

MARKET ORIENTATION: DO UNIVERSITY STUDENT EXPERIENCES MATTER? A CASE STUDY OF SECOND YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UGANDA

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ABSTRACT

Market orientation in the higher education sector is receiving growing scholarly attention. There are several studies which show that market orientation has positive outcomes for organization performance. However, there is a lack of evidence in studies examining the relationship of market orientation and university student experiences in general and in specific Uganda. Hence, this study. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate for the study. A sample of nine students in their second year of study in the Faculty of Marketing and International Business was used. Personal in-depth interviews using structured open-ended questions were used to examine the variables under study. A qualitative data analysis was carried out which showed that market orientation has many associations with university student experiences. The main themes for market orientation were customer focus and functional orientation which are important in creating and sustaining student experiences. The results showed some lapses in the implementation of market orientation. The findings for the association between study variables were consistent with extant literature except in cases where the study returned mixed results. The main themes for student experiences revealed that self-motivation is very important, gossip can have negative outcomes on student experiences, and though the physical environment is important it has not been well attended to. Lastly, the influence of peers and participation in non-academic activities could have mixed effects.

Keywords: market orientation; student experiences; campus atmosphere

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing scholarship that recognizes the importance of market orientation in higher education (Chandler, et al., 2021). While market orientation in other sectors of economic

endeavor has received much inquiry it seems up to now far little attention has been paid to the relationship between market orientation and student experiences in higher education. A Google search on November 20, 2024,

revealed that the highest citations of a scholarly article on these set of variables was only 36.

It was possible for private universities to emerge in the late 1980s because of the liberalization policy adopted by the government of Uganda. Prior to this policy all university education was a monopoly of the state being provided for by Makerere University established in 1922. The first private universities were chartered in 1988 and there has been a rapid growth to the current number in the year 2024 of 8 and 43 public and private universities respectively (The National Council for Higher Education, 2024). Some of the main challenges in Uganda include management and meeting the ever-increasing demand for education (Kasozi, 2016). However, there is scanty focus on creating an experience for students. It appears university students in Uganda have not yet been fully acknowledged as customers and co-creators of better universities. For instance, in the UK, student surveys have been institutionalized since 2006 and provide one set of data for evaluating the performance of universities (Neves, et al., 2024). There is therefore an

apparent gap in knowledge which this research seeks to address. The main significance of this study is that it examines how student experience shape market orientation in higher education institutions. To this end it contributes to filling a gap in extant literature of lack of studies on second-year student experiences in Ugandan universities.

Deepening the understanding of student experiences in higher education is vital but seems not to be a major issue in some universities in Uganda. Consequently, evaluating university performance without the metric of student experiences will only be partial. Lastly, the greatest benefit of creating an environment which is student oriented may be missed if the relationship between market orientation and student experiences is not investigated and findings explored further for possible implementation. The main question of research is: What is the relationship between market orientation and university student experiences?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Market orientation comprises mainly of customer orientation,

competitor orientation, and coordination between functions. These are reviewed in the following discussion.

Customer Orientation

Customer orientation involves activities of collecting information on existing and potential customers, sharing this information, and taking actions which target specific customer needs by creating the highest value proposition (Gulakova, 2021). Customer orientation affects an organization's stake holder's customers inclusive (Zhao, 2022). The need to adopt a customer orientation in universities in Uganda is evidenced by the growing enrollment figures. In 2018 total enrollment was about 261,000 then in 2019 it was about 275,000 (The National Council for Higher Education, 2024). While the National Council for Higher Education has provided a quality assurance framework there is no consensus in extant literature on the meaning of student experience (Matu, et al., 2021). Additionally, it seems that there is scanty focus on examining experiences of university students in Uganda and marketing philosophies of the various

universities (Kaguhangire-Barifaijo, et al., 2020).

Competitor Orientation

Private universities emerged in the late 1980s because of the liberalization policy instituted by the government of Uganda which is now encouraging students to consider applying to vocational technical training institutions as a viable career path. This means there is latent competition among higher education institutions which a market orientation can provide some solutions.

