Staff Professionalism in University Services: a case study of UiTM

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that staff professionalism is one of the factors that lead to customer satisfaction in university services. Staff professionalism is an important component in university services. A quality service is considered as one of the important research topics in the context of service delivery in universities. Frontline university service is the first step before the public or customers pursue the matter further. If at this first step they are provided with quality service, indirectly it reflects positively on the university. However, if the quality of the service provided is poor it reflects negatively on the university. In this study, 192 of 909 graduates students who responded to the questionnaire and analyzed by using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software to achieve the outcome of the study. The findings show that there is a positive relationship between staff professionalism and customer satisfaction. Several recommendations were suggested to UiTM in order to improve its counter services delivery and to achieve customer satisfaction.

Keywords

Staff professionalism, customer satisfaction, public universities

Introduction

The quality of service to the public is very important for public agencies. Quality is the degree to which a service satisfies customers by meeting their needs, wants, and expectations while services are deeds, processes, and performances (Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996). The importance of service delivery to the public has been mentioned in the fifth thrust of the National Mission, 2006-2020. According to Abdullah (2006), the National Mission is a framework for Malaysia's development agenda which outlines the steps that the government will take in the fifteen years to come. The National Mission comprises five thrusts as follows;

- to move the economy up the value chain,

- to raise the country's capacity for knowledge, creativity and innovation and nurture 'first class mentality',

- to address persistent socio-economic inequalities constructively and productively,

- to improve standard and sustainability of quality of life and

- to strengthen the institutional and implementation capacity of the country.

In the fifth thrust, the government aims to improve the public service delivery system at various levels. The Prime Minister, in his speech during the tabling of the motion on the Ninth Malaysia Plan in 2006 mentioned that the more important thing in the National Mission and the Ninth Malaysia Plan is to ensure effective and efficient implementation. Hence, it is the government's duty to structure in such a way that monitoring and evaluating devices are in place to make it more effective. Therefore,

the fifth thrust of the National Mission is to strengthen the country's institutional and implementation capacity. To achieve this, strive to the government will improve organisational structures; facilities and work environment; the quality of human capital; and laws and regulations. With these steps, the government expects to enhance the performance of frontline government agencies include university as well as improve the delivery system.

Staff Professionalism in University

In organizations, fulfilling customer satisfaction is very important. It is a part of staff jobs. Customers do not ask for too much, it is enough if staff can provide them with clear information, courtesy, the ability to answer them politely and the service can easily be accessible. In service oriented organizations, staff have a big responsibility to treat customers well. This is because service is their core business like universities, consultants and airlines.

Staff must be professional in dealing with customers. There is no emotional influence in delivering services to customers. Professionalism is the combination of all the qualities that are connected with trained and skilled people (Cambridge Advance Learner's Dictionary, 2007). Staff professionalism refers to the ability, capability and courtesy in dealing with customer. The personal qualities and values among individual public officials are key factors that need, team spirit and close rapport among employees of an organization. Undoubtedly this impact on productivity and the quality of service rendered by an agency (Muhammad, 1997). For this study, staff professionalism refers to the professionalism of staff while servicing the

customer in university. Staff need to be helpful, polite, respectful and knowledgeable when dealing with customers.

Staff professionalism can lead to customer satisfaction. Customer need to deal with knowledgeable, friendly, respectful and helpful staff. According to Gerson (1993), service and quality performance that result in customer satisfaction and retention can only be provided by competent and qualified people. Based on Gerson's study, in order to deliver good and quality service, organization must have good staff. They need to be trained to deliver quality service professionally. This is because people view front liners as the representatives of an organization.

The government also emphasize on staff professionalism. A circular from the Chief Secretary to the Government stresses on staff professionalism by stating that heads of department need to ensure that all counter staff must be courteous and friendly at all times when dealing with the public and they should also smile. The staff will also be trained necessary (Chief Secretary to the Government, 2004).

Past research found that staff professionalism is one of the factors that lead to customer satisfaction. Professionalism is the staff abilities that can provide a valuable service to customer and operate with no self-interest. In staff professionalism it must have responsibility, know-how and know-why, problem solving perseverance, and need to have a values toward high quality services. The study conducted by Local Government Association (2007) found that staff professionalism is one of the 'drivers' of customer satisfaction. This 'driver' is the broad factor which that most significant in determining customer satisfaction. In

4

addition to that Ticker (2004) in his study of student expectation, suggested that quality and professionalism in important in the provision of service in university. This is because the students of higher education perceives themselves as customers of a service and for university by improving some areas in university service can raise the level of satisfaction.

