

Student Customers

I think the student as customer has been creeping up on us for longer than we may have realized though most recently it has become a University position that is quite blatant. My experience of this includes the following:

There has long been an expectation that any postgraduate student will complete an MA or PhD whether or not they should. In my past experience, outside of Australia, the majority of a postgrad cohort didn't complete. Governments see this as waste of money. I see it as the only way of ensuring that those who do receive an MA or PhD are really qualified to hold such degrees. In my twenty plus years of teaching, I have discovered that it is very hard to know if an applicant really has what it takes until they produce their thesis. When those who are not really postgraduate material are pushed through, the reputation of a discipline is damaged and both the student and the supervisors may end up feeling that they have wasted a lot of their time. A more rigorous postgraduate program that winnows a postgraduate class would address this issue. And governments might be reassured that even though many students drop out it has not been a waste of money. If the dropouts weren't receiving scholarships, they might well be on Centrelink, and time spent in a university environment is rarely a waste, even in today's circumstance. Ideally, at least, it is an environment that enables students to better learn not only about the world but also about themselves. And this is of considerable personal and social value whether or not one ends up with an advanced degree.

A more recent and blatant example of the student customer is the administrative concern with 'student satisfaction'. This has been manifest in a number of ways, the most destructive of which, in my experience, is the executive response to the supposed student desire to receive lectures online, although it has never been clear if requiring online lectures was initiated in respond to actual student demand or the result of misguided desire of an inept executive to appear 'with it' in the electronic age. It is, however, an arrangement that undermines some of the most important aspects of university experience. University lecturers are unique people well worth listening to, no matter how 'boring' they may first appear. They exemplify a kind of thinking that is rarely if ever present in other societal domains and so repeated exposure to it is a necessity. Listening to lectures on line, however, and there is substantial evidence that students don't avail themselves of this 'service' until shortly before the exam, is not the same as being there, seeing the lecturer at work and the reactions and interactions with the lecturer of other students. Required online lectures turns the academic into a 'service provider', reducing their stature vis a vis the student, thus undermining the student/teacher relationship (see Charles Dickens' Martin Chuzzlewit). When recorded, rather than communicating specific information and a way of thinking, their lectures are no longer a form of human interaction, called 'teaching'. They become a product that the student may choose to 'consume' or not. The lecture itself as 'product' is something that the University may appropriate as 'property of UWA', and put to uses the executive deems appropriate,

apparently without the consent of the lecturer. Academic is naturally a high stress environment and experiences of loss of control only add to that stress. The increasing desire of my colleagues at UWA for it all to just come to an end, is just one expression of their increasing negative states of mind. Students are also affected by such arrangements. For the most part they are adolescents, and substantial research in a variety of disciplines depicts the adolescent brain as one highly sensitive to environmental factors, particularly those of a social nature and portray adolescents as acutely aware of, and affected by, sociocultural cues, including those that come from explicit teaching. Their sociocultural sensitivity and a propensity for risk taking can, in the right environment, enhance learning that contributes to positive futures. So we need to ask what kind of environment is being created when it is one in which 'the customer is always right'. What message do we send when an administrator can insist that a lecturer change marks that students complained about although the lecturer had good reason to assign those specific marks? Does this creed lend itself to educating the kind of citizenry we need in Australia or the world more broadly?