

The tension of elite vs. massified higher education systems: how prospective students perceive public and private universities in Kenya

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This article examines how recent changes, leading to a diversified supply in Kenya's university education system, is reflected in prospective students' aspirations, perceptions and preferences to undertake university education. The results, based on a combination of a convenience and snowball sampling of settings, within which random samples of final year high school students were selected, reveal that aspiration to undertake university education is high among all social groups, and that state universities are preferred by a majority of the students in spite of the rapid growth in the number of private universities of acceptable quality. By examining the aspirations of students and college choice, the paper engages the debates around elite vs. massified higher education in Kenya's context.

Keywords: diversified higher education system; elite education; aspirations; perceptions, preferences, higher education in Kenya; student choice

Introduction

Research evidence shows that when presented with choice, students will enter college only when it appeals to them, and when the other available options have lesser value compared to college entry. This can present a problem for any society where college enrolment is not optimal, and in such circumstances, the logical objective is to attempt policies that would change some students choice behaviour (Jackson 1982). Many studies on college entry choices and behaviour by students have been conducted in the US, largely because of its large and highly diversified higher education system (see Siegfried and Getz 2006; Jackson 1982; Litten and Hall 1989; Tierney 1980; Cheslock 2005; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Perna 2000). Lately, however, a number of countries have seen their higher education systems become diversified through the establishment and growth of private higher education institutions alongside an already established state university system, leading to some form of college entry choices. Kenya, an East African country within Sub-Saharan Africa, is one such case. It is therefore of interest to investigate how this is reflected by students' aspirations, perceptions and preferences of their university education and consider the findings in relation to wider debates of elite vs. massified higher education systems and what is already known based on the literature from the US (see Hossler and Gallagher 1987). Moreover, understanding the aspirations, perceptions and preferences by prospective students is important for policy strategies that may affect the pattern of student enrolment in colleges. It can lead to policies that change the situation or ways of improving information upon which students make choices (Jackson 1982, 237).

At independence from British colonial rule in 1963, Kenya did not have a fully-fledged university. University College, Nairobi, was a constituent of the University of East Africa with other campuses at Makerere (Uganda) and Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania). It was an elite higher education

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system. Over the years the state has increasingly expanded higher education to match a growing demand, and throughout the period, state policies in higher education have, to some extent, been aimed at changing some students' minds in terms of their educational preferences, and to address the issue of the elite education system. For example, during the 1960s and early 1970s, those who entered university were given government grants and allowances to compensate for preferring to enter further education instead of direct employment, which was readily available after completion of high school. It was compensation for opportunity, cost and income forgone as a result of going to university. At the time, university graduates were scarce; the Kenya government needed to build capacity in the civil service and felt that giving such incentives would motivate the youth to study harder to attain the entry requirements for university education. It meant that private returns to university education were quite high but these incentives also fostered an elite model of university education. In recent times, and with a rapidly expanded education system coupled with sluggish economic growth, the number of those with university education has grown more than the labour market can quickly absorb. At the same time Kenya's higher education has also become diversified in supply since the government no longer monopolises the supply of university places as it did in the first two decades of Kenya's independence. There is much already written about the diversified system (see Oketch 2004; Nyaigoti-Chacha 2004) but there is no evidence of studies that have dealt with prospective students' aspirations, perceptions and preferences in this diversified system and to cast these in terms of tensions between elite vs. mass higher education. Earlier studies that closely dealt with student preferences such as that by Somerset (1974) focused on school type and student aspiration, and a study by Eshiwani (1985) only focused on female students enrolled at one of Kenya's public universities in the field of sciences and mathematics. There is thus a gap in the literature specific to Kenya on the subject of students' aspirations, perceptions and preferences in university education system that is now diversified in supply. This paper aims to fill this gap. Based on a small but random sample of final year high school students residing in Nairobi, and selected by a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, this study investigates how the diversified supply of higher education in Kenya, through the growth of private universities and self sponsored programmes at public universities, is reflected in the aspirations, perceptions and preferences that prospective students hold about university education. It also investigates how family background, gender and income level potentially influence their aspirations, perceptions and preferences for university education.

