The evolving interpretations of customers in higher education: empowering the elusive

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Abstract

Students within higher education are increasingly referred to as customers. And there have been increasing pressures for academics to respond to them as such. Universities, especially their management, have been adopting the vocabulary of quality management systems that may be more commonplace in industry. In recent decades, there has been a fierce debate among academics as to whether this approach is appropriate in the academic sector, and whether students are customers, consumers, clients, etc. This paper explores the debate and the central ideas that have informed it. Despite the largely semantic debate over the definition of customers, universities have attempted to empower the multiple stakeholders, using a variety of tools. The paper goes on to discuss how the nature of students is evolving with the move toward widening access, and how the concepts and tools surrounding quality systems must also evolve.

Keywords Total quality management, customers, higher education, students, widening access.

Introduction

Empowering customers implies applying some of the basic tenets of quality management. Academia, as with other sectors, has been wrestling with the concepts of customers and quality. The purpose of this paper is to review the evolving debates on identifying and responding to 'customers' in higher education (HE) in the UK and elsewhere. There is a semantic distinction between 'customer' and 'consumer', the former more associated with one who pays. Rightly or wrongly, much of the academic community has focused the debate on the term 'customer'. This paper will discuss some of these

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semantics within the context of students and other important stakeholders.

The great debate

Calling a student a 'customer' often elicits very strong reactions among academic circles. More often than not, these reactions are negative. This is partly because the customer enigma is part of a larger debate surrounding the place of quality management principles in HE. In many ways, academic principles have not sat easily with those of total quality management (TQM). While surely all universities have striven for excellence and quality, their interpretations of the basic tenets of quality are often at odds with the understanding and application of quality management found in industry or the service sector.

The concept of quality has evolved over the last century. Fifty years ago, quality may have been associated with inherent superiority or luxury of a product. A quality car had hand-crafted parts, fine leather upholstery, hardwood dashboards, and probably went very, very fast. There was an element of exclusivity associated with the so-called quality. Thanks to the pioneering philosophies of business gurus such as Deming and Juran, many companies started to rethink their definitions of quality.[1] Central to this paradigm shift was the placement of customers and their expectations at the heart of the decision making. Quality cars soon were expected to not only be good, but be good consistently, without breaking down. Customers wanted reliability, perhaps more so than that hardwood dashboard. Perhaps more important, this notion trickled down to customers at all levels. These days, people are more willing to apply the term quality to the cheapest of cars, as long as it meets the customers' expectations.

Through the years, industry has developed a number of tools to help them translate the philosophical aspects of TQM into workaday, methodical procedures, such as

quality management systems typified by the ISO 9000 series. Business consultants have prospered on various repackagings of Deming's ideas. Despite various criticisms of the TQM approaches, it would be fair to say that the commercial sector has bought in to the overall philosophy in one shape or another by the beginning of the 21st century.

Academia, however, has not had such a clear-cut love affair with TQM. Furthermore, academic quality is presently a contentious issue because it is very much enmeshed in the debate over elitism vs. widening access. Are universities meant to be for the best and brightest, or are they for the masses? This is further complicated by the funding issue, especially in the UK where it appears the students will be paying an increasing percentage of the costs of their education. Regardless of the outcome of these political debates, academics must still confront the issues of quality at the chalk face. Rightly or wrongly, universities are heading toward education for the masses. This has required some rethinking of the notions of quality. So, like companies that offer that cheap but wonderfully reliable little car that fits the bill, many universities must now reinvent themselves to produce not only the elite high-flyers, but also good solid graduates, and do so with quality in mind.

In order to understand the debate of students as customers and appreciate some of the resistance to these concepts, it's important to review some of the differences (or perhaps perceived differences) between academia and the commercial sector.

Management styles in industry and the commercial sector have always varied. In the past, many organizations may have operated with a fairly autocratic hierarchy, with decisions made by managers, cascading down to the workers. Yet through the years, organizations have experimented with flattening out the pyramid, even including the workers in the decision-making process. Business philosophies and methodologies such as TQM have helped with this transition.

