

*Are Students Our 'Customers'? : A Perspective on the Bureaucratic Implications of
'Student-Customer' Concept in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions*

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Abstract

This paper is about the use and abuse of treating students as 'customers' and implications that follow for quality assurance in Malaysian higher learning institutions. Students graduating from PhD programs in higher learning institutions are increasing in number every year. In the year 2012 alone a number of public universities have produced or have 'graduated' hundreds of students with PhD qualifications. However, the bulk of them were found to be foreign students, especially from the Middle Eastern countries. The mushrooming number of higher learning institutions over the past decade has led to stiff competitions amongst them, especially in the context of student recruitment. This paper discusses the mounting pressure to accept students who are not capable of doctoral-level work, concerns about overseas students' language difficulties and the bureaucratic difficulties of failing PhD candidates. It is inevitable that a push for quantity of PhD students leads to diminution of quality because resources never match the increases, leading to poor supervision, disappointed students and lower-quality work. It is argued that treating students as customers, especially in the context "customers are always right" would be clearly corrosive to the education industry. Although these managerial or business concept probably meant with best of intentions, it is likely to have results that are a contrary to the best interest of the students themselves.

Keywords: Student Customers; Private Higher Learning Institutions

Introduction

As Malaysian private higher learning institutions have mushroomed over the past few years, stiff competitions are observed among the institutions concerned in the context of student recruitment. This is evident from the amount of money spent by educational institutions of higher learning in their participation of education fares and road shows every year. Apart from involving their regular personnel from their marketing departments, the institutions concerned are forcing their academic personnel into these operations. While it might take a substantial number of years for universities and academic institutions to introduce post graduate programs after their initial establishments, we could notice most private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia have introduced Masters and PhD programs upon their initial or first year of commencement.

Corporatization and privatization of higher education in Malaysia allows for a shift from state controlled sector to a state-supervised sector dictated by market-based policies. With the gradual shift in the relationship between the government and the institutions of higher learning, the former through the ministry of higher education, no longer regulates access conditions, the curriculum, degree requirements, examination systems, the appointment and remuneration of staff, the selection and admission of students and other administrative matters. The growth of private higher educational institutions in the past two decades reflect the global trend where private institutions represent the fastest growing area of post secondary education.

The irony about this phenomenon is that the competing institutions are prepared to recruit students who have absolutely no knowledge about research methods, who have never attempted or resorted to do a dissertations or a project paper even at Masters level and those lacked language proficiency in English. A recent local news paper report indicated that a bulk of those who have graduated from their Masters and PhD programs in public universities happened to be students from Middle-Eastern Countries (The Star, 2012). This is neither the intention of the writer nor the purpose of this paper to generalize the idea that all students from middle-eastern countries lack the necessary language proficiency and thinking skills to pursue studies at postgraduate level for any reasons. However, the perspectives of the academic personnel involved in this small scale study acknowledged the fact that many of the Middle Eastern students in their respective institutions suffered severe language difficulties, thinking skills and their ability to articulate thesis matters as well as meeting other academic requirements at post graduate level. The worst part of their ordeal was the students' non-acceptance of these facts, and their unscrupulous demand to get higher grades for poor quality work. The academic personnel concerned allegedly suffer frustrations and demoralizing effects having to deal with such cases while having to meet the organizational demands of their institutions which adopt the student customer concept in their recruitment process. This paper

discusses the mounting pressure to accept students who are not capable of doctoral-level work, concerns about overseas students' language difficulties and the bureaucratic difficulties of failing PhD candidates.

Literature Review

Although a major commitment, relatively little is known about what actually motivates students to enroll for doctoral programs or what they subsequently look forward to it as its benefits in the future (Leonard et al., 2005) and we know even less about what might be the effects of gaining a doctorate on their lives subsequently. We also have little idea whether the experience or usefulness of a doctorate may have changed over time.

Globalization and free market economy have led to commoditization of knowledge and of education in general. Higher learning institutions especially, in the private sector are adopting the corporate culture whereby students are perceived as customers or clients (Franz, 1998). Consumer or customer is a person who shops for products in the market place. Consumerism implies that the desires of customer are supreme. In other words 'customer sovereignty' and that the consumer should be promptly satisfied. If we apply this concept or model in education, particularly to higher education, students react predictably. That is to say they tend to develop a typical attitude which implies perceiving education as a product to be bought like an item from the shop or store. Students who regard themselves as customer study only when it is convenient for them, a pursuit that symbolizes 'shopping', expect satisfaction regardless of effort, want knowledge served up in 'easily digestible' forms. They assume that when they undertake a course of study, academic success must be guaranteed.

