



Are university students really customers? When illusion may lead to delusion for all!

Are university students really customers?

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Abstract

Purpose – The marketing concept is an idea that has been adopted in non-marketing contexts, such as the relationships between universities and their students. This paper aims to posit that marketing metaphors are inappropriate to describe the student-university relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors provide a conceptual discussion of the topic.

Findings – The use of marketing metaphors appears sometimes to be indiscriminate and the appropriateness to use them in student-university relationships is questioned in this article.

Research limitations/implications – This notion of students as customers has caused a misinterpretation of the relationship between universities and students.

Practical implications – Students should not be viewed as customers of the university, but as citizens of the university community. The contention contained within this paper is that the customer metaphor is inappropriate to describe students' relationships to universities.

Originality/value – The use of marketing buzzwords does not contribute to a correct description or an accurate understanding of the student-university relationship. On the contrary, misconceptions and misunderstandings flourish due to misleading terminology and contradictory vocabulary. These frameworks tend to be illusionary if used in non-marketing contexts, such as universities.

Keywords Students, Marketing theory

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction: marketing metaphors and buzzwords

In the marketing literature it is constantly argued that the marketing executive should pay attention to the customers' needs and wants in order to achieve and maintain successful business relationships in the marketplace. This fundamental approach is often referred to as the "marketing concept" (McKitterick, 1957; Keith, 1960; Kotler, 2000). It is one of the most significant concepts ever developed in the marketing literature. There are different approaches to marketing such as the marketing mix (e.g. McGarry, 1950; Borden, 1964; McCarthy, 1960), industrial marketing (e.g. Håkansson, 1982; Ford, 1998), services marketing (e.g. Shostack, 1977; Grönroos, 2000) and relationship marketing (e.g. Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Gummesson, 1995) all of which stress the importance of the customers to the firm.

The marketing concept is an idea that has been adopted in non-marketing contexts, such as the relationships between universities and their students (Aliff, 1998; Baldwin, 1994; Delmonico, 2000; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Lust, 1998; Pitman, 2000; Seymour and Collett, 1991; Shupe, 1999; Spicuzza, 1992; Tierney, 1999). Students are seen as



customers of knowledge at many universities. Likewise, universities regard themselves as suppliers of knowledge to these customers. In extension, many universities go a step further and regard their students as collaborators in the quest for knowledge. It is apparent that these universities have been strongly influenced by marketing metaphors. The use of marketing metaphors appears sometimes to be indiscriminate and the appropriateness to use them in student-university relationships is questioned in this article. This notion of students as customers, we contend, has caused a misinterpretation of the relationship between universities and students. As Driscoll and Wicks (1998, pp. 60) have said:

We suggest that limits be placed on the application of the marketing concept in universities, and urge relevant stakeholders to consider the dangers of taking the customer-seller analogy too far.

Generally, we suggest that marketing metaphors are inappropriate to describe the student-university relationship. The student-university relationship has no analogy to traditional marketing relationships such as customer-supplier or buyer-seller (Shupe, 1999). The expectations inherent in the customer-supplier relationship are inappropriate in the student-university relationship, because the relationship is not just predicated on the purchase and use of a product, but upon a level of interaction between the product, the consumer and the supplier that is not the norm in the general marketing relationship. Specifically, we contend that the customer metaphor is inappropriate to describe students' relationships to universities (Shupe, 1999). The use of marketing buzzwords does not contribute to a correct description or an accurate understanding of the student-university relationship. On the contrary, misconceptions and misunderstandings flourish due to misleading terminology and contradictory vocabulary. These frameworks tend to be illusory if used in non-marketing contexts, such as in respect to universities and their recruitment strategies for students.

The world of education today

Today, we constantly hear the term the "knowledge economy" (Stilwell, 2003). One has to have skills that are often only provided by a university education. If one does not have a degree, one's job prospects in many areas are severely restricted. As the economies of first world countries have moved from a manufacturing based economy to a service based economy, the "knowledge of thought" that is one's ability to create solutions as a result of one's thinking abilities rather than "the knowledge of process" that is one's ability to replicate a manufacturing process has become the backbone of the economy.

In order to progress in these new economies, a university degree moves from being desirable to, in many cases, being a necessity. Universities have capitalised on these changes in the economy and have coined the term "life long learning" as a "marketing hook" to ensure repeat business for their product offerings. No longer is a bachelor's degree enough to ensure employment that leads to a career. One needs constantly to be upgrading one's skills in order to compete in the marketplace. Universities reflect this reality in the marketplace and use their marketing departments to capitalise upon this obvious marketing opportunity.

