



The Influence of Quality of Work Life on Internal Customer Satisfaction: A Comparison of Public and Private Universities

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Abstract

Retaining employees is essential for organisations to maintain their effectiveness, especially in light of increasing competition in all spheres of any economy. This study explores differences in the quality of work life (QWL) and internal customer satisfaction (ICS) across Zambian universities. Utilising a quantitative research design, survey responses were obtained from 404 academic staff members representing 15 private and public institutions. The results indicate no significant overall difference in QWL between academic staff in private and public universities; the low mean in private institutions suggests marginally lower QWL. The subdimensions of QWL reflect significant differences with job security, salary, and work-life balance higher in public universities, while work environment and collegiality are higher in private universities. For ICS, the study indicates higher scores in private universities. Overall, this research contributes valuable insights into the contextual differences between QWL and ICS, offering practical implications for managers and practitioners in the higher education sector. In particular, it recommends that policymakers pay attention to policies that elevate the QWL in both private and public universities for stakeholders to be served better.

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1. Introduction

In any organisation, employees are its most valuable assets, and the higher education (HE) sector is no exception. In today's highly competitive environment, where numerous universities operate, the capacity of universities to both recruit and retain students is crucial for their long-term viability^[1]. As a result, universities must be equipped to effectively meet the needs of their students. In the context of universities, academic staff serve as the primary point of contact for the main customers, who are the students^[2]. They must be empowered to meet the needs of customers. According to the HEA (2021), there were 5533 lecturers in 63 universities in Zambia, of these 60.3% were employed in private universities, while 39.7% were in public universities with the University of Zambia being the country's oldest and largest university^[3]. In terms of student numbers, private HE institutions are growing at a fast rate, accounting for about 63% of students compared to 34% in the public sector. As a result of this growth, there are challenges and opportunities which demand a better understanding of the HE sub-sector by managers and regulators^[3]. As the number of universities continues to increase, the level of service that is provided in both public and private HEIs will become increasingly critical to ensure that graduates that are being produced meet the national and international standards^[4]. One major difference between public and private universities lies in their funding sources. The government supports public universities through grants specifically allocated for research, teaching, and infrastructure projects. In addition to government funding, public universities also benefit from diverse income streams such as tuition fees, research initiatives, consultancy projects, and donations^[5]. This financial model enables public universities to maintain high-quality services for their students, as doing so is essential for securing ongoing financial support. On the other hand, private universities in Zambia predominantly rely on tuition fees and contributions from NGO's or business entities, with little income from consultancy work^[6].

Consequently, private universities are under pressure to provide high-quality services to their students to sustain their funding through student loyalty. Despite these differences, both private and public universities are subject to the same regulations and hence they are expected not only to meet but also exceed the minimum university standards.

Scholars suggest that universities are challenging organisations to manage effectively, and they rely heavily on academicians to provide high-quality services to their students^[7]. Hence, when academic staff are satisfied with the level of service that they receive internally, they tend to serve the students better, and this directly impacts the organisation's performance, let alone survival. Considering that there is scant literature on QWL in the HE sector^[8]. A recent systematic literature review observes research gaps in most studies on QWL's antecedents and outcomes: Researchers note that QWL research was initially dominated by U.S. scholars, with India taking the lead in the 2010s, followed by broader Asian contributions in the 2020s. Today, Asian countries are the primary drivers of QWL research^[9]. Moreover, systematic reviews observe that most of the keywords used in QWL research do not include customer satisfaction, whether internal or external, and that there is also a need for evidence from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East to assess applicability in diverse socio-economic and institutional contexts. Scholars call for expanded research into QWL's antecedents and outcomes at both individual and organisational levels across broader disciplines and geographical regions. Despite recognising that customer-centric behaviours should cascade across organisational levels, research rarely examines how internal practices like QWL, and internal marketing tangibly influence external outcomes, particularly customer value. They observe that studies seldom explore these dynamics across disciplines or integrate both internal and external customer perspectives, leaving a significant gap in understanding the full organisational impact of QWL^[10].

In light of the foregoing research gaps, this study seeks to compare public and private universities concerning QWL dimensions and ICS in the under-researched Zambian HE sector.

