

Factors That Influence The Positioning Of Meetings, Incentives, Conferences And Events (Mice) Destinations In Uasin Gishu County, Kenya

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Abstract:

Meetings, incentives, conferences and events (MICE) tourism has been alluded by many scholars as a sector that draws lucrative, direct and indirect revenue to host destinations. Despite this fact, little seems to have been done in Kenya especially at the county level to position the MICE product. The aim of the study was to establish the factors that influence the positioning of Uasin Gishu County (UGC) as a MICE destination. Specifically, the study sought to establish the influence of facilities, marketing and government policies on the positioning of UGC as a MICE destination. Mixed research approach including quantitative and qualitative methods was employed for the study.. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the information collected. The results of the multiple regression indicated that facilities greatly influenced positioning of the MICE product in UGC (+0.533) followed by marketing (+0.331) and finally the government policies (+0.201). In order to better position UGC as a MICE destination, it's important that facilities, marketing and government policies are addressed.

Key Words: *Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Events*

1.0 Introduction

Globally MICE tourism has grown in recent decades (UNWTO, 2014) and has become a significant operating sector of the tourism industry (Goeldner & Ritchie, 2012). It has contributed to income, employment, and investment (UNWTO, 2014). In 2009, a total of 11,929 international meetings were held worldwide (Yang & Gu, 2011). The industry consists of multi sectors of hospitality services, including lodging, food and beverage, catering, convention service, convention facility supply, transportation, tourism, retail, and entertainment and thus bears great importance for the local economy of a destination (Yang & Gu, 2011).

Today, countries all over the world are putting their best foot forward to develop the MICE industry as a means to enliven national economic development (Yang & Gu, 2011). Thus, it not surprising that destinations are seeking to grow their tourism industries and to differentiate themselves from competitors, in part, by targeting MICE tourism (UNWTO, 2014). From a destination perspective, MICE tourism also decreases seasonality, produces greater tourism receipts on average, and increases brand awareness (UNWTO, 2014).

The United States of America (USA) is the leading country in MICE tourism followed by Germany and Spain respectively (ICCA report, 2013). To the U.S. economy the industry contributes \$263 billion in annual spending, provides \$25.6 billion in tax revenue at the federal, state, and local levels, and creates 1.7 million jobs for the

American workforce in local communities. For Singapore, which relies on MICE heavily for its tourism industry, MICE business contributes even more to the nation's economy. Within Africa, South Africa has been the most popular in MICE followed by Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. However in 2013, Kenya came second after South Africa (ICCA, 2013).

Kenya's MICE tourism started in 1973 with the opening of the Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC) in Nairobi (Odunga *et. al.*, 2011). It has been the host destination for high profile international and national conferences and events (Meetings Kenya, 2014). More recently, as part of Kenya's priority for tourism development, the country recognizes MICE as being a growth sector which is needed in order to make Kenya a top ten long haul destination (Ministry of East Africa, Commerce and Tourism, 2013a). Kenya considers the MICE sector to have 'untapped tourism potential,' which makes it a key opportunity for Kenya's tourism development (Ministry of East Africa, Commerce and Tourism, 2013a).

In recognition of the contribution of the MICE sector, the National MICE Committee and Secretariat was established in July 2010 and was tasked with the responsibility of charting the way forward for the MICE subsector. It comprises of public and private sector actors, the national MICE committee and secretariat and this is a clear indicator of the government's commitment to develop this sector.

(Samcotech, 2011).

Destinations should define strategies for both positioning (creating an image or identity in the minds of their target market) and repositioning (changing the identity of the destination as a product, relative to the identity of competing cities/countries) always retaining front of mind the reshaping of opinion and constant evolution of the sector (UNWTO, 2014). Research on positioning of MICE has not been done in Kenya. Thus the aim of this research is to shed light on the factors affecting the positioning of MICE destinations in Kenya.

