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Student satisfaction and the customer focus in higher education

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Advocating a customer focus, the Total Quality Management model of leadership has led to success in raising performance levels throughout various manufacturing and service industries. Many education stakeholders, however, are resistant to the notion that postsecondary students benefit from being treated like customers. While many critics oppose the traditional business philosophy that 'the customer is always right' and maintain that pandering to students' short-term demands is damaging to the learning process few studies explore alternative notions of what it means to ensure student satisfaction. This paper promotes a conceptual interpretation that is not governed by the philosophy that 'the customer is always right'.

Keywords: customer focus; higher education; student as customer; student satisfaction; Total Quality Management

Introduction

Many educators are resistant to the notion that Total Quality Management (TQM) principles – of which the customer focus is an important component – are applicable to higher education. Although there is evidence that postsecondary students benefit from being treated like customers, the progress toward a universal adoption of a student-customer paradigm has been slow. Much of the resistance seems to stem from a perception that a customer focus is potentially damaging to the learning process (Albanese, 1999; Bay & Daniel, 2001; Buck, 2002; Cloutier & Richards, 1994; Franz, 1998) because ensuring student satisfaction would involve pandering to students' short-term demands and lead them to blame the institution for their own personal failures. However, this criticism can be shown to be out of step with more contemporary theories of the customer in relation to service delivery where the old fashioned business philosophy that 'the customer is always right' is no longer relevant. Customers are now thought to engage in a partnership with the supplier and are in many ways partly accountable for their own satisfaction (Hill, 1995; Kotze & du Plessis, 2003; Lengnick-Hall, 1996).

The problem is that many critics have not been disabused of the misconception that students are satisfied – within the context of a student-customer model – when educators pander to their short-term demands. This paper argues that students are only satisfied when they have gotten what they paid for: a quality education in a field of their choice with an accompanying credential that is valued in the labour market.

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The controversial student–customer model

Changing government policy and increased student expectations have put pressure on universities to be more accountable, (Brennan & Bennington, 1999; James, 2001; Rolfe, 2002; Scott, 1999). In addition, the emergence of a competitive global marketplace has necessitated that students obtain the highest quality education possible at a given cost. As a result, some universities are adopting a customer focus by promoting greater student input, increased accessibility of faculty, and a curriculum that properly serves the needs of students (Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2001). However many educators are reluctant to embrace the student-customer model and are often suspicious of any attempt to apply business concepts to an educational setting. The main contention is that higher education is so completely separate and distinct from the business world that it simply cannot measure success and failure in the same way. Besides, educators have a more principled mission – a higher calling – that does not centre on achieving some bottom-line profit. Resistance also stems from a rejection of the philosophy that 'the customer is always right' or that universities must somehow pander to the short-term demands of students in order to ensure satisfaction.

An analysis of contemporary services marketing literature on the topic of customer participation reveals that there have been significant advances in customer theory and that many opponents of a student-customer model may be basing their criticisms on an outdated conceptualisation of the customer role. The supplier–customer relationship is more collaborative now than it was in the past, and customers are no longer viewed as passive recipients, but as active participants in service delivery and co-producers of the services they receive (Hill, 1995; Lengnick-Hall, 1996). 'In many services, the consumer is required to contribute information and/or effort *before* the service transaction takes place. The consumer input constitutes the raw material that is transformed by the service organisation's employees into a service product' (Hill, 1995, p. 11). Thus the quality of service and the level of satisfaction customers enjoy are linked to the quality of their own efforts and inputs (Hill, 1995; Kotze & du Plessis, 2003; Lengnick-Hall, 1996). This has important implications for the postsecondary student's role as customer and co-producer of learning and suggests that a customer focus need not carry with it the assumption that students will be immune to accountability for their own success or failure. In the past, when customers were perceived to be separate from the production and delivery processes, pandering to them by adopting a philosophy that 'the customer is always right' may have been a necessary evil to ensure their satisfaction. However, this is no longer the case, as quality service delivery is now the responsibility of both supplier and customer (Hill, 1995).