2. Theories, Conceptualisation and Hypotheses

This section of the study develops the conceptualisation based on the existing literature on QWL and ICS. The discourse benefits from the differences observed between Zambia's private and public universities, providing an examination of how these variables interact to shape the country's educational landscape.

2.1 Quality of Work Life

QWL as a concept emerged in the 1960s and 70s as a response to the negative impacts of industrialisation and the need for a more humane approach to work. QWL emphasises designing work to meet employees' psychological and social needs, promoting participative management, job enrichment, and employee empowerment^[11]. In other words, QWL refers to a positive work atmosphere that contributes to employee satisfaction^[9]. It describes how good or bad a workplace is for employees^[12]. It encompasses, "adequate and fair compensation; safe and healthy working conditions; the opportunity to use and develop human capacities;

opportunities for growth and security; social integration; constitution in the work organisation (i.e. standards and guidelines that protect workers outlining rights and duties), balanced work life; and, the social relevance of work life p.5,"^[13]. In all the definitions above, it is clear that improving the QWL for employees improves employee productivity^[8]. Scholars suggest that when employees have a better QWL, they are more productive and satisfied in their jobs^[14]. Therefore, meeting employees' individual needs at work fosters constructive relationships that improve QWL^[7]. Consequently, scholars note that a significant number of studies examining QWL carried out from 1980 to 2006 consistently demonstrated a positive relationship between various organisational characteristics such as job satisfaction and the overall QWL experienced by employees^[15]. Equally, scholars argue that improving the QWL produces a win-win scenario as it significantly improves the well-being of employees, which may lead to higher productivity levels, reduced employee turnover, and ultimately higher profitability for the organisation^[14]. In this study, it is expected that the higher the level of QWL, the higher the effects on customer satisfaction, whether internal or external. In this study, while there may be a myriad of aspects of QWL that scholars suggest, the main focus is on seven sub-dimensions as follows:

2.1.1 Work-life balance

Work-life balance is the state in which a person successfully manages the demands of their career alongside the demands of their personal life^[11]. It involves prioritising both professional responsibilities and personal well-being, including spending time with family and friends, pursuing hobbies, and maintaining health. Achieving work-life balance is about finding equilibrium between work commitments, personal matters, and recreational activities.

2.1.2 Job Security

Job security refers to an employee's perception of their likelihood of retaining their job within an organization^[16]. It's a sense of stability and continuity in one's employment, minimizing the worry of potential job loss. Factors like company health, economic conditions, and individual performance play a role in shaping this perception.

2.1.3 Recognition/Appreciation

Though they are frequently used interchangeably, appreciation and recognition are crucial for fostering a healthy work environment. While recognition honors certain accomplishments and turning points, appreciation recognizes individuals for their efforts and positive traits^[9]. In contrast to appreciation, which is more casual and personal, recognition is formal, and performance based. Combining the two fosters a culture where workers are inspired by their successes and feel appreciated, which raises morale, increases productivity, and increases job satisfaction.

2.1.4 Creativity and personal development

Creativity and personal development are deeply intertwined. Engaging in creative activities fosters self-discovery, enhances problem-solving skills, and boosts confidence, all of which contribute to personal growth^[17]. Conversely, a strong sense of self-awareness and personal development can unlock greater creative potential by providing a foundation of self-belief and understanding.

2.1.5 Salary and Compensation

Salary and compensation refer to the total monetary and non-monetary rewards that an employee receives in exchange for their work^[16]. Salary is the fixed monetary amount paid to an employee regularly, while compensation encompasses the entire package, including salary and additional benefits like health insurance, paid time off, and other perks.

2.1.6 Work environment

A work environment includes the physical, social, and cultural conditions in which employees carry out their tasks^[18]. It covers everything from the office layout and equipment used to the company culture, communication styles, and opportunities for growth and development. A positive work environment encourages employee engagement, productivity, and well-being, while a negative one can result in decreased morale and higher turnover.

2.1.7 Collegiality

Collegiality is respectful interaction, shared responsibility, and collaborative decision-making within academic units and organisational units^[19]. Collegiality refers to the cooperative relationships among colleagues and may have a significant effect on performance outcomes in both academic and organisational settings.

