

## **AMOSSHE Future of Student Life & Services Series**



### **Discussion paper: 'Are Students Customers?'**

#### ***Introduction***

1. As part of its policy work, AMOSSHE hosts a series of strategy and policy discussions, the '**Future of Student Life & Services.**' The second 'Future of Student Life & Services' event, a **policy breakfast** took place from 8-9.30 am on **Wednesday 17 April 2013** at Goldsmith's, University of London. The topic was 'Are Students Customers?' and Liz Bromley, Registrar & Secretary of Goldsmith's chaired the discussion. Participants included mission groups, sector regulators, commercial service providers, and heads of Student Services for higher education (HE) providers.
2. Participants debated the following questions put forward by AMOSSHE members:
  - a. Does the concept of the student as a customer work for everyone in HE? Are we forgetting that students are students?
  - b. Does the 'supplier/customer' relationship only apply to part(s) of the student experience? Where does this leave Student Services?
  - c. How do we measure excellent customer service in HE?
3. This paper outlines the themes explored during 'Are Students Customers?' It attempts to bring together the differing views expressed. The paper does not represent AMOSSHE's, or indeed any of the groups in attendance', policy stances or convictions. The paper is intended as a record of the issues considered and a starting point for further conversations.
4. The session concluded that students are far more than customers. To label them as such is to do a disservice to students, staff, and HE at large. Although students may be perceived as consumers of HE and the services that Student Services provide, they are also co-creators, thinkers, learners and citizens in HE communities. There are opportunities to maximise the quality of services delivered to students that ensure high quality provision but do not reduce HE to a marketplace; only in this way can we shape the future of Student Life & Services.

#### ***Discussion***

##### **Customer definitions**

5. Defying common rhetoric of 'the HE marketplace,' not one of the forum's participants characterised students as consumers. Students do not buy a product but partake in current and future experiences; they cannot normally return an education package that they simply do not like or change their mind about. More popular concepts are students as partners or co-creators. If a customer metaphor must be used, the idea of a two way relationship whereby the customer only gets back what they put in, like a gym membership, is the closest proxy.
6. The concept of students as co-creators for course content and delivery style is increasingly accepted at institutions, and good practice needs to evolve in this area. There is a danger that co-creation can undermine academic integrity; it must clearly be

in the spirit of academic endeavour but never compromise academic judgement. So, for example, students shaping how a course is delivered and models of assessment should be encouraged; comment on academic judgement or grades awarded to individuals is inappropriate.

### **Rhetoric**

7. High profile policy commentary about HE and fees has both mooted and muted the concept of students as customers. Public statements artificially relate fees to degrees in the language of according costs to a product, but students do not tend to articulate their own role as being that of consumer. However, comments being submitted to institutions about pure quality of service provision, for example accommodation, estate facilities and learning environments, or even levels of heating, reference higher expectations now there is a perceived personal spend attached to HE participation. This framework has been set by the policy environment, media and peers.
8. Employability rhetoric drives both policy discussion and institutional marketing to attract students and justify HE. HE is about more than employment outcomes; it includes knowledge and personal development. This is not recognised in the oversimplification of students as customers: not every user seeks the same HE product, despite buying into the same institution and fee model.
9. The media has documented that despite an intention that the increase of the fee threshold for HE providers would result in varying fee levels, this has not been realised. With no significant differentiation in fees, the concept of a market is virtually nullified. Institutions cannot be compared on a like-for-like provision basis if the majority of institutions charge the same fees for entirely different experiences.

### **Academic provision versus service provision**

10. Students' HE participation tends to be split into 25% academic interaction and 75% other course or university related activity. The divide between academic and service provision is, in some ways, arbitrary: students do not need to see or understand seams between departments, but rather need fluid 'seamless' provision.
11. Simply stating that an HE provider is committed to the student experience and partnership working is insufficient. A student centre does not become student focused because of its name; the culture, strategy and staffing of an institution need to move beyond treating students as consumers calling on a helpdesk to supporting individuals by providing relevant access to services.

### **What students want**

12. Research suggests that students consistently place a high value on welfare. For example, even those purchasing the highest cost accommodation suggest that the core improvements that could be made in their housing are: improving social environments; and providing pastoral care with that accommodation. Student Services play a critical role in personalising the student experience(s) and in ensuring that HE is not about delivering products or transactions which can be quantified in a pure sense.
13. The elements that students suggest would improve their HE experience are subjective, so difficult to meet through one service model. This makes the concept of student as customer even more problematic than identified in paragraphs 5-6; social and pastoral activities cannot be predicted per head, and service leaders cannot anticipate every potential support need that might arise.