Furthermore, as private providers have increased in number and now play an important role in the supply of higher education in Kenya (see Eisemon 1992; Oketch 2003, 2004, 2006; Abagi et al. 2004), the necessity of policies that would reflect students preferences between public and private higher education (Tierney 1980) is increasingly an issue of legitimate public policy objective in Kenya's higher education. This would alter students' choice behaviour and lead to the matching of their preferences with their choices. Currently, the debate on choice in Kenya reflects two alternatives which are contentious.

First is the call to disband the University Joint Admissions Board (JAB) that selects high school students who enter state universities under government subsidy and replace it with a system, similar to that used by private universities, whereby each individual university would make its own admission selection independent of the selection decision by another university institution. Those who support this line of action argue that it would allow students to practice their preferences and have 'real choice' within the public system similar to those in North America's public and higher education or in the UK's system. At present, Kenyan students cannot be selected to enter more than one state university under a government subsidy because the selection process is centrally conducted and controlled by JAB. Moreover, government subsidy in the form of grants and loans is administered

directly to the university to which a student is selected without any flexibility of transfer to another institution. This system rather than an individually administered subsidy and portable loan scheme makes it impossible for students to transfer from one institution to another once they enter college. They may therefore be stuck at a university which does not reflect their preference.

Under the present system, students are allowed a pseudo type of choice whereby they select a number of public universities and courses of study during the final year of their high school with the private universities totally excluded from the list of institutions to be selected. Once a student qualifies and is selected by one state university for a given course within their selection, another university within the state system cannot select them. Even if a student's performance in the final examination reflects a better course cluster for a degree course s/he might have thought s/he wouldn't qualify for, JAB would only consider what was selected based on the student's anticipated performance, rather than the actual performance. The ambiguity of such a system is what has made some critics call for the scrapping of JAB. While JAB may have been instrumental in coordinating admission patterns and ensuring quality in a higher education system that was small and elitist, it has become ineffective, unfair and ambiguous to ensure that students are given the choices that match, or closely match, their preferences. The present public universities selection system doesn't truly operationalise students preferences as students may be forced to enter institutions and courses they may be less interested in. The present system which guarantees enrolment to state universities may also retard competition as institutions do not have to strive to create conditions to attract applicants. Faculty may also remain unproductive in research and rely on chalk and talk as they are assured of a continuous supply of students to teach. If each individual institution were to be allowed to admit their own students directly the way private universities do, there would be potential for competition for students among the state universities. A student is likely to be selected to more than one university at the same time and will subsequently enter the one that s/he prefers. It would also allow private universities to compete for students with state universities on an equal footing. It may also compel universities to specialise in areas of their comparative advantage, and at the same time, improve on conditions that make them more attractive as institutions of higher learning and intellectual engagement. Faculty would be more rigorously held to account and be asked to be productive in research, including possibly being supplied with computers and being compelled to become computer literate. These changes would inevitably trigger better remuneration of faculty and eventually a higher education system where remuneration and promotion is more effectively linked to performance.

Second, there are calls to increase student eligibility for government loans by extending these to those who may prefer to enter private universities. For the latter to happen, the former must be in place but such a policy would alter the pattern of college attendance in Kenya. It also presents another problem for preference if it is not extended to those who choose to join a state university under the parallel self-sponsorship programme.¹ The arguments seem to suggest that for those who are high achievers, and therefore automatically eligible to enter selective state universities, a combination of government grants and loans should be made available. But loans must be extended to everyone else who is eligible and who may prefer to join other non-state universities. The reality in Kenya today is that the system of higher education allows preference between entering a public or private university. How this is reflected in student perceptions and preferences for university education has not been documented. This paper therefore provides a snapshot view on how prospective students' aspirations, perceptions and preferences mirror the diversified supply of higher education in Kenya. Despite the obvious public policy implications of such information, no research has adequately addressed this issue.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. The section that follows provides a brief overview of Kenya's higher education, its growth and diversification. This is followed by the survey, methods and sample. Findings and analysis follows. The last part contains the conclusion and some policy recommendations.

