

Full Length Research Paper

Educational Quality and Students' Complaint Handling: A Case of Private Higher Institutions in Addis Ababa

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Abstract

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Higher educational institutes like other service organizations are realizing the significance of customer-centered philosophies and are turning to quality management approaches to help manage their operations/service delivery. On the other hand, the nature of students' complaints and their effective handling by the management, through set procedures, play an important role in managing the quality of educational services in public and private institutions at the tertiary level. Moreover, students, especially from private higher educational institutions, are believed to be the customers paying their tuition fees, and therefore, should be treated well on the part of handling their complaints to draw a competitive advantage. The paper identifies major problems that students complain about and the responsiveness of the management on effective handling of those complaints, considering a critical step in promising operational quality in three private higher institutions: St. Mary's University, Queens College, and Admas University. A descriptive study was designed to investigate the problem areas and their root causes, as identified through the preliminary investigation with a group of students. SPSS 15.0 package was used to perform all the analyses in line with the research objectives. Factor analysis and ANOVA statistics were applied to check the unidimensionality of scale items and compare the performance of the three Private higher institutions over the stated issues respectively. The research findings reveal that the major focus of private higher educational institutions under study is on attracting new enrolments rather than treating the existing students effectively. Finally, the study offers directions and implications to private higher educational institutions to ensure quality service delivery through appropriately handling students' complaints.

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1. Introduction

Education is considered to be the primary agent of transformation towards civilization and sustainable development, therefore, regarded

equally for the development of human capital both by the public and private sectors. As a result, the deregulation of the education sector appeared in many countries, including Ethiopia, whereby private partners were invited to establish educational institutions serving at various levels. While the mushrooming of private higher educational institutions solved part of the prob-

lem of capacity building/development, many of them are suspected on the part of educational quality.

Along with the strict measures carried out by Ethiopian quality assurance units for higher education providers, flourishing public sector institutions dictating fierce competition in the sector, lack of facilities and qualified staff, and improper handling of students, thus dissatisfaction, causes some of the service providers to disappear from the market. Therefore, by considering higher education as a competitive market, service providers started paying attention to satisfying their customers while meeting and exceeding their expectations.

Moreover, while paying tuition fees, students view themselves as (paying) customers, demanding value for money and the right to be heard (Spira, 1996). As in many other parts of the world, the general public began to demand greater accountability and called for valid, reliable, and quality performance of teaching-learning initiatives in higher education (Wilson et al., 1997). As a result, the increasingly competitive environment has also led several higher education institutions to monitor levels of student satisfaction (King et al., 1999), when describing it as an indicator of quality, consistent with the total quality management approach (TQM). Wiklund and Wiklund (1999) report that several universities are now adopting TQM to be more customer-focused and seeing this approach as a core to value delivery. While the precept that students are customers is not universally accepted (Wallace, 1999), there has been growing support for the development and use of student complaint-handling procedures and satisfaction surveys as

indicators of service (teaching) quality (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998).

While there is a consensus that higher education institutions (HEIs) must strive to achieve and sustain the highest possible standards, they should be able to establish mechanisms to identify and meet societal needs, engage in systematic analysis to discover their strengths and weaknesses, make best use of their resources, renovate their teaching-learning process, and invest in staff development programs. On the other hand, quality cannot be measured only by quantitative parameters such as student/staff ratio, number, and capacity of lecture rooms, libraries, etc. Qualitative parameters such as academic rigor and competence of teaching staff, ethical/moral behavior of institution, capacity to meet student demands and needs, and thus the degree of students' satisfaction, should also be considered, as **it may be argued that** dissatisfied students may cut back on the number of courses or completely dropout from the college. Hence, the satisfaction-intention-retention link for students in higher education should be studied and carefully managed (DeShields et al., 2005) from a quality perspective.

