


INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IDENTIFIED AS CUSTOMERS: THEIR EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS

Julianne East

La Trobe University

j.east@latrobe.edu.au

Currently in Australia, higher education is urged to operate more commercially, and in these times of change students are identified as customers. University marketing promises quality of service and there is vigorous competition for the enrolment of international students. In this paper it is argued that universities are now expected to change to meet students' needs and that international students in their identity as customers will have expectations and perceptions of quality service. While much is written about the needs of international students, little has been written about how international students perceive their experience and there is only limited research on international students as customers. The paper reviews customer concepts in universities and reports on the perceptions of a group of La Trobe University international students. The data were gathered from group discussion, questionnaire and interview. The students had much to say that was insightful about what they value about the Australian university



experience and what they expected of this experience. They wanted to be assured of the quality of the teaching, wanted the University to respond to their educational needs, wanted to improve their English language skills and wanted to experience Australian culture and mix with local students. Not surprisingly, there were gaps between the students' expectations and what they perceived to be the quality of the educational service that they actually received.



Keywords: *international students, customers, expectations, perceptions guidelines*


Introduction

Current Australian government policy on higher education seems to be largely founded on an acceptance of the role of market forces as germane to a quality university system. Given that public funding has not paralleled the increase in student access to university education, universities need to be alert to all forms of fund raising which include international student dollars. Higher Education Minister Kemp (1998) focuses on university education as a financial investment and identifies students as customers shopping for value for money. Competition for these student 'customers' is claimed to result in better support for students (DETYA 1999).

Students identified as customers

It could be argued that the university student is not the customer. Brennan & Bennington (1999) present a number of reasons why a student is not the same as a customer. Universities can fail students, so that students despite having paid money for service, will not receive the desired credential, and switching to another provider is not an easy option for a dissatisfied student. Furthermore, given that education providers do not operate in a totally free market place (Marginson 1997, p.161) customer concepts have limitations.








Those who work with students could be motivated to identify the student in the role of customer according to an expedient understanding of an audience perception. Ballard (1986) at the conference, *Education as an International Commodity*, argued that it would be in the universities' interests to alter their 'product' to suit the market in order to be successful. More recently, in a paper presented to the 1999 Australian International Education Conference (Qinglin 1999) it was claimed that 'full-fee paying international students expect to be treated like customers and to receive high quality service.' Qinglin later states that his study shows that 'education has been treated as an industry but students are yet to be treated as customers in some cases.' His examples of student comments reveal a dissatisfaction with the commercial greediness of some university actions.

Earlier Australian and U.S. research also indicates some dissatisfaction. Nesdale & Todd (1993) and Lapidus and Brown (1993) in the U. S. report disappointment with the lack of interaction with local students. Compared with Australian students Gatfield (1997) and Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock (1995) found that international students consistently rated the quality of teaching in Australian universities low. Patterson, Romm & Hill (1998), in marrying the needs of students with market concerns, note that students' satisfaction, or otherwise, will be broadcast to their home country.

The expectations that international students bring may not be based on a thorough knowledge of what is likely to happen at university, although students 'shop around' for a suitable university in Australia (Smart & Ang 1993; Symes & Hopkins 1994). Jayanti (1998, p.59) claims that service users often base their expectations on a 'categorization' approach, which is used as a simplification strategy. When education is categorised it may become more readily understandable but complexity is lost and the information base is incomplete. The very complexity of higher education is an obstacle for consumers trying to make reasoned judgments on which to base expectations, this in turn makes it difficult to analyse how satisfaction can be achieved.

The expectations students bring could be underpinned by such a positive attitude that experience will inevitably be perceived as confirmation. In his research on satisfaction








Oliver (1980, p.467) concluded, 'It may be argued that one's attitude somehow captures the totality of the expectation level and that it provides the baseline for other cognitions of an overall nature, particularly satisfaction.' From this it can be surmised that the prestige reputation of a top ranked university will ensure that its students remain satisfied with their experience. An example of this is research which showed that students were prepared to recommend their university even when they were doubtful about the quality of the teaching and facilities (Mullins et al. 1995, p.209). This 'halo effect' is but one customer attitude (Oliver 1997, p.110). The evidence (Oliver 1997; Jayanti 1998) indicates, however, that while pre-purchase evaluative impressions influence received service evaluations, poor service will be judged accordingly.

