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A Comparison of the Performance of Direct and Transition Students in a Bachelor's Degree Programme in Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined the comparative academic performance of direct entry and transition students in several Bachelor's degree programmes in Kenya, in the context of the Recognition of Prior Learning framework. Through the historical review of Kenyan education policies, the Kenya National Qualifications Framework Act (2022), and General Regulations 2025, the study established that alternative admission routes are essential tools for employability, lifelong learning, and inclusivity. Using a quantitative retrospective design, final mean cumulative GPA data from 2,542 graduates were analyzed through one-way ANOVA and Games-Howell tests. Of these, 1,728 (68%) were direct entry and 814 (32%) were transition students. A one-way ANOVA showed that there was a significant difference in cumulative GPA between students who joined the undergraduate program via Direct Entry and those who transitioned from diploma programs ($F_{(1,2540)} = 4.859$, $p = 0.028$). The Games-Howell Test for post hoc analysis showed that the transition group performed significantly better than the direct entry group in the Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Counselling ($F_{(1,383)} = 6.653$, $p = 0.01$) with ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 3.11 \pm 0.34$) and ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.96 \pm 0.53$) respectively. The reverse was true in computer science ($F_{(1,465)} = 14.583$ and $p<0.001$), with the direct entry students returning a cumulative GPA of ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.66 \pm 0.47$) as compared to the transition group ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.42 \pm 0.58$). There was no difference between the groups in the Bachelor of Arts in Communication ($F_{(1,591)} = 0.000$, $p>0.05$). These results affirm the RPL policy that provides alternative routes of access to undergraduate studies. The study recommends further investigation on the identification of the specific factors that influence better performance from transition students and exploring the issue of admitting students without formal qualifications into degree programmes.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning, direct entry students, transition students, bachelor's degree programme

1. Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process by which all previous formal, informal, and nonformal learning is given academic recognition.[1] It involves evaluating an adult learner's previous experience, skills, knowledge,

[1] Garnett J & Cavaye, A., (2015). Recognition of Prior Learning: Opportunities and Challenges for Higher Education. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, *7*(1), 28-37.

and informal learning and articulating it towards a formal qualification.[1] The evolution of educational policy in Kenya is profoundly characterized by the influential Sessional Papers of 1965 and 2005. Each of these policy documents was crafted in response to major national aspirations, global pressures, developmental ideals, and socio-economic realities of the education system in Kenya.[2] Both sought to align education with the broader goals of nation-building, economic growth, and social equity. [3]Despite being produced over forty years apart, both documents share the central aim of reforming Kenya's educational system to better serve society, albeit under different socio-political contexts.[4] Education reforms in Kenya evolved over decades, responding to changing socio-economic, cultural, and political dynamics. An essential component of quality and inclusive education is the recognition of learners' prior learning- that is, knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through formal, informal, and non-formal means before or outside of the classroom settings.

The 2005 Sessional Paper No.1 2005, explicitly acknowledges the importance of non-formal and informal learning and proposes the importance of Prior Learning as a strategy for reintegrating out-of-school youth and adults to Higher Education. This Sessional Paper emphasized the need to bridge non-formal education and formal higher education systems. The paper encourages the development of flexible admission criteria in Higher Education Institutions and supports the development of modular and credit accumulation systems to accommodate indirect entry to Universities. The Sessional Paper 2005 policy marked a great paradigm shift from rigid academic pathways to a flexible, progressive, and inclusive education systems that appreciate prior and experiential competencies and skills in University admission.[5]

The Kenya National Qualifications Framework Act[6] provides an approach for the alignment of Kenya's qualifications framework with global standards while tackling long-standing issues such as fragmented qualifications, bottlenecks, lack of transparency, lack of comparability, and poor linkages between education outcomes and labor market needs in academic spheres.