Coordination between functions

Universities in Uganda use a model which provides for three distinct groups of activities: administration, academic, and support services. Anecdotal evidence that all is not well in the coordination function in some Uganda universities can be deduced by the many university student strikes in Uganda (Ainamani, 2019) frequent strikes by academic staff (Daily Monitor, 2021).

University Student Experiences

Student experiences are important in the transition of learners to productive members of society.

Accordingly, there is an increased examination of student experiences. According to a bibliometric analysis most of the scholars in this field are from Nordic countries, US, Australia, and UK (Ertem, & Aypay, 2023). The context of Uganda and Africa remains understudied.

Academic Student Performance

There is consensus in the literature that academic performance is one of the student experiences in higher education (Zhang, et al., 2022). The standard practice for reporting by higher education institutions is based on degree program and gender without providing details of performance (Martin, 2024). While the detailed data is available in individual higher education institutions, to the best of our knowledge aggregated data has not been published. This research therefore does not provide historical data on student performance in higher education institutions precisely because it examines individual student experiences which have not been sufficiently studied.

The most recent study of university students in Uganda did not investigate student academic

performance but the validity and reliability of the constructs in the Servqual model (Kyoshaba, et al., 2022). There is a gap in the literature concerning student academic experiences which this study seeks to fill.

The relationship of market orientation with student academic performance remains largely under studied. Google scholar as at March 4, 2024 has no exact match for the variables under study instead most of the studies relate to business performance of higher education institutions the most cited ones being by (Ahmed Zebal, & Goodwin, 2012) and (Kivistö, et al., 2019) with 99 and 53 citations respectively. Clearly therefore there is very scanty research on the relationship between the variables in the present study.

Social and Emotional Wellbeing

In the last two decades, there has been growing concern and attention over the social and emotional wellbeing of young adults and this concern was heightened during the COVID 19 outbreak where countries implemented lockdowns and restrictions which negatively impacted

all aspects of people's lives. The sudden change from physical to online classes and the loss of social connections during the pandemic placed strains on student's health leading to stress, anxiety, and depression (Pei, et al., 2022). Therefore, social, and emotional wellbeing is a crucial part of students' lives at the University.

Campus Atmosphere

A campus atmosphere is an environment with the right collective energy, attitudes, and interactions among students, faculty, non-academic staff, and visitors with the aim of inducing the academic rigor and standard needed to stimulate students' thinking. The setup of the physical university campus has a direct impact on student's learning and campus experience (Mulrooney, & Kelly, 2020).

Theorization

This study adapts the market orientation theory which is multifaceted. A market orientation provides the foundation for understanding customer wants and responding to competition in a proactive manner and thereby

achieving superior performance and competitive advantage (Sukoco, et al., 2022).

Attitude Theory

This study adapts the Attitude theory which has three basic components: affect, behavior, and cognition (Rind, 2022). Since student experiences invariably involve affect, cognition, and behavior this study finds attitude theory essential in its discourse.

RESEARCH METHOD

Most studies have used quantitative positive orientation with a cross-sectional survey. However as previously observed there is scanty research on the phenomenon of university student experiences in Uganda. Accordingly, the use by this study of the qualitative approach which enables a deeper understanding of the phenomenon through the voices of individuals who have experienced it is appropriate (Creswell, 2014). Authorization to conduct the survey was given by the Dean of the faculty. Thereafter purposive sampling of nine second-year students, in the Faculty of Marketing and International Business

of one university, based on interest in participating in the survey was used. The name of the university is hereby anonymized for the sake of confidentiality. Undergraduates in second year were selected because they have one year's experience and have a stake in the various experiences for the remaining two years. The recruitment phase involved requesting the student leaders in the faculty to reach out to second year students advising those who are interested in participating in the survey to register in person with the principal investigator within five working days. The target number of participants was twelve (6 female +6 males) selected on first come basis. However, at the end of the period for registration only four females and five males had registered.

Personal in-depth interviews were held with nine students (4 female and 5 male) though the target sample was 12 respondents with gender parity. Personal interviews are versatile and often secure higher response rates.

