Diploma in

Managing Quality in Higher Education

Table of Contents

THE CUSTOMERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

According to David Garvin, most definitions of quality were transcendent, product-based, user-based, and manufacturing-based or value based.[135] The transcendent view states that quality is something that is intuitively understood but nearly impossible to communicate. You just know it when you see it.[136] The product-based view argues that quality is found in the components and attributes of a product. It implies that the higher the amounts of its characteristics, the higher its quality. The user-based says that if the customer is satisfied, the product has good quality. It is based on the presumption that quality is determined by what a customer wants. This leads to a definition of quality which is fitness for intended use or how well the product performs its intended function. According to the manufacturing-based view, if the product conforms to design specifications, it has good quality. Quality then is defined as the desirable outcome of engineering and manufacturing practice, or conformance to specifications. Lastly, according to the value-based perspective, if the product is perceived as providing good value for the price, it has good quality.

Towards the end of the 1980s, many companies have come to embrace a more customer-driven definition of quality.[137] Quality has come to be defined as meeting or exceeding customer expectations. In order to comprehend this definition, one must first understand the meaning of the term 'customer'. Most people think that customers are the ultimate purchasers of the product or service and are more specifically referred to as consumers. This type of customers may be referred to as external customers. But before a product reaches the consumer, it may first flow through a chain of many firms or departments, each of which adds some value to the product. It is thus important to note that every employee in a company also has internal customers who receive goods or services from suppliers within the company. Thus, understanding who one's customers are and what their expectations are is key to achieving customer satisfaction.

In higher education, the notion of having customers is foreign to many campuses. Even the suggestion of the term can arouse many emotions, preconceptions, and misconceptions.[138] Faculty and administrators alike are reluctant to call a student or anyone else a customer. They find the commercial flavour distracting and difficult to translate to education. In campuses that do admit they have customers, there is usually a general agreement that the term applies to businesses, government agencies, and the society at large. That is not generally the case with students. Many faculty members feel threatened by the notion that students are customers of the educational process. The idea that students (customers) are partners in developing and delivering quality education (the product or service) threatens the historic, traditional academic role of faculty as purveyor of knowledge. All too often this perspective is reinforced by administrative actions that tend to put the benefits of the institution before the needs of the student body.

Many educational institutions are very hesitant to consider themselves as customer-driven entities.[139] Yet one fact has been proven over and over again. Customer-driven organisations are effective because they are fully committed to satisfying, even anticipating customer needs. The future success of colleges and universities will increasingly be determined by how they satisfy their various customers. The successful ones will be those which very clearly identify their mission and the customers they serve.

WHAT IS A CUSTOMER?

The centrality of the customer is grounded in history and tradition. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric*, stated that it is the hearer that determines the speech's end and object.[140] The success of the speaker therefore depends on the audience, the recipients of the message. The Bible teaches that "You shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself"[141] and "just as you want men to do to you, you also do to them likewise".[142] This Biblical principle inspires us to give others the same regard we hold ourselves – a beginning point for the service-orientated individual.

The Wordsmyth Educational Dictionary defines the term customer as follows: (a) "one who buys goods or services; shopper, patron"; or, (b) "one who must be dealt with." In a normal commercial sense, definition (a) is probably sufficient. It involves the concept of exchange whereby two parties are willing to trade something for their mutual benefit. The (b) definition is broader and more informal and is suitable for academia. W. Edwards Deming, one of the founders of the modern quality movement, stated that the customer is one who gets your work.[143] Juran suggests that we follow the product to see whom it impacts. Anyone who is impacted is a customer.[144]

These definitions are generally applicable to all kinds of organisations, profit or not-for-profit, which serve internal and external customers. "Every one of us is a customer. Every one of us serves customers".[145]

THE CUSTOMERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Lewis and Smith observed that every college and university has a mission but very few fully identify who they serve.[146] They also noted that even fewer institutions acknowledge that they serve customers. This was surprising given the fact that in order to be effective organisations must be customer-driven. Customer-oriented organisations are successful because they have a unified focus on what they do and who they serve.