Higher education in Kenya – growth and diversification

Since the late 1980s the provision of higher education in Kenya has become increasingly diversified. The diversification has taken two forms: first is the establishment and growing prominence of private universities; and second is the privatisation within the state universities through the introduction of 'parallel' programmes (Eisemon 1992; Oketch 2000, 2004; Nyaigoti-Chacha 2004; Abagi et al. 2004). These two changes have subsequently introduced choice for students with ability to pay, who hitherto had to contend with the offer that was given to them through the state higher education Joint Admissions Board. While the board still has its functions in selecting all the students who join the state universities under the regular government subsidy, those who sponsor themselves in the state universities, as well as those who end up at the numerous private universities, have opportunity for preference and choice that didn't exist a decade or so ago. More importantly, the minimum entry requirement to join the university which traditionally meant that those who joined the private universities were rather 'rejects' of the stringent selection process has been redefined by the government, and now those who opt to join the private universities face similar academic requirements as those who join the state universities under the parallel degree programmes. This has therefore meant that the private universities, especially the established ones, are no longer viewed as offering 'second class' education. It has also meant that some form of competition has been introduced in higher education in Kenya between the state parallel programmes competing for students with the private universities. It has also changed the way students with ability to pay may choose universities. There are now three prevailing options. They can either join the private universities or parallel programmes at the state universities or go overseas. With the last option (going overseas) being more expensive and with increased stringent visa requirements to traditionally popular destinations such as UK, the US and Australia, the first two have become popular with students and their families.

University education has dramatically expanded, particularly since the 1980s. From a humble beginning at independence in 1963 with one university college, the country now boasts more than 20 universities and university colleges. The university college status was attained following a 1961 Act of the East African Commission which upgraded the Royal Technical College, Nairobi, to University College status. The Royal Technical College had operated as an institution since 1952. Its establishment is traced to 1947 when the Asian community in Kenya petitioned the colonial authorities to charter a college as a memorial to Gandhi and one that would specialise in offering training in commerce and technical subjects. Although the petition was rejected, it led to the founding of the Royal Technical College in 1952 (Eisemon 1992; Oketch 2004). University College Nairobi remained a constituent of the University of Eastern Africa until 1970, when it was upgraded to University of Nairobi following institutional iterations and by an Act of Kenya Parliament (Eisemon 1992; Oketch 2004). For the first two decades of independence, Kenya operated with a single university. There was no choice as those who planned to enter university locally knew they were either to join Nairobi and its constituent college, Kenyatta University, or proceed to Europe, particularly the UK or North America, for higher education. India also attracted a sizeable number that went overseas for higher education. Whatever may have been regarded as private university was 'insignificant' in Kenya's higher education landscape as it was even more prestigious to join Kenya Polytechnic than go to unknown small private

university institution. A private university was simply viewed as 'second class' education. But policies pursued by the government since the 1980s not only mark unprecedented expansion of state owned higher education, but also usher in an era in which the private universities shed off their 'second class' education image. First, Moi University was established in 1981 following the recommendations of the Kenya Education Commission Report, popularly known as the MacKay Report (Government of Kenya, 1981) to become the second state university. Kenyatta, which had been a constituent of Nairobi University, was upgraded to university status in 1985. Following the Kenya Education Commission Report of 1988 which recommended that state colleges be upgraded to university status, Kenya now has seven state universities with several constituent colleges and 17 private universities. Enrolment at the state universities has gone up dramatically from 571 students enrolled at the university college Nairobi in 1963–1964 to about 35,000 in 2000–2001 in numerous state universities (Oketch 2004). This figure does not accurately reflect the numbers enrolled under parallel programmes now thought to outnumber the regular student population. Private universities have also grown in number although remained small in the number of students that they enrol. It is estimated that private universities account for 20% of total university enrolment in the country. The main private universities are United States International University, Nairobi (USIU), Catholic University, Daystar University, and University of Eastern Africa Baraton and Strathmore college, which are thought to enrol about 4000 students each on average. From a single university college in 1963 at the time of independence to more than 20 universities over the past two decades, Kenya's higher education can now be described as one that is diversified and massified. But how is diversified supply reflected by the aspirations, perceptions and preferences of prospective students? The section that follows provides some answers.

