A CRITICAL COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION OF JOB SATISFACTION IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN CROSS RIVER STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study carried out a critical comparative analysis of employees' perception of job satisfaction in public and private universities in Cross River State, Nigeria. It was conducted to critically explore the perception of job satisfaction among lecturers in public and private universities in Cross River under the Job Characteristics Model. To this end, primary research was carried out to understand the differences in the level of skill variety in academic roles between lecturers in public and private universities; understand how lecturers in public and private universities perceive the significance of their work in terms of its impact on society; and critically compare the differences in the degree of autonomy experienced by lecturers in public and private universities regarding their job responsibilities. The research design was a multiple case study design, which relied on semi-structured interviews to collect primary data from 14 lecturers (7 each from a private university and public university) in Cross River State. Snowball sampling technique was applied. The data obtained were thematically analysed. The findings revealed that lecturers in both public and private universities experienced a high level of skill variety through their engagement in multiple roles such as teaching, supervising, curriculum development, administrative duties, and student mentoring. However, significant differences emerged in how this skill variety was perceived and experienced across the two institutional types. It was also found that lecturers in both sectors in Cross River State view their work as highly significant to societal development, though shaped by their institutional contexts. In addition, it was found that lecturers in public universities enjoyed considerable academic freedom, allowing them to independently plan their courses, design assessments, and engage in research with minimal institutional interference. Whereas, lecturers in private universities reported significantly limited autonomy, as they were often required to adhere strictly to pre-determined curricula, institutional guidelines, and administrative controls, which restricted innovation and undermined intrinsic motivation. On the basis of these findings, the study recommended that public and private universities should adopt structured role diversification, visible recognition of societal contributions, and flexible academic autonomy frameworks to align lecturers' tasks with their strengths, validate their wider impacts, and empower their teaching and research choices. This would enhance their motivation, reducing burnout, and promoting deeper professional engagement across both sectors.

Keywords: Employee perception, Job satisfaction, Employee productivity, Public universities, Private universities

INTRODUCTION

In educational institutions, job satisfaction is a complex and personal feeling of happiness at work, shaped by factors such as meaningful tasks, fair pay, good relationships, career growth, shared values, and a positive work environment (Jalagat, 2016). It is essential for an organisation's success and stability, as it helps improve employee motivation, efficiency, and loyalty, lowers staff turnover and absenteeism, encourages new ideas, and attracts skilled professionals (Taheri et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the way employees perceive job satisfaction tends to vary between public and private universities, largely due to disparities in working environments, remuneration systems, employment stability, managerial assistance, resource provision, prospects for career growth, and the structure of institutional leadership (Torlak & Kuzey, 2019). Indeed, the subject of job satisfaction continues to spark debate among university staff in Nigeria, as it is influenced by a wide range of systemic, organisational, and socio-economic issues (Okoli, 2018). Within public universities, staff frequently face delays in receiving their salaries and allowances, sometimes for extended periods, leading to economic hardship and diminished workplace morale (Osakwe, 2014). This financial uncertainty is exacerbated by recurring industrial actions, especially those initiated by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and other staff associations, which interrupt academic schedules and generate instability for both educators and students (Chukwudi & Idowu, 2021). Moreover, employees in public institutions are often challenged by deteriorating facilities, congested lecture halls, and inadequate financial support, all of which compromise the delivery of effective teaching and hinder professional satisfaction (Okeke et al., 2021).

On the other hand, private universities, while offering relatively better infrastructure and timely remuneration (Idiegbeyan-Ose et al., 2019), present their own challenges. Academic personnel in privately owned universities are frequently burdened with overwhelming workloads, as these institutions often require them to undertake

supplementary administrative duties, comply with stringent performance standards, and manage extensive teaching obligations without adequate institutional backing (Adegboyega & Babatunde, 2022). In addition, the nature of employment in these universities, often characterised by temporary contracts, limited opportunities for union representation, and a business-oriented managerial structure that may prioritise financial outcomes over employee wellbeing, contributes to a pervasive sense of job insecurity (Atunde et al., 2021). These distinct institutional dynamics result in varying perceptions of job satisfaction between staff in public and private Nigerian universities. Consequently, comparative analyses are essential to discern how different categories of academic staff interpret and value job satisfaction in relation to their unique work environments and experiences. To guide this inquiry, the Job Characteristics Model developed by Hackman and Oldham (1974) will serve as the theoretical framework. This model allows for a methodical assessment of the influence of fundamental job attributes, namely, skill diversity, task completeness, task relevance, autonomy, and performance feedback, on employees' internal psychological conditions and resultant job-related behaviours across both public and private university settings. Through this lens, the study aims to provide a coherent understanding of the internal and external elements that shape job satisfaction within distinct institutional frameworks.

