

HUOM! TÄMÄ ON RINNAKKAISTALLENNE.

Käytä viittauksessa alkuperäistä lähdettä:

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Are students customers in Finnish higher education?

Abstract

This study examines Finnish higher education students' perceptions of whether students are customers based on qualitative interview data. The paper contributes to the discussion on students as customers by giving attention to students' own voices from a country where tuition fees are not generally collected. The data are presented and analyzed using a matrix of preference and perception of seeing students as customers. While the data contained student voices insisting that it is not appropriate to talk about customers because money is not involved, different orientations showing either a preference or perception of students as customers were also described. It is concluded that seeing a student as a customer might be a solution that could be attached to various current higher education challenges which are not all related to tuition fees.

Introduction

One of the most debated metaphors in higher education is that of student as customer. The metaphor is influential because it allows all higher education stakeholders to use common language and shared reference points when participating in the discussion. The researchers approach the theme through specific vocabulary relating to neo-liberalism, economic rationalism, new public management, consumerism, commodification of education, or total quality management. The customer metaphor, for the very reason that it is easily comprehensible, can be seen as an invitation for all stakeholder groups to join in the discussion on what is going on in higher education and what will make the higher education institutions more versatile, effective, and flexible. The customer metaphor is based on the idea that the choices of a student-customer will enable market function. The metaphor emphasizes that individuals know best what is good for them and are able to make the best possible decisions based on the acquired knowledge. Students' decision-making processes

are facilitated by modern higher education actions and tools, such as modularized curriculum structures, shared measures of credit accumulation and transfer, systems for the accreditation of prior learning, definition of learning outcomes and assessment criteria, open access to accreditation and auditing data, and the publication of national student surveys. The basic premise in the customer metaphor is that in order to succeed and survive, a modern higher education institution needs to make constant efforts to ensure the quality of its offerings and keep its student-customer loyal (Baldwin & James, 2000; Gross & Hogler, 2005; Kaye, Bickel & Birtwistle, 2006; Miller, 2010; Modell, 2005; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Patomäki, 2005; Rochford, 2008).

The power of the customer metaphor is strengthened if it is used simultaneously by different stakeholders. Student recruitment campaigns may play a very important role in the students' construction of their university relationship (Svensson & Wood, 2007). In their efforts to convince prospective students to "choose us", higher education institutions attempt to offer differentiated value propositions to appeal to the anticipated needs of targeted applicants and distinguish universities from their competitors. These messages set expectations for students even before they enter universities. Inside the university, the quality assurance measures that are taken to guarantee student satisfaction may further strengthen students' potential customer identification (Little & Williams, 2010). The quality discourse often frames teaching as a service provision. In this discourse, faculty members are often seen in the roles of service providers whose job is to satisfy the needs of their student-consumers. The debate on customer metaphor reflects these newly constructed roles. Moreover, the metaphor echoes potential power shifts in academia, as the students' bargaining power is seen to increase at the expense of faculty. The bargaining power of university leadership and administration is also seen to grow, as the student evaluations and opinions might be used as powerful tools for decision-making, sometimes against the wishes of faculty (Jones, 2010; Newson 2004; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010).

The communications and actions of the university strengthen the underlying identity of a consumer-student, but the messages of national and supranational bodies echoing the student's critical role in the higher education market also have wide-reaching effects on student potential identification (Newson 2004; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010). Moreover, if students are exposed to constant commercial messages in their everyday life, then it is not surprising that students start to evaluate the courses and professors in a similar manner as they rate other services used. For example, students use online professor rating platforms with an intention of informing other student-consumers of their experiences.

One of the negative effects related to students' identification as consumers is what is known as academic entitlement or a sense of entitlement. Academic entitlement has been given various definitions, but generally the term is referred to as a student's "tendency to possess and expectation of academic success without taking personal responsibility for that success" (Chowning & Campbell, 2009, p. 982) or "belief of being entitled to or deserving of certain goods and services to be provided by institutions and professors that is outside of the students' actual performance or responsibilities inside the classroom" (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010, p. 344). Academic entitlement is seen in student actions such as bargaining for grades, demanding individual arrangements, asking for personalized services and schedules, and even disrupting classes (Achacoso, 2002; Greenberger et al., 2008).