Additionally, the KNQA's 2025 General Regulations 2025 establish the credit accumulation and transfer system (KCATS) as a foundational mechanism for upward, downward, and lateral movement within Kenya's qualifications framework. Regulation 29 of the KNQA General Regulations is the principal provision concerning credit transfers, while Regulation 29 (3) of KCATS says that KCATS is designed to "facilitate credit transfers and exemptions and vertical and horizontal mobility of learners and enable entry, re-entry and attachment of lifelong learning."[7]

A maximum of 49% of the total credits earned from a completed qualification (such as a Diploma) may be transferred to a related or similar qualification when bridging to a higher level, such as a Degree (see Regulation 29(4)(e) but credits for core units such as projects, attachments, and similar experiential components are often excluded.[8] A person who has gained a diploma-level qualification (KNQF Level 6) through informal or non-formal means, for example, through work experience, self-study, or industry-based learning, may apply to a registered Qualifications Awarding Body for an RPL process to have their skills and knowledge assessed and awarded a formal Level 6 diploma. Once awarded, these can be used in credit transfer under the KCATS provisions.[9]

Direct entry into a university bachelor's degree programme is based on standard academic qualifications such as

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[1] AM Singh, (2011). Let the Doors of Learning be Open to all - A Case for Recognition of Prior Learning. *The South African Journal of Higher Education*, *25*(4). https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC37705Cited by:1

[2] M Ngau, (1990). The Gap Between Promise and Performance: Education-Policy Making and Implementation in Kenya. Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] See Sessional paper No. 1 of 2005 on a Policy Framework for education, training and Research (10 above).

[6] The Kenya National Qualifications Framework Act CAP 214, Revised in 2022. http://kenyalaw.org:8181/exist/rest/db/kenyalex/Kenya/Legislation/English/Acts%20and%20Regulations/K/Kenya%20National%20Qualifications%20Framework%20Act%20-%20No.%2022%20of%202014/docs/K

[7] Section 29(3) of the Regulations.

[8] See General Regulations of 2025, see also Kenya National Qualifications Authority capacity development programme, available at https://acqf.africa/capacity-development-programme/webinars/2nd-training-week-5-9-september-2022-skills-qualifications-and-frameworks-for-mutual-trust/session-18_kenya-cats.pdf/@@display-file/file/session-18_kenya-cats

[9] Regulation 35(4).

the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) and the Kenya Advanced Certificate of Education (KACE.[1] Non-direct entry into a university bachelor's programme is facilitated by alternative entry pathways like mature age admission, diploma qualification, and credit transfers. In this case, diploma holders with a credit pass are eligible for admission, or those with a pass diploma could be considered if they have two years of post-graduation experience.[2] This aligns with the recognition of prior learning principle as it allows diploma holders entry into degree programmes.

Universities in Kenya responded to the demand for higher education by introducing a module 2 form of admission. Through module 2, people with diploma qualifications are allowed entry into a degree programme. Others with degrees in other fields are also allowed to use their degrees to gain access to other degree programmes. The introduction of module 2 was an appreciation that there must not only be one pathway to academic progression. This approach has ensured that Nurses who previously possessed a diploma could 'upgrade' to a degree within two years of additional study. A similar approach was adopted in the Schools of Communication, Business Studies, Computer Science, Social Sciences, and many others. In the fullness of time, students admitted through the two pathways attend the same classes and sit for similar exams in their third and fourth years. The concept of RPL is also intended to admit to higher levels, people with no formal learning but with practical experience in a certain field.

In Australia, RPL was introduced as part of the national framework for the recognition of training. The initial focus was on vocational training and training at polytechnics and adult education. However, the programme has now been accepted for accreditation of education and training, including at the university level. In Europe, a wide range of RPL has been developed, providing exemptions in admission of candidates for further studies. For instance, France allows the issuance of degrees based on competence, whether formally or informally. In all, RPL has been recognized as important in addressing issues relating to lifelong learning, employment, and social inclusion. A study established that mature students who adopted alternative academic progression pathways were more motivated by intrinsic goals, meaning that the prior life experience of mature students promoted a deep approach towards studying in higher education.[3] Indeed, this was confirmed by Kaldi (2009), who established that mature students had significant skills and experiences which contributed to acquiring a high standard of education and success in course completion.[4] Hongtao and Xuanning did a longitudinal study on 12,096 students between 2002 and 2014 to establish the time it took for students to graduate, either through direct entry or from an RPL perspective.[5] It was established that students' decisions and performance in college were major factors in determining graduation. Through longitudinal data and event history analysis, up to 12096 first-time freshmen in a large public university were tracked between the years 2002 and 2014. The findings revealed that academic performance was the most important factor, followed by students' decisions on majors (such as having double majors/minors) in determining graduation and time to degree. However, the study did not establish whether this academic performance was a function of prior learning.