As universities have embraced the marketing concept, they have established marketing departments focussed on capitalising on these newfound opportunities. The

use of marketing terminology and concepts permeates every thing they do in respect of recruitment. They use the jargon: positioning, target markets, advertising message (Baldwin, 1994). They transfer this customer paradigm on to their websites and into their conversations with prospective students. Nothing is wrong with adopting a marketing focus as long as the university, in its promotional strategies, is upfront in terms of disclosure about what a university education really does require. Students do not all complete their degrees because some of them just cannot do it. Either these students do not have the intellectual capital to cope with university life and the pressures associated with it and/or circumstances outside of their control conspire against them extraneous to the university experience that preclude them from finishing their studies. Some of these issues can revolve around family matters, personal health issues and/or financial hardship issues.

Academics are in the positions that they are in because they have completed the academic studies often with accompanying industry experience that equip them to sit in judgement on the efforts of their students, and whilst “real world” experience is a distinct advantage in a university environment, a more academic approach is required when one embarks upon a university degree. It is not uncommon to hear anecdotal reflections from academics who have been challenged by students who question, in some cases in the most vociferous of tones, the academic’s right to judge the merit of their work as they work in the “real world” per se and their perception is that the said academic is either out of touch with reality, or according to the student has never experienced commercial reality as they have.

Students need to engage with the academic rigour of the course and to demonstrate the interconnectedness between theory and practice. Some of these obvious links are being missed in the marketing of universities and the expectations of students are sometimes blinkered when they enter the university system. Often students are not informed of the level of academic rigour required of a university degree and the fact that not everyone passes and not everyone is deemed as a high achieving student. In some cases, if these students have come through an articulated pathway from the commercial arm of a university their expectations can be falsely set based on the ease of assessment and the awarding of higher marks to such a cohort of students. Such marks may be unsustainable when they progress on to the mainstream university system.

As universities have become comfortable with the use of marketing terminology as a paradigm for the relationship that they have with their students, they have created in the minds of students a perception that they are customers (Delmonico, 2000; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Pitman, 2000; Seymour and Collett, 1991): customers who perceive that they have rights equivalent to those rights that they see in the every day marketplace. This concept of students as customers has extended into the popular press with discussions occurring in respect to this issue in such well-read daily newspapers as the Sydney Morning Herald (Jopson, 2005) and the Washington Post (Shepard, 2005). Since the 1960s and the activities of Ralph Nader in the United States of America, there has been a rise worldwide in the concept of “consumerism” (Kotler *et al.*, 2001; Perrault and McCarthy, 1999). Governments have introduced and implemented consumer rights legislation, trade practices legislation, antitrust legislation, watchdogs and consumer advocates to ensure that the customer is protected against the provider of the goods or services that they purchase (Kotler *et al.*,

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2001). One can, therefore, understand that students enter universities being told that they are customers, and consequently in their own minds they justifiably are. They transfer the dominant marketplace “customer” model to their perceived relationship with the university. If they have concerns in their studies, they are encouraged to express their dissatisfaction. They are frequently surveyed to determine what they like and what they do not like about their courses. The role of the customer is reinforced in them and they act out that role when they engage with universities on issues that have not met their expectations. Whilst no one could be naïve enough to suggest that students do not have rights and that universities should not protect these rights assiduously, many students lack an understanding of their responsibilities for their own education.

As a customer, if you do not like something you are entitled to complain. The major increase in student complaint, communicated anecdotally by academics, is the appeal against the marks awarded for assignments and examinations (Shepard, 2005). Of course, students are entitled to voice their concerns in these areas, but they are becoming more strident in their interactions with the academic staff. Students are now challenging the format of the examinations that are set because as the customer, they do not necessarily believe that the examination format will be in their personal best interests. It may not cater for their own perceived areas of positive skills, so they challenge academics to debate the merits of these examination formats. Driscoll and Wicks(1998, p. 60) capture this idea when they contend:

... that venerating student needs may be detrimental to higher education in the long run, because the need for a quality education is not patently clear in the minds of all students (or potential students), and as such a customer orientation cannot ensure high quality programs.

