

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.

State of the nation The consequences Silver lining

State of the nation

The UK government is asking universities to make savings of £700 million to their budgets.

At the same time, student applications are up by 16.5% on last year, yet there are 70,000 graduates on the dole or in dead end jobs and one in four UK students fail to complete their degrees.

Previous government policies had aimed to increase the number of secondary school students entering higher education (50% by the year 2010 was one strategy) and universities have been investing heavily in buildings and infrastructure for an expansion.

Now the government funding agency, HEFCE, is capping the numbers of students being supported.

Yet, recently it was deemed that all new nurses and social workers in England and Wales must be educated to at least graduate level. (This is already the position in Scotland.)

For mature workers wanting to upgrade or change careers and re-grade, no financial support is available if they are studying at a lower or equivalent level to their existing educational qualifications.

The Browne report on student funding is due to be published shortly and the government is holding back on announcing its plans till then. There is talk of tuition fees being raised but the Liberal Democrats, now in the coalition government, fought the last election on a platform of scrapping fees completely.

Clearly the whole higher education sector is in a state of huge upheaval and may remain that way for the next few years.

The consequences

Being in uncharted territory with so many financial and political implications, it is impossible to be certain but there are good indications that HEIs will have to become even more commercial in their outlook in attracting and retaining students and staff and in looking for multiple income streams.

Marketing, branding and customer service will increase. 'Brand loyalty' and 'the student experience' will become common ways of thinking. Universities will need to become less dependent on government funding and expand horizons to seize local, national and international opportunities with other educational and commercial institutions.

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Universities will become more competitive - against each other, nationally and internationally.

There will be much more flexibility in teaching; flexibility in timing, in locations and in media. Two, three and four year courses are being mooted. More people will be studying from a distance, at home or in local institutions, whilst attaining qualifications from universities worldwide. The University of London and the Open University have been doing this in different ways for years. 'Think global - learn local' could be the new catch phrase.

Some universities might become more like examining and award bodies, as happens with state run secondary school examinations. They will be responsible for setting and maintaining standards and leave local colleges to do the teaching.

Others might remove themselves from the public sector altogether and become private institutions relying on research and reputation and setting their own fees.

Yet others might become more vocational and act as educational and training feeders to the professions.

These are certainly exciting but unsettling times to be in HE.

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Silver lining

The financial cuts might produce at least one unintended benefit regarding student engagement and retention, though.

For several years, many universities have been offering a range of multiple pathways to achieve a degree. There has been a confusing number of combinations and permutations made possible by the modular system of constructing programmes.

One negative consequence has been that some students have their own unique study pathway and have little connection with other students who might be following different patterns. This can lead to isolation and is exacerbated by larger class sizes resulting in some students not having many friends, support groups or much affinity to their universities.

With more students living at home and engaging in part time or even full time employment, engagement has been suffering.

If university cuts result in fewer courses and pathways, students might spend more time and have more contact with their peers, so enhancing their student experience.