

EXPLORING STUDENTS' COMPLAINTS MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN TANZANIA - LESSONS FROM THE COLLEGE OF BUSINESS EDUCATION

Margareth A. Mapunda, Assistant Lecturer, Department of Marketing, College of Business Education,
P. O. Box 1968, Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania, Email: m.mapunda@cbe.ac.tz
and

Nasibu R. Mramba, Lecturer Department of Marketing, College of Business Education, P. O. Box 2077 Dodoma, Tanzania,
Email: n.mramba@cbe.ac.tz

ABSTRACT

Complaints are important drivers for improvement in service delivery for any kind of enterprise. Like other types of customers, students also do complain. Students' complaints may result from actions of University/College management or from government policy and regulations. However, to what extent are all Universities/Colleges effective or ineffective in managing these complaints is still a big challenge. The study involved a total of 43 respondents drawn from four academic departments; academic office; dean of students' office; registrar's office; and quality assurance office, using judgmental sampling. Two types of respondents were used in this study, namely; students and staff members who have direct access to students' complaints. The findings indicate that, the majority (90%) of the students are in view that, the Colleges are not doing enough in managing their complaints, as more than 65% of their dissatisfactions are managed ineffectively. The study implies that, the Colleges should take those complaints as an opportunity to improve their daily operations which will resolve hidden issues that were not known.

Keywords: Complaints Management, Higher Learning Institutions, Tanzania

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Complaints are important drivers for improvement in service delivery for any kind of enterprise. It is defined as "an expression of dissatisfaction or disquiet with company offerings that requires a response" (Steinhardt, 1998). In other words, a complaint is a negative feedback from the customer (Bell & Luddington, 2006) and can be considered reasonable or unreasonable (McCole, 2004). This study is about complaints management in institutions of higher learning. Specifically, it focuses on complaints management perception and effectiveness.

There are different reasons why people complain. People complain because they want the undesirable state to be corrected; regain some measure of control; solicit sympathy and test for consensus of the complaint; and to create an impression (Hoffman & Bateson, 1997). However; other people consider complaints as signs of failure. When a complaint is managed effectively it becomes an opportunity of showing customers how much good they are (Plymire, 1991). Therefore, there is a need to encourage customers to complain. Complaints should be considered as an indicator of organizational performance assessment, signalling problems or failures in internal processes that needs quick recovery in order to avoid migration of profitable customers (Filip, 2013).

Managing customers' complaints accordingly leads to high customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and spreads positive word of mouth about the company and, also increases the level of customer retention (Lee, Wang, & Trappey, 2014). On the other hand, poor management of complaints brings about dissatisfaction, poor customer relationship, economic and social loss, and spread of negative word of mouth about the company's offerings (Cambra-Fierro, Melero, & Sese, 2015). Effective complaints' management requires a customer oriented leadership, strong information structure, policy and strategies for effective customer management; well understood complaints management approach, and good procedures to track and handle complaints within a value chain (Zari, 2000).

Despite the importance of complaints to the organization, customers do not like to complain. Some customers do not complain to respective staff, but instead complain to friends and family, and this means that the service recovery process is not successful, thus leading to disloyalty. In a case like this, the firm does not detect its mistakes/errors, and therefore may not recover from the failed service situation, and the customer just goes away unhappy (Komunda & Osarenkhoe, 2012). In most industries, nearly 50 per cent of the customers do not bother to complain (Zari, 2000). If customers do not say

anything to the company, this does not mean that they are satisfied, though they do not complain. A dissatisfied customer may tell 6 to 10 other people about a dissatisfaction (Barlow, 1996). Customers do not complain because either they do think that nothing worthwhile would happen as a result of the complaints, or think that complaints are too much a hassle. They may also just find it difficult to reach the right complaining venue, or do not have the time to complain (Cook, 2012). The best way to reduce the possibility of customers spreading negative word of mouth is to accept their complaints, but also effect positive solutions to some of them.

