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## STUDENT MOBILITY IN KENYA'S PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECT OF UNIVERSITIES' CUSTOMER CARE SERVICES

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### Abstract

The study analysed the effect of customer care services on student mobility in private universities in Nairobi County, Kenya. The study employs a descriptive survey design targeting 26 registered private universities. A study sample of 180 private university students and 9 registrars was selected using multi-stage sampling whereby the private universities from Nairobi County were purposely selected. The universities were further sampled in stratus using stratified sampling. The registrars further applied random sampling to select the students who were interviewed. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaires for registrars and students. Analysis was then done descriptively and through thematic means for quantitative and qualitative data. Linear regression analysis was also used to establish the extent of the effect on the dependent variables of independent variables. The study's findings indicate that customer care services influence students' mobility in private universities in Nairobi County. This implies that students prefer being in institutions of learning that provide good customer care services. The study recommends that marketing departments of universities in the target areas invest more in customer care services to promote their respective universities to prospective students.

**Key terms:** Students mobility, customer service, private university, administration.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Student mobility may be a result of various reasons; Search for credit transfer, sports transfer, military transfer, moving away and out of town, corporate transfer, online and distant learning, summer courses restarting and returning to college, social circumstances, moving back home, not a good fit, financial reasons, changing career directions, life, and work, academic challenges, international transfer, self-paced, open courseware transfer among others. Student mobility is therefore considered a phenomenon where students change from one academic institution to another (through either credit transfers or total assumption of a fresh move to undertake similar or related courses) or change from one academic program to another for various reasons (Raghuram, 2013). Anderson and Bhati (2012) referred to student mobility as the frequency with which students transfer between one school community and another, while according to Clavel (2015), student mobility may constitute prospective opportunities to study outside their countries. Moreover, student mobility can also take place between institutions or countries (inward) or out of an institution or a country (outward). In this case, such mobility has also been described in terms of intra-national meaning within the confines of a nation and international being beyond a country's borders. This study focuses on intra-national or inward students' mobility among private universities with the intent to understand how customer care services influence this mobility despite students having made their choices to join a specific university.

Education empowers individuals to take up responsibility in society by ensuring that they have indispensable skills and knowledge to develop and transform governments and state economies. However, this demands an understanding of key factors driving student mobility. This paper is therefore developed against this backdrop to assess the effect of customer care services in Private Universities in Nairobi County, Kenya.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer service is perhaps one of the critical factors that provide the management of an educational institution with a competitive advantage (Wahab (2016)). Moreover, stakeholders in the education sector are more conscious of their rights and consequently demand services just as they would in commercial engagements. Consequently, the improvement in responsiveness to improvement in the delivery of services to students and stakeholders generally is imperative for all educational institutions. This could be done by adopting clear communication strategies between students and college administration.

Customer service involves a sequence of actions intended to improve the customer satisfaction level (Turban et al., 2012). They assert that many educational institutions are now offering customer services to their students, with some departments devoted to providing student-centred services. However, the provision of customer care must be institution-wide by involving everybody (Emery et al., 2011). According to Turban et al. (2012), most higher education institutions emphasise producing graduates rather than the process of upright customer service. Consequently, institutions have tended to emphasise the need for students to work hard at college to finish their studies. According to Emery et al. (2011), while students may, in the short run, not appreciate the hard work they must put in, they nevertheless are very grateful for the quality education service they finally get.

Bejou (2015) suggests that adopting customer relationship management (CRM) is an avenue for institutions to establish and maintain better student relationships. Bejou (2015) further affirms that CRM is

an important tool for helping institutional administrators effectively allocate resources that ensure continued recruitment, retention, progression, and enrolment in institutions of higher learning. The provision of customer care should lead to higher retention rates and, consequently, an increase in the revenue for higher education institutions (Bejou, 2015). According to Ewers (2010), institutions need to have their employees join training sessions on customer service to better serve their customers. Moreover, Vaill (2015) asserts that because education is a service and not a product, institutions must endeavour to respond to the needs and expectations of their student. Hoskins and Brown, 2017 on the other hand, asserts that customer care services in institutions of higher learning comprise designated activities that help to improve student satisfaction. The only way this can be achieved is when all departments in the institution are involved. Hence, good customer support results in the production of educated graduates (Hoskins and Brown, 2017)

