

A Skills and Training Needs Gap Analysis of Zimbabwe's State-Owned Universities' Food Service Employees

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Abstract

Food service provision at universities worldwide has assumed greater importance in recent decades as students now have access to numerous learning options. Furthermore, it has been observed that the quality of food services is one of the components that influence personal satisfaction with campus life. It is within this context that this study sought to establish the skills and training needs of Zimbabwe's state-owned universities' foodservice employees. Multiple data sources such as document analysis, semi-structured interviews, a self-completed questionnaire survey and personal observations were utilised. One of the key themes emerging from the study is that most state-owned universities lagged behind in terms of viewing foodservice personnel as a strategic business asset. In this connection, training and education development plans for foodservice staff were limited among the state-owned universities. In addition, it was established that the majority of the food service employees had a profound desire for continuing education and training programmes. Furthermore, it appeared that the country's macroeconomic instability had adversely affected numerous aspects of food and beverage operations at the universities' canteens including the morale and reward packages of most of the employees. The study concludes that state-owned universities need to adopt a strategic human resources management perspective towards foodservice personnel in order to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly overcrowded market for university students. The study ends by indicating future research priorities.

Keywords: Canteens, foodservice employees, state-owned universities, Zimbabwe, training needs

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that there is stiff competition among universities for students globally. In light of the numerous options that face students wanting to access university education, it has dawned on university administrators that serious attention has to be paid to the quality of student life on campus (Garg & Kumar, 2017). The foregone line of thinking resonates with observations by several scholars (e.g. Gramling et al., 2005; June, 2006; Garg & Kumar, 2017) that the quality of food provided by universities to students is one of the key determinants of personal satisfaction with campus life. It is therefore imperative that apart from focussing solely on the provision of quality education, university administrators must bear in mind that "paying thoughtful attention to food services is an additional attraction for students" (Garg & Kumar, 2017: x). Therefore, it seems plausible to argue that the provision of high-



quality food services may provide a competitive advantage for universities (Gramling et al., 2005; June, 2006) whilst shoddy services in worst cases, result in often violent student food riots or as observed several decades ago by Eckel (1985), culminates in students seeking off-campus canteens.

The increased importance attached towards foodservice provision at universities has spawned a small but growing literature that mainly focuses on students' perceptions and attitudes towards campus dining experiences. In addition, significant research efforts have been directed at assessing the level and quality of universities' staff training and development programmes for food service personnel in the developed world.

However, the above state of research is not obtaining in developing countries. To this end, an extensive review of the international literature by the researchers revealed that the skills and training needs of foodservice employees at universities in developing countries is an under-researched theme. In light of this foregone analysis, this study aimed to establish the skills and training needs of Zimbabwe's state-owned universities' foodservice employees. Addressing this research gap is hoped to facilitate enhanced foodservice provision at Zimbabwe's state-owned universities. In doing so, this study attends to an often neglected domain within the developing world realm thereby producing useful baseline information for future studies.

Literature review

As alluded to above, there has been extensive research efforts in the developed world context directed at evaluating students' perceptions of the meal experiences provided by university canteens. For example, studies such as Meyer and Conklin (1998), Woo et al. (2009), Garg and Kumar (2017) and Osman et al. (2018), using mainly quantitative research established how various aspects such as food taste, operating hours, price, food safety and ambience affect students' satisfaction with campus meals.

Apart from the above line of enquiry, there has also been in developed countries, profuse research focussed on assessing both college students' and foodservice employees' food safety knowledge, attitudes, practices, and training needs. For example, Unklesbay et al. (1998) studied college students' attitudes, practices, and knowledge of food safety and found among other things, that students who took at least one course related to food safety had more food safety knowledge and requisite attitudes and practices than their counterparts. The study recommended the training and education of college students around proper consumer food handling behaviours.