Research Rationale

The noticeable gap in job satisfaction levels between personnel in Nigeria's public and private universities has remained a significant concern among academic staff, primarily because it influences their motivation, output, and general quality of life (Bankole et al., 2023). Staff in public institutions frequently contend with challenges such as salary delays, recurring industrial actions, and insufficient funding, whereas those in private institutions grapple with intensified workloads, rigid organisational rules, and unstable employment terms (Issa, 2021). In response, numerous Nigerian scholars have undertaken empirical investigations aimed at identifying the root causes of these disparities and exploring potential solutions to bridge the divide. Nevertheless, a review of existing studies reveals that many prior investigations employed quantitative methodologies focused narrowly on select aspects of job satisfaction, namely remuneration, recognition, workplace environment, policy framework, leadership practices, and peer interactions (Bello et al., 2017; Ademodi & Akintomide, 2015; Okoli, 2018). Most of the studies were also conducted in different locations in Nigeria, particularly Western Nigeria (in states like Lagos, Kwara, Osun and Oyo), while Southern states like Cross River have been short-changed.

It was also observed that previous research has predominantly focused on analysing statistical disparities in job satisfaction levels between employees of public and private universities in Nigeria (Yaya, 2019; Agbonifoh & Agbonifoh, 2022; Iornem, 2017). However, such studies fall short of providing a thorough and comparative exploration of how staff in both sectors personally interpret and experience job satisfaction. This gap in the literature represents a significant research concern, as a nuanced understanding of these individual experiences and viewpoints is essential for crafting strategies that are specifically designed to meet the diverse challenges and expectations of staff in both public and private higher education institutions. Consequently, this research aims to rigorously examine and compare how employees in public and private universities within Cross River State perceive job satisfaction, drawing upon the theoretical lens of Hackman and Oldham's (1974) Job Characteristics Model. In contrast to the typically reductive nature of quantitative methodologies (Brar et al., 2024), this study will employ a qualitative design, utilising in-depth interviews with staff from both university types. This approach is intended to uncover the distinct, subjective interpretations of job satisfaction held by employees within the educational sector. Therefore, the study pursued the following objectives:

i. To critically compare the differences in the level of skill variety in academic roles between lecturers in public and private universities in Cross River State.
ii. To investigate how lecturers in public and private universities perceive the significance of their work in terms of its impact on society.
iii. To critically compare the differences in the degree of autonomy experienced by lecturers in public and private universities regarding their job responsibilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is an individual's emotional and cognitive response to their work, reflecting the extent to which their job fulfils personal needs, expectations, and values (Katebi et al., 2022). It is viewed as a function of rational decision-making, where employees weigh their wages, benefits, and working conditions against alternative employment opportunities, leading to a cost-benefit assessment of their job's desirability (Yuen et al., 2018). In the views of Torlak and Kuzey (2019), job satisfaction is shaped by social interactions and workplace culture, influenced by factors such as organisational norms, co-workers' relationships, and societal expectations about work. Similarly, Alsafadi and Altahat (2021) defined job satisfaction as a strategic variable that affects productivity, employee retention, and organisational performance, making it a key indicator for designing policies that enhance motivation and engagement. From these scholarly viewpoints on job satisfaction, it has been

observed that job satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For instance, Katebi et al. (2022) define job satisfaction as an individual's emotional and cognitive response to their work, emphasising the extent to which a job meets personal needs, expectations, and values. This definition highlights the subjective and psychological dimensions of job satisfaction, focusing on how employees internally assess their job experiences in relation to their personal aspirations and desires.

In contrast, Yuen et al. (2018) conceptualise job satisfaction as a rational and evaluative process, wherein employees compare their wages, benefits, and working conditions to alternative employment opportunities. Their perspective frames job satisfaction as a calculated cost-benefit analysis, suggesting that employees remain satisfied if their current job offers better overall rewards than potential alternatives. While Katebi et al. (2022) emphasise an emotional and intrinsic interpretation, Yuen et al. (2018) stress the economic and decision-making aspect, viewing job satisfaction as a logical outcome of workplace comparisons. Similarly, Torlak and Kuzey (2019) consider job satisfaction to be shaped by workplace social interactions, cultural dynamics, and organisational norms. Their definition underscores the role of external environmental influences, such as co-workers relationships and societal expectations, in shaping an employee's level of contentment. This perspective contrasts with the individualised focus of Katebi et al. (2022) and the economic rationality proposed by Yuen et al. (2018), instead suggesting that job satisfaction is largely driven by interpersonal and communal factors. Meanwhile, Alsafadi and Altahat (2021) define job satisfaction as a strategic variable that affects employee retention, productivity, and overall organisational performance. Their definition positions job satisfaction as a practical and measurable indicator for designing policies that enhance engagement and motivation. Together, these scholarly perspectives illustrate that job satisfaction is not a singular experience but rather a complex interplay of personal, organisational, and societal influences.

