



## THE IMPLICATION OF CUSTOMER SERVICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: REVIEW PAPER

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### ABSTRACT

*Higher Education (HE) is becoming highly competitive today and therefore, Institutions of Higher Learning need to look closely at improving their customer service strategies. Consumers in the education sector are now much more aware of what exactly they want; and therefore the demand for these services is similar to what they demand for commercial businesses. Customer service has become the centre of management activities which constitutes the basis of competition in the higher education sector today. Universities and colleges should begin by becoming proactive not reactive in the marketing of their services. The Customer Service Quality model has been widely used to study service excellence in a number of service industries; education inclusive.*

**Keywords:** Customer service, Higher education institutions, Customer, Customer expectation, Students, Uganda.

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### Contribution/ Originality

The study documents the performance of higher institutions of learning with regard to improving quality and increasing productivity. This is seen through institutional policies and structures to deliver the services promised, recruiting staff competent enough and responsive to the dynamic education sector and designing the environment to fit an academic context.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education in higher institutions of learning is very pertinent in as far as home capital investment is concerned.

Higher Institutions of learning develop human resource through teaching, conducting research and community service by interacting (Okwakol, 2009). The competition in HE is mostly in terms of student numbers, quality staff and resources which are key in the provision of education. Because of the increasing demand, education has moved away from being the service for only the elite as it is known, to a service open to the masses. In 1987, there was only one university in Uganda with a student population of about 10,000 students. As of now, there are over 30 universities in Uganda both private and public (Okwakol, 2009). All institutions; public, private, profit or non-profit can prosper or suffer from the public's perceived image or brand of them.

Customer service is not fluff or some trite politically correct nuisance. It has become the centre of management activities which constitutes the basis of competition in the higher education sector today (Teri, 2014).

Most Institutions of higher learning have branded themselves differently, but they still remain institutions. There are those institutions that have had their history and tradition for hundreds of years. This makes the staff (top administrators, academic, and support) have the very same academic system and the same experience of customer service; which has become an acceptable standard for those very institutions. Among these institutions, there are some that receive many student applications and those that have too few applications.

Those institutions that have outstanding reputation and are over-subscribed to tend to be arrogant and hence promoting poor customer service. This is because students, who want to study there, are grateful for their place at the Higher Education Institution (HEI) of their choice and are unlikely to challenge poor customer service. They are relieved that they got a place and there is, allegedly, the risk of academic or other reprisals (Toolman, 2014). Irrespective of the reasons, HEI and for that matter many other institutions still provide poor quality of service to their students (Ebid).

### 1. 1. Theoretical Background

Customer service is based on the premise of identifying and satisfying the needs of customers and their desires. All organizations should have a commitment to deliver consistent services which can help them gain and retain customers. Top service organizations are now focusing on delivering value to well- defined customer groups. They are looking to improving quality of their services from the perspective of the customers rather than what management thinks.

Customer satisfaction and loyalty are impossible to separate when it comes to quality service provision, which finally has an impact on an organization's profitability (Dorling, 2014).

Turban *et al.* (2002) noted that "Customer service involves different activities that are put across to improve on customer satisfaction; that is, the product performance should meet customers' expectation." Harms (2013) states that Customer service is knowledge delivered with care to make life easy for the customer.

Customer service may also be determined by the organizational culture; which stipulates the priority an organization gives to its customers. This is achieved through training employees on various customer service issues.

### 1. 2. The Concept Customer Service in Higher Institutions of Learning

Customer service is knowledge (or assistance) delivered with care to make life easier for the student (Harms, 2013). Institutions of higher learning are experiencing significant changes, and the focus is moving to competitiveness and customer care (Lieberberg and Barnes, 2004).

Consumers in the education sector are now much more aware of what exactly they want; and therefore the demand for these services is similar to what they demand for commercial businesses (Robert and Eric, 2008).

In order to manage improved service on campus, institutions should be responsive to customer issues, efficient, adopt clear communication strategies, and manage conflicts. This will save them the rigor of sacrificing institutional policies to promote customer satisfaction.

Turban *et al.* (2002) noted that most institutions of higher learning have now improved the quality of services by dedicating whole departments to be responsible for student services.