Similarly, Hsu and Huang (1995) studied sanitation knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours of 178 university foodservice non-managerial workers among the top ten USA universities. The study found, inter alia, that foodservice employees were most knowledgeable about dishwashing procedures and mould-related food poisoning issues and least knowledgeable about microorganisms. The study among other things recommended the provision of recurrent training on food safety.

In a related study, Cushman et al. (2001) assessed the personal hygiene practices of part-time student employees at three foodservice facilities at one USA university. The study revealed that female student employees had more favourable hygiene practices than male student employees. This study also showed that the length of employment with the organization influenced personal hygiene practices negatively.

On a slightly different note, Greenhawt et al. (2009) investigated food allergy attitudes among some USA university students and found that many universities were not equipped to meet the needs of students with food allergies. The universities were also found without written food allergy policies yet as pointed out by Choi (2012: 3) "all employees working in food



service establishments bear the responsibility to ensure that the food served to customers is safe, particularly food served to patrons with food allergies.”

The state of research around foodservice employees’ training and education needs within the developing country context lags behind their counterparts. The limited research efforts have been mainly directed at the assessment of student satisfaction levels with university canteen meals. For example, in the Philippines, Galabo (2019) studied student satisfaction with canteen meals and found that service quality was moderately satisfactory and positively related to canteen ambience, empathy and responsiveness, among other variables. In the same vein, Raman and Chinniah (2011) found that the quality of food served required improvements at one Malaysian university. Pursuing the same theme as above, Osman et al. (2018) investigated through quantitative research variables that influenced students’ satisfaction with campus meals at 5 private universities in Bangladesh.

On a different note, Sani and Sow (2014) study of the knowledge, attitudes and practices of food handlers regarding food safety at one university in Malaysia represents the limited efforts directed at university food service personnel. Sani and Sow (2014) established that although the food service personnel had good knowledge and practises towards food safety, the majority were unaware of disease-causing pathogens and the temperature danger zone for the storage of ready to eat foods. It was also interesting to note that a majority (73%) reported that they had never attended any training related to food safety and did not always apply the knowledge acquired through training when they handled food.

With regards to the geographical focus of this present study, namely Zimbabwe, like elsewhere worldwide, there has been improved access to university education through the 18 private and public universities that have been established since the country gained its independence in 1980. Notwithstanding this phenomenal expansion in learning options, it is surprising that there has been minimal scholarly attention paid to foodservice provision at universities. This limited research is incongruous with the increased importance of the campus meal experience as one of the key determinants of students’ satisfaction with campus life. The existing sparse research in Zimbabwe has focussed on mainly students’ perspectives on the quality of food provided by university canteens. For example, Benhura et al. (2012)’s study through observations and questionnaire interviews, revealed the meal preferences of students at one Zimbabwean university and made the observation that students were generally satisfied with the private canteens. The study also reported that some students preferred bringing food from their homes than utilising the university private canteens.

This study is therefore important in that it sheds light into university-owned canteens rather than private canteens as was the case with the above-cited study. It must be noted that university-owned canteens have traditionally operated on a not-for-profit basis for decades in Zimbabwe although budgetary constraints are now driving the commercialisation and or privatisation of some university canteens.

Another emerging stream of research has focussed on the microbial status of the foods offered by Zimbabwe’s universities’ canteens. For instance, Moyo and Baudi (2004) undertook a bacteriological assessment of one university canteen and found that cutting boards, as well as the vegetable and meat sections, were the most highly contaminated surfaces. The study recommended an improvement in canteen’s cleaning and disinfection programme. Similar studies have also been directed to food vendors who are found outside university entrances. One such recent study by Senda-Moyo (2018) established that the food sold by food vendors was not safe for students as it was contaminated with pathogens. The above analysis reveals a distinct research gap in the international literature that this present study seeks to address. That is, there has been limited attention paid to the documentation and assessment of the training and education needs of university food service employees within developing countries.