Job satisfaction in higher educational sector in Nigeria: An empirical review
Overall tertiary education sector in Nigeria
The subject of job satisfaction in the higher education sector in Nigeria has garnered substantial research attention as problems of poor remuneration, incessant industrial actions, excess workload, lack of funding, and government negligence plague the sector. Compared to other sectors of the Nigerian economy, Okolocha et al. (2021) found that employees in the higher education sector are generally dissatisfied with their jobs particularly because of inadequate compensation, limited recognition, and unfavourable working conditions. In another study, Yaya (2019) revealed that the level of job satisfaction is perceived as poor in Nigeria's tertiary institutions as a result of limited career advancement opportunities, inadequate infrastructure and resources, high levels of work-induced stress, and poor remuneration. Similarly, Osifila and Abimbola (2020) acknowledged that core challenges such as inadequate funding, low employee morale, insufficient research facilities, administrative inefficiencies, disconnect between academia and industry, and industrial conflicts are significantly undermining the level of job satisfaction experienced by employees in Nigeria's higher education system, thereby denigrating the quality of education obtainable therein. Moreover, Idiegbeyan-Ose et al. (2019) added that whether employed in public or private tertiary educational institutions, employees, especially academic staff, confront far-reaching issues that diminish their job satisfaction, thereby fuelling employee defection to the private sector.

Public tertiary educational institutions
In Nigeria's public tertiary educational institutions, poor job satisfaction among employees is driven by several key factors, with inadequate remuneration being one of the foremost of them (Bello et al., 2017). Many academic and non-academic staff members receive salaries that are not commensurate with their workload, qualifications, and rising living costs. Without competitive and timely remuneration, employees struggle to meet their financial obligations, leading to demotivation and reduced commitment to their work (Okolocha et al., 2021). Another major factor is poor working conditions, which include inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teaching and research materials, and overcrowded classrooms (Majekodunmi & Olajide-Arise, 2024). As such, employees are often forced to work with outdated resources, making it difficult to achieve academic excellence (Salau et al., 2020). Additionally, bureaucratic bottlenecks and excessive workload also contribute to dissatisfaction, as employees are often overburdened with administrative duties, large student populations, and unrealistic performance expectations without corresponding support (Adewoyin, 2022). Other key factors include poor career advancement opportunities, frequent industrial disputes due to government neglect, and inadequate welfare benefits such as housing, healthcare, and pension schemes (Ibrahim & Abubakar, 2023).

Private tertiary educational institutions
Employees in private tertiary educational institutions in Nigeria also grapple with their own share of challenges, foremost among them is job insecurity, which stems from the absence of strong labour unions and inadequate regulatory protections (Okoli, 2018). Unlike their counterparts in public institutions who benefit from union advocacy, private institution employees often work under precarious conditions where contracts can be terminated abruptly without adequate compensation or due process. This is complicated by the fact that many institutions operate on a profit-driven model, leading to cost-cutting measures such as short-term contracts, lack of tenure, and arbitrary dismissals, which create uncertainty and anxiety among staff (Abdulkareem et al., 2020). In addition,

low and irregular salaries pose a significant challenge, as many private institutions, particularly smaller or less-established ones, struggle with financial instability (Adeniji et al., 2014). Employees often experience delayed salary payments, unexplained deductions, and a lack of structured salary scales, making it difficult for them to plan financially. Furthermore, excessive workload is another pressing issue, as lecturers and administrative staff are frequently assigned multiple responsibilities beyond their job descriptions without corresponding remuneration (Adeeko et al., 2017). This includes teaching an overwhelming number of courses, supervising numerous students, and handling administrative duties, all of which lead to burnout and decreased productivity. Moreover, poor working conditions and lack of benefits such as healthcare coverage, career progression, pension schemes, and housing allowances further worsen job dissatisfaction for employees in private tertiary institutions (Tella & Ibinaiye, 2020).