Method

The objectives of this research are building on previous academic findings on the subject of students college choice behaviour in the US (see Jackson 1982; Carroll et al. 1977; Kohn et al. 1976; Radner and Miller 1975; Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Perna 2000). It is based on the arguments by Jackson (1982) drawn from two complementary models of student choice, the sociological model, and the economic model. The sociological model specifies a variety of social and individual factors leading to occupational and educational aspiration (Jackson 1982, 238). According to the sociological model, educational attainment (which includes college entry) results from the interaction between aspirations and real-world constraints. But sociologists tend not to have much interest on the effect of constraints and so they focus on the aspiration-building process or aspirations themselves (Jackson 1982). The economists on the other hand are interested more on constraints and so they tend to specify that students first exclude and then evaluate alternatives, the exclusion criteria being largely a product of geographic, economic and academic factors and the evaluation criteria a function of students' family backgrounds, social contexts and academic experiences. The difference between the two models is that economists are mostly interested in the relationships between the attributes of 'goods' and individual choices, and these interests lead to models that emphasise the interaction between preferences, largely a function of aspiration, and constraints (Jackson, 1982). Elements of both models are included in the much applied Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model that has influenced research in this subject in the US. In their model, Hossler and Gallagher identify three phases in the choice behaviour, which they label as: (1) predisposition; (2) search; and (3) choice. But since the Kenyan selection system is different from US and college age cohort participation is low at about 5%, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model is less relevant in this paper compared to Jackson's (1982) model.

Procedure

During the month of August 2005, a survey questionnaire was randomly administered to 200 students from 23 different schools in Kenya. These were students who resided in Nairobi City around this period of a month-long school holidays. They were all students in the final year of high school who were on a rather shorter holiday (less than one month) as they were required to report back to their respective schools to cover the syllabus as candidates for the national examination known as Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE), which they were to sit for later on in the year. They were aged between 17- to 20-years-old with a majority reporting 18 years as their age. The samples were obtained by means of a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. The initial information on where to get students who were candidates was obtained with assistance of one high school teacher who introduced the research team to some of their students who were KCSE candidates. These candidates in turn introduced the team to their friends and those whom they knew to be KSCE candidates within their Nairobi residence suburbs. Through this process of convenient snowball sampling, random samples numbering 200 were selected and questionnaires administered to them. Because of snowball process the sample ended up with some schools being over-represented in the samples and these were mostly schools within Nairobi city. It can be said therefore that these results represent the aspirations, perceptions and preferences of KCSE students in Nairobi.

The motivation for the study was to assess students' aspirations to undertake university education and their perceptions and preferences of public and private universities, and compare these based on their socio-economic background and gender. Moreover, given the high levels of unemployment in the country even among university graduates, were high school students being put-off and loosing the desire to continue with education? Some of the recent discussion of higher education in Kenya paint a picture of a growing value attached to private universities by families put off by the image of congestion at state universities, particularly since the introduction of cost-sharing and parallel programmes (see Oketch 2004) but do students see it the same way? Ultimately, the aim of the questionnaire was to provide some analysis of: (1) students college aspirations in Kenya; (2) student perceptions of public and private universities and; (3) students preferences; (4) contribute to the debate on elite vs. mass higher education systems.

Of the 200 questionnaires which were administered, 199 were collected back with complete information. This nearly 100% response was achieved because the researchers went back to each student to collect the forms. 141 (70.85%) of the respondents were male and 58 (29.15%) were female. This sample had more males because of the method used to obtain the sample.

Aspirations and preferences

After filling in their names, sex and family socio-economic status, pupils were asked about their aspiration to undertake university education. The aim was to find out how media reports about the difficulties that students experienced at the state universities coupled with the paucity of jobs upon graduating with a degree was reflected by students' aspirations to go to university. The answers revealed that 185 (92.96%) aspired to undertake university education; only 14 (7.04) reported that they did not aspire to undertake university education. In the next question, it was thought that factors such as having a family member with university education experience might influence a student's aspirations. So it was asked if they had any family members with university education experience, or any that were currently undertaking university education. Given that the questionnaire was administered in Nairobi to pupils who were on short school holiday, and with inequalities between rural and urban Kenya in terms of the qualities of secondary schools (Somerset 1974), it was anticipated that a majority would report having a family member with university education. If the questionnaire were to be administered in the rural