Globally, Ali et al. (2016) examined the effect of service quality on global student satisfaction, loyalty, and institutional image in Malaysian public universities. Using a study sample drawn from global students at three public Malaysian university campuses, the study established that the five dimensions of higher education service quality predisposed student satisfaction and institutional image. The result was increased student loyalty. While the subject of the study is applicable, the findings are based on data from worldwide students at just three Malaysian public university campuses. At the same time, this paper has its focus on local students. Moreover, the study does not examine the aspect of student mobility as the effect of customer care services in universities as is envisaged for the present study.

Hoskins and Brown (2017) investigate how institutional petition consequences contribute to sustaining the Liberal Arts College identity. The research is guided by the principle that organisations that cater to a small base of customers in the market yet demand customer loyalty and satisfaction to an extent above the industry average. These colleges take advantage of their search for identity to enhance student experiences. Consequently, these colleges have established a niche in the higher education market that is unique and gives them a competitive advantage. While this study's sentiments focus on the establishment of identity by students in an institution, it does not provide a basis for investigating student mobility as envisaged in this paper.

Regionally, Hinson (2020) asserts that students are external university customers, groups of people receiving services, goods, or ideas from universities for an approved consideration, which is generally monetary. They include both local and international students. Instead of these African universities taking these issues as critical customer feedback, they rather hit back by debating that they are just engaged in generalist training and that it is the corporate sector's job to shape the graduates into what they need them to be. The list of internal stakeholders' poor customer delivery complaints in Africa is nearly endless. It is often argued that if so, several African universities do such a poor job of where their internal stakeholder audiences are satisfied, then external stakeholders have no chance of receiving excellent customer service. Hinson (2020) argues that external and internal stakeholders in African universities all seem to have issues with the level of services they receive from customer care. This is because very few universities in Africa have well-developed and full-blown customer service units with clear customer service delivery mandates and customer service policies.

Locally, Nyaga (2018) examines feedback from international students enrolled in Christian universities in Kenya. The study sought to investigate the students' satisfaction with university experiences through a

survey and cross-sectional data collected. The study determined a correlation between student characteristics and satisfaction using Mann-Whitney U tests and Kruskal Wallis tests and the variables of gender, age, residence, and accommodation preferred. The findings showed different satisfaction levels, with younger students showing lesser satisfaction than their older counterparts and female students showing lesser satisfaction than their male counterparts. This study does not, however, relate satisfaction as a causal factor in student mobility as it will be envisioned for the present study.

Institutions of higher learning often provide academic guidance as customer care service. A student's college experience is highly influenced by their ability to seek and find guidance from academic advisors. Several university students need academic advice in less developed countries since most of them are often first-generation college students in their family lineage. According to Petty (2014), first-generation student is taking further studies compared to their parents. In addition, the advice is key for the educational achievement of many first-generation and non-first-generation students. Allen et al. (2013) argued that academic advice offers five crucial functions to college and university students. These functions include integration, referral, information, individuation, and shared responsibilities. This implies that about five advisors are needed to best guide a student. Integration involves helping the students connect their academic, career, and life goals with their curricular choices (Allen et al., 2013). This is key to developing problem-solving skills among students. It also helps in building key decision-making skills among students.

Students are also able to be organised as they get to know how to develop academic student plans. According to Allen et al. (2013), the most important thing students wanted from their academic advising sessions was accurate information about their programme requirements. Another important aspect that was highly rated was connectivity to career and life goals and assistance with students' choice of academic specialisations (majors). Allen et al. (2013) argue that academic advising was more useful among categories of students, especially female and older students. Academic advising was also key among Asian American, African American and Hispanic students.

According to Grites (2013), new students in any institution of academic learning require a huge collection of information to live a smooth life conducive to higher education. Customer care services are essential in making students comfortable. Such services enable students to figure out simple things that will help them, such as where to park on campus and understand the location of crucial resources, including financial aid, bookshops, libraries, and student support service offices. In its provision of customer care services, the university can also aid the student by providing them with a campus tour and an information packet with telephone numbers and maps to find offices.

