

Students as customers: a paradigm shift in higher education

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, higher education students are being considered as customers or clients. But this new way of seeing students implies a substantial change in the traditional notion of the student. The idea of student–customers goes beyond the demand for proper attention to the student: it is part of an entirely new paradigm in higher education, which also includes other factors, such as the idea of higher education as a competitive market, public reputation as an institutional priority associated with a greater capacity for attracting and satisfying students, study programmes conceived by the students as an important personal and economic investment, curricula designed with a clear professional development orientation, quality systems centred on the value of customer satisfaction, and a new way of understanding educational relationships between students and faculty. This paradigm is the everyday way of thinking in some countries, while in others, such as Spain, it is slowly breaking through only now. This paper analyses this paradigm via an extensive bibliographical review of the research on the different factors that characterise it and its impact on the quality of the learning processes and the social function of universities.

Keywords: higher education, students, quality, learning processes, student–faculty relationships, customer satisfaction.

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THE STUDENT–CUSTOMER CONCEPT

Recently, a senior executive at the London South Bank University, mediating on the intense British debate about students as customers, said, “Students are customers, and I would challenge anyone to suggest otherwise. We are charging our customers nearly £50,000 over three years, and for that cost, they deserve to know that they will receive the very best service” (Mehrtens, 2016). The progressive transformation of higher education into a competitive market has placed the issue of attracting student–customers at the centre of

university management. Marc C. Taylor, from Columbia University, emphasised that “To deny that higher education is a product and students are customers is to duck the tough questions we should be asking.” (New York Times Editors, 2010, para. 8). Heather Rolfe confirmed this shift in the conception that lecturers have of students: “We increasingly see them as customers and, as customers, we should give them good service, which I think is a good thing” (testimony of Lecturer B6, Rolfe, 2002, p. 178); “And I find myself telling them that if they want to come to see me, which is partly what they pay

me for, they are the customers and have rights” (testimony of Lecturer C7, Rolfe, 2002, p. 178). The transformation of students into customers, although recognisable in almost all countries, seems particularly established in university systems set up as competitive markets, such as those in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

Without doubt, high tuition rates encourage students to adopt an attitude of demanding value-for-money and thinking more like customers than as members of the university community. As customers, they demand what they think they need from their provider, in a concrete and specific way. Indeed, a comprehensive report about student attitudes commissioned by the British Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) pointed to the emergence of a consumerist ethos, relative “to the value attributed to their educational experience and the value they expected to receive as a return for their investment” (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013, p. 22). Getting ‘value for money’ is the motto underlying the student conversations gathered in this study, where an “overwhelming majority” valued their university experience in terms of an economic investment, often referring to high fees.

The annual report of the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) shows a trend of uninterrupted growth of the idea that students are investors over decades in North America. In this context, there is a growing number of students who state that they go to college with a view to earning more money (74.6% in 2012 versus less than 50% in 1976; Pryor et al., 2012). Consistent with this finding, the 2014 study undertaken by the Lumina Foundation and a Gallup poll recorded that 95% of students believed that the purpose of studying for a university degree was to “get a good job”. “There is no greater financial investment in one’s future than a college degree”, claims Lowe (2014) in *The Huffington Post* and, like his, a myriad of similar articles analyse which degrees and universities provide a better return on investment.

In Spain, ‘Ensuring a living’, ‘Getting a good job’, ‘Making money’, or ‘Being successful’ are also clearly students’ top reasons for going to university (Boza and Toscano, 2012; Suriá et al., 2012).

This instrumental vision of higher education, as an investment in time, effort, and money from which a return is expected in the form of economic dividends and social prestige, certainly generates a fertile climate—necessary, but not sufficient—for the idea of the customer–student to thrive. To think of the student as a customer also implies thinking of the university as a provider—of services, a qualification, a social brand—creating a relationship in which the customer is in a position to demand, a characteristic of any client in a competitive market.

The increasing number of complaints and claims made by students in the British and Australian ambit is a valuable indicator of the growth of the idea of the customer–student who demands value for their investment. Glyn Jones, director of the Kingston University Student Affairs Office, highlighted the subject thus:

As students now have to pay more for their education, they are becoming more demanding in their expectations about what universities should provide. In recent years, the relations between institutions and students have shifted from the traditional academic relationship to a more contractual type of relationship taken from a consumer’s perspective (Jones, 2006, pp. 70–71).