areas, the opposite would have been anticipated, given the disparities that exist between rural and urban school quality, combined with the fact that most university graduates end up in Nairobi more than anywhere else in the country. The answers revealed that 82 (41.21%) had a member of their immediate family (sibling or parent) with a university education, while a majority 117 (58.79%) reported that they didn't have any family member with university education. This response reflected the likely household income level of the various suburbs of Nairobi based on the average monthly house rents and types of houses in those suburbs. The responses were divided into suburbs which were categorised by the researcher as being for low income earners (unlikely to have members with university education), those with residents whom would be regarded as middle income earners (likely to have members with university education), and those for high-income earners (highly likely to have members with university degree education). The response from the pupils showed that 124 (62.31%) considered themselves as coming from ordinary income families, 72 (36.18%) reported coming from middle income families, and 3 (1.51%) reported that they were from highly well off background. Obviously the high-income sample is too small but it needs to be noted that Kenya's highest income families are very few. Since it wasn't asked if the respondent was staying with a relative rather than their own parents, there could have been some under reporting or over reporting in terms of income or 'class'. It is not unusual for a brother who has broken the economic barriers from a rural or low-income background to stay with a sibling who is still in school, or through marriage for in-laws or relatives to stay together. So there is a possibility that some students may have responded according to what their parents earned rather than what the individuals whom they lived with earned.

The next question asked students about their perception of private and public universities. This question was intended to know how public and private universities were perceived by prospective university students. There had been positive media reports about some of the more established private universities in the country such as the United States International University, Daystar University, and Catholic University, Strathmore College and less favourable reports about the conditions at the state universities, particularly since the introduction of direct cost-sharing and parallel degree programmes. To analyse the responses, those who aspire to enter university were separated from those who did not aspire to undertake university education. The responses reveal that of those who aspired to enter university, 60 (30.77%) had a positive perception of private universities and 135 (69.23%) had a negative perception of private universities. Clearly, a majority of the students did not seem to have been influenced by the negative media reports about conditions at the state universities. They still perceived state universities more positively. It might however be argued that private universities appeal to a certain group, either because of their religiosity or those who simply want a smaller institution (differentiated demand). Given that private universities have some religious affiliation and are smaller in size compared to state universities, the results might be capturing just that 31% who will always view private universities favourably. It may also provide the answer to the question why private universities only cater for 20% of the entire university enrolment in the country.

The information gathered did not include information on the students' academic performance, but it was still asked if they would accept an offer to join a public university if they qualified under the JAB selection criteria. This question was prompted by the fact that a direct offer to join public university is still rigidly conducted through JAB. One can choose to decline the offer if they wish but that is a choice only for one who qualifies but may have no aspiration to enter university or those with resources to afford self-sponsorship (parallel programme), those who prefer and can afford private universities and/or those who only want to undertake university education abroad for the prestige of international qualification attached to them. Indirectly, it was asking students about the role of JAB. The response shows that of those who aspired to enter university, 186 (94.42%) would accept admission into public university if they qualified and

Table 1. Pupils' ranking of universities in Kenya (N= 199).

Preferred university	Frequency	%	Cum %
University of Nairobi – public	81	40.7	40.7
Kenyatta University – public	35	17.59	58.29
Moi University – public	18	9.05	67.34
Maseno University – public	16	8.04	75.38
Egerton University – public	13	6.53	81.91
JKUAT* –public	12	6.03	87.94
USIU** – private	6	3.02	90.96
Strathmore University – private	5	2.51	93.47
Catholic University – private	5	2.51	95.98
Dayster University – private	5	2.51	98.49
No preference – any university	1	0.5	98.99
None-doesn't prefer any	2	1.01	100
TOTAL	199	100	

Note: *Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology; **United States International University

only 11 (5.58%) would not accept admission into public university even if they qualified. It can be argued that even those who had positive view of private university would still prefer to enter public university if they qualified for university education. It also showed that students were either satisfied with the JAB system or were simply uninformed of the limitations that JAB places on their preferences. So the same question was asked differently, this time asking them to name their top most and preferred university in the country. The responses are as provided in Table 1.

What is interesting from Table 1 is that all the public universities are represented but only a handful of the 'well established' private universities were mentioned. The list of universities was not provided in the questionnaire, so these are names that the students themselves generated.

Since it wasn't directly asked if it was public or private university that they considered best, the variable, *is public or private university best* was derived from the above responses and the results show that 181 (90.95%) would have considered public university to be better than private university, 15 (7.54%) would have considered private university to be better than public university and only 3 (1.51%) did not care much between public or private university. The variable *which one would you prefer, public or private?* was also derived from Table 1. The results show that 161 (81.73%) preferred public university to private university and only 36 (18.27%) preferred private university. It is interesting to note that only 18% would prefer private universities although responses in an earlier question on perception indicated that 31% had positive view of private universities. This implies that to have positive perception doesn't necessarily translate to preference.