Methodology

This study was qualitative as it sought to gain a firm understanding of the university foodservice employees' attitudes and opinions. As succinctly expressed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008: 7-8), a qualitative approach "is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a setting or activity as viewed from the perspective of the research participants." In line with the ethos of qualitative research, the field evidence for this study was obtained through the use of multiple data sources including personal observations, document analysis, interviews and self-completed questionnaires. It is noteworthy that the use of multiple data sources in qualitative research facilitates deep understanding or Geetz (1973)'s notion of a "thick description" of the studied phenomenon.

The study utilised the lottery method of sampling to select four of the six state-owned universities to draw its 155 study participants from. University A provided 100 study participants out of its 310 permanent foodservice employees' whilst University B had 35 out of its 110 foodservice employees. University C and D had the smallest number of food catering employees of some 30 employees and provided ten study participants. The study, therefore, sought the views of permanent foodservice employees only at each university as time and other considerations did not allow the inclusion of student attaches and part-time food service personnel.

A questionnaire survey was administered involving non-managerial university foodservice staff at each university by making use of convenience sampling. The use of the survey was necessitated by the larger numbers of employees in this job category that made it impractical to use face to face interviews. It must be borne in mind that the researchers as full-time university employees had to attend to teaching and other university duties during the course of the data collection period. The managerial staff such as catering directors, buyers, and head chefs were subjected to semi-structured interviews lasting on average twenty minutes. Semi-structured interviews were considered ideal because unlike other methods like questionnaires they allowed the researchers to probe, offer clarification and to note verbal and non-verbal cues. It is noteworthy that Stake and Torrance (2005: 33) recommended the use of semi-structured interviews on the grounds that they offer insights "into respondents' memories and explanations of why things have come to be what they are, as well as descriptions of current problems and aspirations."

In relation to data collection, consent and permission to carry out the research was first sought from each university and then the data was collected over a six month period in 2019. The researchers observed all the ethical considerations including issues of confidentiality, anonymity and non-traceability of the respondents. It is noteworthy that all the study participants were more than willing to participate in this research as they felt that the research was of much relevance to them. The data collected was analysed using thematic analysis and descriptive statistics.

Results

Nature of staff compliment

As expected, the older universities had larger staff compliments of around 300 hundred employees and 8 canteens whereas the newly established universities had fewer than 35 employees per university. The employees were engaged in a variety of roles such as waiters, senior cooks, junior cooks, cost controllers, butcher men, dining hall supervisors, storemen, chefs and catering managers. It was observed that there was a fair representation of both males and females in all job categories. However, the top managerial posts at most of the universities were dominated by males as were the food preparation and service duties. The latter was perceived as a derivative of the physical demands of food preparation duties as most kitchens



were not modernised in terms of technology. Another interesting observation was the range of training opportunities that food catering employees had undergone. The majority of the elder employees (above 50 years) had gone through mostly in-house training whilst their counterparts had obtained culinary skills from a greater number of formal training institutions such as universities, polytechnics and private colleges. The above trend reflected the increased training opportunities that the dawn of the country's independence in 1980 brought.

Training opportunities availed since gaining employment

The employees were asked to narrate the training that they had been exposed to since joining the university. It was found that in the majority of cases and across all job categories limited training opportunities had been availed by the state universities. To this end, a cook with 20 years' experience indicated that he had had "no training opportunity since joining as the university assumes you are qualified for the job and do not need any further training." Furthermore, the same level of response (around 90% across all job categories) was found with regards to whether the university had scheduled any training opportunities in the next 2 years for the employees.

The desired training that should be availed by state universities

It was interesting to realise that the majority of the food service staff were eager to learn new skills. To this end, the employees expressed a range of short, medium and long term training courses that should be availed by state-owned universities. The short and medium courses that were desired by the employees were food and beverage preparation especially regarding new recipes, sauce preparation and dessert making, accounting software packages, handling job-related stress, motivating lowly paid employees, firefighting, food handling, food safety, pastry making, customer care and cost control. In addition, the long term courses indicated by the employees included diploma and degree courses in culinary arts and event management as well as exposure to relevant information communication technologies. Some employees also expressed the need to be trained in labour-saving devices and to be engaged in look and learn visits or staff exchanges in other food catering institutions.

