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Abstract:

In environments characterised by complex structures and processes, universities rely on co-operation and goodwill between staff to function effectively, underpinned by good service quality. However, there is a lack of research on relationship quality in internal service settings and on the role support staff play in the development and enhancement of these relationships. This research aims to address this gap by examining the dynamics of university support staff relationships and their contribution to institutional performance, by analysing the link between relationship quality and service quality. Findings from a qualitative study with 50 staff in three UK universities reveal the ways in which interpersonal relationships can enhance or constrain internal service quality, with consequences at individual and organisational levels. The degree of co-operation encountered within a relationship influences how value co-creation, trust and reciprocity are experienced, with effects on job performance, motivation and commitment of staff. This research did not explore the role of personality differences in service quality relationships, an area future researchers could examine.

Keywords: service quality; staff relations; internal service; performance; co-operation

Introduction

Although 51% of the university workforce in England works in non-academic roles (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2017), the contribution of this staff group has had limited consideration in Higher Education (HE) research, or is examined in isolation from academic colleagues (Whitchurch 2006). With an institution's prime resource being its staff, and the day-to-day functioning of a university relying on effective co-ordination of individuals and teams to generate value and institutional performance (Kok and McDonald 2017), productive interpersonal relationships between staff are vital. Earlier studies of relationship quality have examined buyer-seller exchange in services selling (Crosby, Evans and Cowles 1990) and the significance of relationship quality between colleagues in work teams (Sias 2005), but have not considered internal service provision where the interpersonal relationship may have greater significance due to the longer-term nature of the relationship. This paper, therefore, extends service research and relationship quality literature by combining these perspectives through an investigation of relationship quality in the internal service context of universities.

Through a study of the relationships between internal service providers and their customers in a university setting, this paper examines how interpersonal and organisational dynamics influence service outcomes and perceptions of service quality. The research provides a deeper understanding of how these factors combine in service experiences to influence individual and institutional performance, and of the contribution made by university professional services staff through their engagement with colleagues. This study examines internal service provision from a customer perspective, i.e. from the point of view of the colleague accessing support, enabling an in-depth investigation of the expectations and experiences of the service user, and the outcomes generated for them as a result of service interactions.

Internal services are those provided within an organisation to enable employees to deliver results to customers (Heskett *et al.* 2008). In a university setting, professional services teams provide specialist functions to enable other staff to focus on their own areas of competence and responsibility (McCinnis 1998). Effective internal service provision underpins the performance of the university, and studies have demonstrated that the quality of university administrative services can influence student outcomes, such as dropout rates and student satisfaction (Roberts 2018; Baltaru 2018). As part of an organisation's service climate, the quality of internal service is at least as important as external service quality in predicting service effectiveness (Schneider and Bowen 2019), because when the needs of internal customers are met, employees are in turn equipped to satisfy the needs of external customers (Gremler, Bitner and Evans 1995).

Literature Review

Relationship quality in service exchange

Relationship quality is defined as a perception on the part of one party of the strength of a relationship, or as an evaluation of the overall calibre of relational ties (Palmatier 2008). Relationship quality builds up through multiple exchange encounters as relationship norms develop and become aligned over time and experience, through a dynamic, interactional process (Palmatier *et al.* 2013). The quality of a relationship is contingent on contextual factors such as the motivations of individuals involved, as well as situational factors such as organisational politics and access to resources (Naude and Buttle 2000). In exchange interactions, the quality of the relationship between buyers and sellers affects service outcomes and future interactions (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987). Some of the most frequently identified outcomes of relationship quality are trust, commitment, co-operation and performance. Commitment and co-operation are viewed

as immediate outcomes in terms of attitudinal and behavioural phenomena, whilst performance is described both as a direct and indirect outcome generated as a result of commitment and co-operative behaviours (Palmatier 2008).

Relationship quality research positions trust as a key construct (Jiang *et al.* 2016). Trust plays a key role in the development of co-operation in organisations and between individuals and groups and is a vital component in effective working relationships (Colquitt, Scott and LePine 2007), facilitating the formation of cohesive teams capable of knowledge sharing, collaboration and interdisciplinary ways of working (Jonasson, Normann and Luring 2014). Trust plays a key role in breaking down barriers between functional departments within an organisation, particularly in times of challenge (Massey and Kyriazis 2007). Organisational trust scholars connect trust with positive effects on employees' performance (De Jong, Dirks and Gillespie 2016), and as an organising principle in dynamic, highly relational settings such as universities where command and control models are less effective (Tyler 2003). Benefits include reduced transaction costs due to a reduced need for close monitoring, the fostering of prosocial behaviours, better job satisfaction and job performance, and increased incidence of organisational citizenship behaviours (Kramer 1999).