2.2 Internal Customer Satisfaction

Internal customers refer to the individuals or groups who utilise the service provided by another department's employees within the same organisation^[10]. Heskett *et al.* suggest that internal services are those offered within a company by one set of employees to help other staff members provide a service to external customers^[20]. Researchers began to distinguish between internal and external consumers in the mid-1980s by arguing that each business and department had its own clients, known as internal customers^[15]. The quality of services provided by employees to other employees is critical for preserving a competitive edge in service-oriented organisations such as universities^[1]. According to the Service-Profit-Chain, strong internal service quality is the cornerstone of external customer satisfaction, loyalty, and overall performance of an organisation^[21]. Research indicates that employees who derive fulfilment and are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to deliver high-quality service not only to their colleagues but also to external customers. Findings from scholars support this relationship^[22,23] highlighting the importance of employee well-being in fostering a positive service environment. Scholars highlight that when employees feel recognised and engaged, they are more likely to collaborate effectively, thereby enhancing team cohesion and the overall quality of service^[12]. These scholars underscore the need for deeper investigation in this area to generate insights that could improve employee experiences and service delivery in the sector.

2.3 Service Profit Chain Theory

Service profit chain theory underpins this study.

Schlesinger and Heskett introduced the service profit chain model in 1991 to improve business performance through better service provision^[20]. Unlike the old industrial model, which harmed service quality and staff morale, they emphasised treating service employees as internal customers. Instead of replacing people with machines, they encouraged using technology to support and empower employees. They argue that positive employee experiences fostered through effective HRM strategies enhance service quality, thereby exceeding customer expectations and strengthening overall firm performance^[15].

This model emphasises how internal organisational practices influence both service delivery and business outcomes. Scholars further assert that employee satisfaction can improve ICS, as valued and supported employees tend to collaborate more effectively and deliver higher-quality services, ultimately boosting customer satisfaction and productivity^[14]. Others contend that organisations should not just focus on external but internal customers, and a balance is required^[21]. Hence, the focus of practitioners should be on ensuring they create a positive working environment for employees to stimulate high levels of satisfaction, which should lead to high levels of other factors, such as ICS.

2.4 Stakeholder Theory

The Stakeholder theory suggests that the diverse influences of its stakeholders are instrumental in shaping the purpose, strategic direction, and cultural aspects of an organisation. The term "stakeholder" was first introduced by Freeman to denote an organisation's responsibility to all individuals and groups that impact its ability to operate successfully. This encompasses business owners, shareholders, investors, employees, customers, suppliers, business partners, competitors, government entities, local authorities, NGOs, advocacy groups, local communities, the media, and others^[24]. Each of these stakeholders interacts with one another and significantly affects how a business functions.

This theory conceptualises organisations as systems with interdependent relationships whose sustainability relies on addressing the diverse interests of stakeholders^[1]. It operates through three theoretical lenses: descriptive, highlighting stakeholder behaviours and relational dynamics; normative, addressing ethical obligations and group-specific values; and instrumental, emphasising stakeholders' strategic influence on organisational performance and competitiveness^[25]. They suggest that stakeholder theory is not merely conceptual as it offers practical insights into how stakeholder engagement supports institutional effectiveness. Consequently, this study anticipates notable differences between private and public universities because of diversity in shareholder structures, sources of funding and governance mechanisms as play.

2.5 Conceptual Framework

Considering the foregoing theoretical background as well as the identified gaps in the literature, this study proposes a conceptual model reflecting the influence of QWL components on ICS.

