

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Welcome to our occasional newsletter about customer service within Higher Education where we review topical issues of interest to the sector.

KISs me, H E OIA Pathway 3 consultations Accommodation services AUA London Conference

KISs me, H E

Whilst it is much more likely that Horatio Nelson's dying words were, "Kismet, Hardy", rather than the more erotic version often quoted, there is nothing 'kismet' about the new requirements from HEFCE, who have been publishing details of their Key Information Sets (KISs).

From 2012, all HEIs must publish data on their websites to enable prospective undergraduates for 2013 entry to compare universities on a number of factors. Some of these are cost related, like fees and accommodation rents, some are satisfaction levels, but the key ones are employability and starting salaries.

Universities will need to show, on a programme basis, the percentage of fresh graduates who were in work six months after graduating and their annual salaries.

These data are notoriously difficult to obtain from alumni, some of whom will have left the university experience well behind them, so accuracy and reliability will be problems.

To the extent to which the numbers are valid, there could be a reduction in applications to courses with low

employability, leading to insecurity of that academic department. The programme might cease being offered and, three years later, there could be a shortage of graduates in that subject.

OIA Pathway 3 consultations

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) has recently published its latest consultation document, the key features of which are to develop a mediation service earlier in the complaints procedure and to offer on campus services.

- the creation of campus ombudsmen and associated support networks
- the development of mediation on campus
- the creation of a good practice framework for complaints and appeals processes including the incorporation of effective time-frames for handling
- the development of an OIA 'kite-mark' accreditation
- the introduction of a revised funding mechanism for the OIA Scheme which contains a case-fee element.

Accommodation services

Whilst we accept that it is only bad news that sells newspapers and good news is not always celebrated, we have come across some pretty

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poor customer service performance from the Accommodation Departments of some universities:

- undergraduate students from overseas, with unconditional offers for September/October entry, being told that accommodation applications must be received by March but that confirmation will not be given till the middle of August. If they are not offered places in hall, they will have to find their own private accommodation
- rooms being offered that failed to meet any of the student's listed criteria
- current accommodation fees not being published on the website, only last year's
- offers being made with advice that they will be withdrawn if acceptance, with a deposit, is not received within seven days
- invoices for rental being sent out with demands for payment to be made within five days or penalties might be applied.

Securing accommodation can be extremely stressful for students, particularly if they are coming from abroad. The hall of residence is often the new student's first physical contact with the university and a bad experience can colour those first impressions.

AUA London Conference

Annelise and I will be speaking at the AUA's London Conference on 6 December at UCL. Our session on Customer Service (of course!) addresses what we are seeing as an increasing issue – Cross Cultural Understanding.

The change in fees for UK/EU students is encouraging HEIs to recruit more international students whose fees are already much higher.

These students could well have spent many successful years learning in schools in their own countries with different administrative systems and different relationships with academic staff. When they arrive at a UK (or Australian) university, they can only fall back on their own experiences and behave in their previous patterns.

The transition to different methods can easily be understood cognitively but it is not always so easy to change deeply ingrained values and behaviours.

Obviously, the benefits to students studying overseas include absorbing different cultures and so enhancing job opportunities on return home and the university cannot be expected to change all its procedures. Indeed, it would be doing a disservice to the students if they experienced here exactly what they would have experienced at home.

However, understanding why certain issues have significance and why certain behaviours are the norm, goes a long way to building happy and supportive relationships. Where accommodations can be made, without disadvantage to others, the appreciation can be well reciprocated.

We look forward to seeing some of you there.

timrussell

Tim Russell and Annelise Cruickshank are currently consulting with a number of UK and overseas universities in areas related to customer service. We can be contacted by:

email: info@TimRussellGroup.com
tel: +44 (0) 20 7638 5357 (London office)
+61 (0) 8 9285 0265 (Australian office)
+44 (0) 797 777 3365 (mobile)