

# UCE

University  
of  
Central England  
in  
Birmingham

## **STAFF SATISFACTION**

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## **Abstract**

The paper reports on a technique to systematically assess and evaluate the areas of their work with which staff are satisfied or dissatisfied. The technique also identifies which issues are important or unimportant to staff and goes on to illustrate the action that the University is taking to address the concerns that have been identified.

## **Staff Satisfaction**

The systematic analysis of the satisfaction of employees in any area of working life is rare. Employees often undertake 'spots checks' of contentment. Unions often undertake similar one-off surveys to show how discontented their members are. However, these do not add up to a systematic exploration of employer-employee relations, and in no way parallels the systematic surveying of 'customers' to be found in most commercial and industrial sectors.

Much the same can be said of the higher education sector. Increasingly, higher education has been seeking feedback from 'stakeholders': students, graduates, employers, professional bodies. Feedback from students, in particular, is becoming increasingly sophisticated and systematic. It is another issue as to whether this results in any action to deal with issues raised as problematic by students or other stakeholders.

Views of teaching and support staff in higher education are not often collected. When they are collected it is not often on a regular or systematic basis. It is rare that the results of such studies become public. It is even rarer that the questions in the survey are determined by the staff themselves, rather than managers or representative bodies, or that any systematic action follows the publication of results.

Following the successful development of Student Satisfaction (Geall, Moon and Harvey, 1995) at the University of Central England in Birmingham (UCE), it was decided to extend the process to cover staff. Student Satisfaction is more than a survey, it is a tool for collecting management information for action to improve the service to students. It is rooted in a philosophy of continuous quality improvement. It is a process that is endorsed and managed from the top of the institution but which delegates responsibility to improve to those who own and control the practices and procedures at the student-staff interface.

Unlike many surveys of students, which collect data with no clear indication of how the data might be used, the Student Satisfaction approach was designed from the outset as an action tool. Student Satisfaction is unique in combining the following:

- student-determined questions;
- satisfaction and importance ratings;
- management information for action.

The topics in the *Student Satisfaction* questionnaire are based on the outcomes of a stratified sample of focus groups of students. The issues raised in the focus groups are converted into questionnaire items by the Centre for Research into Quality (CRQ), who are independent of management and staff.

The research examines student *satisfaction* with a wide range of aspects of provision and then identifies which of those areas are *important* for students. Those areas, which are important to students but where students are dissatisfied, are priority areas for management intervention.

Student Satisfaction involves an annual cycle of focus group, questionnaire design or modification, data collection, analysis, publication of a report that identifies areas for action based on the satisfaction and importance ratings of students, interviews to ascertain action strategies, codification of intention or reporting of action underway, and feedback to students about what has happened as a result of their responses. The basic Student Satisfaction methodology, which is the market leader, has been published in the *Student Satisfaction Manual* (Harvey *et al.*, 1997a) and marketed world-wide.

In developing Staff Satisfaction and adopting the same approach, UCE has taken a step into previously uncharted water. The implications of Staff Satisfaction are profound. Although adopting a well-developed approach, this is no longer an exploration of 'customer' views but an examination of industrial relations issues. To commit to ensuring the same process of public scrutiny, followed by a systematic identification of issues, commitment to action and feedback of outcomes is fairly unique in any area of work but, to our knowledge, unprecedented in a higher education institution.

The Staff Satisfaction survey was piloted in 1996 and it was demonstrated that the Student Satisfaction approach could successfully be applied to exploring staff perceptions of their working experience (Harvey, *et al.*, 1996). The pilot included all staff employed by UCE. However, the approach turned out not to be appropriate for visiting teachers and other hourly-paid staff and for weekly-paid manual workers because the questionnaire was too wide-ranging and consequently response rates for these groups of employees were very low. In 1997 Staff Satisfaction was limited to monthly salaried staff (Harvey *et al.*, 1997b).

In line with the Student Satisfaction approach, the research on staff satisfaction examines satisfaction with aspects of the work situation and the importance of those areas for staff. As in the Student Satisfaction approach, the areas that are important to staff, but where they are dissatisfied, are priority areas for management intervention.

## **Focus groups (Group Feedback Strategy)**

As in the Student Satisfaction approach, the CRQ convened appropriate focus-groups of staff to identify the issues that staff regarded as important. These subsequently provided the items in the questionnaire. Staff were invited to take part in the focus groups and were divided into broad categories, based on their job description and location within UCE.

The focus groups were designed to cover all the main types of job (management, teaching staff, administrators, support services, estates and so on) at the major sites. As far as possible, staff of broadly similar job description were invited to the focus groups: so that there was one group for administrators at Perry Barr, another for new nursing academics at Westbourne Road, and so on. Every attempt was made, on the basis of the information available, to avoid having staff in the same group as their line-manager. In all there were 13 focus groups involving a total of 208 members of staff.

Each focus group was organised in a similar way, and in most cases lasted for one hour. Members of staff were asked to spend five minutes noting the 'positive' and 'negative' aspects of working at UCE on an 'individual feedback sheet'. These initial thoughts were discussed in small groups of four-to-six members of staff, who noted their consensus views on a 'group feedback sheet'. Half an hour was then spent on a total group feedback where the issues raised by the sub-groups were aired and debated.