2.0. Methodology

2.1. Study Area

The study was carried out in Uasin Gishu County (UGC). UGC is one of the 47 counties in Kenya. Uasin Gishu County is situated in the mid west of Kenya’s Rift Valley and shares common borders with Trans Nzoia County to the North, Elgeyo Marakwet County to the East, Baringo County to the South East, Kericho County to the South, Nandi County to the South West and Kakamega County to the North West. It lies between Longitudes 34⁰ 50” East and 35⁰ 37” West and Latitudes 0⁰ 03” South and 0⁰ 55” North. The county is named after the Ilwuasinkishu Maasai clan who initially used the area for grazing. Uasin Gishu County is situated in the mid west of Kenya’s Rift Valley and shares common borders with Trans Nzoia County to the North, Elgeyo Marakwet County to the East, Baringo County to the South East, Kericho County to the South, Nandi County to the South West and Kakamega County to the North West.

2.2. Sampling Procedure

The sample size for this study was 190 respondents obtained statistically using Mugenda and Mugenda (1999) formula since the population was less than 10,000.

The hotels which constituted the sample for this study were chosen through purposive sampling. Stratified sampling was used to select employees according to departments then systematic random sampling was used to select employees from the various departments which formed the respondents for this study.

Questionnaires were administered to the 190 employees of the seven convectional hotels in UGC: Sirikwa hotel, Cicada hotel, The Klique, Naiberi campsite, Poa place and resort, The Wagon and The Noble. The gender composition of the respondents indicated that 69.5% were female (n=132) where as 30.5% were male (n=58). The level of education results indicated that those who had finished high school and joined the industry represented (14.2%). Those who went to middle level colleges accounted for 56.3% while those with university degree comprised 29.5% of the respondents.

3.0. RESULTS

3.1 Sources of MICE Customers

Fig. 2 shows that most of the respondents (59%) claimed that most of their domestic MICE clients were from the corporate sector, 12% were small entrepreneurs while 9%

were from trade associations. Religious and political sources were the least source where each constituted 4% respectively.

The corporate sector’s lion share could be attributed to the fact that the sector engages in MICE because of sponsorship from the employer, and need to show case new products to consumers.

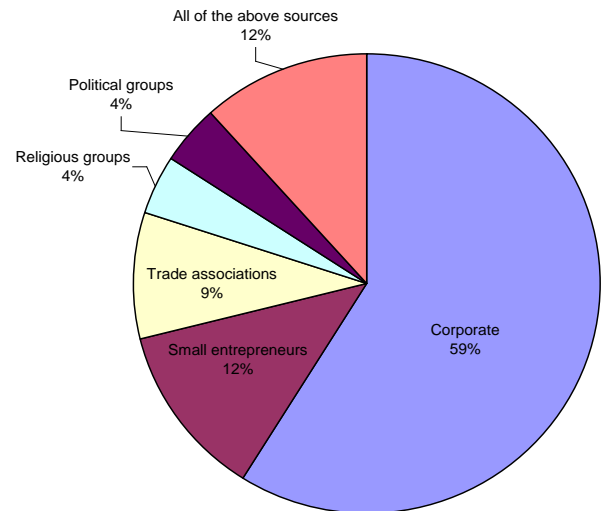


Fig. 2: Sources of MICE clients

Table 1: MICE activities hosted by establishments in UGC

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Meetings	62	32.6	32.6
Trade fairs	6	3.2	35.8
Crusades	10	5.3	41.1
Concerts	8	4.2	45.3
Conferences	16	8.4	53.7
Weddings	6	3.2	56.8
Product launch	7	3.7	60.5
All of the above events	75	39.5	100.0
Total	190	100.0	

Meetings constituted the most popular activities undertaken during MICE as shown in table 1 above with 32.6% of the respondents giving this response. Most of the respondents acknowledged that they hosted many MICE activities though less popular compared to meetings and these included; trade fairs (3.2%), conferences (8.4%), weddings (3.2%), product launch (3.7%) and concerts (4.2%).

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With reference to table 2 below, photographers benefited most whenever MICE activities were staged. According to the study, they constituted 33.7%.Taxi drivers followed suit with 26.3%.

