

## 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.

**Different approaches to customer service development**  
**Student surveys**  
**Cultural issues**  
**Typical problem areas**  
**Undergraduate blooper**

### **Different approaches to customer service development**

We are noticing a definite increase in interest in customer service development among universities as commercial interests rise to the fore.

However there is no one way of achieving this that will fit every HEI, as each has its own culture, history and strategy.

We are working with various approaches with our clients that range from a complete consultancy and tailored training package for all administrative and academic staff to action learning and project work including setting up customer service academies with websites, coaching and mentoring, face to face and online.

We would be delighted to share our experiences on what we find works and why.

### **Student surveys**

Another student satisfaction survey has just been published and universities are preparing again for the next annual National Students' Survey.

Whilst these are a useful source of

feedback, caution is necessary before implementing a raft of changes until the last set of improvements has had a chance to settle. Staff and students can find too much change confusing and that in itself can lower morale and the standards of customer service.

It is noticeable in the Times Higher Education league tables that the city centre universities ranked significantly lower than the green field campus ones, with the highest ranking university in London being placed 60<sup>th</sup> of 101. When it is seen that the assessment criteria include 'good sports facilities' and 'cheap shop/bar/amenities' this may not be surprising.

League tables have their place but it is hoped that prospective students and employers read the criteria and don't just focus on the position.

### **Cultural issues**

A cultural variation noticeable between people from different backgrounds can be measured on a dimension from 'universalism' to 'particularism'.

Universalists prefer consistency and standardisation. They view it as

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fair, open and equitable that everyone is treated the same.

Particularists prefer decisions to be made on the unique, specific circumstances at the time.

This can cause a real conundrum within universities. When is a rule a policy and when is it a guideline. To the universalists, rules are policies to be followed exactly and applied to all students equally. To particularists, rules are guidelines that help inform the specific decision for that particular student.

Our experience working within HEIs is that most staff know the rules precisely, but some see them as policies and others see them as guidelines. In these cases, there can be trouble with students asking different staff until they hear the answer they want to hear. They then gloat to their friends who complain about discrimination and favouritism.

Our work involves helping staff identify all the rules that impact on their areas of work and agreeing with

them which are policies and which are guidelines.

## **Typical problem areas**

One of the common problem areas we are finding is staff who know their own work very well but don't always know what colleagues do. They have what might be called a 'silo' mentality.

So when they are faced with an enquiry that is outside their expertise and they refer the student to another department, it is sometimes more as an act of faith rather than with complete confidence that they are sending the customer to the right place.

The consequence of this is that a common cry heard among students is that they are pushed 'from pillar to post' with their frustration level rising with every wrong direction.

## **Undergraduate blooper**

Apparently a student wrote in an essay on global warming:  
"Tackling climate change will require an unpresided response."

There may be some truth in that!

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