

Challenges of Quality Management in Private Higher Education Institutions: The Case of St. Mary's University College

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Abstract

In the last one decade, more than 60 private higher education institutions were inaugurated in Ethiopia. As part of their growth in number, they need to give extra attention to their quality management process because this is their essence of existence and their future development. This paper is designed to assess the major challenges faced by private higher academic institutions in their quality management process focusing on St. Mary's UC. Both primary and secondary data were collected. Based on the questionnaire collected from the top management, academic, nonacademic staffs and students from the selected UC data analysis and interpretation were made. From the external environment, some selected employers were a part of this study. Finally the research paper concludes and recommends.

1. Government and Private Higher Education Development in Ethiopia

Ethiopia possesses a 1,700 year tradition of elite education linked to the Orthodox Church. But secular higher education was initiated only in 1950 with the founding of the UC of Addis Ababa. During the following two decades half a dozen specialized technical colleges were established. These institutions hosted an educational culture that was heavily influenced by its long informal association with the Orthodox Church (Wagaw, 1990); (Saint, 2004)

Ethiopia now boasts about 60 private colleges, which enroll about a quarter of all students. Most of these institutions are based in the capital, Addis Ababa, with a few branch campuses in major towns. Virtually all of these institutions were established in the last half decade. While a closer analysis is warranted, the enrollment rate appears to have been climbing rapidly for several years; but the pace has now moderated, and in a few cases a decline has been reported. (Damtew, 2005)

Most private institutions in Ethiopia, like others in Africa, offer courses that render good employment opportunities. The programs include business administration, computer studies, and information technology (IT). Others also provide training in health care and teacher education. A few of these colleges also offer distance education to tens of thousands of students. (Damtew, 2005)The study focusing on SMUC

SMUC is an outgrowth of St. Mary's Language School which was established in 1991 in Addis Ababa. St. Mary's College was established in 1998 under St. Mary's General Educational Development PLC with its head office in Awassa and a branch in Addis Ababa. After a lot of hard work and dedication, the College was raised to the level of UC in February 2006. Currently SMUC have managed to graduate more than twenty thousand students in the conventional and distance modes.

SMUC offers undergraduate and joint graduate programmes in many fields of studies. Excluding the Distance Education Division, the UC offers courses in ten departments organized under four faculties comprising the Faculties of Business, Law, Informatics and Education. These courses are run under two categories of programs i.e. the Regular Program (run during the day time) and the Extension Program (offered in the evening). Students are trained in the specified levels: the certificate (10+1 and 10+2), the diploma (10+3) and the degree programs.

2. Statement of the problem

As the quantity of the PHEIs increases, the institutions should also focus on the quality of their education. They should have a controlling means that ensure all the activities necessary to design, develop and implement a product or service are effective and efficient with respect to the system and its performance. Quality management can be considered to have three main components: quality control, quality assurance and quality improvement. Quality management is focused not only on product quality, but also the means to achieve it. Quality management therefore uses quality assurance and control of processes as well as products to achieve more consistent quality. Therefore, having a quality management system in these PHEIs is very important for their survival as well as growth.

Currently, as there are a number of PHEIs, the business environment becomes very complex and competitive in every direction. And in this complex and competitive business environment, quality of education plays a very important role. Education efficiency and success do not depend just on quantity but as well on quality. Adoption of quality management practices in higher education is a mandatory activity.

In this study attempt will be made to address the following research question

- Is the organizational desired result achieved more efficiently?
- Are there any means the institution maintains its continual quality improvement?
- Is the organization considering current and future customer needs and tries to meet customer requirements?
- Do the UC's executives create and maintain the internal environment in which people can become fully involved in achieving the organization's objectives?
- To assess whether the academic and supportive staff are in the essence of the organization?

3. Research methodology

The data required to undertake this study are obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The secondary data are the organization and government policy manuals. In addition to the secondary data, additional data are gathered from primary data sources; including the management, employees, students and other stakeholders.

Primary data are collected through questionnaire and observation. There are 308 questionnaires that are filled by different stakeholders found with internal or external environment of the UC. The internal stakeholders included the academic staff, supportive staff and students. From the external environment the study tried to address parents, and few selected employers.