### **3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

With the intent to find out the effect of customer service care in universities on the mobility of students among private universities, the descriptive analysis produced the results presented in Table 1, where most student respondents agreed on the statement that there is a complaint desk where they can report issues that they perceive as unfair. Those who agreed with the statement comprised a cumulative of 44.3 per cent, with 25.5 per cent agreeing and 18.8 per cent strongly agreeing. The proportion of respondents disagreed with the statement was 38.1 per cent. About 17.6 per cent were undecided. On a scale of 1-5, an average student rating of the statement that there is a complaint desk where they can report issues that they perceive as unfair was 3.12, with a standard deviation of 1.34.

**Table 1: Customer Care Services**

Statements	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total	Mean	St d. Dev
1. There is a functional student portal in the university	1 (0.6)	5 (3.0)	8 (4.8)	80 (48.5)	71 (43.0)	165 (100)	4.30	0.75
2. There is social media integration to keep us up to date on news and announcements	9 (5.5)	12 (7.3)	1 (0.6)	84 (50.9)	59 (35.8)	165 (100)	4.04	1.07
3. There is a complaint desk where I can report issues that I perceive as unfair	22 (13.3)	41 (24.8)	29 (17.6)	42 (25.5)	31 (18.8)	165 (100)	3.12	1.34
4. There is timely response to inquiries at the university	6 (3.6)	36 (21.8)	21 (12.7)	60 (36.4)	42 (25.5)	165 (100)	3.58	1.19
5. The university embraces online payment system that allows students to make payments with ease	9 (5.5)	5 (3.0)	5 (3.0)	84 (50.9)	62 (37.6)	165 (100)	4.12	1.00
6. The university responds to students' issues quickly	22 (13.3)	38 (23.0)	24 (14.5)	60 (36.4)	21 (12.7)	165 (100)	3.12	1.28
7. The staff at the university are approachable to me	5 (3.0)	1 (0.6)	5 (3.0)	94 (57.0)	60 (36.4)	165 (100)	4.23	0.80
Overall							3.79	0.68

Most students agreed with the statement that there is a timely response to inquiries at the university. Those who agreed with the statement comprised 61.9 per cent, with 36.4 per cent agreeing and 25.5 per cent strongly agreeing. The proportion of respondents disagreed with the statement was 25.4 per cent. About 12.7 per cent were undecided. On a scale of 1-5, the average student rating of the statement that there is a timely response to inquiries at the university was 3.58, with a standard deviation of 1.19.

Most students agreed with the statement that the university embraces an online payment system that allows students to make payments with ease. Those who agreed with the statement comprised a cumulative of 88.5 per cent, with 50.9 per cent agreeing and 37.6 per cent strongly agreeing. The proportion of respondents disagreeing with the statement was a cumulative 8.5 per cent. About 3 per cent were undecided. On a scale of 1 - 5, the average student rating of the statement that the university embraces an online payment system that allows students to make payments easily was 4.12, with a standard deviation of 1.00.

Most of the student respondents agreed with the statement that the university responds to students' issues quickly. Those who agreed with the statement comprised a cumulative of 49.1 per cent, with 36.4 per cent agreeing and 12.7 per cent strongly agreeing. The proportion of respondents disagreed with the statement was 36.3 per cent. About 14.5 per cent were undecided. On a scale of 1 - 5, the average student rating of the statement that the university responds to students' issues quickly was 3.12, with a standard deviation of 1.28.

Most of the student respondents agreed with the statement that the staff at the university are approachable. Those who agreed with the statement comprised 93.4 per cent, 57 per cent agreed, and 36.4 per cent strongly agreed. The proportion of respondents who disagreed with the statement was cumulative at 3.6 per cent. About 3 per cent were undecided. On a scale of 1 - 5, the average student rating of the statement that the staff at the university are approachable was 4.23, with a standard deviation of 0.8. Most of the students' ratings of perceived quality of customer care services in their university ranged between 4 -5 (41.2%) and 3 - 4 (47.9%), as summarised in Table 2.