The term customer can be defined as the recipient or beneficiary of the outputs of work efforts or the purchaser of products and services. It can be a person, a unit, a department, or an entire organisation. Customers have wants, opinions, perceptions, and desires which are often referred to as the voice of the customer. The voice of the customer can also be defined in technical terms as the "standardized, disciplined, and cyclic approach to obtaining and prioritising customer preferences for use in designing products and services.[147]

In order to understand customer needs, an organisation must first identify who its customers are. Often customers are classified as internal or external. Internal customers are people or units who receive goods and services from within the same organisation. Their outputs provide inputs to other functions and activities within the organisation. External customers are those individuals or organisations which are not part of the organisation in question but are nevertheless impacted by that organisation's activities. They are the ultimate ones we are trying to satisfy with our work. The final recipient of a product or service is commonly referred to as the end-user or just plain consumer.

Internal Customers – Academic

The following may be identified as major internal customers of higher education on the academic side.

Students.

They are usually considered the most important internal customers of higher education. Students usually enter school with the desire to acquire skills, to gain knowledge and learn about the world around them. They need to develop the confidence and drive to pursue their dreams and desires. They also need to experience joy in learning both within the classroom as well as within the whole school environment.[148] Within the academic environment, students are unique in the sense that they assume different roles each of which has a different implication for improving the process of learning.

- *Raw material*. This view suggests that we must understand students' backgrounds, attitudes and differences in academic preparation. This does not imply that students are passive recipients of the learning process. On the contrary, this view helps us to be more understanding of students and to be more sensitive especially to the differences in their preparation for the higher learning process.

- *Work in process.* Once students are admitted, they go through a sequence of courses required for their degree. They are tested and graded at the end of each course and throughout the course of their academic programmes.

- *Product*: This view helps us to focus on the end result of the students' educational process and identify the relevant skills and information that they will have upon completing the process of a course. This product view does not suggest that students are passive recipients or outcomes of the learning process or methods. Rather this view aids us to match course content and activity with the desired educational outcomes.

- *Co-worker*: This view compels us to look at the course being taught as a collaborative undertaking and to solicit student input when designing and redesigning course requirements and processes.

- *Customer*: Students are appropriately viewed as customers in the sense that they are beneficiaries with needs that should be satisfied. This view does not imply that they are the ultimate arbiters of quality in the commercial sense. We recognise that many of them when they enter college or university do not have a good understanding of what is best for their professional preparation. However, students are well-equipped to evaluate an educational delivery system, although they may not be qualified to give input as to its content.

The status of students within the academic program is somewhat unique. Their ability to interact with the rest of the system further complicates the relationship that exists between them and their professors. When it comes to the delivery of knowledge, instructors are the suppliers and students are the receivers-customers. But students are also expected to learn the material presented by their professors, do assignments, complete projects, and prepare for tests. In this part of the academic process, students function as co-workers or co-laborers. Thus, no one should be surprised if students are quite happy when classes are cancelled or dismissed early. When it comes to this matter, students do not behave like typical customers. Their co-worker role outweighs their customer role.

While students may be considered primary customers for the delivery of course material, they may not be treated the same for the content of the course. Deming argues against the practice of conducting exit surveys to obtain feedback from new graduates to restructure course content.[149] How could a student know what to teach? His or her ideas may be worth listening to 10 to 15 years from now. As a matter of fact, the ultimate outcome of a student's education is not known until many years later.[150]

Faculty.
Teachers are entrusted with the solemn responsibility of preparing the students of this nation for the future. They deserve recognition and respect for what they do and less blame for what the system does or fails to do. Teachers need continued professional growth opportunities and the tools and autonomy to accomplish their tasks and experience joy in work. Such opportunities will greatly enhance their self-esteem and allow them to have pride in their work. Also, professors teaching particular classes require that students have adequate background in the prerequisite courses. Perhaps one of the most pressing needs of teachers today would be adequate compensation for their work besides recognition and respect.

