The Influence Of Job Satisfaction On Customer Focus In Public Higher Education Institutions In Nigeria

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Abstract

The tremendous growth within the Nigerian higher education sector has drawn increasing attention to address the issue of competition. The intense competitive situation within the sector is reflected through the increasing number of both private and public universities. As competition intensifies, perhaps the most useful way to distinguish one institution from the others is through ‘contact personnel’ or the staff responsible for teaching students. It is said that satisfied employees would deliver satisfactory service because they are able to understand their customer better and are customer focused. The main aim of this research was to identify the type of relationship existing between Professors’ job satisfaction and customer focus. The study, ‘using the service perception gap’ to measure customer-focus, demonstrates that lecturers who are satisfied with their job role may not necessarily be customer focused. Though satisfied with their job role Professors are not able to understand customers’ needs better. The research provides a useful insight for further research on teaching based on customer-focus.

Keywords:
higher education, professors, lecturers, universities, perception gap, customer focus, job satisfaction.

Introduction

The rapid increase in the number of public and private universities in Nigeria indicates that competition within the higher education sector is becoming very intense. There are now over 100 public universities, 22 private universities and many other colleges and polytechnics. The total enrolment is expected to increase from 321,729 students in 2000 to 526,679 in 2012 and beyond as predicted. As the sector becomes more competitive, it is important for these institutions to distinguish themselves from competing institutions. It is argued that being customer-focused is the “rule of the game” that can be adhered to by institutions in today competitive education market, the purpose of which is to ensure continued growth.

Acknowledging that the quality of the teaching programme is crucially important, focusing on the customers (students and their parents) is equally important. The quality of the programme provides the bundle of benefits to customers. Nevertheless according to Bateson and Hoffman (1999), it is often impossible for a service organization to differentiate itself from other similar organizations in regard to the benefit bundle it offers. These authors stressed that contact
personnel are the important source of product differentiation in service organizations.

Zeithmal and Bitner (2003) note the important role of employees in the service delivery process, and stressed that it is often within the control of front-line employees. Hence, in a situation where there is a service delivery failure, employees setting things right will make a huge difference. In addition, the authors state that satisfied employees can satisfy customers by delivering satisfactory outstanding service because they are able to understand better customers’ needs or they are customer focused. Lovelock et al. (2002) argue that customer-contact personnel perform a triple role as operation specialists, marketers and are part of the service product itself.

At the end of the delivery process, customers form perceptions of the services rendered to them. Measuring students’ perceptions of the delivered service quality and comparing their perceptions with lecturers’ perceptions of service quality would demonstrate the extent of employees customer-focus, as the size of the perception gap signifies the level of lecturers’ customer focus. The smaller the size of the gap, the closer lecturers are to meeting the customers’ needs. In other words, they are more customer-focused. Relating to what has been said by Zeithmal and Bitner (2003) that satisfied employees can satisfy customers, it is interesting to conduct a study to investigate whether satisfied employees, in the context of academic staff are also customer-focused.

The aims of this research were first, to determine the current level of lecturers’ job satisfaction; second, to determine lecturer’s and student’s perception of Service Quality; third, to identify the lecturers and student’s perception gap; and fourth, to determine whether lecturers’ job satisfaction level has an impact on the size of service quality perception gap.

Literature Review

Customer focus

The “marketing concept” as defined by Kotler et al. (1999) highlighted the importance of being customer-focused. The authors argued that customer needs must be the central focus of any activities undertaken by market-oriented organizations and profits can be generated through customer satisfaction. Zeithmal and Bitner (2003: 15) pointed that customer focus is important as “all strategies are developed with an eye on the customer, and all implementations are carried out with an understanding of their impact on the customer”. Based on the works of these authors, in their research, customer-focus is defined as the extent to which service employees can meet customer needs. Customer-focus is measured using the service quality perception gap which is defined as the difference between students’ evaluation of service quality and lecturers’ evaluation of service quality.

Traditionally, Conant et al. (1985) have reported that institutions of higher education put more emphasis on meeting their own needs and considered students only as an input to satisfy their needs. However, as hinted by Snipes et al. (1997) due to changes in the external factors, such as demographic, political and economic ones, successful institutions in the future will be those that
apply market orientation, treating students as valued customers, rather than a producer-centered organization.