Universities often bestow on students an ability to critique a situation about which they may have little understanding (Delmonico, 2000) and in a situation where their own self-interest may in fact cloud their objectivity. How does a first year university student judge the depths of educational quality of the units presented to them based on such limited experiences? As Lust (1998, p. 34) contends:

If we think only of the short term customer satisfaction, the longer term benefits of intrinsic motivation and intellectual exploration will be lost.

What is wrong with these issues being raised? Well, there is nothing wrong really, because many students genuinely believe that they are customers and as such are entitled to voice their concerns if it may be seen that the elements of academic assessment may be of detriment to them. Besides they have paid their money and/or they have financial costs for their studies and they want value for that money and/or costs, because, after all, they are “customers” of the university. The next obvious question is how is it that universities have found the need to “market” to students in the ways that they have?

The educational environment today

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, universities around the world were forced to look at financial sources other than those provided by governments, (Delmonico, 2000; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998; Marginson and Considine, 2000) that would enable them to generate fee income for the sector (Stilwell, 2003). This fee

income would need to come from overseas students and local students willing to pay for the privilege of doing a university course. Universities became creative in their course offerings and broadened their target markets. No longer did they focus solely on home country residents, but they sought out international students and targeted the corporate world through their newly established university commercial apparatus: apparatus that was designed to introduce the corporate world to the concept of “life long learning”: the repeat purchaser. Marketing metaphors have become a natural part of the academic vocabulary in the marketing efforts directed towards prospective students. With the deregulation of the tertiary sector came the need for universities to actively compete for “market share” (Stilwell, 2003).

Universities not only established partnerships with large corporate sector businesses in order to provide education to the staff of the corporate, but also to generate much needed fee income. The fee income that was generated from these groups soon became seen not as “a windfall”, but as consolidated revenue and university plans were predicated on the continued growth of these fee income streams. The “financial” imperative began to rival the “academic rigour” imperative as the focus for universities. Universities had crossed from the realm of “protectionism” in which they were funded by the state to all out competition in a deregulated marketplace. They had, by default, become commercial enterprises (Byrd, 2001; Jopson, 2005) that in themselves had become subject to the vagaries of the marketplace of which they were a part, but also one which they had helped to create.

It was a simple transition to adopt the practices of the marketer, for these universities were locked in a battle for survival based on “market share”. When one assumes the mantle of free market competition, one then assumes the trappings of such a philosophy. The key to sustain growth is to employ the principles of marketing. The adoption of marketing principles within the university sector led to the obvious transition to the concept that students were customers (Aliff, 1998; Driscoll and Wicks, 1998), because as a “revenue stream” they were seen as such by university authorities.

Universities are more and more adopting the posturing and the functionality of free enterprise organisations (Jopson, 2005). They value their “customers” and have become more sensitive to their needs for these student-customers are the “continued lifeblood” of the institution and the sector, but is this situation a correct portrayal of the relationship that should exist? We think not! As Aliff (1998, p. 5) contends:

business terms applied to education represent ‘a clash of metaphors’.

Characteristics of the student-university relationship

The characteristics of the student-university relationship are illustrated in Figure 1. Initially, the relationship between the student and the university may be interpreted as

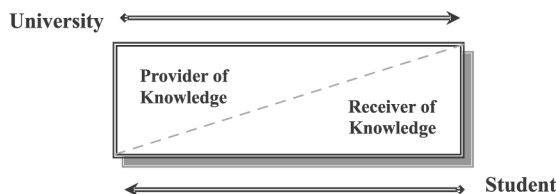


Figure 1.
Provider-receiver of knowledge relationship between student and university

a provider-receiver relationship, where the university is the provider of knowledge and the student is the receiver of knowledge, however, the roles of provider and receiver become interchanged as the student-university relationship evolves. Eventually, the provider-receiver relationship becomes modified, where the student is the provider of knowledge and the university is the receiver of knowledge.

The evolutionary interchange of roles between provider and receiver of knowledge between students and universities undermines the reasoning and adequacy of the customer metaphor in these relationships. Even though we assume that the student is a customer, there is a gradual change from customer to non-customer characteristics in the evolution of student-university relationships, which further strengthens the doubtfulness of the customer metaphor. The customer (i.e. the student) becomes the supplier (or provider of knowledge) and the supplier (i.e. the university) becomes the customer (or receiver of knowledge). Consequently, it may appear to be a customer-supplier relationship or buyer-seller relationship on the surface, but the underlying features that underpin the student-university relationship do not support the use of marketing metaphors in general.

