

Practical Customer Service Skills in Higher Education

A Handbook to help with the basics

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Background

In 2007-8 I conducted a number of discussions with staff developers, training providers, service managers and staff about customer service provision in HE. The overwhelmingly common theme was one of frustration derived from attempts to demonstrate real impact from this training and real change in the people being trained. Convinced that there must be something more substantial on which to hang such training and more methodical ways to bring about improvements, I bid for, and won, a LFHE Small Development Project grant to investigate the principles and practicalities of customer service in HE. This handbook is the final product of the project summarised in this section. I hope you find it useful and even of interest!

Project Brief – a short summary

Increasing student “savvy”, relentless financial pressure and increased public and media awareness has driven Universities to address the issue of customer service head-on.

There has been some debate about customer service skills in HE, largely from the perspective of the threat to collegiality, “academe” and “scholarly communities” that an increasingly “commercial culture and consumer mentality” brings to universities. However it is clear that universities should aim to encompass all aspects of their responsibilities to staff, students, parents and external communities within which they exist.

Colleagues from around the UK approach customer service skills delivery in different ways with varying degrees of success and at vastly different levels of cost and measurable effectiveness and there is no doubt that an injection of concerted effort is now required to determine:

- what are the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding that require attention;

- what are the most effective forms of intervention to deliver this;
- what is the relevance of the different customer service quality standards and how are they related to each other and to other quality initiatives and standards.

Project objectives

This project aims to address the above issues and concerns in the following manner:

- Delivering a comprehensive discussion of extant issues and solutions along with detailed case-study examples of successful current provision
- Communicating this information as rapidly and widely as possible within the community to encourage practical application of the recommendations and support further debate of key principles as necessary.

This Handbook

This handbook is divided into six sections, this being the first.

The second section gives examples of large and small customer service initiatives in four Universities of very different shapes and sizes.

The third section describes in detail the principles and theory of customer service with empirical research and well tried models that have been applied in the public and private sector throughout the world.

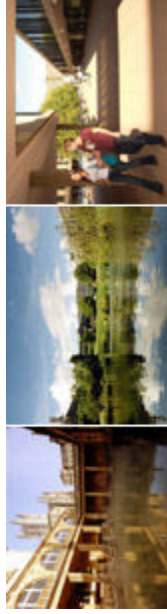
Section four provides users of this manual with a short exercise for anyone interested in taking things further in their own Institute and a guide to the presentation material produced by this project and available from the LFHE website.

The last section points readers to more information and acknowledges contributors to this project.

The Service Culture Initiative

About Bath

Bath has around 13,000 students, just over 9,000 of these being undergraduate graduates. There are just over 2,700 staff of which over half are academic staff. Bath is a campus University, occupying a site at Claverton Down since 1964, a few miles outside the city of Bath. Recent years have seen considerable investment in “modernisation” programmes for the campus grounds, buildings and student residences.



Overview

Simon Inger, Head of Staff Development, tells of the perceived need for cultural change across the University, prompted by concerns about the student experience in some academic departments, but quickly expanded to include the range of service provider relationships internally and externally.

There are layers of issues that impact on the University culture, resulting in behaviours and attitudes that hinder good working relationships and good customer service. Simon employs the “Schein model”¹ of culture to help describe these layered interrelationships (very roughly: the organisational environment; public, projected image; underlying reality).

These relate well to the “service dimensions” from the world of customer service where the projected image (i.e. establishing expectation) can have a massive impact on the experience of customers (i.e. visitors, students and staff colleagues) when reality does not match the expectation.

¹ See note at end of text.

In summary, Simon’s initiative is aiming to get staff to better understand the organisation of which they are a part; to think about the impact of their attitude and behaviour on others; and to improve relationships with their colleagues and their customers.

Approach

Simon’s starting point has been to make use of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education’s *Change Academy* programme. Members of Computing Services, Physics, Biology & Biochemistry, Catering Services and the Students’ Union Executive have been supported to attend the Change Academy with the aim of addressing issues around customer service whilst benefiting from cross-departmental working.

