

# Student Satisfaction with University Lecturers in Malawi: A Case Study of a Private University

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on a research study that was done to find out students' opinions about their satisfaction with lecturers at a private university in Malawi. The research used a qualitative approach through semi structured interviews with senior students at the university. Additional information was collected through a review of institutional documents at the university. The study has found that the university has inadequate teachers to effectively carry out their teaching duties and that some of the teachers do not have the necessary qualifications to teach at university level. It has also been established that most of the teachers at this university are part time. All the three findings above do not augur well with the need to provide quality university education. Therefore there is need for the university and other private universities in Malawi to do something to raise the quality of teaching by among other things employing adequate and well qualified staff.

**Keywords:** Malawi; quality; University of Malawi; National Council for Higher Education.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The value of higher education and in particular university education has been discussed by numerous writers from different parts of the world. For example Yizengaw, (2008) argues that higher education provides economic and other benefits to both the individual and the public and also produces qualified human resources. It prepares workers with relevant skills which enable them perform in businesses, industries and also in the civil service. Helms (2008) on the other hand indicates that tertiary education provides advanced skills for the knowledge based labour markets and also trains different professionals such as teachers, doctors, engineers and others, all of whom are critical and instrumental in a country's development. In addition to acknowledging the role of education in providing the much needed human resource to spur development, Ajayi and Ekundayo (2008) add that tertiary education is an instrument for the promotion of a country's social-economic, political and cultural aspects. Looking at the importance of education from a micro level i.e. from the perspective of an individual, Mwebi (2013) notes the power of education in moving individuals from the bottom levels of the social ladder to the upper levels. He indicates that "access to university education is not only one of the fundamental human rights of an individual but also, and more importantly, a crucial tool for sustained social economic development and an important exit route from poverty" (p. 352). For Materu (2007) higher education is crucial to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals in the areas of health, education, agriculture, research, science and technology among others. The importance of one of these areas which is research is highlighted in the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II where one of the goals of the Education, Science and Technology priority area is to enhance contribution of research, science and technology to national productivity (Malawi Government, 2012).

Realizing the importance of higher education, soon after independence, the Malawi government started investing in higher education by among other things establishing the University of Malawi in 1964 (World Bank, 2010). Currently the number of public universities in Malawi stands at four. As observed by Varghese (2004), to a larger extent the creation of a public university soon after independence was aimed at producing highly qualified indigenous people to take over from

expatriates in different sections and departments of the government. Therefore the government assumed full responsibility and control in the running of university education and the University of Malawi was very well supported by government funds through adequate budgetary allocations. All the required facilities and resources were readily provided. The students did not pay any tuition fees but instead they were given a monthly allowance in addition to providing them with board and lodging. Such full support to public universities was the case in most African countries soon after independence because the countries considered university education as a public or social good and that it was the governments' sole responsibility to provide the much needed education to their citizenry by consistently and increasingly funding university education (Akpotu & Akpochafo, 2009; Banya, 2008).

However, according to Mwebi (2013), many countries are moving away or have already moved away from their roles as welfare service providers in university education and are implementing the idea of privatization of higher education. This could be due to many reasons including the world economic down turn before the new millennium which necessitated some major reforms in government departments including education. On the other hand, Banya, (2008) argues that globalization and other market forces have made it necessary for countries to move from a centralized control of university education towards capitalist political economy or market economy where the private sector is also involved in the provision of university education

## 2. PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

In the Malawian context a private university is one that is established, owned and managed by private entities. Although they are private, such universities are required to operate under government regulations for operating such institutions. Private universities in Malawi started operating in the late 1990s and provide tertiary education in different fields such as education, business studies, Information and Communication Technology and religious studies among others. These universities do not receive any funding from government for their operations and therefore their main source of income comes from the fees that are paid by the students. While some of the private universities are owned by private individuals and enterprises, most of them are owned by religious organizations.