It might not be an exaggeration anymore to say that we are into an era whereby we experience the transformation of tertiary institutions becoming 'education bazaars' offering various 'academic products' ranging from Diplomas, Degrees, Masters as well as PhDs. According to Mukherjee (2010), in these academic market, the role and obligation of the 'academics' is strictly treating students as customers and satisfying their respective needs as clients. As more and more education bazaars are mushrooming day by day bearing the name of universities, PhD and Masters Student clients are free to choose institutions that confirm to their standards and norms. The serious implications of this pervasive phenomenon that academics are forced to prove themselves for survival in the way the academic system wants.

Pursuing a subject is not a matter of passion anymore but rather a compulsion, a means to achieve a career path. Human enrichment through education has become purposive. It tends to be a matter of status or means to achieve lucrative career if not a compulsion. In other words people are aspiring to upgrade their academic status for material benefits and of social status. To put it in a nutshell people tend to learn more in order to earn more. The urge for status and recognition is definitely withering away the practice of cognition. Education and human enrichment is becoming more purposive and not spontaneous as

what it used to be in the past. The materialistic greed of consumerist society is all set to take on the emancipating forces of education. As a result, academics are forced to adhere to the corporate ethics of satisfying their student customers. There is no place for true academics; they have to prove themselves for their survival in the way the academic system expects them to be.

Eagle and Brennen (2007) are of the opinion that it might be alright to place students as customers under the Total Quality Management (TQM) concept. This means providing quality education for students' best money value. According to the authors the concept might also be extended to the provision of the best academic environment with all the necessary state of the art facilities. The concept should also include the humanitarian treatment the students deserve in all their dealings and communications with the institutions.

The Method

Qualitative interviews were held with nine (N=9) academic staff from three private institutions of higher learning in the Klang Valley area. The respondents concerned are full-fledged professors [(Four (4))] and associate professors [(Five (5))] with at least three years of experience, teaching middle-eastern students at PhD and Masters level. In the pursuit of striking a balance for the number of respondents, the writer chose to interview three academics from each institution. Subsequently the institutions were visited and the basic purpose of the study was discussed. Out of this number, five of them were ladies with a professional status of associate professorship. The participation of these academic personnel in this short study was solely on the basis of willingness. All the three private academic institutions of higher learning where the respondents worked have been upgraded from university colleges to the status of full- fledged universities within the last three years. The interviews were held face to face at their respective offices in their institutions. The names of the institutions are not disclosed for ethical reasons.

Findings and Discussions

Although the scope of this study does not include the public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, many of those universities, are jumping on to the band wagon along with private institutions in their massive campaign to recruit more and more of Masters and PhD candidates. This takes precedence from the government's idea of bringing about a frog leap approach in increasing the number of PhD holders in lieu of Vision 2020 that will see Malaysia as a fully developed nation in the near future.

However, the irony is that students who have absolutely no knowledge about research methods (an essential criterion for understanding the PhD concept and contribution to new knowledge) and who have never attempted or resorted to do a project paper even at Masters level are increasingly showing interest in pursuing their PhDs. When asked what

is the major issue in recruiting middle-eastern students for post graduate studies, one senior professor said:

“The obvious characteristics that we could notice, especially those among the foreign students are their lack of English proficiency to undertake studies at post graduate levels. According to a number of lecturers interviewed, these students never bother to master their language skills and are of the impression that their basic communicational English will suffice”.

All the nine respondents shared a common notion: “They are not here for studying”. In this respect, one of the lady respondents expressed her views in the following manner:

“If at all they think of studying in its true sense, they could have remained in their own respective countries to complete their education. The marketisation of education and the drive to attract more PhD students who pay full fees is indeed damaging.” In this regard another professors added :

"In this case, the PhD student becomes a 'customer' who expects to get something at the end of four years of time investment, regardless of the quality of the work - which is, of course, problematic."

Supporting the above, another professor related the phenomenon to reasons as to why private institutions of higher learning set organizational demands to treat students as customers. He said:

“On the other hand the university management perceive that it might be detrimental to the image of their institutions if students are retained longer than the minimum duration for graduation, having to repeat the modules to better their marks. There is a tendency on the part of the institutions to feel that if they retained students for too long, students might drop out in the process or leave to join other institutions where their customer demands are easily met. Moreover, student drop out or failure rates might send out the wrong message to some of their fellow countrymen who might have interest in joining the institutions for the same pursuit. This might affect the university’s reputation and popularity as the strength of corporate universities is based on the student number” .