Relationship quality also draws on social exchange theory which describes actions by individuals as contingent on the rewarding reactions of others (Blau 1964), and locates the central concepts of reward and value within mutually contingent social processes (Emerson 1976). The concept of 'relational cohesion' as a positive force and an outcome of repeated or frequent exchanges is illustrated by Lawler and Yoon (1996), who show that once cohesion has been achieved, the relationship is valued in itself and can provide emotional uplift and satisfaction from working and co-operating successfully together.

When economic exchange is embedded in a social relation such as in the workplace, then trust, co-operation and commitment are stronger (Molm, Melamed and Whitham 2013).

A service perspective centred on intangible resources, value co-creation and the interaction between service supplier and customer, contextualises the interpersonal interactions between colleagues in an internal service setting (Vargo and Lusch 2004). The concept of value co-creation recognises the interdependency of customer and supplier in creating value and the significance of social context (Gronroos 2011). The quality of the co-operative relationship between exchange partners determines the extent to which value co-creation is possible, with the degree of interdependence of complementary resources being a critical factor (Dyer, Singh and Hesterly 2018).

University support staff relationships

Professional services staff in universities navigate a complex web of ongoing service relationships with colleagues which are reciprocal and interdependent, and which operate against a backdrop of organisational politics and competition for authority and resources (Pick, Teo and Yeung 2012). These relationships play out against a backdrop of sectoral and organisational challenges in an increasingly competitive environment (Burnes, Wend and By 2014), and involve questions of professional identity and positioning within the institution, within the framing of the organisational context.

Organisational context

Universities are inherently complex organisations with diverse inputs, outputs and processes in a context of continuous change (Shattock 2013; Prysor and Henley 2018). With high levels of autonomy, multiple sub-units and diverse disciplinary traditions, there is potential for a multitude of different goals, values and cultures on campus. This challenging context is compounded by changes in the external environment, including the movement from elite

to mass access of higher education (Giannakis and Bullivant 2016). The resultant work intensification and accountability requirements on academic staff (Taberner 2018), influences of globalisation and corporatisation (Olssen and Peters 2005), the increasing marketisation of higher education (Taylor 2017) and requirements of external accountability and quality assurance regimes (Olssen 2016). These characteristics of the working environment add pressures and tensions to working relationships between colleagues.

Power relations between academic and non-academic staff groups are frequently referred to in HE literature (Wohlmuther 2008), particularly in relation to the positioning of decision-making authority. Managerialism and centralisation are two key organisational factors that significantly influence the nature of relations between these groups, and support staff can be negatively associated with managerialism and viewed as instruments of corporatisation (Szekeres 2006). Managerialism is a recurring theme in HE literature (Karlsson 2019; Teelken 2012), and is characterised in universities by the pursuit of efficiency and effectiveness in services, an emphasis on accountability and monitoring (Deem and Brehony 2005), and an erosion of academic values of collegiality (Shattock 2013).

Centralisation is an outcome of managerialism, and, therefore, conceived of as a negative phenomenon where encountered on campus (White, Carvalho and Riordan 2011). Implications of the centralisation / decentralisation debate include whether authority for decision-making is concentrated at the top of the organisational hierarchy or delegated to lower levels (Cullen and Perrewe 1981), how policy and strategy is developed and governed (Shattock 2017), and how limited resources are allocated in the face of competing demands (Jarzabkowski 2002). This latter issue is apparent in the decisions a university makes about how professional services are organised, and whether control of support functions is held centrally or locally.

Professional identities

Issues of professional identity for support staff are significantly represented in the literature (Whitchurch 2006), as roles evolve and boundaries between staff groups become blurred. The traditional view of support staff as subservient with no influence over management or policy is being revised as changes in job roles and organisational business needs have led to a new breed of professionals on campus who work across administrative and academic boundaries, in broader translational, management or project roles (Whitchurch 2008). The developing and strengthening of the professional identities of support staff can lead to concern that administrative functions are encroaching on areas traditionally controlled by the academic community, and these changes in power dynamics underpin tensions between the two staff groups (Szekeres 2011). Given the potential for conflict, the importance of strong interpersonal relationships in overcoming prejudices and fostering appreciation between staff groups cannot be overstated (Gray 2015).