In the past two decades, the number of private universities in Malawi has increased tremendously such that currently there are more than ten private universities operating in Malawi. This figure is far much higher than that of operational public universities which are only four. This trend applies to the African region as a whole as noted by Varghese, (2004). In the case of Malawi, there was rapid establishment of private universities after the mid 2000s when the first cohort of the Free Primary Education programme graduated from secondary school to join tertiary education. The Free Primary Education programme which was introduced in 1994 caused the primary school intake to almost double and accordingly this had a ripple effect on the demand for secondary school education and also tertiary education (SARUA, 2009). Although there are more private universities than public ones, the majority of the students are enrolled in public universities and in 2008, private universities contributed only 12.4% of the total university enrollment (World Bank, 2010). This could partly be attributed to the high fees that private universities charge, inadequate space in the private universities and lack of prestige because the private universities have been established recently. Varghese (2004) alludes to the fact that in many instances private universities especially in African countries are small in size and thus their contribution to the total enrolment to higher education is relatively low. In terms of fees, private universities charge more than double and in other cases triple the fees in public universities.

## 3. RAPID ESTABLISHMENT OF PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN MALAWI

There is extensive literature that provides reasons for the proliferation of private universities in many parts of the world (SARUA, 2009; Varghese, 2004; Adu, 2009; Ajayi & Akundayo; World Bank, 2010). The common reason that all the above writers emphatically highlight is demand for university education. For example, talking about the situation in Ghana, Adu, (2009) observes that the sprouting of private universities in that country among other reasons is due to the high demand for higher education. He indicates further that in 2008 only around a third of those who applied for admission into universities managed to get a place. On the other hand, Ajayi and Akundayo (2008) note that in Nigeria in most cases the demand is by far higher than the supply in spite of the mechanisms that the government put in place to increase enrolments in public universities. The trend in Malawi is the same where every year public universities receive far more applications for admission than the number of students that are actually enrolled. That is why Divala (2009) notes that there are far more students qualified for university education than the system can take in. In 2007, Mzuzu

University which is one of the public universities in Malawi received 6000 applications for only 800 spaces. According to the World Bank (2010), in 2008 the University of Malawi admitted only 28% of those students who passed the university entrance examinations. Shara (2012) also reports that of those candidates who passed University of Malawi entrance examination in 2012, only 21% were admitted into the constituent colleges of the university. This trend is continuing despite the fact that there is a government policy to increase access to university education through different endeavors such as the admission of students on nonresidential basis.

There could be some factors responsible for the general increased demand for university education in Malawi and in other countries. Firstly, the demand could be as a result of the increased numbers of those who are graduating from the lower levels of education as a result of an increase in population (Mohamedbhai, 2008). On the other hand, Ajayi and Akundayo (2008) argue that the increased demand could be due to the realization of the importance of higher education at a micro level where individuals and certain groups of people would want to have advanced education for them to get employment which could improve their social status.

Due to the high demand for university education that public universities are unable to satisfy in Malawi, private universities come in to fill the gap. Therefore they augment and complement government's efforts of increasing enrolment into university education (World Bank, 2010). In the same vein, Jiang, (2015) acknowledges the contribution of private universities to the expansion of access to university education in many countries including China. However, it should be noted that even with the participation of the private sector in university education, demand for admission into universities in Malawi is far from being satisfied as the university sector is very small where only 0.3% of the eligible candidates are enrolled annually (World Bank, 2010). This means that every year, a very big percentage of eligible candidates for university education is locked out of university education.

#### **4. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Since private universities started operating in Malawi, there have been a lot of discussions about the quality of education that is being provided in these universities. While the general feeling among the Malawian population is that private education at primary and secondary level is of better quality than that provided in public schools, at university level there seems to be skepticism where some people feel that public universities provide better quality of education than private universities. However, there has not been any published research to look at quality related issues in private universities in Malawi.