Additionally, Zairi (2000) states that most organizations face big challenges in coping with ensuring quality delivery of services as lacking a systematic approach to complaints handling, professionalism, or not recognizing, strategically, the significance of customer complaints behavior. This, perhaps, can be seen in the higher education sector too, where complaints arise when a student is found to be dissatisfied with the provision of educational service delivery, basic facilities, terms and conditions of service offering, staff performance, etc. Some of the common grounds for

complaints by the students are observed as inadequate supervision on course/research assignments, non-availability of essential resources (required to gain effective teaching-learning experience), plagiarism, assault or threatening behavior, sexual harassment, any action likely to cause injury, staff conduct, non-academic provisions (student dormitory and facilities therein), and any socially unacceptable behavior. However, these factors may differ from country to country and institution to institution.

Keeping this in mind, the study was designed to identify the factors causing complaining behavior among students, the nature of complaints, and their handling by private higher educational institutions. However, the study is limited to three private higher institutions in Addis Ababa: St. Mary University College, Admas University, and Queens College. Specifically, the study focuses on the following research questions:

- i) What are the major problems that force students to complain?
- ii) Is there a formal structure that exists in private HEIs to handle students' complaints?
- iii) Do Private higher institutions use students' complaints in designing their strategies focused on quality improvement?

2. Literature review

COMPLAINING BEHAVIOR, COMPLAINT HANDLING AND SERVICE RECOVERY

Many students, being customers of private HEIs, complain when something goes wrong with them or the service provider. This may require the attention of the individual institution to hear and solve the problem with sincerity and quickly, particular-

ly, in the stage of fierce competition. While, the complaint is defined differently from various perspectives, based on the nature of that handling procedures can be worked out. From an academic perspective, the complaint is the expression of a specific concern about the provision of a course/module, a program of study, or a related academic service. It defines an appeal, as a request, for reviewing a decision of an academic body charged with decisions on student progression, assessment, and awards (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2007). Others define it as arises when a student is dissatisfied with the provision of goods, services, or facilities provided by the institution or the terms and conditions on which these are offered. Similarly, there may be complaints concerning provisions such as access to the library or other facilities, racial or sexual harassment, and direct or indirect discrimination on any unlawful ground including race, gender, and disability (Code of Guidance, 2004). Complaint means the expression of dissatisfaction drawn to the attention of a member of the College that requires review, investigation, or action, and may be lodged in writing by letter or email, or verbally by telephone or in person (University of Western Sydney, 2007).

Additionally, complaint behavior, as defined by the Melbourne Rudolf Steiner Seminar (2008), is "a student or prospective student's expression of dissatisfaction with any aspect of the services and activities of the university/college including both academic and non-academic matters such as the enrolment, induction/orientation or application process; the quality of training or assessment provided, the way someone has been treated, and access to personal records including information obtained." This definition considers those students

enrolled in the university or college and also those prospective coming to the service provider. The University of Western Sydney expanded the above definition and includes complainant, respondent, and grievances. While complainant refers to the person(s) who have complained, respondent claims to be the person(s) to whom the complaint is directed, and grievance has the same meaning as complaint.

However, a key factor in the effective handling of complaints or appeals is the institution's ability to respond promptly and bring matters to a conclusion as quickly as possible. It is, therefore, helpful if procedures and correspondence include indicative timescales for responses. It is also important that the time scales set are both fair and realistic, and have sufficient flexibility that they can take account of individual circumstances as and when required. Equally, the institution must set out the responsibilities of the person(s) complaining, on academic or non-academic issues, to respect the procedures, while considering that filing complaints about unfavorable situations in the private higher institution is the right of every student. Additionally, the information obtained from students can be used by the HEI as an informant where the aforementioned problem is found, as ignored or mishandled complaints may have direct consequences concerning lost business and/or negative word-of-mouth communication.

Therefore, effective handling of complaints can increase or restore a customer's confidence in the firm irrespective of whether it operates in physical space or cyberspace. With that in mind, effective management of customers' complaints is considered to be an evaluation tool that can be used by both not-for-profit (public) and profit-seeking (private) organizations. From this perspective,

Universities/Colleges have a variety of procedures for dealing with student-related issues including grade appeals, academic integrity violations, student discipline and disclosure of student records, student elections, sexual harassment complaints, disability accommodations, and discrimination. However, one of the areas not generally covered by other procedures concerns student complaints of faculty conduct in the classroom or other formal academic settings (laboratory, field, etc.). The University/College respects the academic freedom of the faculty and will not interfere with it as it relates to the content or style of teaching activities. Indeed, academic freedom is and should be of paramount importance.