In addition to the dimensions of power, control and identity, the tensions in interpersonal relationships between the two staff groups can also originate in structural factors such as reward structures and organisational positioning. Academic staff are rewarded for independence and individualism whilst support staff are valued for efficiency, effectiveness, teamwork and compliance, resulting in differing priorities, motivations and values, as each is rewarded for different capabilities (Szekeres 2011). The positioning of roles also affects the quality of working relationships, such that staff in more centralised roles feel the effects of the divide between academic and support staff more acutely than those based in academic departments who have a better understanding and appreciation of the complementarity of each other's roles (Wohlmuther 2008). A further complication is that professional support staff are not a homogenous staff group and tensions also exist

between the various functions and professions in different parts of the institution, in the same way as tensions exist between academic disciplines (Szekeres 2011).

Method

This study investigates the expectations, experiences and outcomes for individuals of their day-to-day relationships with university professional services staff. The scope of the study was limited to professional services staff as a subset of ‘non-academic’ staff, as staff in this category have opportunities to influence colleagues’ work at operational and strategic levels. They include those employed in professions such as finance, human resources and librarianship, as well as those in roles considered to operate at a professional level, such as research support, teaching quality and registry. Semi-structured interviews were used to provide personal reflection and in-depth focus on experiences and effects at the individual level.

Sample selection

Fifty interviews were conducted with staff in three universities in the UK to investigate the effects of organisational context on workplace relationships, providing sufficient qualitative data for thematic analysis as recommended by Saunders and Townsend (2016). Centralisation as an organisational characteristic has a significant influence on how professional services are delivered on campus (Jarzabkowski 2002), and so sites representing different degrees of centralisation were selected. Site A (16 participants) is a research-intensive university with a traditional, highly devolved academic governance structure and centralised core services; Site B (16 participants) is a research-intensive university with an empowered faculty structure; and Site C (18 participants) is a strongly centralised modern university. The sampling strategy achieved a broad range of perspectives to reflect the diversity and variations within university staffing, including gender, staff type and subject

discipline or specialism. To ensure participants had sufficient experience on which to base their responses, the sampling criteria included a requirement for participants to have a degree of management responsibility and to inhabit a role that required regular contact with professional services staff.

Procedure

Interviews were conducted between January and July 2018, and were transcribed and analysed using NVivo v11. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and matrix framework techniques to identify themes, patterns and meanings (Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014), and inductive coding enabled the capture and scrutiny of significant ideas and concepts provided by participants (Braun and Clarke 2006).

