

## THE IMPACT OF STUDENT CONSUMERISM METAPHOR ON HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

*After the implementation of TQM concepts in Education, the status of students has changed. Now the students are considered consumers of education. This proposition about student consumerism is much debated. The concept of consumerism leads to the analysis of many important issues about product and consumer satisfaction. However, less is discussed about the impact of consumerism on students. This paper attempts to critically analyze the issue from the perspective of its impact on students. This paper attempts to analyze the important concept of student consumerism by discussing its impact on students in higher education. The main objective of the study is to find out how the concepts of student consumerism influence the students as they are considered the main element of education system.*

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**Keywords:** Customers, Tertiary Education, Teacher Evaluations, Student Consumerism, Education Market.

### INTRODUCTION

An increasing body of academic knowledge recognizes students as consumers of higher education. Some recent research demonstrated higher education students as customers of “global knowledge industry” (Newson 2004:227; Eagle and Brennan 2007). Further, Newson (2004:227) notified scholars, policymakers, journalists and students alike, whether they are critical or supportive of the trend, agree that this way of conceiving of the relationship between the receivers and deliverers of higher education services, is a good fit with the new reality of university and college education.

Though, student as customer metaphor is disliked and alleged, nevertheless accepted by the majority of academics and staff. However, the term customer or consumer is considered inappropriate for the kind of relationship between student and university academics and staff. University staff, in a study, suggested the term “client”

rather than customer as an appropriate term for students because clients don't have expectations like the customers have (Pitman 2000:170; Conway *et.al.*, 1994; Carlson and Fleisher 2002). Further, Helms and Key (1994 cited in Kamvounias, 1999:32) argued: Not surprisingly, this difficulty has led some to note that no term is appropriate to convey the complexity of the situation and conclude that students should just continue to be referred to as students.

However, Freeman and Thomas (2005) explain that the term consumer justifies well to the status of student as consumer because student is a person who finally select, experience and consume the services of education. There are further more stakeholders involved in the process such as parents, funders, academic institutions, government, public and businesses. Mainly, Total Quality Management (TQM) is considered responsible for the concept of student as customers in education (Kamvounias, 1999), albeit the concept of TQM does not fit so well to higher education as it was originally developed for manufacturing sector (Kamvounias, 1999). However, most TQM approaches have been applied with some modifications to suit the unique nature of higher education system. By keeping in mind the concept of customer in TQM, different customers of education have been identified such as students, parents of students, government, funding agencies, public, businesses, university employees i.e. administration and faculty (Carlson and Fleisher, 2002). Still, many agree that a student is a main consumer in the higher education process (Eagle and Brennan, 2007:55).

#### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

A careful review of the extant literature suggests that student consumerism in higher education is yet under-research which needs urgent attention. Consequently, this study attempts to critically analyze the issue from the perspective of its impact on students by exploring concept of student consumerism in higher education. Study also aims to address how the concepts of student consumerism influence the students as they are considered the main element of education system.

#### **CRITICAL REVIEW OF EXTANT LITERATURE**

When students are considered customers or consumers, then the marketing concepts such as 'customer is the king' or "the customer is

always right” may prove detrimental to the education system (Eagle and Brennan, 2007:45) and to the customer itself. Since these are pure marketing terms created to delight the business customers, whose relationship to businesses is a kind of transaction i.e. give and take. A business customer does not have a long and different kind of relationship which a higher education student shares with his or her institute and teachers. Let’s assume, if students are treated by keeping in view the concepts such as the customer is always right, it would not make students ‘happy customers’ in the long run. Because if the motive is to satisfy student customers, then there will be no classes or there will be only fun and enjoyment in class with no homework and no exam. The entire students of class would demand A+ and there would be no learning. Will students be happy? No! Because in this situation, students are losers not winners, students want good grades for future prospects and jobs. All that actually needed is learning and education that makes students ‘happy customers’ in the long term. Patton and Patton (2006:4) describe this situation as “The classroom professor is similar to the cruise ship officer: teaching passengers to put on life preservers when they know the ship is going down”. It means that teacher’s role is not to pamper students but to make them learn by even the toughest way. Education is a very exceptional kind of a service where a consumer is assessed/tested and selected on the basis of his or her competence and aptitude (to check the eligibility of customer) for the product (Patton and Patton, 2006) and then every customer receives the final product according to his or her proficiency. It means that every time a customer or consumer purchases the product, the end product of education is different.