Customer service activities should not be left to only a department or a few individuals; this is the responsibility of all employees in the organization. Top management must inspire every staff into customer service activities. Some scholars argue that HEI have ignored customer care activities and instead focus all their attention to producing the final product; the students they graduate. Students are normally awarded a diploma or degree if they meet all the academic requirements set before them. However, these institutions are not involved in knowing whether students were satisfied with their services in the course of achieving their (student) academic requirements.

Turban *et al.* (2002) as cited in Emery, Kramer and Tian (2001) said, Students rarely become excited about their difficult achievements in the short run, but in the long run, they become appreciative of those who prepared them to face the real world. A diploma/degree should not be the only concern for these institutions, they should carry out tracer studies of how their students are performing outside school environment.

In academia, there is an argument that students are similar to customers and therefore, institutions supply them with a service which is education (SaraB in Sara, 2014) as cited in (Emery, Kramer, & Tian, 2001). This view has been debated since the 1950s but came to prominence in the 1990s (SaraB in Sara, 2014) as cited in (van Anandel, Pimentel B?tas, & Huisman, 2012).

### 1.3. The Customer-Student Paradigm in Education

Kitchroen (2004) as cited in Griffin (1996) defined a customer as anyone who pays money to acquire an organization's products or services. This can be an individual or organization. A consumer is the individual or a firm that uses the services provided by the institution. In education, students are customers who come to contact with service providers of an educational institution for the purpose of acquiring the services (ibid).

Proponents of the customer- student model argue that viewing students as customers is not being fanciful a necessity (Maguad, 2007).

Institutions that flourish have always been seen as offering superior services to their students. Institutions must brand or rebrand themselves to have a competitive image to their potential students (Mark, 2013).

Hejwosz (2010) noted that; academics has become a commercialized venture where all the stakeholders are seen as revenue centres, every student as a customer and every professor as an entrepreneur. This makes institutions to be seekers of profit financially or through human resource development.

She reiterated that, what is called enrolment is nothing more than a marketing strategy. Universities have become brands of themselves through their promotional and pricing.

Most institutions are now trying to increase their revenues by searching for ways to do more with less. One method of accomplishing this is to be customer –centric (Ricky, 2012).

The changing trends in higher education has made institutions to bench mark the private sector on how to better serve all the relevant parties in the education process; which concept is being emphasized all round (Tricia, 2013). Although the major player in the education service provision is the student, parents, government and the society are also customers of the education industry as a whole (Kitchroen, 2004).

Opponents of the customer-student model point out that viewing students as consumers can lead to a general sense of academic entitlement (SaraB in Sara, 2014) as cited in (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2010; Wueste & Fishman, 2010).

The academic entitlements (documents) offered to the students by their respective institutions is the belief that students owe the institutions desirable educational outcomes. This attitude among students could potentially undermine the educational process and hamper attempts to encourage creativity and critical thinking (Schaefer *et al.*, 2013).

The opponents also argue that faculties should view students as co-producers of the educational services, whereby cooperative engagement with the students is necessary to create a positive impact to educational outcomes.

Ricky (2012) as cited in Vaill (2008) went on to say, Higher education has to be careful not to think of the student as a customer in the conventional sense assumed by a profit-oriented business. These institutions as businesses compete for customers. However, this should not misinform students of the kind of life they ought to live while at these institutions.

According to Gecowets (2014) Universities are absolutely in the business of service (customer service included); which assumption constitutes a weakness because education is the outcome not the service. The argument that customer service may turn education into a commodity is only posited by those who didn't take the time to differentiate the outcome of these institutions such as educated citizens, research and community service etc and the discrete services provided to stakeholders in the education process. However the services provided by faculty staff and administrators of institutions can and should be constantly improved to increase the number of successful graduates, improve the quality of university research, and engage in more community outreaches.

### 1. 4. The Neutral Level

Regardless of whether one calls students customers or not, there are basic principles about the customer service paradigm that could and should be utilized in higher institutions of learning. Ricky (2012) as in Demetriou (2008) observed that, service standard provided to students is important and that institutional officials should observe the following when providing services to students:

- Students should be treated with dignity and respect.

- Students should be given clear directions on how to handle specific issues.
- School officials should be responsive to students' and parents' concerns.
- Students' grievances should be attended to promptly.

Ricky (2012) as cited in Bejou (2005) suggested adopting customer relationship management (CRM) as a way of establishing and maintaining the relationship between the student and the institution of learning.

Bejou (2005) got concerned that schools could apply CRM in their organizational structure to help them in effective and efficient resource allocation in terms of recruitment, retention and enrolment.