Lengnick-Hall (1996) explained that customers become part of a co-production team where suppliers function as team leaders. These professionals 'serve as coaches, teachers, and stewards. They provide resources, set standards, and manage work flows. The customer as co-producer, however, must demonstrate self-leadership and self-management in order to be an effective team member' (p. 803). Lengnick-Hall also asserts that successful co-production requires three things: 'the clarity of the task, the ability to do the work, and motivation to do the work' (p. 804). In other words, customers must know what to do, be able to do it, and have a desire to get it done. Thus for students to obtain a university credential they must first be aware of the relevant academic standards and requirements; they must have the time, resources, and proper preparation to be successful; and then they must demonstrate sufficient effort toward meeting the requirements. If there is deficiency in any of these areas failure is inevitable, and 'unless customers perform their "co-production" roles effectively, the desired outcomes will not be realized' (Kotze & du Plessis, 2003, p. 187). This belies the notion that a customer focus in higher education must involve pandering to students.

Another argument is that students simply lack sufficient knowledge of what is required to make themselves into successful learners (Albanese, 1999; Wambsganss & Kennett, 1995). Unlike business customers, students cannot fully discern when the product they are receiving is defective, and only after they have completed their studies and entered the labour market will they know if their education and skills are adequate (Albanese, 1999; Bay & Daniel, 2001). Moreover, there is considerable discordance between what students desire and what they actually need (Rinehart, 1993; Schwartzman, 1995).

Although they require long-term guidance and the benefit of their instructors' expertise, their personal desires 'often consist of very short-term and self-serving goals: to pass a course, to graduate, to learn concepts and techniques whose immediate applicability to employment are manifest' (Schwartzman, 1995, p. 218). However, Eagle and Brennan (2007) found that students generally understand that they have to work hard to reap long-term rewards and that they do not prefer unchallenging curricula and inflated grades at the expense of obtaining a respectable credential. It is also difficult to prove that students are unaware of what constitutes a good education. For one thing, they certainly understand what makes for effective instruction (Dillon, 2010). In fact, responses to a student survey developed by Harvard researcher Ronald Ferguson showed that even elementary students were aware of the difference between good and bad instruction (Dillon, 2010). Also, there is evidence that postsecondary students tend to understand what style of teaching works best for them and 'prefer the style that matches their conception of learning' (Covill, 2011, p. 94). For example, Covill (2011) points out that students who learn primarily through memorisation are not averse to the lecture format, while students who perceive learning to be about developing their understanding of concepts are more motivated by instruction that demands active participation.

We can thus assume that the extent to which students are clueless about what constitutes quality education may be exaggerated. Furthermore, some postsecondary institutions are increasingly allowing the judgment and existing knowledge of their students to help with the creation of more relevant programmes of study. The rise of student-designed curricula is an example of this, underscoring the 'belief that active participation by the students in the teaching/learning process enhances both commitment to learning and learning outcomes' (McCuddy, Pinar, & Gingerich, 2008, p. 612). Students are empowered and assert greater ownership of the learning process when they have a meaningful role in designing their courses of study (McCuddy et al., 2008). A customer focus in higher education would welcome such input from students. In business, customers bring a considerable amount of useful knowledge and information, and when they are not fully engaged, the firm forfeits a valuable resource and makes itself less competitive (Lengnick-Hall, 1996). Universities are likewise at a disadvantage when students are not fully engaged and when their contributions to the learning process are limited.

Another perceived drawback of the student-customer model is the inevitable inversion of authority and responsibility that must accompany such a paradigm shift. Treating students as customers, it is thought, facilitates a transfer of power to students and prompts them to blame the institution for their own personal shortcomings (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Courtney & Courtney, 2006; Motwani & Kumar, 1997; Scott, 1999). Individual failures are attributed to flaws in the curriculum or instruction and faculty become more vulnerable to negative student evaluations, no longer having the freedom to impose high standards. In other words, faculty have to engage in pandering because of the importance that student evaluations carry in 'tenure, promotion, and reappointment processes' (Courtney & Courtney, 2006, p. 3). However it is unclear whether these claims can survive scrutiny, as it cannot be proven that students punish their professors for not pandering. Studies show that

students do not give poor ratings simply because instructors demand hard work (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Marsh & Roche, 2000). In fact, a study by Marsh and Roche (2000) actually showed the opposite, that easier classes tend to receive lower ratings than more demanding ones and that there is little correlation between ratings and expected grades. It is not easy to show, therefore, how faculty members will ever be under significant pressure to pander. It is difficult to see exactly where an inversion of authority and responsibility is manifested within the context of a student-customer model.