Table 2. Businesses that benefit whenever events are hosted

	Frequen cy	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Curio dealers	34	17.9	17.9
Taxi drivers	50	26.3	44.2
Photographers	64	33.7	77.9
Option 1, 2and 3	20	10.5	88.4
All of the above businesses	16	8.4	96.8
Other business	6	3.2	100.0
Total	190	100.0	

3.2. Conferences Hosted Per Year

With reference to figure 3 below, 76.3% of the respondents claimed that they hosted more than fifty conferences per year. Those hosting between 20-50 conferences were 9.5% while those hosting less than 20 were only 14.2%.These indicate the level of demand for MICE activities. Establishments hosting less MICE activities blamed few MICE facilities, location of the establishment, parking space and lack of enough accommodation facilities.

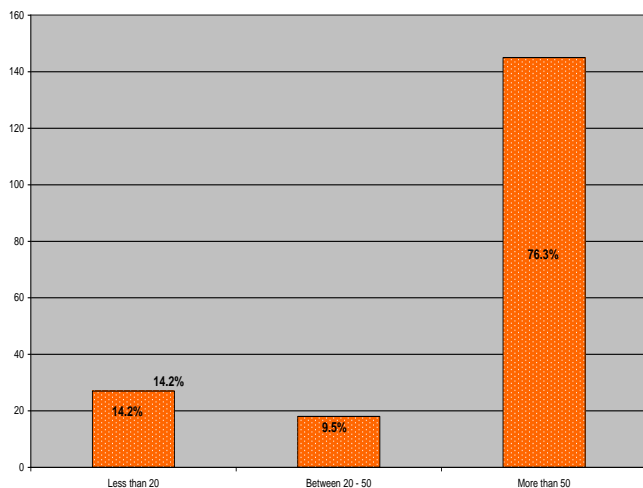


Fig 3: Conferences establishments hosted per year. (Source: This study, 2013)

On the other hand establishments that hosted many MICE activities attributed these to their strong marketing efforts, their proximity to roads and to the airport and good parking space as well as availability of attractions. For instance two of the establishments had attractions like wild animals within the establishment, nature trail where attendees of MICE activities would spend their free time after their MICE activities.

Fig. 4 shows that most establishments had a conference

room with a capacity of 500 people. 87% acknowledged that their conference rooms did not exceed 500 while others claimed that sometimes they had to turn away clients due to lack of space.

Demand for conference space is constantly rising and establishments were having plans to expand these facilities and others were in the actual process of expanding. Only 5% had a conference room exceeding 1000 while 8% had a conference room with a capacity of 501-1000.

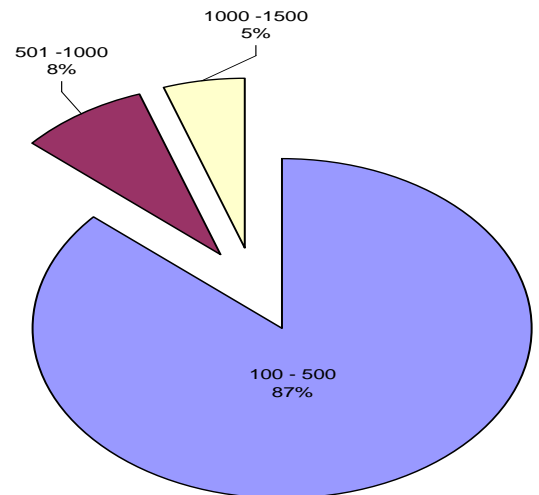


Fig. 4: No. of guests biggest conference room accommodate .Source: This Study, 2013

3.3. The influence of facilities on the positioning of UGC as a MICE Destination

Facilities appeared a major challenge whenever MICE activities were hosted. Employees were asked several questions regarding the facilities that their establishment had to cater for the MICE business and a five point Likert scale was used. In table 3 below, 26.3% strongly agreed that the accommodation facilities that they had in their establishments were adequate for all their MICE clients but on the contrary, 19.5% (n=37) disagreed meaning that accommodation facilities they had were not adequate.

When asked whether they had to organize for accommodation for delegates in other establishments whenever they hosted MICE activities 41.1% (n=78) of the respondents agreed. When asked about the adequacy of conference venues for their MICE clients, 24.2% disagreed acknowledging the fact that availability of those conference venues was another challenge they faced.

Concerning whether some conference clients were turned off due to lack of space, a significant proportion of respondents strongly agreed (24.2%, n=46) while 25.3%, n=48 agreed. Due to the competitive nature of hosting MICE activities, respondents were asked whether their conference venues met international standards; 27.4% of the respondents agreed while 31.5% (n=60) were of the neither opinion.