Focus groups (of staff) provided initial data on where issues lie, with the Staff Development Unit providing facilitation to plan and embed changes. Initially these are focused on one professional service department and one academic department. (These pilot sites were chosen not because they are poor performers but rather that they are large, complex and typical, and have supportive management).

The approach is one of escalating interventions, from small “safe” focus groups, hopefully through to large group interventions including staff and customers/stakeholders.

Commentary

There are many possible entry points for cultural change of this nature; the middle ground, in this instance was seen as the least confrontational and most readily addressed. A problem is the lack of a perceived crisis, compared to many other changes going on, so little momentum from the departments to get involved.

Staff opinions and attitudes are significant. They are diverse and range from



Case Study 1 — University of Bath

the disengaged academic “why should we care” (given the strength of the University) to the reluctant service provider “what happened to lunch-times?”. One comment was that staff just needed to “be nice to people on Open Days”.

The picture is not uniformly negative; many examples of good service behaviours and systems were identified, and the need to share and consolidate these is paramount.

The overall context being a poor identification with the purpose of the University and their role in this. The natural extension to querying this position is “what is the University here for anyway” and ultimately “why have Universities?”.

Any examination and discussion of service provision, students, customers and Higher Education tends towards this direction and every HEI needs to ensure this message is resolved and communicated effectively for all its staff.



The first level is where the organizational attributes that can be seen, felt and heard by the uninitiated observer and includes behaviour, colours, furnishings, recognition.

The next level is about the professed culture of the organization members - slogans, flyers, lists, statements.

The last and deepest level is where lays the organisation's tacit assumptions - these elements are unseen, subconscious, the 'unspoken rules' of the organisation. Schein's model gives an opportunity to measure these levels and to compare the links between them. If the links are strong then there is a strong organizational culture. (Wapedia -2009).



Note about the Schein Model

The Schein model defines organizational culture as the deepest and strongest aspect of organization life. The culture has three cognitive levels which one can measure.

The Customer Service Academy (CSA)

About Imperial

Number of students: just over 13,000 (of which circa 8,500 are undergraduates). Number of staff: 6,285 (of which nearly 2,000 are classified as research staff). Founded in 1907 Imperial is spread over several locations in SW London, the focus being at the urban South Kensington campus.

Overview

Imperial's CSA is the product of a joint initiative between Steve Rathborn (Manager, Learning & Development Centre) and Paddy Jackman (Director, Commercial Services). The initiative arose from a Senior Team review of customer service in late 2007/early 2008. Imperial did not perform very well in the NSS coming 67th despite being 5th in international HEI league tables.

The CSA is loosely based on a successful cultural change model deployed by Yale and is intended to address embedded attitudes and behaviours that work against the University's central mission and objectives. These are epitomised by careless treatment of prospective students, a lack of regard for the needs of colleagues and students and poor staff engagement with important Institutional activities.

Approach

The CSA features groups of four staff (a diagonal cross-section of levels/grades but aimed at senior team members, team leaders and junior middle managers) each from: Registry; ICT; Business School; Commercial Services; and Finance.

It is based around a short curricular programme including a launch breakfast with the Registrar's attendance, followed by a

customer service (group work) tour of London to find examples of good and bad customer service. This is followed by seven, day-long directed learning sessions, highly interactive, designed and led by the CSA management team and consultants.

Delegates conduct one internal project and one cross-departmental project: the project ideas coming from delegate line managers and from the CSA management team.

Group-based activities involve: team building sessions; consultant-led sessions giving a perspective of customer service issues within and beyond the sector; interactive sessions (including actor-led role-play); and team leading and leadership development.

What has happened so far (November 2009)

20 delegates have been recruited; one complete programme of sessions completed; internal and external projects launched and most completed, with reporting over the next few weeks. Following a review, a further Academy is planned for 2010. This will incorporate recommended improvements.

Views from the Management

1. Steve Rathborn (Joint CSA Lead)

The CSA approach to a large and difficult area of work has worked well, given that this was a pilot and there have been real challenges not least of which being the changes in the HE (and wider) economic climate. This led to increased pressure on performance and it became apparent that discretionary time for projects was threatened. To this end three planned sessions were allocated a project time to secure their success. The projects need to be shorter and more tightly run to improve the experience. The mix of staff could also be improved.