Programmes or departments.
The academic subsystem, as part of the larger system of higher education, consists of its own set of input resources, the transformation process, and outputs. Its resources include, but are not limited to, students, faculty, staff, library, computing and laboratory facilities, and other facilities. The transformation process consists of activities done to disseminate knowledge, to conduct research, and to provide community service. It is in the transformation process where interactions among the input resources occur. Thus, the need for cooperation and collaboration between programmes or departments in the performance of the various tasks. Effective communication and information exchange is also necessary within the academic subsystem and between the academic system and the administrative subsystem. The outputs of the academic process are educated people, research and publications, and service to the community. Programs or departments need to be engaged in the never-ending process of quality improvement.

Internal Customers – Administrative

The following may be identified as major internal customers of higher education on the administrative side.

- **Students**.
  They are clearly the primary internal customers of many facilities in the campus. Students pay for the use of many facilities such as dormitories, food services, bookstores, libraries, gymnasiums, security services, and others. These facilities help to attract better students, provide a more satisfactory campus climate and support the academic programmes of the institution. In the non-academic setting, students are treated as typical customers by providing them services when they request for them and answering their queries when they ask for assistance.

- **Faculty**.
  Teachers benefit from the use of certain facilities in the campus like the bookstore, the library, the computer store, the postal office, the health club, the swimming pool and other campus facilities. Also, they benefit from services offered by other departments like the Human Resources office, the transportation department, the administrative offices, and others. Teachers expect that they be treated as typical customers by providing them services which are requested and by answering their queries promptly and accurately.

- **Non-teaching staff**
  The needs of the non-teaching staff are to an extent similar to those of the faculty. They seek continuous personal growth, security, and joy in work. They need to be kept informed and involved and shown how they are part of the bigger system of higher education. The institution must help them develop and realise their potential in pursuing their quality and performance objectives. They are considered as assets to be developed, not expenses to be controlled.

- **Administrators**.
  Like the faculty, administrators expect improved professional status, proper recognition for their work, and reasonable compensation for their efforts. To perform their job more effectively, they need support and feedback from all constituents of the educational system in providing constructive solutions to common problems faced by the institution.

- **Units, departments or divisions**.
  The needs are similar to those of programmes or departments in the academic subsystem. Units, departments or divisions within the administrative subsystem must work as a team together and in conjunction with the programmes and departments in the academic subsystem. Barriers between them should be broken down to allow for effective communication and information exchange. They must be engaged in the never-ending process of quality improvement.

External Customers – Direct
The direct external customers of higher education include future employers of students, other colleges and universities that students attend to further their education, and suppliers from which the college or university receives students, goods, or services.

- **Employers**.
It is fairly reasonable to say that service and manufacturing industries and other non-for-profit organisations are the largest direct volume customers of higher education.[151] Employers expect colleges and universities to produce well- qualified and trained graduates who could work efficiently and effectively in the jobs for which they have been hired. They need workers with communication and problem-solving skills and willing and able to learn their specific jobs quickly and effectively.

- **Other colleges/universities**.
Colleges and universities which admit students from other higher educational institutions require that these students possess enough knowledge, skills and preparation to take up further or higher studies. In other words, they want students who are capable of advanced learning and research.

- **Suppliers**.
Suppliers include those from whom a college or university receives students, goods, or services. They include high schools or academies as well as those organisations that supply goods and/or services to the college or university. Suppliers need feedback from the recipients of the goods and services that they provide in order to improve the quality of their production processes. They also seek to build a long-term relationship with colleges and universities based on loyalty and trust.

External Customers – Indirect
The indirect external customers of higher education include governmental bodies, communities served, accrediting agencies, alumni, and donors.