The benefits of attaining customer satisfaction have been discussed by many authors such as Lovelock, (2001); Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2001), Brown and Gulycz (2002) and Zeithmal and Bitner (2003). For example, Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons (2001) pointed out that satisfied customers would turn into loyal customers. Supporting Fitzsimmons and Fitzsimmons, Lovelock (2001) discussed the economic benefits of loyal customers, which include increase usage over time, reduced operating costs, profits from referrals and paying a price premium. In addition, Brown and Gulycz (2002) stated that customer satisfaction is a competitive weapon because traditional bases for differentiation - product features, price and distribution - are insufficient in themselves.

Job satisfaction in higher education

Although much research has been conducted in studying job satisfaction in an educational setting, most of them have focused on secondary school teachers (Jabnoun and Chan, 2001; Chan, 1995; Nawi, 1989 and Salleh, 1988). Currently several study of job satisfaction among academic staff of public universities in Nigeria indicate that the academic staff were neither highly satisfied nor seriously dissatisfied with their job.

As a result of many decades of efforts by social scientists, there appear to be a high level of agreement among them on the meaning of job satisfaction. Typically job satisfaction is conceptualized as a general attitude toward an object, the job (Robbins and Coulter, 1999). Comm and Mathaisel (2000) defined job satisfaction as the difference between employee perceptions and expectations in a service work environment. Job satisfaction is also characterized as a feeling about a job that “is determined by the difference between the amount of some valued outcome that a person receives and the amount of outcome he feels he should receive” (Cranny et al., 1992: 12). Locke (1976: 18), whose multifaceted concept of job satisfaction has gained wide support, defined job satisfaction as a “pleasurable or positive emotional state, resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences”. He also stressed that measures of job satisfaction should include work, pay, promotion, recognition, working conditions, benefits, supervision, co-workers, company and management.

The use of job satisfaction as a tool for improving customer service and satisfaction is supported by the study of Schmit and Allscheid (1995). These authors found a positive relationship between security service-workers attitude and customer satisfaction. Hoffman and Ingram (1992) determined that overall job satisfaction, satisfaction with work, supervision, co-workers and promotion were positively related to customer behaviors. In another study, Testa (1999) found that job satisfaction of customer contact employees accounted for 30 per cent of variance in customer satisfaction. Based on the positive result of these studies, investigation of job satisfaction level is crucial for front line employees in service sectors such as in higher education institutions.

A study of academic staff in UK by Oshagbemi (2000) shows that on the whole, lecturers were
generally satisfied with their jobs. They were particularly satisfied with their primary duties which are teaching and research. Another area where they also derived great satisfaction was interaction with their co-workers. However, they only expressed moderate satisfaction with the behavior of their heads of department. The three aspects of their job where they derived dissatisfaction were pay, promotion and reward. Similar findings were found in another study by Liaqua and Schumacher (1995). The authors analyzed factors affecting job satisfaction and the job satisfaction of faculty member in higher educational institutions. Their findings lend support to Herzberg’s Two Factor Theory, where job satisfaction is driven by intrinsic factors such as achievement, recognition, work itself, responsibility, advancement and growth while job dissatisfaction is related to extrinsic factors such as company policy, relationship with supervisor, working conditions, salary, relationship with peers, personal life, relationship with subordinates, status and security.

Interestingly in another study, Comm and Mathaisel (2000) used the definition of quality and SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) to define and measure job satisfaction of academic staff in the university. They defined job satisfaction as the difference between perceptions of work and expectations or importance of work. SERVQUAL or service quality is a difficult and complex concept to define. However, the definition of quality as a standard of conformance to requirements works well in engineering environments, but less useful in the intangible world of services. Marketers tend to define quality as fitness for use and customer satisfaction. According to Bradmore (1996) SERVQUAL is a concept that allows managers to adopt a more aggressive strategy as an instrument for pleasing customers and not just protecting them from annoyances. Hence the concept of customer-perceived quality can be defined by customers and occurs where an organization supplies goods or services to a specification that satisfies customer needs (McColl, Callaghan and Palmer, 1998). The findings show that significant discrepancies existed between employee expectations and perceptions with the largest discrepancy being between the importance of pay and the perception of the adequacy of employee salaries. The second largest discrepancy was between workload and the perception of their actual workload. The issue here is what sort of activities should be included in the workload of employees? A good number of employees believe that workload should include all activities that have something to do with their job, whether or not these activities are carried out at workplace or somewhere else such as home.