2. Paddy Jackman (Joint CSA Lead)

This project's primary purpose is to improve staff's awareness of their environment. This impacts on our ability to do our job effectively and with regard to the environment in which we work.

This is also to do with, at the minimum, “acting the part” since our jobs demand us to be conscious of the quality of service we should be delivering at all times.

We based our CSA on the Yale model which proved the need for an ongoing programme rather than a one-off intervention. From the start it is important to get high level support – you need the message to come from “on-high” – hence our involvement of the Rector.

We employed specialist consultants at the start to help with engagement of senior management, to give us an outsider's view and to enhance our capacity to deliver. I am not sure if this is necessary but worked in this instance.

The choice of delegates is an issue – their selection within departments will impact on the effectiveness of the groups and the projects. The whole programme needs full commitment, this needs planning ahead for the staff concerned and good engagement of management in the relevant departments.

The projects have been a worthwhile experience – ideas for what to look for and how this might happen are given but otherwise delegates are left to be creative and execute their work how they want to.

Although the initiative has been successful in meeting its broad aims there may be a credibility issue for future iterations in its current form. At the very least we have sown some seeds, opened doors and got people thinking and working together.

Views from Participants

Participant 1

The programme started very abruptly and it would have been good to have some more information about overall content, style of delivery, people involved and intentions along with a better idea of measures of success. Without this the coherence of the programme (and CSA identity) was somewhat lost.

However, although “earth-shattering changes” were not expected, the outcomes are significant for both our department and the University (with regards the cross-department project).

In terms of detail, it was interesting to see customer service models. It was also valuable to be reminded that some people rely on protocols and procedures rather than judgement calls and, by extension, not everyone are equipped to make judgement calls.

Participant 2

One of the most important parts of this programme was meeting people from other service areas, getting to know them, working with them in groups and finding out what is like to work in their jobs. More time should be dedicated to bonding with staff from other areas, especially before we start working in groups and doing projects.

Having a different view of what customers want and how this is met is essential and this element could be enhanced in this programme perhaps to include visits to external organisations like Virgin.

The project work was valuable but a tighter timescale better focus would help. Trying to do an internal and external project was too much to do really well as the cross-group work proved hard. You need full participation for project teams to work and staff from different areas have different working patterns and pulls on their time.

A Customer Service model for Academic Services

About Exeter

Exeter has 15,000 students and just over 2,500 staff (roughly half of which are academic). The Institution plans to dramatically improve its international rankings whilst retaining its position as one of the most attractive destination Universities (with a consistently high NSS score).

Overview

Exeter's Corporate Services Division has long been a champion of customer service, achieving numerous awards (Welcome Host, Hospitality First, and most recently Customer First). Whilst no proof of consistent excellence huge changes have been wrought through these standards for student residences, catering and the campus buildings and facilities.

The challenge now is to bring about similar transformations to professional services such as Admissions, Registration, Library and IT. As in other Institutions this is as much about cultural change as about ensuring appropriate process and policy are in place.

Small steps

Exeter's Professional Services has held Investors In People since 2008 which sets a baseline for some areas of staff engagement, particularly around learning and development and internal communications. A programme of restructuring within Professional Services, particularly Academic Services (Library, IT, Admissions,



Marketing, MIS, Projects, Registry and related) means that staff face extra challenges in providing consistent and customer focused services to all their customers, including each other. Although the policies and processes encouraged by IiP help there are bigger issues in terms of understanding that everyone is a customer at some point and that some customers are particularly important—namely our students.

The current initiative in Academic Services aims to:

- Engender a culture of customer awareness, focus and care
- Ensure the right policies and procedures are in place that enable best practice and do not work against the provision of quality services
- Raise awareness of staff behaviours and attitudes
- Provide suitable learning and development to help address behaviours and attitudes that challenge the culture.

The project

Driven mainly by staff in middle and senior management roles in Academic Services, the customer services initiative will be working towards implementation of the Customer First framework across the service, starting with a full service audit of all points of service and establishing a “Service Quality Improvement Team”.

The initiative will employ the principle of “Service Dimensions” (see main project research) to structure its investigations into all its services, beginning with “mystery shopper” exercises for all managers concerned to increase awareness of different levels of service quality and what that means to their own areas of work.

