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The 'Student as Customer' Phenomenon

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Since the introduction of £9000 per year tuition fees in the UK there has been a shift in the expectations of students, and rightly so. After all, students (or their parents) are now paying a small fortune for access to the same higher education that was free for previous generations.

Aside from the hard decisions this has placed on students, it has also raised issues for staff in the academy. One of those is the 'student as customer' idea.

A perception now exists that, as 9K per annum fee payers, students are customers and universities are service providers. The analogy is as follows: You go out for a meal in a restaurant. The service is slow and your food is lacking the normal quality you expect. You complain. You get an apologetic manager address you and offer you compensation for your troubles. Result. More often – students are reacting in a way similar to this with complaints over their higher education experience.

The difference is this: Education is not a service, or a commodity. When a student pays fees, they are paying for access to an education *process* and the resources that they will need to traverse that process (tuition, facilities etc.). They are not paying for an entitlement to be awarded a good degree. This important fact has not changed with the introduction of tuition fees. Fees are an unfortunate policy of our political overlords that humble lecturers have no control over. Fees have not meant that lecturers have more resources, or more time to give over to students (unfortunately). The fees have, quite literally, transferred the cost of education from government subsidies to the student, in full. Universities are not richer because of fees, they are actually often worse off due to the unpredictability of the new system and the withdrawal of that once stable supply of government money.

So – while the everyday plight, ability, and resource of lecturers has not changed, what has changed is expectations from students. A minority of students believe that as 'customers' their grievances and complaints now should be dealt with in a manner akin to the restaurant analogy given above. This presents significant problems for staff. Should staff react with appeasement to a student making an unreasonable demand just to keep that 'customer' happy – or should staff give them a more appropriate rebuttal?

An example: A student complains that they have too many deadlines and are overworked at the end of term. Then, they blame their lecturers for poor results in those assignments. The reality is that those deadlines have no bearing on when the student could elect to do those pieces of work over the full length of term. This, of course, assumes that students are organised and do not leave everything to the last minute. Should a member of staff cave in and appease the student and offer compensation, or should they tell the student that time management is an important part of the education process and a vital life skill to take forward beyond their degree?

For me, the answer is clear. I'm not prepared to set academically irresponsible precedents through short term appeasement gestures. I'm fully aware that students are under more pressures than ever, and that their private lives are often an obstacle to their studies. When such cases are acute there are appropriate extenuating circumstances processes available and arrangements can always be made via official channels and student counselling services. Most often, such as in the example given above over deadlines, it is really just down to learning the virtues of good time management (the hard way if necessary).

Catering analogies often infest my thinking as I was (for the best part of ten years) working in the catering industry, either full or part time, prior to becoming an academic. There, I learned an important lesson:*Customers are not always right.* In certain situations, it is very important to explain (politely) to a customer why they are wrong. This is so that in future instances they have a correct perception/expectation. Failing to do this leads to a knock on effect of misery for all affected.

To bring this back to the academy… we can learn from these catering analogies. While students are not customers, they do sometimes complain like customers do. For that reason there are strategic and long term implications to the way we handle this new wave of 'student as customer' phenomenon. The customer, like the student, is not always right. When they are right, we should be quick to fix things and feedback that action to the student. When they are wrong, we should not be afraid to correct their expectations in an appropriate way.

Due to high tuition fees in the UK, educators are now faced with higher expectations. We have to rise to that challenge and raise our game. No arguments there. However, we must not do so at the expense of our integrity, or in a way that dumbs down higher education.

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