At the same time, the University/College recognizes its responsibility to provide students with a procedure for addressing complaints about faculty treatment of students that are not protected by academic freedom and are not covered by other procedures. Examples might include incompetent or inefficient service, neglecting his/her duty/assignments, physical or mental incapacity, and conduct, leading to inappropriateness to be a staff member (Student Handbook, 2008). However, most of the students feel that complaining is not worth the effort or that they do not know how to or to whom to complain.

Additionally, the need to resolve a customer problem satisfactorily is critical, as each satisfied customer tells three other people, on average, about his/her good experience, but the average dissatisfied customer grips to eleven people (Kotler, 2000). Also, customers whose complaints are resolved satisfactorily become more loyal to the firm than dissatisfied customers.

Customers may feel dissatisfaction with the service that they receive from certain organizations.

However, the way customers respond to their dissatisfaction may differ. Some complain informally to an employee working in the organization; ask to speak to the manager or to the person positioned high on the organizational authority/hierarchy, while some others file a complaint. Additionally, most people or customers do not complain if they think that the services provided by the organization are poor (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004). But organizations should have an understanding of the nature of complaints coming to them, to be effective in their handling and retain complainers with them to learn from and be competitive in the market.

Moreover, special care and support must be given to those (customers) who are not satisfied but do not want to complain about the poor service or their dissatisfaction. Therefore, organizations try to maintain open communication whereby customers can put their complaints by using a suggestion box (Etsegenet, 2007). Thus, suggestion boxes must be installed by the responsible individuals/authorities of the institution to get feedback or even suggestions from the customers about the service provided. However, the problem of many HEIs is not to discover complaints but to provide appropriate responses promptly. Most organizations focus their service recovery efforts on getting the error corrected, but in the process fail to correct the inconvenience they have caused to customers. Service recovery is defined as actions that service providers take in response to service defections or failures in service delivery to return aggrieved customers to a state of satisfaction by addressing their problems (Gronroos, 1988). More specifically, service recovery can be thought of as being concerned with the productive handling of complaints and includes all actions taken by a ser-

vice provider to try to resolve the problem a customer has with some organization/unit.

Recognizing that customers are a valuable asset base, managers need to develop effective procedures for service recovery following unsatisfactory experiences. Furthermore, service failure and inappropriate service recovery efforts that do not meet customers' recovery expectations link directly to negative word-of-mouth and switching behavior that result in poor image and profit loss (Hoffman and Kelley, 2000; Jonhston and Hewa, 1997). The importance of satisfactory service recovery can be found not only in mitigating negative impacts but also in retaining relationships with customers. Studies (Lovelock and Wirtz, 2004; Ennew and Schoefer, 2003) have provided empirical support for the proposition that complaint handling and service recovery are closely tied to both trust and commitment. On the other hand, if it is impossible to avoid service failures and customer dissatisfaction, then it becomes increasingly important for organizations to understand how to manage such occurrences and minimize their adverse effects.

Indeed, arguably the greatest barrier to effective service recovery and organizational learning is the fact that only 5-10% of dissatisfied customers choose to complain following a service failure (Tax and Brown, 1998). However, what constitutes an effective service recovery has been the subject of some debate. Additionally, the main purpose of complaint handling is to resolve the problem without hurting the operational activities. From the HEI perspective, complaint handling is used to establish a clear set of regulations (guidelines and procedures for addressing student complaints and grievances) crafted to achieve mutually acceptable resolutions. Many Universities/Colleges use two

kinds of approaches to solve such kinds of problems coming to them for resolution: informal and formal.