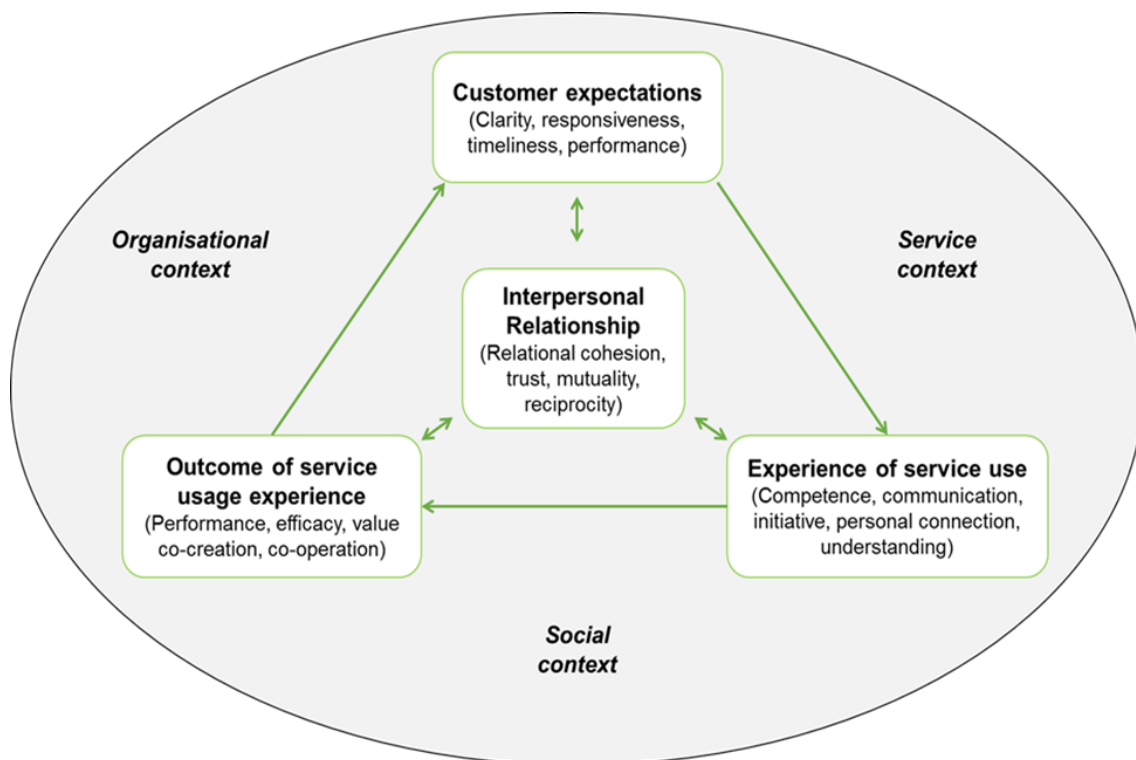
Findings

The sample consisted of 23 academic staff representing the broad disciplines of sciences, social sciences and humanities, and 27 professional services staff from key support functions such as departmental administration, registry, IT, library and student support. Participants were operating at middle-management levels or above, in roles such as Head of Department, Director of Programmes, Head of Operations, and had been in position for over a year, with the majority having over 5 years' service with their university.

The experiences and reflections of participants strongly underline the significance of the interpersonal relationship in internal service exchange. Consequences of internal service exchange relationships were experienced through practical, as well as, psychological outcomes, and these could have significant positive or negative effects on staff morale, motivation, commitment and performance. The key findings are integrated into a conceptual framework, (see Figure 1), which illustrates how internal service exchange relationships operate in the context of a university, from the customer

perspective. The framework captures the three key elements within the exchange - customer expectations, customer experience and customer outcomes – and the dominant themes for each element that emerged from the empirical research. The framework shows how interpersonal relationship quality influences and is influenced by service usage and outcomes at each stage, as well as the significance of the backdrop of organisational, service and social contexts. The recurring and cyclical nature of these exchange relationships is captured, as well as the potential for influences to be multi-directional.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the internal service exchange relationship



Variations in service experiences

Positive service experiences

Positive service experiences were characterised by competence, reliability,

professionalism and initiative of professional services staff, coupled with strong interpersonal skills such as communication, responsiveness, ownership and adaptability to the needs of the customer. In positive examples, factors relating to interpersonal relationships were cited more frequently than service quality, indicating that once a reasonable standard of service has been achieved, relationship quality is what makes the difference in perceptions of service exchange quality. Participants spoke in emotive terms about the value of positive relationships, describing working relationships that provided succour and moral support as well as practical solutions to challenges faced.

It gives you a very positive mind-set, I think, when you come into work you know it is going to be an enabling atmosphere, and you know that whatever is thrown at you, there will be people who will apply their considerable intelligence to finding a fix (Site A, Professional Services).

Where experiences of services provided by professional support staff were particularly positive, collaborative working delivered process efficiencies and ‘short-cuts’ through the application of specialist skills and know-how, illustrating the concept of exchange efficiency (Palmatier 2008).

Negative service experiences

Service exchange relationships deemed by participants to be less productive were characterised by frustration and time wasted, with significant implications for individuals’ own effectiveness and performance. Participants were doubly frustrated when they were not permitted to seek support elsewhere when services failed to meet their needs. Academic staff in particular noted the existence of central service charges levied on their departments that were seen to be wasted on poor quality services, compounding frustration with a sense of poor value for money. Academic staff felt the frustration and time wasted particularly keenly because of other pressures on their time, as one participant stated:

The pressures on us around research and getting marking done and seeing the queue of students who are outside your office door, if suddenly you lose a day to something mundane that someone in professional services really could have dealt with, that's very stressful and makes you frustrated and angry (Site A, Academic).

Participants frequently used the phrase 'passing the buck' or felt that they were 'passed from pillar to post', with no-one taking responsibility for resolving issues for fear of being blamed. When probed more about the roots of such experiences, participants noted capacity issues with service providers, individual competence, tensions between departments or staff groups, and the existence of competing priorities and agendas. Service providers were seen to lack understanding of the implications of their actions (or inactions), and this was exacerbated by their unwillingness to take ownership of problems or recognise customers' needs, as in this example:

With finance, it is very much "the computer says no" and there is no human aspect. They don't care about what they have done to the other bits of the business. They have followed a policy and your voice means nothing (Site C, Professional Services).