Table 4.3: The influence of facilities on positioning of UGC

Factor	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Accommodation facilities that we have in our establishment are adequate for all our MICE clients	50 (26.3%)	89 (46.8%)	8 (4.2%)	37 (19.5%)	6 (3.2%)	190 (100%)
We organize for accommodation for delegates in other establishments whenever we host MICE activities	69 (36.3%)	78 (41.1%)	7 (3.7%)	36 (18.9%)	0 (0.0%)	190 (100%)
Accommodation is a big challenge whenever we stage events	26 (13.7%)	36 (18.9%)	48 (25.3%)	68 (35.8%)	12 (6.3%)	190 (100%)
Our accommodation facilities are of international standards	43 (22.6%)	62 (32.6%)	50 (26.3%)	18 (9.5%)	17 (9.0%)	190 (100%)
Our conference venues are adequate to all our MICE clients	81 (42.6%)	50 (26.3%)	6 (3.2%)	46 (24.2%)	7 (3.7%)	190 (100%)
We turn off some conference clients due to lack of space	46 (24.2%)	48 (25.3%)	16 (8.4%)	15 (7.9%)	65 (34.2%)	190 (100%)
Our Conference venues meet international standards	45 (23.7%)	52 (27.4%)	60 (31.5%)	18 (9.5%)	15 (7.9%)	190 (100%)
We have modern conferencing facilities in our establishment	35 (18.4%)	106 (55.8%)	16 (8.4%)	18 (9.5%)	15 (7.9%)	190 (100%)
We need to expand our conference facilities to meet the huge demand for conference facilities	140 (73.7%)	37 (19.5%)	6 (3.2%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (3.7%)	190 (100%)
Facilities is a big challenge to the MICE business in Uasin Gishu County	114 (60.0%)	44 (23.2%)	7 (3.7%)	6 (3.2%)	19 (10.0%)	190 (100%)
Total	649 (34.2%)	602 (31.7%)	224 (11.8%)	262 (13.8%)	163 (8.5%)	1900 (100%)

Source (Researcher, 2013)

To further find out about conference facilities in establishments in UGC, respondents were asked **whether they had modern conferencing facilities in their establishments and the majority (55.8%, n=106) agreed to this fact.** Respondents were also asked whether their establishments had any plans to expand their conference facilities and majority of them; 73.7% (n=140) strongly agreed that plans were underway to expand the facilities for the MICE business. However those who did not have any plans constituted 3.7%, (n=7).

When asked about the facilities that their establishment used to engage their MICE clients after an event, 93% of the respondents mentioned a swimming pool, while 11% claimed to have a sports ground (Fig.5). Those that did not have any facility in place comprised 10%. The nature trail is also being used to engage MICE clients at the end of a MICE activity as supported by 32% of respondents.

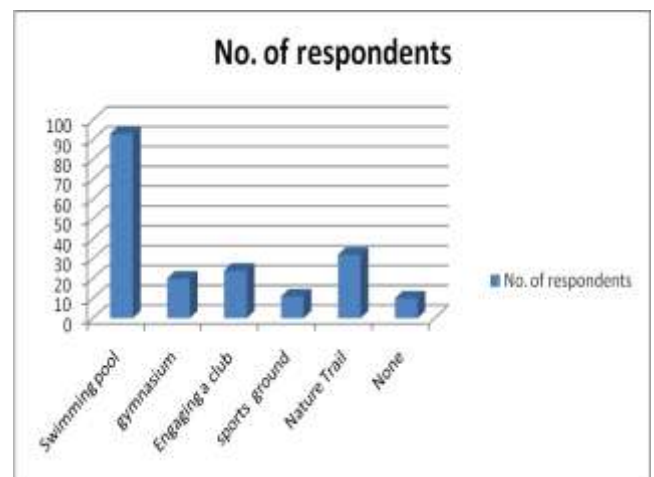


Figure 5: Facilities establishments put in place to engage MICE clients after an event (Source: This study, 2013)

3.4. Marketing of the MICE Product

Concerning the status of the marketing of the MICE product in UGC, respondents were asked about the marketing of the MICE product in UGC. 31.6% (n=60) strongly agreed that

there was poor marketing of the MICE product in UGC while 22.1 % (n=42).