The measurement for market orientation was adopted from constructs used by previous scholars (Muya, 2022). The main sub constructs are customer orientation/focus,

functional coordination, and competitor orientation. This study used the first two sub constructs. The measurement of university student experiences was adopted from constructs in extant literature (Amado Mateus, et al., 2023). This study used the following sub constructs: social and emotional wellbeing, Campus environment, and academic performance.

The measurement instrument used open-ended questions to determine important issues regarding market orientation and student experiences. A semi structured interview guide with three sections was used. Section one: Participant Profile – demographics: age, program, and sponsorship, Section Two: Perceptions of market orientation – customer focus, and functional coordination. Section three: Social and emotional wellbeing, campus environment, and academic performance.

Validity was catered for by adapting questions which have been used by some scholars and through piloting with experts in the marketing discipline. Reliability was ensured by taking notes verbatim of what the respondent said and reading back to

confirm accuracy of the respective transcribed records.

The target population was the second-year students enrolled in the Faculty of Marketing & International Business. The use of small samples ranging from 5-25 individuals is the norm in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Accordingly, this study used a sample size of n=9 with 4 females and 5 males. The participants were chosen purposively on first come basis.

A 12-item questionnaire was designed to elicit evaluations of market orientation, and student experiences. The content analysis deployed common procedures previously used by scholars (Kleinheksel, et al., 2020). First an exhaustive list of significant statements, without repetitions, was generated from the responses. This was followed by coding and grouping the significant statements into broader categories until no new codes emerge. Lastly a description was made of the most common significant experiences within the University. Verbatim significant statements were quoted to support the analysis of responses.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Demographic characteristics

The students were drawn from the Faculty of Marketing & International Business. The target sample was six females and six males to ensure a gender balance. However, only nine students signed up. The details are shown on the table below:

Table 1 Selected Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics		Frequency
Gender	Female	4
	Male	5
Age	20-25	7
	26-30	2
Sponsor	Parent/Guardian	7
	Employer	2
	Government	0

Market orientation

The study scope was restricted to customer orientation and functional coordination. The main reason being that the students have direct experience with these components of market orientation in as far as their experiences at university are concerned.

Customer Orientation

The study sought information on three aspects which are critical to customer orientation, namely: sharing information with target customers,

customer satisfaction evaluation, and showing appreciation for customer patronage. Regarding sharing information, the majority (5) of the students advised that no information was shared with them prior to joining the degree program. Three common experiences of not receiving information are captured in the views of two students: Student 6 remarked: “I was unaware of the Bachelor of International Business as a program, but didn’t know what it was all about in terms of meaning, the kind of jobs offered after graduation.” Student 8 observed there was no personalized information instead: “There was an advert for different programs which I responded to but got admitted to a program I had not applied for.” However, a few of the students observed that information had been shared such as: degree entry requirements, fee’s structure, and job career opportunities through adverts in the press/media. This aligns with (Gulakova, 2021) who found that disseminating information to customers helps a company to create value and thus meet customer expectations. Additionally, (Moreno-Charris, et al., 2022) found that market

orientation does enhance firm response capabilities.

There was a consensus that some evaluation of satisfaction in terms of likes and dislikes was done. Students have evaluated academic curriculum, academic staff, and campus resources. Two categories of common likes emerged and are represented in the views of Students 7 and 9 who observed: “the program is flexible using both online and face to face delivery methods which accommodate my schedules and preferences” Student 7. Lastly Student 9 observed “the program offers numerous opportunities to connect with peers and industry professionals which expands my network.” The majority of the dislikes fall in three categories: poor communication evidenced by student 7 saying: “Some instructors provide inadequate feedback on assignments and exams making it difficult to understand the improvements required.” Additionally, some lecturers change the blended learning schedules without notifying the students in good time.

The second dislike was the perceived high level of fees. Student 7 observed that “the program tuition and

fees are excessive causing financial strain.” Additionally, there is the view that the published tuition and fees are only partial as Student 9 observed: “the total cost of attending the program should include estimates for accommodation, meals, living expenses, and financial assistance/loan facilities available.” These estimates once available would go a long way in determining the cost of attending a university program. This aligns with (Chandler, et al., 2021) who found that when students pay fees they are considered as customers and accordingly have expectations which have to be handled.