In fact, the number of complaints received by the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), the centralised UK office that deals with final stage of student claims, grew from 586 in 2006, to 1850 in 2015 (OIA, 2015, p. 9). Australian Anita Stuhmcke (2001) points out how the configuration of the university system as a competitive market with high enrolment rates, has generated a very significant increase in the number of complaints, which increasingly frequently end up in the courts. This has forced universities to write down

their commitments to students very carefully and to create complaints offices with professional experts on the subject.

From the academic point of view, this new student–customer and university–provider scenario, which is especially typical in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia (whose higher education systems have been transformed into a competitive market with high enrolment rates), raises very relevant issues, to the extent that it can mean a profound transformation of the relationships between students, faculty, and institutions, which has redefined academic culture.

Herein, we extensively review the research available in these countries with a view to systematising the transformations that are taking place in two aspects:

- (1) Institutional academic priorities in this student–customer and university–provider scenario to ask: Where are academic resources and effort being invested?
- (2) The academic implications of converting student–customer satisfaction into a new priority institutional objective to ask: How these changes affect the academic offer and educational activity? How are roles and attitudes transformed?

Finally, we present a global vision of what this new scenario represents from the point of view of universities' academic policies and educational activities. The ultimate objective is to anticipate the possible threats that a transformation of this nature represents to the traditional university model in countries like Spain.

INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES IN A CUSTOMER–PROVIDER SCENARIO: REPUTATION, SELECTIVITY, AND SATISFACTION

Correct functioning of the market in a competitive university environment requires the potential customer to have sufficient comparative information about the different institutions and their academic

offer. University systems have thus invested a great deal of effort in implementing public indicators, from the degree of job placements for each degree or university or the dropout and academic success rates, to information about the qualifications of teachers or the agreements with companies and training available. However, nothing is more decisive in the enrolment decision than the reputation or prestige of the institution, the level of entry selectivity, and student satisfaction reports: three factors that reinforce each other and that strongly determine the perceptions, attitudes, and actions of student–customers.

The institution's reputation is a key factor that provides it with a great competitive advantage. Classical marketing literature has always emphasised the importance that reputation has on intangible products and services, and which cannot be measured, tested, or verified before purchase and which therefore requires a kind of act of faith by the purchaser (e.g. Zeithaml et al., 1990; Fombrun, 1996). As Litten states, "They cannot be shown directly or photographed; they cannot be handled, examined, compared to each other on a shelf or on the shop floor, nor can they be tested in the same way as physical goods can" (Litten, 1986, p. 18). US studies at the time also confirmed this general principle in the higher education market: "Academic reputation has a powerful influence on students, greater than professional counsellors' advice or relatives' influence", concluded McDonough et al. (1998, p. 533).

Reputation is a complex concept, built upon the aggregation of multiple dimensions, but university rankings are a simple way to showcase them publicly. The analyses by Bastedo and Bowman (2010) show a strong correlation between the overall rankings results and those of peer reputation surveys, as well as little variability in the time of these valuations. This conclusion is not a surprising if we consider that some of the most important world rankings make reputation surveys one of their most decisive assessment sources (accounting for 50% of the valuation in the QS ranking, 33% in the Times Higher Education (THE)

ranking, 22.5% in the *US New & World Report*, and 25% in the *US Global*). This virtuous cycle protects the major university brands (Diamond and Graham, 2000), i.e., their reputation leads to good results in the rankings, which, in turn, reinforces their good reputation. As Craig and Lombardi (2012) point out, the only evidence of reputation is reputation itself, which makes the rankings alien to the true qualities of the institution.

Reputation is presented as a key factor in attracting students, particularly those with better academic records or those in advantageous economic positions (McDonough et al., 1998; McDonough et al., 1997; Kotler and Fox, 1995) and, likewise, attracting students with higher academic qualifications is considered to be one of the determinants of a university's reputation (Astin, 1970; Volkwein and Sweitzer, 2006). Reputation is also, according to Eskildsen et al. (1999), the variable that exerts the strongest influence over student fidelity. The concept of fidelity shows students' disposition to recommending the institution to other students and to discuss its positive aspects, as well as their intention to continue attending its study programs or other educational activities.