A critical comparative analysis of both institutions

These scholarly positions underscore that job satisfaction in Nigeria's tertiary educational institutions is undermined across both private and public institutions. Scholars such as Okolocha et al. (2021), as well as Yaya (2019), maintain that job dissatisfaction in Nigeria's tertiary educational institutions is a widespread issue affecting both public and private institutions, albeit for different reasons. A major area of convergence among scholars is that inadequate remuneration is a primary factor contributing to job dissatisfaction across both sectors. For instance, Bello et al. (2017) argue that employees in public institutions struggle with low and delayed salaries, while Okoli (2018) highlights that private institution employees face financial insecurity due to irregular and arbitrary salary structures. Similarly, excessive workload is another shared challenge, as both Salau et al. (2020) and Adeeko et al. (2017) agree that academic staff in both sectors are burdened with multiple responsibilities beyond their job descriptions, leading to burnout and reduced productivity.

Furthermore, poor working conditions are noted across both sectors, with Majekodunmi and Olajide-Arise (2024) emphasising that public institutions suffer from inadequate infrastructure and overcrowded classrooms, while Tella and Ibinaiye (2020) stress that private institutions provide suboptimal office spaces and limited research resources. However, key points of divergence exist in the nature of employment security and industrial relations. While scholars such as Ibrahim and Abubakar (2023) contend that public tertiary institution employees frequently experience job dissatisfaction due to industrial disputes and government neglect, Abdulkareem et al. (2020) argue that private institution employees face a greater threat of job insecurity because of weak labour unions and a lack of tenure protections. Additionally, career advancement opportunities differ significantly between the two sectors; whereas Yaya (2019) attributes dissatisfaction in public institutions to limited promotion prospects and bureaucratic hurdles, Adeniji et al. (2014) point out that employees in private institutions suffer from a lack of structured career progression frameworks. Despite these differences, scholars collectively acknowledge that systemic issues such as insufficient funding, administrative inefficiencies, and the disconnect between academia and industry, as highlighted by Osifila and Abimbola (2020), continue to undermine job satisfaction in Nigeria's higher education sector.

Theoretical framework

This research draws upon the Job Characteristics Model originally introduced by Hackman and Oldham (1974), which serves as the foundational theory for analysing how employees perceive job satisfaction within both public and private universities situated in Cross River State, Nigeria. Hackman and Oldham's (1974) model outlines five fundamental elements of job design, namely, skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback, which collectively shape three essential psychological conditions that subsequently impact an individual's motivation, satisfaction with their role, and overall job performance. The central argument of the model posits that when roles are structured to incorporate these five key components at a high level, they nurture internal motivation, enhance job satisfaction, and promote effectiveness by instilling a sense of purpose, personal accountability, and an understanding of work outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1974).

In essence, employees are more likely to be motivated, satisfied, and productive when they perceive their tasks as meaningful, feel accountable for their results, and receive consistent feedback regarding their performance, factors that collectively contribute to improved organisational output (Wan et al., 2018). Consequently, the model is highly applicable to the current investigation, as it provides a theoretical basis for understanding how particular aspects of job design—such as the aforementioned core characteristics—directly influence employees' internal psychological experiences, thereby affecting their level of job satisfaction. By applying the Job Characteristics Model to both public and private universities in Cross River State, this study can assess how differences in job design, working conditions, and institutional policies impact employees' perception of job satisfaction, thereby providing insights into key areas for improvement in both sectors.

Gap in literature

From a review of several relevant research articles on job satisfaction in Nigeria's tertiary education sector, major research gaps were identified. Fundamentally, earlier research primarily utilised quantitative methodologies, concentrating on a narrow range of job satisfaction elements, such as remuneration, recognition, administrative

practices, workplace environment, organisational policies, and interpersonal relations, without delving into how employees personally interpret and experience these factors (Bello et al., 2017; Ademodi & Akintomide, 2015; Okoli, 2018). Moreover, most of the existing literature focused on numerical comparisons of job satisfaction levels between staff in public and private universities, rather than undertaking a comparative exploration of their real-life experiences, thereby restricting a comprehensive understanding of what influences job satisfaction. (Yaya, 2019; Agbonifoh & Agbonifoh, 2022; Iornem, 2017). Furthermore, research efforts have been concentrated in Western Nigerian states like Lagos, Kwara, Osun, and Oyo, while Southern states such as Cross River remain underrepresented, creating a geographic research gap that this study aims to address.

METHODOLOGY
Research design
This study is a multiple case study research comprising two tertiary educational institutions in Cross River State, Nigeria – Arthur Jarvis University and University of Calabar. Multiple case study design is a research approach that involves the in-depth exploration and comparison of multiple cases within a real-world context, allowing researchers to understand similarities and differences across the cases while gaining a broader understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Queirós et al., 2017). In the context of this study, multiple case study design was suitable because it allowed for a detailed comparison of employees' perceptions of job satisfaction in both a public and a private university, providing deeper insights into differences, similarities, and key areas for improvement (Hazari, 2024). It is also crucial to note that this study aligns with Yin's (2012) condition for case study research by focusing on a real-world phenomenon within its natural setting, using multiple sources of evidence to explore employees' perceptions of job satisfaction in both public and private universities, and conducting an in-depth comparative analysis to understand key similarities, differences, and areas for improvement (Yin, 2012).