Effectively measuring and improving academic staff satisfaction is a critical function for management as business in the higher education sector becomes more competitive, and employees need to generate competitive advantages for their organizations through continuous upgrading of their skills. Management must view employees rather as valuable contributors whose opinions and perceptions are important sources of knowledge and customer satisfaction (Miles and Creed, 1995).

**Conceptual framework and methodology**

Zeithmal and Bitner (2003) pointed that satisfied employees can satisfy customers and are able to understand customers’ needs. In the context of academic staff it is interesting to investigate
whether satisfied employees are also customer-focused. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship among the several factors that have been identified as important to the problem being studied.

The modified version of SERVQUAL – another way of explaining service quality developed by Sureshchandar et al. (2001) was used in this study to measure service quality. The authors had modified the instrument to make it more flexible to suit any service category. The dimensions of service quality proposed by them were core service, human element of service delivery, systematization of service delivery, tangibles of services and social responsibility.
The job satisfaction level of the lecturer is measured using the Job Satisfaction Survey developed by Spector (1985). This instrument was selected due to the fact that it is short and the instrument assesses nine dimensions of job satisfaction including salary, promotion, supervision, benefits, rewards, work procedures, co-workers, nature of work and communication.

The population for this study was selected from two public universities in the South South Region of Nigeria namely University of Port-Harcourt, Choba and University of Science and Technology, Nkpolu Rumuigbo. The selection of these two universities was due to their commonality. Both universities offer first degree programme in Accountancy, Management and Economics. Thus, the population selected for this study was from the lecturers and students delivering and taking Management, Economics and Accountancy courses in their respective university.

A total of 320 self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the students in these institutions and 262 questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 81.8%. The lecturer self-administered questionnaires were distributed to 80 lecturers. A response rate of 72.5% from this sample group was received. The data collected from these two sample groups were subjected to several statistical procedures such as descriptive statistics, reliability test, and simple linear regression.

Profile of respondents

The majority of the lecturers participating in the research were young and female, holding Masters degrees. Most of them only worked for their present higher learning institutions less than six years. In addition, the Ikwerre – the predominant ethnic group - joined the present institutions without prior working experience in the same field. The sample represents the different ranks of academic staff ranging from tutor to professor.

The majority of students who were the subject of the research were female Ikwerre students between the age of 20-21 years old, taking the Management Programme. Most likely, this is due to that fact that majority of UST students are Ikwerre as the University was set up in the Ikwerre homeland where the students are the largest ethnic group. The respondents represented students of different years of study.

Findings
Level Of Lecturers’ Job Satisfaction

The study adopted a well-validated measure of job satisfaction level developed by Spector (1985). The result of a reliability test indicates that the instrument used to measure job satisfaction is reliable, attaining a Cronbach’s alpha value of 0.93. The current level of lecturers’ job satisfaction is determined by using a descriptive analysis. Table 1 shows the mean scores, median and standard deviations of each job satisfactions’ dimensions.
Table 1: Job Satisfaction Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Mean Score</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Co-Workers</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nature of Work</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Procedures</td>
<td>4.89</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefit</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Satisfaction</td>
<td>4.75</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The calculated overall satisfaction mean value for lecturers was 4.75 on a scale of 1 to 7. This finding indicates that the current lecturers’ job satisfaction level is at a moderate level. With the standard deviation of only 0.5, the implication is that the majority of the academic are moderately satisfied with their work and there is no large variation in this view. The co-workers dimension has the highest mean score, 5.16, which clearly indicates that there appeared to be no widespread interpersonal problems among academic staff. This kind of friendly atmosphere is useful as academic staff perform many aspects of their job role in teams.

Lecturers and student perception of service quality

Lecturer and student perceptions of service quality were determined by conducting descriptive analysis as evidence in Likert’s typology. On a Likert Scale of 1 to 7, where 1 is equal to very poor and 7 is equal to very good, the attained mean score of lecturers perception was 4.71 with the standard deviations of 0.74. This finding indicates that lecturers perceived that the service quality at their university was fairly good. Similarly, students’ perception of the service quality rendered by their universities was also fairly good being based on a calculated mean score of 4.37 and a standard deviation of 0.92.

