

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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Higher education and the economic crisis

We are noticing some conflicting evidence in higher education of the consequences of the current financial state.

Whilst some potential students are questioning the value of investing so much time and money when there is still no guarantee of a good job at the end, others are taking the opportunity to prepare themselves for when the economy does pick up.

The latter appears to be particularly the case for the more vocational courses where enrolments are increasing and for mature students embarking upon a new career.

Service definitions

We have been encouraging staff of our client universities to produce service definitions for the various administrative functions.

An example of one for a student information centre might be 'informed and informal'. This simple statement helps set the job roles of the staff, the recruitment and training needs as well as work layout and staff dress and behaviour.

Student surveys and feedback

'Feedback' is the issue that most frequently shows up poorly in student satisfaction surveys.

We are finding, however, that some universities are trying to fix this without a detailed definition of exactly where the problem areas lie. If the wrong problem is diagnosed, the wrong solution will be prescribed.

The student disappointment could be about the quality of the feedback, the quantity or the timeliness. On the other hand it could be confusion between the tutor's constructive criticism and the assessment grade that is the point of complaint.

Maybe the students just didn't like the marks they were given.

Tim Russell's book "Effective Feedback Skills", published by Kogan Page, explains many of these issues.

Cultural issues and learning styles

We have recently been working closely with a college in Australia some of whose lecturers are finding difficulty with students from parts of

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Asia who have had successful educational careers to date using totally different learning styles.

Whereas the college is trying to promote a facilitative style of learning by discovery, the students see the academics' role as providing certainty and answers.

Our experience of learning strategies in multicultural environments around the world is helping the staff to design and run appropriate educational interventions.

Handling violence

Whilst we certainly don't recommend it, we were interested to read about an American university where staff are being trained how to grapple with armed and dangerous attackers.

The theory is that it is better to be proactive than passive and that the single aggressor can probably be overpowered by the combined efforts of enough people.

Typical problem areas

Strangely, one of the biggest problems we are finding in our research into customer service within universities is poor signage.

Whilst the staff know their way around well enough, it can be a nightmare for new students, their parents and visitors.

We have found signs that lead round in a circle, some that lead nowhere and some referring to a building that does not exist. There have also been cases where an office is labelled with one name, but is always known by another.

As so many campuses are open access it does not give a good initial impression for prospective students who are wandering around lost.

Undergraduate blooper

When asked to use the word 'judicious' in a sentence to show its meaning, a student wrote, "Now hands that judicious can feel as soft as your face."

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