When asked for evidence for the prevalence, or how the student customer concept works in her institution, one associate professor mentioned that:

“Students are given the flexibility to register for subjects any time between the start of the semester and the final exams. Although universities have rules on this, such rules are not followed as student interests and demands are valued as customers”.

In voicing her grievances on the pressing issue of student customer concept, one professor related her experiences in the following manner:

“The obvious characteristics that we could notice, especially those among the foreign students are their lack of English proficiency to undertake studies at post graduate levels. Language proficiency is the basic requirement for undertaking postgraduate studies. How is it possible for people like us to work with such students?”

According to the academics interviewed, these students never bother to master their language skills and are of the impression that their basic communicational English will suffice. In this regard another respondent said:

“When comes to assignments they resort to the ‘copy paste’ culture using the internet, with no, structure and sense of direction as to what they are doing or supposed to be doing.”

Some of the academics interviewed even claimed that on most occasions students even ‘buy’ their assignments by asking outsiders (syndicates) to write their assignments and academic projects. Likewise it was also learnt that the students concerned produce poor answer scripts in their final examinations. In this respect another respondent added that:

“In their exams, they produce poor quality answer scripts, with no relevance to questions asked, with no grammar and proper sentence structure. We can scarcely notice any difference in their work, although we go all our way out to provide the maximum ‘exam tips’ suggesting as how the answers should be”.

From the analysis of the respondents’ perspectives it was noted that many of the students are confident that, at the end of the day, they will somehow ‘swim through’ the process to get their degrees. The students concerned are of the staunch believe that the university system will somehow come to a compromise to accept them as graduates for the mere fact that they are ‘paying for the studies’, portraying the typical ‘customer characteristics’. There have been cases where lectures are intimidated or having to give in to students demand for better marks.

Many of the academics who participated in the study expressed dissatisfaction on the attitude of the foreign post graduate students, especially those hail from middle-eastern countries. The students concerned who are engaged in the writing of their thesis or project paper expect academics to ‘acknowledge’ their work even though the work concerned do not meet the quality requirements. According to some of the academics, the students concerned make such demands because most of them are government scholars and they are to return to their respective home countries within three years, that is to say the minimum time required to complete their studies. Should they take extra duration to repeat their papers, then they have to bear their own cost for tuition and living expenses in Malaysia. This might be difficult and would certainly add to their frustrations because the current immigration policies do not allow foreign students to work and study in Malaysia.

Another interesting notion that surfaced from this study is a reason why many middle eastern students of poor academic calibre come to Malaysia to pursue higher education. As Malaysia is a Muslim country, it attracts a considerable number of female students from the middle-eastern countries in the pursuit of higher education. However, as per the policies of many Arabic nations, women scholars are not allowed to leave their respective countries if they are not married. It was learnt from the perspectives of the respondents that female students tend to fare well in education compared to their male counterparts. As such on most occasions, the female students gain admission in professional fields such as medicine, accountancy etc., in public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The governments of the respective countries also provide scholarships for their husbands to undertake an academic degree while they remain in Malaysia accompanying their spouses. The male students who normally hold poor credentials hardly qualify for admission in public institutions and hence often end up in private higher learning institutions where they are treated as student customers. When the wives have completed their degrees in public institutions, the husbands demand for the completion of their degrees in private institutions as well.

Conclusions:

The present study was intended to capture the perspectives of academic personnel in Malaysian private higher learning institutions on the issue and treatment of student customer concept. As mentioned qualitative interviews were held with the participants and there was a general consensus among the participants that the 'student customer' concept was indeed embedded in their institutional policies. Many private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia belong to gigantic corporate organizations. As such they are profit orientated and tend to treat their students as customers.

As in line with perpetuation of knowledge, it might be good or even noble on the part of universities increasing the number of candidates for tertiary institutions. It might be even alright to lower the entry requirements in the pursuit of attaining the intended student number, quantity wise. However, university authorities (whether public or private) should ensure that, their students fulfill the quality requirements and meet the minimum academic standards before they are allowed to graduate. Using the customer concept to compromise quality to meet student demands and aspirations is certainly against the academic norms of academic institutions. The incursion of the customer concept into higher education degrades educational standards and damage educator-student relationships. By no means should universities churn out worthless graduates who might flood the existing unemployment market.

Limitations of the Study

Originally the present study was intended to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to capture the perspectives of a larger number of respondents. While many of the academic staff in private higher learning institutions declined to participate, time constrains restricted access to other willing respondents.

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