**Table 2: Students' Rating of Perceived Quality of Customer Care Services in their University**

Scores	Frequency	Percentage
1-1.99	1	0.6%
2-2.99	17	10.3%
3-3.99	79	47.9%
4-5	68	41.2%
Total	165	100.0%

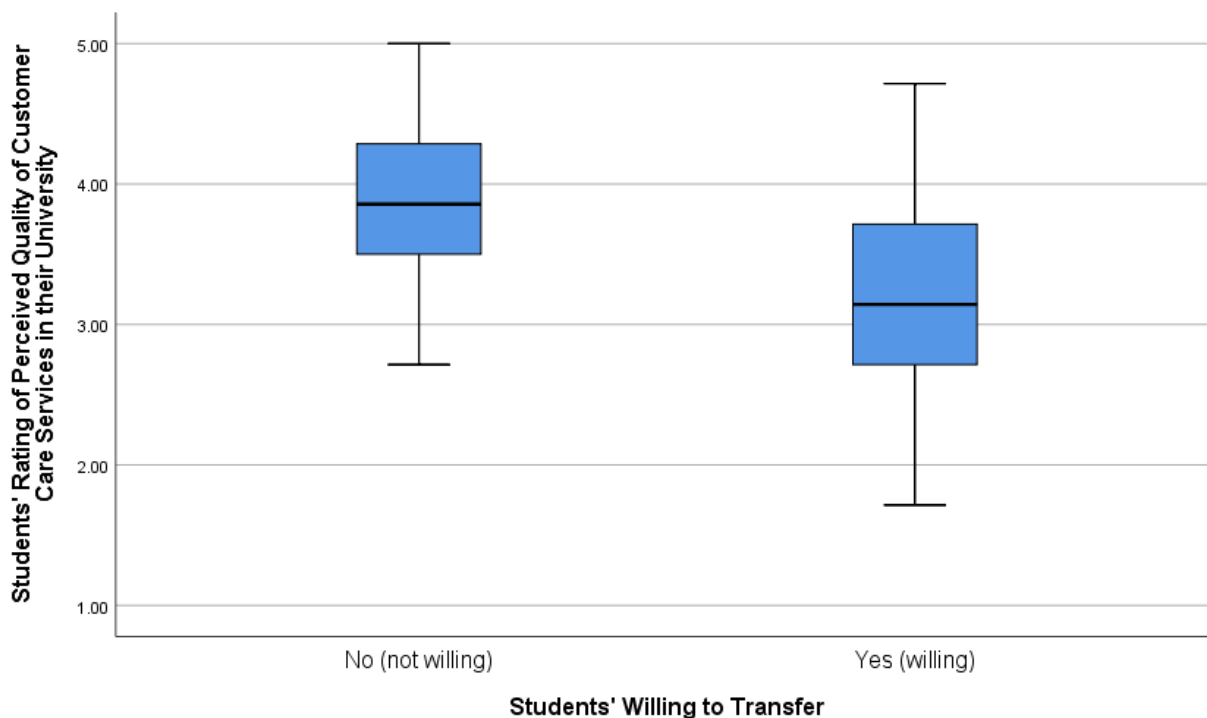
The overall students' rating of perceived quality of customer care services in their university (on a scale of 1 - 5) was a mean of 3.79, with a standard deviation of 0.68. Further, the study aimed to determine if there was a significant difference in the students' rating of the perceived quality of customer care services in their university. Therefore, analysis was done using an independent samples t-test. The results are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3: T-test results for the Comparison of Students' Rating of Perceived Quality of Customer Care Services in their University between those willing and those not willing to Transfer**

Group	Obs	Mean	Std. Err.	Std. Dev.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
No	131	3.921	0.050	0.576	3.822	4.021
Yes	34	3.273	0.140	0.815	2.989	3.557
combined	165	3.788	0.053	0.682	3.683	3.893

Note: Mean difference = 0.648; Standard error = 0.122; P-value = 0.000; t = 5.333; df = 163

The mean difference in the scores on students' rating of perceived quality of customer care services in their university (between those willing to transfer and those not willing) was computed as 0.648. The mean difference is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Comparison of Students' Rating of Perceived Quality of Customer Care Services in their University between those willing and those not willing to Transfer.**

The calculated t-value of 5.333 at 163 degrees of freedom indicates that the mean difference was statistically significant at a 5 per cent level ( $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that customer care services significantly influence student mobility in private universities in Nairobi, Kenya.