Cook (2000) in her research found that customers want to deal with people whom they can trust, are knowledgeable, technically able and at the same time friendly and polite to customers. In her research also found that the memorable to the customer in term of service experience is the personal touch rather than material aspects of the service. The research proves that staff plays an important role in service. Their attitudes, knowledge and communication make up staff professionalism. If staff does not have those skills, it can make customer dissatisfied. This finding is similar to the study reported by Wall and Berry (2007). In their study that the lowest customer satisfaction occurred when there is a staff negative or cold and unresponsive staff.

In recent years, interpersonal skills have also become an important feature in the service sector, partly because of the importance currently placed on business ethics. Another development is in the change of terminology used. Students are currently referred to as clients or customers. They must be treated as valued customer. Staff need to communicate well to the customers. Communication plays important role in service counter. Staff must be nice to customer and well communicate. It well will make them satisfy with service counter. According to Webster (1991) communication between staff and customer represent one of those factors of customer satisfaction and quality of service. Communication is a part of staff professionalism in university

services. Parasuraman, Ziethaml and Berry (1985) include communication as dimension of service quality and formative component of customer expectations. In order to improve service delivery to the public, the government agencies require their staff to attend customer care courses as part of in-service training. Communication skill is important for staff in dealing with customers.

As reported by CUEPACS (2007) in its survey, generally, customers find counter service's staff in public agencies unfriendly and unprofessional. Carr (1996) stated that public organization front liner is not welcome and unfriendly compared to private organization. Surveys all too frequently reveal that users are reluctant to ask for help, partly because they do not want to look foolish and uninformed and partly, for a variety of reasons, because they do not see staff as approachable. Staff needs to be polite, friendly and always need to be able to behave in a courteous, patient and tactful manner. They also need to give customers their full attention during the interaction.

This study will focus on Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), a public university in Malaysia which from a part of public sector scenario. UiTM's core business is teaching and learning and students are its largest customer group with about a 100,000 in enrollment currently. Being a customer, students need quality service to be provided to them. In relevance to that, in its client charter, UiTM promises to serve quality service to customer. With that, UiTM must deliver good and quality service to its customers. Customer service is everyone's responsibility; it is not just the duty of staff at the service counter or front desk. Since UiTM aspires to be world-class in all its endeavors, its customer service should be good or excellent.

Staff play important role in university services to the customers. Support from staff is very important to ensure the success of strategies and planned actions of the management. According to the Development Administration Circular 10/1991, there is a strategy and improvements, which are planned by management, is the infrastructure that enables the support staff to carry out their duties efficiently and effectively. In order to upgrade the quality of services they provide the support-staff behind the counter should strive to undertake the following:

- strive to improve further their skills and knowledge in carrying out their daily responsibilities;
- conform to the performance standards set by management to ensure that service provided is always up to the standard;
- conform to the directives and guidelines, which have been prepared by the management;
- practice an excellent work culture;
- be prepared to voice views and proposals towards the improvement of work environment especially where they are directly involved.

Staff need to be ready all the time when dealing with customers. They must be able to solve the customer's problem or give some guide and advice for particular case. The communication skill and interpersonal skill are important when facing with customers. The politeness and friendliness will show the staff professionalism. When customer deals with friendly, courtesy, knowledgeable and helpful staff it will lead to customer satisfaction.

Findings

The findings of this study indicate that there are positive relationship between staff professionalism and customers' satisfaction. The satisfaction level of customers on UiTM's service counter was examined. There was an effect on independent variable to dependent variable found in the findings, staff professionalism have significant influence on customers' satisfaction. The result also indicated that there is no difference between genders on customers' satisfaction while on specific criteria, there was a difference in satisfaction level between male and female was found.