Lecturer and student perception gap

The difference between lecturers’ and students’ perceptions of service quality is termed as the service quality perception gap. The service quality perception gap construct was derived by subtracting the mean score of lecturer’s service quality perception from the mean score of student’s perception of service quality delivered. The size of service quality gap indicates the
extent to which the academic staff is able to meet or understand students’ needs. The narrow gap indicates that lecturers are able to understand their students’ needs better and they are customer focused. The author of this research interprets the gap between service perception by lecturers and students as very small, only 0.34. The finding implies that lecturer and student perceptions are almost similar to each other, although students’ perception was lower than those of lecturers. To some extent these lecturers are customer focused.

The impact of lecturers’ job satisfaction level on the size of service perception gap

A regression analysis was used to determine the impact of job satisfaction level on the size of service perception gap. There is only one independent variable in this study, which is job satisfaction. Therefore a simple regression analysis examines the effect of job satisfaction on the size of service quality gap. The result of simple regression analysis indicated that there was no significant relationship or effect of lecturers’ job satisfaction level on the size of service quality gap. Their finding indicates that when there is a change in the level of employees’ job satisfaction it does not lead to a change in the size of the service perception gap. In other words, even though the lecturer satisfaction level increases or decreases it does not affect the customer-focus of lecturers.

Discussion

This study was able to indicate that on the whole the lecturers were moderately satisfied with their jobs and they were customer-focused. They were particularly satisfied with their co-workers and nature of their work. The findings suggest that good relationship existed with their co-workers and performance of their duties jointly. This finding is similar to the study conducted by Oshagbemi in 2000, which demonstrated that 70 percent of the UK academic staff was satisfied with their coworker’s behavior.

The least satisfied four aspects of their jobs were reward, promotion, benefit and salary. This finding conforms to the finding of Olsen (1993), who stressed that those extrinsic job factors such as salary and reward have been seen as source of dissatisfaction for academic staff. Salary has been a significant issue, because academic incomes have failed to keep pace with the increase in the cost of living and levels of compensation in other professional domains in Nigeria.

Interestingly the study is able to identify that satisfied lecturers may not necessarily be customer-focused. They seem to enjoy their work, have good relationships with their co-workers, however they failed to have a better understanding of students’ needs. This type of employees has been identified by Piercy (1995), as “internal euphoria”. According to this author, internal euphoria can be described as the situation where the employees are satisfied with their job, enjoy their co-workers’ company, love their work and they like their organization. As they are having a good time with their job, they do not bother to understand their paying customer.
Perhaps the possible explanation to this situation is due to the perceptions of the lecturers towards their students. Conant et al. (1985) stressed that traditionally lecturers perceived students as the product of their university, not their customers. The likelihood that this kind of perception still applies in these institutions is possible. Therefore, when lecturers do not perceive students as their customers they do not take the “extra miles” to learn and understand the needs of their students better.

Caution should be exercised when interpreting the finding of this research. First, the research measured customer-focus by using the service perception gap which may be insufficient to cover the definition of customer-focused comprehensively. Perhaps in future research, the measurement of customer-focus should include validated dimensions that measure the construct.

A second possible limitation is the study only investigated higher education in a limited geographic area, that is, in the South-South Geo-Political Region of Nigeria. A third possible limitation is that the study did not include personality traits that might have impact on lecturers to become customer-focused. Although the study is able to demonstrate that satisfied employees are customer-focused, the detail analysis (regression analysis) indicates that employees’ job satisfaction has no impact on the size of the service perception gap which is used to measure customer-focus in the research.

In summary, the research suggests that satisfied academic staff may not necessarily be customer-focused or otherwise. Perhaps the lecturers’ service-mindset has an influence on being customer-focused. Therefore to build student-focused lecturers, management of universities needs to develop an appropriate service mindset among lecturers, probably through training and short courses. The findings of the research suggest that further research is needed to identify other factors that are contributing significantly to employees becoming customer-focused. In further research, the studies should include studying the underlying personality traits (e.g. extroversion, agreeability) of lecturers, so that understanding of these factors, which explains why some employees are more student-focused than others, can be explored.

References