Undoubtedly, the satisfaction of students and graduates is just as an important factor in the public construction of reputation, as long as there are mechanisms that allow this to be advertised beyond mere personal communication. It is precisely the countries that have openly opted for a competitive system that have implemented a survey of student satisfaction among institutions. In the United States there are several widely-used instruments, such as the *Student Satisfaction Inventory* (Noel-Levitz, n.d.), but in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Netherlands, governments implement only one survey—the *National Student Survey* (NSS)—for all universities, and provide rankings that have a strong impact on both universities' reputation and demand. Universities that obtain the best positions in the NSS (implemented in the UK since 2004) or in the NSE (*Nationale Studenten Enquête*, applied in the Netherlands since 2010) advertise their results with great fanfare, including outdoor advertising on billboards and buses.

The factors contributing to student satisfaction are highly diverse and extraordinarily variable, according to different university contexts. Decades ago, Astin (1977) foretold that student satisfaction could not be clearly attributed to any specific educational quality, and subsequent studies have done nothing but confirm the enormous complexity of the phenomenon, and the difficulty of decisively attributing satisfaction results to any particular factor. Thorough studies such as those by Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002), Hill et al. (2003), Douglas et al. (2006), Alves and Raposo (2007), or Duque and Weeks (2010) all yielded very different definitions of the factors that determine the degree of student satisfaction. Student satisfaction is continually shaped by the very diverse experiences of life on campus, both inside and outside the lecture hall (Sevier, 1996) and strongly depends on specific contextual factors that fashion their expectations. As Elliott and Shin concluded (2002, p. 198) "Student satisfaction is a subtle and complex phenomenon".

One particularly interesting result of these studies is that they demonstrate a close bidirectional link between reputation and satisfaction. Empirical investigations such as those of Eskildsen et al. (1999), Alves and Raposo (2007), or Brown and Mazzarol (2009) demonstrate a strong correlation between the two factors. Alves and Raposo conclude that in terms of total effects, if the institution's image increases or decreases by one point in terms of assessment, satisfaction levels proportionally increase or decrease by 0.86 point (2007, p. 81). This strong dependence could be due to the supposed better educational quality of universities with a better reputation; however, the data do not seem to support this hypothesis (educational quality is usually a relevant factor, but not as important as the prestige of the university). Nor do specific studies on the educational practices of the most prestigious universities confirm this supposition (Dale and Kreuger, 2002; Kuh and Pascarella, 2004).

Thus, we must resort to the idea that, for students, the prestige of their university is valuable in itself—to the extent that employers consider it as a mark of

their qualifications (Regev, 2007). Regardless of the educational quality per se, attending a prestigious university does mark a difference in future opportunities (Kingston and Smart, 1990; Clarke, 2002; Dill, 2003; Montgomery and Canaan, 2004). In this respect, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) pointed out that students do not ‘buy’ qualifications as such, but rather the benefits that a title can provide them in terms of employment, status, and lifestyle, among other things. On the other hand, the fact of belonging to a highly selective university predisposes students to have a more positive attitude and greater satisfaction with the university experiences they live. The classical studies by Fombrun already warned us that “reputation affects the probability that all involved show favourable behaviour” (Fombrun and Riel, 2003, p. 4). The image and reputation of an institution can be even more important than the quality itself, because it is the perceived image that really influences the choices and attitudes of students (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Not even the high fees of many of these universities seem to penalise student demand or levels of satisfaction, because they perceive the high price to be a sign of higher quality and prestige (Monks and Ehrenberg, 1999).

On the other hand, studies have shown there is a link between a university’s reputation and better rates and quality in its graduates’ employment. We should consider this information together with the fact that the universities with the best reputations and employment rates are those often attended by the best students, from the academic point of view, among which a medium-high or high socio-economic level predominates.