Reviewing the Customer Service Culture at Middlesex—Putting our Customers First

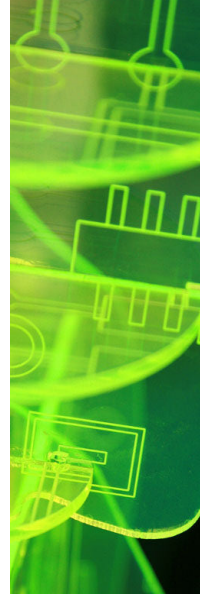
About Middlesex

Middlesex University dates from 1878, becoming chartered in 1992. Middlesex operates from its flagship campus at Hendon London with 3 other campuses nearby although it is planning to coalesce these in the near future. The University also has strong international ambitions with campus developments in Dubai and Mauritius in addition to overseas partnerships. There are 2,000 UK staff. In total the Institution has over 34,000 students studying on Middlesex courses world wide. The Internationalisation agenda has played a significant role in driving forward improvements in student experience and customer service.

Overview

Middlesex’s organisational initiative, launched fully in 2009 had its roots much earlier in a DVC-led conference on “The Student Experience” which resulted in plans for big changes to re-focus the Institution on its core functions.

For Natasha Bennett, Head of Staff Development, the need for change was further highlighted when she was asked to provide courses on “how to deal with difficult students” and realised that the problem lay not with “difficult students” but with an endemic lack of a service culture. This manifested not just in how students were treated but also in interactions between staff and other stakeholders internally and externally.



The lack of consistency in service provision was fundamental to the problem, as Natasha put it: “ask four different staff a simple service question and you may get four different answers”.

The initiative for change is being championed jointly between Natasha and Lucy Everest, the Director of Marketing having achieved strong support at University Executive level. The Chief Marketing Officer is the Executive sponsor.



First steps

Early plans for the DVC’s change agenda resulted in Task Groups being formed to explore a number of key issues ranging from academic support, assessment and feedback, student engagement and communication, and student services. In a separate Task Group, led by the DVC for Corporate Services explored the University’s core behavioural values and their application for the treatment of customers and colleagues, in particular aiming to promote:

- Strong personal commitment to colleagues and students
- Honesty and integrity
- Mutual support
- Taking personal responsibility.

The group explored the fundamental question “What do we mean by Customer Service?” and attempted identify the culture they believed they wanted to develop across Middlesex. Core would be a sense of pride and recognition that “we take ownership of all we say and do in the University’s name”; with the following identified behaviours and expectations explored and defined:

- Ownership
- Empathy
- Knowledgeable

- First Impressions

With so much at stake Natasha and Lucy researched and developed a full project brief to take this work forward.

The project scope is influenced by external factors affecting the HE sector:

- rise of the student as purchaser/consumer and associated demands for ‘value for money’ from tuition fees
- increasing expectations on the “Student Experience” – indicated for Middlesex through the need to improve our NSS results
- Increasing competitiveness and changing nature of the HE sector – and our particular need to stand out in London

Additional internal influencers affecting Middlesex include the:

- volume of change affecting university staff in recent years
- varying levels of expectation and delivery of service levels currently in place
- The type of students we have and the multi priorities they face (including demographics and internationalisation)

The project

The areas for research are mixed. There is evidence and data from various sources about different aspects of the organisational approach to customer service, and its specific impact on the student experience (eg NSS, ISB scores). There is currently, however, but no hard data on the beliefs and stories that staff and students have to tell that are at the core of the issues and problems around service culture generally and the student experience specifically. Exploration of these areas will help develop understanding of current shortcomings, in particular the possible lack of pride in the organisation.

Natasha feels this is the first critical step: engage the staff to find out why

they feel what they feel. Addressing the issues raised will help develop a “positive attitude to the organisation”, without which a true service culture will be impossible.

The project outline is ambitious:

Stage 1 includes further analysis of student feedback data, setting up and running a staff engagement survey, exploring customer service frameworks and conducting “mystery shopper” type evaluations with student support groups.