Organisational factors

Service exchange relationships in universities take place against a backdrop of organisational and social structures, and the data explored these alongside interpersonal relationships, in line with the service eco-system concept. Positive relationships drew on contextual factors such as personal networks and working culture, and these helped individuals to respond to organisational change and complexity. Poorer relationships reflected issues in the service context such as service models, resource constraints, high turnover of contact staff and tensions between staff groups.

Centralisation was seen as a neutral issue, but its implications were experienced as problematic. For instance, decisions made by centralised services did not always take into account local needs and tended towards a 'one-size-fits-all' approach that made

implementation difficult. Top-down decision-making was viewed as paternalistic and out of touch with reality at the ‘coal-face’, and these effects were felt most profoundly when consultation was lacking, as in this example: ‘We’ve got a centralised project which has been rolled out without any discussion, without understanding the sensitivities or the nuances of course delivery’ (Site C, Academic). The importance of effective, two-way communications channels in mitigating these effects was highlighted by participants. Without strong relationships, mutual suspicion could develop as a consequence of the physical and organisational distance between centrally-organised services and distributed customers.

Participants recognised interdependence as a feature of the university context, and the organisational risk when sub-units are not working effectively together. Management structures could hinder efforts to mitigate such risk, adding structural complexity through matrix management, or fragmenting services with a ‘silo’ mentality. Tensions between staff groups were evidenced in the data where competing motives were discerned, such as between academic and professional services staff, or between centrally- and locally-based staff: ‘The thing that sets off my red flashing light is when I can see the people I’m dealing with are following an agenda that’s their own’ (Site A, Academic).

Non-academic participants who worked in academic departments sometimes felt caught in the middle between centralised professional support services and local academic colleagues where there were conflicting agendas. At the same time, these staff were better positioned to bridge the tensions between staff groups as they drew on the know-how and language of both groups to develop trusting, productive relationships. Effective collaboration was possible only through the efforts, commitment and goodwill of individuals in overcoming such organisational obstacles.

Interpersonal factors

The most frequently identified characteristics of relationship quality in positive service experiences were interpersonal in nature and included mutual understanding, a personal connection, and the existence of shared interests and values. Strongly rooted in trusting relationships, honesty and openness in communications with colleagues signified for participants a positive regard for the other person and facilitated more productive interactions as a result: ‘We got on so well it was just dead easy to pick up the phone and to say “what’s happening to this, what can we do about that” or whatever’ (Site B, Professional Services). The ease of communication with known individuals points to exchange efficiency, saving time and effort for both parties. In less positive relationships, issues relating to communication, tension between colleagues and personality clashes were the primary interpersonal factors cited.

The existence or absence of a personal connection made a significant difference to the working relationship experience, and lack of a personal connection was an indicator of a negative relationship. In some cases, it was not an actively poor personal connection that was problematic, but the lack of any connection at all. This could be caused by poor communication, but was also attributed across all three sites to the implementation of impersonal IT systems, online portals, and use of generic email accounts, in place of personal contact. One participant highlighted this when stating: ‘Now you get an email saying “sorry but don’t speak to me, put it on the portal”, but sometimes I just want to speak to somebody’ (Site C, Academic). These approaches acted as barriers to service use, reducing exchange efficiency when the customer had to explain their needs each time to someone new, with limited insight into their circumstances.

Outcomes of service exchange relationships

The findings of this research show the outcomes of service exchange relationships through effects on participants' attitudes, behaviours and actions. In both positive and negative service exchange relationships, all participants stated that subsequent engagement with those services would be influenced by their experience, both in terms of whether they requested help again, and the way in which they would approach the service if they did. Findings demonstrate that high quality relationships underpinned by trust generate value co-creation and co-operative behaviours, enable problem-resolution and innovation, promote efficiency and performance, and help staff to operate effectively in large bureaucratic structures. These discoveries are consistent with general management literature on relationship quality (see for example, Carmeli and Gittel 2009; Colbert, Bono and Purvanova 2016) and extend the insights into the internal exchange relationship.

Several participants noted that access to valued advice was possible once a positive working relationship had been established, and that without such a bond they would not have felt able to ask the questions needed to help manage risks: 'I can share difficulties with them more readily, I can confess my own shortcomings with them more readily, and they'll work with me to help' (Site C, Professional Services). Positive working relationships provided opportunities to learn specialist knowledge from service providers, improving career prospects, and fostered the sense of being part of a wider community of practice. Strong relationships produced important benefits for staff wellbeing, personal efficacy, job satisfaction, performance and productivity, with increased goodwill on both sides promoting reciprocal behaviours, and a greater willingness to work collaboratively: 'You feel more of a kind of corporate belonging, that we're all part of the same organisation' (Site A, Professional Services).