Evaluative impressions determined prior to consumption (Jayanti 1998) influence customer perceptions of the degree of expected satisfaction with the service provision. If evaluative impressions are disappointed the result is a low service evaluation. This has important implications for those who market to international students, because it indicates that what is promised must be delivered. LeBlanc and Nguyen (1999, p.195) concluded from their research that university marketing should not promise more than the university can deliver, and that 'management should ensure that students' expectations with regard to service are closely examined and analysed so as to set quality standards from their perspective'.

If customers have high expectations but these are not met, the negative reaction will be overriding (Jayanti 1998). On the other hand, if customers find that the service outstrips their expectations they will have a strong positive reaction. This relationship is explained by 'disconfirmation', in which a customer will be the **least** satisfied by low expectation and service worse than expected, while a customer is the most satisfied if high expectations are exceeded (Oliver 1997, p.104). The implications are that if international students are customers then universities should try to exceed students' expectations of quality service; mere confirmation of expectations is what is expected and will not carry a message of superior service.








While university marketers could feel disquieted by the prospect of trying to gain a competitive edge by ensuring that the university has positive promotion, yet delivers service better than promised, they can relax a little with the notion of the 'zone of tolerance' (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991, p.58). Customers will tolerate and accept a range of service and so, despite some performance shortfall, will see their needs as being (minimally) fulfilled (Oliver 1997, p.70). The customers' assumptions of a certain expectation being integral to the product/service direct the limits of their tolerance zone. Oliver (1997, p.73) uses the term 'passive expectations' to define these assumptions - considerations which are not actively and cognitively processed. In other words, when customers know what a product/service will or must do, they do not entertain the cognition that performance outcome will be otherwise (Berry & Parasuraman 1991, p.57). If students' passive expectations are not met, university service is taken to be far removed from the 'zone of tolerance'. A further concern for university marketers is that, if international students tolerate a low level of performance they will be unappreciative, up to a certain level, of high service performance. It is a demanding task to exceed the service expectations and uncover the 'passive expectations' of international students.

In marketing to international students it is also necessary to know what these students value. Kotler and Fox (1985, p.7) define marketing as being '...designed to bring about voluntarily exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives'. Value can be defined as the return for what the customer pays out, with the strongest determinant of value judgments being quality.

In the commercial world, advocates of improving services have absolute faith in providing superior customer service (Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman 1990, p.9). Universities promote themselves as having identities (Symes & Hopkins 1994) but for many the product is all too similar. Service, however, is claimed to differentiate.

Given these claims for the remarkable value of providing quality customer service in service industries, it would seem reasonable to expect there to be a measure from which to gauge service quality. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry, the major proponents of the value of service quality, explain that it is the perception of quality







which is important and define this as ‘the consumer’s judgment about an entity’s overall excellence or superiority. It differs from objective quality...it is a form of attitude, related but not equivalent to satisfaction, and results from a comparison of expectations with perceptions of performance’ (Parasuraman et al. 1988, p.15). Customers might perceive quality as a subjective response, yet Parasuraman et al. (1988) found in their research that there are general attitudes which support global evaluations of characteristics of service quality. Using these, they developed a questionnaire, SERVQUAL, devised to ‘objectively’ measure service quality (Parasuraman et al. 1988). The SERVQUAL questionnaire first asks what a service should do, then it asks if the particular service has met the expectation. Zeithaml et al. (1990, p.19) explain that ‘... service quality, as perceived by customers, can be defined as the extent of discrepancy between customers’ expectations or desires and their perceptions’.

For this research the SERVQUAL was adapted to be appropriate for the university context. The questionnaire was initially trialed and then supported with group discussions and interviews. Using a seven point Likert type scale with designations of ‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’, the SERVQUAL questionnaire paired 22 expectations of university service with 22 perceptions of service experienced at La Trobe University. The students were also asked to rank from 1 – 10 five types of service (labelled as ‘dimensions’). (Having ascertained which dimension is most valued by its customers, a service provider can focus on improving service on the items within that dimension which have revealed the largest discrepancy between expectations and perceptions.)

The setting for the current study was the Bundoora campus of La Trobe University. La Trobe has a number of campuses of which Bundoora is the largest. In 2000, there were 1,112 international students commencing studies onshore at La Trobe University. The unit at the Bundoora campus provided convenient access to international students. In October, 2000 the Language and Academic Skills (English as a Second Language) unit (commonly known as LAS(ESL)) had enrolled over 350 students, two thirds of whom were international students. Using only students who had enrolled in LAS(ESL) ensured that all the students were aware that support services were available at La



Trobe University. The sample in this research represented a nationality mix, gender mix, spread of faculty and length of stay typical of full-fee paying international students at La Trobe University, Bundoora.