The questionnaires are distributed accordingly;

- 60 questionnaires to managements, academic and supportive staff using stratified probability sampling technique.
- 200 questionnaires for the students were distributed using judgmental non-probability sampling technique. The selection process will consider the students' entry, department and division. The questionnaires are only distributed to prospective graduating students from three faculties. These are from Business, Law and Informatics Faculty and from both Degree and Diploma level students who have been attending in the UC in regular and extension programs.
- Again using judgmental non-probability sampling technique 30 questionnaires distributed to regular students' parents and four become uncollected.
- 18 questionnaires for few selected employers engaged in various activities like banking, merchandising, manufacturing and other organizations which are owned by the government and private individuals.

The data gathered are analyzed using descriptive and analytical analysis methods. Eventually, the data analyzed are presented by using tables that helps to explain the fact in summary.

4. Review of Related Literature

Quality management in education is a vital milestone in the development of the modern and future society. The cohesion of the requirements of students, society and university staff is the foundation of sustainable knowledge spiral to quality education. In order to examine the problem thoroughly one should study the motivation of the parties involved in the process. (Gueorguiev, 2006)

Parties involved in quality management of education

In order to achieve continual improvement universities should recognize their 'customers', regard them as the primary reason for their existence and do everything possible to maintain good relationships with students, staff, companies, and society in general. (Gueorguiev, 2006). According to Gueorguiev, there are six parties involved in quality management process of education. These are

- Students
- University
- Society
- Companies
- Government

Students

The primary customers of schools, colleges and universities are students. (Gueorguiev, 2006) According to Spanbauer (1995), refers to the students as the primary customers, with the customer relationship being somewhat different – the student may not know what they need to learn and it does not necessarily mean that they must be given whatever they request. It is the faculty that can determine the needs of the students.

Difference between ‘Student’ and ‘Customer’

The business rule that the customer is always right and the common expectation that the customer has the authority in business relationships are at the heart of the negative consequences of misidentifying the student as customer. Student evaluations of teachers are given the importance of customer satisfaction surveys and take on a disproportionate role in tenure, promotion, and reappointment processes.

The real customer in any situation actually has authority in their ability to dictate details to the producer, or take their business elsewhere. Should the student really have authority over the teacher in the classroom? The business model fails miserably here, because education is a kind of apprenticeship or mentorship. To be successful, teachers need to set and apply the standards.

Does it make sense that the student is setting and applying their standards to the teacher? Viewing the student as customer elevates short-term student happiness over long-term improvement in abilities. Satisfaction comes later when the benefits of the difficult training are realized. How many successful college coaches would fare well in a survey of player satisfaction before ample opportunity to understand the benefits of the rigor?

Viewing the student as the customer shifts teacher focus exclusively to a pedagogical role. The teacher is no longer an empowered gatekeeper with control over academic rigor and learning quality. It's analogous to removing the automated test system from the factory floor. This is the heart of grade inflation. Motivation is limited to the carrot; the stick is not available

Motivating students requires both selling the beauty and benefits of knowledge and abilities in an area (the carrot), and awareness of potential failure with the attendant consequences (the stick). Misidentifying students as customers removes the motivation of the stick, because students shift the blame for failure to the instructor. In their minds, they paid for quality instruction. If they fail, the customer model inclines them to believe they are not getting what they paid for. Thus under-performing students are deprived of the opportunity for proper introspection.(*Michael, 2006*)

5. Data analysis

Resource management

a) Availability of Physical Resource

It is known that every educational institution should have necessary facilities that enable it to give quality education for the students. These facilities include equipped class room, laboratories, compute lap, libraries, office for staffs, cafeterias, and other services. Currently SMUC provides resources, activities and guidance to all students to help them achieve their short-term goals as well as life-long learning.

Each department at SMUC has its own separate office for the instructors and department heads, plus there are also rooms to give syndicate services like meeting, advising and some times for trainings also. The UC has equipped classroom with white and black board, chairs and tables. There are also computer lap rooms. Beside, SMUC has three libraries serving its students as well as academic and administrative staff. The libraries have systematically collected books, periodicals, newspapers, research materials, CD-

ROMs, and Audio recordings to support the teaching-learning process and research, and to respond to the needs of all members of the UC.