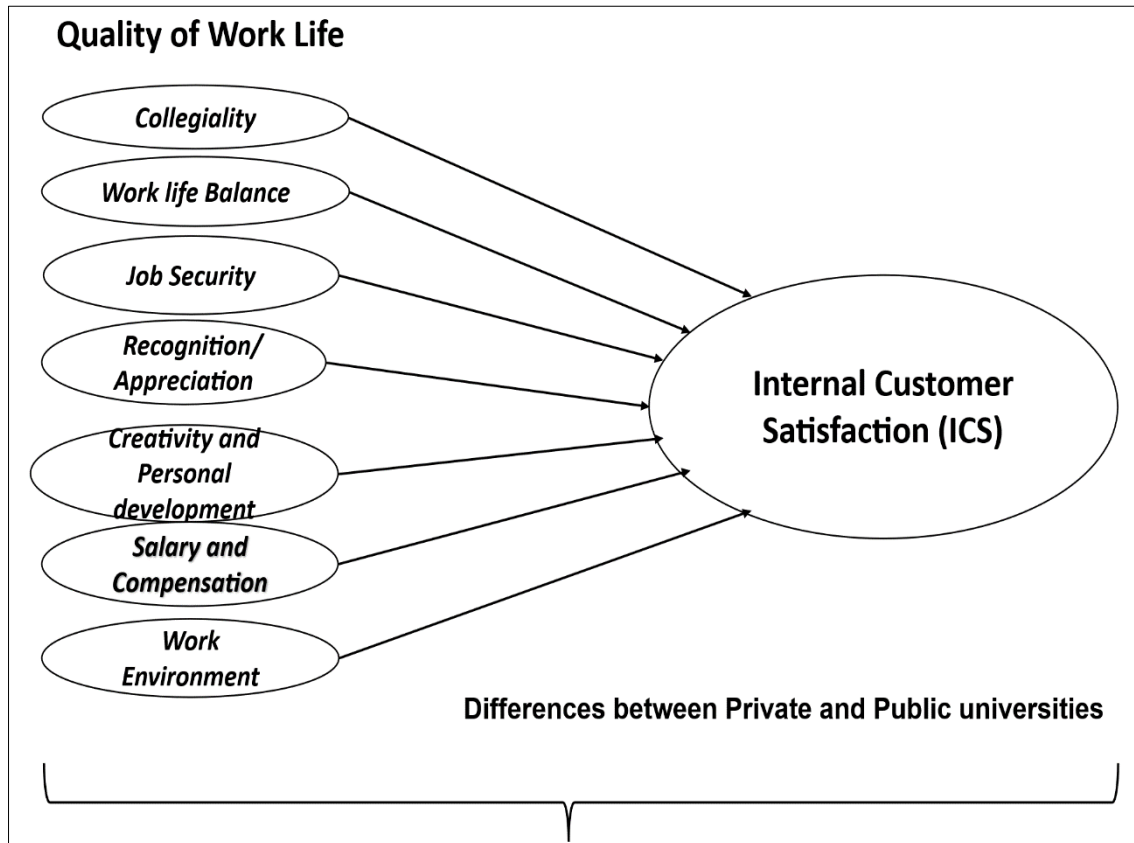


Fig 1: Research Conceptual Model

2.5.1 Comparison of QWL and ICS between public and private universities

Employees who express dissatisfaction with specific aspects of QWL tend to have a lower overall perception of it^[8]. Studies indicate that a higher QWL is associated with increased job satisfaction, and vice versa. Research has demonstrated that motivated employees are more inclined to support their internal customers, leading to higher levels of external customer satisfaction^[26]. Concerning universities, QWL is expected to differ between public and private universities due to several factors. Private universities often face budget constraints, relying heavily on student fees and donations, which can limit salaries, benefits, and available resources for its employees^[27]. In contrast, public universities typically have more diverse funding sources, including state funding allowing for better compensation and facilities. Additionally, job security varies, as public university employees may benefit from long tenure and union protections, while private institutions may offer different contractual arrangements that can lead to uncertainty^[28]. Furthermore, workload expectations can differ, with private institutions having higher number of students, thereby increasing workload and therefore stress levels^[27]. Finally, the organisational culture can vary significantly; private universities may foster a unique identity based on mission and values, creating a work environment that is perceived as more supportive or collaborative, thus impacting QWL^[28]. These differences collectively contribute to the varying perceptions and experiences of QWL among employees in public versus private universities, ultimately influencing their overall job satisfaction and effectiveness. Therefore, generally we expect the following hypothesis to hold:

H1: There are differences in QWL between public and private universities.

H_{1a}: There are differences in work-life balance in private and public universities.