Although enshrined in various international qualification frameworks, there still exist certain barriers that have prevented the application and widespread use of RPL. Such barriers range from personal to institutional, financial, and procedural issues. The case of the MBA programme at the University of KwaZulu-Natal could be a good case study.[6] The Graduate School of Business of the University of KwaZulu-Natal admitted seven students onto the MBA programme based on RPL. The decision was challenged by senior academics at the faculty level on the basis that it was unfair that someone with no prior qualifications could be admitted to Master's Study programme and would obtain a qualification equal to or just below that of academics who had spent at least seven years to achieve a master's qualification. It was counter-claimed that RPL was a national imperative and one which the University had a moral obligation to meet. Furthermore, it was argued that based on the University policy on RPL, the School and Faculty had an obligation to comply. This study aimed to determine the academic merit of RPL (a student's performance on the programme) and whether RPL students needed additional support or mentorship. Based on the

[1] Daystar University, *Current Statutes of Daystar University* (2013) 13, The University of Nairobi, *Statutes* (2013) 50, The Egerton University, *Statutes* (2023) 75.

[2] Ibid 76.

[3] J Richardson, (1994). Mature Students in Higher Education: I. A Literature Survey on Approaches to Studying. *Studies in Higher Education*, 19, 309-325. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079412331381900

[4] S Kaldi, (2009). Student Teachers' Perceptions of Self-Competence in and Emotions/ Stress about Teaching in Initial Teacher Education. *Educational Studies*, *35*, 349-360. https://doi.org/10.1080/

[5] Y Hongtao & F Xuanning, (2017). Rethinking Graduation and Time to Degree: A Fresh Perspective. *Research in Higher Education*, *58*, 184–213, at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-016-9420-4>

[6] AM. Singh, (2011). Let the Doors of Learning be Open to All — A Case for Recognition of Prior Learning. *SAJHE*, *254*, pp. 803–818.

students' results, RPL has been found to have academic merit and RPL students did not require additional support in order to succeed on the MBA.

Kenya has practiced the admission of students to degree programmes using an alternative route, largely a diploma. Students with diplomas are admitted and mixed with direct entry ones attending the same classes and sitting for the same examinations. Another but similar approach is admitting students with a degree in one field into another field altogether, such as using a degree in engineering to get into a Law program. These approaches emphasize progression from one level of academic achievement to the next. No serious attempt has been made to implement RPL. Even then, there is no study investigating how these two pathways compare.

One of the main issues of concern has been whether learners who gain direct entry for degree studies comparatively register higher academic achievements than the learners who gain admission through alternative progression pathways. There is therefore a need to determine whether or not there is a difference between the academic achievement of direct and non-direct entry degree candidates.

2. Objectives

This study will seek to:

1) Compare the performance of students admitted directly from school and those admitted through progression on the final grade attained at university.
2) Propose policy recommendations regarding admissions for bachelor's degree programmes in Kenya.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the Rhizoactivity theory as proposed by Dae Joong Kang's work. This is a postmodern theory of lifelong learning that proposes understanding learning in a complex, interconnected world, drawing inspiration from the botanical concept of a rhizome. It advocates for embracing uncertainty and rejecting linear, binary ways of thinking about learning, reflecting a more "nomadic" and open-ended approach to knowledge acquisition and development. Rhizoactivity theory, grounded in the premise that learning is non-linear, dynamic and entangled, was leveraged as a framework for examining the learners' journeys for both direct and transition entrants into degree programmes in Kenya. Rhizoactivity theory draws attention to learners' wayfinding within and across the entangled relationship between learning histories, social relations and institutional practices. For both categories of students who entered university for the first time, either directly from secondary school or through a transition programme, the trajectory was far from straightforward. For direct students, Rhizoactivity theory drew attention to their impulse to make new connections in response to unfamiliar and potentially new academic/pedagogic challenges with little or no history of academic or pedagogic experiences beyond secondary schools. As such, their entry and trajectories could be construed as making new connections/entanglement in an otherwise relatively empty/undiscovered rhizosphere of higher education and beyond secondary education.[1]