However, academia has been coming at it from a different direction. Academics have always enjoyed a certain amount of flexibility with managing their work, often referred to as 'academic freedom'. Academic staff are still accountable to management and are notorious for locking horns with them over funding issues, pressures to produce research, having to teach, and other

unreasonable requests. However, the line management chain-of-command is rarely as defined as it is in the corporate sector. This resistance to being managed has made it all the more difficult to introduce change through management procedures. Herein lies one of the greatest paradoxes: whereas TQM has been used by a tool in industry to loosen up some of the hierarchical bureaucracy, it is seen by many academics as an increase in bureaucracy.

This resistance to, and resentment of quality assurance (QA) initiatives became a contentious issue in the 1990s as many countries undertook educational reform. External forces, in the form of a competitive marketplace or demanding funding councils, put increasing pressures on universities. Management, responding to these external forces, started to introduce systems into previously under-managed institutions. Academics across the world, doing what academics do best, started debating the relative merits of these new management initiatives, as well as TQM.

Many argued eloquently that it simply would not work. Among others, Jauch stated that all of the fundamental assumptions of TQM were misplaced in universities.[2] The process of education should not be considered analogous to manufacturing a product. The notion of consistency and continuous improvement could not be applied to students. Not only are the raw materials (students) inconsistent, but it is also unrealistic to think that the products (students again) can be continuously improved, if indeed the quality of that product can be measured. In fact, reducing variability within the context of teaching would seem counter to the academic ideals of creative thinking. Benchmarking would be problematic as it involves identifying and emulating best practice. Integrated Management Systems and empowerment of the workforce are hampered by the historical divisions between academics and administrative support. And perhaps the most contentious aspect of all is the accepted notions of customer.

Many bemoaned the commercialization of universities, where management has been openly applying business vocabulary to education, where programmes are products that are client-centred and market-driven. Critics evoke analogies of consumer choice in certain fast-food chains whose corporate images are at odds with academic altruism.[3,4]

On the other side of the debate, many academics saw the positive benefits of TQM. After all, TQM had long since been applied to the service sector, not just manufacturing. And what were universities but service providers? Spanbauer advocates TQM as providing much needed leadership, team problem-solving, and customer focus.[5] Mullen counters point for point the arguments of Jauch, finding examples of the roles of continuous improvement and customer satisfaction available in an institution adopting quality management.[6]

The debate continues into the 21st century as new forms of management systems evolve. An increasing number of universities have even adopted ISO 9000 standards. Sullivan advocates European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model as an appropriate template.[7] Despite the availability and flexibility of the models, some have noted the slow uptake of TQM in the UK HE, as compared with the US.[8]

All of the arguments, pro and con, grapple with one central theme: the role of customers. Most identify the central enigma: are students really customers? TQM proponents say to achieve quality, an organization must focus on customers, then meet and exceed their expectations. But can we easily identify the customer?

The initial response to that question was that, of course, students are the customers. Not surprisingly this notion first appeared in the US where the cost of HE is borne largely by the fee-paying student. It is logical that they are considered customers in the traditional sense. Concepts such as 'student consumerism' in US universities can be traced back to the 1960s.[9] Students as consumers or customers had expectations and exercised their preferences by choosing their universities. In a competitive market, universities adopted techniques from the commercial sector, with a heavy emphasis on marketing. Universities began to compile quality indicators, providing more information for prospective students and adopting sophisticated marketing campaigns.

The clear-cut logic of fee-paying student equals customer didn't translate as well to countries such as the UK where, historically, society (the taxpayer) picked up much of the bill. Here, there is a semantic argument that students should be referred to as 'consumers'.