Sample criteria
This study targeted a sample of 14 academic staff members; 7 each from the University of Calabar, Calabar and Arthur Jarvis University. As a qualitative study, a sample size of 14 participants is appropriate because it allowed for in-depth exploration of experiences and perspectives while ensuring manageable data collection and analysis, and it is also large enough to achieve data saturation, where no new themes or insights emerge from further interviews. The academic staff members were targeted through the snowball sampling technique, relying on referrals from initial participants to identify others with relevant experiences and insights for the study (Naderifar et al., 2017).

Data collection methods
This study relied on a semi-structured interview, which entails asking participants a set of open-ended questions based on a flexible guide, allowing them to share their experiences in detail while giving the researcher the freedom to ask follow-up questions for deeper understanding (Olson, 2016). In the context of this study, semi-structured interview was deemed most preferable because it provided a balanced approach by allowing employees to freely express their perceptions of job satisfaction while enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions for deeper insights, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their experiences in both public and private universities (Long & Jiang, 2023; Knott et al., 2022). The interview schedule comprised relevant questions carved from the research objectives in order to generate data capable of actualising each objective so as to realise the overall aim of the study. Prior to actual interview administration, preliminary interview guides were shared with potential participants to completely apprise them of the details of the study in order to enable them prepare their responses. This enhanced the quality of data obtained and the credibility of research findings because it allowed participants to fully understand the study's purpose, reflect on their experiences beforehand, and provide well-thought-out, relevant, and detailed responses during the interview.

Analysis methods
The qualitative data obtained in this study were analysed thematically through the Braun and Clarke reflexive thematic analysis framework. This is a qualitative data analytical method that helps researchers identify, organise, and interpret patterns or themes within the data by systematically coding and reflecting on meanings to gain deeper insights into the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2024). In the context of this study, the Braun and Clarke reflexive thematic analytical framework was chosen because it provided a clear and flexible approach to identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data, allowing for a detailed exploration of employees' perceptions of job satisfaction (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION
This unit presents the findings and discussion of the study, structured around four main themes that emerged from the data analysis. In line with the research objectives, the analysis adopts a thematic comparative approach, where each theme presents findings from both public and private university lecturers, followed by a critical discussion linking the findings to relevant literature and the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1974). The four key themes identified are:
Theme 1: Multifaceted Responsibilities and Skill Variety

Theme 2: Perception of Societal Impact and Task Significance
Theme 3: Academic Autonomy and Institutional Constraints
Theme 4: Challenges to Motivation and Work Conditions
Each theme integrates the findings and discussion comparatively, highlighting the similarities and differences between case 1 (public university) and case 2 (private university).
Participant overview

TABLE 1
Participant Overview

Participants	Institution	Gender	Length of work experience
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 1	Public university	Male	10 years
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 2	Public university	Female	6 years
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 3	Public university	Female	11 years
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 4	Public university	Female	7 years
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 5	Public university	Female	15 years
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 6	Public university	Female	6 years
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 7	Public university	Female	6 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 1	Private university	Male	5 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 2	Private university	Male	8 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 3	Private university	Male	3 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 4	Private university	Female	8 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 5	Private university	Male	3 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 6	Private university	Female	12 years
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 7	Private university	Female	7 years

Source: Authors' Interview Data (2025)
The data on TABLE 1 presents an overview of participants who took part in the interview session. Of the 14 participants interviewed, 7 each came from a private university and a public university in Cross River State. With regards to the gender of participants, 5 of them were male, while 9 were female. Regarding participants' length of work experience, it ranged from 3 years to 15 years, indicating that participants were well experienced

academics within the educational sector in Cross River State. The data shows that 10 participants out of the 14 had worked between 3 years – 8 years in the education sector, while 4 participants had worked between 10 years – 15 years in this sector.

Coding overview

To enhance the transparency and rigour of the thematic analysis, a code sheet was developed summarising the key themes, indicative codes, example participants, and corresponding institutional affiliations. This table (see TABLE 2) provides a concise visual representation of how the data were organised during analysis, enabling clearer interpretation of the thematic structure and the comparative insights drawn between public and private universities. The code sheet also demonstrates the consistency and saturation of the data across participant responses.