H_{1b}: There are differences in job security between private and public universities.

H_{1c}: There are differences in recognition/appreciation in private and public universities.

H_{1d}: There are differences in creativity and personal development between private and public universities.

H_{1e}: There are differences in salary and compensation in private and public universities.

H_{1f}: There are differences in work environment in private and public universities.

Research on the differences between public and private institutions is limited. Scholars suggest that public universities tend to be more efficient and focused on serving their communities, while private institutions often place a higher emphasis on profitability^[29]. In a study conducted in Malaysia, it was revealed that public institutions consistently outperform private universities, highlighting significant differences in educational quality^[30]. The findings are inconsistent with those who found that private universities in the United States of America enjoy higher levels of satisfaction, although their research predominantly concentrated on administrators rather than academic staff^[31]. Drawing upon these insights, the current study seeks to explore how institutional arrangements vary according to university type. Thus, it posits that:

H2: There are differences in ICS between public and private universities.

3. Research Design

3.1 Population, unit of analysis, and sample

The purpose of this study was to compare QWL and ICS in private and public universities in Zambia. The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design, prioritising objective analysis, hypothesis testing, and the generalisation of broadly applicable findings [32]. The target population included all 5,533 academic staff in public and private universities [3]. The target group comprised academic leaders such as deans, heads of departments, and university administrators. Although the Raosoft calculator suggested a representative sample size of 360, 404 questionnaires were returned and analysed. Literature indicates that individual survey response rates average around 52.7%, while institutional surveys tend to achieve about 35.7%, sometimes falling to 10 - 20% [33, 34]. The 404 responses corresponded to a 67.5% response rate. Based on Park's adjusted sample formula ($360 \div 0.60 = 600$), this rate significantly exceeds typical survey benchmarks, reinforcing the credibility of the

data [35]. The strong participant turnout offers a solid foundation for examining the proposed hypotheses. For data collection, a structured questionnaire was developed through a comprehensive literature review using a 5-point Likert scale. Further, to ensure that all ethical guidelines were adhered to, a formal process for obtaining the university's ethics clearance was followed and successfully obtained before the data collection.

The study successfully gathered data from the top fifteen universities, comprising 90% of the total student population, based on systematic sampling, ensuring that the sample fairly represented each participating institution. The resulting sample profile table is given in Table 1.0, showing that 138 (34.2%) of the respondents were from public universities while 266 (65.8%) were from private universities. This is in line with the statistics from the State of Higher Education Report, indicating that about 60.1% of academic staff are in private universities, with only about 39.7% in public universities [3].

Table 1: Sample Profile

Variable	Responses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Gender	Male	265	65.6	65.6	65.6
	Female	139	34.4	34.4	100
Age Group	25 and below	12	3	3	3
	26 to 30	44	10.9	10.9	13.9
	31 to 35	13	3.2	3.2	17.1
	36 to 40	50	12.4	12.4	29.5
	41 to 45	86	21.3	21.3	50.7
	46 to 50	98	24.3	24.3	75
	above 50	101	25	25	100
Education	Diploma	2	0.5	0.5	0.5
	Bachelor's Degree	45	11.1	11.1	11.6
	Master's Degree	285	70.5	70.5	82.2
	Doctorate Degree	72	17.8	17.8	100
Current position	Tutor	36	8.9	8.9	8.9
	Lecturer	306	75.7	75.7	84.7
	Senior Lecturer	38	9.4	9.4	94.1
	Research Fellow	6	1.5	1.5	95.5
	Senior Research Fellow	2	0.5	0.5	96
	Associate Professor	8	2	2	98
	Professor	8	2	2	100
	University Type	Public	138	34.2	34.2
Private	266	65.8	65.8	100	
Teaching experience	5 years and below	103	25.5	30.1	30.1
	6 to 10 years	90	22.3	26.3	56.4
	11 to 15 years	62	15.3	18.1	74.6
	16 to 20 years	30	7.4	8.8	83.3
	Above 20 years	57	14.1	16.7	100
Monthly Income	K5000 and below	10	2.5	3.1	3.1
	K6000 to K10000	70	17.3	21.7	24.8
	K11000 to K15000	59	14.6	18.3	43
	K16000 to K20000	47	11.6	14.6	57.6
	K21000 to K25000	65	16.1	20.1	77.7
	K26000 to K30000	51	12.6	15.8	93.5
	K31000 and above	21	5.2	6.5	100
Discipline	Business	78	19.3	24.4	24.4
	Health Sciences	71	17.6	22.2	46.6
	Engineering	28	6.9	8.8	55.3
	Natural Sciences	32	7.9	10	65.3
	Information Technology	20	5	6.3	71.6
	Social Sciences	91	22.5	28.4	100