During the period of August - October, 2000, 60 questionnaires were distributed to postgraduate and undergraduate students attending the LAS(ESL) unit. Of these 45 were filled in and one was incomplete. When the data from the 44 completed questionnaires were analysed for co-efficiency using Alpha Correlation in the SPSS program two items were removed in order to ensure correlation. A number of the students who did the questionnaire also participated in the group discussions.

Thirty nine students from 15 countries, enrolled in the subject, *English as a Second Language 1*, (delivered by LAS(ESL) lecturers) provided the group discussion sample. All undergraduates, the students were evenly distributed across faculties. They discussed problems facing international students studying at an Australian university and differences in some of the elements of academic culture.

Ten students, four postgraduate and six undergraduate, who had completed the questionnaire were also interviewed in depth, having been selected on the criteria that a range of study areas was represented and that there would be a gender balance

Findings

It was clear from the interviews that the students believed that the educational experience of itself was intrinsically valuable, but there was also an understanding that education is an investment and that there is value in having overseas qualifications. The students wanted to receive a quality education and value for money, and having paid money they were prepared to work hard. While some students were adamant that education should not be just a commercial transaction, some noted that having paid money they should get what they wanted. The student who was the least satisfied was keen that students should have customer rights. She had not chosen to come to La Trobe, had had low expectations and was disappointed with what she had experienced. This could be described as a phenomenon of 'disconfirmation' in which a customer is





the least satisfied if she has low expectations and service is worse than expected (Oliver 1997). Most of the students wanted an experience that was more than a transaction: they wanted to be responsible for their own learning, but they also wanted assurance, responsiveness and empathy from their teachers; they wanted to interact with local students and they want to be involved in the Australian university learning experience.


The students admitted that their pre-purchase knowledge of La Trobe University was limited. In guiding them to their decision the students talked about the importance of personal contact with La Trobe representatives and the immediate and appropriate responses to study enquiries. From the group discussions, which took place in the first week of a first year subject, it was clear that the students had anticipated that the teaching, learning and assessment roles in Australia would differ from those in other educational cultures.

There was disappointment with the lack of interaction with local students and students reported feeling excluded from class activities. A French student commented 'The contact is not friendly... not helpful...it's 'I'm on my own, you're on your own.' A Korean student perceived that local students 'feel like they could have a lower result if they have a group with [an] international student...they think we haven't got any brain...probably they feel we are not helpful at all' There were two examples of 'successful' interaction with local students. A student who had 'Aussie' friends had rejected his own culture declaring, 'I don't like Japanese culture.' Another student described how local students were more 'open-minded' and wanted to work with her when they realised she could 'easily solve the questions.'

Some students were prepared to blame their study difficulties on lack of English language. Their frustration was threefold: feeling that lack of English had impeded their social interaction and their academic progress, and hoping that studying in Australia would greatly improve their English language skills.

The rankings from the questionnaire indicated that priority should be given to improving the teaching of international students and to developing more concern in teaching staff





for the educational progress of students. This questionnaire finding correlated with the interviews during which a number of points were raised about how the quality of teaching could be improved. These included tutors being better organised, facilitation of more productive discussions and group projects, providing handouts and including all students in teaching and learning activities.

It could be argued that there was a mismatch of expectations here with Australian university lecturers trying to develop in students independent skills of analysis. The students, however, commonly asserted that they expected to take responsibility for their own learning and the need to adapt to the Australian context. Furthermore, they claimed that the notion of independent learning was a positive feature of Australian educational culture. Some of the students also enjoyed the informality of Australian lecturer student relationships, and appreciated those lecturers who showed an interest in their welfare.

The questionnaire results when analysed according to faculty and degree level showed no statistical significance, however, when analysed for language background the Myanmar and Vietnamese students, who interestingly were scholarship holders, tended to hold the most positive perceptions of the quality of educational service delivered at La Trobe.

Conclusion

The concerns that the students raised about the issue of teaching quality indicate that at La Trobe teaching practices should ensure that students from overseas are included in learning activities. Such practices can be appropriate for the Australian culture of learning and as Kalantzis & Cope (2000) conclude, teaching practices which include international students actually help all students. Academic discourse can cause difficulties for many students (Lea & Street 2000), not just for those using English as a second language. Lecturer awareness of such 'language' difficulties would be a step towards enhancing all student learning.