The reliability of measures indicates the extent to which the instrument is without bias and hence ensures consistent measurements across time and across the various items in the instruments (Sekaran, 2003). For this study, the reliability survey was carried out to investigate the internal consistency of the scale of study. Cronbach's Alpha coefficient can range from 0.00 to 1.00 and reflect the strength of the relationship between items within scale. Reliability coefficient related to measurement error. The higher reliability coefficient shows the smaller measurement error. Nunnally & Bernstein (1994) suggest that Cronbach'c Alpha coefficient greater that 0.7 is reasonably reliable. However, an alpha coefficient for scale with less than six items can be much smaller (0.6 or higher) is still acceptable. This is also mentioned by Hair, Balck, Babin, Anderson & Tatham (2006) with values of 0.60 to 0.70 deemed the lower limit of acceptability.

The Reliability Analysis of the Scale

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Staff Professionalism	0.66
Customers' Satisfaction	0.87

The table above shows that the reliability coefficients for all scales used in the study. Each of these aspects is measured by a five-point-scale. The reliability coefficient for each scale should range from 0.6 and higher to be reliable. The reliability coefficient for all variables are more than 0.6, therefore all variables are acceptable.

For this study, the test for normality has already been done to see the normality of the data. Even though Kolmogorov-Smirnov value seems to prove non-normality of the data, one can still rely on others such as the shape and curve of the distribution. Skewness and Kurtosis, which are within acceptable value of ± 2. In addition, the overall boxplot also shows normality as well as Q-Q plot of the variables.

The aim of this objective is to know whether there is a positive or negative relationship between staff professionalism and customer's satisfaction. The staff professionalism consists of communication skills, knowledge level, politeness, respectfulness, interested in customers' questions, friendliness, seriousness in attending to customers and treat customers with values attached to them. The researcher believes that there might be a positive relationship between these variables.

Since the researcher wanted to know the relationship between these variables, the correlation is the suitable method. This is because correlation looks at the relationship between two variables. Pearson correlation has been selected to describe the relationship between these two continuous variables. It is measure of the strength of the association between two variables.

Correlation between Staff Professionalism and Customers' Satisfaction

Variable	Pearson Correlation (r)	Sig. (2-tailed) (p)
Staff Professionalism	**0.715**	**0.00**
Communication skill	.561(**)	.000
Knowledge level of staff	.542(**)	.000
Staff friendliness	.573(**)	.000
Treat as valued customer	.663(**)	.000

The result confirms the scatterdot in that a significant positive relationship between staff professionalism and customers' satisfaction (r=0.715, p<0.05). Therefore, results of correlation indicate that staff professionalism is associated with customers' satisfaction. There is a significant relation between staff professionalism and customers' satisfaction.

In addition to that, to be more specific, relationship between the four related aspects of staff professionalism were also examined as depicted in above table. The result shows that there is a relationship exists between staff communication skills, knowledge level of staff, staff friendliness and treat as valued customer and customer satisfaction.

The finding of (Webster, 1991) indicates that support staff communication is important in counter services. Communication between staff and customers

represent one of those factors of customers' satisfaction and quality of service. The result shows, that there are significant positive relationships exists between the four aspects of staff professionalism and customers' satisfaction.

There is a significant relationship between staff professionalism and customers' satisfaction. Staff professionalism is the key in counter services. Service delivery needs staff to act on behalf of the organization. In services like UiTM, staffs need to deal face to face with customers. So, they need to have good communication skills, politeness, knowledgeable, respectfulness and able to treat customers as valued customers. When humans deal with humans it involves feelings. Staff needs to be polite, friendly and respectful towards customers. It shows that there is a personal touch in service, things that memorable to customer. The findings support Cook (2000), the social interchange between customer and service providers and the way this process managed is pivotal to achieving excellent customer services. Research also shows that the memorable of customer in term of service experience is the personal touch rather than material aspect of the service.

UiTM is different from other local authority and other public agencies. The customers' schedules are quite different. Since some of them are working people, they may come to office to have service at lunch hours. So, staff needs to be ready at all times and be prepared to serve customers. If staff can treat them professionally at all times (even during lunch hours) the customers will be happy. The professionalism in dealing with customers is needed in UiTM.

There are certain aspects that can be seen in staff professionalism in service delivery. The aspects that customers want to see are; communication, skills, knowledge level and staff respectfulness. Communication plays an important role in counter service. Service providers and receivers (customers) need to communicate. Customers will be satisfied if staff communicates well, clear information is delivered and politeness is practiced while communicating. The finding of (Webster, 1991) support that staff communication is important in counter services. Communication between staff and customer represent one of those factors of customers' satisfaction and quality of service. It may be able to say that, staff needs good communication skills when dealing with customers. The message should be clear and staff needs to communicate in a right way. Make customers feel that they are being treated nicely and the information delivered is clear to them. The tone of voice is also important in dealing with customers, staff needs to communicate in a suitable voice tone and make customers feel that there is a two way communication.