**Test of the Null Hypothesis ( $H_0$ ); the Influence of Customer Care Services on Student's Mobility**

The null hypothesis was formulated and tested using binary logistic regression. The choice of binary logistic regression was justified because the dependent variable (willingness and non-willingness to transfer from one institution to another) was binary. Table 4 shows the influence of customer care services on students' mobility in private universities.

**Table 4: Influence of Customer Care Services on Students' Mobility in Private Universities**

Willingness to transfer	Coef.	Std. Err.	z	P>z	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Customer care services	-1.597	0.359	-4.440	0.000	-2.302	-0.893
_cons	4.406	1.264	3.490	0.000	1.929	6.883

Note: Log likelihood = -71.07; LR  $\chi^2(1) = 25.74$ ; Prob >  $\chi^2 = 0.000$ ; Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.153$

The log-likelihood for the fitted model (-71.07) and the likelihood ratio chi-square value of 25.74 (Prob>Chi<sup>2</sup> = 0.000) indicate that the model parameters (the independent variable and the constant) are



jointly significant at 5%. The Pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.153 implies that about 15.3 per cent of the student's willingness to transfer from one private university to another could be attributed to customer care services (the independent variable). Pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.153 meet the statistical threshold confirming that the willingness to transfer from one private university to another among the sampled students was well attributed to students' rating of perceived quality of customer care services in their university. The coefficient of customer care services (-1.597) was statistically significant at a 5 per cent level. This implies that the null hypothesis, "Customer care services do not significantly influence student's mobility in private universities in Nairobi County in Kenya", was rejected. Therefore, customer care services significantly influence students' mobility in private universities in Nairobi County in Kenya.

One registrar from a privately sponsored private university in Nairobi explained:

*Poor customer service is a major reason most students prefer to leave their current institutions and get placed in other institutions. Students are known to be very active in using the internet and can know what happens in other institutions through social media. Due to this exposure, students normally demand high-quality customer care services (equivalent to what is offered in other universities that they benchmark). The end resort is massive transfers when an institution is rigid in meeting high customer care services requirements.*

The findings of this study agree with Wahab (2016) who found that customer service is one of the critical factors that provide the management of an educational institution with a competitive advantage. Where customer services are poor, academic institutions are avoided by students (some things becoming a major cause of student mobility). Moreover, stakeholders in the education sector are more conscious of their rights and consequently demand services just as they would in commercial engagements. Consequently, the improvement in responsiveness to improvement in the delivery of services to students and stakeholders generally is imperative for all educational institutions. Adopting clear communication strategies between students and college administration is one of the avenues to good customer care services.

The findings of this study concur with Turban et al. (2012). They learned the importance of customer services in institutions of higher learning, noting that students prefer to be in an environment where they can access superior customer services. Customer service involves a sequence of actions intended to improve the customer satisfaction level. Owing to the importance of customer services, many educational institutions now offer such services to their students, with some departments devoted to providing student-centred services. However, according to Turban et al. (2012), higher education institutions that place more emphasis on producing graduates rather than on the process of upright customer service are slowly losing their customer base.

In support of these findings, Bejou (2015) emphasises the importance of providing quality customer care services among learning institutions. The clients (students) are attracted with quality customer services, and with poor customer care services, students are repelled. Good customer care services also lead to higher retention rates and, consequently, an increase in the revenue for higher education institutions.

The findings of this study also concur with Ewers (2010) and Vaill (2015). According to their separate studies, they found that institutions of learning need to have their employees join training sessions on customer service to better serve their customers (students). Vaill (2015) asserts that because education is a service and not a product, institutions must endeavour to respond to the expectations and needs of their student. In the same vein, Hoskins and Brown, (2017) asserts that customer care services in institutions of higher learning comprise designated activities that help to improve student satisfaction. The only way this can be achieved is when all departments in the institution are involved. Hence, good customer support results in the production of educated graduates.

The study findings are consonant with Bejou (2015), who suggested the adoption of customer relationship management (CRM) as an avenue for institutions to establish and maintain better student relationships and hence attract more students for enrolment in their favour. Customer relationship management is an important tool for helping institutional administrators effectively allocate resources that ensure continued recruitment, retention, progression, and enrolment in institutions of higher learning.