Even customer satisfaction is a very important concept of consumerism; nevertheless Pitman (2000:169) observed in his study that the majority of university staff was of the opinion that customer satisfaction in education is not a necessary condition for customer service. They described customer satisfaction in terms of good grades or results and not every customer can be satisfied i.e. good grades cannot be given to every customer irrespective of their abilities and learning. Staff described customer satisfaction or customer service as: “...to explain to a dissatisfied customer the reasons for a particular decision, but felt that ultimately it was possible that some customers would fail to be satisfied under any circumstances. In this instance, the credo ‘The customer is always right’ becomes harder to live by, or

rather it would be more accurate to say, ‘which customer?’” (Pitman, 2000:169).

Higher education students are criticized for being more career oriented and less inclined to take pleasure in academic learning and comprehension of multifaceted world around them; as a result students are indifferent to changing affairs of state, worsening economic conditions and sufferings of unprivileged people (Carlson and Fleisher 2002; Spiegler 1998 cited in Freeman and Thomas 2005). Further, Norris (1978 cited in Hwarng and Teo 2001:195) argues that “Higher education is not only a career preparation but, more importantly, an intellectual development which should have life-long impact on individuals”. However, Carlson and Fleisher (2002:1109) does not hold students responsible for their approaches such as career orientation and intellectual disengagement as they describe it the outcome of “world we (educated elite) have created” for students; as “students’ parents are consumed in work” and encourage their children too and “Public school teachers are forced to worry more about guns, drugs and gangs than lesson preparations”. They further emphasize on the need to urge every stakeholder to work together to improve the situation.

Further, students as consumers of education are said to be more inclined towards temporary achievements rather than enduring accomplishments resulting in declining faith in academic institutions and growing distance between students and academia (Spiegler, 1998 cited in Freeman and Thomas, 2005). Therefore, there is a growing need to create a strong relationship between students and faculty so that students learn to think and act intellectually. Students take admission in higher education institutes for some realistic reasons. The most important reason is to acquire the needed qualification (Chonko *et.al.*, 2002 cited in Eagle and Brennan 2007:44) or skills to obtain a good job or growth in career (Eagle and Brennan 2007; Metcalf 2001 cited in Rolfe 2002) to pay the student loans after completing the study (Rolfe 2002). Since it has become difficult for students to continue their higher education studies and then look for a job because students have to fund their higher education studies. This ugly harsh reality plus strong marketization of universities has made students think like consumers. Students are compelled to believe education service as like purchasing a fast [education] food which enhances their employability and they are accused of demanding their

consumer rights and the guaranteed results for these services irrespective of their efforts (Carlson and Fleisher, 2002).

Then here comes the problem! Since education service is not like other services and it is quite a unique and distinct kind of service which shows the path to outstanding future but it does not guarantee that future for all. At the end of the day, it is the individual's hard work and abilities that decides who gets what [in terms of results]. While, students have been described consumers or customers of education piquantly and criticized for the decline in the quality of education, on the other hand, student too might be suffering from the consequences of student consumerism. As these were not the students but the administration (Pitman 2000) that started such tendencies of student as customer or consumer metaphor, yet students are the party (easy target) to allege for every crime in higher education. Students are blamed of those offences to which they are the bystanders. However, students are enjoying the results of changing trends in higher education system but they are not directly responsible for these tendencies. It is the management or administration of higher education institutions which is bringing faculty under strict inspection and assessment and decided to give students freedom to demand their rights which help administration in controlling their employees in a much better way especially academics.

Student as consumer metaphor is assumed an important reason for decline in academic standards and related grade inflation. Carlson and Fleisher (2002) described an example of a professor who was coerced to give A and B grades to students who actually earned B and C grades to delight the students. But who coerced the professor? Furthermore, Carlson and Fleisher (2002:1106) incriminated the process of student evaluation of courses and teachers as the means of grade inflation and declining academic standards because, College professors' success and indeed their tenure depend on the satisfaction of student customers. So-called student evaluations of college courses are often the single-most important data set to determine a professor's tenure and/or increase in annual salary.

However, Eagle and Brennan (2007) argued against these accusations and described them baseless due to insufficient supporting data; while Rojstaczer (2001) described it the outcome of educational institutions' race for widening participation to earn more profit and to follow their business formula to succeed in education

market. It is assumed that students rank those courses higher which are easier with less workload. Marsh and Roche (2000 cited in Eagle and Brennan 2007:53) proposed it as widely held “myth” and they observed that there is a positive relationship between students’ ranking and workload; students were much inclined to rank those teachers higher in teaching assessment whose workload was “average or above-average” but not lower and courses were “challenging and average-difficulty” (Mukherji and Rustagi 2008:49). Mukherji and Rustagi (2008:49) concluded in their study that students mainly appraise and value “teaching effectiveness and degree of learning” and it is misgiving about students that they rate higher to those courses or teachers who give them higher grades than they deserve. In addition, Lammers *et.al.*, (2005:213 cited in Eagle and Brennan 2007:54) defended the students and stated that students are well aware of the fact that hard work is needed to get good grades and have good estimate of number of study hours per week required for getting higher grades.

