in terms of thematic blending and logical flow of information. Being an opinion survey no empirical data was used. Opinions however often play critical roles in change management from a tacit knowledge perspective.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Responses to Total Quality Management Items

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

About 58% of the respondents generally agreed that staff were not empowered to be pro-active in decision-making. 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. Such attitudes would not allow stakeholders to spontaneously go the extra mile to add value to the system. The challenge to corporate management is how to inject passion for work among employees, without losing the managerial chain of command.

Generally over 80% of the respondents expressed dissatisfaction about their needs and those of other customers being met. From a scenarios analysis perspective, the future of the relevance of the Universities in this age of competition would be undermined, particularly due to the negative image the universities stand to acquire. These needs tend to revolve mostly around welfare, which suggests that more needs to be done with respect to labour relations. Whether university managers will be willing to take advantage of the window of opportunity opened from the promulgation of the 2010 National Constitution (Republic of Kenya, 2010) remains an open question.

About 54% of respondents agreed with the notion that most workers did not offer their services willingly. In terms of conflict management, majority of the respondents (60%) were of the view that conflict resolution skills were rather poor (Figure 2). These two scenarios are a frequent recipe for such events as "moon lighting" (faculty using their official time to offer their services to other entities rather than their employer), industrial actions and student riots. Such eventualities tend to be countered through authoritarian means with consequent negative impacts on overall system stability and performance. In a progressive University, strategic management would endeavour to predict looming conflicts and pre-empt them amicably. Regrettably about 70% of the respondents felt that insufficient effort is dedicated to resolving vital problems quickly. The ensuing crisis management often results into net losses