The above findings resonated with the responses given when employees were asked whether their employer had availed staff development plans or career path development plans for them. It was found that the state-owned universities had no provision for the continuing education needs of the food service employees. In this connection, the employees lamented that they were not given financial support if they enrolled for further education and were not granted leave if they enrolled at learning institutions, unlike university academic staff. In this environment, personal growth was said to be limited as those who had gained further education and skills had not been rewarded through promotions for instance. Testimonies of the employees revealed that those who had graduated from local universities were still employed in menial jobs such as cooks. The perceived lack of room for personal growth at universities by some of the food service employees was summarised by one 55-year-old cleaner who said 'am still working as a cleaner since I joined the university twenty years ago. I need a better job such as a cook'

The study revealed that state-owned universities seemed unresponsive to foodservice employees training and education needs and aspirations: an unproductive situation as it has been argued by several researchers (e.g. Barney, 1991; Armstrong, 1992; Dessler, 2006; Sommerville, 2007) that any organisation is as good as its employees. In this regard, state-owned universities should realise that satisfied employees create a sustainable competitive advantage for an organisation hence investment in employee training and retraining programmes is mandatory (Barney, 1991; Gramling et al., 2005; June, 2006). The latter is



more pertinent given that the competition for students is increasing with the country now hosting some 18 public and private universities as stated earlier on. Furthermore, dissatisfied university students may engage in violent food riots or not utilise university canteens but instead, other perceived value for money or ‘cheaper’ food outlets denying universities much needed revenue streams. Indeed, during the field visits, we witnessed some students buying cooked food from vendors just outside the university entrances. This finding draws parallels with Senda-Moyo’s (2018) study at one university whereas alluded to earlier on, food safety had been compromised by pathogens.

Food safety issues

Personal observations and interviews revealed that the majority of the university canteens did not have food safety plans and disease crisis management policies. Furthermore, power outages and the non-availability of water were some of the reported factors that affected food safety. It was also observed that basic requirements such as ensuring the availability of hot or warm water, soaps at all sinks and paper towels and hand dryers were not met. The employees also reported that there was an absence of adequate equipment to ensure the safety of food such as thermometers, gloves, test strips, functional fridges and cold rooms. With regards to the foregone, it is noteworthy that the interview data revealed that Zimbabwe’s macroeconomic instability has meant cash flow problems that impacted on food and beverage operations such as the timeous repair or acquisition of kitchen equipment.

Furthermore, 92% of the employees reported that they had received no food allergy training whilst 90% had not received any training to avoid cross-contact contamination between foods during food preparation. . It was also observed that some food servers chatted endlessly whilst serving meals whilst others did not wear head scarfs and gloves. These results suggest that the training received by the employees was insufficient with regards to meeting food safety standards. It was also interesting to find that 84% of the employees could not identify the correct food item that did not belong to the top eight allergens in the self-completed questionnaire survey. This finding underscores the need for formal training programmes to be availed to foodservice personnel as they should competently serve students with food allergies. In addition, the findings resonate with Greenhawt et al. (2009) study that investigated food allergy attitudes among some USA university students and found that many universities were not equipped to meet the needs of students with food allergies.

Food related complaints received from students

The employees pointed out that the majority of the students complained of the poor quality of the food and lack of meal variety as well as the improper temperature the food was served at. The latter was said to be an outcome of the constant power outages that affected the country resulting in canteens opting for firewood as a source of fuel. It was also observed that there was an absence of food warmers at the institutions and modern gadgets such as cook-chill systems. It was also interesting that during the field visits, one student complained about “the monotonous meal, served with the same soup since my first year four years ago.” Some of the complaints from students reported by the foodservice personnel included being served with poorly cooked sadza (86%), shortage of fresh fruits (82%), lack of vegetable variety (76%), shortage of salt and sauces (88%) as well as small portion sizes (72%) and poor customer care from kitchen staff (78%). In this connection, one catering manager pointed out that students did not take lightly incidents of shoddy service; “Students dislike the use of Royco and other spices in their food. Students can shout at staff because of poor service or write on social media.”