Stage 2 features learning and development interventions targeted to the needs of particular groups, piloting the Customer First framework, and work on integrating desired behaviours into recruitment, induction and onwards.

Success for this major project is seen as being:

- Improved feedback from students and key stakeholders
- Penetration into organisational work such as business process reviews
- Improved staff awareness of HE globally reflected in student and stakeholder expectations
- Improved staff awareness of their behaviour, manner and conduct
- Improved recognition of the support staff have available
- A visible link for staff between service standards and the University objectives and values.

The momentum is now firmly in place but the project leaders fully accept that this is a long term piece of work that needs continual impetus to achieve meaningful cultural and behavioural change. Fundamentally this is about achieving a renewed focus on a student centred ethos and for success the project scope needs to reach the whole organisation. The priority staff groups to work with in 2010 will be front facing student services and the academic teaching staff.



About this section

A large part of this project was to investigate the theoretical principles along with empirical studies in the field of customer service (in HE in particular), and to correlate this with input from Universities and with consultants and training providers who specialise in this field.

The full research is available from the LFHE website, this section distils the key findings in a more practical form to enable quicker understanding and re-purposing.

Summary of key project findings

1. There is empirical research to support theoretical models of customer service even in HE.
2. The most important customer is the student and their parents (or their sponsor).
3. Get service essentials right for this customer segment and all the others follow suit (i.e. staff-staff, internal-external).
4. The most important concern is to meet the gaps between expectation and reality (for the customer) at *all* levels.
5. Underlying problems that work against this are usually cultural, and can feature slippery areas such as (job and) organisational pride and belonging.
6. Successful solutions therefore focus initially on changing attitudes as well as getting systems and processes right.
7. Skill sets can then be developed that aren't immediately negated by other barriers.

Theory & principles in an HE context

Prologue: the student as customer/consumer

Palfreyman (2007) discusses the complex marketplace in which UK (and US) HE operates and the historical changes that have resulted in the system *status quo*. We might be tempted to begin with an attempt to understand why Universities exist but, for this project at least, it is sufficient that they exist and that the primary customer is the student.

It is widely agreed that “*students are undoubtedly consumers of what Universities offer*”. It is also reasonable to conclude that students are potentially dominant forces in the delivery of the services/products that UKHE offer. However, as Palfreyman puts it (in the role of consumers):

“the student punter does not know what he/she is buying by way of HE”

The role of the student, the concept of HE as a service provider and the complexities of the market are all investigated in the full research document and are summarised here.

Customer service: is it all nonsense anyway?

There are a plethora of popular books, internet sites, articles and studies that are aimed at addressing the spectrum of subjects that collectively form the topic of “customer service”. The majority of even the most popular published books and articles, however, contain little or (most often) no reference to empirical or theoretical research to support their content.

It is, however, clear both anecdotally (eg by talking to any call-centre operator) and in research literature that “customers” and “services” are not entirely artificial concepts but can be characterised, albeit with varying degrees of complexity, and explored objectively and empirically.

Customer Service theory and principles

The customer as co-creator of the service experience

Ng and Forbes' (2009) discuss the application of marketing theory and research in an educational context. Appreciating services marketing principles, as applied in HE, is central to attempts to understand the impact of customer service practices on the main customer (i.e. student). However, As Ramsden (2006) puts it,

“Students are not customers in any conventional sense of the word. The product or service they acquire derives value from their striving to achieve it and their achievement of it is determined to a significant extent by those who supply it”

The underlying principle here is that the “product or service” (i.e. the overall University experience) is co-created by both the student and the service provider (i.e. the collective body of the University).

This concept is supported by other research (Sierra and McQuitty, 2005) applying social exchange theory.

The post-modern educational paradigm of “shared discovery” is hardly new but brings into question other aspects of the university’s relationship with its students. The Times Higher Education reported in March 2009 that:

“The language of the student as customer is very strong, but the language of the student as a junior member of a learning community is less often heard.”

Maybe the concept of student-as-customer is not always the problem. It is important to understand all the components of the complex relationship between University and student.

The concept of Core and Supplementary services

Ng and Forbes (2009) present elements of a “University Experience Framework” that indicates as objectively as possible the key points for students and how this is impacted upon by the University’s contributions.