While, the normal mode of accepting complaints refers to an oral communication initiated by the student while raising problem area(s) with the person immediately involved, e.g. Lecturer, Administrative Officer, Chairman of the Department/Division, Librarian, Student Counselor, Program Coordinator, etc. (The University of Johannesburg, 2008), formal mechanisms are to be developed and used to file appeals/complaints in writing through appropriate authority/office to monitor, evaluate, and improve problem areas (both academic and non-academic).

3. Materials and methods

Out of all the private HEIs in Addis Ababa, three (St. Mary's University, Queens College, and Admas University) were selected for the study on a convenience basis together with considering the significant number of students enrolled with them in various academic disciplines. The recent data obtained from the registrar offices of each University College indicate that the total student enrollments (both in regular and extension programs) are greater than 15,000 (St. Mary's-6,570; Admas-5,600; Alpha-3,160 students).

Therefore, to obtain the necessary information about students' complaints and their handling in private HEIs, both secondary and primary sources were explored. While

various published and unpublished documents claiming effective complaint handling following various approaches by the institutions were reviewed, a survey research method was applied to reveal the complaining behavior of the students in stated private HEIs. To gather the primary data, a structured questionnaire covering the problem areas boosting complaining behavior, methods of complaint filing, complaint handling procedures, and service recovery was designed. A total of 42 items describing these dimensions were developed as statements and placed on a five-point (5-being strongly agree and 1-strongly disagree) Likert-type scale.

However, before administering to the final respondents, the instrument was tested through a pilot study conducted among 40 students, selected randomly from selected private HEIs. Upon successful adjustment of all the comments provided during pilot testing, the final version of the questionnaire was exposed to 240 sample respondents (divided based on the total enrollments with each college as 103, 88, and 49) selected by following stratified random sampling. Considering Malhotra (2007), a sample of over 200 respondents in a survey study is likely to give an acceptable degree of accuracy, provided, it is based on some probability technique. Therefore, the stated sample size was considered to be appropriate to general-

ize the study population. Moreover, the study considered second and third-year students from three departments namely Management, Accounting and Finance, and Marketing Management by considering the time and experience these groups of students maintain in reporting the educational services offered to them.

Finally, 218 (90.8% response rate) filled questionnaires were collected back and used in the analysis. All the scale items were exposed to test the validity and reliability (Hair et al., 1998). Factor analysis was carried out to assess the unidimensionality and, thus suitability of the constructs for subsequent analysis. The principal components method of extraction with direct-oblimin rotation was employed to run the factor analysis. All the items with a factor loading of 0.5 and higher were considered to be used for the next round of analysis. In this way, five items (those scored below 0.5) were removed. The analysis was re-run and generated with 9 dimensions namely responsiveness, complaint areas, facilities, complaint filing using suggestion box, complaint handling procedure, service recovery and complaint measures, feedback actions, empathy, and response on suggestion box. These dimensions were assumed both logically fit and statistically significant while explaining about 71% of variation caused and used for further analysis. Additionally,

the total scale reliability was computed to be 0.842 (Cronbach Alpha coefficient), a further indication of the acceptability of dimensions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

SPSS 25.0 package was used in carrying out various analyses. Descriptive analysis was carried out to summarize means of dimensions and demographic profile of the respondents. ANOVA scores were computed to observe the differences among the responses obtained from three private higher institutions on various dimensions.

4.2 Personal profile of the respondents

The profile of the respondents was found to be more or less diverse, with little over half (51.38%) claimed to be male and the remaining (48.62%) as female. This, however, develops the hypothesis that male participation in higher education, especially in private sector institutions, is gradually increasing and the gap between male and female students is declining. On the part of age, the great majority (73.83%) of the students reported being in the younger age group (18-30 years), while the remaining (26.17%) distributed between 30 and 40 years. On the part of academic programs, little less than half (47.23%) were claimed to be regular scholars, however, the remaining (52.77%) reported participating in the extension programs.

