

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.

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A totally integrated approach
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A ‘new year has dawned’

Another academic year begins with thousands more undergraduate (and parental) expectations to be met.

Now would be an excellent time to review the student experience from their first enquiry to their first lecture. The past ten months will have been very stressful for the freshers and small focus groups will capture their opinions on the treatment they have received so far from your university. What impressions did they have before they arrived and what do they think now, after the first couple of weeks?

Students should have received a seamless experience, no matter which staff member they contacted, and they should have heard consistent answers to their queries.

This wasn't always the case in the sample enquiries we made to various UK universities.

A totally integrated approach

We are working with HEIs that are setting up a complete flow from undergraduate entry to exit with a separate Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of each of the three stages:

1. Getting ‘em in
2. Treating ‘em well
3. Getting ‘em out

The first stage includes schools liaison and everything up to Freshers' Week. The second stage is the on campus experience and the third is employment, further education and alumni.

Bombarded with new information

During these first few weeks, new students can be overwhelmed with new information and many are unable to distinguish what is crucial from what is ephemeral.

The really important rules, regulations and policies should be highlighted as such and repeated again in several places at appropriate times. Just signing a form about plagiarism or hand in deadlines is not sufficient to demonstrate a real understanding of the meaning or the consequences.

Second year retention

This is also the period when universities typically experience a higher drop out rate, as second year students return for another year.

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The excitement of their first year has gone and only hard work is in front of them for their foreseeable future.

HEIs that have set up proactive pastoral care systems that initiate contact with students will be the earliest to pick up students who are having doubts and difficulties.

Websites

We are hearing of disappointments where the promises of the website are not being fulfilled. It is always a difficult balance. The HEI obviously wants to show the institution in its best light but not everyone can be allocated the recently built hall of residence.

This is a good time to set up some 'service recovery' to demonstrate a genuine willingness to be approachable and helpful.

If you haven't seen it, check out Imperial College's stunning new website. Perfect for a science and engineering university and also very witty.

UCAS 29 September 2010

With effect from 29 September, UCAS has changed the way that references for independent

applicants are collected. Instead of the reference being attached to the student's application form, the applicant must now put down contact details so that the referee can be contacted directly by UCAS.

The reason is to prevent fictitious and inflated testimonials being given. It will, though, present problems for the first year as students and universities get used to the new system.

University of West London

In case you wondered, Thames Valley University (TVU) has been through a huge re-visioning and re-organisation and has re-emerged as the University of West London.

Sprinting an extra mile

We have always advised against customer service staff 'going the extra mile'. It is too far out of the ordinary. Once it has happened a couple of times, it becomes the norm and customers become disappointed if the same level of service cannot be extended every time. Our preference has been to go the extra yard.

Apparently, the new mantra now is to 'sprint the extra mile'. Whatever next!

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