Some authors argue that postsecondary students may not even fit the profile of customers in the first place. Although students tend to think of themselves as paying customers of the university (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Helms & Key, 1994; Quinn, Lemay, Larsen, & Johnson, 2009), there is no consensus among other education stakeholders. The notion of conceptualising students in such a way is a strange idea to many faculty and university administrators – one that would compromise the quality of postsecondary education (Hebert, Dellana, & Bass, 1995). According to Bay and Daniel (2001), one reason it is difficult to conceptualise students as customers is because they rarely pay the full cost of their education, which is often subsidised by outside entities such as tax payers and donors. Students thus fail to have a realistic sense of its value the way true paying customers would.

Others suggest that future employers are the primary customers (Bailey & Bennett, 1996; Wambsganss & Kennett, 1995), depending on educational institutions to 'provide qualified and capable individuals to help run organisations' (Emery et al., 2001, p. 114). Franz (1998) argues that society itself is the primary customer and that the purpose of education is to help students become good citizens. Scrabec (2000) is reluctant to call anyone a customer and prefers to think of students as 'recipients' of education while the other stakeholders are 'beneficiaries.' There certainly is no shortage of perspectives on this. However, TQM specialist W. Edwards Deming explained that the primary customer of an organisation is the end user of the product or service, despite who actually pays the bill (Brennan & Bennington, 1999). There may be other stakeholders, but the individuals most directly serviced by the organisation are its primary customers. Students are the ones most directly serviced by the university and its mission (Motwani & Kumar, 1997), so they should be regarded as its primary customers. The fact that they may obtain funding from other sources is of less relevance.

Customer specifications

Customers are thought to be satisfied when the quality of service they receive matches or exceeds their expectations (Hill, 1995; Kelley, Donnelly, & Skinner, 1990; Munteanu, Ceobanu, Bobalca, & Anton, 2010; Sirvanci, 1996; Swan, Bowers, & Grover, 2002). These expectations may be related to their own specifications for service delivery. Specifications give customers more control over the service delivery process and give them a greater sense of responsibility for outcomes and personal satisfaction (Swan et al., 2002). This would suggest that when students set specifications for educational services they are likely to take more ownership of the learning process. They develop a greater sense of responsibility and maintain a level of satisfaction that is consistent with their own efforts. A common assertion, however, is that students have little or no authority to set specifications with respect to learning standards, and as a result, they cannot truly be regarded as customers. Teachers know best. Among other things, they decide the pace of instruction and the material to be covered; they set exam schedules and evaluate student performance; they set grading policies and award credit, while students simply lack the expertise to do any of this (Albanese, 1999). However, it is important to consider that many specifications are implicit in the

expectations that customers have for a given service. As with any service encounter, certain elements of the delivery process are ceded to the better wisdom and expertise of the provider. A patient would not normally seek to guide the hand of the surgeon or rise from the bed to confirm that a scalpel has been brought to the surgery. It makes more sense for the trained professional, after extensive consultation with the patient, to deliver service according to the specifications and desired outcomes that have been discussed. In the context of higher education, students expect that instructors will set standards and guide the learning process, but as customers, they co-produce their education according to their own specifications and desired outcomes.

Advances in pedagogy are likely to make this perspective more mainstream. It is now thought that the traditional 'sage-on-the-stage' model of university teaching has become a thing of the past – or should be (King, 1993). A popular alternative is the 'guide-on-the-side' model which leads the academic to 'move away from being the one who has all the answers and does most of the talking toward being a facilitator who orchestrates the context, provides resources, and poses questions to stimulate students to think up their own answers' (King, 1993, p. 30). With this changing role of the academic, students are more active in their co-production of education and are more empowered to set specifications with regard to learning standards and their own desired outcomes.