In particular, the customer metaphor appears to be highly doubtful and contradictory in this context. Normally, the customer continues to be the customer in marketing relationships and the supplier continues to be the supplier. Consequently, there is a customer metaphor paradox inherent in the application of student-university relationships.

The major reason that we contend that it is contradictory to accepted marketing practices and should not be accepted as such is based upon the interaction with the product on offer. If one compares the purchase of a car to the “purchase” of a university degree there are some obvious differences. The car manufacturer will sell the car to you if you have the ability to buy. The ownership of the product will pass into the customer’s hands upon the payment for the car being received by the supplier, however, in universities the exchange of money is not enough. Universities assess how you use the product before they deem that you are able to purchase more of the product in subsequent years. A car manufacturer does not examine one’s ability to use their product before they will let you buy another one. This is the essential and inherent difference in the two relationships that in its very essence makes the customer-supplier relationship for students and universities inappropriate and unacceptable. Money may let one purchase and drive a car, but money alone should not let one purchase and possess a university degree. The purchase of a car is based solely on a “product payment” basis, whilst a university degree should be based on a “product performance” basis. University students must perform to the satisfaction of the university with the product called university education before they are allowed to purchase more of the product. This relationship appears to be unique. The relationship with a “product payment” basis of purchase is not interchangeable.

A relationship has a cycle that may be structured in various phases. There are some fundamental differences between the customer-supplier and student-university relationship cycles. Essential areas of importance are current rights and obligations inherent in these relationships. Typically, the relationship cycles of students’ and customers’ rights and obligations are different (see Figures 2 and 3). In fact, they are truly contradictory.

The rights and obligations in customer relationship cycles may be divided into four phases based upon the typology illustrated in Figure 2. The typology consists of two dimensions that are rights and obligations. Each dimension consists of two categories, namely the relative importance between less or more continuous customer rights in the post-purchasing phase (e.g. service and guarantees), while the obligations are restricted to the buying and complying phases (e.g. terms and conditions). Consequently, the time-span of customer rights is longer than the one of customer obligations during the relationship cycle. The rights of the customer are also mostly stressed in the final phases of the relationship cycle and one contends even after the buying cycle has formally ended.

The rights and obligations in student relationship cycles may also be divided into four phases based upon the typology illustrated in Figure 3. The typology consists of two dimensions that are also rights and obligations. Each dimension consists of two categories, namely the relative importance between less and more rights versus obligations. For example, once the student has been approved or accepted for participation in a course the student has the right – not necessarily the obligation - to participate during lectures. The student also has the right to interact with the lecturers in charge by asking questions and receiving answers to some of these questions – not all (e.g. the correct solutions in advance of forthcoming exams). Generally, the student relationship cycle is initially characterised by students' rights in the commencing and continuing phases. The obligations occur mainly in the continuing and concluding phases. For example, the student has the obligation to fulfil course related tasks during the time period of the course. In addition, they are often obliged to be present and interact actively with the other students and the lecturer(s) during seminars. These tasks and seminars tend to occur after the initial phase of the student relationship cycle, that is, in the continuing and concluding phases. There may be separate or connected task assignments that should be accomplished before the final exam, as well as one's presence during seminars. The task assignments, the seminars and the final

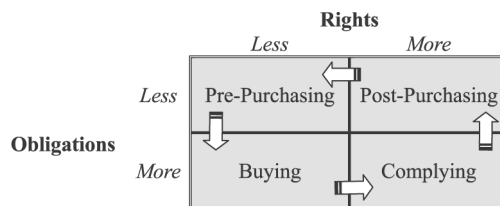


Figure 2. Customer rights and obligations in customer relationship cycles

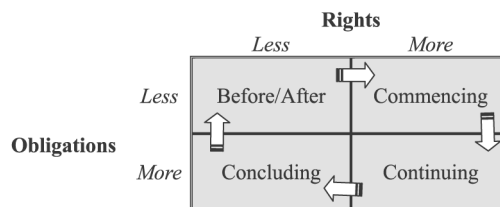


Figure 3. Student rights and obligations in student relationship cycles

exam are compulsory for the student in order to pass the course. Consequently, the time-span of student rights is – relatively speaking – primarily located in the initial phases. In the same way, the obligations are mainly emphasised at the end of the relationship cycle.