When work relationships with professional services staff were described by participants as less effective, the consequences were experienced at personal and institutional levels. The strongest effect of poor relationships on participants was emotional, leading to demoralisation. Participants reported negative emotions such as frustration, anger, resentment and a sense of disempowerment which stymied progress, sapped morale and squandered goodwill. In some cases, these emotional responses led to raised stress levels which had detrimental effects on health and wellbeing: ‘It’s incredibly time consuming, it’s exhausting and it feels like a battle...I’ve got enough battles I’m dealing with in this department, I don’t need to battle with the people who are supposed to be supporting me’ (Site A, Professional Services). Academic participants in particular emphasised the consequences for innovation, in that regularly encountering difficult relationships and barriers to support had a dampening effect on creative energy and led to an unwillingness to commit to more innovative or strategic initiatives, potentially compromising research, scholarship and student experience.

When faced with a poor service relationship, participants would either do the work themselves if they could, avoid the service entirely, find alternative means or escalate to senior managers. These behaviours led to increased workload, lower levels of personal efficacy and reduced value for money of internal service provision, and provide concrete evidence of the consequences for institutional effectiveness of internal service quality, as proposed by Schneider and Bowen (2019). Whilst the majority of consequences were experienced in the internal operation of the institution, participants also recorded the impact of relationship quality on their external contacts, in particular where student recruitment and research funding were affected. These findings extend the works of Reynoso and Moores (1995) and Schneider and Bowen (2019) by providing evidence of the link between internal and external service quality, and performance.

Relationship quality

Findings demonstrate how perceptions of relationship quality affect attitudes, behaviours and actions of service users, contributing to relational exchange outcomes. They also provide support for relationship quality literature in demonstrating how contextual, situational and interpersonal factors influence the exchange relationship (Naude and Buttle 2000). Findings evidence the importance of relational ways of working and the significance of relationship quality in co-operation between service providers and customers (Palmatier *et al.* 2006). The research emphasises the significance of mutuality and shared understandings and values, in a way not previously addressed in the relationship quality literature. This phenomenon may therefore be particular to the exchange relationship in an internal service setting, as parties would ultimately be working towards common organisational interests and hence there is a greater expectation of common ground as a basis for collaboration than might be seen in an external service context.

Participants described trust most frequently as an outcome of service exchange relationships, not as an antecedent, although once established it would inform future service exchange encounters and promote exchange efficiency and relationship quality in the longer term. Reciprocity was a strong relationship driver that emerged from positive exchange experiences, stimulating co-operation and collaboration. In combination with trust, reciprocity fostered value co-creation and organisational performance beyond the individual service exchange relationship.

This study uncovered the role of emotions in internal service exchange relationships, supporting the idea that emotions influence behaviours and attitudes in exchange relationships, and that the effects are stronger in relational exchange than transactional exchange (Lawler 2001). Numerous examples were cited by participants substantiating the existence of ‘companionships of misery’ and the phenomenon of

negative interdependence (Lawler, Thye and Yoon 2006): ‘The relationship was very antagonistic...and it seemed to be a very ‘us and them’ relationship’ (Site B, Professional Services). An academic viewed the problem as ‘just total arrogance that centrally they know best and they don’t need to discuss with anyone’ (Site C, Academic).

The findings also provide copious evidence of the beneficial outcomes of relational cohesion, where the relationship is valued for itself (Lawler and Yoon 1996). High-quality relationships with colleagues generated benefits beyond the service exchange relationship and contributed to institutional commitment, motivation, job satisfaction, personal wellbeing and work performance: ‘It contributes to a really dynamic working environment. So you have good colleagues, you have a sense of camaraderie, and you know who you can rely on’ (Site A, Professional Services). Participants recognised the conscious effort that they made in developing effective working relationships, because they valued the benefits they could yield. Prior (2016) found that significant investment of personal resources was required by service providers to foster relationship quality, and this study provides evidence to show that this is also the case for customers.

Discussion

Taking a thematic approach, this discussion illustrates the interplay between interpersonal relationship dynamics and service quality outcomes. Five themes were evident and demonstrate the combined effects of interpersonal, organisational and contextual factors on perceptions of service quality.

Competence, efficacy and performance

Competence and the specialist knowledge, skills and experience of professional support staff provided the foundation for the working relationship, or their absence could derail a

relationship. The findings of this research support the view in relationship quality literature that competence is an antecedent to relationship quality, alongside reliability (Subramony 2012), as well as the work of Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) which positions ability, benevolence and integrity as precursors to trust development.

