

ROLE OF EMPLOYEE CAPACITY IN THE STRATEGIC POSITIONING OF NEWLY CHARTERED PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN KENYA: THE CASE OF LAIKIPIA UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Globally, University education is known to be essential for social, economic and political transformation of society. This recognition has caused heavy investment in this sector in Africa and Kenya in particular. However, this rapid expansion has brought many challenges in service delivery and customer satisfaction by universities. Among these is employee capacity that can add value to the strategic intent of the universities in the face of intense competition in the university training services value chain. Through a cross-sectional survey, this study evaluated the role of employee capacity and the strategic positioning of newly chartered public universities, with specific reference to Laikipia University in Kenya. Results indicate that employee capacity was crucial for sustainable competitive advantage of the University. It was apparent that the University had a workforce that had fairly good capacity to contribute to its strategic intent through their cooperation, commitment and involvement in the activities of the University. However, the University needs to invest more in building the capacity of its entire human resource to elevate the current position and to achieve sustainable competitive advantage. Employees need to be empowered through increased opportunities for scholarships, training and mentoring activities. This would require training and development needs assessment and methods to be effective in boosting employee capacity. Moreover, employee motivation through better remuneration, and appreciation and recognition of efforts of employees would be desirable to enhance chances of strategic positioning of the University. This study contributes to information on employee capacity and its role in strategic positioning of newly chartered public universities that university managers and policy makers would need to employ to achieve sustainable competitive advantage among universities in the country.

Key Words: *Employee Capacity, Strategic Positioning, Newly Chartered Public Universities, Kenya*

Introduction

Globally, University education is known to be essential for social, economic and political transformation of society. This recognition has caused heavy investment in this sector in the East African region and other parts of Africa (Ngome, 2003). Kenya in particular has had very rapid expansion in the University education in the recent past (CUE, 2014). However, the rapid expansion of university education in the country has resulted in many challenges in service delivery and customer satisfaction by the universities (Ogana, 2013). These include an increase in competition in terms of student recruitment, search for financial resources (Wiklund & Wiklund, 1999), and recruitment of qualified, skilled and experienced workforce amongst the universities (Kosgey, 2013; Laikipia University, 2013). Other challenges to overcome are limited physical facilities, leading to low access and participation rates, poorly equipped lecture theatres, laboratories, workshops and other learning equipment (Saitoti, 2004). This calls for strategic positioning to enable universities thrive in the face of intense competition and attain sustainable competitive advantage (Arthur & Strickland, 2003; Gershon, 2003).

Positioning is the art and science of fitting the product or service to one or more segments of the broad market in such a way as to set it meaningfully apart from competition (Kalafatis et al., 2000). For instance, the goal of positioning a university would be to make it to be among the top universities worldwide. Strategic positioning is the positioning of an organization in the future, while taking account of the changing environment, plus the systematic realization of that positioning (Denning, 2001). It includes the devising of the desired future position of the organization on the basis of present and foreseeable developments, and the making of plans to realize that position (Arthur & Strickland, 2003; Gershon, 2003). It can be termed as a process through which an organization conducts a divergent exploration of core competencies and develops winning strategies to create and sustain a competitive advantage in a global and dynamic market place (Trout & Rivkin, 2000). Strategic positioning is aimed at ensuring the continuity of the organization (Porter, 1980 & 1985). For instance, the competitive capacity of Laikipia University in relation to other universities in Kenya would be its strategic position.

A notable issue attendant to the rapid expansion of university education in Kenya is the low employee capacity to enable strategic positioning of newly chartered universities (Kosgey, 2013). Employees are the primary producers of output for the customers, implying that they are an important player in service delivery that contributes to the strategic position of a university. Their cooperation, personal commitment, involvement, training and empowerment during the development of the strategic position will determine the success and sustenance of the strategic position (Hitt et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2008). Low employee capacity implies that the newly chartered public universities will not survive the current competitive and operational issues they face, and are likely to become unprofitable, non-viable institutions in

the long-term. Consequently, strategic positioning of the affected institutions becomes necessary. However, studies hardly exist on strategies newly chartered public universities in Kenya were employing regarding employee capacity to position themselves in the face of intense competition for students and scarce resources to ensure their long-term survival and viability. The current study focused on the role of employee capacity in the strategic positioning of newly chartered public universities in Kenya, with specific reference to Laikipia University.