### **(An) individual experience(s)**

14. Whilst students should not be artificially designated as customers, their need for personalised, high quality services has increased in the new HE landscape. A great focus is placed on meeting individual requests, but with Student Services often at capacity, this can be difficult to deliver to. Innovative solutions are needed to respond to individual situations and personalities, as well as out of hours provision.
15. The academic/service divide, although in some senses artificial and unnecessary, leads in some cases to unrealistic expectations being placed on personal tutors. Interactions between service divisions are often limited, which can cause frustration and service delivery that is process rather than person focused.
16. Expectations about service delivery timescales have changed dramatically in recent years; this was the most strongly acknowledged implication or notion of consumerism. This is likely a by-product both of: the metaphor of the HE marketplace; and changing technologies and expectations of basic service provision in all areas of life.

### **Disabilities**

17. Student Services in the UK are generally more advanced and better received by students than other areas of Europe. However, UK provision for disability support is not provided in as uniform a way as other countries. Particular concerns came to light around mental health care, and where that sits in a consumer model of HE.
18. HE providers tend to be excellent at accommodating extenuating circumstances, so long as they are indicated to the institution in advance. This is problematic for mental health support; students are often reticent to disclose depression for fear of what they perceive may be longer term reputational repercussions. This is especially apparent where there may be potential career consequences, such as fitness to practice issues for those studying to become qualified in medical, social work, or education professions. Even where students do feel comfortable in declaring such issues, they may do so to one member of staff only and this not be passed on.

### **Measuring the quality of service provision**

19. Complaints are an excellent source of feedback. It is critical that institutions act on complaints, not only to resolve the complainants' situation, but to ensure a quality of service across the piece. HE providers must not trivialise issues raised as mere individual concerns, but realise that every complaint is important and individual.
20. It can be difficult to utilise complaints as a quality measure for Student Services. Most students who engage with support services value the services, as despite any shortcomings in provision, the student will usually have benefitted.
21. Exit interviews are not conducted at all institutions if students withdraw. The evidence from these is important to understand the perceptions of support provision beyond the academic programme. There are limitations to using exit interviews as evidence as withdrawing students frequently state what they feel is an 'acceptable' or 'tick box' reason for withdrawing, rather than their actual concern(s).

### ***Final comments and observations***

22. The shift in discussions from students as learners to students as customers has resulted in a dramatic swing in the approaches that HE providers take. Institutions that previously

prioritised pure academic experience are seemingly enhancing their employability and support offers; institutions that previously focused on the wider student experience(s) are seeing budget cuts to services that may be deemed peripheral and outside of the academic experience.

23. There is a temptation for those in management positions in policy and HE to refer to their own student experiences of the past, and attempt to overlay a market model. This is inappropriate: leaders must engage current students in their thinking to develop services that support the present and future Student Services environments.
24. The session concluded that students are far more than customers. To label them as such is to do a disservice to students, staff, and HE at large. Although students may be perceived as consumers of HE and the services that Student Services provide, they are also co-creators, thinkers, learners and citizens in HE communities. There are opportunities to maximise the quality of services delivered to students that ensure high quality provision but do not reduce HE to a marketplace; only in this way can we shape the future of Student Life & Services.

**Editor's note: AMOSSHE**

1. AMOSSHE is the UK HE Student Services Organisation. AMOSSHE informs and supports the leaders of student services, and represents, advocates for, and promotes the student experience. 149 HE providers are members of AMOSSHE with some 500 named individuals associated with membership.
2. AMOSSHE is critical to the Student Services landscape and policy discussion because:
  - a. AMOSSHE members shape the student experience in HE;
  - b. AMOSSHE empowers Student Service leaders; and
  - c. AMOSSHE is a key voice of student experience leaders.
3. AMOSSHE advocates for Student Services leaders and ensures that their voice is heard on key policy and strategic development issues in HE. AMOSSHE provides timely policy briefing for members on all major developments relating to the student experience, and submits influential responses to national consultations. All consultation responses are available at [www.amoshe.org.uk](http://www.amoshe.org.uk) under 'Publications.'