The outcomes of the focus-group discussion were noted during the session and the group and individual feedback sheets collected. The data from the groups were collated and analysed. The main headings in the questionnaire reflect the broad themes of the discussions and the specific items reflect the detailed points made during the discussion and noted on the feedback forms

## **The questionnaire**

The Staff Satisfaction questionnaire was based on the outcomes of the discussion groups and headings included terms and conditions, staff development, academic environment, modularisation and semesterisation, management, working environment, libraries, catering and other facilities, personnel, job role, interaction and teamworking and communication at UCE.

## **The sample**

All monthly-paid salaried staff employed at UCE were included in the sample. A total of 1666 questionnaires were distributed. 993 usable questionnaires were returned by the final deadline. The overall response rate was 60%. Response rates varied between faculties and centres and different types of staff. The highest response rate was in Personnel (95%) and the lowest in the faculty of Engineering and Computer Technology (35%).

Most of the sample are full-time (87%) and permanent (91%). Over two-fifths (44%) of the sample have been working at UCE less than five years and less than a quarter (24%) for more than ten years. Males (55%) outnumber females in the sample. Two thirds of the sample are between 31 and 50 years of age (66%) and the majority of the sample are White.

Just under half the sample are on academic or research contracts (45%). Nearly two-thirds of the academics are senior lecturers and they make up more than a quarter of the

entire sample. There was no detail available for 59 respondents, including those who anonymised their responses, were on spot contracts, or where job role was not specified.

Throughout the process, the responses are treated as confidential. No-one outside CRQ has access to any of the questionnaires, and no-one at all has access to both a questionnaire and the database of respondents' names. Only aggregate results are reported and all individual comments used for illustrative purposes are anonymised.

## Reporting satisfaction

**Insert figure 1 here**

The central feature of Student Satisfaction is the way that results are reported. Instead of matrices of statistical data, the reporting procedure is to adopt a simple letter code to identify the satisfaction and importance scores for each item (figure 1). On the basis of this grid, a single letter is assigned to each item to represent the combined satisfaction and importance score, which are easily converted into 'action' messages (figure 2). In presenting the results, it is easy to pick out areas of exceptional performance and areas where action urgently needs to be taken. (For example, figure 3, shows staff perception of management by faculty).

**Insert figure 2 here**

**Insert figure 3 here**

## The results

The results of the first full year of the survey have been revealing and of enormous use to the University (Harvey, *et al.*, 1997). They are very detailed and point to an array of very positive areas and also a significant number of potential action areas. The complexity of industrial relations in the public sector means that many areas are effectively beyond the control of the University. However, there are key areas that the University can deal with and it has been decided to review all the results with the managers concerned to seek to identify and agree plans that will address the staff's concerns before the next survey is undertaken.

## Areas of satisfaction

Generally staff are satisfied with the following important areas:

### **Terms and conditions**

- the amount of annual leave;
- the pension scheme;
- security of employment;
- flexibility of working hours;

### **Academic environment**

- the stimulation they get from working with students;

### **Management**

- the soundness of the financial management at the Directorate level;
- the support from their line manager;
- the confidentiality of IPRs;

### **Job role**

- the variety of work they do;

### **Interaction and teamworking**

- the support they get from colleagues;
- the friendliness of colleagues;
- the stimulation they get from working with colleagues;
- the expertise and experience of colleagues;

### **Communication**

- communication with their line manager;
- communication with other staff at their level;

### **Equal opportunities**

- the equal opportunities policy;

### **Working environment**

- access to a telephone;
- access to a computer
- access to a printer;
- the helpfulness of UCE mail staff;
- the efficiency of the mail staff in dealing with external mail;

### **Library**

- the opening times of the library

## **Areas of considerable dissatisfaction**

In general, staff express considerable dissatisfaction with the following important areas:

### **Terms and conditions**

- opportunities for regrading;
- the regrading process;

### **Academic environment**

- the amount of reading and preparation that students do;
- the level of student attendance;
- time available to undertake research;
- the support provided to undertake research;

### **Management**

- the skills of those in management positions;
- the opportunities for the appraisal of management by staff;
- the extent to which their views are heard by managers;

- the system of student appraisal of teaching;
- the outcomes of students appraisal of teaching;

### **Job role**

- the time available to reflect on their work;

### **Working environment**

- the air quality around their campus;

### **Library**

- the time it takes for books to be ordered in the library;
- the noise level in the library;

### **Other facilities at work**

- the availability of social space (common rooms).

## **Impact of gender, ethnicity and length of service**

There were no overall substantive differences in satisfaction, on important items, between males and females in the sample. Similarly, length of service at UCE did not result in any substantive differences in satisfaction.