Research Methodology

A cross-sectional survey was undertaken at Laikipia University in Kenya, in which primary data was collected using sets of pre-tested structured and unstructured questionnaires from 102 teaching and administrative employees (Grades V-XIV) from a sample frame of 205 employees in that category in the University. The sample picked for the study was about 50.0% of the target population, which was higher than the 30% recommend by Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) for such studies.

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected, emphasising on the full analysis of the strategic positioning practices in the University. Secondary data was obtained from records and documents in the University offices. The survey respondents provided information regarding employee capacity and its role in strategic positioning of the University. General statistics were used to describe the results, and correlation analyses done to establish the effect of employee capacity on strategic positioning of the University. The results are presented in tabular summaries.

Research Results

General characteristics of the respondents

Findings relating to the general characteristics of the teaching and administrative staff survey respondents in the University indicated that males dominated (60.8%) the teaching and administrative staff, implying women were less represented in these sections in the University. Those married were the most (76.5%) while the singles comprised about 20.6%. The age category of 36-45 years was the majority (37.3%) and the least (2.9%) was 56-65 years of age. Most (27.5%) of the teaching and administrative staff survey respondents had diploma as their highest level of education. Further, majority (69.2%) of them were of the rank of administrator, and were in permanent and pensionable employment (63.9%). Additionally, most of the teaching and administrative staff survey respondents had served for between 1-5 years in the University.

Majority (51.0%) of the survey respondents agreed that they were familiar and understood the vision, mission and the strategic goals of the University, understood their job descriptions/specifications and how their work directly contributed to the overall success of the University (45.1%). Similarly, most (57.8%) of the respondents strongly agreed that their qualifications

were relevant to the jobs they were doing, and had adequate opportunities for professional development and advancement at the University (57.8%). Further, about 44.1% of the survey respondents had attended trainings or forums on capacity building and about 32.4% adequately supervised and mentored their subordinates. Additionally, most of the survey respondents agreed that they were sufficiently supervised and mentored by their supervisors (58.8%), that employees worked together as a team to accomplish assigned tasks (45.1%) and that they worked with others as a team to develop their careers (53.9%).

Majority (40.2%) of the survey respondents agreed that they attended team building activities aimed at enhancing team work, recognized that it was their duty to improve performance (57.8%) and were loyal to ensuring that they improved their performance (50.0%). Approximately 48.0% of the survey respondents agreed that they could use a computer to gather and transmit information, and analyze data. Most (59.8%) of them agreed that they understood the full meaning of International Organization for Standardization (ISO) 9001:2008 Quality Management System Standard Operating Procedures, and always attained high standards of excellence in their work (61.8%). Further, about 31.3% of the survey respondents agreed that they shared daily work experiences with fellow employees and supervisors. Moreover, majority (57.8%) of them agreed that they were encouraged to learn from their mistakes, and that their work was challenging, stimulating and rewarding (53.9%).

About 36.8% of the teaching and administrative staff survey respondents agreed that they were able to disagree with their supervisors without fear of getting into trouble while about 47.1% agreed that they were comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas at work. Besides, about 30.4% of the survey respondents agreed that the University attracted, developed and retained people with diverse training and socio-cultural backgrounds. Additionally, 29.4% of the respondents agreed that people with different opinions and ideas were valued at the University while 30.4% agreed that the University's management recognized and respected the existing workers' unions.

Correlations between the leadership of the University's senior management and strategic positioning of the University as perceived by the senior management respondents in the University indicated that the University's pursued for ISO 9001:2008 certification significantly and positively affected the University's master plan that was being implemented ($r=0.644$, $P \leq 0.05$). Similarly, existence of business plans for all campuses of the University significantly influenced the inspiration of the University's leadership to stakeholders to attain the University's vision and mission ($r=0.644$, $P \leq 0.10$). Leadership believe in core values of the University also significantly and positively influenced the leadership believe in the University's vision and mission ($r=0.811$, $P \leq 0.05$), the leadership inspiring the stakeholders to attain the vision and mission of the University ($r=0.632$, $P \leq 0.05$), the leadership believe in the strategic objectives of the University ($r=0.846$, $P \leq 0.05$), and the University having a strategic plan (Laikipia University, 2014a) that was being implemented ($r=0.611$, $P \leq 0.05$). Additionally, the University undertaking community outreach or consultancy services significantly and positively affected the leadership believe in the vision and mission of the University ($r=0.495$, $P \leq 0.10$). Further, the existence of a citizens service charter (Laikipia

