

Supporting students as both consumers and learners

Striking a balance is a perennial challenge for student Support services in universities – are we getting any better at it?

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In the context of widening participation and an increasingly competitive higher education (HE) sector with reduced public funding, it has become common to approach potential students as ‘customers’ as a way to improve performance quality. Transaction as a form of two-way (beneficial) engagement has given way to transaction as an exchange for a service.

But is this productive? An empirical study by Bunce, Baird and Jones reported that consumer-orientated institutions mediated traditional relationships between learner identity, grade goals and academic performance. They found that higher consumer-orientation was associated with lower academic performance.

At the same time, Shea, Li and Pickett used measures such as academic success and persistence to show that community plays a critical role in student learning. The challenge to create a sense of community, and a sense of belonging, personal identity and engagement for all HE students, is increasing difficult to achieve.

In this context then, HE finds itself at a crossroads: student identity is being questioned (consumer vs learner), as indeed is the very purpose of university education itself. With a proliferation of consumer-oriented HE institutions, and against a backdrop of growing private-public partnerships and micro-credentialing, a coherent (re)conception of student identity is fundamental and urgent.

In this dynamic HE environment, Student Support Services find themselves in the interesting, yet often paradoxical and contradictory, position of having to provide a ‘customer service’ while also developing a student identity and lifelong learning disposition. The on-line environment only adds to the challenges faced by Support Services because of mixed results relating to engagement, critical thinking/reflexivity, persistence and retention.

While many Student Support Services do great work amidst, what some have called, the shifting paradigm of higher education, the time has come for urgent reflection on how best to support students as both consumers and learners in our universities.