3.2 Reliability test

A reliability test was executed to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire items for internal validity purposes. The measurement items were largely adapted from

prior studies. All Cronbach's Alpha values (see Table 2) were above the minimum threshold of 0.70, except for collegiality and work life balance (at 0.556 & 0.672, respectively) are still acceptable for psychometric tests. Researchers recommend

that: if $\alpha=.9$ —excellent, $\alpha=.8$ —good, $\alpha=.7$ —acceptable, $\alpha=.6$ —questionable, $\alpha=.5$ —poor, $\alpha<.5$ —unacceptable [36, 38]. In addition to reliability tests, checks for missing data, outliers and normality were performed on the scale data. There was no missing data on all the variables from all the respondents. For outliers, an inspection of boxplots and comparison of actual means with the 5% trimmed means for the variables revealed no extreme scores with a strong influence on the means [37]. Lastly, in terms of normality, most of the constructs had a kurtosis and skewness within the range of +2 to -2 [38]. Additionally, other studies suggest that larger sample sizes (i.e. sample sizes greater than 200) are robust enough to take into account any adverse effects of non-normality [39]. Thus, the sample size of 404 is more than meets these requirements.

4. Results

4.1 Correlation Analyses

Pearson correlation analyses were used to evaluate the direction and strength of the correlations between the various variables [36]. Table 3 reflects the means, standard deviations

and correlations among dependent, independent, and control variables. The findings show that all variables have comparatively low correlations with one another (less than 0.8). Multicollinearity is therefore not an issue [40].

Table 2: Internal Consistency of measurement instrument

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Quality of Work Life	
Opportunity for Growth and Creativity	0.860 ¹
Salary and Compensation	0.752
Recognition and Appreciation at work	0.898
Health and Safety	0.744
Job Security	0.788
Work Life Balance	0.672
Collegiality	0.556
Internal Customer Satisfaction	
Communication and Feedback	0.881
Physical facilities and reliability of service	0.769
Competence	0.857

Table 3: Correlation Matrix among all variables

#	Variable	Mean	Std. Dev	N	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Internal Customer Satisfaction	3.404	0.649	404	-											
2	Quality of Work Life	3.465	0.612	404	.636**	-										
3	University Type	0.658	0.475	404	.143**	-.066	-									
4	Gender	0.344	0.476	404	-.093	-.097	0.071	-								
5	Age Group	5.109	1.716	404	0.085	0.028	-.052	-.113*	-							
6	Highest qualification earned:	3.057	0.554	404	0.016	-.035	-.105*	-.093	.484**	-						
7	QWL - Collegiality	3.837	0.910	404	.427**	.583**	0.063	-.056	0.035	-.087	-					
8	QWL- Work Life Balance	3.157	0.855	404	.384**	.714**	-.118*	-.049	0.040	-.023	.310**	-				
9	QWL- Job Security	2.789	0.997	404	.296**	.553**	-.120*	0.012	-.007	0.056	.197**	.367**	-			
10	QWL- Recognition and Appreciation at work	3.753	0.873	404	.540**	.762**	0.016	-.040	0.062	-.022	.434**	.375**	.385**	-		
11	QWL - Creativity and Personal Development	3.830	0.774	404	.487**	.758**	-.024	-.139**	0.009	-.069	.459**	.435**	.225**	.574**	-	
12	QWL - Salary and Compensation	3.012	0.918	404	.379**	.686**	-.156**	-.164**	-.011	-.052	.300**	.479**	.362**	.376**	.380**	-
13	QWL - Work Environment	3.789	0.901	404	.534**	.696**	0.094	-.046	-.005	-.027	.434**	.430**	.270**	.481**	.445**	.431**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Correlation coefficients between (r) = 0.10 and 0.29 indicate a small effect size [41], while coefficients between r = 0.30 and 0.49 indicate a medium effect, and lastly, coefficients between r = 0.50 and 1.0 indicate a large effect size [36]. Table 3 reflects statistically significant positive medium to large effect sizes for all QWL dimensions and overall QWL as well as ICS.