There were substantive differences between ethnic groups (Asians, Black, White) on the following important items (the dissatisfied group(s) are indicated in parentheses)

- opportunities to attend work-related training courses (Asian);
- relevance of work-related training courses (Asian);
- openness and transparency of decisions made by UCE strategic management (White);
- openness and transparency of decisions made by Dean or Head of Centre (Black);
- devolution of financial management to faculties (Asian);
- efficiency of the UCE switchboard (Black);
- system of authorisation signatures as part of the procedure for the Central Finance System (Asian);
- implementation of equal opportunities policy in Faculty or Centre (Asian, Black)
- procedures for dealing with equal opportunities issues (Asian, Black);
- induction procedures for new staff (Asian);
- availability of furniture and equipment (Asian);
- amount of office space (Asian);
- access to the UCE network (Asian);
- speed of response of information technology support staff (Black);
- the time it takes for books to be ordered in the library (Asian);
- the system for funding the library (Asian);
- personal safety on and around campus (Black);
- adequacy of health and safety procedures (Asian).

## Action taken

A critical feature of the Student Satisfaction survey has been the action that is taken as a result of the expressions of dissatisfaction. Each year the deans of faculty and heads of services have a meeting with the Vice-Chancellor to review the results of the Student Satisfaction survey for their area of responsibility. Where there is a continuing source of dissatisfaction the meeting seeks to agree a course of action that will address the dissatisfaction and solve the problem. Over the years that Student Satisfaction has been operating at UCE many problems have been solved by this technique. Indeed it is ironic that once a problem is solved, students no longer regard it as important! It often disappears as an issue in subsequent feedback meetings and there is no reward for past successes!

The results of the Student Satisfaction survey are now characterised by a limited number of problems, many of which for external reasons, are insoluble. An obvious example is the increasing concern that students experience about their financial well being.

The same technique is now being applied to Staff Satisfaction. Meetings are taking place with deans and others to see if the issues that staff expressed concern about can be identified and resolved. This technique is already achieving some success. As an example, staff across the University have expressed concern about the staff development policy. That policy is common across all groups of staff, faculties and departments. It is clear that a minority of deans have developed techniques of openness and clarity of communication that means that staff in their area understand, and as a result, are satisfied with the staff development policy. Other deans are already learning from that open approach and are confident that this issue can be resolved in time for the next survey.

It is important to realise that some of the techniques that make Student Satisfaction valuable may not be easily translatable to the Staff Satisfaction survey. In particular, in Student Satisfaction the size of the survey allows us to disaggregate a particular problem so that it can be identified with an individual school or department if that is where the issue is occurring. In order to protect confidentiality and because of the more limited size of the sample it is not possible to disaggregate staff satisfaction in the same way. As a result managers are sometimes not clear whether there is a general problem leading to dissatisfaction in their department or whether it is a small group of staff who are particularly dissatisfied about an issue. This inability to disaggregate and refine the problem is undoubtedly one weakness of the Staff Satisfaction approach as we are currently undertaking it. The problem is exacerbated when reviewing the results from faculties where it is clear that the views of the support staff can be masked by the larger number of teaching staff. There does appear to be a distinctly different set of values and attitudes amongst the support staff in the University when compared with the teaching staff. Put simply, support staff have an allegiance to the institution whereas teaching staff's primary allegiance is often to their subject and course. While that is understandable, it does lead to different concerns, attitudes and influences coming through in the survey's results.

On some issues the survey gives a fascinating insight into life in the institution. For example, most of the staff at the Perry Barr campus are satisfied with the provision of car parking. Yet the staff in the Personnel Department are dissatisfied. This puzzled us as Personnel has exactly the same parking opportunities and problems as all the other staff on the campus so why should Personnel be dissatisfied? When we thought about it, it was obvious. Staff in the Personnel Department include the Security staff who are responsible for organising the car park. They end up having to solve everybody else's problems! So while the rest of the staff are satisfied that their parking problems are solved the security staff are understandably dissatisfied about having to solve them.

There are some interesting contrasts between Staff Satisfaction and Student Satisfaction. Mischievously it can be reported that there appears to be no correlation whatsoever between the satisfaction of students with their educational experience at UCE and the satisfaction of the staff in the faculty concerned. Presumably improving the satisfaction of staff with their working life at the University is going to achieve rewards other than an improvement in student satisfaction. One interesting area of comparison is the different attitudes between staff and students on certain issues. For example students are entirely satisfied with the noise level in the libraries, (except Librarianship students). Staff are dissatisfied with the noise levels in the libraries regarding them as too noisy in an environment that should be characterised by silent reflective study. The difference of views is so clear that someone has to win. As the University principally exists for the education of the students, and the students do not regard the noise level as a problem, the staff are going to have to adapt to it. Perhaps the very process of saying clearly and consistently that if the students are satisfied on this issue we should not be concerned about it, may change staff attitudes.

Student Satisfaction has been an immensely important and valuable tool in a large, diverse and devolved University. I am certain that Staff Satisfaction will be equally valuable although it will probably be necessary to keep in mind the distinct differences that exist between the staff and student populations and the attitudes and values that they hold. UCE is committed to repeating the Staff Satisfaction survey and to continue to use it as an open and public tool for consistent improvement.

## REFERENCES

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## **Biographies**