Therefore, the charges against students that “Like car and refrigerator customers, student-customers shop for the courses with the least work and highest grades” do not fit all (Carlson and Fleisher, 2002:1106). If students were looking for such universities which give highest grades and least work then why would students look for League tables and university rankings? Why would universities and educational institutions waste their time, efforts and money in getting high rankings? Or does it mean high ranking universities in league tables give students higher grades with a reduced amount of workload. Of course, this is not correct, then how and why students are accused of such allegations.

Another allegation on students is a reduction in students’ interest towards academic study and rise in the attitude of selecting those subjects for university education which have good scope and are useful for acquiring skills for prospective jobs in the market (Rolfe 2002:173) . Further, lecturers described in Rolfe’s study (2002:175; Robert Zemsky 1993 cited in Delucchi and Smith 1997) that “students were reported to want more ‘prescribed’ teaching, delivering the required knowledge, rather than to do their own reading and research”. Students were accused to learn how to pass or get good grades rather than better learning and lecturers were expected to instruct or guide students how to get good marks. Conversely, in a

recent study, Patton and Patton (2006) reported that they found a very small percentage of students i.e. 9% who required the teacher to teach only what is necessary to pass; besides this 68% students wanted their professors to give them knowledge and training/ grooming them for occupational world. Thus, we might conclude that not all the students have such a negative attitude towards learning. Moreover, Some lecturers in a study of Rolfe (2002) asserted that the responsibility of career orientation does not only lie to students but is supported by university itself, because universities now emphasize on enhancing employability in terms of both vocational and core skills of their students. So that universities are able to sell their students in the market and enjoy good reputation and attract more students in future.

Robert Zemsky (1993 cited in Delucchi and Smith 1997; Rolfe 2002) blamed that students desiring classroom learning in an easy to understand, convenient and amusing way rather than doing self-regulated studies in the library. However, in our view, students just need some kind of break during a 2 hour study. Hence, it is not the demand for entertainment, but in reality it's quite impossible for human brain to concentrate continuously on the same thing.

Rolfe (2002) further found that increase in the cost of higher education studies does not have any effect on students' demand for more teaching or individual contact time. However, students with lower academic ability were experienced to ask for individual contact to teachers and getting more in touch with tutors for help in their studies. These students were described as a large intake of lower achievers from secondary level which were not properly trained and the result of mass higher education.

However, these changes were not described and related negatively to student consumerism but lecturers in Rolfe's (2002:173) study called it the consequences of mass higher education leading to the large number of admissions to include "lower achievers at secondary level" with non-traditional educational backgrounds such as "women, minority groups, immigrants, handicapped individuals, and older people" (Webb 1993:205 cited in Michael 1997:120). Rolfe attributed the declining quality of education to mass higher education, high intake of lower achievers of secondary education [not grooming and training students enough for higher education studies] but not student consumerism.



Clayson and Haley (2005 cited in Eagle and Brennan 2007:54) discussed the issue that when students are heartened to consider themselves customers of education then they might accuse and shift their responsibility of learning and under-achievements or failure to get the highest grades to “service provider” . Service providers may be held accountable for the number of students passing or failing in their class by the administrators of the university. “Poor performance becomes the fault of the professor” (Clayson and Haley 2005:3 cited in Eagle and Brennan 2007:54). However, Eagle and Brennan (2007:54) reasoned that it is the customer who has to take the responsibility for his or her success or failure of the objective not the facilitator or “service provider” like in the “weight-reduction industry” the facilitator or instructor is not responsible for weight loss of the customer. Because instructor is just there to help and guide, the customer has to work out himself or herself. However, Laskey (1998) described it the role of the teacher or academics to stimulate student consumers intellectually to take their responsibility of learning. Since students are not prepared well by secondary education to do the self-regulated studies and take the responsibility of their learning. “We think the ideal community of learners is quickly disappearing, and falling prey to the pressure of workplace preparation” (Carlson and Fleisher, 2002:1104). In that situation, students are also the sufferers that they have to learn to learn, self-regulate their studies and adjust to a completely different kind of education system.

Andrews (2003 cited in Freeman and Thomas 2005:167) notes the need for academic personnel to adopt new teaching methods, including approaches that turn the classroom into a workshop to encourage the student to become an active learner, a role not previously expected or accepted.