As it is confirmed by the majority of 4(7%) and 40 (75%) of staff respondents ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ on the UC providing sufficient resource to run the teaching learning process respectively. Again 45(25%) and 105(58%) of the students also ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’.

The staffs and the students also added that there are no enough computers in computer lab plus at the office to facilitate the learning process and there is no adequate internet access to the students to enable them browse additional learning materials.

In addition to this, the respondents pointed out that there are no entertainment facilities in the UC compound like playground where the students can socially interact with other students. These entertainment facilities have positive impact on the students’ social life in his/her tenure at SMUC.

The majority of the staffs and the students said that the current physical environment did not take in to consideration the disabled students in which they can easily learn, study, and have social life in the UC.

b) Human Resources

The most important resource in any service giving organization is its human resources. SMUC also acknowledges this point. Among total teaching staffs engaged in the three faculties more than 50% of the staffs have an academic rank of Lecturers, 33% of them Assistant Lecturer and 13% are Graduate Assistant. The higher rank available currently is the Lecturer position and their academic qualifications are PhD and Masters in different specialization. All Assistant Lecturers and Graduate Assistants are holder of BA, BSc, LLb and B.Ed.

The female staffs’ composition from the total academic staffs is fifteen (14%). Considering the current Ethiopian demographic composition which is 50% of the total population is female. Therefore, the participation of female at SMUC is very low.

Eighty nine percent of the staffs and 88% of the students' responses showed, that the UC employs qualified, competent and caring individuals.

SMUC is committed to upgrading the skills of its staff with the belief that institutional improvement takes place only through continuous staff development and support. The UC has sponsored three cohorts of higher diploma trainees during a ten-month period each, toward attaining their licenses to teach in any higher education institution in Ethiopia.

Seventy five percent of the staff respondents agreed that the UC ensured that its personnel are aware of the relevance and importance of their activities and how they contribute to the achievement of the quality objective.

c) Challenges faced to provide necessary resources

The respondents listed the following challenges faced by SMUC to avail necessary resources and materials to achieve the UC quality objectives

- Ever-increasing and highly inflated costs of input
- Shortage of skilled manpower in some discipline.
- Lack of commitment in some staffs especially in part time staffs
- Unpredictable government policies
- Not acquiring its own premises
- Turnover of well trained, experienced staffs
- Dispersed teaching place at different campus
- Low pay rate and lack of benefit packages

Student Satisfaction

The following analysis where made to assess whether SMUC is identifying its customer needs and wants to delivery their requirements or not.

a) Stakeholders participation

The study attempts to assess the extent of stakeholder participation in decision making, strategic management formulation, revision of curriculum and programs and any other major decisions' of the UC. More than 50% of the student respondents said that the students are participating in decision making bodies through their elected representative. This indicated that the UC considers students' opinion in their decision making process. This contributes a lot to the quality of the education the UC intended to have.

b) Handling complaint

Ninety percent of the respondents of the staff agreed on the UC having a fair and effective timely procedure to handle student complain and there is a risk free environment for the students to raise their complaint, appeals and questions with out fear. Similarly 67% of the students' responses support the above idea. These indicate that the UC has a formal and effective procedure to handle student appeals.

Taking proper action for a compliant and appeal on time increase the student satisfaction. And based on the majority staffs and students respondents, the UC is currently taking necessary and proper measure following student complaint.

c) Enhancing student satisfaction

One of the tools of quality management is enhancing customer satisfaction by providing goods and services that fulfill the customer satisfaction. In order to know whether the UC enhance the students satisfaction or not, the following analysis were made.

Based on 93% of the staffs' and 69% of the students' response, the top management is highly concerned in determining and meeting the customer satisfaction.