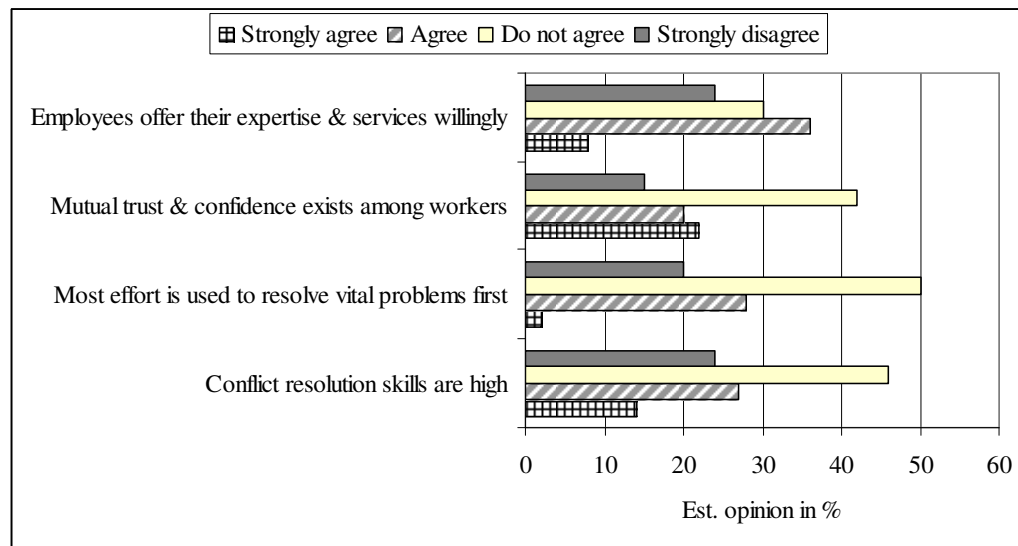


Figure 2. Respondents' opinions on TQM indicators 7, 3, 4 and 9 respectively

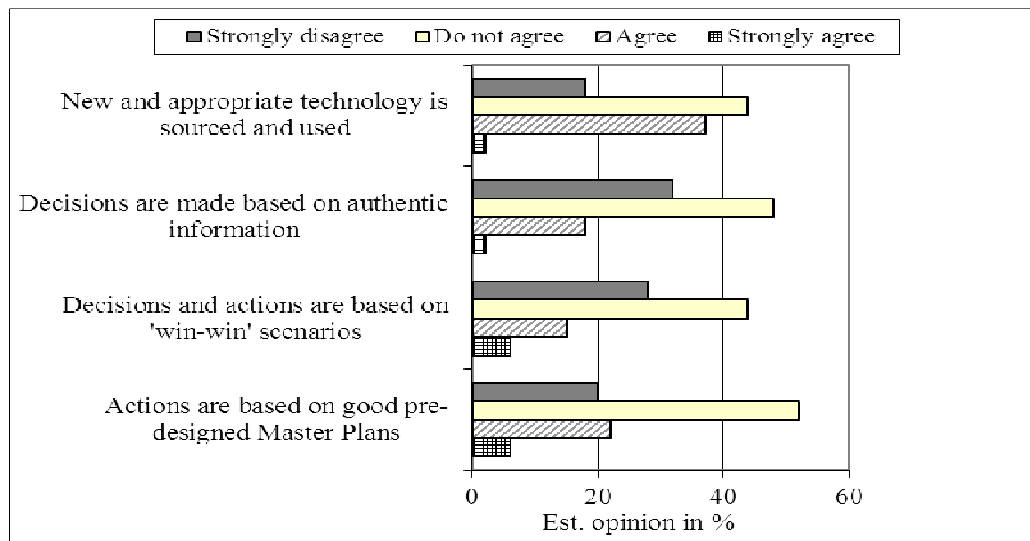


Figure 3. Respondents' opinions on TQM indicators 13, 2, 6 and 8 respectively

to the system. Being able to predict stress in the system and amicably pre-empt it would be indicative of a people-centred corporate management regime.

In addition, over 50% of the respondents did not believe that mutual trust and confidence exists among university workers. Such an environment breeds fear, suspicion and undermines teamwork spirit. The benefits that would be accrued from latent synergistic partnerships inherent in the components of the universities' systems are effectively lost. The challenge in corporate management would be how to lubricate relationships within and between human components of the university system.

It was also worrying when about 70% of the respondents thought that decisions and actions were not based on 'win-win' scenarios. This implied existence of a sense of mistrust, antagonism and marginalisation among stakeholders, which tends to breed apathy and low productivity. To be expected under such circumstances are heavy net losses to the system in the event of extreme disturbances like industrial actions. Although few universities have made tremendous improvements in physical infrastructure, about 60% of the respondents felt that universities are lagging behind in the acquisition and utilization of appropriate and state of the art technology within these facilities (Figure 3).