- **Government**.
Federal tax policies affect higher education in terms of research support and financial support for students attending colleges and universities. As a condition for federal spending and tax support, legislative and executive agencies of the government impose a variety of rules and mandates on both institutions and students. The impact of the federal government on higher education is substantial, diverse, and constantly changing.[152]

State governments are a major source of funding for their respective state institutions. Thus, they have legitimate interest in the responsiveness of higher education to major societal needs. While institutional autonomy is important, there is need for constructive relationship between the college/university and the state. Higher education recognises that it has a stake, if not responsibility, to engage with state political leaders regarding the nature of their relationship. This includes defining those societal goals toward which the college or university should direct its energies and shaping the policies which govern such relationship.[153]

- **Community**.
Community support is crucial to the success of the operation of higher education. Community outreach and programs strengthen overall institutional effectiveness in preparing tomorrow's students for lifelong involvement.[154] University support for student and faculty opportunities to volunteer and perform community service leads to enhanced civic responsibility. In addition to these services, colleges and universities are expected by their communities to contribute to the development of a competent workforce, the training of leaders and followers, and the nurture of politically active and civic-minded citizens.

- **Donors**.
The process of asking for gifts begin by informing potential donors of the social need being met by the organisation, involving them in the work of that organisation and then inviting them to invest financially in that work.[155] The donor usually offers something of value to the organisation for a variety of reasons, without expecting any material or monetary return. Naturally, donors expect that they be informed about the legitimacy of the need and be given appropriate acknowledgement for making a donation. The college/university can acknowledge the gift by recognising donors for their support of a worthy cause, by helping them feel that they made a difference in the resolution of a problem and by giving them a sense of ownership in a programme that serves the public good.

- **Alumni**.

    In many ways, the college or university connects with the society at large through its alumni. The real success of its programmes is often judged by how well its alumni represent its values in their everyday lives and in their lines of work. One way this connection can be strengthened is through programmes which bring alumni to the campus in a participatory way. It is a known fact that alumni are a significant source of financial gifts for the institution.

- **Accrediting agencies**.

    Accreditation provides public notification than an institution or programme meets standards of quality stipulated by the accrediting agency. To be recognised by the accrediting agency, the institution or programme is committed to self-study and external review by one's peers not only to meet standards but to continuously seek ways to enhance the quality of its education and training. Accrediting agencies expect accreditation-seeking institutions to comply with their established criteria and standards.

DEVELOPING A CUSTOMER FOCUS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It is important for an organisation to clearly identify its current and potential customers because failure to identify them results in wasted efforts and even failure in the entire quality initiative.[156] It is highly desirable that different groups within higher education come to a common consensus as to who their true customers are. For the total quality philosophy to have a lasting impact on change and quality improvement in higher education, the latter must have the right customer-focus model to follow.

While students can be considered customers of higher education, they differ from the typical business customers in a number of ways. For example, colleges and universities often admit students selectively based on certain academic standards and requirements. Businesses usually do not do that. In fact, they do not ordinarily prevent prospective customers from purchasing their products and services. Moreover, in higher education, students often do not totally pay for the full cost of their tuition and fees. These expenses are sometimes covered by payments from parents, state subsidies, scholarships and student loans. In business, customers generally pay for their purchases with their own funds. Another difference is that once students are admitted they are continually tested and graded to determine how well they have learned their lessons. They must maintain their good academic standing in order to be able to take more advanced courses and complete their programmes of study. Businesses do not do that to their customers.

Identifying the customers of higher education is important in order to know how to proceed in establishing a feedback mechanism. Establishing a feedback mechanism is accomplished through a systematic, factual collection of data from customers so that we truly know whether or not the job is done right. The data that is collected should be used responsibly, that is, to resolve problems; otherwise, there is no valid reason to gather it. Information gathered should be used solely for purposes of continuous improvement within an environment of trust. This takes courage since it signals that one is serious about not doing business as usual.