Like other types of customers, students also do complain. Specifically, the more dissatisfied students are, the more likely they are complaining to the university/college and to their friends (Lala & Randi, 2013). There are two types of student's complaints, which are raised in the majority of Sub-Saharan countries. The first ones are those caused by dissatisfaction with University/College management, e.g. inadequate or inferior accommodation, catering services, intermittent water and electricity supply, academic curriculum issues, teaching and learning environment and examinations. The second type of complaints are those caused by government policy and regulations that affect the students' welfare, e.g. students' loan fee structure, political affairs, and economic climate (Etadon, 2013). However, to what extent all Universities are effectively or ineffectively managing these complaints and why they do enjoy the advantages offered by complaints, is less known hence calls for research.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

There is abundant research on complaints' management in the business field as witnessed by a large number of researchers (Knox & Van Oest, 2014; Ro & Wong, 2012; Cambra-Fierro, Melero, & Sese). However, it is still unclear if Institutions of Higher Learning in Tanzania are effective managers of student complaints. For this reason, this research focuses on this area with the aim of helping Tanzania's institutions of higher learning become effective or managers of students' complaints.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to help institutions of higher learning in Tanzania become effective managers of their students' complaints and turn them into business opportunities. In this study, researchers intend to:

- i. Explore sources of students' complaints in the College of Business Education (CBE);
- ii. Assess CBE's perception of students' complaints as opportunities or expression of failure.
- iii. Determine how CBE students perceive the effectiveness of the College toward management of their complaints.

2.0 RELATED STUDIES

2.1 Theoretical views

The famous theory that explains customer dissatisfaction and complaints is *exit-voice, theory* advocated by (Albert, 1970). The theory postulates that customers can air out their dissatisfactions against company offerings through the exit and voice. Exits entail that the customer stops buying, while voice is the customer's complaint that expresses his/her dissatisfaction (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987). Exits associate with negative economic outcomes by which sales revenues diminish as the customers go to competitors. On the other hand, voice is political in nature and results in the negative word of mouth (NWOM) and decline in firms' goodwill. Voice is a cry from the customers to change the situation, policy, offerings, and the way to do business; hence it provides a room for corrections. In other words voice is an opportunity. Albert (1970) argues that although the voice is costly, it provides a share of the surplus from avoiding exit: it may be a costly decision, but can be prevented through appropriate complaints management policies (Gehlbach, 2006). The relevance of this theory to the current study is that, effective management of students' complaints (voice) may result in students' satisfaction and high brand equity. Authors needed to reflect on how this theory relates to Tanzania Higher Learning Institutions' practices with regard to handling students' complaints.

2.2 Empirical Literature

2.2.1 Complaints as Opportunity

Although traditionally consumer complaints are seen as undesirable and a sign of failure, they are opportunities that need to be encouraged (Plymire, 1991). It is a source for customer focused process improvement that can lead to customer satisfaction and retention (Uusitalo, Hakala, & Kautonen, 2011). Well-managed complaints turn into an opportunity in the sense that they prevent customer switch off, unfold the area of weakness and hence immediate action. They are a source of information for improving the existing and new products and goodwill of the firm, and put off the organization from the effects of NWOM (Metehan & Yasemin, 2011). A customer complaint is one of the best opportunities for an enterprise to turn unhappy customers into happy and loyal ones. A complaint gives the vendor chances to fix what is wrong and

improve his/her business. A study by Johnston (2001) found a strong relationship between a firm complaints management and customer retention, employees' productivity, and process improvement, which in totality affect financial performance. A company that has a tradition of collecting and resolving customer complaints effectively enjoys two benefits: first, it can fix a complaint and retain the customer's residual value, and second, is the possibility of preventing such kind of dissatisfaction in the future. When a complaint is handled successfully, customers and the organization in general get satisfied with the situation as a whole.