Taken together we have drawn the key virtuous circle of the potential to attract the student–customer: better students (higher selectivity), better reputation, greater satisfaction, and better rates of employment, factors that feed each other and that make a university attractive. In other words, if one manages to attract the best students from the best socially positioned families then, logically, one obtains the best academic results and employment outcomes.

STUDENT–CUSTOMER SATISFACTION: THE NEW PRIORITY FOCUS OF POLICY AND ACADEMIC ACTIVITY

“If customers like it, then it’s a quality product”
(Doherty, 1995, p. 3).

According to Kanji and Tambi (1999) in higher education, student–customer satisfaction is the goal and measure of quality: “Satisfaction means being better at what matters most to customers and this changes over time. To be in touch with these changes and to give satisfaction to the customer now, and in the future, is a basic part of the integral management of quality” (1999, p. 152). In a competitive environment, in which students are customers, the quality of qualifications and institutions tends to be identified with the degree of satisfaction of their students. High satisfaction levels not only improve retention and fidelity rates and increase universities’ ability to attract new students, but also enable the creation of collaborative networks of graduates with huge potential and which are highly instrumental in improving the organisation’s reputation and position in the market. From this perspective, how students feel during their university experience is an important focus of an institution’s attention (Munteanu et al., 2010; Hill et al., 2003) i.e., they are “an avenue through which a competitive advantage can be gained” (Elliott and Shin, 2002, p. 199) and are the focal point for the university’s quality strategy.

Satisfaction can be understood as “a psychological state or a subjective judgement based on the client’s experiences compared with their expectations” (Helgesen and Nettet, 2007, p. 43). In other words, customers are satisfied when the service conforms to their expectations and are very satisfied when the service exceeds their expectations (Petruzzellis et al., 2006, p. 352). Thus, for academic university directors, what is important for students, i.e., their priorities and expectations, becomes the benchmark of quality on which to model and reorient the institution’s activity. In this respect, López Rupérez asserts that the students’ perspective is “becoming a fundamental reference point when it comes to establishing what is of quality and what is not” (2003, p. 44). The focus

does not encompass *what is best for the students* but rather *their perceptions of what is best* (Jackson et al., 2011, p. 393). In conclusion, if the objective is their satisfaction, it is the student–customer who defines what quality means in relation to the academic offer and teaching quality (Houston, 2007, p. 9).

It is difficult to infer to what extent the level of student satisfaction reflects the quality of education. Among the many factors that contribute to satisfaction (including academic, social, personal, administrative, financial, material, and environmental aspects), which are diverse and shift according to the context, there is no guarantee that the quality of the learning processes or of the curriculum play an important role (James and Coates, 2006). What can be inferred from the conclusions and models of empirical studies—such as those mentioned above—is that, given the strong contextual nature of what we call satisfaction, everything related to the quality of teaching and learning can strongly influence some circumstances but may be little relevant in others.

Faced with the increasingly widespread trend of making students' satisfaction the focal point of university academic quality, many authors (e.g., Sirvanci, 1996; Bay and Daniel, 2001; Carlson and Fleisher, 2002; Clayson and Haley, 2005; and for a review on the controversy see Eagle and Brennan, 2007) have called into question the idea that the student is a customer, and that their satisfaction, values, and interests should be the main objective of the educational effort made by universities.

It is not the same—or at least not necessarily—to focus on students' learning and development as it is to focus on their perceptions and satisfaction. The search for student satisfaction can be useful from the point of view of marketing, but could be detrimental from an educational point of view. The arguments put forward can be synthesised in three main points:

- (1) It is debatable whether the customer in higher education is always right (Mark, 2013). Clayson and Haley argue that students can have a