No	Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Responsiveness	3.334	0.910
2	Complaint areas/types	3.404	0.672
3	Facilities	3.108	1.279
4	Complaint filing using the suggestion box	2.805	1.270
5	Complaint handling procedure	3.418	0.882
6	Service recovery and complaints mean he sure's	3.339	0.708
7	Feedback actions	2.640	1.127
8	Empathy	3.251	0.962
9	Response to the suggestion box	2.723	1.034

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

4.3 Descriptive statistics

Based on the nine dimensions, extracted from factor analysis, table 1 presents the mean scores and statistics of standard deviation across dimensions.

Therefore, it can be observed from the above table that responsiveness shown by the private higher institution in providing quick response to students' complaints, taking appropriate measures both from resource and employee perspectives, and solving the problems caused by sexual harassment and unethical behaviors, is above average (3 on a 5-point scale). However, this cannot be seen as very much satisfactory to command a significant level of responsiveness shown by the stated private HEIs. As human behavior is difficult to predict and complicated to understand, Private higher institutions are expected to be quick in handling problems/complaining areas affecting the students. On the other hand, the above-average score (mean 3.404) on the areas/nature of complaints forwarded to the Private higher institution reveals the complaining behavior of students directed to many areas. It means that the students in the stated Private higher institution are kept on complaining about various issues such as evaluation practices

and grading system, lecturers and other staff behavior, library and other services on offer, payments made for obtaining study materials, and basic facilities such as classrooms, seating arrangement, toilets, cafeteria, etc. A serious concern, therefore, is required by the management on all such issues. Moreover, the inappropriateness of facilities at private higher institutions can be observed from the next item (mean 3.108) as being reported above average. In other words, HEIs under study are operational by neglecting some of the important facilities to be extended to their students to ensure quality in their educational service delivery. Some of such facilities as reported by the respondents include the unavailability of free space to pass their time outside classrooms, student corridors, and neat and clean toilets/washrooms, and are considered to be of great significance in ensuring quality delivery of education together with educational facilities.

Additionally, complaint filing through the suggestion box (mean 2.805) was not considered to be an effective practice maintained by the Private higher

institution. However, the respondents admitted that the colleges maintain suggestion boxes, but assumed that it is not appropriate for complaining or that Private higher institutions do not use suggestion boxes for complaint handling. Perhaps, they are under the impression that complaints filed through suggestion boxes are not receiving appropriate attention or effective responses are not attainable via this mean, as reflected from the last dimension (response on suggestion box) which maintains a mean score of 2.722. As the suggestion box referred to a common mechanism through which organizations in general, and HEIs in particular, receive feedback from their customers on operational effectiveness, this can be attributed to the fact that either respondents or Private higher institutions under study are not habitual to use suggestion boxes for complaining purposes.

Furthermore, the respondents agreed that there exists some procedure of complaint handling (mean 3.418) which dictates the dos and don'ts expected from students through the student handbook, but hardly demonstrates the steps and authority hierarchies to be followed when addressing complaints. Moreover, meeting with time effectiveness to reach to conclusion/response on the problem complained, is under question, as most of the time Private higher institutions do not maintain fair or realistic timeframe to respond to the complainant.

On the part of service recovery and complaint measures (mean 3.339), though the score is above average, it was not reported to be satisfactory by the respondents as they perceived that the measures taken by the university college to recover from a problem/complaint were inappropriate. Also, the responsible staff showed little kindness or understanding to the complainant respondent,

thus the response was not up to expectation. While service failures are often unavoidable due to human and non-human factors/errors, this causes customer dissatisfactions which ultimately force them to complain, disseminate negative word-of-mouth communication, and finally contract termination. Additionally, on the part of feedback actions taken (mean 2.64) by the Private higher institution in terms of responding to victims, a slow and weak appearance is observed. Since private HEIs operate in a dynamic and competitive environment, receiving and providing appropriate and timely feedback can be seen from a strategic perspective that further, may ensure success for the firm in the sector. However, an interesting thing to understand is why Private higher institutions are slow in responding. Perhaps, they do not open the doors to an outsider informing the management where they are going wrong, and more believing in what they are doing.