2.2.2 Effectiveness of Complaints Management

Complaint management is a system set by the firm, that offers an opportunity for customers to have their grievances resolved (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987). It includes the strategic planning, implementation, and control of all activities available to a business for handling customer complaints (Hennig-Thurau & Hansen, 2000). The study by Johnston (2001) summarized the quality of good complaints management as one which is: *"Having clear and understandable procedure, which provides timely, reliable and consistent response to client complaints; having single, accessible and user friendly point for information; keeping complainant informed, understood by staff and customers; taking complaints seriously; having a flexible and cost efficient follow-up mechanism to monitor and evaluate the organization's complaints management system"*. However, Barlow (1996), added that an excellent customer complaint management system needs to be publicized, personal, uniform, consistent, and supported by information technology.

Despite the benefits of complaints, there is evidence that many companies do not receive satisfactory numbers of complaints due to poor complaints management procedure (Homburg & Fürst, 2007). Meanwhile, (Goldstein, 2009) reports that, out of 100 dissatisfied customers, it is only 20 who complain while the other 80 go away without complaining. Furthermore, the study shows that out of the 80 non-complaining customers, 61% exit, while the 39% are retained. One among the reasons for dissatisfied customers not to complain is inefficient complaint procedure and the manner a complaint is handled in an organization (Fornell & Wernerfelt, 1987). Nevertheless, complaints remain to be an important element in an organization as it offers invaluable feedback, improves customer service, and prevents customers from defection, hence a need to welcome them. One of the techniques proposed for encouraging customers to complain is to make the whole complaint procedure effective and efficient to encourage many to complain (Coussement & Van den Poel, 2010).

2.2.3 Students Complain Behaviour

There are a number of reasons for the students to complain. The mostly reported complaints from students of higher learning institutions are matters relating to their lecturers, and general studying environment (Dolinsky, 1994). Van Hoorebeek & Gale (2011) report that disputes and complaints from students to management are attributed by many factors but the common ones are matters relating to finance and legislations/policies, recommended for the universities' managements to deal with right at the beginning before they become crises. Students' complaining behaviour is likely to differ between students who complain and are responded to immediately even if the response is not favourable, and those who appear to be satisfied without complaining. Complaining students can become more loyal than the others (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Another study by Fitz, Patrick, Davey, & Dai (2012), show that students' complaints in China's higher learning institutions are unheard by the universities in which they have enrolled, therefore they spell it out via posters, hand-outs, and websites. The study calls to translate unheard complaints to heard complaints in order to enhance student satisfaction.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative exploratory design, drawing from forty three (43) respondents. The authors conducted nineteen (19) in-depth interviews; and three focus group discussions each comprising of eight (8) respondents. The respondents were obtained through random sampling technique drawn from four purposively sampled academic departments (Accountancy, Business Administration, Marketing and Procurement and Supplies Management); academic office; dean of students' office; registrar's office; and quality assurance office at CBE Dar Es Salaam campus. The choice of CBE Dar Es Salaam campus was influenced by location, cost, and familiarity. In qualitative research, the sample size is determined by the data saturation criteria. The suggested criteria for choosing initial analysis sample is at least 10 interviews are conducted and the stopping criteria is additional 3 interviews if no more new theme is emerging (Francis et al., 2010). The data saturation for this study was attained at the thirteenth interview and confirmed with six more interviews. The College of Business Education Students Organization (COBESO) authority was approached to provide the list of students from the four departments and who have studied not less than two years at CBE. From this list a random selection was made. The Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data originated from personal interviews and focus group discussions using the same interview guide. The interviews had two sessions, and

were conducted by face to face which took an average of 20 to 30 minutes. The first session was between researchers and CBE management (heads of department, registrar, quality assurance manager, and dean of students). The second session was between researchers and students' representatives and individual students. The focus group discussion involved six to twelve people (6-12) it was between researchers and COBESO's leaders and the discussion took an average of 45 to 60 minutes. The secondary data was obtained from published articles of the recognized journals. The study adopted qualitative strategies in data collection, and in data analysis. Qualitative data were analysed based on categories and emerged major themes. The interviews were audio recorded and field notes were hand written. The audio material and field notes were then transcribed verbatim, coded and presented according to emerging themes. The process of data collection and analysis were done simultaneously. The transcriptions were read by two different individuals to confirm the codes. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents

SN	RESPONDENTS	NO OF RESPONDENTS
1	Students (from level 6, 7, & 8)	21
2	Head of departments	02
3	Academic officers	03
4	Registrar and Quality assurance manager	02
5	Dean of students	02
6	College of Business Education Students Organization (COBESO) representatives	13
	Total respondents	43

Source: survey data 2015

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The aim of the study is to explore the students' complaints management at CBE. The research answered three key research questions; explore sources of students' complaints, assess CBE's perception of students' complaints as opportunities or expression of failure and determine how CBE students perceive the effectiveness of the complaints management. The following section present and discuss the results of each research objective.

4.1 Exploring sources of students' complaints in the College of Business Education

The findings from interview establish that, many complaints at CBE originate from teaching and learning environments: lecturing, timetable, examination process and registration; college infrastructures (classes, toilets, and internet). Table 2 shows the complaints and their scores as the respondents reported them after being asked if they were dissatisfied with college offerings. The complaints which scores 3 and above were taken into account since they were persuasive issues. However, those scored 1 and 2 were ignored as the complaint was unconvincing. Therefore, out of 43 complaints: 10 scored 5; 12 scored 4; 9 scored 3; 6 scored 1 and 2.

Table 2: Types of complaints and their scores

SN	Type of complaint	Scores
1	Limited self-study space; library space	5
2	Unclean washrooms, hostels not well maintained	5
3	Washrooms - not enough (especially for ladies)	4
4	Course work and final exam results changing over a time; (inconsistence)	4
5	Some lecturers demand bribes	4
6	Tent classes not conducive during rainy times, hot time as well	3
7	Computer breakdowns	3
8	Insufficient number of facilities (chairs, desks, tables)	3

The findings from the question; "*did you complain to the appropriate office*"? Show that, 57% report their complaints to the College of Business Education Students Organization (COBESO); 24% submitted their complaints to the head of departments through class representatives, and as individual 19% did not complain anywhere because they were afraid of being victimized.

The findings from the question “do you know where to forward your complaints?” Revealed that, 70% of class representatives know the channels of submitting their complaint. However, 30% of students’ respondents showed that they do not know where to forward their complaints. For example, the findings show that, some of the students when dissatisfied, report their dissatisfactions to class representatives who in turn report to the COBESO, instead of reporting to head of department or academic office. This practice makes it difficult to handle the particular complaints effectively.

In another question “Do you think CBE is doing enough to deal with your complaint?” The findings show that the majority of respondents are moderately satisfied with how the college is handling their complaints. They said that, CBE is at the mid in handling their dissatisfactions. It is making neither very good nor very bad in handling customer complaints. For example, one of the student respondents said that “If someone asked me to rate CBE in terms of percentage in handling students’ complaints I can award 49% out of 100%. It is making good in handling our dissatisfactions, but there are some areas it needs more attention”

Majority student respondents (90%) are in view that, the College of Business Education is not doing enough in managing their complaints. They pointed out that, more than 65% of their dissatisfactions are managed ineffectively. Furthermore, they insisted that, when they report the complaints to the responsible office they don’t receive feedback in time, sometimes they never get it at all. Other students reported that, they receive unsatisfactory responses and discouraging statements from the office secretaries when they approach them to file their complaints.

4.2 Assessing CBE’s perceptions of students’ complaints

It has been observed that, 77% of the respondents under CBE management perceived complaints as opportunities. They mentioned the benefits of identifying complaints as: they give management specific area to make improvements; they are one way of assisting students and staff to know the nature of the problem; they improve college or staff daily operations; and they help to explore things which were hidden. This was evidenced by one of the interviewed heads of academic department: “Through students’ complaints we were able to know a lecturer who was not attending his/her class for almost a month, hence took appropriate measures”.

However, 23% of the respondents among the CBE management see complaints as a disturbance and time wasting. They said that, handling students’ complaints take much of their time, sometimes they fail to attend important meetings or class lectures. Therefore, to them complaints are a threat rather than an opportunity.

