

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.

Higher fees and higher standards

Volatility of student numbers

Taiwan closing HEIs

The future of universities

OIA complaints

Handling upset customers

AUA Conference

Higher fees and higher standards

Speaking at a CBI conference recently, Lord Mandelson, the UK minister for universities, suggested that student fees will rise and that students will then demand even more value for money, not just from the courses but from their whole student experience.

He wanted more competition between institutions and said that universities or courses that failed to live up to students' expectations would be scrapped.

We are hearing that the cap will be lifted and that fees could rise to £8,000 or more per year.

Volatility of student numbers

There is likely to be increased volatility in student numbers for at least the next year or two.

If student fees do increase, fewer young people might be prepared to take on loans and debts when there is no guarantee of getting any job, let alone a higher paid job, after graduation. Unemployment figures are still a concern.

Despite this, HEIs still have to plan several years in advance to ensure that there will be the right numbers of buildings and qualified staff and the right courses being offered.

Taiwan closing HEIs

Taiwan announced recently that they would need to close up to 60 universities and colleges over the next twelve years because of falling birth rates. That is one third of the current total of HEIs.

The future of universities

We have been reading some interesting projections that, in years to come, universities might find themselves shifting away from teaching and moving towards becoming examination and standards boards.

With increasing numbers of joint ventures with other HEIs and commercial organisations around the world and with more teaching being conducted remotely and through virtual classrooms, it could be that the delivery of learning will be outsourced and that quality control and standards will become more important. The university teaching model could become like secondary school education and assessment.

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If this were to happen, HEIs would expand their role in research and extending the boundaries of knowledge. We would then see them linking closer to the users of that research. There is already evidence of this as more universities are building hospitals and business parks.

OIA complaints

The Office of the Independent Adjudicator, the university ombudsman for England and Wales, received 900 complaints from students in 2008 - a rise of 23% on 2007 - but just 7% were upheld.

These figures are very telling. As it is so easy (and free) for upset students to complain, the numbers will continue to increase. However the 93% success rate for the universities hides the real grief, stress and trauma for the academic and administrative staff who have to justify their actions. We have spoken to several staff who have had such complaints and they all report the severe distress that it brings.

Obviously if the student wants 'their day in court', nothing will prevent them. But if their complaints are the result of a genuine frustration that they feel their concerns have not

been handled by the HEI with the seriousness they deserve, these problems could have been resolved much earlier.

We are currently working with universities in identifying and pre-empting causes for complaints and helping them to resolve such problems before they escalate.

Handling upset customers

When people are upset, they often ask the wrong questions, go backwards in time and try to allocate blame. The favourite, "Why didn't you tell me that earlier?" is typical.

In response, always acknowledge the person's frustration and then try to move the conversation forward. "I can understand your annoyance that you didn't have more notice. What we can do is"

AUA Conference

We shall be speaking at the annual conference of the Association of University Administrators (AUA) at Warwick University from 29 – 31 March 2010.

Our subject will, of course, be customer service and Higher Education and we hope to see you there.

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)

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