A competent service provider enabled greater personal efficacy and job performance for the customer but also produced efficiency in relation to the relationship itself as a result of effective communication and understanding of the customer's context and needs. In contrast to existing relationship quality literature (Palmatier *et al.* 2008), the findings from this study propose exchange efficiency as an outcome of a positive relationship not an antecedent, such that once understanding, trust and confidence in the other party has been established, exchange efficiency is then possible. When staff turnover meant that service relationships were disrupted, participants noted the loss of exchange efficiency, and the need to establish a strong working relationship with the new provider before they could benefit again from such efficiencies. This evidences the cost of staff changes in service exchange relationships in terms of productivity.

Bureaucracy, rules and discretion

Professional services staff were often negatively implicated in the application of institutional policies and processes, underlining earlier findings of Szekeres (2006) who recounted how support staff could be perceived by academic staff as instruments of unwelcome corporatisation and bureaucracy. One participant said 'They see themselves as guardians of rules, implementers of rules, and they have a policing function' (Site C, Academic). Where the service provider demonstrated a willingness to use discretion and to be flexibility in their approach, this contributed to higher relationship quality because it showed an understanding of the customer's needs. This finding empirically reinforces earlier studies of discretionary

behaviour (Gwinner *et al.* 2005), and underlines the significance of benevolence as an indicator of trustworthiness (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman 1995).

The findings of this study also support the idea that bureaucratic controls and top-down policy development erode organisational trust, and lead to a low-trust climate (Hoecht 2006). Where discretion was not forthcoming, participants felt that they were not trusted by their colleagues, illustrating how the use of control measures can hinder the development of trusting relationships between individuals and across departments within an organisation.

Ownership, problem resolution and engagement

Participants valued the commitment and dedication of their colleagues in tenaciously seeking solutions, in being prepared to make decisions, and to see an issue through to resolution by co-ordinating actions with other service providers. When ownership was lacking, relationship quality was compromised, as the effort of chasing providers was time-consuming and could have consequences for job performance, productivity and motivation. The concept of ownership receives limited attention in service quality and relationship quality literature, and only then in relation to customer ownership of value co-creation processes (Vargo and Lusch 2017). This finding, therefore, contributes a new dimension to relationship quality research by demonstrating the significance of ownership by service providers for internal service quality.

Participants - especially academic staff - saw engagement in terms of an individual service provider's willingness to engage intellectually with the subject matter and content of their department's work. Where this was in evidence, providers were perceived to be more committed to the needs of the customer, and the customer was more willing to invest in the interpersonal relationship as a result. This finding supports the theory that engagement leads

to better co-operation and work performance (Purcell 2014). Kahn (1990) theorised that the more employees were personally engaged in their work the better they performed, and the greater their ability to develop strong personal bonds with colleagues. These findings extend this understanding of work relationships by showing how their effects also contribute to internal service quality.

Mutuality and reciprocity

The importance of mutual interests, shared priorities and values, and the acknowledgement of mutual dependency emerged strongly from the findings, confirming previous research in relationship quality (Dwyer, Schurr and Oh 1987) and relational co-ordination (Carmeli and Gittel 2009). The findings show that a personal connection and development of rapport are precursors to the identification of mutuality and shared understanding. Conversely, competing priorities were frequently cited as the root of difficulties with interpersonal relationships with providers, particularly where interactions were infrequent or where service providers were physically or psychologically distanced from the academic community that they served. When one part of the university appeared to be pitched against another, the development of mutual understanding helped to reduce tensions.

Reciprocal behaviour was evident in the research findings in examples of information sharing, the discretionary giving and receiving of advice and the granting of favours. The theory of reciprocity is strongly supported in these findings which show the development of integrative bonds of trust and commitment between colleagues. Participants relied on the goodwill of those with whom they had developed reciprocal relationships in social and informal networks to help them navigate professional support service structures and locate the support they needed.

Value co-creation and co-operation

The concept of value co-creation as an outcome of collaborative processes in service exchange is evidenced in this study, which illustrates how the successful integration of customer and provider resources leads to long-term, productive relationships that deliver significant value for individuals and institutions alike. Employing a relationship quality approach, the findings develop earlier service research (Gronroos, 2011) through an examination in an internal service context, and illustrate how value co-creation is manifested in universities, driving value for both internal and external customers. The generation of ideas, innovative and adaptive approaches, and creative solutions to problems and risk were all cited as valuable outcomes of collaborative ways of working. Antecedents to value co-creation included trust, reciprocity, respect, shared interests and understanding, and effective and honest communication.