#### **5. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

One of the aspects that is considered in discussions of quality in education is the teaching staff. Teachers are directly linked to education quality and that they can affect an education system in both negative and positive ways. Mwebi (2013) posits that teachers are a critical resource in any education system. Additionally, Henard and Leprince-Ringuet (2008) highlight the important role of teachers by indicating that no education system is better than the quality of its teachers. In an era when education is becoming more expensive to the buyers of the commodity who are mainly the students, their parents and guardians, it is imperative to seek the students' opinions about their satisfaction in different aspects of education. It is envisaged that the opinions from students can go a long way in helping to shape the education landscape of the private universities. Arif, Ilyas, & Hameed (2013) also acknowledge that students are the main customers of an education system because the teaching and learning process is built around them. As such students are supposed to be satisfied with the education that they get from education institutions. Therefore, the study was carried out to determine the quality of teaching in a Malawian private university using the opinions of students on their satisfaction with their lecturers. The study was conducted at a private university that is located in Lilongwe which is the capital city of Malawi. However, for ethical reasons the university is anonymised and given a pseudonym of Private One University.

#### **6. PROFILE OF PRIVATE ONE UNIVERSITY**

This is a government-accredited private university that has been in operation for more than four years. The university is located in Lilongwe and is owned, managed and operated by a private enterprise. At the present time there are six faculties at the university offering programmes at Certificate, Diploma, Bachelors Degree and Masters Degree levels using different modes of study such as regular full time study, weekend classes, evening classes and distance learning. However this study focused on students who are studying for Bachelors Degree.

## 7. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative methodological approach was chosen for the execution of the study. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008) qualitative research is that which mostly rely on the collection of non numerical data which could be in the form of words and pictures. Additionally, Haepfl (1997), states that qualitative research designs are used to better understand a phenomenon which is not very well known to the researcher. In the case of the current study, little is known about teachers in private universities in Malawi. Therefore the qualitative approach was considered appropriate to enable the researcher to deeply delve into students' perspectives in order to have a deep understanding of their opinions about their teachers at Private One University.

Data for the study were mainly collected from senior students who were in years three and four of their four year-degree programmes. Only senior students were targeted on the understanding that they had been at the university for a reasonably long period of time such that they would be able to competently and insightfully comment on issues to do with teachers at the university. Supplementary data were collected through official documents about the university that the researcher managed to access. The supplementary data were necessary to help strengthen information from the students. This was a form of triangulation which enhanced the credibility of the findings as argued by Maxwell, (2009)

The students who participated in this research were identified using purposive sampling. According to Maxwell (2009), purposive sampling is a type of sampling in which the researcher purposefully selects particular individuals to be part of a study based on his belief that they can provide useful information for the research. Such decisions are made after careful and critical consideration of who is to take part and also what they would bring to the enquiry. Therefore the researcher decided that only senior students were recruited as research participants. The sample was made up of 16 students, equally split between year three and year four.

The study used semi structured face to face interviews to collect data from the respondents. The use of interviews accorded the respondents an opportunity to freely talk about what they thought in relation to their teachers and this helped the researcher to have deep understanding about their opinions (Creswell, 2003).

An interview guide was prepared and it had both open ended and closed ended questions. Broadly, the questions focused on issues of teachers' qualifications, teachers' employment status and the adequacy of teachers at the university. Each interview lasted for a maximum of 60 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a secure room that was provided at the university to maintain the interviewees' privacy. The researcher's role during the interviews was to lead the interviews and take down the notes.

Data analysis involved organizing the notes from the interviews by reading them and properly typing them using a word processor to produce transcripts. The transcripts were then read several times to have a full understanding of the data. Based on the purpose of the study, the researcher was able to identify and extract themes from the data set. All the information belonging to one theme was put together by pasting parts of the transcripts to their appropriate themes in Microsoft word.

## 8. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study sought to find out the satisfaction of students with teachers in a private university. Specifically the study explored issues to do with teacher adequacy, qualifications and employment status. Findings and discussion of these aspects are presented below.