University, 2014b) displayed at service points in the University significantly and positively affected the following; the leadership believe in the vision and mission of the University ($r=0.768$, $P \leq 0.05$), the leadership inspiring the stakeholders to attain the University's vision and mission ($r=0.495$, $P \leq 0.10$), the leadership believe in the strategic objectives of the University ($r=0.647$, $P \leq 0.05$), the existence of the University's strategic plan that was being implemented ($r=0.574$, $P \leq 0.05$), and the presence and implementation of the University's master plan ($r=0.475$, $P \leq 0.10$).

Discussions

The purpose of this study was to establish the role of employee capacity in strategic positioning of newly chartered public Universities in Kenya, with specific reference to Laikipia University. The overriding principle is improvement in quality service delivery that would contribute to strategic positioning of the University, as a satisfied customer was a repeat customer (Crosby, 1979; Deming, 1982; Belohlav, 1993). However, it is notable that newly chartered public universities in Kenya have mostly been riding on propositions and policies of their parent universities. This implies that they are not set to compete favourably against intensified competition from their parent or other older universities (Kosgey, 2013). The fierce competition is a serious threat to these newly chartered public universities, and calls for their strategic positioning to survive and be sustainable in the university training services value chain. This would involve a divergent exploration of core competencies and developing winning strategies to create and sustain competitive advantage in the global and dynamic market place (Porter, 1980 & 1998; QuickMBA, 2014). When an organization can clearly articulate its perpetual location relative to those of other organizations in the industry, the complexities surrounding alternative decisions are significantly reduced (Porter, 1980; Gershon, 2003). It, therefore, becomes necessary to investigate factors that may influence the strategic positioning of the newly chartered public universities in Kenya. Once understood, it is essential to invest in core strengths of the University at present so that the changes made now and in the future can benefit the University's students, staff, stakeholders and the entire society by strengthening the quality of its education, research and public service (Porter, 1980; Adam, 1992).

It was apparent from the current study that Laikipia University's workforce was predominantly male and relatively young, majority being below 45 years of age. This means that the University needed to recruit more females to enhance gender equity in its workforce. The higher level of education among the respondents suggested that the workforce was fairly qualified. However, few had doctorate degrees and most of them were administrators. It was also notable that most of the employees were adequately experienced at work, and in permanent and pensionable employment. The foregoing indicates that the University's employee capacity was fairly good but still required a boost. However, to enhance employee capacity, the University needed to recruit more senior lecturers, and competent middle-level managers, especially in positions of strategic guidance. Besides, the fact that majority of the survey respondents were familiar and understood the vision, mission and the strategic goals of the University, understood their job descriptions/ specifications and how their work

directly contributed to the overall success of the University suggested that employee capacity in the University was fairly good. This was corroborated by the fact that qualifications of the survey respondents were relevant to the jobs they were doing, and that they had adequate opportunities for professional development and advancement at the University.

The expected employee capacity at the University included the enhancement of skills and knowledge through on-the-job training and external capacity building programmes. This was identified as the main need of the teaching and administrative staff if their role in enabling the attainment of the strategic positioning of the University was to be realized. Although most of the survey respondents had attended trainings or forums on capacity building, were sufficiently supervised and mentored by their supervisors, and worked together as a team to accomplish assigned tasks (Table 2), more effort was required to enhance these aspects to boost employee capacity in the University. A greater commitment from departmental leaders in the development of innovative training strategies would allow the University to ensure that knowledge creation, transfer and utilization was maximized and efficient at all levels of the University (Hitt & Ireland, 2002).

