

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.

Engaging staff on commercialisation

New roles in senior positions

Browne report

National customer service standards and awards

Customer second

Poly or uni?

The Archers

Engaging staff on commercialisation

Research from the Berkshire Consultancy Group shows that one in two Deputy Vice Chancellors feels that their university is struggling to engage staff on the issue of commercialisation and 48% report that academic staff lack an understanding of the environment in which they now operate.

The negative repercussions from a lack of academic buy-in are also found at senior levels, with the majority of DVCs (60%) seeing the over-representation of academics on the governing board as a barrier to success. Moreover, a third of DVCs feel that their management team is resistant to change.

Vice chancellors in the Russell Group are facing an added pressure, with respondents reporting that 22% of their staff actively oppose the move to a more commercial approach (this is halved in red brick and new universities).

New roles in senior positions

Responding to the changing roles of university management, we are coming across an increasing number of top positions like DVC and Pro Vice Chancellor being taken by

business executives who are not academics. We are also finding titles such as Director of Marketing and Culture on the main executive board.

Browne report

The Browne report on the financing of Higher Education in England has been published and the government has announced its plans. Student fees will be raised significantly and the repayment rates and dates for loans will be changed. The opposition Labour Party has said that they will vote against the proposals when they are put before Parliament and the Liberal Democrats, now in the coalition government, fought the last election on a platform of scrapping fees completely. If the Lib Dems also vote against, the Conservatives will have some work to do as they will not have enough votes to pass the legislation. How the recent protests and their descent into rioting will affect sentiments has yet to be seen.

If the Bill is passed through Parliament, the changes will take effect for 2012 entry. We are already hearing cases of gap years being cancelled so that students can get in at the previous rates. Applications for 2011 could be greater than ever.

National customer service standards and awards

We are often asked about the merits of national customer service standards and awards. The two main ones that universities are using are Customer Service Excellence, CSE, (formerly CharterMark) and the Customer First Standard, CFS.

Both are fairly strenuous to achieve, otherwise they wouldn't be worth it. CSE is more public sector oriented, being run by the Cabinet Office, and more detailed with 57 standards. CFS is slightly more commercial and has 32 standards.

Whilst neither covers the soft skills that staff should be using in handling internal and external customers (we can do that!), they are good for sharpening policies and procedures and also for raising awareness. Both involve detailed external audits and can take months or even a couple of years to attain. During this time, it is a great opportunity to promote campaigns and conduct skills training as the award provides a focus and a culmination of achievement and celebration.

The awards have a finite currency and, as some people have found with Investors in People (IiP), it is good for the first time but might not be worth all the effort of renewing.

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Customer second

We are hearing a number of commercial organisations stepping back from the previous mantra of 'customer first' and now claiming that it is their staff who are first and the customer second. We have long promoted the view that customer service includes staff dignity and if it is a case of retaining a good staff member and losing an objectionable customer – the customer goes.

Poly or uni?

Singapore newspapers have recently been emphasising the merits of a polytechnic over a university education by comparing employment levels for recent graduates. This trend is also evident in Australia as well as the UK. With high graduate unemployment yet skills shortages in key areas, vocational education might become a more attractive option.

The Archers

Even the Archers, the world's longest running radio soap, is getting into the debate with Pip, the farmer's daughter, deciding whether to go to university, agricultural college or to give up formal education altogether and learning from just working on the farm.