A wide body of the academic literature to date around customer metaphor has been conceptual in nature. Its proponents welcome the metaphor because they see that it places teaching and students in the central position, activates and empowers the students as well as improves the quality of teaching (Chung & McLarney, 2000; McCollough & Gremler, 1999). The critics of the metaphor, however, underscore the metaphor's shortcomings by arguing that it overtly emphasizes the instrumental values of education and reduces the student-university relationship as a contractual relationship. Moreover, the customer metaphor is said to passivize education, emphasize the

personal risk of the student, standardize and routinize teaching, and even lead to the exclusion of students from the university community (Acevedo, 2011; Franz, 1998, Gross & Hogler; 2005; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009; Newson, 2004; Ramachandran, 2010; Scrabec, 2000; Sharrock, 2000; Svensson & Wood, 2007). These arguments against the use of the customer metaphor in higher education, on the other hand, have been criticized by others who point out that the role of the customer might be too narrowly interpreted in these critiques. It has been suggested that an idea of a customer as a value co-creator might be a particularly suitable framework to discuss student-customers (Gruber, Reppel & Voss, 2011; Eagle & Brennan, 2007; McCulloch, 2009; Ng & Forber, 2009; Obermiller & Atwood, 2011; Taylor & Judson, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011).

In addition to the conceptual debate, the customer metaphor has attracted the interest of empirical researchers. These studies have shown that the perception or preference of seeing students as consumers varies between disciplines (Lomas, 2007; Obermiller, Fleenor & Raven, 2005), types of higher education institutions (Cardoso, Carvalho & Santiago, 2011; Lomas, 2007), different ranks of university leadership (Webster & Hammond, 2011), faculty and administration (Lomas, 2007; Pitman, 2000), students' ages (Finney & Finney, 2010), and countries (Hutton et al., 2011; Obermiller, Fleenor & Raven, 2005). Some of the empirical studies strongly accentuate the arguments expressed in the critical literature and highlight the unwanted consequences of students' customer identification because it threatens student engagement (Little & Williams, 2010), student satisfaction and achievement (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2009), and increases the sense of academic entitlement (Finney & Finney, 2010; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010). On the other hand, there are plenty of publications, mostly in the quality framework, in which the student identification as a customer is taken for granted (e.g., Arambewela & Hall, 2006; Barnes, 2007; Glaser-Segura et al., 2007; Zafiropoulos & Vrana, 2008).

There is a considerable lack of empirical studies, however, that have been carried out explicitly in the context of no direct monetary exchange from student to university. Although the Finnish ministry of education has granted temporary license to voluntary higher education institutions to experiment with charging non-EU students tuition in English-language master programs, the number of the actual tuition paying students is minimal (Pyykkö et al., 2012). Moreover, all undergraduate students study for free both at Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. Thus, this paper contributes to the topical discussion on the effects of customer metaphor in higher education by asking if Finnish higher education students regard themselves as customers.

Data

The data for the analysis was collected by interviewing 15 students at five different Finnish higher education institutions in the spring of 2012 and in groups of three students. Two of the higher education institutions were traditional universities and three universities of applied sciences. The institutions were situated in southern Finland. Interviews were conducted both in Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking higher education institutions. The interviewees were recruiting with the help of the student union at each institution. Nine of the interviewed were male and five were female, while one interviewed student did not want to be categorized in either gender. Fourteen students were studying at the bachelor level and one at the master level. Six of the interviewed students studied business/economics, three engineering, and three studied social work and health. The major subjects of the remaining interviewed students were law, forestry, and theology.

The interview guide covered wide themes of 1) identification/non-identification as a customer, 2) discourse of customer metaphor at the higher education institution, 3) student's role in the higher education institution quality work, and 4) promises given by the university. The interviewees were encouraged to comment each other's answers and move on to discussion leads

introduced by other group members. The interview questions were phrased in Finnish, but the students whose native language was Swedish were encouraged to reply in Swedish if they desired. The interview tapes were transcribed verbatim and coded. The analytic framework used for coding was constructed with an x-axis representing perception of seeing students as customers and a y-axis representing the preference of students as customers (Figure 1).

Figure 1 here

The unit of coding for the analysis was part of a sentence, a sentence, or a larger construct of multiple sentences exemplifying an orientation that reflected students as customers. The objective of the analysis was not to categorize individual students to different groups, but rather to classify the different constructions with which students made sense of their orientations towards seeing students as customers. For that reason, the same student might have voiced one or more orientations of the theme. In order to offer a more vivid description of students' voices, the description will include several quotations from the interviews translated into English. The quotes are indicated with reference to the student's discipline, university sector, gender, and a random interviewee number between 1 and 15. Student orientations are discussed by first introducing the two categories that indicate dislike for seeing students as customer (Categories 1 and 2 in Figure 1) and after that describing the two categories that indicate a preference for students' customer identification (Categories 3 and 4 in Figure 1.)

Students are students, not customers

The orientations of students who do not want students to be customers or perceive them as such (Category 1 in Figure 1) signaled a dislike for the term "customer" in connection with higher education. Not surprisingly, some students expressed similar arguments as the National Union of

the University Students (SYL, 2010) when explaining distaste of the term “customer”. They argued that Finnish students cannot be customers because they do not pay tuition. Moreover, because they are not willing to pay tuition in the future, they want to avoid the term altogether and suggested that the real customers of Finnish higher education institutions are the government and municipalities who fund higher education and purchase education degrees from the universities to the benefit of the society and Finnish taxpayers.