It is also noteworthy that personal observations revealed that the ambience in most of the visited dining halls at the state universities left a lot to be desired. Of particular concern, was the dilapidated state of the dining equipment including tables and chairs as well as the low levels of cleanliness. In this regard, even the dining halls for university staff members and offices of some of the food catering managerial employees were not any exception. However, on a positive note, there was one canteen that served university staff whose ambience serves as an exemplar for a modern dining arena. Thus, it appears that the solid relationship between ambience and satisfaction with meal experience that has been established by several researchers seemed lost among the state-owned university canteen managers.

Conclusion

This study established limited efforts that had been deployed towards the continuing education and training needs of state-owned universities' food service employees. In light of this, it is imperative that state-owned universities urgently prioritise the training and education needs of foodservice personnel as is the case in developed countries. In the latter, one of the main attractions for working in a university canteen is the discounted tuition fees that are awarded to an employee and his or her dependents including spouses. Thus, university administrators could adopt such a strategy to meet the continuing education and training needs of food service personnel. It would also appear that comprehensive skills and training audit are required in order to address the range of short to long term courses that employees' testimonies revealed as desirable. Overarching this is the adoption of a strategic human resources management philosophy which celebrates employees as a strategic business asset instead of an inconvenient cost (Barney, 1991; Dessler, 2006). Put differently, strategic human resources management is concerned with "formulating and executing human resources policies and practices that produce the employee competencies and behaviours the company needs to achieve its strategic aims" (Dessler, 2006:11).

In addressing the foodservice employees' training and education needs, there is also a need for the universities to engage in strategic partnerships with other education and training institutions. For instance, the canteen managers may engage such university departments as tourism, marketing and human resources departments as well as established hospitality companies in strategic partnerships that facilitate the training and education of the employees in the identified skills gaps. Such training should be conducted using innovative, convenient and user-friendly delivery formats such as themed conferences, demonstrations, interactive and hands-on training methods. The above recommendation draws inspiration from several past studies (e.g. Sneed & White, 1993; Sullivan et al., 2002) who found that some food service employees had a preference for less conventional training delivery formats or classroom-based lectures.

The field evidence suggested that with largely underpaid and demotivated employees who saw minimal room for personal growth coupled with the country's macroeconomic instability, the university canteens faced limited prospects of offering memorable meal experiences. In this regard, it would appear that running the canteens on a commercial basis seems a more prudent solution otherwise the canteens will not withstand the increasing competition within and beyond the university gates.

It was observed that the myriad challenges spawned by the country's macroeconomic instability such as foreign currency shortages, inflation, raw material scarcity (e.g. soaps, sauces, fruits and vegetables), power outages and erratic water supplies adversely affected food and beverage operations at state-owned university canteens. In this regard, it appears the adoption of solar energy is a long-overdue solution as is scaling up university farms so that they provide the necessary ingredients such as vegetables and poultry products for the canteens.



However, the ultimate solution to the observed human resources challenges appears to lie partly in the radical improvement of Zimbabwe's macroeconomic climate as this would facilitate optimal food and beverage operations.

Finally, it is noteworthy that this study was limited in terms of scope because of time and budgetary constraints. In this connection, future studies might find it more fruitful to involve more state-owned universities and study participants including part-time employees and student attaches' perceptions. These attempts would facilitate a firmer understanding of the training and education needs of universities foodservice personnel on a national basis. Furthermore, there has not been a focus on the training and education needs of food service personnel in privately owned universities. This research gap needs to be addressed. Another promising line of enquiry is comparative studies of the skills and training needs of the country's public and private universities' foodservice staff.

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