The third dislike was the inadequate facilities for persons living with disability. There was an observation that “there is limited support for students with disabilities. The program resources and accommodation for students with disabilities are inadequate” (Student 7).

Showing appreciation for patronage was collected under two perspectives: feeling valued or feeling ignored. Two dimensions of feeling valued emerged. The first was in terms of providing learning/academic processes. These include Sharing of

lecture timetables, completing the syllabus, publicizing Examination Rules, and lecturers making an extra effort to ensure learners understand. This dimension is aptly described by Student 6: “the university has provided good resources that enhance the smooth running of academic activities. I feel valued as a human being.” The second perspective involves providing for social and religious diversity. “The university has provided space for the meeting of different Ugandan cultural associations and religious affiliations. This shows the university values its students” (Student 9). The foregoing observations align with (Sarki, et al., 2021) who found that student evaluations influence market orientation. Additionally, (Gaol, & Habiburrahman, 2024) established that quality services and facilities have positive outcomes on student satisfaction in universities.

Feeling of being ignored had three dimensions. First lack of recognition “when I get to a particular office, and everyone. seems not to mind my presence really makes me feel ignored” (Student 2). “Low level of follow- up on missed

papers. Basically, zero attention in case someone is being left behind” (Student 9). Lastly, the commercialization of some academic resources which students ordinarily expect to get for free. The issue at hand is the selling of lecture notes/pamphlets by some lecturers. The above findings are discussed below.

The findings from this study indicate lapses in sharing personalized information with target customers. This finding is supported by extant research on universities in Uganda which observes that there are many organizational challenges which can limit implementation of market orientation (Sekiwu, et al., 2019). In specific (Lamaro, et al., 2025) determined these challenges to be: inadequate resources, low levels of stakeholder engagement, and delays in updating curriculums. Lastly, market orientation invariably involves engaging customers by way of getting their likes and dislikes. This study established the likes and dislikes of students. Students’ evaluations are useful, but this is not always the case. Sometimes student evaluations are biased, are influenced by many factors and may be difficult to rely on (Thi

Hue, et al., 2023). Caution is therefore called for when using student evaluations.

Functional Coordination

A university coordinates various activities of academic staff and non-academic/support staff in the delivery of academic programs. Accordingly, students will have experience with both categories of staff. The main themes of student experiences are reported below.

The experiences with academic staff were mainly of three types, namely: Receiving detailed explanations and being mentored to a higher skills level. Five students had this type of experience and Student 3 aptly said: “academic staff in my department have always attended to our questions in case of any difficulty in any course unit.” The second type of experience was being counselled by the Dean of the Faculty. Three students considered this as very motivating, and their view is similar to what one of them observed: “inspiration is a big part of motivation for me in academics” (Student 9). Lastly, the lecture sessions which are held in the mornings are preferred since they give students an

opportunity to pursue other engagements during the latter part of the day. The experiences with academic staff also had some negatives as highlighted below.

The university uses both face-to-face and online modes in the delivery of academic programs to learners. This approach is called blended learning and is currently in vogue. However, most of the students complained of the failure by the university to follow the Blended Timetables. The delay in releasing results online and misplacing student results was a negative according to three students. Lastly, lack of consistency in the delivery of learning evidence by some staff dodging lectures, late start of some course units, staff not being available most times and some staff are not supportive. The students did not have much interaction with non-academic staff and in the circumstances, it is only prudent not to report on this item due to the low response rate on this matter.

Market orientation also entails functional coordination. This aligns with (Bowen, 2024) who found that functional coordination has to be embedded in market-oriented practices

in order to meet student needs. The findings in this study indicate there are challenges when it comes to providing and scheduling blended learning activities. It is imperative to synchronize these activities to minimize the negative effects of online study on student learning such as stress, higher levels of anxiety, and depression (Mostafa, et al., 2023).

Social and Emotional Well Being

Four themes emerged out of the students' responses to social and emotional wellbeing. The first is related to happiness on campus. Social activities like live concerts, games, "makes me happiest" (Student 5). However, the frequency and variety of these activities appears inadequate: "I would like to have more entertainment besides the fresher's ball... we really need fun within our campus" (Student 5). Engaging with supportive and understanding staff members who lecture well also brought happiness (Student 4). Lastly the tech savvy considered the availability of free Wi-Fi as an integral component of happiness at campus (Student 6).