Finally, concerning paying personal attention to customers, empathy (mean 3.251), above average score represents that Private higher institutions are engaged up to some extent in paying individual attention to the concerns of students, which is very much logical from the perspective of private HEIs when comparing those of public Universities. Therefore, politeness and courtesy can be observed on the part of private University College's treatment of students. However, Private higher institutions were found to be using empathetic behavior more to attract new students to their camps rather than pleasing the existing ones.

Additionally, as Murphy and Peck (1980) state information is the lifeblood of any organization, to ensure survival, the communication barrier between students and the college management must be removed. This further facilitates the develop-

ment of a new system promoting the culture of effective listening against the existing one, which orients more on dictating/commanding.

4.4 Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

Statistics of one-way ANOVA were computed to observe the differences among responses obtained on various dimensions from the respondents of the three private higher institutions. When the number of groups under study is more than two, ANOVA statistics is commonly used to observe any significant differences among and between them.

Since the study involves respondents representing three Private higher institutions, by using ANOVA differences among mean scores across various dimensions were obtained and checked for their significance (Table 2). Additionally, analysis is made among the three Private higher institutions as the best per-

formers or least performers using the relative mean value differences on nine identified dimensions.

On the part of the University College's responsiveness to student complaints on various issues, the difference in mean values among the three Private higher institutions reveals that Admas University is less responsive than the other two. This result confirmed the responses obtained from the students of Admas University as they reported that the person handles complaints and the coordinator is one. Therefore, the complaints about him and his functioning cannot be forwarded to any other body for prompt action. However, the differences among the three Private higher institutions, on the part of responsiveness, were not found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.707$).

Table 2: Analysis of Variance

SN	Dimension	Admas U (1)	Queens C (2)	St. Mary's U (3)	Difference			F
					1-2	1-3	2-3	
1	Responsiveness	3.2771	3.2825	3.4111	-0.0054	-0.134	0.1286	0.349
2	Complaint areas/types	3.5301	3.3383	3.321	0.1918	0.2091	0.0173	2.263
3	Facilities	2.8313	3.4556	3.1889	-0.6243	-0.3576	0.2667	4.243*
4	Complaint filing using suggestion box	2.6566	2.1667	3.2611	0.4899	-0.6045	1.0944	13.041**
5	Complaint handling procedure	3.5813	3.0291	3.4528	0.5522	0.1285	0.4237	6.202**
6	Service recovery and complaint measures	3.2751	3.3778	3.3778	-0.1027	-0.1027	0	0.124
7	Feedback actions	2.506	2.1889	2.9889	0.3171	-0.4829	-0.8	8.216**

								*
8	Empathy	3.4217	2.963	3.237	0.4587	0.1847	-0.274	3.554*
9	Response to the suggestion box	2.5843	3.1111	2.6556	-0.5268	-0.0713	0.4555	4.438*

Note: *** Significant at 0.001 level; ** Significant at 0.005 level; * Significant at 0.05 level

Regarding the nature/type of complaints, once again Admas University was reported to be with handling complaints on many issues in comparison with the remaining two private HEIs. Therefore, this college is more exposed to complaining customers among the three under study, however, the difference was not statistically significant ($p < 0.108$). Concerning facilities extended by the Private higher institution to the students, Admas University was reported to be the provider of minimal basic facilities among the three, other than classroom equipment, such as free/open space, student corridors, neat and clean toilets/washrooms, etc. Furthermore, significant differences ($p < 0.05$) have been observed on this parameter among the three Private higher institutions. , This supports the above idea of complaint areas/issues with the University College, as many of the complaints are expected from the students when such basic facilities are not met. On the other hand, the availability of basic facilities at Queen's College was claimed to be higher than the remaining two private HEIs.

Complaint filing through the suggestion box was found to be encouraged at St. Mary's University when comparing the other two. However, appeared to be an uncommon practice both at Alpha and Admas University, or the students therein are not motivated/perceived to file their complaints using suggestion boxes. This further led to the significance ($p < 0.001$) on the part of differences reported by Private higher institutions. As revealed from the qualitative responses, there exists hardly any suggestion box for student complaint filing in the above two Private higher institutions. As a result,

both the Private higher institutions were found to maintain scores below average on this dimension.

