**If students are consumers, why doesn't HE practise good customer service?**

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Students rarely see the results of the feedback they give on their courses – that's not a risk universities should take



Are HEIs offering good customer service? Photograph: Juice Images/Alamy

A point of contention in higher education following [Lord Browne's review](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/%2B/hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report) is whether the sector should be thinking of the student as a consumer, and many academics – justifiably proud of their teaching role – object to a mindset equating education to a business transaction.

However, the real question is not if we are comfortable with the "consumer" tag, but in actuality, how will students view themselves in the light of the fee increase in 2012? There is already evidence that young people are less inclined to tolerate what they perceive to be substandard service on the part of their university, and an acknowledgement of this will give individual institutions a head-start in a volatile market.

Earlier in the summer, the [Office of the Independent Adjudicator](http://www.oiahe.org.uk/), which handles complaints from students in England and Wales, said that student complaints had risen by a third in the past year – and predicted that complaints will rocket when tuition fees rise to up to £9,000 as [students increasingly insist on value for money](http://www.oiahe.org.uk/media/30013/oia_annual_report_2010.pdf). Universities are under increasing pressure to become more transparent and accountable on issues of quality and standards. Gaining effective student feedback on all courses and lecturers to enable transparent reporting is a must to ensure not only teaching and learning quality, but also student satisfaction.

Electric Paper – which works with more 600 universities in the UK and worldwide to help them evaluate their courses – has released a report: [Effective Course Evaluation – The Future for Quality and Standards in Higher Education](http://www.electricpaper.biz/fileadmin/user_upload/10_documents_EN/Effective_Course_Evaluation_-_The_Future_for_Quality_and.pdf). The report finds that the process currently being undertaken by many UK universities to evaluate student modules is largely ineffective.

Senior academics and student representatives interviewed for the report suggest that many universities do not adopt a centralised approach to student survey administration, leading to poor response rates, slow turn-around, and frustration for those students who do respond but have no hope of seeing the benefit of their feedback as it will – in theory – be used to improve the experience of their successors.

In the report, the student representatives explained that ideally they want the opportunity to express their views on course improvements at a time that their feedback benefits them directly. End-of-module evaluation is a particular stumbling block as the turn-around of the results can be slow, and they want to know that their opinions have not only been taken seriously, but actioned. As one of our interviewees put it: "It's important for universities to close the loop and tell students what has happened – or hasn't happened – as a result of the feedback provided and why. This should not be an autopsy at the end of a course, but a process embedded through the learning experience."

Without taking note of these fairly simple requests, universities risk alienating these "consumers", and in the digital age where opinions can be shared globally at the click of a button, that is not a risk any should be willing to take. As many universities have taken the decision to charge the full £9,000, it will become even more important for students to distinguish between institutions on issues of quality and standards. Quickly capturing feedback across all courses, and providing students and their parents looking to decide on a university with evidence-based feedback about the quality of teaching and learning, will be a tremendous advantage. With the introduction of Key Information Sets, universities need to do everything they can to provide indicators of quality. Being seen to capture, and respond positively to, student feedback on course evaluation can only help boost recruitment targets and reputation.

Our research suggests institutions spend a huge amount of time and money on survey administration, and approaches are inconsistent (with management of module surveys sitting centrally in one university, for example, and departmentally in another). An effective process for course evaluation can offer significant cost and efficiency savings, addressing the hidden costs in survey administration and freeing up staff expertise for other areas.

A better model would allow universities to embrace new technologies to improve turnaround time, but not necessarily at the expense of old methods. A separate survey by Electric Paper of 100 university administrators in 2011 found that three out of four agree that both paper and online is a requirement for surveys in higher education. It's not a question of either/or, because both methodologies can provide effective results and efficiency savings for the right surveys in the right context.

Universities should establish a more consistent, centralised approach to survey administration – including a standard set of survey questions – to enable effective benchmarking at course and institutional level. However, individual departments should have the flexibility to include bespoke questions for particular courses to allow for differing elements such as lab and field work. Furthermore, increased student involvement in survey administration can increase commitment as they engage not just as consumers, but as stakeholders in the process.

What is clear is that all universities need to embrace this agenda, as failing to respond to these issues over the next 12 months and beyond should not be an option. In any volatile, market, quality is key, and consumers vote with their feet.

*Eric Bohms is managing director of* [*Electric Paper*](http://www.electricpaper.co.uk)