The second theme was related to inspiration and motivation at

campus. While ordinarily parents and lecturers are considered to be sources of inspiration only three students thought so. Most of the students observed that motivation is a personal matter. This common view is succinctly put by one of the students: “Self-motivation.... I have to work harder and attain better grades for my future academic qualifications.” (Student 8).

The third theme was related to inter-student communications. Four students observed that some students are fond of making “unfounded and unjustified complaints against fellow students” (Student 3). Students will be students! This leads to the last common experience highlighted below.

The last common experience was the realization that social interaction between students has some negatives. The most cited is “lack of genuine interpersonal relationships and humility” (Student 7). The second was to do with “lack of genuine academic student to student learning and support” (Student 6), “my first semester was affected a lot by the group members since they used not to show up whenever we had to meet for group discussions” (Student 3). A

discussion of findings on social and emotional wellbeing follows.

The study findings underlined happiness as part and parcel of social and emotional wellbeing. Specifically, social events, games, and availability of the internet contributed very significantly to happiness. This finding is supported by the observation that social media has positive influence on undergraduate and post grad students (Almahaireh, et al., 2022). However, recent scholars have put a caveat on this as too much of it is bad and detrimental to student experience (Shi, et al., 2020). The second component of social and emotional wellbeing was the source of inspiration for university students. The respondents underlined self as most important for inspiration and motivation. This is supported in extant literature: Self-talk is most effective (Uhrich, et al., 2023). Lastly intrinsic motivation should be emphasized (Teo, et al., 2023). However, there is a minority observation that both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation have no significant relationship with academic performance (Laliman, & Palacio, 2022).

The last dimension of social and emotional wellbeing entails communication among students. This study finds a rumor mill to be very much alive. Gossiping among students can be good as it builds social bonds, clarifies social norms, and builds character resilience amongst students (Dores Cruz, et al., 2021). However, gossiping has a dark side: can cause serious damage to reputation through character assassination and lead to burn-out and suicide intentions in some instances (Wang, et al., 2020).

Campus Atmosphere

Three categories of common experiences emerged from the analysis of student responses. First, the student likes and dislikes. The likes were mainly on ambiance. That the campus is “quiet and cool with greenery in addition to being clean with tarmacked roads” (Student 8). The second category of experiences dealt with student dislikes the main ones were: sitting arrangement, some lecture rooms don’t have enough space for students, broken furniture, expired posters and flyers as Student 3 remarked “I dislike the flyers which are all around the classrooms which make

the lecture rooms look shabby”. There is dissatisfaction with IT connectivity “it is hard to access Wi-Fi within the university. (Student 9). Lastly the number of reading shades is grossly inadequate.

The findings underlined the importance of the physical campus environment to student experiences in a university. This rhymes with extant literature where there is a consensus about this matter, (Mulrooney, & Kelly, 2020). However, according to the study respondents there are some lapses in the maintenance of the campus environment.

Academic Performance

There were four common categories of experiences which emerged. The first concerns the likes and dislikes with the academic delivery/learning in the program. Most of the students liked the competence of the academic staff, professional delivery and the use of group discussions led by the respective lecturers. The use of face – to - face learning is still liked by the students: “physical classes are more convenient because one gets to interact eye-to-eye with lecturers and fellow students

concerning burning academic issues” (Student 6). The use of online delivery is disliked by students mainly due to the inadequate time and opportunity it provides for learner talk back: “online lectures! I really hate them because sometimes I can’t understand especially course units involving calculations.” (Student 7). Additionally, there is limited free internet access which forces students to incur additional mobile data expenses. The delay in releasing results was disliked by the majority of the respondents. Lastly between students those who are not serious and dodge tasks assigned to groups are disliked. The second common category of experience is related to interactions with other students and lecturers which affect academic performance. The positive side with peers is that they are able to offer personalized learner – to - learner support: “discussion with peers to a greater extent affects my academic performance.” (Student 9). The downside of peer interactions was noted to consist of loss of identity and changed priorities including values: “some peers are the ones who encourage other students to engage in risky behaviors” (Student 6).