When referring to the procedure of complaints handling, guiding students' concerns to the management/decision-makers, Admas University claimed to be the one with a supported formal mechanism. However, the status of the complaint handling (formal) procedure at Queens College is just average, which further indicates that either the complainers are not very familiar with the process or see it as doubtful to obtain a favorable response. Furthermore, both Alpha and St. Mary's University were found to be effective against Admas University when it comes to service recovery provisions. This further demonstrates a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.005$) within and among the responses obtained from three Private higher institutions on practicing varying procedures (informal and formal) of handling complaints. Respondents claimed that some of the effective measures were carried out by these colleges to not leave the students dissatisfied and to avoid separation or negative word-of-mouth. Such actions were claimed to be insufficient to bring a respectable degree of satisfaction among students, however, found to be maintaining significant ($p < 0.001$) differences among Private higher institutions when relating to steps taken on improving service provisions or quality enhancement, while all the three observed with below average.

Finally, while Admas University was reported to be showing empathetic behavior when handling student complaints, responses to the complaints directed through the mechanism of the suggestion box were found to be low. Also, this difference

among Private higher institutions under study was found to be statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). However, Queens College was stated to be the least while showing personal attention and courtesy to student complaints. Showing empathetic behavior can be considered as a symbol of designing and creating a conducive and convenient environment for students, and when it comes to their recognition of any problem, they may feel free to easily report it to officials and get acknowledged.

5. Conclusion and Implication

HEIs of a country can be seen as the source of knowledgeable manpower that further contributes to the development of the nation if trained appropriately i.e. by supplying the right skills. Recognizing this, the Federal Government of Ethiopia liberalizes the education sector and opens the door for private Investors under policy initiatives. As a result, many private HEIs have been established to develop skilled manpower. However, the functioning of such HEIs was controlled through quality benchmarks, and intensive competition (among and between themselves and with public universities) forces private HEIs to effectively manage their operations and students by providing what is necessary to lead to a quality teaching-learning experience. Lately, however, it has been discovered that many such private HEIs concentrate significantly on attracting new students to their camp rather than managing and satisfying the requirements of existing ones, which causes complaining behavior among students studying there. Being a paid customer, students with such institutions have a right to get quality service at the time it is required by them, perhaps, if not exceeding, equivalent to what they have been paid for. Moreover, this forces them to be treated like customers by their service providers and effectively exercise

their rights when something goes wrong. However, one of the mechanisms of exercising their right is to draw complaints and forward them to the concerned official to obtain recovery measures or solutions.

Unfortunately, many of the private higher institutions do not maintain an office, individual, or well-stated procedure for accepting and handling complaints coming from students regarding various issues/areas, and this may lead an institution to go out from the competition.

On contrary to this, many of the Private higher institutions see complaints as a negative attitude towards institutions and systems developed therein, rather than looking at such activities as a source of the informant to further build themselves by coming across existing problems and weaknesses. Hill (1995) stated that perceived service quality in the higher education context is the product of several service encounters and evaluations by students. Therefore, experiences with administrators, teaching staff, managers, educational and non-educational resources, facilities, etc. have a keen role in shaping the quality image associated with an institution. Therefore, an effective (quality) teaching-learning process requires an integration of all such factors and resources available both within and outside of the classroom.

The study reveals differences as being observed on nine dimensions/areas, more specific to complaining behavior and complaint handling among three private Private institutions. It was found that Private higher institutions do not have a well-documented/practiced (formal) complaint-handling procedure that is communicated and open to all the students. However, the experiences of other sectors in general, and HEIs in particular, outside the nation, state that maintaining a free

communication path, thus transparency in the system provides the institution a good name/image. One of the areas to be explored and seen for discovering such transparencies is depicted in the establishment of free discussion with students and hearing their problems.