Table 4: Independent samples t-test

# Variable	Private N=266		Public N=138		Levene's Test for Equality of		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence		Cohen's d
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
1 Internal Customer Satisfaction	3.471	0.632	3.276	0.665	0.055	0.814	2.888	402	0.004	0.195	0.068	0.062	0.328	0.301
2 Quality of Work Life	3.436	0.640	3.521	0.551	3.301	0.070	-1.334	402	0.183	-0.086	0.064	-0.212	0.040	0.143
3 QWL - Collegiality	3.878	0.912	3.757	0.905	0.000	0.985	1.264	402	0.207	0.121	0.095	-0.067	0.308	0.133
4 QWL- Work Life Balance	3.085	0.915	3.297	0.708	10.934	0.001	-2.581	344	0.010	-0.213	0.082	-0.374	-0.051	0.260
5 QWL- Job Security	2.703	1.024	2.954	0.925	3.684	0.056	-2.414	402	0.016	-0.251	0.104	-0.456	-0.047	0.257
6 QWL- Recognition and Appreciation at work	3.763	0.915	3.734	0.788	2.895	0.090	0.315	402	0.753	0.029	0.092	-0.151	0.209	0.034
7 QWL - Creativity and Personal Development	3.816	0.800	3.855	0.725	1.778	0.183	-0.482	402	0.630	-0.039	0.081	-0.199	0.121	0.051
8 QWL - Salary and Compensation	2.909	0.935	3.210	0.852	0.754	0.386	-3.167	402	0.002	-0.302	0.095	-0.489	-0.114	0.337
9 QWL - Work Environment	3.850	0.931	3.672	0.830	4.521	0.034	1.961	306	0.051	0.178	0.091	-0.001	0.357	0.202

Cohen's d Criterion for effect sizes: small effect=0.20 Medium effect=0.50 Large effect=0.80

Internal Customer Satisfaction

Table 4 reflects the ICS scores for private and public universities compared using an independent samples t-test. The table indicates a statistically significant difference in mean scores between the two types of institutions (private and public) with private universities ($\bar{x} = 3.471$, $SD = 0.632$) and public universities ($\bar{x} = 3.276$, $SD = 0.665$; $t(402) = 2.88$, $p = 0.004$, two-tailed). The indication is that ICS is higher in private universities. These findings illustrate the dynamics within the HE sub-sector, suggesting that private institutions,

driven by the imperative to maintain a customer-focused approach, often outperform public universities in terms of customer service. This is because their survival as businesses hinges on their ability to deliver value and meet the needs of their stakeholders, which likely contributes to the higher ICS ratings observed.

Overall Quality of Work Life

An independent samples t-test revealed no significant difference in overall QWL between academic staff in private