The great enemy of courage is not cowardice, but conformity. The vast majority of people yield to the pressures of conformity because it is safe. It is unconventional to set your sights high, to climb out of ruts. That takes courage.[157]

An institution committed to customer satisfaction and continuous improvement will need to work with students, faculty and staff and other customers to understand current expectations and to anticipate future requirements. The college or university needs to establish trust within the entire organisation where frank and open discussions are allowed, where opinions are respected, and where participants are empowered to take corrective action on poor processes and express their true feelings about tasks, processes, and systems that are out of control and requires urgent attention and solution.

Educational institutions that truly believe in the quality of their services make strong commitments to their customers. They address the principal concerns of customers, eliminate conditions that might weaken their trust and confidence and communicate clearly and simply to them. Building good customer relationships depends on the quality of customer- contact personnel. This begins with the recruitment process and the selection of employees who show the ability and desire to develop good customer relationships. These customer- contact employees must understand their products and services well enough to answer any question, develop good listening and problem recovery skills, and feel able to handle problems. Their actions are guided by a common vision and a clear understanding of what actions they may or should take. Educational institutions need to establish service standards and communicate these standards to all customer-contact personnel. These standards must continually be reinforced. Colleges and universities should implement a process for tracking adherence to the standards and provide feedback to employees to improve their performance. But despite all efforts to satisfy customers, every institution experiences unhappy customers. Customer-contact personnel must be trained to deal with angry customers, to listen carefully to determine the customer's feelings and understand the complaint, and to make every effort to resolve the problem quickly. Information collected from the complaint resolution process should be used to continually improve service processes.

Customer satisfaction is perhaps the most important element in managing for quality in higher education. It is often used synonymously with quality which focuses on meeting and exceeding customer expectations.[158] Bergquist lists four sets of criteria by which quality could be defined and assessed.[159] These criteria are described as follows:

- **Input criteria**.
  These criteria focus on the nature and level of resources available to the institution like the characteristics of incoming students, credentials of faculty, size of library, structure and availability of physical facilities, and the amount of financial reserves. For many years, the input criteria have been the most commonly identified measures of quality. Many accrediting agencies have used input measures to measure quality like the quality of entering students, number of books in the library, quality of graduate degrees held by faculty, number of square feet of classroom space, student-faculty ratio, and others.

Many people believe that if you put good things together, something good will come out of it. This concept of education is often associated with traditional high-status institutions.

- **Output criteria**.
These criteria stress the nature and extent of institutional products, characteristics of graduating students, success of alumni, research and scholarly publications, and public service. They build on the assumption that institutions of higher education are accountable to society for what they produce. In recent times, the reputation and quality of educational institutions are increasingly being determined on the basis of their demonstrated outcomes.

- **Value-added criteria**.
These criteria zero in on the differences that an institution has made in the growth of all of its members: intellectual, moral, social, vocational, physical, and spiritual. Considering these criteria, an institution would be judged by "the extent to which it is effective in developing the talents of its students from whatever level they are at when entering".[160]

- **Process-oriented criteria**. These criteria include the level and manner of participation of all appropriate constituencies (or customers/stakeholders) in the educational, administrative, and governance processes of the institution, including the defining and assessing of quality. Based on these criteria "it is not what we do or what we accomplish that makes for quality; rather it is the way in which we do what we do and how we decide what to do that differentiate a high-quality education".[161]

There is no single, all-encompassing definition of quality that meets the needs of all customers in higher education. Quality therefore should not be considered as a unitary concept but a multiple one. Green suggested that "the best that can be achieved is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality, and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken."[162] Bergquist proposed that a comprehensive and useful definition of quality in higher education must include all four sets of criteria described above: input, output, value-added, and process-oriented.[163]

Developing and maintaining a customer focus in higher education requires effective leadership. After all, leadership 'is the use of non-coercive influence to shape the group or organisation's goals, motivate behavior toward the achievement of those goals, and help define group or organisation culture'.[164] Leaders are part of a system and they are affected by the system in which they work. They perform tasks that are essential for others to accomplish their purpose, which in this case, is quality improvement and customer satisfaction. As quality increases, so will the pride-in-workmanship. The end result will be that a new institutional culture will emerge, one in which working becomes fun.