A second type of argument opposing the idea of students as customers highlighted the different missions of higher education institutions and businesses. The students who presented this argument wanted to emphasize the core task of education opposed to the profit orientation of businesses. The profit maximization, or “the capitalist logic”, as expressed by some students, would be an improper way to discuss the inputs and expectation outputs of the higher education, especially from the point of view of faculty.

There are educational, life preparatory elements involved [in higher education]. It [higher education] is much more than a service provided. It involves adaptation of a new and more critical way of thinking and taking a more active role in society. (Student 1, business, university of applied sciences, male.)

Companies and customers have different interests to some extent. It is the aim of a company to earn much money, whereas a customer wants to get a service with as little money as possible... If you would think like that, it would be profitable for a lecturer to expect minimum efforts from the students and give grade four to all students. In that way the teacher would minimize her/his own effort and would achieve good results. That would be absurd. (Student 2, business, university of applied sciences, male.)

A third way of indicating dislike for the term was that students, instead of being treated as customers “only”, should be seen as a part of the academic community and be involved in conversations on teaching-related issues with other community members. This would be a preferred way of influencing the quality of teaching and learning. The students who exemplified this

orientation preferred to use the term “collaborative” or “junior partner” when referring to this kind of a role in the academic community (Ferris, 2002; Clayson & Haley, 2005).

The higher education institution and the student should not always be seen to represent opposite sides. For that reason junior partner is a better term, we are kind of altogether involved in making this as relevant as possible and an open conversation is the starting point for that. (Student 14, business, university, male.)

However, quite a different point of view was expressed by students who argued that the term “customer” is inappropriate in higher education because business customers should be critical towards the service provider. Unsatisfied customers will look for another provider if their needs are not met. The students explained that at higher education institutions, students do not have the power to freely select their courses and study methods. Compulsory courses and study methods chosen by the faculty are to be followed, although this is not always to the liking of an individual student. In other words, the students argued that they are not and should not be “kings” in higher education.

Unfortunately students are customers

The orientation that showed the perception of students as customers but had a distaste for it (Category 2 in Figure 1) reflected disapproving observations of either university leadership treating students as customers or students behaving like customers. According to the students, the leadership at some higher education institutions directly or indirectly refers to students as customers.

Are students customers? (Interviewer)

This should not be the case, but unfortunately, at least in my own experience, this is how the leadership of the school sees students in all seminars. This is also apparent when one speaks with the leadership. Students are money making machines, a source of money for the school and even though the strategy includes fine goals such as providing the best instruction that is secondary for the leadership. (Student 4, engineering, university of applied sciences, male.)

On the other hand, it was observed by many of the interviewed students that some students behave like customers. The interpretations of this behavior were twofold. The first interpretation was that students' customer behavior was related to their passive involvement in the community. This behavior was described as students attending classes without taking any interest in what is going on at the university. Exemplifying the logic of rationality (Arum & Roksa, 2012, p. 17), these students were seen to be consuming higher education service with a minimum effort and doing it as comfortable as possible, taking what they need and leaving the institution with a degree. As the interviewed students remarked, the passive students do not want to complete course evaluations because the possible improvements would not help them, but rather would only help the group of students who took the class the next semester.

Do students behave like customers? (Interviewer)

Some, for sure, in the way that they come to school and are utterly uninterested who is talking upfront and what is being talked about as long as it in some way relates to course contents. After the class, they leave and do not want to influence the quality of the instruction or anything at that higher education institution. (Student 4, engineering, university of applied sciences, male.)

The other type of behavior that was described in connection with students' customer-like behavior was quite different and reflected the patterns discussed in the literature of academic entitlement (Achacoso, 2002; Greenberger et al., 2008; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010). These students were described in a negative light as expecting and demanding special treatment and asking faculty to bend rules for them.

It is assumed that everyone is here for me and I kind of tell in which way I will take care of my professional growth. The others then somehow nurture my development like this. And the attitude will be very negative if lecturers say that they can't make individual schedules or individual arrangements. It is somehow taken to a very personal level. As if the student's path to academician is sort of not supported enough. (Student 11, theology, university, female.)

When specifically asked about academic entitlement behavior, the interviewed students gave accounts of students negotiating grades and passing the course, demanding extra tests, and asking for individual schedules because of work arrangements or extra holidays in the middle of the term.