The core service is all about the learning experience which is (based on cognitive science research) “emergent, unstructured, interactive and uncertain” and the learning by the student cannot be disconnected from the teaching by the staff. Not only is it co-created by both student and teacher but it is “hedonic”, i.e. contains elements of pleasure and adventure. The hedonic aspect might seem even further out of the University’s control but can be a product of many service-oriented functions and features. For instance, through the creation of more pleasant social spaces resulting in improved customer-customer interactions.

Within, and also beyond, the core service element is the “Supplementary service”. Ng and Forbes’ concept of supplementary services includes student applications, finances, campus facilities, accommodation and so on and includes the combination of the people involved, forms, manuals and processes. Crucially, Ng and Forbes propose that:

“...the efficient delivery of supplementary services does not denote a good university experience. These are commonly referred to as hygiene services...i.e. services that meet basic needs and that, when not met, can cause dissatisfaction amongst students. Yet, meeting these needs does not make students satisfied – it merely prevents them from becoming dissatisfied.”

The relationship between all the different services provided to customers is also critical. In a University context the faculty and professional services might thus mutually culpable for bad customer experience.

In terms of marketing and evaluating services, this model thus begs the question of “what DO students want?” or even “WHY are students attending University?”

Service Quality Management

Successful customer service is founded on a culture of service quality. There is evidence that strong, central leadership is required to ensure that this culture is fostered and maintained.

Customer Service theory and principles

This central leadership needs access to current data on:

- customer perceptions of service quality
- actions in place for service improvement
- actions in place for problem resolution
- communications to customers of planned and envisaged changes.

Expectation vs reality

Research shows that good customer service is a result of a strong match between customer expectation and service reality. Ng and Forbes' (2009) model dissects the various points at which these mismatches can occur and demonstrates their various interactions that impact on the student experience.

Consistency is important along with joined-up communication, which begins with Institutional marketing where pre-conceptions about the University experience will be established. This is also greatly impacted upon by staff attitudes to their employer and their behaviours and attitudes expressed at key public events (Open Days, Graduation etc).

In HEIs polled there is a lack of co-ordinated understanding of who is really responsible for every service on offer to students throughout the entire student journey. This means there is a strong potential for misalignment of services to customer expectations at multiple points.

Additionally, it is the norm that services set their own standards and protocols which vary hugely across the institution. This applies not only to students but also to staff, internal customers and when dealing with external clients and partners.

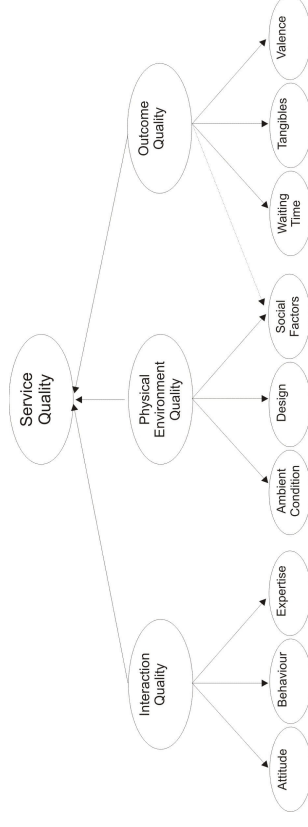
All these factors work against the model of minimising the gaps between expectation and reality.

Service Dimensions

“Hospitality” type services widely adopt accredited routes for service quality management (eg “Customer First”), and some HEIs are also pursuing or have achieved the “Charter Mark” standard in, for instance, Library Services (eg Swansea).

Whilst accredited standards are no guarantee of service quality there is evidence that quality can be gauged, monitored and improved by concentrating on appropriate “service dimensions”.

Research shows that closing the gap between expectation and reality for all these service dimensions will help drive up service quality. Whilst the service dimension model is not perfect (and there are a host of variations on the theme) the model presented by Brady and Cronin (2001) presents a good starting point:



Environment and Staff

There is substantial evidence that the service environment impacts heavily on the customer experience and on the performance of service staff. This is not just about nice décor but also about physical barriers, signage and access.