There is also a linear relationship between knowledge level of staff and customers satisfaction. Customers need to get information and staff need to be able to respond to customers' questions. It may be that, staff need to have some alternative methods in answering customers' questions. Staff should not cause customers to doubt and be confused about the solution offered by them. Staff needs to have better knowledge in academic affairs and other matters that related to the university.

There is also a positive relationship between being treated as valued customers and customers' satisfaction. Customers may need to feel welcomed. In a university, students are the most important customers. Staff needs to treat them well as this will

make them happy. Happiness can lead to satisfaction. Staff needs to treat all customers (students, parents, guest, internal staff, etc) as valued customers. Thus, show that staff are trained to value their customers and to treat them fairly. It is found that, customers want to deal with knowledgeable, friendly and polite staff. This makes customers happy and satisfied. This finding is also similar with Cook (2000), found that customers want to deal with people whom they can trust, are knowledgeable, technically able and at the same time friendly and polite staff to customers. Her research also shows that the customers remember personal touch rather than the material aspects of the service.

In all aspects of staff professionalism, the findings show that staff professionalism is very important and has a relationship with customers' satisfaction. Quality staff can deliver quality services. It supports Denton's (1989) statement that, staff professionalism is important because services need dedicated people (i.e. people with good communication skill, courtesy, the ability and capability to help customers, etc) conducive lay out of the counters and informative counters will determine customers' satisfaction. Customers' satisfaction happens when a company focuses on quality service.

Recommendation

Staff professionalism can be improved by having a course for administrative staff especially those who deal directly to the customers. They need to be trained to communicate well, to be polite, respectful towards the customers and serious in handling and resolving matters that are raised by the customers. In addition to that,

staff needs to have some exposure on the environment of frontline service that is implemented in corporate sector such as Maybank, Maxis and CIMB. The front liners there treat customers as value to them. This may be because corporate sector is business oriented but government staff needs to know how corporate staff communicate and treat their customers. As a front liner to the faculties/departments/units in UiTM, staff needs to change their attitudes to be more efficient and professional in doing their work. Staff need to be ready to serve customers and they must know that customers do not purposely come to the counters for a visit but they have problems that need resolving and to get clear information.

Staff is the main aspect of university services. Staff needs to communicate to every single customer who came to the them. Any service needs communication. Communication is compulsory in services. The skills must be there. If the heads of department detect that staff do not communicate well, the staff need to be sent to communication skills course. Staff needs to attend communications course in order to improve their communication skills. During the course, staff also needs to be trained to respect customers (whether they are students, parents or public). There must be no bias in treating customers. All customers must be treated fairly and full of respect to make them feel as valued customers. UiTM must show the first class service to customers.

Staff needs to be more creative. Problems and issues that come to them must be settled. They must find alternatives to settle every single problem that comes to them. The way to settle the problem is by having logbooks and procedures of work.

Logbooks can help staff solve customers' problems. Logbook consists of work that he or she had done on that day. Every single step, method and contact person will be written in the logbook, not on a piece of paper and the paper will be lost or be throw away. The problem is almost similar between customers, staff needs to be minutes or jotted down step by step in solving any particular problem. So the next time if a similar problem arises again, staff can refer to his or her logbook.

The other way is by having the work procedures for the registration processes, examination processes, contractor registration processes, events management and many others can be referred. This is similar to the procedure in ISO 9001:2000, but it is more informal. The A4 paper will state one process from beginning to the end. The contact person and telephone number must be in to be stated for easier reference. Everybody can have a look and sharing of knowledge can occur in that department of faculty. Staff must be trained to minimize customers' mobility. If students come to them with a problem on education fees, they must help them by calling the treasury department to know the actual problem and not directly ask them to go to treasury department. They must think that not all customers know the exact place to refer and should instead try to make them clearer and give full support to customers in solving their problems.