Important nodes within the academic rhizome include those formed by the forms of prior learning of students from diploma or bridging programme undergraduates, which closely align with the concepts in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) theory and Rhizoactivity theory. RPL is defined in the Competency-Based Curriculum of the Kenyan context and closely aligns with CBC, which focuses on recognizing both the tacit and explicit competencies nurtured outside formal academic settings and pathways.[2] Transition undergraduates utilized their prior theoretical and practical academic experiences to recalibrate their learning within the degree programmes, thus demonstrating that prior learning can be recognized and utilized for the purpose of advancing in the academic hierarchy.[3] By contrasting the two groups through the dual lenses of Rhizoactivity theory and RPL, this study elucidates the performance differentials as not merely reflections of inherent capabilities but as products of distinct learning paths, each informed by the respective educational histories and institutional validations of competencies of the cohorts.

4. Methodology

This study assumed a quantitative retrospective approach comparing the mean performance on the final examinations of direct entry and transition students. The final cumulative grade point average (GPA) of students who graduated between 2020 and 2024 was compared. A total of 2,542 final year grades were used. Of these, 1,728 (68%) were direct entry and 814 (32%) were transition students. This was for the degrees of BA Communications (n =586), BA International Relations (n = 564), BA Peace and Conflict Management (n = 385), BA Public Relations (n = 122), Bachelor of Commerce Business Administration (n = 418), and BSc Computer

[1] Kang, DJ, (2022). *Rhizoactivity Theory: A Post-Qualitative Framework for Learning Trajectories*. London: Routledge.

[2] Republic of Kenya, (2017). Basic Education Curriculum Framework. Nairobi: Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development.

[3] UNESCO, (2020). *Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Kenya*. Nairobi: UNESCO.

Science (467). The names of the subjects were redacted to protect their privacy. The data used cannot be traced back to the individuals who attained those scores. There were no other serious ethical issues involved.[1] Descriptive statistics such as bar graphs, tables, means, standard deviation, and standard error of the mean were used. A one-way analysis of variance was conducted, followed by the Games-Howell Test for post hoc analysis. This latter test is ideal when group variances are unequal and sample sizes differ, as was the case in this study.

5. Results

This study compared the mean performance of the cumulative GPA of subjects from six different degree programmes for direct and transition admission to the University. We compared data from 2,542 subjects. A summary of the cumulative GPA for the direct and transition group of students is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. A presentation of the mean, standard deviation, standard error, and 95% confidence intervals for direct and transition entry students in all six programmes (n=2,542)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
D	1728	2.8219	.49518	.01191	2.7986	2.8453	.00	3.83
T	814	2.8667	.43978	.01541	2.8365	2.8970	.00	3.73
Total	2542	2.8363	.47851	.00949	2.8177	2.8549	.00	3.83

(D = Direct admission, T = Transition from diploma students).

Transitioning students had a slightly higher mean GPA (2.867) than those admitted directly. Direct admission students showed greater GPA variability (SD = 0.495) compared to transitioning students (SD = 0.440). The standard errors (SE) are low for both groups, meaning the mean GPA estimates are precise. The 95% confidence intervals for the two groups do not overlap completely (Direct admission: 2.7986 – 2.8453, Transition from diploma: 2.8365 – 2.8970). This hints at a potentially significant difference between the two groups. Both groups have students with zero GPA, which could indicate academic failure, withdrawal, or non-completion. Overall, the transitioned students achieved a higher cumulative GPA than the direct entry ones (Figure 1).