Exclusivity and customer qualifications

The intrinsic exclusivity of an educational institution has been thought to prove that the relationship between university and student is something other than a pure supplier–customer relationship. While 'businesses do not restrict the purchase of their products and services to a select group based on personal attributes' (Sirvanci, 1996, p. 100), educational institutions reserve the right to refuse applicants based on admissions standards and have no obligation to do business with every student who takes an interest in their services (Brennan & Bennington, 1999). Moreover, even those students who have been admitted may pay substantial fees for a credential they never receive (Albanese, 1999).

Care should be taken, however, that such arguments not be based on flawed reasoning. For it is important to remember that even in the business world not all products and services are accessible to all customers and that even in the realm of pure capitalistic forces of supply and demand exclusivity still divides people along the lines of their abilities to gain access to the things they seek. Put simply, there is a difference in the desirability of customers (Wright, 2008). Some are qualified to engage in certain transactions while others are not. The most straightforward example would be the purchase of a service which remains too expensive for one customer but is far more easily accessed by another. A further example might be the purchase of an item such as a firearm which might require proper licensure to obtain. In each case providers have no obligation to take on customers who lack the qualifications to purchase their products or services. In much the same way, universities make determinations about the qualifications of their applicants. Some students are admitted into more academically rigorous schools and become customers of those schools, while those students who are not admitted must take their business elsewhere and seek admission at other institutions.

Student satisfaction

Although there is little debate over the need to satisfy students, arriving at a precise meaning of what that entails is still a matter to be settled (Guolla, 1999). We already know from the

services marketing literature that customers are thought to be satisfied when the quality of service they receive matches or exceeds their expectations (Hill, 1995; Kelley et al., 1990; Munteanu et al, 2010; Sirvanci, 1996; Swan et al., 2002). Thus in higher education student satisfaction happens when 'perceived performance meets or exceeds the student's expectations' (Elliott & Shin, 2002, p. 199). The important question therefore becomes what is it that students expect from their university experience?

Some authors seem to suggest that students expect pleasure with the everyday process of learning. According to Bay and Daniel (2001), students' incomplete understanding of what constitutes a quality education means that their demands and expectations are based mainly on their short-term goals; and meeting such expectations could turn out to be 'detrimental to both the students and the institution for the long term' (p. 3). In such case, universities would have to focus on 'keeping students happy' rather than 'preparing them for their futures or on creating new knowledge' (p. 5). Franz (1998) goes even further and suggests that students expect to be delighted and entertained, which is why a customer focus should be avoided. When universities become like shopping malls where students come to buy education, classes 'become popularity contests. Pedagogy becomes entertainment – with MTV and video games as the models' (p. 63). Again the top priority of the institution becomes making sure students are happy.

This echoes the narrative that ensuring student satisfaction through a customer focus involves pandering and that students will be content with easy courses and lenient professors even perhaps at the cost of obtaining a quality education. However this is like saying people go to the theatre merely to sit in the comfortable seats. Sure, we may concede that uncomfortable seating would make the experience less desirable, but a bad show would make the outing almost pointless. It would be of little value to assess theatre patrons' overall satisfaction solely by their appreciation for the comfortable seats. Likewise, there can be no meaningful discussion of student satisfaction without focusing primarily on the long-term quality of education they receive and the extent to which the learning process has fostered their success. For what brings students to university in the first place is not the gratification of having easy courses and inflated grades. Such things are merely incidental and part of a series of means to a particular end. Studies in the United Kingdom have shown that students largely go to university to improve employment prospects, a decision which greatly influences their choice of institution and course of study (Rolfe, 2002). Thus it would be a stretch to assume that for most students who enter university the main motivation is not somehow marked by a personal desire to advance their education and career goals.

The notion that students are concerned more with the processes of learning than with learning outcomes is only supported in the cases of students who lack clear goals. These students 'tend to base their satisfaction judgements on the educational process and the educational environment' (Browne, Kaldenberg, Browne, & Brown, 1998, p. 3). However, students who have a clearer sense of their personal goals tend to to be driven by learning outcomes such as 'skills, knowledge, and ability to proceed successfully into later stages of life' (Browne et al., 1998, p. 3). The implications are that even in the cases of students who are concerned more with processes than with outcomes universities can avoid pandering by helping those students clarify their long-term goals and expectations.