The UK is, however, moving toward higher fees. The Dearing Report[10] proposed several mechanisms and timescales for increasing the percentage of student con-

tribution. As of 2004, the average student contribution of the total cost to an undergraduate course is roughly 25%. So it would be easy to argue that the student is a customer of lower priority. But of course to do so would be insensitive, as there is much rancour over the issue of student fees. The generation of students currently going through the UK universities is generally less-equipped to cope with the financial burden than their American counterparts. In the US, there are alternative sources of funds through scholarships, aided by an innate understanding of all middle-class parents that college savings begins at conception.

Leaving behind the debate over funding and the exact percentages of input, there are other fundamental problems with calling students customers. Customer-related truisms commonly touted in business include: 'the customer knows best', or 'the customer is always right' or 'the customers know what they want'. Yet, academics from the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and elsewhere are all quick to point out that this is not, nor should be the case with students.[2,3,11–13] Their arguments point out, with varying degree of candour, that students do not know what they want. In fact, students come to university because they lack the experience, objectivity or maturity to understand the fields that they have come to study. Such a stance may be perceived as arrogance or academic snobbery, but it reflects a very real conflict in the perceived role of lecturer as expert, facilitator or pastoral support and not just a provider of a purchased product.

There is, of course, an element of truth to the above truisms even applied to students, insofar as they will be expressing their choice over a wide range of educational options presented to them. In most educational systems, students can express their preferences through their choice of universities, the choice of courses within the university or perhaps even their combination of modules within a degree. The bone of contention, however, is the assumption that having made that choice, the students should defer to the expertise of the deliverer. However, there have been innovative approaches to providing more flexible choice, notably in Scandinavian countries, where students are actively encouraged to negotiate the contents and direction of their degrees.

But students are not the only focus for discussion. Many debates on the nature of customers in HE focus

on the multiplicity of customers. Clearly in countries such as the UK, where the government is currently paying the majority of the cost of undergraduates, the government would be considered a primary customer. As customers, governments of the day come with their own expectations and political agenda. Universities must therefore respond to a changing political landscape. There is some advantage in having the government as a primary customer. Dearing points out that funding bodies are monopoly purchasers, and are in a better position to keep the costs down.[10]

As for other customers, universities must respond to a wide range of interests. Students as customers may not know what they want. But quite often their parents do. Studies show that parents still exert a strong influence over the decision-making process in selecting their child's university.[14]

It is hoped that many graduates will go on to gainful employment, therefore employers must be considered customers. Through professional bodies and standards associations, many prospective employers have long had a relationship with universities, helping to define and guide the curricula of courses. They are increasingly expressing their preferences for students with varying skills.[15] On top of specific skills such as engineering or science, universities are expected to provide a base of more general skills such as numeracy, literacy, teamwork and problem-solving.

There is an enormous debate over the divided loyalty of university staff between teaching and research. Academics expected to 'publish or perish' must devote sizable effort to securing and maintaining research grants. Many career paths are defined by this income. So it is only logical that many would consider the research funding councils as the primary customer. This career path is often so heavily weighted toward research that some have observed that ensuring quality teaching becomes secondary.[16] Many lecturers continue to provide quality teaching, but it may be motivated more out of a sense of moral obligation, and the motivation for doing so is thus more intrinsic than extrinsic.

There are also strictly university-based customers to consider, such as administrative and support units. The marketing department needs specific information from the academics, registry needs information from academics, student support needs information from registry, etc. The long-running divisions between academic and administrative staff have been a source of animosity. Nevertheless, universities are attempting to smooth out such feuds by adopting the civil dialogue of service-level agreements and customer focus between internal sections.[17]

Equally introspective, universities should consider other universities as customers, as many undergraduates may choose to pursue a Masters or PhD elsewhere. There are therefore certain expectations of the students as raw materials for further HE. The skills required of future researchers may be different from those required by less academic employers.