One reason for the changing attitude of students towards learning might be the large number of students in a class and lack of attention from the instructor due to large number of students. Students have been accused of so much concern about grades rather than learning developing.

“Physicist Kurt Wiesenfeld (1996) of The Georgia Institute of Technology describes the pursuit of grades among his students as follows: In the last few years...some students have developed a disgruntled-consumer approach. If they don't like their grade, they go to the "return" counter to trade it in for something better.... Their



arguments for wheedling better grades often ignore academic performance. The one thing college actually offers-a chance to learn-is considered irrelevant, even less than worthless, because of the long hours and hard work required” (Wiesenfeld, 1996:16 cited in DELUCCHI and Smith 1997:325).

However, if we think realistically about a student customer who is dissatisfied with his or her grade, so in my view he/she has to justify it otherwise he or she is not going to get higher grades in replacement without any concrete basis. It’s not same as if you don’t like a product; you go and change/replace the product with the new one without any further efforts.

This is all about the beautiful and satisfying relationship between teacher-student which is lost somewhere. This has nothing to do with student consumerism. This is furthermore, associated to student consumerism, that brings “accountability in higher education and promotes a customer–service relationship between students and faculty members” (DELUCCHI and Smith 1997:325). This has created a gap and coldness in student teacher relationship. However, this is actually the need of the time that students should be reminded of the important relationship between them and their teachers (that the faculty has more knowledge and proficiency of the field) rather than criticizing adopting a positive behavior.

Pierce (1995 cited in Freeman and Thomas 2005:158) found the changing pattern of thinking in both Canadian students and their parents, when deciding about taking admission in any university, career opportunities are among the top priorities. On the other hand, a study conducted by Universities UK (Universities UK 1998 cited in Freeman and Thomas, 2005:159) brought totally opposite results and found that 21 years and younger students thought about career prospect elements in their last priorities for selecting any university and even the students over 25 years age did not have such an element in decision making. Although, both age group students have looked for teaching reputation of the institute as of an intermediary importance element but the students over 25 years also considered and sought for the academic support facilities element. This shows the clear concern of students towards learning.

However, there are some who believe in the positivity of student as customer approach such as Kovesi *et.al.*, (2004 cited in Patton and Patton, 2006) believe that student as customer approach is

constructive for higher education system. He believes that like private sector, consumerism in education will steer higher levels of quality in higher education. Furthermore, Rojstaczer (2001) does not blame students for lack of academic commitment but describe it the responsibility of an institution to provide an environment that stimulate learning and intellectual engagement of students.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Extant literature published on the subject of student consumerism in higher education was reviewed in peer-reviewed journals in the fields of higher education, social sciences management, psychology, sociology, organizational studies and economics between 1980 to date. Authors searched through online sources e.g. <http://www.jstor.org/> and <http://scholar.google.co.uk>. A large amount of literature was downloaded and carefully reviewed. Only most relevant research studies were selected for further review and reporting in the study. In most recent studies of Parker (2010) and Jonson (2009) same method for literature review has been used.

#### **LIMITATION OF THE STUDY**

This study is a Critical assessment of the relevant literature. There is a need to analyze this issue by using different qualitative and quantitative methods which may further provide the evidence about the nature and growing effects of student consumerism on students and universities. Further, this issue may be analyzed in the environment of various universities of Sindh which may support the quality enhancement efforts of HEC.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Students have been described customers and consumers of higher education in much of the intellectual work against such concepts. But few have written about who brought such concept in. Students themselves are not the ones who created such tendencies and terminology. It was the management who used TQM and other business concepts in higher education to compete in higher education market to get good rankings. When management felt the growing competition, they made education a business and applied different approaches used in businesses to compete in the higher education market. Of course, when students were made aware about what

powers they can have as a student, they are enjoying and utilizing them. Therefore, it is not the conflict between the student and academics, but between management and academics of universities. In that condition, it is not the customer again who is imposing such conditions upon the faculty but the concept of branding university. The education service has become more of commodity to be sold on national and international levels.

If we examine closely and clearly, it is not student consumerism which is responsible for deterioration of education system but in reality, these are in reality the clashes between corporatized university management and academia. It is the profit oriented universities which coerce the academics to delight their students to keep funds coming in. Even universities alone cannot be blamed for student consumerism; they are compelled for this by their governments and economic situations. In the past, universities were considered holy institutions where true intellectual learning took place but lack of funds and growing economic pressures have brought universities to the current situation. Further, there is a need of reunion between students and academia.

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