A study by Elliot (2002) of the key determinants of student satisfaction concluded that students are most desirous of 'a quality education' and a 'feeling of belonging' (p. 277). 'Moreover, students need to experience intellectual growth . . . and interact with faculty who are fair/unbiased and are able to provide quality instruction' (p. 277). In addition to that, students 'want to expand their general knowledge and understanding in the areas

they are majoring in' (p. 278). According to Munteanu et al., (2010), 'student satisfaction is an increasingly important indicator of the quality of teaching performance and can be considered as an outcome measure of the education process' (p. 125). Similarly, Browne et al. (1998) found that satisfaction was 'driven by the student's assessment of the quality of the course work and other curriculum-related factors' (p. 10). They also noted that satisfaction was likely related to students' emotional responses to both processes and outcomes. This is a far cry from simply being kept happy. Moreover, none of these authors offered any evidence that students are satisfied with substandard learning or that they are 'sufficiently short-sighted as to prefer a university education that is built around easily-won qualifications and a cheerful approach to customer service' (Eagle & Brennan, 2007, p. 55).

As such, it is wise for universities to aim to satisfy students exclusive of the notion that the 'customer is always right'. It is important to 'constantly improve the quality of educational programmes at all levels and to strive for high standards in course content and pedagogy' (Browne et al., 1998, p. 11). This can be done by embedding quality into the learning process through quality instruction, quality assessment, and greater attention to students' needs. Moreover, it is important to realise that students are not content with being pandered to. Rather they are satisfied when they have gotten what they paid for: a quality education in a field of their choice with an accompanying credential that is valued in the labour market.

Conclusion

At the centre of every education policy should be the question of how to ensure the satisfaction of students. Just as satisfied customers are the indispensable part of a successful business (Wright, 2008), satisfied students are crucial to the success of any institution of higher learning. There is little reason to think that universities can remain competitive in the long run if they are not conscious of the need to provide students with a quality education and a learning process that fosters success. Moreover, they can be certain, as the cost of obtaining a degree continues to rise, that few postsecondary students will be content with an education that is not valued in the labour market upon graduation. It is therefore important for educational institutions, if they are going to remain viable in a time of unprecedented global competition, to ensure that students receive an education that meets their needs in our modern world. A customer focus is a sound and manageable way to accomplish this. However it will be necessary for educators to move away from more product-oriented conceptualisations of the student role. Otherwise educators may never fully appreciate how a service mindset can help improve the quality of the education they provide.

Today the customer is no longer seen as a 'passive demander whose every fleeting whim has to be satisfied at all costs. Services-marketing theory emphasises the important participative and co-production roles of customers and also considers how customers can be socialised to fulfil these roles more effectively' (Kotze & du Plessis, 2003, p. 199). Thus in higher education, a customer focus does not carry with it a mandate that educators must pander to students. Rather, it provides a framework for ensuring student satisfaction by embedding quality into the learning process through quality instruction, quality assessment, and greater attention to students' needs. It need not be viewed as a threat to the future of learning quality. In fact the greatest threat to such quality – considering that we can expect the relationship between universities and students to continually evolve and become more collaborative over time – may simply be educator reluctance to discard old-fashioned conceptions of this relationship. It simply must be acknowledged that students – by paying

for the guided learning experience, and by being selective about the institutions and career paths they choose, and by specifying many aspects of their educational experience – do very much comport themselves as customers, and merely stating emphatically that they do not does little to alter the nature of their behaviour.

Student-designed curricula, teaching guarantees (McCollough & Gremler, 1999), and increased student input in policy formulation are only a few examples of measures being taken up by some universities to make the learning experience more of a partnership with students. As institutions continue to choose to adopt a student-customer paradigm we can expect to see higher quality instruction, greater accessibility of faculty (Emery et al., 2001), and more efficient processes at every level of the university community (Scott, 1999).

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