The principal phases of rights and obligations in student and customer relationship cycles develop and move in opposite directions to each other. As indicated previously, the student relationship cycle has a stronger emphasis on the student's rights in the initial phases, than on the obligations that have a stronger emphasis during the latter phases. On the contrary, the customer relationship cycle has a stronger emphasis on the customer's rights in the latter phases, than on the obligations that have a stronger emphasis during the initial phases. Relatively, the customer and student relationship cycles are not compatible, since the content and evolution of the relationships differ in terms of the rights and obligations involved. This indicates the inappropriateness of the customer metaphor in student-university relationships.

Characteristics of the citizen-authority relationship

The term "citizen" relates to the relationship between a state and the individual who lives within that state. Citizens are members of a community in which they participate (Barbalet, 1988), such as students enrolled in a university. Such a notion of being a citizen implies a need to acknowledge the rights and responsibilities of both the state and the individual to each other. Each member of the community is a citizen and there is a reciprocal relationship of rights and responsibilities between the parties (Carter, 2001; Fisher and Lovell, 2003). The state (authority) is able to implement policies that will have a strong impact on its citizens (Beland, 2005), just as universities can do with their students. If one scrutinizes the student-university relationship, it resembles more the characteristics of the citizen-authority relationship than a customer-supplier relationship. In other words, the student-university relationship and the citizen-authority relationship are not necessarily identical in every aspect, but they are more similar to each other than the similarity to the customer-supplier relationship.

We contend that there are fundamental reasons to use a citizen metaphor instead of a customer metaphor to describe the student-university relationship. In the first place, the university is an authority that has the right and the obligation to provide higher education in a society. In most traditional customer-supplier relationships the supplier (or seller) has the commercial rights to offer the marketplace a good or a service. This is done voluntarily and it is not an obligation. In the second place, a society consists of citizens all of whom are entitled to attend and participate in higher education, if they fulfil stipulated requirements. Students are citizens of the society – not customers! Universities exercise their authority by passing or failing students after examinations. Consequently, there is an obvious difference in terms of the rights and the obligations involved in customer-supplier relationships versus student-university relationships. Figures 2 and 3 have intended to support, to illustrate and to underpin this argument.

Generally, the citizen relationship cycle (see Figure 3) is initially characterised by students' rights in the commencing and continuing phases (e.g. the participation in higher education), while the obligations occur mainly in the continuing and concluding phases (e.g. the examination in higher education). Consequently, the time-span of student rights is primarily in the initial phases and the obligations are at the end of the student relationship cycle.

As the student-university relationship evolves the relativity between rights and obligations changes. The same applies in the citizen-authority relationship. For example, students' obligations in higher education dominate, while their rights are subordinated. Likewise, citizens' obligations become evident in for example taxation, justice and parenthood. This does not mean that the students' and citizens' rights are unimportant, but universities' and authorities' rights as the authority are exercised and dominate the relationship to some extent. On the one hand, students are considered to be customers at many universities, as well as citizens and they are expected to be served by the authorities. On the other hand, a university is an authority that judges the students' performance, as well as the authority judges the citizens' behaviour, obedience and compliance. The university "punishes" the students that fail the exams by not passing them. The authority "punishes" the citizen that misbehaves, disobeys and does not comply in their area of regulations by fines, enforced treatments and imprisonments. Normally, customers judge the performance of their suppliers, not the reverse. The university and the authority judge the performance of the student and the citizen, not the contrary! The student and the citizen may have an opinion and may disagree, but they are not in the position to judge, therefore, the student-university and the citizen-authority relationships resemble each other to a larger extent than the customer-supplier relationship that evolves in a different context.

Customers maintain the relative strength between rights and obligations throughout the relationship cycle, which is not the case with students'/citizens' relationships with universities/authorities. Relatively, the students' rights are stronger than the obligations at the start of the relationship cycle, while the students' obligations are stronger than their rights at the end of the relationship cycle, with the university (see Figure 4). Accordingly, the previous discussion has pinpointed that the student-university relationship resembles more to a citizen-authority relationship than a customer-supplier relationship, therefore, we argue that the customer metaphor is inappropriate and unfortunate. It creates a biased and distorted understanding of universities' rights and obligations in relation to students. Likewise, students considering themselves as being customers may inappropriately misinterpret their rights and obligations in relation to the university (Driscoll and Wicks, 1998). It may cause them to misbehave, disobey or not to comply appropriately – an action that may be in vain and cause negative consequences for them. For the mutual good of the rights and obligations of all parties, universities, academics and students should perceive themselves as involved in a citizen-authority relationship, otherwise this current distorted perception may seriously affect the overall and ultimate outcome of the relationship.