Ricky (2012) as in Wallace (2010) compiled 15 Principles for Complete Customer Service. Here are seven of the fifteen principles for customer service that institutions can adopt to put in place a neutral level about students as customers:

1. Providing quality services to students is the key to the success of HEI.
2. Serving students should be the key of all employees in the organization.
3. Students' perception of service should be understood so as to offer maximum satisfaction.
4. Students' needs differ, and therefore, it is important to understand the needs of individual students.
5. Employees should treat students as their children.
6. Service recovery strategies should be employed.
7. Active listening should be enhanced as a way of improving the service.

### 1. 5. The General Evaluation

Whether students are customers or not, the general understanding is that HEI should make use of the customer service literature to empower students to be successful.

The seven principles by Ricky (2012) apply to the parameter of the service quality model (SERVQUAL) (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990) which are: Reliability, Assurance, Tangibility, Empathy, and Responsiveness.

### 1. 6. Instruments to Measure Service Excellence/Customer Service

#### 1. 6. 1. The Service Quality (SERVQUAL) Model

Parasuraman *et al.* (1990) proposed to subjectively establish the difference between customers' desired service and adequate service so as to get their perceptions of the real quality of performed service.

In the service quality (SERVQUAL) model, services are viewed in a structured, integrated way known as the gaps model of service quality. These gaps occur within the organization providing the service and they include: the difference between customer expectations and company perceptions; between customer-driven service designs and company perceptions; between customer-driven service designs and service delivery; and between service delivery and external communications.

The SERVQUAL authors identified variables that influenced the occurrence of the gap to be: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, communication, credibility, security, competence, courtesy, understanding/knowing customers, and access.

These variables were later summarized into five factors, that is; Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy and Responsiveness (RATER).

- **Reliability** which means the company should meet promises. The company should have the ability to perform the service dependably and accurately.
- **Assurance** is the employees' confidence and trustworthiness in delivering service.
- **Tangibles** refer to the appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials. This helps provide physical representations or images of the service that customers, especially new customers, will use to evaluate service quality.

- **Empathy** means giving customers individualized treatment. This implies that the firm sees customers as unique and special and that their needs are understood.
- **Responsiveness** means that the employees of the firm should be willing to help customers and also give them prompt services.

The formulated RATER model is easily applicable in service delivery because it allows customer experiences to be examined and evaluated quantitatively (Parasuraman *et al.*, 1990). Each attribute can easily be evaluated to measure expectations and perceptions of service which is seen to be appropriate to each dimension, calculating the difference and then averaging across attributes (Khodayari and Khodayari, 2011) as in (Bolton and Drew, 1991).

Nyeck *et al.* (2002) stated that the service quality (SERVQUAL) model is still the most valid tool in measuring service quality. It is stated that many researchers have used the SERVQUAL model/tool to examine numerous service industries; education inclusive.

### 1. 7. Relevance to Higher Education in Uganda

The education service providers are grappling with an increasing competition as new institutions are established (both public and private), and new foreign entities enter the market. This come with changes education sector: more new programs are offered, new delivery means of the existing program (i. e. distant learning or e-learning) are introduced. With this, service quality perceived by students, increased productivity and service excellence becomes key success factors.

The formulated RATER may be adopted to improve the standard of services HE as follows:

Reliability: Institutions can draw up policies to help them deliver the promised services.

Assurance: All employees should be competent and trust worth with regard to service delivery.

Tangibles: Institutions should have appropriate physical infrastructure and resources to enable service delivery to all stakeholders.

Empathy: Employees should treat students as individuals. There should be a customer (student) - centred environment.

Responsiveness: Institutions should emphasize the willingness to help customers and provide prompt services.

### 1. 8. Critical Evaluation of the Service Quality Model

Buttle (1996) made a critical assessment and evaluation of the model and came up with two clusters of criticisms based on theory and operational-ability. He observed that the formulated RATER does not cover all service aspects of the organization and cannot be applied the same way to all organizations. The context of service determines the applicability of the dimensions; Kitchroen (2004) as in Babakus and Boller (1992).

## 2. CONCLUSION

The service quality model is used to compare two aspects of standard service; expectation and perception. The quality generation and assurance of education service is, however, a more dynamic process. The RATER attributes of service quality may therefore be integrated into an input-process-output framework. The standard output depends on how good the input is and the quality control of the process by the educational institution.

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