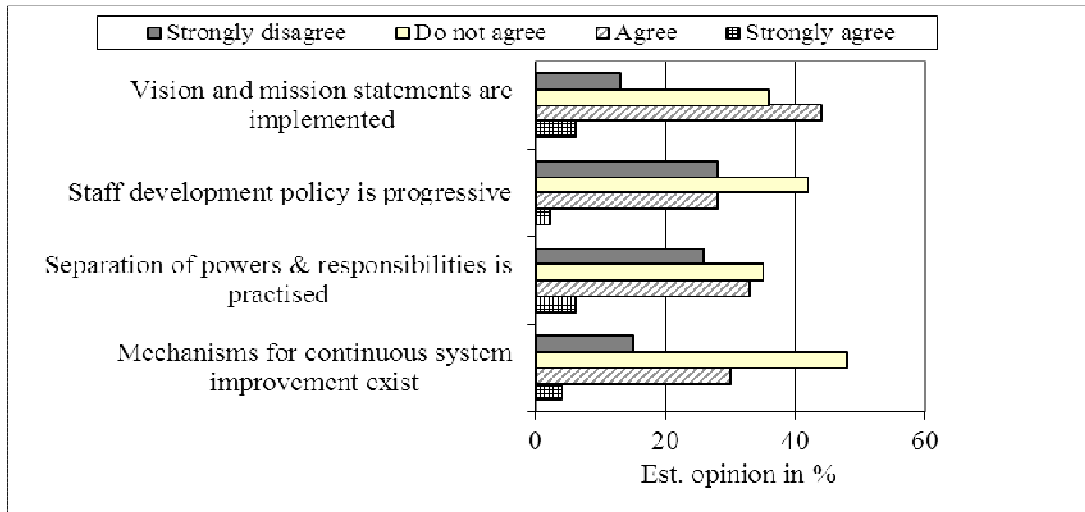


Figure 4. Respondents' opinions on TQM indicators 16, 15, 14 and 10 respectively

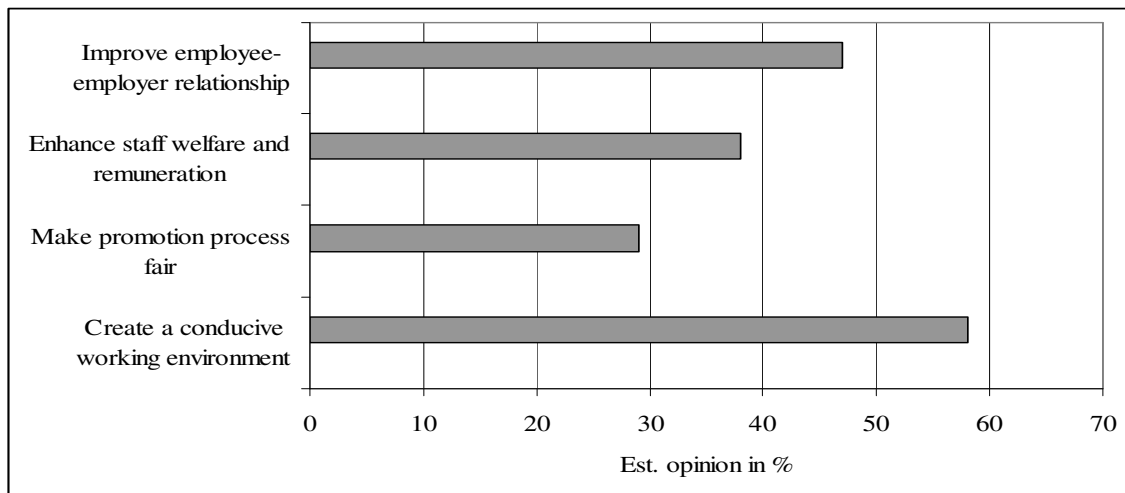


Figure 5. Staff opinions on the way forward towards quality corporate management

About 70% of the respondents were generally dissatisfied with existing staff development policy, particularly promotion criteria (Figure 4). Most respondents thought it was open to manipulation depending on the target candidate. In addition, about one third generally agreed that separation of powers and responsibilities was practiced. The rest had a generally opposing view. Further, only one third of the respondents felt that mechanisms were in place for continuous system improvement. These observations suggest the need to invest more in pro-active approaches to change management. A key challenge to progressive corporate management would be the institutionalization of multi-direction performance evaluations, where managers evaluate their workers and vice versa. Voluntary initiatives in this regard would particularly be useful tools in pursuit of total quality management. working environment In particular; respondents wish to

Despite these varied opinions on corporate management, about half of the respondents generally agreed that the vision and mission statements of the institutions were being implemented. This would imply that the rate of progress towards world class status would be unprecedented were academic staff to be spontaneous participants in decision-making and their subsequent implementation. The proceeding section summarises this management dilemma based on the final open-ended question that addressed the options on the way forward.

Opinions on the Way Forward

Four critical areas for urgent re-orientation and implementation in pursuit of quality assurance and hence world-class status were identified (Figure 5). Over 55% of the respondents affirmed the need to create an enabling

see more investment in adequacy and quality of learning infrastructure and technology in tandem with massification of student enrolment. For effective learning to occur, the challenge to corporate management would be to try and keep manageable staff to student, and student to equipment ratios, despite their unique business environments.

Next in importance was investment in better employer-employee relationships, with key areas of concern being the need to tolerate and accept divergent opinions or positive criticisms as part of organisational learning entry points. On the contrary a culture of fear tends to undermine people's basic rights of association, assembly and exchange of ideas. Further, respondents pointed out the need for improved communication and more democratic decision-making with their employers based on mutual trust and respect. Such free environment promotes intellectual engagement and creativity, which are essential in the quest for quality assurance.

Fair remuneration and recognition of performance were identified as key concern in staff welfare policies. Finally, the promotion criteria were thought to be unfair and not consistent as goal posts are often changed during the interviewing process. This was likened to management crossing bridges and immediately destroying them, thus leaving deserving colleagues stranded on the other side of the river. Respondents also felt that appointments to top university management should have the input of academic staff, while all top administrative positions should be professionalized to avoid wasting academic talent in administrative positions they are not trained for.

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CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Strategic corporate management will continue to play an increasing role in quality service delivery within public universities in Kenya. Although academic faculty are a key asset in this process, university management generally tends to marginalize them through subtle top-down approaches, which suggests that the quality of corporate governance needs to be enhanced. This will require among others deliberate efforts to invest in a people-centred management system build on the tenets of mutual trust, mutual respect and professional symbiosis for the common good.

Public university managers tend to stick to policy and legal expediencies, often at the expense of the common good in the system. A critical challenge and yet opportunity in strategic corporate management would be to invest in adaptive management in-line with the dynamic nature of the higher education environment. In particular the courage to "do the right thing" contrary to being bogged down in policy expediencies could trigger critical positive amendment for posterity. Continuous improvement in the total university system also calls for institutionalising both vertical and horizontal evaluations, where students evaluate academic staff on behalf of management, while faculty members likewise evaluate management practices.

Public universities should re-think the relevance of ISO certification as a key indicator of quality assurance. While ISO certification is essential in quality management procedures and processes, public universities should invest more in a corporate culture that directly boosts research, publication and community service, which remain cardinal international tools in university rankings.

To enhance and institutionalise corporate culture within the university system the following options should be explored: a majority of University council members should be out-sourced from the corporate world; all university managers and administrators should take corporate governance courses; and universities should invest more in consultancy services to government, private sector and other non-governmental organisations. The inevitable partnership with such stakeholders would gradually enhance the corporate culture in the system.

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