Majority of the students (90%) said that SMUC is striving towards achieving a quality education. The opinion collected from the student showed that most of the student registered in this UC because the UC gives a quality education. Again most of the parents (85%) choose SMUC because they believe that there is high quality of education in the institution. Their second best reason is due to location, 27% of the parents said that the location is center.

d) Challenges SMUC faced to satisfy its students need

The following challenges are some of listed by the respondents the UC faced to satisfy its students need:

- Unpredictable and unclear government policies have an influence of the UC achievement of customer satisfaction.
- Regular interruptions of electric power hindered to smoothly run the teaching learning process on the time scheduled.
- The students' perspective towards an academic institution. Some students want only grades to the level of their satisfaction not according to the merit based assessment and some students only want to get the certification.

Continuous Quality Improvement

SMUC places great value on continuous improvement. Through systematic evaluation of all personnel, programs, and services, an avenue is provided for modifying existing plans.

The UC has a separate section called Center for Educational Improvement, Research and Quality Assurance (CEIRQA) which is responsible to perform a wide range of activities to fulfill its mission in educational improvement, research and quality issues.

The UC has a quality manual that ensures the effectiveness of planning, operation and control of the UC's process. These quality manual polices are not well communicated to non-management staffs

Eighty six percent of the staffs' respondents replied that SMUC is implementing necessary action to achieve the objective of the UC plus it is continually striving to improve it.

From the questioner distributed to academic, non academic and top management, 28% respondents strongly agreed and 43% agreed. The UC continually improves the effectiveness of the quality management system through the use of the quality policy; quality objectives audit results, analysis of data, corrective and preventative actions and

management review. Ten respondents disagreed on the UC continually improvement of its quality management system, and 6% respondents were neutral.

a) Students Assessment

More than half of the respondents agreed that there are valid and reliable principles and procedures to conduct assessment and these principles and procedures are publicized to all staffs. Having formal and standard principles and procedures about assessment process will play a major role on quality education. More than 80% of the staffs' respondents replied that the UC assessment practices promote effective learning. Similarly the data collected from the students strongly supported the assessment practice promotes effective learning.

The UC has a fair mechanism of marking student results (98% of the staffs' and 75% of the students' responses). Student result is marked based on their performance and they get their assessed work results on time. And the UC is periodically review and amend assessment regulations, as appropriate, to assure themselves that the regulations remain fit for purpose.

Parents were also asked whether there is appropriate mode of assessment in the UC. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents replied that students are assessed in appropriate mode of assessment. The parents also said that the students are evaluated in continuous basis. This will help the students to work hard and to have an adequate knowledge on the subject matter. In addition to this, the UC adopts different assessment techniques like tests, assignment, presentation and others. In contrast, 23% said that the mode of assessment is not appropriate. The continuous assessment results the students to have stress.

b) Revision of Programs/Curriculums

In order to meet the stakeholders' interest, technological changes and due to any other reason, academic institution regularly revises their programs and curriculums. More than 60% of the respondents said that the UC is regularly monitors the effectiveness of their programs to evaluate the extent to which the intended learning out comes are being

attained by students and make the necessary revision and amendments. The UC informs the students about any significant changes about the program at their earliest possible and advised them for any option available in those circumstances.

The study also attempted to assess whether the necessary stakeholders participate in any revision of curriculum made by the UC. Based on the data collected from the students and parents, they do not have any opportunity to express their view on curriculum revision. Without stakeholder participation, the new revised curriculum will not also achieve its intended learning out comes.

c) Rules and Regulation

Ninety-five percent of the students said that the UC rules and regulation are fair. It creates an enabling environment for student to learn, study and to do other extra curricular activities to achieve their learning out comes. Ninety-nine percent of the students' response show that the UC action taken on undisciplined student is proper and it is also in line with the rules and regulation of the UC.

d) Challenges SMUC faced to achieve continuous quality improvement

Challenges the UC faced to continually improve its quality, based on the respondents reply:

- Lack of interest on some teaching staffs and the student.
- Instructors understanding problem on quality and being reluctant on policy implementation.
- The monetary inflation is tempting the UC not to cope with the quality standards set.
- The current educational policies

Leadership

One of the most critical requirements for total quality is the prevalence of outstanding leadership at all levels in the organization. Besides, there must be a set of policies, procedures and practices in place that provide the utmost of support to total quality. (Bharat, 1994).

a) Staff Responsibility and Obligation

SMUC has a clear and practical organization structure and clearly defined responsibilities for the academic and non-academic staffs. Sixty one percent of the staffs' responses showed that the authority assigned to different employees in the UC and their responsibilities are compatible.

b) Concern of the management and staffs

The UC top management has concern and commitment for their job, 29% strongly agreed and 36% agreed. Some respondents said that some managers are reluctant to make decision.