As was mentioned earlier in the discussion on the growth and diversification in Kenya's higher education, there is now an aspect of privatisation within the public universities under the parallel degree programmes. This is the aspect that has brought about some of the negative media publicity on state universities. It is also argued by some that it is indeed what has propelled private higher education to the forefront of Kenya's higher education (Oketch 2004). Critics however argue that these parallel programmes have 'cheapened' university degrees as state universities have become massified with classes filled beyond capacity and lecturers teaching round the clock without time for research. The selectivity that makes Oxford and Cambridge in the UK or the American Ivy Leagues look elitist institutions has sort of been dismantled at

the once selective and 'elitist' University of Nairobi because Nairobi now uses pricing to admit anyone with minimum requirement to enter university into the parallel programme. But how do prospective students view this problem? Would they prefer parallel programme at state university over private university? After all, both parallel and private universities cost almost the same in some programmes. So it was asked if prospective students supported the idea of self-sponsored students at the public universities. This question was asking if students would have preferred the 'elitist' image of Nairobi University that existed until the massive enrolment increase through parallel programmes. The response shows that 160 (80.40%) said they did support the idea of parallel programmes and would consider undertaking university education under the parallel programme if circumstances necessitated that. Only 39 (19.60) said they didn't. This was an unanticipated response. It had been assumed by the researcher that a majority would suggest that public universities should stay public, and that the idea of self-sponsorship be abandoned, and be replaced with a system where everybody gained entry into the state university under same criteria, rather than a two tier system whereby in one willingness and ability to pay determined acceptance whereas in another with government sponsorship a competitive merit system was applied.

Relationship between pupils' background and aspiration and preferences

Might there be some relationship between pupils' background and the way they responded to the questions on aspirations and preferences? Put differently might a pupil's background influence his/her aspiration and preferences for university education in Kenya? Would the results confirm what is already known from international literature on aspirations and preferences? Such information would be useful policy-wise in making precise decision on college admissions. The next step in the analysis is therefore to respond to these questions. First, aspiration will be considered in relation to pupil characteristics, such as having a family member with university education, sex and income/class. The results are presented in Tables 2 and 3.

The results in Tables 2 and 3 focus on aspirations to undertake university education and other factors such as having family member with university education, gender, preference and economic class. From Table 2, 64% of students from 'ordinary' class backgrounds aspired to undertake university education compared to 43% from middle class. This was rather unusual finding for international comparison where it is often revealed that those from 'working' class backgrounds have less aspiration for college compared to the 'middle class' backgrounds. In the

Table 2. Those who aspire to enter university (N=185).

Pupil characteristics	Frequency	%
'Ordinary' background	119	64
Middle-class background	64	43
Upper-class background	2	1
Male	130	70
Female	55	28
With family member/s with university education	76	41
Without family member with university education	109	59
Prefer private university	14	8
Prefer public university	170	81
Support parallel programme	150	81
Don't support parallel programme	35	19

Table 3. Those who don't aspire to enter university (N=14).

Pupil characteristics	Frequency	%
'Ordinary' background	5	36
Middle-class background	8	57
Upper-class background	1	7
Male	11	79
Female	3	21
With family member/s with university education	6	43
Without family member with university education	8	57
Prefer private university	1	7
Prefer public university	11	79
Support parallel programme	10	71
Don't support parallel programme	4	29

UK for example, one study has indicated that there is a great deal of concern about the ability of universities to attract and retain working-class students (Quinn et al. 2005). In America, African-Americans have been compared poorly with white pupils on how they make college entry choices because their income and resources don't match those of white children (Perna 2000). In much of Africa, education was seen as the means for social mobility right from the time of independence, and the poor and the rich have tended to have similar educational aspirations. Heyneman's (1979, 181) study of poor children in Uganda illustrates this point and explains it on the basis that 'the school children of the wealthy are no more self-confident than are the school children of the impoverished'. Somerset's (1974) study, while not directly involving social and income differences, does indicate that it was income based on the types of schools that students attended that affected their aspirations but not necessarily that those from low income backgrounds had lower aspirations. In fact, Somerset concluded that those from low quality schools would have known that immediate employment upon completion of O level was more realistic in view of their financial constraints. But his findings could also be interpreted to show the options that were readily available to students who had completed fourth form. One could join A level or teacher training college, or polytechnic, or find employment then with such a qualification both in the civil service and the private sector. With a saturated qualifications market today and the scrapping of A level following the 1981 Mackay-led Education Commission recommendation, rapid expansion of education and unmatched labour market expansion due mainly to sluggish and sometimes negative economic growth, the only option available to Kenyan student today is perhaps to either have a university degree or not have it. Many pupils are increasingly becoming aware that they cannot find most well paying formal jobs without university education in the near future – not even being a teacher is guaranteed anymore, as Kenya has stopped automatic employments of its own trained teachers.