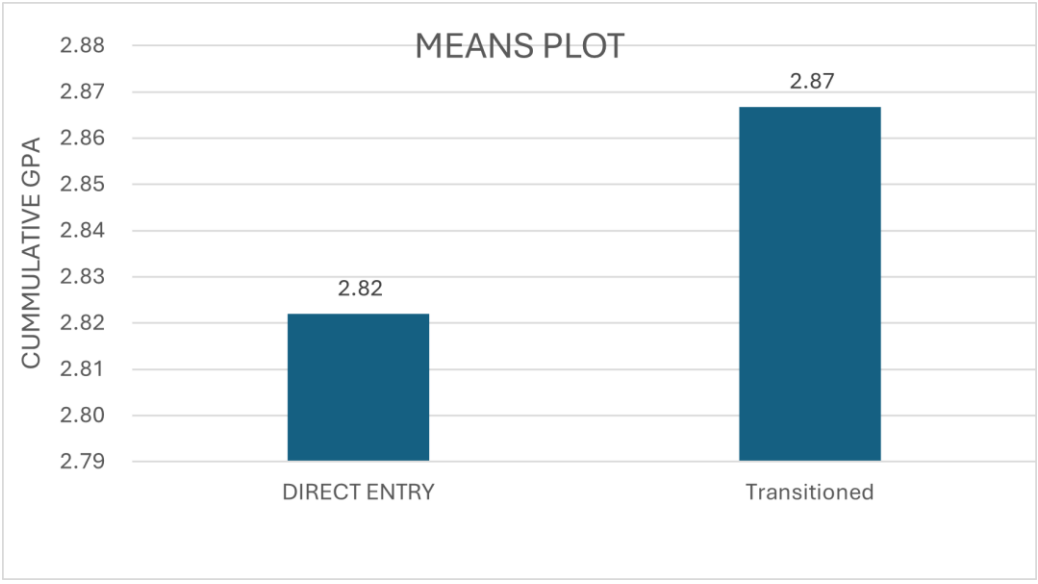

Figure 1. A comparison of the mean cumulative GPA between the direct and transitional entry students

Table 2 presents the mean GPA, standard deviation (SD), and standard error (SE) of GPA scores for 2,542 students across six undergraduate programs. These figures offer insights into academic performance and variation within each program.

[1] M Wekesa, (2025). *Research Methods*, 2nd edn. Nairobi.

Table 2. The Mean, Standard Deviation, and Standard Error of GPA scores for Six Selected Academic Programmes at Daystar University (n = 2,542)

	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
BA.C	586	2.8250	.38274	.01581
BA.IR	564	2.9466	.42393	.01785
BA.PC	385	2.9990	.49046	.02500
BA.PR	122	2.9016	.53563	.04849
BCM.BA	418	2.7695	.52290	.02558
BSC.C	467	2.6256	.49369	.02285
Total	2542	2.8363	.47851	.00949

[BA.C – BA Communications, BA.IR – BA International Relations, BA.PC – BA Peace and Conflict Management, BA.PR – BA Public Relations, BCM.BA – Bachelor of Commerce Business Administration, BSc.C – BSc. Computer Science]

The ANOVA results ($F_{(1,2540)} = 4.859$, $p = 0.028$) indicate a statistically significant difference in cumulative GPA between students who joined the undergraduate program via Direct Entry and those who transitioned from diploma programs (Table 3). While the difference is statistically significant, it is relatively small in magnitude, suggesting that the mode of entry has a limited impact on overall academic performance.

Table 3. Analysis of Variance Testing the Difference in Performance for Two Different Modes of Intake by Use of Cumulative Grade Performance Average (GPA)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.111	1	1.111	4.859	.028
Within Groups	580.698	2540	.229		
Total	581.809	2541			

The highest performing Programs were BA (Peace and Conflict Studies) with an average GPA of 2.9990, and BA (International Relations) with a mean GPA of 2.9466. The lowest Performing Program was BSc (Computer Science) with an average GPA of 2.6256. This variation in GPA across programs justified performing an ANOVA test to determine if the differences are statistically significant.

A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference in cumulative GPA across the six undergraduate programs ($F_{(5, 2536)} = 37.694$; $p < 0.001$). (Table 4).