### 8.1. Adequacy of teaching staff in the university:

The study has established that the university has problems as regards the number of teaching staff in that there are inadequate teachers to properly teach all the courses in different programmes. In most cases the students felt that the number of teachers in many sections was less than the required number for the effective delivery of the curricula. Some interviewees suggested that financial problems could be responsible for the university's inability to recruit adequate teaching staff and that this makes the few teachers that are on the ground to be overworked because they are made to carry a teaching load that is supposed to be carried by more teachers. This is in line with the findings of a study conducted in Nigeria by Asiyai (2013) where he observed that many universities suffer from the problem of inadequate teachers. He noted that this is negatively affecting their output because the teachers are overworked. On the other hand, writing about

the situation in Kenya, Gudo, Olel & Oanda (2011) report that in some cases a university could have only a quarter of the required teaching staff as regular teachers. Such situations are counterproductive to provision of quality education as noted by Mwebi (2013) who argues that increased workload could only help in bringing down the quality of education delivery. There was no any document among the ones that were accessed to ascertain the deficit in the required number of teachers at this university. However informal discussions with an official from the National Council for Higher Education which is the higher education watchdog in Malawi indicated that it is not uncommon for private universities to have inadequate teachers.

### **8.2. Status of employment for teachers:**

University teachers in Malawi enjoy three main statuses depending on their terms of employment. One could be employed as a full time teacher enjoying all the benefits of someone holding such a status including a monthly salary. Others are employed as contract teachers for a period of time such as two years. For this group of teachers, the universities have the liberty to renew the contracts or not after the expiration of a running contract depending on the performance of the teacher and other factors. Some teachers are employed on part time basis. In most cases these are teachers who may have their full time jobs elsewhere and could only report for duties at the universities when they have classes to teach. The study has found that Private One University has more part time teachers on its payroll than either full time or contract teachers. This is a confirmation of what Varghese (2004) noted that many private institutions of higher learning in Africa rely on part time lecturers. Jiang (2015) observes that there is a similar trend in China. One of the reasons suggested in literature for private universities' obsession with part time lecturers in most African private universities is the inability of the universities to attract full time lecturers due to poor remuneration packages (Banya, 2008). On the other hand, one would argue that the engagement of part time teachers is one way for the private universities to save money or to make more profits by reducing expenditure on teaching staff in form of salaries and other benefits as indicated by Amponsa and Onuoha (2013). Normally, part time teachers in Malawi are paid per hour while those on full time basis are paid per month regardless of how many hours they have worked. This means that at the end of the month, full time teachers may receive bigger salaries than the number of hours they have actually worked in a month. While the employment of part time teachers could be considered as a good business decision by private universities, it may work to the disadvantage of students. Part time lecturers may not be willing to fully commit themselves to their job in the university because it may not be their main way of earning a living. Mwebi, (2008) further notes that part time lecturers in most cases have more than one work place; as such they are only available during their scheduled teaching time and they knock off as soon as they finish their classes. This robs the students of the time for academic consultations with the teachers. Lack of such support is detrimental to the quality of student learning. In a study that they conducted in Thailand and Japan, Gamage, Suwanabroma, Ueyama, Hada, & Sekikawa (2008) found that Thai students highly valued the academic support that their lecturers gave them after classes.

In relation to having limited or no time for student consultations, the study found that some part time lecturers are too busy to always manage to report for duties according to their scheduled times. As a result such lecturers are given a block of hours when they are free to finish all their content. Firstly, this would mean postponing some of the other classes to accommodate such part time lecturers. Secondly, in such an arrangement, content which was meant to be taught for three or four months is squeezed into a week or two. While the lecturers may be able to cover everything within the one or two weeks that they are given, one would still doubt how such arrangements would enhance the quality of learning. For a fact, the teaching and learning process may not be thorough as the lecturers will be aiming at covering a lot of ground without serious regard to whether learning is taking place or not. Although they were writing about academic calendar destabilisation in African public universities due to staff and student strikes, Akpotu and Akpochafo (2009) observed that students are the ones who lose out when lecturers rush through their teaching in order to cover a lot of content in a short period of time

