"Service excellence" means treating staff as customers

Northumbria academic claims approach would raise workforce morale. Sarah Cunnane reports

A business scholar has called for the implementation of “service excellence” in higher education and urged universities to treat staff as “internal customers,” not employees.

Hina Khan, programme leader for business creation at Newcastle Business School, makes the recommendations in a paper for the Education and Training journal.

She told Times Higher Education that she believed the time was right for universities to re-evaluate the way they thought about their staff, highlighting a mismatch between the drive to improve “student satisfaction” and the attention paid to staff morale.

“Treating academics as customers rather than employees would enhance functional and performance synergy,” Dr Khan said.

She added that this would give universities “sustainable competitive advantage and greater internal and external customer satisfaction”.

The paper, titled “Implementing service excellence in higher education”, was co-authored by Harry Matlay, professor of small business and enterprise development at Birmingham City Business School. It asserts that academic jobs should be viewed as “internal products”.

It also says that a strong institutional culture that values “internal customers” could help universities benefit from “a motivated workforce, loyalty, high performance, innovation and a distinctive institutional competitive advantage”.

Dr Khan explained that it was important for universities to view staff as the “face” of their brands, and to provide training in communication and interpersonal skills to embed “service excellence” in the fabric of how institutions are run.

The paper contends that there is a lack of understanding about the needs of staff in many universities, and Dr Khan suggested that institutions should consider implementing staff-satisfaction surveys similar to those conducted among students.

“Nobody really tries to engage with the difficulties or problems that staff face. There are lots of gaps between service excellence given to staff and to students,” she said.

The current approach adduced by universities was in contrast, said Dr Khan, to the high rewards systems favoured in the industry, she added, such as performance-related pay and bonuses.

Dr Khan said that in some academic disciplines, such as accounting, economics, the absence of such benefits contributed to a dearth of morale among professionals, not to mention extraneous reward systems.

“As a senior lecturer, you feel like a pay band,” she said. “It doesn’t matter how many hours you put in or how long you’ve been a lecturer; that’s your pay.”

Dr Khan denied that service excellence in the academy is an unwelcome managerial concept.

“It’s not about form-fill box-ticking, it’s about delivering the best to internal and external customers,” she said.

sarah.cunnane@tsleducation.com