Perhaps more conceptual is the idea that society as a whole is the ultimate customer. In economic terms, a better-educated workforce is more likely to ensure a stronger economy. In a more altruistic, yet very real sense, even students who may not enter into direct employment would still benefit society. The notion of democracy and culture has always been linked to an educated populace.[11,18]

With all these competing customers, there have been some attempts to rank them. Owlia undertook a survey in the early days of the debate in which, not surprisingly, students were perceived to be the most important customers, followed by employers, government, faculties and families.[19] Despite the rigorous debate, or perhaps because of it, institutions may have avoided the issue altogether. Research by Conway implies that there is a confusion at the strategic level, as many institutions fail to recognize or acknowledge the students as customer issue.[20]

Throughout the debate, there has been an acknowledgement of multiple customers, with special emphasis on the role of the students. However, to turn the argument on its head, students are customers, but they're not just customers. Sharrock[11] describes how they are not only customers wanting routine information, but also clients in need of expert guidance, citizens who have certain rights within a system, and subjects who have certain obligations as well.

Perhaps one of the best semantic compromises is calling a student co-producer of education. Kotze[21] borrows the term from the newer, more esoteric vocabulary of quality in the service sector. In the world of service

industry, as opposed to the sectors that produce tangible goods, services are produced while being consumed, and the customers are an integral part of delivery.

Getting on with it

Despite the elusive nature of the perceived customers and the eclectic debate of TQM in HE, universities, and specifically their management, have decided to get on with it and address these customers.

In the UK, not surprisingly, management has responded greatly to those customers that hold the most obvious purse strings: the funding councils, and their allies the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA was founded in 1997 with the purpose of safeguarding the public interest and encouraging continuous development in the management of HE, goals consistent with the established ethos of TQM. Their existence and their methods have been highly contentious in academic circles.[22–24] Critics accused them of being overly bureaucratic, intrusive and stifling creativity. Nevertheless, through the years, the QAA has pushed through an agenda which incorporates many aspects of TQM that would be recognized in other industries: benchmarking, consistent documentation, internal and external auditing, etc. As with Deming's original philosophies, there has been an emphasis on systems, not just the product. Therefore, universities, when being inspected by the QAA, must demonstrate that they have robust quality systems in place.

The QAA's methods are mindful of the multiple customers. In the process of responding to the QAA, universities are, in theory, responding to numerous customers, including students, prospective students, parents, employers and society in general. This is a tall order indeed. Nevertheless, universities have adopted various tools for gathering and disseminating information, and started using a fairly consistent vocabulary.

A key tool for communicating with various customers is the programme specification. In some ways this is a rebranding of what some universities may have called a course document. It contains details on the course content and delivery methods, in a format prescribed by the QAA. Those customers concerned with how their monies are being spent (funding councils and QAA) should be able to find evidence or signposting that there are sophisticated quality management systems in place. Students and parents, interested in comparing course content across universities, should be able to find the ingredients listed on the box. Even internal service providers should be able to use some of the information in coordinating the various information management systems.

Fundamental for empowering all the customers is the transparency that comes with the documentation. The QAA has been quite insistent that these programme specifications be public documents. These documents join other quality-related information that universities are providing for their students, such as student handbooks and charter manuals.

Increased documentation is not the only weapon within the TQM arsenal. The use of questionnaires, surveys or focus groups has become commonplace in universities, eliciting the students' views on the delivery and content of lectures. Predictably this has become a thorny issue as students are invited to judge those who are judging them. It is often difficult to separate legitimate issues of poor-quality academic delivery vs. less objective judgements based on grudges or dissatisfaction with marks.

Data are often gathered from a variety of directions or departments, whether student services, central management or catering, each with their own QA remit. Most concentrate on perceptions of student satisfaction, some go as far as assessing the psychological well-being of the students.[25] Administering surveys has become fairly easy thanks to the students' tendency to devote much of their spare time accessing their computer accounts. Too many surveys, however, often lead to questionnaire fatigue[26] (P. Phillips, personal communication), declining response rates, with some universities resorting to the inducement of cash prizes for respondents.