Table 4. Analysis of Variance testing the difference in performance for 6 different programmes by use of cumulative grade performance Average (GPA)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	40.248	5	8.050	37.694	.000
Within Groups	541.561	2536	.214		
Total	581.809	2541			

The between-groups sum of squares (SS = 40.248) reflects the variability in GPA due to differences between the six academic programs. The within-groups sum of squares (SS = 541.561) captures the variation in GPA within each academic program. The Games-Howell post hoc test was conducted following a significant one-way ANOVA to compare the mean cumulative GPA between six undergraduate programs. This test revealed statistically significant GPA differences between many program pairs at the $p<0.05$ level as shown below:

Program Pair	Mean Difference (I−J)	p-value	Direction
BA.C vs BA.IR	−0.1216	.000	BA.IR > BA.C
BA.C vs BA.PC	−0.1740	.000	BA.PC > BA.C
BA.C vs BSc.C	+0.1994	.000	BA.C > BSC.C
BA.IR vs BCM.BA	+0.1771	.000	BA.IR > BCM.BA
BA.IR vs BSc.C	+0.3210	.000	BA.IR > BSC.C
BA.PC vs BCM.BA	+0.2295	.000	BA.PC > BCM.BA
BA.PC vs BSc.C	+0.3734	.000	BA.PC > BSC.C
BA.PR vs BSc.C	+0.2760	.000	BA.PR > BSC.C
BCM.BA vs BSc	+0.1439	.000	BCM.BA > BSc.C

A one-way ANOVA shows there is a statistically significant difference in GPA between Direct Entry and Transition students $F_{(1,2540)} = 4.859$, $p<0.05$). Transition students (T) showed a slightly higher mean GPA than Direct Entry students (Table 4).

A comparison of the means between direct entry and transition groups for each academic programme is shown in Figure 2. These findings confirmed that the Bachelor of Arts in Peace & Conflict and the Bachelor of Arts in International Relations have significantly higher GPAs compared to the BSc.C (Computer Science) and the Bachelor of Commerce Business Administration.