### **8.3. Teachers' qualifications:**

According to the staff recruitment policy of Private One University, the minimum qualification for teachers is a Masters Degree. The understanding is that someone with such a qualification will be able to effectively teach at university level because they have the knowledge and expertise beyond that of a first degree holder. The study found that the university has some teachers who are qualified up to Masters Degree level. However, most of the teachers (both part time and full time) are first degree holders but are given the responsibility to handle students in degree programmes. According to

Banya (2008), the employment of under-qualified staff could be due to financial constraints which make it difficult for private universities to attract well qualified staff who may demand high remuneration packages. One of the reasons for the existence of private universities is to make profits and in fact operating a private university is big business in Africa and other parts of the world (Jiang, 2015; Ajayi & Ekundayo, 2008; Amponsa & Onuoha, 2013). Therefore one would think that the employment of unqualified staff could partly be a deliberate mechanism for the universities to reduce expenditures and maximize profits. The possession of necessary qualifications is vital for any job let alone teaching. Appropriate qualifications instill confidence in the students about their teachers and are a source of inspiration to the students. Onjoro, Koech, Githui and Shinali (2014) note the importance of teachers' qualifications to the provision of quality education. On the other hand, in their study on the issue of teachers' attributes, Gamage, Suwanabroma, Ueyama, Hada & Sekikawa (2008) found that Thai and Japanese students valued certain attributes of their teachers where credentials ranked very highly. The students desired teachers with appropriate credentials.

In relation to teachers' qualifications and the problem of teacher shortage the study also found that some subjects were taught by teachers who are not experts in those subject areas in spite of possessing a Masters Degree in their fields of expertise. Although this could be considered as an issue of efficient use of available resources from the university's business point of view, it runs counter to issues of quality education provision. Teachers who teach subjects in which they do not have the right expertise in spite of having the right qualifications may not be competent enough to teach effectively. Therefore it would be difficult for the students to experience the transformation in terms of knowledge, skills and attitude. To emphasise the importance of teachers' expertise in education, Voss and Gruber (2006) report about a study conducted in Germany on the perceptions of students in relation to the attributes that their teachers possessed where they found that one of the most critical attributes is the teachers' expertise.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted some issues about teachers at Private One University from the perspective of students. It has been shown that the university has problems with its teaching staff in terms of adequacy, qualifications and employment status. Although the highlighted problems could have a negative effect on the quality of education provided in this university, it would be premature for the writer to declare that the quality of education in this university is low because education quality cannot be determined from one dimension only. There are other equally important aspects that need to be looked into using a comprehensive set of standards to determine the quality of education in an institution.

Further, the proliferation of private universities in Malawi calls for issues of quality to be seriously considered in the provision of education in these universities (Ajayi and Ekundayo, 2008; Banya, 2008). Therefore the establishment of the National Council for Higher Education is a step towards helping universities, both private and public in their efforts to provide the Malawian population with education of high quality.

As this study has found out, one of the areas where private universities have been criticized on and that could lead to poor quality of education is the teaching personnel (Amponsa and Onuoha, 2013). The importance of teachers in any education system cannot be overemphasized. They are responsible for the proper academic development of the students from the first lesson up to graduation. Therefore, to ensure that there is high quality education being provided in private universities, there is need for the National Council for Higher Education to see to it that universities employ highly qualified lecturers with relevant work experience. To this end, the council should be given the mandate to take a leading role in helping the universities in their teacher recruitment process. There should also be staff development programs in the private universities to ensure professional growth of the lecturers. It should also be the responsibility of the National Council for Higher Education to put down clear regulations in relation to many aspects including staffing. For example, there is need for clear guidelines as to how much percentage of teaching staff should be part time for the effective operation of a university. Issues of teacher-student ratio should also be clearly defined and the council should vigilantly monitor what is happening in private universities as a way of protecting students who are the main customers from getting substandard education. However, for the National Council for Higher Education to achieve its objectives, there is need for maximum support for its activities. The government should make sure that the council is provided with adequate funds for its smooth operation including the training of personnel to regularly carry out their duties in institutions of higher education.

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