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Abstract

Purpose: Character education is a process of teaching people how to behave morally. This study probed how public and private university students in Kenya perceive character education in the university and its possible role in influencing positive behaviour. The examined student character education attributes included universal moral principles of honesty, responsibility and self-discipline; whereas student behaviour was described by property use, examination writing and substance use.

Methodology: A descriptive survey design was used for the target population (54,864) of undergraduate students. A sample size of 381 students was randomly selected and information on the study variables obtained using a questionnaire. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.813. The level of significance was alpha 0.05.

Findings: The findings of the study were that students' character education perception was significantly higher in private universities compared to public universities. The influence of student character education on the university students' behaviour was significantly positive ($\beta=.909$, $p=.000$) regardless of year of study and gender of the students.

Recommendations: The major recommendation of the study is that Kenya universities should introduce character education in the curriculum with the aim of improving students' behaviour and quality of graduates.

Keywords: *Universal Values; Character Education; Student Behaviour; Campus Environment.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background of the Study

University students may most likely enhance self-worth, respect other people and recognize the sanctity of life through character education exposure. Cheng and Lee (2007) observe that since the beginning of this century, scholars in the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia, and Japan found that the world's new crisis is the ignorance of "character education" at schools and universities. The United States Government in the year 2000 advocated a national character education programme to promote and subsidize character education in universities. This was with the hope of rebuilding its power and creating a new social order.

Lickona (2007) defines character education as the deliberate effort to develop virtues that are good for the individual and society. Character education promotes the universal value of hard work, responsibility, respect, honesty, justice, and self-control. According to Schaps *et al* (2001), character education is meant to complement academic knowledge by engaging and inspiring students' hearts and their minds. Arthur (2003) argues that character is intimately linked to the ethos of society itself and shaped by public forces. He describes character education as a way of educating the head (to know the good), the heart (to care about the good) and the hand (to do the good). Many parents and educators mostly attach a great deal of importance to their children (students) getting good grades (academic prowess) and enjoying high self-esteem at the expense of ethical, emotional and interpersonal competencies (character).

University students' perception of character education may be informed by their understanding of moral values which are best transmitted through warm and caring interpersonal relationships. Gert (2005) contends that students who live by moral ideals are most likely to promote healthy and mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships. Otworl (2007) equates success to career. He asserts that students who pursue university degrees leading to various professional careers may feel deprived unless moral ideals are core in their study. Students embrace the virtue of humility as necessary complementary attribute to intellectual excellence. This is essential to students' future success as well as to a healthy, prosperous and humane society. Pilot study findings in 2013 by Character Creativity Initiative of the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis, the Ministry of Education and other partners revealed that nurturing character and creativity improves students' academic performance and reduced social problems such as violence.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Appropriate character is expected of everyone in institutions of learning and across multi-cultural societies in the world. Destructive behavior among university students in Kenya as a result of riot presupposes little or no appreciation of character education attributes such as responsibility, honesty and self-discipline. It is curious relating intellectual character and moral character as intrinsic attributes of education. Whereas university academic courses such as Philosophy, Ethics, Guidance and Counselling are taught with the aim of sharpening students' critical

thinking skills and improving behaviour; incidences of examination cheating, alcoholism, vandalism and violence on university campuses seem to escalate unchecked.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey design was used for this study. The target population for the study was the undergraduate students in public and private universities in Kenya. The sampling frame consisted of 54,864 students, 49,750 from public and 5,114 from private Christian universities. A sample size of 381 students was randomly selected. A questionnaire was used to collect data. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.813. The data was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics with the aid of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (version 22). Descriptive statistics used included frequencies, percentages and means. Inferential statistics used was multiple regressions. The level of significance was alpha 0.05.

3.0 RESULTS

The study investigated the students' perception of character education and influence on behaviour of university students. The findings of the study were that perception of character education was significantly higher in private universities compared to public universities. The influence of student character education on the university students' behaviour was significantly positive ($\beta=.909$, $p=.000$) regardless of age (year of study) and gender of the students.