Research also highlights the importance of customer-customer interaction and the need to encourage this in a positive fashion and to exploit this to

Customer Service theory and principles

communicate information about services.

There is substantial evidence that employee behaviour also has a significant impact on the customer experience, greater even than the quality of the service itself. There is evidence that good management through observation and feedback, engagement of service staff with customers outside their usual transactional role and engagement of service staff in service design, contribute to high standards. This must go hand in hand with a high level of service knowledge and expert deployment of service protocols and policy.

Service skills are important and basic training might be necessary particularly with regards helping staff deal with certain situations. However there is evidence that some people are more suited to “frontline” roles than others.

Cultural change

Proactive HEIs are adopting organisational approaches to customer service and engaging senior staff across their institutions. The focus at this level is not on the idea of customers but on communication channels, image, marketing (i.e. matching expectation to reality), the institution's values and how these are adopted by all staff.

The intention is to make everyone aware that it really does matter how you answer the phone, talk to a student's parent, help someone find the building they want or provide information to a colleague; and it matters on every occasion.

What Training Providers and Consultants say

This section contains highlights of the information kindly provided by two leading customer service training providers in HE, Paul Kent Associates and the Tim Russell Group. Both providers, and also Mentor with whom Exeter have worked, offer bespoke and standard workshop-style skills sessions which they have tailored to the UKHE market.

All agree that:

- customer service awareness in UKHE is on the increase
- until recently customer service skills development was restricted to student services
- greater emphasis is now given to building relationships including with colleagues, addressing the internal market
- academic staff are becoming more amenable to skills interventions and becoming involved in wider initiatives delivered through external providers (although the “customer” word is not employed as such).

Paul Kent have developed a substantial portfolio of different customer service interventions aimed at all HE staff and have a broad experience with many HEIs tailoring provision to meet their needs – where the tailoring element is seen as crucial to effective delivery. Paul Kent’s work is beginning to be driven by:

“fee paying students wanting more value for money”

Tailoring and targeting skills sessions, and putting them into a wider programme of development will drive change to some extent, although the impact of such skills sessions will be lessened where there are procedural gaps, or poor management or supervision. This was evident in one Institution where trainers delivered a whole programme of skills sessions which, upon evaluation, were discovered to have had “little or no impact”.

Tim Russell’s approach is less about skills interventions and has taken on a more strategic theme with his team acting as consultants and advisers. This model identifies employee behaviours as one of the keys to service quality and is also inclusive of all staff and all customer segments:

“It should be emphasised that, although there has been some debate about the use of the word ‘customer’ within HEIs,

the thrust of our work is about developing the effective relationships between all interested stakeholders within the university. These include academic and administrative staff, students at all levels of study, their parents, employers and local and national businesses, suppliers, research and funding agencies.”

What can be done?

1. Get the basics in place. If you don't have consistent customer service policies and procedures then ask your customers to help you develop them. Make sure your staff are all on board.
2. Use a framework. There is a lot to do across services and within teams. A framework like Customer First gives a good introduction to the basics where there are a lot of inconsistencies and/or communication barriers.
3. Employ someone to oversee it all. There are so many key areas where things can go wrong which halt the necessary cultural change that an individual driving force might be able to overcome.
4. Get senior staff engaged. Cultural/organisational change is impossible without strong leadership.
5. Monitor constantly. Effective monitoring and evaluation of services is essential and is one of the starting points for any initiative. This needs to be consistent and the data gathered needs to be of value and communicated and acted upon appropriately.
6. Offer skills development. Targeted, tailored skills development will always be needed. Choose the provision carefully and make sure people know why they are receiving it and what impact it should have. Measure and evaluate this constantly.

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Getting started—a guide to reading material

As stated earlier and as the key references demonstrate above, there is a wealth of reading material about customer service which is overwhelming for staff wanting a good insight into the principles or background to the topic.

Below is a reading list that might help newcomers get some good ideas in covering: a Service framework; universal lessons from business; and some theory and principles.