($\bar{x} = 3.436$, $SD = 0.640$) and public universities ($\bar{x} = 3.521$, $SD = 0.551$; $t(402) = -1.334$, $p = 0.183$), though the mean was lower in private universities. When examining QWL sub-components, significant differences emerged in areas such as work life balance, with public university staff scoring higher ($\bar{x} = 3.297$, $SD = 0.708$) than those in private institutions ($\bar{x} = 3.085$, $SD = 0.915$; $t(344) = -2.581$, $p = 0.001$), and job security (public: $\bar{x} = 2.954$, $SD = 0.923$; private: $\bar{x} = 2.703$, $SD = 1.024$; $t(402) = -2.414$, $p = 0.016$). Salary and compensation also favoured public universities ($\bar{x} = 3.210$, $SD = 0.852$) over private ones ($\bar{x} = 2.909$, $SD = 0.935$; $t(402) = -3.167$, $p = .002$). Conversely, private universities showed better outcomes in work environment ($\bar{x} = 3.850$, $SD = 0.931$ vs. public: $\bar{x} = 3.672$, $SD = 0.830$; $t(306) = -1.961$, $p = 0.051$) and slightly higher mean scores in collegiality (private: $\bar{x} = 3.878$, $SD = 0.912$; public: $\bar{x} = 3.757$, $SD = 0.905$; $t(402) = 1.264$, $p = 0.207$). No significant differences were found in recognition and appreciation (public: $\bar{x} = 3.734$, $SD = 0.788$; private: $\bar{x} = 3.763$, $SD = 0.915$; $t(402) = 0.315$, $p = 0.753$) and creativity and personal development (public: $\bar{x} = 3.855$, $SD = 0.728$; private: $\bar{x} = 3.816$, $SD = 0.800$; $t(402) = -0.482$, $p = 0.653$) reflecting broadly comparable experiences across both university types in these areas.

4. Discussion, Contributions and Implications

The overall results between QWL and ICS reveal valuable insights across different organisations and countries. The results in the current study reveal that internal customer satisfaction is statistically higher in private universities than in public universities. Additionally, there is a shortage of studies reflecting a direct influence of QWL dimensions on ICS; this study has helped to fill that gap using the under-researched developing country context. In prior research, no such direct relationships have been explored. Across varied organisational contexts and geographic regions, research consistently highlights the strategic importance of internal customer satisfaction (ICS) in driving performance outcomes, though with differing emphases. Studies that adduce evidence that point to interpersonal competence and HR practices^[42] as key contributors to external service and corporate climate^[43]. In contrast, sector-specific studies that emphasise employee empowerment, performance reviews, and coworker relationships as central to job satisfaction and ICS^[44]. In India, these findings are supported by linking supportive environments and loyalty to service outcomes in SMEs^[45], while other scholars further note that enhancing internal service may not immediately impact external quality but shape broader standards^[46]. Collectively, these findings reveal both commonalities and context-specific nuances, underscoring the layered and strategic nature of ICS.

Results on the second hypothesis indicated no significant differences in QWL between public and private universities, it was noted that some subcomponents exhibited significant differences between public and private universities, for example, job security, work-life balance, and salaries and wages were higher in public compared to private universities. This suggests that QWL is slightly lower in private universities. This is in line with findings from India which revealed that public university lecturers had a higher QWL than lecturers in private universities^[47], probably due to higher salaries and wages. Similar findings from Pakistan posit that having adequate and fair compensation leads to increased job satisfaction and, in turn, a higher QWL^[48]. In

addition, the higher workload for lecturers in private universities, due to the higher number of students, could be a contributing factor. Further, job security is lower in private universities compared to public universities. In public universities, many aspects of employee working conditions, including minimum qualifications, selection processes, and salaries, are subject to extensive institutional or national regulations when compared to private universities^[49].

5. Limitations and future research

Though this study makes important contributions to theory and practice, it has some limitations that point to relevant opportunities for future research. By focusing on Zambia's HE sector, the findings may limit generalisability, hence the need for research in different sectors and countries. Such studies could help us understand how QWL affect ICS in various settings. Moreover, the study applied a cross-sectional design, which examines relationships at a single point in time. This limits our ability to make causal conclusions. Therefore, adopting longitudinal or experimental designs could help us understand changes over a period of time. Involving non-academic staff in the research would also provide a broader view of ICS and add depth to our understanding of the organisational environment.

6. Conclusion

In an increasingly competitive landscape, organisational sustainability hinges on delivering high-quality goods and services that foster customer satisfaction and loyalty. This emphasises the strategic importance of cultivating internal environments where employees are engaged, satisfied, and empowered to support one another. How employees perceive their QWL influences how they interact and collaborate across departments. A service-oriented culture that goes beyond internal interactions improves external customer satisfaction and is reinforced when academic staff members have a better QWL, as they are more likely to assist their colleagues. Ultimately, the extent to which organisations invest in their people, for example, through effective leadership and supportive policies, determines their capacity to achieve consistent service excellence.

7. References

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