The management of faculties, departments and units must make sure that staff at counters provides customers with full information. Staff needs to respond to customers. Staff must be informative. In other words, staff must be knowledgeable especially in academic matters, current issues in the university and important dates of events. The circulars must be circulated to all staff or announced in staff emails or

pasted on the notice boards. Having short meetings with staff can help them to be more informative. A weekly briefing system (WBS) which is one hour a week or one in two weeks will be a suitable platform for management representative to deliver messages for the up coming events and sharing of information between staff from different groups. For example, staff at grade 41 or professional level (administrator) can chair the briefing system for administration staff. Staff from all groups in the faculty or department such as group C (science), FT (technical-computer), J (technical-engineering), S (social), and W (finance) must attend the briefing. The short report will come from the every staff from the different groups. The advantages are, all staff will get information on departmental matters and staff who are on duty at the service counter can deliver information as stated in that briefing. The logbook again plays an important role in WBS. The information will be written in the logbook. The minutes of the meeting must go to the dean or heads of departments. Here, the dean can attend when he or she think that he or she have important information messages to deliver to the administration staff. It will not take more that one hour for the briefing system.

The discussion above focus on staff because respondents responded that staff professionalism is the most important aspect of university services. It may be because respondents/customers deal with staff at frontline service so the professionalism of UiTM's staff is the most important aspect in service delivery. It shows that respondents want to deal with staff that is knowledgeable, polite, friendly, respectful and good communication skills. Staff is the main subject that makes the university service especially at frontline run smoothly. The suggestions and comments show that respondents are more concerned with staff professionalism.

The percentage of suggestions on staff professionalism is 20.42%. It may be because staff professionalism is the most important aspect of university and frontline service. If staffs are knowledgeable, friendly, polite and respectful towards their customers, the result will make them happy with the services. In addition to that, customers will feel that they are treated as valued customers and the matters raised by the customers considered seriously. Once the staffs are professional in doing the work and deliver their services to the customers the work processes can flow smoothly.

There is guideline developed by Carr (1990) to organize effective staff or frontline people in organization. It can be implemented in university since the study is focus on customer satisfaction and to improve service delivery to customer. The guideline is as follows:

- select, train and reward frontline people to do everything necessary to satisfy customers,

- provide refresher and update training regularly

- delegate full authority to frontline people to resolve all customer dissatisfactions possible within the organization's policy,

- define the jobs of all supervisors and managers so that their responsibility is to support frontline people,

- create procedure necessary to get information on the reasons for customer dissatisfaction to wherever it needs to go, and

- continually monitor the performance and morale of frontline people to ensure that they are understand and perform their job and that the job is satisfying to them.

This guideline clearly stated that staff is important in frontline or customer service. Being a frontline people to the organization, staff must always ready to receive customers and use the authority given by the management to solve the customers' problem and make them satisfied as possible.

Finally, the management can motivate and encourage staff at the counter to be more enthusiastic in doing their work. The statement supported by Carr (1990) "frontline people should understand that they are the ones who bring success to their moments of truth, and everyone else should understand that their first job is to support the frontline people as they do it".

Conclusion

The best frontline service reflects the image of the university. Public will first go to the counters before they go for their next business. Frontline or counter service should be informative. Staff at counters must provide excellent services to customers. Politeness, respectfulness and friendliness are compulsory behaviors for staff counters. Good communication skills will give clear information to customers. The processes should be smooth and easy. All these things may be able to make customers happy and as a result, they will be satisfied with counter service. If not,

they may dissatisfy. The customers may not write or do make complaints but they may inform their dissatisfaction to others by word-of-mouth.

Lastly but yet importantly, in university, students are the main customers, so they deserve the most attention, professional treatment and courtesy from service providers (staff and management). That is the part of staff duty to satisfy the students' needs, wants and expectations. So whenever possible staff must resolve their problems. Students are the lifeblood of the university; staff must treat them with care, affection and attention. Without them, there is no business and no university. It is not too much if can be said that they must be placed on the highest pedestal and be delivered service that can ensure their satisfaction. Staff at counter and the management may be able to consider statement made by Carr (1990) "customers define value in their own terms. If you want to satisfy them, you have to look at your product or services through their eyes-always!"

Starbucks is obsessed with the sensation its customers receive when they walk the door. Disney is obsessed with the sensation its visitors experience when they enter the theme park. Pyramid Coach is obsessed with the sensation its artists receive when they board the bus (McKain, 2005). And UiTM is obsessed with the sensation of the quality counter service when its customers arrive at the counter.

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