short-term vision or one based on incomplete perceptions: “If a student believes that a high rank is something desirable in itself, then opting for the easiest subjects or least demanding lecturers to ensure maximum gain with minimum effort would be a wise choice” (2005, p. 2). Empirical studies, however, disprove the widespread belief that students place a greater value on whatever requires less work (Clayson and Haley, 1990; Marsh and Roche, 1997, 2000; Marsh, 2001; Centra, 2003), reporting that students “value learning and achievements that involve substantial levels of challenge and involvement” (Marsh, 2001, p. 185). However, as Rolfe points out (2002), students fundamentally consider their studies as a path to a better professional career and are generally shown to be indifferent to issues related to the level of an academic title. Wiers-Jenssen et al. (2002) highlight how this vision of an academic title as an object that is useful in the labour market could jeopardise highly appraised values, such as an individual's intellectual, social, and personal development or the enjoyment and cognitive stimulus of challenging academic goals. From a perspective merely of usefulness, the desirability of manageable and orderly learning processes is imposed, which ensure success at an acceptable level of investment in time and effort. Another point to consider, as Bay and Daniel point out, is that while in other sectors customers know what they need, in the field of higher education students may lack clear ideas about the knowledge and skills they will need when they come to form part of the labour market. Moreover, “they may not realise whether their education suited their needs until years later” (2001, p. 3). In other words, there may be a significant distance between what students want and what they need (Mark, 2013, p. 4).

- (2) This perception of students as customers may negatively alter the relationship between students and lecturers. On the one hand, they may transfer responsibility for their results to the education

providers (Clayson and Haley, 2005), increasing the demands on resources and teachers, “as if education could be simply and passively consumed” (Eagle and Brennan, 2007, p. 51). This would imply a major setback in quality, to the extent that the implication and degree of autonomy of the student are key factors in good learning outcomes (see, for example, Biggs and Tang, 1999 or Ramsden, 2003). On the other hand, students may feel that they have the right to determine how they should be taught or assessed: “I’m not going to pay someone who expects me to learn all this stuff by myself” was the recent response in our institution to a lecturer who asked students to go to the computer lab to become familiar with a program (Bay and Daniel, 2001, p. 6). The educational relationship is very special, and much different from the relationship between provider and customer (Hall, 1996), starting with the fact that it is the teaching staff who demand effort from their students and evaluate them, and may even stop them from continuing (Sirvanci, 1996). Students are the main architects of what they achieve during their passage through a course or degree and they have an impact on the quality of their peers’ education and “contribute directly to their own satisfaction and perception of quality and value” (Kotzé and Du Plessis, 2003, p. 186). In this respect, Bay and Daniel (2001) propose the notion of the student as a collaborating partner. When it comes to thinking about the educational process, introducing the customer–provider paradigm can alter it both profoundly and undesirably (Houston, 2007, p. 9). Houston (2008) argues that the foundation of education is the concern for the development of students and this moral dimension is lacking in a customer–provider relationship, motivated only by payoff.

- (3) Prioritising the student’s perspective can negatively alter the curriculum. As stated above, studies show that most students’ goals are related to achieving a better position in their future career, and they believe that this

immediate advantage forms the key quality criterion of their qualifications (Eagle and Brennan, 2007). This pragmatic perspective, linked to this immediate advantage, implies that the student–customer pushes to obtain good grades, regardless of the effort they invest (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Carlson and Fleisher, 2002). But students are not the only customers, as society as a whole finances a large part of higher education and it is the future employers who will welcome these graduates and that may express their satisfaction with the education received (Bay and Daniel, 2001). Prioritising student satisfaction could lead to a fall in demand of standards, something that is unacceptable from other perspectives. Furthermore, the pressure exerted by students to obtain returns on their investment in tangible and immediate education can lead to curricular shifts towards excessively practical and technical learning. Such education neglects the fundamental aspects of the student’s intellectual and personal development, which is so essential in advanced democratic societies (Rolfe, 2002; Ballard, 2004). In short, “social needs may not be properly considered if students are seen as the sole clients of the institution” (Bay and Daniel, 2001, p. 3).

A PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDENT–CUSTOMER AND UNIVERSITY–PROVIDER SCENARIO

The student’s conversion into a customer is not simply their claim to being the centre of educational activity. From any perspective, both students and learning are at the centre of educational activity and are a fundamental part of what the university represents. Students do not have to be thought of as customers to conceive the curriculum from the perspective of their needs, and to provide a stimulating environment and appropriate learning processes. The important thing is that the idea of the student as a customer is part of a whole new way of understanding the university concept. If the student is conceived as a customer, it

is because the institution is understood to be a service provider, competing in an environment alongside other providers. In this scenario, strategic institutional priorities include becoming a high-ranking and prestigious brand on the market; to offer a product able to attract more customers, as well as to make them loyal to the brand, and, in short, to orientate the organisation's decision-making and academic and organisational activities and resources, to achieving that end. This is a new way of understanding universities that would be characterised by the following guiding principles:

- (1) Student–customer satisfaction as new way of conceiving the quality of educational activity. Regarding the idea that principles and good practices supported by educational research constitute the reference of quality teaching, we must recognise the role played by customer expectations and perceptions: something is of quality if the client says so, and what the student–customer considers to be good does not necessarily have to coincide with what research concludes. For example, in-depth learning that advocates educational research requires slow learning processes and challenging academic goals from a cognitive and personal point of view, something that the student does not always understand or share. From the most immediate and pragmatic perspective of many students, offering them what they have to learn in a clear and well-organised way facilitates achieving their goal of academic success. Students may prefer the rapid consumption of ‘knowledge pills’ rather than complex challenges and processes of conceptual change that the scientific literature demands.
- (2) A new range of institutional academic priorities: an organisation's management strategy aims to attract more students, select the best, and obtain their satisfaction and loyalty. This, in turn, places the institution's reputation and prestige as a strategic objective. This reputation attracts the best students, which allows for a high degree of selectivity, and at the same time consolidates the reputation, promotes student satisfaction and improves the rates and quality of graduates' employment, thereby consolidating the reputation. Becoming an elite university and capturing elite customers, offers huge advantages. Situating the triangle of reputation–selectivity–satisfaction at the pinnacle of university priorities obliges one to rethink the values that define an organisation, to redirect its efforts and resources, and to redefine its function within society.
- (3) A new way of understanding what a degree is and what its value is. University studies are a student–customer investment, from which payoff is expected in the form of future economic and social gains. As a product moulded by these expectations, the qualification is not only defined by a certain initial competency profile, but it also maximises the claims on the advantages of the investment in that qualification. Thus, one observes the proliferation of academic titles in collaboration with or supported by companies or professional associations. Emphasis is placed on internships and work-place training as well as on the presence of professionals of prestige among the teaching staff. There is a proclamation of a pragmatic understanding of the curriculum, aimed at ‘what is really needed’ and plagued with ‘real cases’, in which the student will act as a future professional; or the presence of extensive student orientation and support services for their incorporation to the labour market. Thus their future qualification is not conceived as an immersion in the questions, knowledge, and methods of a certain scientific field, but as a vocational training, training for success in the working world. This new orientation and curricular meaning substantially alters the formative impact that the qualification has on the student: technical and instrumental capacities predominate over the development of scientific thought per se in the discipline; effectiveness and efficiency values tend to be

imposed over intellectual rigour and critical thinking, specific and practical problems gain ground over criteria issues and challenges of substance; in short, getting the *right answer* to the question reigns.

- (4) A new way of conceiving the relationship between students and the institution. Paul A. Trout stressed that, on the market, “consumer desires represent the supreme mandate”, but that “when this sovereign-customer model is applied to higher education, it not only distorts the mentoring relationship between teacher and student, but makes nonsense out of traditional notions such as hard work, responsibilities, and Standards of Excellence” (Trout, 1997, p. 50). The customer demands a solution to their needs, and value for money. From the provider–customer perspective it may seem that education is something that is ‘given’, a packaged product that the customer receives. In fact, this aspect is mirrored in the evolution of higher education through information technology and online training. This vision transports the responsibility for the results and the effects of the education received to the institutions (hence rankings

proliferate that compare the success of graduates from various universities), empowering students to see themselves as passive consumers, rather than as active and responsible participants in their own education (Jennings and Angelo, 2006). This conception contrasts vividly with the idea of a university community, in which the student participates actively, forming part of the decision-making bodies (something unthinkable for a customer) and participating in the organisation, quality, and development of its activities. This also contradicts conclusions drawn by educational research, which place the active involvement of the student as a key factor in learning. Students are ultimately responsible for their learning and assuming this responsibility means not only to adopt an active and autonomous position in the face of learning, but to engage with their peers and teachers in a process of continuous improvement of the learning experience (Ramsden, 2008). It is in this respect that research findings refer to students as *active partners* and members of a *learning community*. This image sketched by research, founded on an enormous amount of evidence, contrasts vividly with the image of a customer who receives something from a provider.