Other mechanisms for student input come in the form of student representation on selected committees. Committees, already commonplace in university life, lend themselves to quality systems in that they provide a mechanism for minuting issues, feeding into action plans and providing a paper trail for auditors.

With all of these data collection exercises, universities are now faced with the challenges of analysing and, more important, finding mechanisms to act upon the

findings, thus closing the loop. Again, there is much debate on how much weight to put on some of the information. Some of the issues raised clearly need to be acted upon. If libraries or IT facilities are inaccessible, management needs to allocate resources better. If lecturers show up unprepared or not at all, management needs to flex its muscles. If students do not understand why they've received the marks they've been given, lecturers must develop appropriate feedback mechanisms. However, there are significantly greyer areas. Some academics may be pre-eminent in their fields, a boon to their department, yet less than entertaining lecturers. Some students simply hate maths or chemistry, and would prefer not to take them. Again the platitude of giving the customer what they want is problematic. Surveys are helpful in identifying issues and preferences, yet they also implant expectations that something is going to be done to fulfil the preferences. And some of the desires expressed through surveys may be at odds with the overall remit of education. Therefore, one must be careful with equating customer satisfaction with service quality, as the standard TQM model would suggest. Athiyaman[27] points out that consumer satisfaction, while extremely important, is often a short-term perception and results from a specific consumption experience. Quality should be seen in the context of an overall evaluation of indicators, including, but not limited to student perceptions.

Quality mechanisms in the university sector are still relatively new and may require some more bedding in. It is hoped that university systems undergo a simplification of procedures, a process that many industries went through in the 1980s when early attempts at voluminous management manuals gave way to streamlined and efficient documents.

Such clarity and flexibility in QA systems is necessary as the very nature of students is changing.

The next big thing

Students are changing. This is not just a nostalgic whinge, with academics decrying the decaying standards of incoming students, with their inability to write anything that hasn't been cut and pasted from Google.

The nature and profile of students will be changing, partly in response to government initiatives, and partly in response to demographics, globalization and the rise of middle classes.

In 1962, only about 8% of the UK population went to university, reflecting an elite education system.[28] Successive governments have since pushed forward policies of widening access, with the aim of attracting those students who may have been previously discouraged or excluded from considering HE. The Blair government has announced expansion targets indicating that 50% of the 18- to 30-year-old population should have experienced some form of HE by 2010; in 2003, the participation rate was around 34%.[29] The UK is well on its way toward a mass education system. And as such, it is starting to deal with the changing nature of the student body.

The government is targeting under-represented socio-economic groups and mature students. And there are now more possible routes of entry. In the 1980s, the majority of entrants to HE came directly from A-level study in sixth forms.[28] Since then, the government has promoted sub-degree studies at colleges of further education (FE). Many of these FE colleges are now forming partnerships with local universities to feed students into degree courses. Industry, too, is also forming partnerships with FE and HE to provide training that can be recognized in the context of a university degree. Work experience is increasingly recognized in gaining credit toward a degree. And perhaps the most sought-after non-traditional student is found in the international market. As foreign students are willing to pay significantly higher fees than home students, universities are falling over themselves to woo this highly lucrative cash cow.

As such, students are arriving at universities with a wide range of educational backgrounds. This diversity, while good for achieving a widening participation agenda, presents new challenges for universities. Students fresh from school with their A-levels have, in effect, recently learned how to learn. They come with one set of expectations. Depending on the pedagogic style of their schools this could be advantageous or counterproductive. If the students expect to be spoon-fed information in lectures for three more years, they might find themselves struggling. If, on the other hand, their schools used more student-centred approaches, e.g. independent study skills, problem-based learning, then the students might recognize university as a logical

extension, albeit more rigorous and demanding. Nevertheless, this is a subtle shift compared to the transition that the non-traditional student has to make.