Similarly, 59% of those who aspired to undertake university education had no family member with or undertaking university education, compared to 41% who had. While 70% of those who aspired to go to university were male, of those who didn't aspire to go to university, 79% were also male. Only 8% of those who aspire to go to university prefer private university over public university, compared with 92% who prefer public university. 81% supported parallel programmes compared with 19% who don't support parallel programmes among those who aspire to go to university. One of the motivations and key assumptions made in undertaking this study was that private choice is positive and is needed in the Kenyan higher education context, yet the data from the sample shows that students do not articulate a need for greater choice.

Trends in relation to public university choice, or private university choice

What kind of student is likely to prefer private university over state university is a question that would be of interest to private universities in Kenya. The results are provided in Table 4.

Trends presented in Table 4 show that 52% of ordinary class students prefer public university, compared with 28% of middle class background students. Similarly 48% of those without a family member at university prefer public university compared with 33% of those who had a family member with university education. What is interesting in Table 3 is that 22% of those who have a positive perception of private university still prefer public universities over private universities.

Conclusion

This was a small sample study but one that has provided some insights on student aspirations, perceptions and preferences of public or private universities in Kenya. The findings from the survey reveal a trend which appears to suggest that students are still inclined to enter the 'elite' segment of the Kenyan higher education system in spite of massification. It is also clear that public universities are still regarded more positively by a majority of the students in spite of the various reports that indicate a decline in the quality of education they offer. Many of these students are also less bothered by the idea of having self-sponsored, parallel degree students at the state universities. Interestingly, even those from the ordinary socio-economic background who would be expected to be against the tendency to privatise state higher education did not oppose this move. These results cannot be taken at surface value as they possibly reflect an unformed student population that still associates prestige with quality. The ranking of universities according to these students and as presented in Table 1 indicates that the elite image of the older universities is still attractive in spite of the existence of many private universities. The fact that this study was conducted in Nairobi may also have played a role in the selection of Nairobi by majority students in the sample. What this paper has not been able to address is why there is still a preference for state 'elite' universities in Kenya.

Table 4. Trends in choice of public university, or choice of private university (N=199).

Factor	Prefer public university (Frequency)	Prefer private university (Frequency)
Those with family member with university education	65 (33%)	15 (8%)
Those without family member with university education	96 (48%)	21 (11%)
Male	113 (57%)	26 (13%)
Female	48 (24%)	10 (5%)
Ordinary economic background	104 (52%)	19 (10%)
Middle-class	55 (28%)	16 (8%)
Upper-class	2 (1%)	1 (0.5%)
Those who supports parallel	127 (64%)	33 (17%)
Those who do not support parallel	34 (17%)	3 (1.5%)
Those who would accept admission to public university	153 (77%)	32 (16%)
Those who would not accept admission to public university	6 (3%)	4 (2%)
Positive perception of private university	43 (22%)	16 (8%)
Negative perception of private university	114 (57%)	20 (10%)

This paper passes the baton to other researchers to explore reasons as to why students in Kenya aspire to enter the 'elite' components of the Kenyan higher education despite a degree of massification that has taken over previous decades.

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Notes

1. Parallel programmes refer to students who are admitted to state universities on the basis of their willingness and ability to pay the full cost of their entire university education without government assistance. They have their own classes alongside the regular students admitted and subsidised by the government, hence the term 'parallel'. The parallel students shall have scored less than the regular students in their final year high school examination upon which university selection is based but will have met the minimum requirement to undertake university education. It was introduced in the 1990s as part of cost-recovery/demand management measures and to raise additional funds while widening participation at the public universities.

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