

## Using Qualitative Methods to Explore Students' Perceptions of the University of Nairobi's Institutional Culture, Kenya

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### Abstract

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Debate on gender and education suggest that discourses of culture and institutional norms are responsible for the differential treatment of men and women on campus. Use of quantitative methods in a study of institutional culture, a complex social phenomenon, may provide superficial, incomplete, unreliable numeric-based information. Thus, in researching institutional culture, feminist scholars recommend use of 'personal/individual' words, opinions and experiences, a way of understanding how boys and girls; men and women construct and make sense of their social, cultural, political and economic realities. Through the use of in-depth interviews and focused group discussions, I was able to carefully listen and record the voices of men and women students' experiences and perceptions, a way of constructing varied discourses of institutional culture. Findings from this study reveal gendered experiences that tend to position men and women students differently on campus. The gendered representations and realities tend to some extent reinforce inequalities, social injustices, likely to affect the achievement of gender equality. Drawing from my PhD journey, I will show why qualitative methods should be used to research institutional culture.

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**Keywords:** Qualitative; Quantative methods; Institutional Culture; Feminist.

### 1. Introduction

University culture is "a collective pattern of norms, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide individual behaviour in institutions of higher learning, thus providing a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off campus" (Kuh and Whitt, 2000: 162). Bergquist (1992) outlines four types of institutional culture existing in a contemporary university: collegial, developmental, and managerial and negotiation culture. Although most institutions of higher learning exhibit values related to the four cultures, collegial culture that consist of values and beliefs related to academic freedom and faculty (academic staff) autonomy in teaching, scholarship and research tend to dominate (Bergquist, 1992) on campus.

Cultural diversity is a common phenomenon in contemporary institutions of higher learning. For example, large public, multi-purpose universities comprise different groups whose members may or may not share or abide by the norms, values, practices, beliefs, meanings (Kuh and Whitt, 2000), way of life, behaviours and thinking (Becher, 1984; Pereira, 2007). A university is thus, a complex, social institution (Ruth, 2000) with unique multi-cultural contexts hosting individuals and groups with different priorities, traditions and values (Kuh and Whitt, 2000). The unique diversified culture of each university is defined by its vision, mission and purpose, size, age, location, curriculum, academic standards, knowledge production and dissemination; characteristics of students, faculty and the physical environment (Kuh and Whitt, 1988; Museus, 2007; Parker, 2008).

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The dimensions of institutional culture shape the behaviour and experiences of faculty, managers, students (Museus, 2007), and other individuals working or studying in various universities and campuses. Since universities are heterogeneous entities each with its unique culture, this calls for different treatment because members of the universities have different interests, experiences, perceptions, responsibilities and values (Martin, 2004). Each university environment present students and staff with challenges in terms of what they value understand and accept as norms and practices of their respective cultures (Lewin, 2007). Institutional culture determines what is important and acceptable, and how business is to be conducted at each campus (Parker, 2008), thus, portray norms of experiences lived by people in an institution, usually perceived as natural and normal (Shackleton, 2007). Therefore, treating university culture as unique enable progress to be made on specific initiatives, since each institution operate on different cultural norms and standards (Eckel, Hill and Green, 1998) including University of Nairobi.

Although case studies on universities' institutional culture are more firmly established and researched in South, Central, West and North Africa, Barnes (2007) and Cai (2008) noted that work on the same remain silent, largely unmapped and a fruitful topic of enquiry. This concurs with sentiments by Mama and Barnes, (2007), Morley, (2005), who further pointed out that institutional culture, is an area that has remained unresearched, especially in East Africa and Kenya in particular. In addition, Cai, (2008) noted lack of understanding of culture, absence of effective tools to identify, access and measure culture as challenges likely to hinder research on institutional culture. Thus, the need to use qualitative methods in carrying out research on university's institutional culture.

