

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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New in-take, their parents and the DPA

The new academic year in the UK welcomed another batch of fresh faced students about to begin the next phase of their lives. Most brought their excitement, their nervousness and their sound systems. Some brought their parents.

This year we have heard more cases than ever of parents demanding preferential rooms in halls of residence, meetings with tutors and tours of the campus. One parent even wanted to attend lectures for the first week to ensure that they were of sufficiently high standard.

Such parents are probably continuing the practice from their child's secondary school and are unaware of the Data Protection Act (DPA) which applies when the student reaches their eighteenth birthday. (In Australia, the Privacy Act is similar.)

It is also worrying how many staff, both academic and support, we are finding who are potentially laying their institutions open to litigation by not knowing nor following the letter of the law.

We are currently advising a number of institutions on this, the Freedom of Information Act and the Disability Discrimination Act.

Failure of staff to follow these can lead to litigation and very bad publicity.

Cultural issues

A cultural variation noticeable between students from different backgrounds can be measured on a dimension from 'communitarianism' to 'individualism'.

Communitarian students prefer to work and socialise in groups and to share their learning among themselves. They are usually family oriented and will seek and give help to family members. The concepts of collusion and plagiarism might be harder for them to fully appreciate, particularly if they have been through an educational system that encouraged the sharing of information.

Individualist students can be more self focussed and see learning to be a competition where it is better to win than to lose. Such students have been known to hide books in different sections of the library to

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prevent other students from accessing them.

To confuse the issues completely, it is common practice for students to be told to study and to work in groups on a joint project and then to write up their assignments individually. Any collusion on the submission is marked down.

Such rules can be difficult for some students to understand and the best practice is to brief students personally, with plenty of examples, when they have settled into university life, rather than rely on the student handbook which the new students might find overwhelming.

Advertising materials

We have been studying the promotional material published by universities through prospecti, brochures and websites, particularly those aiming to attract international students. What has concerned us is the frequent reference to the social scene centring around bars, pubs, clubs and alcohol. Whilst this might be an attractor for local students and perhaps even the overseas ones themselves, it is unlikely to cause their parents to be keen about sending their children to a western university for a few years.

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)**

To unsubscribe please email "Unsubscribe" to: info@TimRussellGroup.com

National Students Survey

University staff are now poring over the recently published results of the National Students Survey. Whilst an understandable concern is shown, it should be remembered that participants are volunteering to complete the questionnaire and are full time students in their final year. They are not necessarily, therefore, fully representative of the entire student body, particularly for universities that offer very flexible pathways to learning.

EQ v IQ

An increasing number of employer surveys are highlighting that, whilst new graduates are demonstrating a high level of intellectual skills, they are lacking in the interpersonal skills of working within an organisation. As employability is an important factor in deciding which university to attend, communication skills should be an essential part of the learning. A number of the institutions we are advising do superb work in this area and in preparing students for ultimate employment.

Undergraduate blooper

Apparently a student wrote: "Psychopaths are white males 90% of the time." – and the other 10%???