Empowered customers

In this group (Category 3 in Figure 1), the comments suggested that if students were identified as customers, then they would have more internal power at higher education institutions. This would increase their bargaining power over faculty (Newson, 2004; McCulloch, 2009) and would be seen by some students as a welcome change to the existing practices of their universities. The treatment of students as customers might result in a better position in the higher education community, which at research universities was mostly described as research centric and not taking student opinion into account. The students wanted to have their opinion heard when the teaching methods were concerned and, if necessary, “vote with their feet” when willing to protest against some methods they do not like, such as obligatory attendance in classes.

[If students were customers] the school would then dance to our tune (laughing). (Student 5, engineering, university of applied sciences, male.)

In a grocery store, you have to be as nice as possible towards the customer, but it is not like that here. (Student 13, business, university, female.)

By referring to their own experiences of working in companies and buying services for their own consumption, the students remarked that if a customer complained in a private company, it would result in a change of practices. This, however, does not occur at higher education institutions. Some students expressed skepticism of whether their course evaluations were ever read by anyone. One group of interviewed students was very unsatisfied with their institution’s practice of using student

feedback. According to the students, the feedback was only seen by the professors and lecturers, while the department heads and deans could only see the statistics and not students' original comments. The students thought it was incomprehensible that their higher education institution was not utilizing a chain of management command in a similar manner as companies where, in the eyes of the students, the customer feedback and complaints are always discussed between the worker and his/her supervisor.

Consuming higher education services

In this sample, there were also student voices echoing both preference and perception of students as higher education customers (Category 1 in Figure 1). For some students, the acceptance of the customer metaphor was unconditional.

Are students customers? (Interviewer)

Yes, yes, I would say they are. The school aims at providing us just the service we request, tailored to our needs. (Student 7, social work and health, university of applied sciences, female).

Well, yes, students are customers, considering for example how many opportunities there are to select the school. One could see that a school is a service provider and that a particular school offers this opportunity to study and another school offers something else. (Student 8, engineering, university of applied science, male.)

Only one of the interviewed students had heard faculty addressing students as customers. The student had understood that with that term, the professor wanted to emphasize the responsibility that faculty has for students. Used in this way, the student welcomed the metaphor to higher education. A similar kind of positive interpretation of the term was brought up by another student when the term "customer" was being compared to the term "apprentice".

If you understand the concept of customer in the positive way, it means that the faculty-student relationship is nurtured. Customer is a very positive term compared to the idea of student as an

apprentice. Apprentices can be mistreated. It [the term “customer”] may inspire the professor, the docent or the researcher to invest in teaching. (Student 10, law, university, gender n/a.)

In addition, it was pointed out by one student that while the customer metaphor is not appropriate to construct a student-university relationship in learning and teaching, there are other functions of the higher education institution, such as student affairs, where its use is to be not only expected, but already present.

Discussion

Metaphors are powerful because they direct our conscious and unconscious behavior by guiding how we think, what we observe, and what kind of interpretations and decisions we make (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 3; Morgan, 1997, p. 347-348). The use of the customer metaphor can be seen as an invitation to discuss basic higher education values and power shifts in academia. This study has indicated that the metaphor of student as customer is not limited to for-profit education or to higher education systems with tuition fees. In different orientations highlighted by this qualitative study, the idea of student as customer is affecting Finnish higher education as well. The metaphor allowed the students to engage in discussion on the current situation at Finnish universities without the need to refer to vocabulary suggested by the researchers. Both the students' critical and positive comments referred to the tendency of the metaphor to highlight the mechanism of freedom to make choices, cause power shifts in academia, and emphasize the logic of rationality.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the multiple ways of meaning construction of the customer metaphor. While one must be very careful to make any comparisons in a small sample or suggest that the sample would represent the opinions of all Finnish students, it is to be noted that the study did not yield any indication that the orientations to customer metaphor are

constructed with a different logic by students of universities of applied sciences and research universities. Very critical and very positive comments with rich argumentation towards the metaphor were expressed by students of both sectors.

If the garbage-can theory of organizational decision making (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972), was used to highlight the findings of this study, it might suggest that seeing students as customers is a solution which could attach itself to multiple type of problems, choice-opportunities or participants in a modern higher education organization. For students it might be a way of having their opinions better heard, even a disguised form of student activism to remedy the wrongdoings of distant leadership and of professors whose course requirements are not seen to be satisfactory. Some students might manifest the metaphor by applying a rational mindset in their studies and trying to maximize the return for investment. For other students, the metaphor might provide a motive to demand extra services and flexibility from their higher education institutions. For some faculty, the customer metaphor might be an encouragement to highlight their responsibility for students. For leadership, the metaphor might provide a boost for reexamining the need for student services and frame their own activities to illustrate their efficiency in modern management. Therefore, as this study suggests, tuition payment might be only one of the possible factors that the students' customer identification is attached to in a modern higher education organisation.

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