Figure 4 refers – one at a time – to single citizen/authority and student/university relationships – not to several or all at the same time. It is important to realize that it contains a time axis that goes from the left to the right for students/citizens (i.e. the

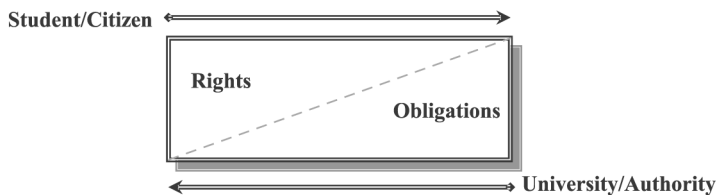


Figure 4.
Rights and obligations in
citizen-authority and
student-university
relationships

right-hand arrow) and from the right to the left for universities/authorities (i.e. the left-hand arrow). In extension, it reflects a unique context per se on each occasion it is applied in a citizen/authority and student/university relationship.

Concluding thoughts

We argue that the citizen-authority relationship metaphor provides a more accurate description of the relationship between universities and students than the traditional customer-supplier relationship metaphor. If this paradigm drift towards students being customers is allowed to continue unchecked, then there may be dire consequences for the university sector (Driscoll and Wicks, 1998). If academics can no longer be the uncompromised arbiters of judging student knowledge acquisition, then the system may at best be stressed and at worst undermined.

Knowledge and the official pursuit of it through the attainment of a degree has been turned into a readily-for-sale commodity. Universities need to collectively enlighten their students that they are citizens of the university community and not just customers of the university product alone. They do have extremely strong and justifiable rights that universities and academics should and must respect, but they also have responsibilities to the university community as well, which they must respect. If universities do not take this collective action, then we shall see the rise of “student consumerism” impact on the quality of university education. As Tierney (1999, p. 126) says:

A customer driven focus certainly runs the risk of destroying standards if the definition of such a focus is to blindly adapt to the marketplace and merely meet the whims of whoever comes to classes.

The whole sector needs to reconsider its apparent myopic commitment to this “customer” focus and to adopt a focus based on the “citizen” concept. If this action occurs, we shall all be able to advance everyone’s knowledge without academics being concerned that a mark awarded to a student may lead to ramifications for the academic (Shepard, 2005).

The next logical step will be litigation by a student from whom universities have taken their money and whom the university system has admitted to a degree and who may claim poor performance on the part of the university. It may be that the student is unable to complete the degree, because they may not have the intellectual capital to do so or the university may not have provided what the student deems to be sufficient for them to complete their degree. There appears, however, to be no such disclaimer about student inability from the university sector, because as all good marketers know, you should never focus on the downsides of your product offering when selling it. By crossing the threshold into the world of commercial practice, universities leave themselves open to the implications of trade practices legislation that may be applied to the university sector (Jopson, 2005) with the resultant consequences that the sector may not have anticipated.

University academic administrators will tell you that such notions are not correct, because they have time-honoured procedures in place to protect the quality of their educational outcomes, but academics dealing with these matters on an every day basis will tell you that this claim is not always perceived by the academics dealing with these issues as correct. Under persistent student pressure, academic managers may be influenced to approve an outcome that is in the best interest of the student, but perhaps

not of the university and its espoused pursuit of sustained quality (Shepard, 2005). Driscoll and Wicks (1998, p. 59) capture this idea when they say:

Moreover, if students are able to negotiate curriculum and evaluation based on their perceived needs as customers, then universities may possibly erode the quality to which students were attracted in the first place.

This focus on the marketing paradigm, we contend, has led some students to perceive that admission to the degree and the payment of the attendant fees are equal to the conferral of the degree. They have “bought” the product and so assume that they have “ownership” of it from the first days of their degree studies.

The very structure of the present system is the reason for its current situation. Governments, universities and academics alike are all responsible for the current situation in which the sector finds itself. Each party needs to do more to redefine their roles and the ways in which they approach their student cohorts. This redefinition is not about establishing a superior position with the students, as the authors see this concept of superiority as an anathema to fostering meaningful, tertiary sector learning, but this redefinition should focus on making the parameters of the relationship as unambiguous as is possible. As Lust (1998, p. 34) contends:

We certainly do owe respect to our students, no doubt about that. But have we compromised respect for expertise and for the learning process itself in our encouragement of the “customers” concept?

The customer metaphor creates a misguided illusion: an illusion that if not corrected may lead to delusion for us all!

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