### **1.1 Qualitative vs. Quantitative Methods and University's Institutional Culture**

The choice of research methods depends on the purpose, the type of information being sought, and the conditions under which the study is being done (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Cai, 2008; Castellan, 2010). Further, Krathwohl (1998), Howe and Eisenhart (1990) suggest that the appropriate method is determined by research questions. The purpose of qualitative study, like was the case with the current study was to enhance deeper understanding of a situation (Castellan, 2010), in this case University of Nairobi's culture. Although Cai (2008) observes that within higher education literature, qualitative methods and organisational culture tend to dominate, however, a number of scholars have expressed concern on the scarcity and limited qualitative data on the experiences of men and women on African campuses. Morley (2005), Mama and Barnes (2007) recommend research to be done on students' experiences in order to illuminate gendered processes and practices within the institutional culture that contribute to the inequalities recorded in disaggregated statistics. Further, Harper (2007) and Adusah-Karikari (2008) points out the need to conduct qualitative research in order to obtain rich description of men and women's lived experiences, a way of answering the question about women's under-representation and their low participation at different levels of the university. Such knowledge will contribute towards achievement of Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, that of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education that promotes lifelong learning opportunities for all in the society regardless of age, sex, culture, race, religion, economic or other status.

In researching institutional culture, Ellsberg and Heise (2005) noted that quantative methods (especially survey methods) may not be the most appropriate since they tend to provide limited data about how men and women experience culture, a complex social phenomenon. This means that qualitative methods give numerical findings/data deeper meaning (Cai, 2008). Thus, knowledge gained through qualitative methods serve as a basis of strengthening and advancing analytical understanding of the descriptive data which can be used to rectify and address status of the University of Nairobi's culture, a way of achieving Post-2015 SDG 4, which calls for a just, equitable and inclusive society.

Drawing from Harper (2007), Harper and Museus (2007) sentiments, quantitative data may to some extent hinder policy designers from making appropriate decisions, since it sometimes provide incomplete information that lack depth, complexity and voice. Commenting on the use of quantative methods (statistics), Farran (1990: 101) argues that such methods are "divorced from the context of their construction and thus lose the meaning they have for the people involved". As such, relying on quantitative methods in a study of institutional culture may provide superficial and unreliable data, which could challenge meaningful transformation on campus. Although Cai (2008) noted that qualitative investigations do not cover a large sample which make it challenging to draw conclusions for empirical generalisations, however, due to the unique and diversified nature of university culture, Simelaine (2001) advice researchers to avoid duplicating studies and contextualise them within the specific university.

Further, Adush-Karikari (2008) caution researchers on the need to avoid generalisation of study findings while using perceptions and experiences as the basis for law reforms. In their argument, Westmarland (2001) and Pugh (1990) reveal that statistics (drawn from quantitative methods) are usually taken away from the context of production where they are generalised to reflect the wider society, thus they may not be the most appropriate/relevant methods to be used in a study of institutional culture, a unique complex phenomenon. Thus, the validity of using questionnaires (quantitative methods) to measure organisational culture may not necessarily be guaranteed (Cai, 2008).

Since qualitative methods provide for flexibility, addictiveness, depth and realism (Tucker, McCoy and Evans, 1990), according to Mama (2003) and Kamau, (2004) they can be used to study the complex process of inquiry required in breaking the silence and uncovering the hidden experiences around gendered interactions of the institutional culture. Since qualitative methods encourage interactions, in this study I was able to engage and establish ethical partnerships with men and women students which led to generation of deeper insights and understanding (Higgs, 2010) of how students perceive and navigate the University of Nairobi's culture. I found qualitative methods best suited to this kind of research because I was able to explore the hidden experiences, perceptions, emotions, feelings, meanings, words and voices belonging to the private domain bringing them into the public domain (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Museus, 2007; Polkinghorne, 2010). While qualitative methods answer questions about how and why people make sense of the social world, Ulin, Robinson, Tolley and McNeill (2002) further appreciate the enormous strength of these methods because such methods address dimensions of human actions and behaviour found among men and women students on campus.