TABLE 2
Code Sheet

Theme	Indicative Codes	Example Participants	Institution
Multifaceted Responsibilities and Skill Variety	Heavy workload; Role multiplicity; Task diversity; Physical and mental exhaustion	Public Participant 1, Public Participant 3, Private Participant 1, Private Participant 5	Public and Private Universities
Perception of Societal Impact and Task Significance	Contribution to national development; Student moral development; Academic mentorship; Societal change	Public Participant 2, Public Participant 5, Private Participant 2, Private Participant 4	Public and Private Universities
Academic Autonomy and Institutional Constraints	Freedom in course design; Research independence; Institutional control; Bureaucratic rigidity	Public Participant 1, Public Participant 4, Private Participant 1, Private Participant 3	Public and Private Universities
Challenges to Motivation and Work Conditions	Salary delays; Poor infrastructure; Administrative bottlenecks; Restriction on research freedom	Public Participant 7, Public Participant 6, Private Participant 1, Private Participant 5	Public and Private Universities

Source: Authors' interview data (2025)

A critical comparative analysis of job satisfaction in public and private universities

This unit presents a critical comparative analysis of participants' perception of job satisfaction in a public and private university in Cross River State in line with the objectives of this study. This critical analysis is structured in themes, discussed comparatively under the Job Characteristics Model. This enabled a systematic exploration of how lecturers in both institutional settings perceive key aspects of their work experience, particularly skill variety, task significance, autonomy, and feedback, as outlined in the Job Characteristics Model. Through the thematic structure adopted, the analysis draws out both the convergences and divergences between public and private university contexts, offering detailed insights into how institutional structures, policies, and socio-economic factors shape academic job satisfaction differently. By embedding the findings within each theme and engaging in critical comparison, the study captures the complexity of lecturers' lived experiences, highlighting the interplay between intrinsic motivators and extrinsic challenges. This comparative thematic approach ensured clarity, reduces repetition, and enables a deeper critical interrogation of how organisational environments influence the professional fulfilment and motivation of academic staff across the two sectors.

Theme 1: Multifaceted Responsibilities and Skill Variety

Lecturers in public universities reported engaging in a diverse range of activities, including teaching, research, supervision, administrative duties, and curriculum development. While they recognised the intellectual engagement this provided, many highlighted the overwhelming workload. PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 1 stated that:

"There is quite a lot I do really. First, I teach both undergraduates and those graduates… marking scripts, and supervising projects… expected to do research and publish… take up administrative roles… Quite demanding."

PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 3 also added that:

"My main responsibility is teaching… I also provide student's research, guiding them… Beyond teaching, I contribute to the development of the curriculum… It's a lot of work, but it keeps me engaged."

Lecturers in private universities similarly described role multiplicity, involving teaching, supervision, administrative roles, and counselling. However, they expressed more acute physical and mental exhaustion. According to PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 1:

"The workload is quite much. I teach many courses... supervise projects, mark scripts... attend meetings, take on admin roles, and sometimes handle duties like being an exam officer. There's barely time to rest. It's a lot, honestly."

PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 5 also added that:

"I teach courses, mark scripts, and supervise projects. I also help students understand difficult topics... serve on committees, attend meetings, and sometimes pick up roles like course adviser or exam officer."

From these interview data, it is evident that both public and private university lecturers experience a wide variety of responsibilities, aligning with Hackman and Oldham's (1974) notion of skill variety and task identity. However, public university lecturers frame this diversity as intellectually stimulating despite its demands, whereas private university lecturers more commonly associate it with exhaustion and stress. This difference may stem from institutional expectations and support mechanisms; public universities, despite their challenges, appear to foster more professional autonomy, while private institutions impose tighter administrative controls that magnify role overload. These findings support Adeeko et al. (2017), who found that excessive workload without commensurate institutional support leads to reduced job satisfaction in Nigerian universities. This entails that the perception of workload among lecturers is significantly influenced by the institutional environment in which they operate. It also suggests that professional autonomy and adequate support structures are critical in shaping whether diverse responsibilities are experienced as enriching or overwhelming for lecturers.

Theme 2: Perception of Societal Impact and Task Significance

A strong sense of purpose was evident among public university lecturers, who viewed their work as essential to societal development and national progress. In the views of PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 2:

"We help shape futures and equip them with the skills they need to succeed... helping them develop into responsible and ethical individuals... we are helping to build a stronger society."

PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 5 also maintained that:

"Many prominent figures have emerged from this university... Our research is well cited... contributing to knowledge and development."

