

Tuition Assistance Mystery-Shopping to Transform Human Resource and Student Experience in Higher Education Institutions

Author: Dayna Smith
The University of the West Indies, Global Campus

Caribbean higher education (HE) institutions face significant internal and external challenges including staff engagement, process inefficiencies, and increased competition from external higher education institutions. To address these issues, institutions can implement a work-study initiative using a mystery shopper model wherein the institution's staff may enroll in courses as students at highly reduced or free tuition, on condition they submit a report providing first-hand insight into their experience as students. Shayna Joubert (2024) states that tuition reimbursement for staff members can enhance employee morale, improve retention and promotion. She continued that the benefits of investing in staff in this way include boosted employee development, engagement and retention, which can improve cost savings on recruiting. All together, this should lead to improved service quality and effectiveness for students as a motivated, upskilled and better-informed workforce results in increased value to customers, the community and the entity itself (Lumina Foundation, 2016).

This exploratory paper, intersecting with the conference sub-themes of “Transforming Human Resource Management to Enhance Higher Education Administration” and “Enhancing Student Experience through Administrative Innovation”, aligns with transformative HE strategic priorities of enhanced sustainability, inclusivity and technological progress. By encouraging and engaging employees to be continuous learners, such an initiative could foster internal capacity-building and equip administrators to grow in line with evolving demands and practices in HE. It can also contribute to an increased bank of qualified staff for succession planning, shoring up the future of the institution and HE sector. The insights received from employee-student reports can contribute to data-driven decision-making to refine operational processes and offer staff the opportunity for reflective and reflexive practice in relation to their work and its relationship with the student experience. Additionally, enhanced processes promote financial sustainability through improved student retention and satisfaction.

The mystery shopper model draws from international precedents, such as Marymount University and the U.S. Department of Education, which successfully leveraged mystery shopping in educational settings. While this concept has been widely applied in the retail sector, its adoption

in Caribbean HE is largely unexplored except at The University of the West Indies Global (formerly Open) Campus. This presentation reports on a pioneering initiative with potential scalability across regional institutions to address the issues critical to HE administration.