For instance, one of the interviewed head of academic department said that, “It takes most of my time dealing with students’ complaints and other important things are not done in time.”

4.3 Identifying the effectiveness of CBE to collect, process, and give feedback to students’ complaints

The highest number of complaints collected per week was 50, and the lowest was 2. This is according to data collected from Heads of departments. However, during result release, the numbers of complaints were higher. The findings show that almost all heads of departments/sections do not have a register or software for recording students’ complaints. All complaints received are processed manually, and there is no formal system for ensuring effective complaints handling. The interview results show that, the registrar does not have a specific meeting to discuss students’ complaints, though they have been taken on board in other meetings. For example: meeting with the Rector during students’ College ‘Baraza’, orientation session, deputy rector’s academic, research and consultant meeting, or during lecturing sessions. Most of the heads of departments/sections do not have a summary of complaints received per month/ week.

Furthermore, the results show that, though there was no specific policy for addressing how to handle students’ complaints, a number of policies are in use when complaints arise. The common ones are examination regulations, client service charter, college prospectus, students’ bylaws, and different circulars issued by management. The study also found that the frequently used channels by students to lodge their complaints at CBE are letters, word of mouth, and telephone.

In addition, the findings from this study reveal that feedback is given depending on the nature of complaints. It can be written, oral, or by Student Academic Register Information System (SARIS) for course work or final examinations. However, there is no feedback regarding the end of semester examination complaints. For example, if some topics were not taught, but appeared in the final examination, the examination committee meeting would handle such case and no feedback will be provided to students. This practice makes it difficult to manage the particular complaint effectively.

5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Traditionally, students should be satisfied with the teaching and learning environment first, in order to make them comfortable while they are in the learning process. The College should look into the details and work on those complaints

that score high frequencies which are: limited self-study and library space; few and unclean washrooms; insufficient number of tools and facilities such as chairs, desks; “tent classes” being not conducive especially during both rainy times and hot season. The above listed constitute the basic things which the Institutions of Higher Learning should offer in their services.

The study recommends the following for effective management of students’ complaints: The College should have formal mechanism - comprehensive and well organized system to collect and handle students’ complaints. There should be a guide document with procedures for handling students’ complaints. Secondly, the College must have a database of students’ complaints and categorized as long-term or short term, in order to speed up their processing and give out feedback on time. And lastly, the College should have a proper channel for handling complaints like having a regular student ‘Baraza’; meeting with Rector and Staff; suggestion box; a telephone line for receiving various complaints and channels to the appropriate responsible personnel for processing it.

We conclude that, the management should view the issue of students’ complaints as an opportunity in order to rectify where they did wrong. The College as a service provider should aim at satisfying their customers by assuring them what is provided is equal to their expectations or beyond. The implication of these findings is that, measures should be taken by CBE in order to reduce unnecessary students’ complaints. If the recommended approaches are fulfilled the number of complaints will be reduced, and the enrollment level will increase since the satisfied students will spread a positive word of mouth about CBE.