It is important to note that private university lecturers also derived satisfaction from their moral and academic influence on students, with particular emphasis on character formation. According to PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 2:

"We guide the students on morals... Education should deal both the head and the character... students have come back to share how the lessons... shaped their careers and personal lives."

PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 4 added that:

"We help shape both the character and knowledge of our students... It's about helping them grow into responsible and useful members of society."

These interview data reveal that both groups of lecturers reported high task significance, a key dimension of the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1974). However, public university lecturers tied their sense of societal contribution to broader research outputs and national development, while private university lecturers focused more closely on the character and career development of individual students. This glaring difference reflects the institutional missions of public versus private universities in Nigeria, with public institutions traditionally emphasising national service, while private institutions place a stronger premium on personal and moral development. These findings are consistent with Majekodunmi and Olajide-Arise (2024), who observed that lecturers' satisfaction often stems from their perceived contribution to society, whether through macro or micro-level impacts. This entails that lecturers' sense of fulfilment is deeply connected to how their institutions frame the purpose of their academic contributions. It further indicates that institutional missions significantly shape whether lecturers derive meaning from broader societal advancement or from the personal development of individual students.

Theme 3: Academic Autonomy and Institutional Constraints

Public university lecturers reported significant academic freedom in planning courses, assessments, and independent research. PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 1 expressed that:

"I can plan how I want to teach... design my assessments... The department gives us enough room to be creative."

Also, PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 4 added that:

"I can choose my teaching methods, course content, and assessment strategies... there is room for flexibility and creativity... it is empowering."

In contrast, private university lecturers reported limited academic autonomy, citing strict institutional controls over course content, teaching methods, and research topics. According to PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 1:

"There's no freedom at all... The course content is set by the institution, and we must follow it exactly... It can be very frustrating because there's little room for... creativity and flexibility in how we teach."

Similarly, PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 3 states that:

"Most times, the course content is already fixed by the department. You're expected to follow the syllabus strictly... little room for creativity or trying out new approaches."

In these participants' discussions, academic autonomy emerged as a critical factor differentiating the experiences of lecturers in public and private universities. Public university lecturers enjoyed considerable freedom, fostering a stronger sense of professional identity and satisfaction. In contrast, private university lecturers experienced rigid controls that limited creativity and innovation, negatively impacting their job satisfaction. These findings resonate with Tella and Ibinaiye (2020), who observed that excessive administrative control stifles intrinsic motivation in private higher education institutions. While public universities suffer infrastructural challenges, they maintain a culture of academic freedom that enhances lecturers' fulfilment. This entails that academic autonomy plays a pivotal role in shaping lecturers' professional satisfaction and sense of identity within their institutions. It also implies that excessive administrative control, as seen in private universities, can undermine lecturers' creativity, innovation, and overall intrinsic motivation.

Theme 4: Challenges to Motivation and Work Conditions
During the interview exercise, public university lecturers expressed dissatisfaction with poor working conditions, including salary delays, bureaucratic hurdles, and inconsistent institutional support. In the words of PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 7:

"We work with minimal institutional support and often go unpaid for months... it takes great effort to remain committed... constant administrative disruptions... really hinders consistent learning."
PUBLIC PARTICIPANT 6 maintained that:

"Certain administrative procedures... especially getting approvals for research funding... consume time... limits the flexibility."
Similarly, the data shows that private university lecturers also experienced challenges, although the emphasis was more on bureaucratic rigidity and restrictions on research freedom. In the words of PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 1:

"Management controls which research topics are approved... There are also strict guidelines for publishing... Everything is heavily monitored... It feels like we're constantly being restricted."
PRIVATE PARTICIPANT 5 echoed this sentiment by stating that:

"The plain truth is that the system is quite rigid. Policies are strict... Even for research, you have to follow certain steps and get approvals. It slows things down."
From these interview data, it is evident that both public and private university lecturers faced institutional challenges that eroded job satisfaction, though the nature of these challenges differed. Public university lecturers struggled primarily with unreliable remuneration and poor working conditions, confirming Bello et al.'s (2017) findings. Private university lecturers, while better remunerated, experienced stifling bureaucracy and research restrictions, echoing the findings of Adeniji et al. (2014). This comparison highlights that while different challenges predominate in each sector, systemic reforms in both are necessary to enhance lecturers' motivation and productivity. This entails that it is possible for institutional challenges, whether financial or bureaucratic, to significantly diminish lecturers' job satisfaction and overall professional engagement. It also suggests that addressing sector-specific issues through targeted reforms is essential for fostering a more supportive and productive academic environment in both public and private universities.