1. Edwards, S.E. and Sommervald, A.M. 2006. *Best Practice Guide for Customer Service Professionals* (Customer Service Best Practice Guides). Customer First International: UK. *An extremely well laid out paperback that is in fact a personal training guide to the Customer First Standard. It can be used also as a tool to create workshops and to diagnose quality parameters with individuals, teams or whole services.*
2. Leland, K. and Bailey, k. 2006. *Customer Service for Dummies*. Wiley & Sons: UK. *A classic in the series with lots of good tips and information for anyone working in this field. It is very business/retail oriented but is light-touch with practical things to do.*
3. Lovelock, C.H. and Wirtz, J. 2003. *Services marketing: people, technology, strategy*. Prentice Hall: New Jersey. *This is a textbook used on MBA courses but has some fascinating insights into customer services principles and some useful stories in the text. Also has definitive sources which are worth exploring in their own right.*

Introduction (from the Project Lead Researcher)

During the research for this project I was asked many times by staff in different institutions: “where do I start?”. There is, of course, no simple answer as the entry point(s) will usually reflect the perceived nature of the issue(s) and concerns.

There are, however, some fundamental questions that can be asked to promote awareness and to get service staff to probe the quality of the services they are providing. The questions use the ‘service dimensions’ model of Brady & Cronin referred to earlier and also nod towards the service quality frameworks by focusing on three main aspects of service:

- Planning
- Quality (effectively Outcome Quality)
- Gaps

The research repeatedly points to the key role played by service managers in taking responsibility for the whole service they deliver. Anecdotal evidence from communications with HE colleagues suggests that few service managers (at any one level) feel they have such executive responsibility.

At the core of many damaged or fragile services are managers who are: not fully engaged with how their services are being delivered and what the customers are experiencing as a result; and who feel they cannot make necessary changes as it’s ‘beyond their control’. Engaging managers and empowering them to take control would appear to be the next steps, when in fact it might be more effective to first stop and think: which is where these questions might help.

Whilst this simple question set will not provide answers it might, at least, get the right people to think about the right things. The questions are broad and can be adapted and interpreted to suit different situations and environments. The same questions can be asked in a different order, of different parts of services or just of the service manager (at any level).

The questions

Service planning

1. How many points of service are there in your section?
2. Who is responsible for these services?
3. How does the person responsible know what services to deliver?

Service quality

1. How do you define the quality of your services?
2. How do you monitor this?

Service gaps

1. Do customers know what to expect from you?
2. Do they receive what they expect?
3. How do you know?

The slideshow

The PowerPoint slideshow downloadable from the LFHE SDP website (or available from Clive Betts—see overleaf for contact details), is aimed at disseminating the results of this project in as digestible and practical a way as possible.

Some familiarity with the material is obviously required (its all in this handbook!) but the slides are short, simple and focus on the key findings. The slideshow ends with the questions above.

Further Information and Contacts

Acknowledgements

Further information about the research and case studies

The Project Leader, Dr Clive Betts, can provide more information on any of the topics presented in this resource. Please contact Clive on:

Email: c.r.betts@exeter.ac.uk

Tel: 01392725348

Presentations, workshops and seminars on customer service in HE

In addition to the research and case studies this project has produced a short PowerPoint display that covers the main topic areas and ends with the question set described previously. These are available from the LFHE website.

Clive is also very happy to deliver workshops or seminars on this topic that cover the areas described here and will contribute to customer services initiatives in whatever way he can. Please contact Clive as above.

From the Project Leader

This project has drawn on the experiences and time of a large number of individuals across the UK Higher Education community and from the world of commercial training providers. I would like to thank all those people who have freely provided their thoughts, ideas, observations, stories and comments over the past 12 months.

In particular I would like to thank Steve Rathborn (Imperial), Simon Inger (Bath), Natasha Bennett (Middlesex), Tim Schuler (Bournemouth), Kass Hawkley (Portsmouth), Matt Davey (Exeter) and Stephen Mossop (Exeter) for their time on the case studies, my reports and many hours of general discussions.

Without the support and assistance of staff in the LFHE and University of Exeter this project would not have been possible, in particular: Stuart Hunt (LFHE) and Sally Turner (Exeter).

Finally, I would like to thank my colleague and long-standing friend Matt Levi (HEaTED) for his perspectives and wise comments from the initial idea of the project proposal right through to this final report.



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9th December 2009