When asked whether their establishments had a designed marketing strategy to market their MICE product; a majority of the respondents agreed (44.2%, n=84). However those who did not have any strategy in place constituted 8.4%, (n=16) of the respondents who disagreed and 3.7 %, (n=7) who strongly disagreed respectively.

When asked about innovation of new products, a significant proportion of respondents agreed that their establishments are always innovative in designing of new products (48.4%, n=92) while those who strongly agreed were 39.5% (n=75). Intermediaries are engaged in the sale and promotion of MICE products to reach the desired consumer; 43.7 %, (n=83) of the respondents agreed that their establishments engaged intermediaries while 35.8% (n=68) strongly agreed.

Respondents that said that their establishments did not engage intermediaries in promoting their MICE product comprised 3.2 %, (n=6) and 3.7%, (n=7) who disagreed and strongly disagreed

respectively. Concerning pricing of the MICE product, most respondents said that they had a systematic way of pricing their products as supported by 38.4% of respondents, (n=70). Respondents whose establishment did not have a systematic pricing mechanism comprised 9.0 %, (n=17).

When asked about the media adopted for the marketing of the MICE product, respondents acknowledged that both local and international media have been used by their establishments. Concerning international media, 31.6 %, (n=60) of the respondents agreed that their establishments use international media to market their MICE product. Those whose establishments did not use international media constituted a significant proportion of; 25.2% (n=48) who disagreed and 14.7%, (n=28) who strongly disagreed respectively.

Local media was the most used media of marketing the MICE product where 47.4% of the respondents strongly agreed while 29.5% also agreed. On the contrary, those who did not use the local media constituted 12.1% (n=23) who disagreed while 11.1% strongly disagreed. Most of the MICE consumers got information about MICE products through their friends and relatives as revealed by 51.1 %, (n=97) of the respondents who agreed to this fact.

3.5. Government Policies

While using a five point Likert scale, respondents were asked whether government policies helped shape the MICE sector. Majority of respondents, 58 (n=112) agreed as shown in the table 4.5 below. Respondents further pointed out that the government needed to formulate clear MICE specific policies to guide the MICE subsector as supported by 60% of the respondents who strongly agreed about it. Concerning whether government policies affected the way establishments marketed their MICE products, majority of respondents agreed 42.1% (n= 80) while 5.3% (n=10) disagreed.

Majority of respondents 86.3% (n=164) said that the

government needs to come up with policies that promote the growth of the MICE sector in UGC.

When asked whether the government gave them any incentives to expand their MICE facilities, majority (40% n=76) strongly agreed while those who said they did not receive any incentives were 14.2% (n=27) and 15.8% (n=30) who disagreed and strongly disagreed respectively. Respondents further noted that government needed to liaise with other stakeholders as they design MICE policies as evidenced by majority of respondents (75.8% n=144) who strongly agreed. Concerning reviewing of policies governing the MICE subsector, most of the respondents (78.9% n=150) suggested that the MICE policies need to be constantly reviewed to better guide the MICE business in general.

3.6. Multiple Regression Analysis.

Besides using descriptive statistics, the researcher was interested to ascertain whether there was any relationship between dependent and independent variables. Thus multiple regression analysis was employed not only to establish the existence of relationships between the variables but also to determine the strength of causal relationships between dependent and independent variables. The multiple regression model used was as follows:

$$\hat{Y} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \chi_1 + \beta_2 \chi_2 + \beta_3 \chi_3 + \Sigma ij$$

Where:

\hat{Y} = is the dependent variable (Positioning)

χ_1, χ_2, χ_3 are independent variables

χ_1 = Facilities

χ_2 = Marketing

χ_3 = Government policies

$\beta_0, \beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ are the regression coefficients

And

Σij is the error component with the mean Zero.

The data was analyzed using SPSS programme version 18.0. After running the statistical test mentioned above, the findings yielded the multiple regressions results as shown in the subsequent sections.