REFERENCES

- Albert , O. H. (1970). *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Ang, L., & Buttle, F. (2006). Customer retention management processes: a quantitative study. *European journal of marketing*, 40(1/2), 83-99.
- Barlow, J. (1996). *A complaint is a gift: using customer feedback as a strategic tool*. San Fransisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bell , S. J., & Luddington, J. A. (2006). Coping with customer complaints. *Journal of Service Research*, 8, 221 – 233.
- Brayne, H., & Carr, H. (2012). *Law for social workers*. Oxford University Press.
- Cambra-Fierro, J., Melero, I., & Sese, F. J. (2015). Managing Complaints to Improve Customer Profitability. *Journal of Retailing*, 91(1), 109–124.
- Cook, S. (2012). *Complaint Management Excellence: Creating Customer Loyalty Through Service Recovery*. London: Kogan Page Publishers.
- Dolinsky, A. L. (1994). A consumer complaint framework with resulting strategies: An application to higher education. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 8(3), 27-39.
- Etadon, F. I. (2013). Campus Conflicts Involving Students' and university management in Nigeria: The case of the Univeristy of Ibadan. *International Journal of Education Science*, 5(3), 333-343.
- Filip, A. (2013). Complaint Management: A Customer Satisfaction Learning Process. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 271-275.
- FitzPatrick, M., Davey, J., & Dai, L. (2012). Chinese students' complaining behavior: hearing the silence. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics*, 24(5), 738-754.
- Fornell, C., & Wernerfelt, B. (1987). Defensive marketing strategy by customer complaint management: a theoretical analysis. *Journal of Marketing research*, 337-346.
- Gambetta, N., Zorio-Grima, A., & García-Benau, M. A. (2015). Complaints management and bank risk profile. *Journal of Business Research*.
- Gehlbach, S. (2006). A formal model of exit and voice. *Rationality and Society*, 18(4), 395-418.
- Goldstein, S. D. (2009). *Superior Customer Satisfaction and Loyalty: Engaging Customers to Drive Performance*. Milwaukee: ASQ Quality Press.
- Heejung, R., & June, W. (2012). Customer opportunistic complaints management: A critical incident approach. 31, 419-427.
- Hennig-Thurau, T., & Hansen, U. (2000). *Relationshipg competitive advantage through customer satisfaction and customer retention*. Springer.
- Hoffman, K. D., & Bateson, J. E. (1997). *Essentials of services marketing*. Orlando, FL: Dryden Press.

- Homburg , C., & Fürst, A. (2007). See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil: a study of defensive organizational behavior towards customer complaints. 35(4). *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 35(4), 523-536.
- Jerry , P. (1991). Complaints as opportunities. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 8(2), 39 - 43.
- Johnston. (2001). Linking complaint management to profit. *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, 2(1), 60 - 69.
- Komunda, M., & Osarenkhoe, A. (2012). Remedy or cure for service failure? : Effects of service recovery on customer satisfaction and loyalty. *Business Process Management Journal*, 18(1), 82 - 103.
- Knox, G., & Van Oest, R. (2014). Customer Complaints and Recovery Effectiveness:A Customer Base Approach. *Journal of Marketing*, 78(5), 42-57.
- Kotler, P., & Fox, K. F. (1995). *Strategic marketing for educational institutions*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hal.
- Lala , V., & Randi , P. (2013). When Students Complain An Antecedent Model of Students' Intention to Complain. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 33(3), 236-252.
- Lee, C.-H., Wang, Y.-H., & Trappey, A. C. (2014). Ontology-based reasoning for the intelligent handling of Customer ComplaintS. *Computers & Industrial Engineering*, In Press.
- McCole, P. (2004). Dealing with complaints in services. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 16, 345 – 354.
- Metehan , T., & Yasemin , Z. A. (2011). Demographic Characteristics and Complaint Behavior: An Empirical Study Concerning Turkish Customers. . *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 12(9), 42-48.
- Ngonyani, D. (2000). Tools of Deception: Media coverage of Students Protests in Tanzania. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 9(2), 22-48.
- Plymire J. (1991). Complaints as opportunities. *Journal of Consumer Marketing*, 8(2), 39 - 43.
- Ro, H., & Wong, J. (2012). Customer opportunistic complaints management: A critical incident approach. 2, 419-427.
- Solvang, B. K. (2008). Customer protest: Exit, voice or negative word of mouth. *International Journal of Business Science and Applied Management*, 3(1), 1-19.
- Steinhardt, B. (1998). *Complaints and Appeals: Most Key Procedures in Place, But Others Valued by Consumers Largely Absent*. DIANE Publishing.
- Uusitalo, K., Hakala, H., & Kautonen, T. (2011). Customer complaints as a source of customer-focused process improvement: A constructive case study. *Int. Journal of Business Science and Applied Management*, 3(1), 1-13.
- Van Hoorebeek, M., & Gale, C. (2011). The role of mediation within university protocols concerning student complaints and appeals. *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal*, 5(3), 209-220.
- Zari, M. (2000). Managing customer dissatisfaction through effective complaints management systems. *The TQM magazine*, 12(5), 331-337.