In a comparative approach, qualitative methods enhance production of discourses, which represent and interpret the reality of the social world (Parker, 1987; Mason, 2002), while quantitative methods generate data that tend to be too simple in examining and representing the complex social reality (Farran 1990 and Westmarland 2001) of the institutional culture. According to Farran (1990) statistics (quantitative methods) are more of construction of reality, while qualitative methods provide an in-depth, interpreted understanding and meaning of the social world/reality by revealing information related to experiences, perceptions and histories (Moriarty, 2008) of its members. The idea is that all human beings interact, socialise and communicate with each other using different languages, situations and times. Thus, in this study qualitative methods enhance generation of information in form of spoken and written language (Polkinghorne, 2010). Language used in research contains basic categories required by researchers to understand themselves and others (Burman and Parker, 1993). For instance, language, as a discourse shape words, concepts and stereotypes, which in turn affect actions, behaviour and expectations (Brayton, 1997). Throughout the data collection period, I was able to interact with men and women students using verbal and non-verbal language which enhanced deeper understanding of the institutional culture. Thus, qualitative methods provided a flexible platform of generating relevant knowledge based on the discourses of men and women students' perceptions and experiences of University of Nairobi's institutional culture.

The complex nature of institutional culture made qualitative methods form the basis of analysing the hidden and complex procedures, structures and practices, thus, making it possible for men and women students to internalise aspects of culture, portraying it as normal and natural. To effectively address the nature of institutional culture in higher education, I agree with what Patton (2002) and Assie-Lumumba's (2006) says that there is need for scholars to have a broader understanding of women's perceptions through qualitative methods. This did enhance generation of insights into particular phenomenon, since qualitative methods tend to treat women as subjects, and by so doing give them the ability to express their feelings through their voices. While comparing the two methods, Westmarland (2001) noted that qualitative methods have generally been associated with interpretivism, non-scientific, subjectivity and femininity, while quantitative methods are based on positivism, scientific, objectivity, statistics and masculinity. Thus, Mies (1983) refer to quantitative methods as "men stream methods" where as Oakley (1974), Stanley and Wise (1993) further states that quantitative methods tend to ignore and exclude women, thus there is a tendency of generalising findings about men towards women. Thus, qualitative data may be used to strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls; men and boys through higher education as stipulated in Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goal 4.

## 1.2 Amplifying the Voices of Men and Women Students through Qualitative Methods

Voice is as a manifestation of 'reality' (Haupt and Chisom, 2007); empowering those who might have been silenced by ensuring their marginalised perceptions are heard (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998; Adusah-Karikari, 2008). Using purposive sampling technique, I was able to conduct 30 in-depth interviews and 4 Focused Group Discussions, where the students were able to provide what Haupt and Chisholm, (2007), Harper and Museu, (2007) refers to as direct and indirect stories/narratives about their lives and insights related to their experiences of institutional culture. Commenting on the importance of using specific respondents in a qualitative study, Castellan (2010) noted that use of specific respondents in a qualitative study (interviews) facilitates the expansion of the developing theory. Storytelling in qualitative research is one of the richest ways of collecting data, since a vivid narrative enables a researcher to put the situation in context by using in depth insights related to certain events (Barbara, 2010). By using vivid narratives to amplify students voices, I was able to make experiences of men and women students/leaders visible and relevant for practice (Aniekwu, 2006), a key aspect to policy revision and formulation.

Voice help to reveal contradictions, fragmentations, conflicts and tensions presented in students' perceptions and experiences in order to understand how each gender negotiate the university terrain (Song, 2000; Mawoyo and Hoadley, 2007). Thus, voice which speaks through qualitative methods, drawing data that can be used to inform policy is a powerful tool especially when urging for change (Arnot and Fennell, 2008). Further, Parr (2000), Ellsberg and Heise (2005), Adush-Karikari (2008) agree that by listening to women's own words, through their voices or by unveiling what Miller (2000) refer to as multiple layered voices based on their experiences, challenges and obstacles they encounter, this could find its way into policy debates, forming a basis for the establishment of inclusive university culture, a key aspect to sustainable development.