In table 4.6 below, it reveals that 65% ($R^2 = 0.650$) of the factors affecting the positioning of UGC as a MICE destination tend to be accounted for by the variation in their reported number of response to the independent variables through the questionnaires issued to them.

After the computation, the multiple regression model mentioned above yielded the multiple regression equation shown below:

$$Y = -0.456 + 0.533 \text{ Facilities} + 0.331 \text{ Marketing} + 0.201 \text{ Government Policies}$$

From the equation, facilities appear to be the most influencing factor on positioning (53.3%) followed by marketing (33.1%). The least factor according to the model is government policies with 20.1% influence. The above equation was further used to ascertain the presence or absence of causal relationships between the dependent and independent variables by generating a scatter plot diagram shown in figure 4.2 below.

The scatter plot shows a linear relationship with few outliers (deviations from the mean) because of variability of respondents used in the study. Examination of Figure 4.2

shows that there is a strong positive relationship between dependent variable that is positioning and independent variables which included Facilities, Marketing and Government policies.

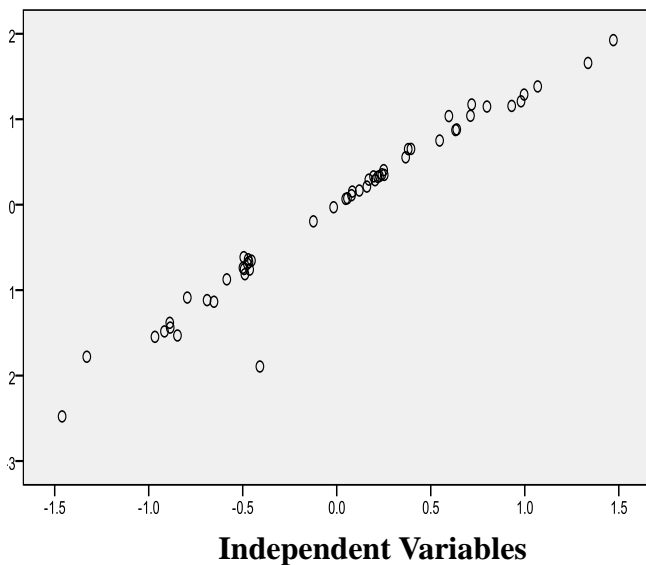


Figure 4.5: Scatter plot showing linear relationships between variables. (Source: This study, 2013)

4.0. DISCUSSION

The results showed that the status of infrastructure was good as evidenced by majority of the respondents who agreed that the infrastructure was actually good. However, those of the contrary opinion claimed that the government needed to repair the roads in the county leading to the facilities both in towns and outside. Respondents indicated the facilities had enough space for expansion and this would go a long way in ensuring proper positioning of their MICE business.

Respondents acknowledged that accommodation was a challenge whenever major events were staged in the county. It was also noted that most of the hotel rooms in UGC according to the interview with the tourism officer did not meet international standards. This was because most of the investors in the hospitality sector in UGC did not seek professional expertise when developing their hotels. In order for the MICE business to be positioned, facilities like rooms must meet international standards.

Concerning venues to host MICE activities, it was noted that sometimes some clients had to be turned off due to lack of space as this was strongly supported by the respondents. The sizes of most of the conference rooms were small. Majority of the respondents agreed that their conference rooms could accommodate between 100-500 people per sitting. This means that most of the establishments could not host MICE activities where clients exceed 500. However establishments located away from towns had spacious compounds where they could stage MICE activities outdoor.

Most of the respondents acknowledged that they had modern conferencing facilities in their conference venues. However, some of the respondents said that they did not

have modern conferencing facilities in their MICE venues. They stated that they had only the basic requirements for instance the meeting room, seats and tables, marker boards but had not invested so much on other facilities for example a sound proof conference room.

Need to expand conference rooms to meet huge demand for conference facilities received a very high response from majority of respondents. They supported their arguments by saying that their establishments were in the process of expanding conference rooms as already work was on going in some establishments to prove these.

Uasin Gishu County as a whole has a rich pool of attractions ranging from sports, culture, weather and the landscape but these attractions do not seem exploited yet these, can be utilized to better position the county. Respondents suggested that there was need for a national park and a museum in this county in order to enhance the attractions present in the county.