By recognizing that it was their duty to improve performance and being loyal to ensuring that they improved their performance demonstrated adequate capacity of the employees. The ability to use computers to gather and transmit information and analyze data, understanding the full meaning of ISO 9001:2008 Quality Management System Standard Operating Procedures, and always attaining high standards of excellence in their work also indicated a versatile workforce for the University. Organization theory and person-environment fit has consistently demonstrated the need for congruity between organization structure, process, technology and environment as well as between employees and their organization (Denning, 2001; Congden, 2005; Luthans, 2005). The reduced cost and increased capabilities of computer technology has triggered significant increases in the delivery of knowledge, which includes computer based training, web-based training, multimedia learning environments and e-learning. The University should, therefore, be keen on the use of modern technology to enhance capacity of its employees, especially given that the University has a fairly elaborate Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) infrastructure.

The daily sharing of work experiences with fellow employees and supervisors, encouragement to learn from own mistakes, and their work being challenging, stimulating and rewarding indicated a fairly high level of capacity building for staff in the University. This was confirmed by the fact that employees could disagree with their supervisors without fear of getting into trouble, and being comfortable with sharing their opinions and ideas at work. Further, the University's ability to attract, develop and retain employees with diverse training and socio-cultural backgrounds, valuing employees with different opinions and ideas, and the University's management recognizing and respecting existing workers' unions suggested the University was doing well in mentoring and training its employees. Cegielski et al. (2005) suggest that the best practice in training includes moving resources around within sub-specialized areas, swapping application experts around to new applications, cross-training between the employees and outsourcing for the improvement of existing applications

to gain beneficial suggestions. There is, however, need to be careful not to outsource haphazardly to ensure the organization is building bench strength and giving opportunity for growth to its teams. Additionally, there is need to find any opportunity to incorporate unique ways of sharing information where, for instance, the teams could hold internal training classes to the entire workforce. This will allow them to compile documentation, hone their presentation skills and share knowledge, which would help to break down any existing knowledge silos (Liu and Barrar, 2008).

To further build effective employee capacity, the survey respondents recommended that the management of the University identifies areas of deficiency and undertakes capacity building to fill the gaps. This can be done through, for instance, facilitation to attend short or refresher courses, workshops, seminars, conferences and long-term professional trainings on relevant areas of work, including outside the employees' careers. According to Denning (2001), adequate number of employees and effective training strategies that focused on an organization's intangible assets will have significant impact on the competitive advantage of any organization. Regular staff meetings and team building events, together with cost-shared trips both in and outside the country while minimising incitement of sections of employees against others, were also indicated by the survey respondents as important to boost employee competency and skills. Research and development on issues affecting employee capacity were likewise deemed to be avenues for improving the capacity of employees. Besides, there was need to motivate staff and encourage them to remain in the University. The University should, therefore, strive to offer competitive remuneration, incentives and a conducive working environment to retain existing employees and attract those from outside.

Overall, the University needs to lay strategies to harness the available human resource to attain strategic positioning. This was an opinion expressed by most of the survey respondents. The survey respondents indicated that senior management of the University should identify and optimize the potential and talents of employees. The overriding suggestion was the need for strategic thinking within the University's leadership and bringing on board all stakeholders to ensure they identify with the aspirations of the University. That is, an all-inclusive leadership was necessary for the University to attain strategic positioning. Enhancing dialogue with employees was also underscored by the survey respondents. Team spirit needed to be nurtured and upheld at all times amongst the University fraternity in all aspects while promoting professionalism in service delivery. Additionally, there was need to empower employees through increased opportunities for scholarships, training and mentoring activities. However, this would require training and development needs assessment and methods to be effective in boosting employee capacity in the University (Ngotho et al., 2014).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Employee capacity had a critical role in contributing to the University's strategic positioning. It was apparent that the capacity of the University's workforce was fairly good and contributed positively to its sustainable competitive advantage through their cooperation,

commitment and involvement in the activities of the University. However, the University needs to invest more in building the capacity of its entire human resource to elevate the current position. Employees need to be empowered through increased opportunities for scholarships, training and mentoring activities. This would require training and development needs assessment and methods to be effective in boosting employee capacity in the University. Moreover, employee motivation through better remuneration, and appreciation and recognition of efforts of employees would be desirable to enhance chances of strategic positioning of the University. The current study contributes to information on employee capacity and its role in strategic positioning of newly chartered public universities that university managers and policy makers would need to employ to achieve sustainable competitive advantage among universities in the country.

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