Figure 1. Summary of the characteristics of the academic offer in terms of educational performance in a student–customer and university–provider scenario

MAIN ACADEMIC TRAITS CHARACTERISING A UNIVERSITY MODEL IN WHICH THE STUDENT IS CONCEIVED AS A CUSTOMER

1. Students as customers who demand what they think they need: value for money.
 2. An academic degree as an investment in a social brand that will provide payoff through a better professional future.
 3. High tuition fees justified by the future personal economic value of the investment.
 4. The higher education system as a market in which institutions compete for student–customers and resources.
 5. Student–customer satisfaction and loyalty as an institutional strategic goal: quality as equivalent to satisfaction.
 6. Satisfaction as a brand: reputation and selectivity as strategic advantages for attracting customers. The brand is seen as a valuable qualification for the student–customer.
 7. The institution as a provider (of the product that best satisfies the customer): curriculum is conceived as preparation for professional success.
 8. Role of the student as a recipient. Responsibility for the results is transferred to the institution. Relationship between the student and the institution (including the teaching staff) is of a contractual nature.
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CONCLUSIONS

The student–customer idea follows the logic of a transformation of higher education into a competitive market and, ultimately, a very lucrative business. The student–customer idea goes far beyond an emphasis on student rights and the obligation of universities to provide them with the best educational experience possible. A customer is someone who pays for a product or service that meets their needs and demands a payoff. A provider in a competitive market seeks to survive by building a prestigious brand, trying to attract more and better customers, and designing products in line with their customers’ preferences and expectations. The customer–provider relationship differs greatly from the teacher–student relationship.

There are, of course, many attractive and interesting aspects of this new student–customer paradigm. But it also encompasses many disturbing nuances and raises no doubt about its impact on the quality of the student’s educational experience as well as the social function of universities, their values and priorities. From the educational perspective, students’ self-perception as customers changes their attitude and puts them in a very different position in terms of their relationship with their lecturers and their university. We should ask ourselves whether this is the best attitude from the educational perspective. The idea of students as active partners in their own learning experience—as consistently supported by research—does not seem to fit in well with their image as customers. From the educational point of view, the conclusion drawn by Lee Harvey and Peter Knight seems much more convincing: “Education is a participatory process. Students are not products, customers, consumers or users of a service: they are participants. Education is not a service provided for a customer (and less so as a product to be consumed) but a progressive transformation process of the participants” (1996, p. 7).

Notwithstanding, Figure 1 endeavours to characterise the paradigm as a finished process, although there are, of course, multiple formulas for reaching a compromise between a traditional university–student concept and the emerging vision of higher education system forming part of a competitive market at any cost. However, we must emphasise that, even in countries where the idea of a competitive market is still incipient, such as Spain, a progressive shift in the latter direction can be observed. The emergence of the student–customer concept within universities is little more than a manifestation of this shift and is clearly reflected in what some have called the ‘complaints culture’, and entails a different attitude towards lecturers and the curriculum. Of course, as Clayson and Haley pointed out, from the faculty’s point of view, “the conceptual approach within which students are defined also defines who we are, what we do and what we think about what we do” (2005, p. 1). Not only should academic qualifications aim to enhance graduates’ professional profiles, but they must also actively appeal to potential students, who are increasingly concerned about their future professional success and for whom investment in higher education is increasingly expensive. Increasingly, university management boards think in terms of *ranking* and *reputation*. The system as a whole is transformed, ideologically moving away from the concept of a university community that gives shape to its institutions. We should ask ourselves whether this newly emerging university is better, and how we can preserve the best of our university tradition within this new context. We should also wonder how we can reconcile the conclusions of educational research with the positions and attitudes that emerge from the new educational paradigm. The question, in short, is how to maintain and strengthen the value of universities in terms of personal development and social wellbeing in an environment where higher education is increasingly seen as an economic investment and as a business.

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