These finding are similar to Ndubi (2009) claims, that where as Kenya's MICE sector had grown significantly since 2002 and there was need for availability of adequate quality accommodations and support infrastructure to handle large conferences. Ndubi (2009) further suggests that time is ripe for purpose built MICE facilities in major urban centre's or in line with Kenya's vision 2030. Samcotech, E.A., (2011) in their baseline survey on MICE tourism in Kenya, concur with these findings; the study also revealed the inadequacy of purpose built MICE venues and suggested the need to use county government structures to diversify MICE destination areas.

A significant proportion of respondents agreed that there was poor marketing of the MICE product in UGC. It was noted that there was no coordinated marketing efforts by MICE stakeholders. There were no joint ways or collaboration to enable intensive marketing of the MICE product.

Engaging of intermediaries in the promotion and sale of the MICE product was another factor that this study critically analyzed. It was noted that local media was the most preferred media to promote MICE activities and this was because most of the clients were domestic and local media was cheaper. A significant proportion of respondents also acknowledged that they used international media to market their MICE product because of the need to reach international clients and also to increase the scope of the market. Most of these respondents acknowledged that they had a website for their establishment. Use of friends and relatives to market the MICE product was another way establishments reached MICE consumers. These findings are in line with Odunga *et al.*, (2011) assertion that the development, marketing and promotion of the conference tourism in Kenya were disparate and suggested that there should be standardization in the marketing and promotional strategies to ensure that the same message is passed across the market about Kenya's MICE product both locally and internationally.

Although it was found out that there were no MICE specific policies, respondents suggested that Government policies specific to MICE should be formulated and reviewed on a regular basis. The government had given incentives to MICE investors to expand their MICE facilities although a significant proportion of the respondents did not seem aware and this could be attributed to their ignorance or failure of the government to disseminate such vital information.

A similar study on the analysis on the situations and policies of China's MICE industry by Wu Jianhua and Xiao Xuan (2010) reveal that in China policies and regulations of the MICE industry are made individually by the local government and other cities have individually released MICE industry plans in their long term municipal planning contrary to the findings of this study. However, there is no unified administrative authority in China to make an overall planning hence there is poor positioning differentiation across regions.

4.1 Conclusion

Although facilities to host MICE activities were present in the study area, they were still inadequate compared to their demand. There is therefore need to expand those facilities and to ensure that they meet international standards in order to better position UGC as a MICE destination.

Some establishments in their quest to better position themselves, are marketing their MICE products both locally and internationally but it appeared that there was still poor marketing of this product which calls for coordinated marketing efforts by all the stakeholders and the utilization of current technologies.

MICE specific Government policies must be formulated to shape this fast growing tourism subsector. All stakeholders are required to cooperate during its formulation and regular review of these policies once in place should not be ignored.

The MICE business just like any other business is competitive and in order to gain a competitive edge, establishments engaging in the MICE business need to position themselves appropriately in the market.

4.2 Recommendations

Stakeholders need to liaise together to increase the facilities to provide adequate venues, acquire modern state of the art equipment to be used during MICE activities, ensure availability of enough space for parking, relaxation, provide leisure facilities to be enjoyed after MICE activities and in address the refurbishment of the current facilities to meet international standards.

The rooms used for MICE activities are very small and it was realized that few hotels had a conference room exceeding 500 people in capacity. This calls for stakeholders to expand these venues to cater for the increasing demand for the MICE product.

Accommodation is a key challenge for MICE activities as

established by this study. More hotel rooms need to be built and when building, the investors need to seek professional expertise in order to ensure that their rooms meet international standards.

The MICE subsector needs to be differentiated from other tourism products and aggressively marketed as a unique niche product. Various methods of marketing need to be engaged ranging from the local to the international media.

Establishments need to design their own websites and offer attractive rates in order to attract MICE clients.

MICE destination branding contributes a lot in ensuring winning of international bids. Uasin Gishu is known globally for producing the best athletes. This county therefore needs to brand itself and attract MICE consumers and in a similar vein, other places in Kenya need similar exercise in order to better position itself in the MICE business since many parts of Kenya have different unique features ranging from culture, physical features and attractions just to name a few.

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