Further, Morley (2005) asserts that the absence of women's voices in research can affect organisational priorities, performance indicators and cultural traditions, yet qualitative methods are meant to privilege the voices of women in higher education (Adusah-Karikari, 2008; Mazzei and Jackson, 2009). Therefore, use of men and women students' voices through qualitative methods in the present study, helped unpack what Qhobela, Eloff and Lange (2008), Ramphele and Brito (2008) and Parker's (2008) refer to as the process of conceptualising behaviours hidden behind numerical profiles, vision, and mission statements, thus, deepening understanding of institutional culture. This is because qualitative data provide detailed, rich and extensive information (Moriarty, 2008), significant for the implementation of meaningful transformative policies and interventions at different levels of higher education.

By listening carefully to 'voices' through in-depth interviews and focused group discussions, I was able to construct knowledge of socially silenced or less privileged groups (mostly women) whose opinions, ideas and feelings are rarely heard or expressed in the public domain (men), yet they have distinct, unique perceptions and experiences of the social world (Allred, 2000; Standing, 2000). DiGeorgio-Lutz (2002) further asserts that women are sometimes a voiceless minority especially in defining values, goals and ever-evolving mission statements in campus. Use of face to face interviews, the most commonly recognised form of qualitative methods (Moriarty, 2008) provided the researcher with a platform to amplify the silenced voices of men and women students through social interactions (Mishler, 1986 in Allred, 2000). This means that use of face to face interviews allowed the researcher to flexibly unearth and expand men and women students' experiences, memories, ideas, opinions, perceptions, knowledge, practices, interactions, relationships, aspirations, attitudes and beliefs (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002; Ellsberg and Heise, 2005), regarding the nature of University of Nairobi's institutional culture.

Qualitative methods (interviews) provide a platform for the researcher to access what is '*inside a person's head*' or '*world*', making it possible to measure what he/she knows (information), likes or dislikes (values and preferences), and thinks (attitudes and preferences) (Tuckman, 1972 in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000: 268; Patton, 2002). The interview guide allowed the researcher to enter into the real world of men and women students by expanding and probing their ideas and thoughts so as to elicit a clearer picture of how they perceive the University of Nairobi's institutional culture. Therefore, I was able to capture students' exact words, concepts and the importance they place in their social world through '*conversations with a purpose*' (Mason 2002: 63; Rubin and Rubin, 2005), that would not have been possible with quantitative methods.

Data drawn from the students' voices was developed and transformed into grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Mauthner and Doucet, 2000) through what Birch (2000), Patton (2002) and Wengraf (2004) refer to as verbatim, narrative reports or textual representation of the 34 audio interviews. Transcribing each interview word by word was important because verbatim means '*complete*' with nothing left out even pauses, hesitations, commas, colons and full stops (Wengraf, 2004: 213).

Use of what Alldred (2000), Mauthner and Doucet (2000), Patton (2002), Griffin (2007) refer to as discourse/content analysis or voice-centred method enabled the researcher to 'hear the exact voices' of students, a way of transforming their 'private lives' into 'public domain'. I found discourse analysis relevant to this study because it offers a way of constructing men and women students as active subjects, not objects through emphasis on 'talk' and 'text' as data sources (Alldred, 2000; Mason, 2002; Griffin, 2007), an aspect not easily experienced through quantitative methods. By capturing the voices of men and women students I was able to obtain clear, deeper understanding of how and why they are for example, involved in different forms of heterosexual relationship/culture and the nature of gendered representations at various levels of the University of Nairobi's institutional culture: social, political and economic dimensions.

### 1.3 Conclusion

In this paper I have demonstrated the significance of qualitative methods as compared to quantitative methods in enriching understanding and theorising men and women student's experiences and perceptions of the University of Nairobi's culture. Since, the future of education in Africa is based on monitoring and implementation as stipulated in Post-2015 SDGs, researchers require a clearer understanding of the needs and interests of men/women; boys/ girls, if they have to competently participate in social, political and economic development. This can only be possible if researchers rely more on qualitative methods when researching social reality. Thus, education for sustainable development will only allow men/women; boys/girls to acquire relevant and useful knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary in shaping learning environment to be gender sensitive, safe, friendly and inclusive for universities and society at large.

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