The student respondents were asked to rate how they perceived efforts to deliberately develop student character education using a 5-point rating scale, with 1 to signify Very Low efforts, 2 Low efforts, 3 Medium efforts, 4 High and 5 Very High efforts. The scores were then added to form the resulting index of students' character education. The descriptive statistics for the indicators and the resulting index of student character education are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution and Descriptive Statistics of Indicators of Students' Character Education in Public and Private Universities

Virtue Indicators	Frequency					Total Score	Mean
	VL	L	M	H	VH		
Honesty	20	3	23	74	217	1476	4.37
Responsibility	12	5	5	42	273	1570	4.65
Integrity	11	3	9	42	271	1611	4.78
Self-discipline	15	3	15	50	254	1536	4.55
Righteousness	11	7	13	51	255	1543	4.57
Curiosity	15	8	27	84	203	1463	4.34
Creativity	28	8	17	72	212	1443	4.28
Mental challenge	15	3	14	44	261	1544	4.58
Diligence	17	7	10	56	247	1520	4.51
Perseverance	42	27	28	97	143	1283	3.80
Community Service	19	28	33	87	170	1372	4.07

VL=Very Low Effort, L=Low Effort, M=Medium Effort, H=High Effort, VH= Very High Effort

The results of Table 1 show that the highly rated indicator was integrity with a mean of 4.78 and the lowly rated indicator was perseverance with a mean of 3.80. The scores from the eleven indicators were combined to form an index of the level students' character education in private and public universities. The maximum possible score from the eleven indicators was 55, and the lowest possible score was 11. The index was further classified into five categories. The range between 11 and 19.8 meant very low levels of students' character education, the range between 19.9 and 28.7 meant low levels, the range between 28.8 and 37.6 meant moderate levels, and the range between 37.7 and 46.5 meant high levels, while the range between 46.6 and 55 meant very high levels of students' character education. The levels of the students' character education in private and public universities in Kenya are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequency Distributions and Descriptive Statistics for the Index of Students' Character Education

Scores	Description	Frequency	Percent	Ob N	Exp N	Residue
11 – 19.8	Very Low	88	26.1	88	67.4	20.6
19.9 – 28.7	Low	72	21.4	72	67.4	4.6
28.8 – 37.6	Medium	13	3.9	13	67.4	-54.4
37.7 – 46.5	High	31	9.24	31	67.4	-36.4
46.6 - 55	Very High	133	39.5	133	67.4	65.6
Total		337	100.0			

Chi-square 134.024, df 4, p =.000. Ob N= observed N, Exp N=expected N

Mean 34.7, median 34, mode 55, standard deviation 16.280

The results of Table 2 show that the mean of the level of students' character education in private and public universities was 34.7 and the highest number of the respondents (39.5 %) were in the category of Very High falling within the score range of 46.6 – 55. These results were significant statistically ($p > .05$). The results show that there was a high variation in the distribution of the variable (high standard deviation 16.280) as the respondents with very low were reasonably high (26.1 %) of the total students. The mean comparisons for the public and private universities were conducted using the independent *t*-test at .05 significant level and the results are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Comparison of Student Character Education in Public and Private Universities using t-Test

Type of University	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t-value	p
Public	168	19.410	5.903	.455	-50.056	0.000
Private	169	49.946	5.279	.406		

Significant ($p > .05$) statistical differences were found between public and private universities level of student character education. The private universities had higher levels of student character education than the public universities.

4.0 DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The level of students' character education perception on behavior in selected public and private universities in Kenya was defined as the deliberate effort taken to develop virtues that are good for the individual and society, they may include: moral virtues such as honesty, good character, kindness, and self-discipline; civic virtues such as community service, and responsibility; intellectual virtues such as curiosity, creativity, and mental challenge; and *performance virtues* such as diligence, and perseverance (Lickona, 2007; Arthur *et al* 2015). These four virtues (moral, civic, intellectual, and performance) formed the variables that were combined to create the index of students' character education with eleven indicators, which included; honesty, responsibility, integrity, self-discipline, righteousness, curiosity, creativity, mental challenge, diligence, perseverance, and community service.

The results of Table 2 were similar to the studies by Skaggs, et al (2006) indicating that over a 4-year period, researchers measured several outcomes in 5 school districts initiating or enhancing character education programs. As expected, schools with more fully-implemented programs experienced a greater improvement in perceived character-driven behavior and lower suspension rates than schools with less well-implemented programs.

Table 3 shows that significant ($p > .05$) statistical differences of the mean comparison of student character education were found between public and private universities level of character education. The private universities had higher levels of student character education than the public universities. This can be attributed to the fact that the private universities are Christian based and they tend to put more emphasis on character qualities on admission to universities as observed in the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Education System of Kenya (1999)

Conclusions from the study findings are that the level of students' character education perception was significantly higher in private universities than in public universities. This can be attributed to the fact that private universities tend to emphasize on character qualities besides performance merit during the admission of students. Public universities insist on mere academic performance merit; character education attributes such as responsibility, honesty and self-discipline have positive influence on university students' behaviour in Kenya. The major recommendation drawn from conclusions of the study is that Kenya universities should introduce character education in the curriculum with the aim of improving students' character perception on behaviour. This should enhance mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships and boost public confidence in the quality of graduates.

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