Finally, the study draws the following conclusions:

1. The number of respondents, in terms of sex, implies that gender disparity is reduced in the HEIs, thus private Private higher institutions can be seen as good examples of encouraging female participation in higher education.
2. Private Institutions are expected to be responsive to accommodate changes taking place within and outside their environment. One way to get this knowledge is to accept communications from various stakeholders including students, and effectively and promptly react to that.
3. Facilities and infrastructure both for performing educational and non-educational activities fundamentally determine the quality of educational delivery. However, some of the buildings that HEIs rented are not built for educational purposes, as these resemble narrow corridors, centralized poles in the lecture rooms, insufficient number of toilets, and cleanliness of the area. Availability of appropriate facilities should be taken as one of the most important requirements for quality teaching-learning experience with Private higher institutions.
4. Though the free flow of information is considered to be the lifeblood of an organization, the Private higher institutions under study were not found to be open to

their students, which may hurt their future performances. This can be judged from the non-availability of suggestion boxes, which means unwillingness to receive and entertain information coming from students, perhaps, on an issue seriously affecting teaching-learning quality/experience.

5. It is also found that the employees/staff of Private higher institutions do not treat students when accepting and responding to their queries and complaints. Lacking empathetic skills draws upon a negative experience not only with the person involved in providing service but also with the entire institution. The results of the study reveal that almost all three private HEIs are lacking in the most important marketing concept of customer service: showing empathic and courteous behavior.

Recommendations

- Private higher institutions are established to support the human development/capacity-building program of the nation while producing graduates who are competent, responsible, and ethical, and ensuring significant contributions to the development of the country. To fulfill these objectives, service providers should create and maintain a conducive teaching-learning environment by facilitating appropriate facilities for students enrolled in various programs and by ensuring transparency in various communications together with a willingness to

accept all kinds of communications (foundation to strategy development to outperform competitors).

- When students feel that they are mistreated or dissatisfied with the services provided by the University College, they are learning and may forward their complaints to the concerned body/official. There must be a responsible officer or full-fledged office to look after all complaints directed by the students and ensure appropriate and timely service recovery/response delivery to the victimized party. Therefore, a formal establishment of such a system with adequate complaint-handling procedures is of great value to avoid any dissatisfaction or separation on the part of the student/complainer.
- While lacking responsiveness to adequately and promptly handling complaints can be seen from a competitive disadvantage perspective, not showing empathetic behavior when addressing such complaints is equally dangerous. Therefore, all three private HEIs should learn and develop the skills/practice of prompt response while designing a mechanism of quickly coming down to problem understanding and its root cause together with dealing with students with politeness and courtesy. The possibility of encouraging such acts can be seen with the development of certain manuals (customer service, complaint handling, etc.) guiding on steps to be followed in rectifying the problem and its scope, and time to be taken in solving that.
- As many of the problems stated by the respondents are inclined to the non-availability of certain facilities (associated with non-a teaching perspective) and improper grading (mostly decided by the instructor independently), a serious review of the existing scenario is expected from the side of management and made appropriate adjustments with proper communication extended to the students. Otherwise, the chances of forming a bad image/reputation of the institution will be high.
- One of the mechanisms of forwarding complaints to the concerned body in the Private higher institution is to place it in the suggestion box. However, a significant number of HEIs do not maintain suggestion boxes for accepting feedback, complaints, and/or suggestions. This approach of collecting information can be seen from a strategic perspective by the management of such HEIs. Also, suggestion boxes will help design a form approach to receiving complaints and their handling. This, perhaps, also can be seen from the perspective of initiating

complaining behavior within students, a kind of critical behavior, to come across sometimes the potential areas of problems and check for a remedy on time. Therefore, installation and appropriate management of suggestion boxes can be thought of to gain a competitive advantage and nurture additional skills of complaining within the students.

- Finally, it is very much advisable to the private higher institution under study that they must orient some training program for their employees on customer handling, particularly for those having frequent contact with students, and start paying attention to students' concerns by considering them as customers. Also, making their customers happy and satisfied will pay back to them in the future.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there's no conflict of interest concerning to the publication of this article.

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