Many point out that under-represented groups find the transition difficult with current approaches to university education. Bowl,[30] describing the experiences of three mature, black, working-class women, comments that, 'the onus seemed to be on the students to adapt themselves to the institution and its rules, rather than on the institution and its main players to adapt in response to the fresh perspectives which participants brought with them'. Similarly, Reay[31] and Archer[32] comment on the mismatch between working-class students and the institutional cultures found in universities.

Mature students, with their wealth of experiential knowledge, may have trouble with some new approaches to education. Many have memories of education as a series of didactic lectures, where students sit at the feet of the masters, absorbing their wisdom. Granted, this attitude toward teaching may still exist with some lecturers, but most universities are shifting toward alternative pedagogies. Critics are quick to point out that some of these changes arise from the economic pressures toward larger class sizes. Yet there is a growing field of academic research which looks into innovative and student-centred methods for achieving 'deep learning'. At any rate, the nature of delivery is changing and some students may not be prepared for it.

With such a changing landscape, universities must cope with and co-opt these new students. Empowering such a non-homogeneous group requires a bit of creativity.

Despite the divisive debate of QA vs. academia, universities have had a decade or so to experiment with quality systems, and have developed some effective tools. Yet with the emergence of the widening access agenda, universities must now raise the sophistication of their quality systems. Empowering students is more than just providing transparent information and asking whether they are satisfied. It has much more to do with focusing on expectations. Students may drop out because it's not what they expected. Students may become upset when receiving low marks, even though they have regurgitated facts perfectly. They may even sue universities because they feel they haven't been given the necessary guidance to achieve their goals.

True, in some cases, it may be down to inadequate service provision, but there are many cases that can be described as a mismatch between expectations.

Scott[16] reminds us that professional educators interested in customer satisfaction must be proactive in bringing students' expectations in line with their own. Therefore, universities should be putting mechanisms into place to identify and work with the expectations of customers (or co-producers). Identifying expectations often involves asking different questions of the students, and working with those expectations implies a structured approach. Much of this can be accomplished through better course design. Rather than a collection of relevant topics packaged into modules, courses should now represent a progression of content and pedagogic style, hopefully weaning students off lectures and toward independent learning. This often involves frontloading the typical three-year programme with study skills and research methods. Aligning expectations implies spending more time focusing on pedagogy and 'learning to learn'. The lecturer and course teams in effect need to be experts in their field, as well as managers of the learning experience.

The alignment process is often seen in terms of a two-way dialogue, with students and tutors entering into a dialogue over expectations and desired outcomes. The need for such a dialogue is all the more prominent in the case of foreign students, where there exists strong economic incentives to keep them happy. De Vita[33] concludes that it is no easy matter to facilitate an exchange between students and tutors over cultural values, assumptions, fears and hopes that come with a multicultural learning experience. Nevertheless they have been able to negotiate with students over pedagogical frameworks and mutual expectations.

With the widening access agenda, universities are faced with multiple customers and multiple subsets of customers, many of whom bring distinct sets of expectations. There should therefore be clear methodologies in place to respond to and align the diverse expectations.

Conclusions

Academics are an argumentative lot. They may never agree on the true nature of customers within the context

of HE. The notion of empowering this elusive customer is easily lost in a conceptual debate. However, at the end of the day, it is not the concept that counts, but the action taken.

Academics have long had the will to provide a quality service, but with increasing workloads, increasing class sizes and increasing demands to pull in money, it is possible to lose sight of providing continuous improvement to all possible customers.

Therefore a bit of structure may be needed, and managerial tools, although anathema in many academic circles, may provide it. Empowerment of (multiple) customers is aided through access to relevant information, and opening up dialogues to align expectations. As students change, so must practitioners. As the customer base evolves, quality must also take on new meanings. Coherent and meaningful quality systems should aid this process.

There is little difference between academia and other more commercial sectors. They are all organizations of people trying to get organized enough to accomplish something. Each is often bemused by the vocabulary adopted by the other. Meanwhile, the customer, consumer, client or co-producer doesn't particularly care what they are called, as long as someone is addressing them.

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