The third area of interaction was with academic staff. Most of the students found this interaction beneficial. A common observation rhymed with this view: “academic staff create an environment which supports student autonomy by supporting student learning choices and interests” (Student 6). The weakest point in the interaction with some academic staff was their unavailability when needed by students. According to Student 2 “academic staff not being in their offices when needed by students for in-depth subject information and or follow-up consultations is the greatest disadvantage.”

The last area of interaction established that participation in non-academic campus activities has mixed results on student academic performance. Some of the respondents argued that such activities are beneficial in terms of networking with fellow students from other programs and or alumni, “deepening subject knowledge and obtaining advance information about the requirements in the world of work.” (Student 5). Other respondents opined that non-academic activities are a minefield for many students. First, such activities put a

high demand on time and often limit the time available for academic study. Second “schedules for such activities may clash with academic timetables and therefore present the student with a dilemma on which activity to prioritize.” (Student 2). Observations relating to the above findings are reported in the following paragraphs.

This study investigated academic performance as the last dimension of student experiences at university. The students preferred face-to-face method of delivery. However, post COVID 19 there is now a growing shift to the use of both face-to-face and online delivery. Blended learning is now the new normal and its use will increase going forward into the future (Nikolopoulou, 2022).

This study made the finding that peer interactions have mixed results on academic performance. Some of the respondents deemed it beneficial. This is consistent with similar findings in extant research which posit that peer interactions positively impact academic performance (Pervin, et al., 2021). However other scholars have argued to the contrary (Fujiyama, et al., 2021).

According to some of the respondents some academic staff are not always available for further consultations by students. This finding is consistent with extant research wherein it is noted that academic staff are over worked, stressed out, and lack interest in the job, and in specific to Uganda face burn out and low remuneration (Kabunga, 2020).

The last component of academic experience involved participation in non-academic activities. The findings returned mixed results as to the benefits of these activities to student experiences. Some scholars argue that such activities improve concentration and may have positive impacts on academics (Chen, et al., 2021). Lastly, the context within which participation in non-academic activities occurs needs to be examined otherwise assuming a positive relationship would be an oversimplification (Muhammad, 2023).

Practical Implications

Several practical implications can be drawn from this study. The main four implications are discussed. First, educational institutions should

prioritize information sharing and institutionalize avenues for receiving evaluating feedback from students to enhance market orientation. These activities form the core of market orientation.

Second, higher education institutions should focus on providing quality services and facilities to enhance student experiences. This might well turn out to be a competitive card to play in terms of differentiating one university from the rest.

Third, higher educational institutions should prioritize experiential learning to foster market orientation. This requires a concerted focus on meeting the various types of student experiences while at university.

Lastly, implementing a market orientation can be a tall order for some universities in Uganda given the many challenges they face. Accordingly, therefore it appears an evolutionary approach in the implementation of market orientation would be the most appropriate in the given circumstances.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative for universities to develop a blueprint of what needs to be done in the context of customer

orientation, and functional coordination in order to create and sustain excellent student experiences. The execution of market orientation has consequences on each facet of student experiences. Second, universities should monitor student social and emotional wellbeing through strategic communications. Peer influence has led some students to drug abuse and ill health which can be reduced by counselling through messages targeting the student community.

Keeping the physical environment top-notch should be emphasized at all times as there is a consensus that it directly impacts student experiences. The design of the physical environment should be informed by the likes and dislikes which are documented in the customer orientation.

Lastly, the academic staff-student interface, where some academic staff are reported to be unavailable, should be redesigned and provided on a fortnightly basis. Such an arrangement makes it easy for administrative supervision and follow-up. Lastly, while participation in non-academic activities should be

encouraged it has a downside. This would imply that the management should be keen on the academic performance of students engaged in sports with a view to detecting early decline in academic performance and taking the necessary interventions.

Limitations

The study is limited to one university in Uganda, restricting generalizability. Besides, the study was limited to second-year students undertaking degree studies in marketing and international business. Lastly the study used only the qualitative approach.

Recommendations

Future studies could use mixed methods approaches to validate findings across multiple institutions. The scope could be expanded to include university students undertaking various degree programs.

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