The issue of exclusion raises a number of questions about the responsibility of universities towards the changing identities of diverse student populations. Is it solely the (international) student's responsibility to be alert to cultural difference or should the university be aware of cultural difference? Could a university accommodate difference or even value it?

Higher Education Minister Kemp's (1998) identification of students as customers has implications for the treatment of students. A university as service provider needs to uncover students' expectations, then if necessary educate students to have appropriate expectations and then actually deliver even better service than was promised. Furthermore, if a university wants to be a market leader it would need to be perceived of as delivering the best service. This group of international students while ambivalent about the value of being identified as customers, perceived that La Trobe University had not always taken on the responsibility of meeting their expectations. I conclude, that meeting these expectations would mean changes in teaching practice and changes in attitudes towards international students.

References


Ballard, B. (1986) Academic Adjustment: The Other side of the export dollar *Education as an International Commodity*. Proceedings of the fourteenth annual conference of the Australian and New Zealand Comparative and International Education Society 1 85 - 87, Queensland University

Berry, L. & Parasuraman, A. (1991) *Marketing Services*, The Free Press, New York

Brennan, L. & Bennington, L. (1999) Concepts in conflict: students and customers. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 2, 19 - 40

Department of Employment, Education and Training and Youth Affairs (1999) Higher Education Report for the 1999 to 2001 Triennium

http://www.deetya.gov.au/highered/he_report/2000_2002/html/references.htm



Gatfield, T. J. (1997) *International Marketing of Australian Higher education to Asia: a comparative study of Australasian and Asian student perceptions of quality and its implications for the praxis of educators, policy makers and marketing practitioners*. PhD thesis, Griffith University.

Jayanti, R. (1998) Affective responses towards service providers: A categorization theory perspective *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior*, 11, 51 - 61

Kalantzis, M. & Cope, B. (2000) Towards an inclusive and international higher. education, in *University and Diversity*, King, R., Hill, D. & Hemmings, B. eds. Keon Publications, Wagga Wagga

Kemp, D. (1998) *Higher Education Report*
http://www.deetya.gov.au/highered/otherpub/he_report/22teaching&learning.htm

Kotler, P. & Fox, K. (1985) *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions* Prentice-Hall, New Jersey

Lapidus, R. S. & Brown, J. J. (1993) Assessing Satisfaction with the University Experience: an International Perspective. *Journal of Consumer Satisfaction, Dissatisfaction and Complaining Behavior* 6, 187 - 195

Lea, M. & Street, B. (2000) Student Writing and Staff Feedback, in Higher Education: An Academic Literacies Approach, in *Student Writing in Higher Education*, Lea, M. & Stierer, B. (eds.), Open University Press, Buckingham

LeBlanc, G. & Nguyen, N. (1999) Listening to the customer's voice: examining perceived service value among business college students. *The International Journal of Educational Management* 13: 4, 187 – 198

Marginson, S. (1997) *Markets in Education*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards



Mullins, G., Quintrell, N. & Hancock, L. (1995) The Experiences of International and Local Students at Three Australian Universities. *Higher Education Research and Development* 14: 2, 201 - 231

Nesdale, D. & Todd, P. (1993) Internationalising Australian universities: the intercultural context', *Journal of Tertiary Education Administration* 15: 2, 189 - 202

Oliver, R. (1980) A Cognitive Model of Antecedents and Consequences of Satisfaction Decisions. *Journal of Marketing Research* 17, 460 – 469

Oliver, R. (c1997) *Satisfaction: a behavioral perspective on the consumer*, McGraw Hill, New York

Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. & Berry, L. (1988) SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality. *Journal of Retailing* 64: 1

Patterson, P., Romm, T., & Hill, C. (1998) Consumer satisfaction as a process: A qualitative, retrospective longitudinal study of overseas students in Australia. *Journal of Professional Services Marketing* 16, 135 – 157

Qinglin, C. (1999) The Quality of Australian Education: What do international students' experiences tell? *Australian International Education Conference* IDP Education Australia

Smart, D. & Ang, G. (1993) *Overseas student recruitment : some recommendations on the preparation of print materials*, Asia Research Centre on Social, Political and Economic Change, Murdoch University

Symes, C. & Hopkins, S. (1994) Universities Inc: caveat emptor'. *The Australian Universities Review* 2, 47 – 51

Zeithaml, V., Parasuraman, A. & Berry, L. (1990) *Delivering Quality Service: balancing customer perceptions and expectations*, The Free Press, New York