Achieving superior quality

The basic objective of SMUC is to offering quality higher education, training, and services, conducting research and publications that exceed the requirements of students and stakeholders, and nurturing sustained and mutually beneficial relationship with them. Therefore an attempt is made to assess what the employer thinks about the graduated student of the UC at their work place. So the collected data were presented as follows.

All selected employers replied that the UC students have ability to work individually as well as in groups. And more than 50% of the respondents said that the graduated students have satisfactory knowledge on the profession they graduated.

Sixty percent of the respondents strongly indicated that the graduated students have ability to apply what he/she learned at the UC. Seventy-two percent of the employers agreed on the SMUC's graduated student currently working in their organizational has a good ethical manner.

More than fifty percent of the employers strongly emphasized that the SMUC's graduated student is highly competent comparing with other universities and colleges students in that organization. Six respondents were neutral.

Therefore, these selected employers are a good witness to prove that the UC is delivering high quality education for the students enrolled.

6. Conclusions

Even SMUC is striving to provide necessary resources that help the UC achieve its quality objectives; still it is observed that some resources are not efficient to achieve the UC desired objectives. Currently we all are witnessing the inflation of price of inputs occurred in our country. This hampered the UC to stretch its hands to acquire more resources and meet the desired level. Beside this, the UC fails to put into consideration to provide suitable learning environment for disabled students. The female staffs' composition from the total academic staffs is very low. The participation of female at SMUC is very low.

The UC strives to achieve continuous quality improvement through the UC using different techniques. The first one is clearly defining and communicating the duties of each staffs and delegating authority for appropriate responsibility. The second one is having applicable rule and regulation and making sure that everyone abide by the rules and regulation and taking necessary measures on irregular actions. Third one is having a quality manual that go with the organizational purpose even if the UC fail to communicate this to all concerned staffs. The next reason is that the UC continually struggles to improve the effectiveness of the quality management system through the use of the quality policy, quality objectives, audit results, analysis of data, corrective and preventative actions and management review. And the last one, top managements high commitments towards to continuously improvement of quality.

According to the respondents the UC is hiring competent staffs and empowering the staffs with the necessary training and assess the staffs' action effectiveness regularly. The management considers staffs' opinion in their various decision making process.

The organization considering current and future customer needs and tries to meet customer requirements and strive to exceed customer expectations due to various reason. First one is by considering students' opinion in their various decision making process. The second reason is that having a fair, effective, and timely for handling procedure for complaint and making available it for the students. The third one is creating risk free environment for the students to raise their appeals and providing academic support the student. The next point is having a proper student mode of assessment and marking that enhance effective learning and giving timely feed back.

7. Recommendations

With all these important considerations in mind, the following are a list of recommendations for a successful quality management system in SMUC

- ❖ Even if there is high monetary inflation in country, SMUC should find a means to improve the current available resources that enhance the UC's objectives like providing over heads, LCD projectors, internet access for the students, additional computers in computer lab and offices.
- ❖ SMUC should considerer in the future to create an environment for disabled students where they can learn, study and do other social activities in the UC.
- ❖ Most of the staffs are not aware of the quality manual of the UC. So it is better to communicate all non-management staffs about quality manual to maintain the internal environment in which people can become fully involved in achieving the organization's quality objectives
- ❖ Without considering the need and the desire of the major stakeholder any product or services will not achieve its targeted objective therefore the UC should consider all relevant stakeholders in its program and curriculums revision in order to achieve a better quality
- ❖ SMUC needs to give reward in academic rank as motivation for the staffs that have been contributing a lot towards its quality management.

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