Findings confirm that when high levels of interdependence exist, the need for co-operation - communication, information sharing and collaboration - is equally high (Linz 2008). Evidence from this study corroborates this view, particularly through illustrations of the constraining influence of poor relationships on co-operative behaviours. Where trust was absent or compromised, participants felt less able to engage in collaborative behaviours and less willing to take risks in sharing knowledge and airing concerns, reducing opportunities for value co-creation. The value derived from co-operative relationships was experienced at an individual level such as in personal efficacy, motivation and productivity, and at an organisational level such as in research funding success and improvements in the student experience. Co-operative ways of working connected participants into the wider university community and encouraged a sense of a collective endeavour in which all parties could play their part.

Conclusion

This study investigated the expectations, experience and outcomes of professional service use in universities and identified the organisational and interpersonal factors, which influence customer perceptions of service quality, in both positive and negative directions. The complex interplay of interpersonal and organisational factors can enhance or inhibit cooperative and collaborative working relationships and their ability to generate value and promote performance. Interpersonal relationships thrive in certain conditions, and if sufficiently strong, they can mitigate more challenging organisational conditions.

Theoretical contribution

This study has generated new evidence that builds knowledge about the significance of working relationships and the contribution of university professional staff to institutional outcomes. The research demonstrates the positive role strong interpersonal relationships play in internal service exchange as well as the effects of weaker relationships. Evidence also shows that the absence of an interpersonal relationship can produce the same negative consequences as a poor relationship, as well as foregoing the positive effects of stronger relationships, in contrast to prevailing relationship quality and trust theory, which imply a neutral position and outcome in such cases.

Through an examination of the benefits of positive relationships, this research contributes empirical evidence of value co-creation processes, extending the theory of Vargo and Lusch (2017) into the internal service context. In HE literature, value co-creation has only been investigated from the point of view of the student as beneficiary (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates 2018) and, therefore, this study also contributes the staff experience.

Internal service literature had not considered the role of interpersonal relationships in any depth. This study demonstrates that relationship quality affects service outcomes for service users both individually and at institutional level, and that these manifest differently

from external service exchange. In particular, the role of mutuality and shared understandings, priorities and values were found to be especially influential in an internal setting, and this was at odds with previous research into the influence of relationship quality in external exchange which had not identified this as a significant factor.

Application of findings in practice

Relationships and interpersonal exchanges can be difficult to measure in practice, and their impact can be intangible and hard to quantify in the workplace, leading to a preference by managers to focus on more easily measurable elements of service delivery and performance. This study provides empirical evidence to redress this balance, illustrating the consequences of internal exchange relationship quality for individual and organisational performance. The findings suggest that universities whose staff routinely encounter poor quality internal service relationships will find it harder to respond to challenges as staff will be demotivated and lack the networks of reciprocal relationships required to pull together in difficult times.

In addition to an appreciation of the role of interpersonal relationships in internal service provision, this study highlighted the organisational constraints that could undermine such interactions. Key areas of concern were (1) the unintended consequences of centralisation that disconnect control of resources from accountability for performance, (2) resourcing and capacity of professional services, and (3) the implementation of service models which exclude the possibility of personal connections with service providers. Negative consequences can be mitigated once the problems are recognised, and consultation with internal customers on an ongoing and genuine basis can facilitate this. Service leaders should consider the implications of service design and constraints from the customer perspective, as service decisions and budget restrictions may lead to false economies at institutional level, when the full service ecosystem is taken into account.

Limitations and areas for further research

This study prioritised the perspective of the customer, in line with service quality measurement literature (Prakash 2019). Whilst this was justified on the basis of service quality being ‘in the eye of the beholder’, the perspective of the service provider on their working relationships with customers may provide an added dimension to understandings of relationship quality. Additionally, the data for this research was cross-sectional, i.e. it was collected on one day in the life of each participant, and can only be considered a snapshot of experiences. Longitudinal data, a critical incident approach with multiple participants, or following a dyadic relationship over a period of time, may provide deeper insights into working relationships and the effect of contextual factors.

Future research could factor in personality differences of respondents that may influence perceptions of service and relationship quality by employing a personality questionnaire in advance or alongside interviews. The conceptual framework of this study could also be empirically tested in other sectors where internal service provision is a factor in overall organisational performance, such as in local government, healthcare, professional service firms and other commercial settings, and could be used to examine the effects of service delivery models on relationship and service quality.

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