Overall, the findings reveal that job satisfaction among lecturers in both public and private universities in Cross River State is multifaceted. While public university lecturers benefit from greater autonomy and perceive a broader societal impact, they suffer from poor working conditions and institutional neglect. Private university lecturers, on the other hand, benefit from structured environments and better salaries but face restrictive academic policies and heavy workloads. In other words, lecturers' job satisfaction is influenced by a complex interplay of institutional strengths and shortcomings unique to each university type. Public university lecturers value their academic freedom and societal contributions but are burdened by infrastructural decay and financial instability. Conversely, private university lecturers appreciate the structured systems and more reliable remuneration but are constrained by rigid policies that limit their academic creativity and autonomy. Against this backdrop, addressing these sector-specific challenges is crucial for promoting sustainable academic environments in Nigeria's tertiary institutions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
This study investigated employees' perception of job satisfaction in public and private universities in Cross River State, Nigeria, using the Job Characteristics Model as an analytical framework. The findings revealed that lecturers across both sectors experience a considerable degree of skill variety through their diverse academic, administrative, and supervisory responsibilities, yet the ways in which they interpret these experiences diverge sharply. Public university lecturers described their work as intellectually stimulating and strongly connected to broader national development and societal progress, though this was often undermined by poor working conditions, salary delays, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. In contrast, private university lecturers, while benefiting from more structured systems and stable remuneration, reported significant dissatisfaction with restrictive institutional controls, lack of academic freedom, and heavy workloads, which constrained their creativity and

diminished their intrinsic motivation. Both groups of lecturers attached high value to the societal significance of their work, though this was framed differently, public university staff emphasised research and nation-building, while their private counterparts focused more on personal and moral student development. These contrasting perspectives highlight how institutional missions, policies, and socio-economic conditions critically shape academic staff's lived experiences of job satisfaction.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that job satisfaction among lecturers in Cross River State's public and private universities is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon influenced by the interplay of skill variety, perceived task significance, and degrees of academic autonomy. While public universities offer greater professional freedom and opportunities for impactful scholarship, they are hindered by infrastructural challenges and administrative delays that sap morale. Conversely, private universities' structured work environments and reliable salaries coexist with rigid systems that constrain academic agency and innovation. This layered comparative insight enriches the discourse on job satisfaction by revealing how subjective experiences are shaped by broader institutional cultures and policies. Understanding these complexities is vital for comprehending the dynamics of motivation and professional fulfilment in Nigeria's tertiary education sector, and it illustrates how diverse contextual factors continue to define the realities of academic work across different university types. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are presented for possible implementation:

1. Both public and private universities should introduce structured role diversification programmes for lecturers, which balance teaching, research, administrative, and community engagement tasks based on individual lecturers' strengths, career aspirations, and workload capacity. By systematically aligning lecturers' roles with their interests and capacities, universities can preserve the intellectual stimulation linked to skill variety without overwhelming staff. For public university lecturers, this approach would maintain the enriching nature of diverse responsibilities while mitigating burnout. For private university lecturers, it would transform feelings of exhaustion into professional engagement by giving them more tailored, manageable workloads that still allow for varied academic experiences.

2. Universities should establish visible and regular platforms (such as, annual public engagement awards, research-to-policy forums, and alumni impact showcases) that formally recognise and celebrate lecturers' contributions to societal development and student transformation. For public university lecturers, such initiatives would affirm their broader societal contributions, strengthening their perception of task significance and reinforcing national service ideals. For private university lecturers, highlighting the tangible moral and career impacts on individual students would validate their character-building roles, enhancing their sense of purpose. In both cases, institutional validation of societal impact would deepen lecturers' emotional commitment to their work.

3. Universities should implement flexible academic autonomy frameworks that allow lecturers to make significant input into course design, teaching methods, and research focus, subject only to broad institutional guidelines rather than rigid prescriptions. For public university lecturers, formalising and safeguarding existing academic freedoms would sustain their intrinsic motivation and professional identity. For private university lecturers, introducing greater flexibility would counter feelings of creative restriction and institutional control, thereby fostering innovation, ownership of teaching processes, and deeper engagement. In both settings, enhancing autonomy would lead to increased job satisfaction by empowering lecturers as key agents of educational excellence rather than passive implementers of preset curricula.

Study limitations and further studies

This study was restricted to one private university and one public university in Cross River State, Nigeria. It did not draw samples from public and private universities across the country, thereby failing to integrate diverse institutional and regional insights from lecturers in other states. As such, the findings made by this study may be limited in generalisability and may not fully capture the broader perspectives and experiences of lecturers across Nigeria. For further studies, it is recommended that researchers incorporate a wider range of public and private universities from different states and geopolitical zones in the country to enhance the representativeness and applicability of the findings.

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