The results further tally with Ali et al. (2016), who examined the effect of service quality on student satisfaction, loyalty, and institutional image in Malaysian public universities. The study established that quality customer service enhances potential students' image of the academic institution and hence a possibility of transferring into the institution when a chance is available. Quality customer service also led to increased student loyalty.

Like the findings of this study, Hinson (2020) asserted that students are external university customers, groups of people receiving services, goods or ideas from universities for an approved consideration, generally monetary. Consequently, good customer service is vital for the retention of the student's client base in universities majority of African universities, however, reply to student concerns by arguing that they are only delivering generalist training and that it is the responsibility of the sector to shape graduates into the types of people that sector demands. This has slowly denied a customer base in many institutions. Furthermore, Hinson (2020) argues that internal and external stakeholders in African universities all seem to have issues with the level of customer service being delivered to them. This is because very few universities in Africa have well-developed and full-blown customer service units with clear customer service delivery mandates and customer service policies.

Further, in agreement with this study's results are Le Roux and van Rensburg (2014), whose work discovered that students on one campus showed much higher loyalty than their colleagues on two other campuses. Consequently, more applications were transferred to the campus with better customer care services. In addition, university students positively perceived professionalism among staff members (in the campus receiving more applications). They were confident that their personal information had been handled securely, thus a high customer experience.

This study supports Nyaga's (2018) findings that there is a correlation between student satisfaction with customer services and their willingness to transfer to other institutions. The findings showed higher satisfaction levels among students who rated the available customer care services well. The findings of this study are also consonant with Grites (2013), who studied key aspects of successful transitions among institutions of learning. Customer care services were crucial in attracting and retaining students in learning institutions. Customer care services guarantee students a smooth life conducive to higher education.

Customer care services are essential in making students comfortable. Such services make it possible for students to figure out simple things that will help them, such as where to park on campus and understand the location of crucial resources, including financial aid, bookshops, libraries, and student support service offices. In its provision of customer care services, the university can also aid the student by providing them with a campus tour and an information packet with telephone numbers and maps to find offices.

The findings of this study agree with Petty (2014), who explored how to motivate first-generation students to achieve academic success and college completion. His findings argued that academic guidance, as provided by institutions of higher learning, is an important component of customer care services. Petty (2014) argued that a student's college experience is highly influenced by their ability to access customer care services, such as seeking and finding guidance from academic advisors. There is a need to promote academic advice among students in less developed countries (compared to their counterparts from developed countries) since most are often first-generation college students in their family lineage. According to Petty (2014), first-generation student is taking further studies compared to their parents (for instance, having to go to university when their parents did not achieve this). Therefore, academic advice is key for the educational achievement of many first-generation students, as well as non-first-generation students.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

**Conclusions:** Most of the students' ratings of perceived quality of customer care services in their university ranged between 4 -5 (41.2%) and 3 – 4 (47.9%). The overall students' rating of perceived quality of customer care services in their university (on a scale of 1 – 5) was a mean of 3.79, with a standard deviation of 0.68. The mean difference in the scores on students' rating of perceived quality of customer care services in their university (between those willing to transfer and those not willing) was computed as 0.648. The calculated t-value of 5.333 at 163 degrees of freedom indicates that the mean difference was statistically significant at a 5 per cent level ( $p < 0.05$ ). This implies that customer care services significantly influence student mobility in private universities in Nairobi, Kenya. Similarly, the binary logistic regression results confirmed that the coefficient of customer care services (-1.597) was statistically significant at a 5 per cent level. This implies that the null hypothesis, "Customer care services do not significantly influence student's mobility in private universities in Nairobi County in Kenya", was rejected. This leads to the conclusion that Customer care services significantly influence students' mobility in private universities in Nairobi County in Kenya. Good customer care services are not only able to attract new potential students to an institution of higher learning. Still, they are also key in retaining these clients in the organisation.

**Recommendation:** Universities' marketing departments should invest more in customer care services to promote their respective universities to prospective students. This is because poor customer care service is a leading cause of student mobility in private universities in the study area. Therefore, to retain students, universities ought to ensure high customer service.

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