Customer, Collaborator or Co-creator? What is the role of the student in a changing higher education servicescape?

Across the globe, higher education (HE) is experiencing ever increasing turbulence. The more established markets are dealing with pressure on budgets, coupled with government intervention to steer HE in particular directions. In contrast, institutions in many developing economies are facing the challenges arising from managing increasingly rapid growth in HE provision. At the same time attitudes to HE are in flux. Students and their families increasingly have to finance the entire cost of their education and this has spawned a ‘student as customer’ approach. Fee-paying students are demanding more of their Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) while these HEIs claim they are expected to deliver more with less. There is considerable debate and uncertainty about how to respond to these pressures and how to leverage the opportunities they present for students and their HEIs.

Higher education, as a service, has some specific characteristics. These include the high level of active involvement demanded of the individuals accessing the service; a prolonged service relationship, and a great variety in the nature of the service offered. Most importantly, at a fundamental level there is considerable debate as to what the service is actually for. The combination of recession, government pressure, fee increases, student unrest and technology is fast re-modelling the ‘servicescape’ for HEIs and raises a number of questions. What are the implications for value creation and service delivery in HE? What is the value of HE from the standpoints of its many stakeholders? What are the changing expectations of service users? Just what is the ‘product’ that this service offers? This special issue considers global changes that are re-defining the relationship students have with their institutions.

We believe that this changing servicescape, in which both students and HEIs are re-modelling their sense of themselves and their expectations of each other, provides great opportunities. For HEIs, a
much more highly developed understanding of students, their aspirations, expectations and goals is essential if they are to play a full part in realising this potential for themselves and for the students that study with them. We hope this special issue will make a timely contribution to the contemporary debate and stimulate further research-based discussion around the ‘marketisation of HE’ and ‘customertisation of students’ concepts. The articles within this issue critically examine the popular discourse that students are becoming more mechanistic with rising expectations of their rights and of what their money should buy them. We have deliberately drawn together papers from authors reporting on research studies conducted around the globe and in a wide variety of HE contexts to offer comparative and contrasting perspectives.

The first two papers consider the ‘customertisation’ concept and seek evidence of a customer-orientation among students in two quite different settings. Both conclude that ‘customertisation’ is more nuanced than the current discourse suggests and that further empirical research is needed to understand the concept and its application to the complex HE environment. Both papers also provide measurement scales for student-customer orientation. Our third paper considers the value of HE and how academic and non-academic experiences contribute to student satisfaction. Our final two papers consider the experiences of the growing band of international students and the challenges universities face in this very competitive market. Universities recognise the need to achieve a ‘global mind-set’ as part of contemporary graduate attributes and these papers contribute to our knowledge of what a ‘global mind-set’ might look like for an HEI seeking to become a destination of choice for ‘global learners’.

Saunders [They Don’t Buy It: Exploring the Extent to which Entering First-Year Students View Themselves as Customers] – reports a study of first year students entering a large public research university in the North East United States. The study shows how the degree of customer orientation expressed by students will vary in relation to different aspects of the overall HE experience. Moving across to the eastern edge of Europe, Koris [Student-customer orientation at a higher education
institution: the perspective of undergraduate business students] conducted a large study of 2nd and 3rd year business administration students within four HEIs in Estonia. The results complement the Saunders study, in bringing out the subtleties of customer orientation, through demonstrating that students expect an HEI to be customer oriented in some but not all aspects of their offering whilst recognising that they must contribute if they are to earn a good degree. Perhaps unsurprisingly the study suggests that there may be a correlation between student expectations and whether they pay for their education or not.

Moving on again, this time to Asia, Lau [Assessing antecedents and consequences of student satisfaction in higher education: Evidence from Malaysia] explores the situation in Malaysia, a fast-growing regional hub for HE, fostered by a government which openly is seeking to create a strong and forward-looking HE sector. Lau presents a structural model of the interrelationship between four components that influence student satisfaction with their HE studies in private universities and finds that student expectations of those components varies by educational level. Most importantly, Lau reminds us that value perception of the HE experience depends on getting the fundamentals right.

The movement of students across the globe in search of a good education has exploded in recent years. The presence of students from around the globe is seen to offer benefits in terms of increasing diversity on campus, enriching the experience of all the students, driving the internationalisation of curriculum and student services and of course offering a lucrative source of income. Frequently, these students pay a premium to study abroad and understandably seek the best experience and education they can find. The volatility of the international student marketplace places a great premium on the ability of institutions to meet the needs of these ‘global learners’. Traditionally, the destinations of choice have been Western Europe, North America and Australia/New Zealand. However, rising costs and (in many countries) fast-developing home provision, pose an increasing challenge and drive a need to focus on improving the service
experience for these students. Padlee [International Student Satisfaction and Behavioural Intentions: The case of universities in Victoria, Australia] moves the debate onto Australia. Australia has been very successful in attracting large numbers of students from the fast-developing economies of South and East Asia to study both within Australia and ‘off shore’. This paper examines the antecedents and outcomes of satisfaction of international students. The research findings emphasise the importance of ‘word-of-mouth’ recommendation for future student recruitment and in a situation of resource scarcity, highlights the need to focus resources onto the four service areas perceived by students as having the greatest value for them.

Finally, Fleischmann [Degrees of Co-Creation: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions of International Students’ Role in Community Engagement Experiences] also writing from an Australian perspective, focuses attention on community engagement by international students. This, he argues, is an important aspect of their university experience and represents a potential point of competitive advantage. Taking an approach informed by service-dominant logic he demonstrates once again that ‘international students’ should not be considered as a single homogenous group. In examining the way in which they engage in the co-creation of their community experience he identifies three distinct groups and notes that both students and institutions need to collaborate effectively if mutual expectations are to be met and the creation of value realised.

Overall, these papers emphasise the diversity of student expectations and experience as well as the importance of providing a quality service in terms of some common fundamentals. They counsel against a simplistic view of students by institutions and highlight the need for institutions to become more aware of the way in which the services they offer must reflect and anticipate the fast-changing demands of the students they seek to attract. Together they caution against being easily led into making assumptions concerning the application of market-driven concepts to student learning and therefore demonstrate a need for empirical knowledge to understand the enormous variety and complexity within which we manage the ‘student-learning experience’ around the globe.
Running order of articles:

Saunders [They don’t buy it: Students as customers]
Koris [Student-Customer orientation at a HE institution]
Lau [Antecedents and consequences of student satisfaction]
Padlee [International student satisfaction and behavioural intentions]
Fleischmann [Degrees of co-creation]