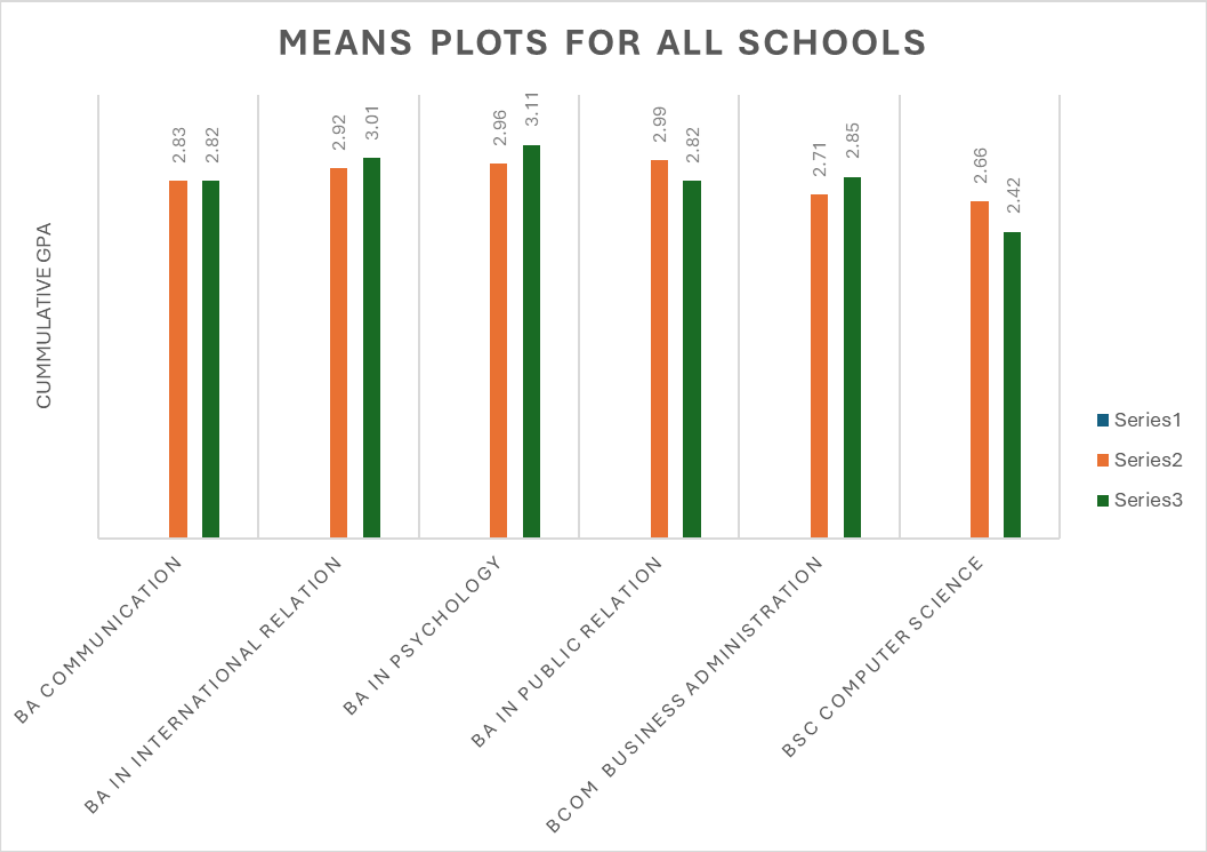

Figure 2. Mean Cumulative GPA for each academic programme

An analysis of variance on Direct entry and Transition for Bachelor of Arts in Communication did not reveal a significant difference ($F_{(1,591)} = 0.000$, $p>0.05$). This indicates that students admitted through both routes performed at par. The diploma qualification appears to have prepared the students adequately for the Bachelor's programme.

An analysis of variance on Direct entry and Transition for Bachelor of Arts in International Relations & Security Studies returned a slightly significant difference ($F_{(1,562)} = 4.732$, $p<0.05$). The transition students performed slightly better ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 3.01 \pm 0.40$) about direct entry ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.92 \pm 0.43$). The analysis of variance on Direct entry and Transition for Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and Counselling showed a significant result ($F_{(1,383)} = 6.653$, $p = 0.01$) in which the transition group ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 3.11 \pm 0.34$) appeared to outperform the direct entry group ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.96 \pm 0.53$). There was no difference in performance between the direct entry and the transition group in the Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations ($F_{(1,120)} = 2.959$, $p>0.05$). A significant difference was observed in the analysis of variance on Direct entry and Transition for Bachelor of Commerce in Business Administration & Management ($F_{(1,416)} = 7.462$, $p<0.01$). In computer science, the direct entry students performed much better ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.66 \pm 0.47$) as compared to their transition counterparts ($\bar{x} \pm sd = 2.42 \pm 0.58$) with ($F_{(1,465)} = 14.583$ and $p<0.001$). Computer Science is the only programme in which the direct entry candidates performed significantly better than their transition counterparts.

Overall, the results tend to show that transition students performed better than direct entry, although the students appeared to have performed at par in most of the programmes. However, other factors need to be investigated for this small difference. Although Richardson[1] and Kaldi[2] attributed such performance to a higher level of motivation and the possession of significant skills and experiences on the part of the transition students, this study did not control for these factors. The results of this study support the policy on the two pathways adopted by Kenya. It is in order that students are given credit transfers for knowledge acquired through the diploma programme. Both routes of access to undergraduate studies appear justified.

It has been reported that in 2006, the University of KwaZulu-Natal Graduate School of Business admitted seven MBA candidates who held neither a bachelor's degree nor its equivalent, which is a requirement for entry onto the MBA programme. There was some initial resistance from faculty members. However, the students passed all their subjects with over 65%. They were followed up with a focus group discussion. The respondents felt excited, fearful about being able to cope, and uncertain. None of them felt inferior. They also complained of bottlenecks in getting recognition, which were of a bureaucratic nature.[3] There was no comparison with direct entry students in this study.

It is recommended that future studies include a qualitative analysis and attempt to find the specific factors that make transition students perform better than direct entry ones in some academic programmes. Equally, such analyses should be able to explain the significant differences observed in the Computer Science programme. Equally worth investigating is whether candidates who have prior learning without a formal qualification, like a diploma, can cope with the academic rigor associated with programmes for the bachelor's degree.

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[2] n14.

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