

# Are Students Customers?

## An exploration into the future of CRM in Newcastle University Business School?

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### Aims

- To discover how much of a role customer relationship management (CRM) could play within the business school for the future
- To understand whether or not students are viewed as customers by stakeholders internal to the business

### Introduction

- A recently triple accredited business school Newcastle University Business School (NUBS) now has more than 3000 students from 80 different countries around half the NUBS students are Chinese alone
- CRM refers to a collection of techniques and technologies that help organisations manage their interaction with their customers by providing the organisation with a better knowledge and understanding of customer 'needs' and by providing the customer with a consistent face to the organisation (Richter and Cornford, 2007)
- From the literature it was clear a debate exists around whether or not students are, or should be, viewed as customers within higher education institutions (HEIs)
- The research seek to consider the views of stakeholders and the literature to determine if CRM has a future in Higher education institutions (HEIs), and if so what might this look like? As the research developed it focused solely on Newcastle University Business School (NUBS) rather than higher education holistically

### References

- Eriksson, P. &. (2008). *Qualitative Methods in Business Research* (1st ed.). London: SAGE.
- Richter, P., & Cornford, J. (2007). Customer Relationship management and citizenship: Technologies and Identities in Public Service. *Social Policy & Society*, 211-220.

### Methodology

- An interpretive research design was taken to better understand respondent opinion.
- A topic guide was created from a review of the literature leading to semi-structured interviews to develop the participants' own interpretation of questions asked and individual points they may raise. The interviews were transcribed by the interviewer to reinforce the data collected (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008)
- A stakeholder list of 20 staff taken from a larger, previously unpublished, piece of research into this area within NUBS was created. From this 9 key stakeholders were interviewed – others were unavailable or did not wish to take part. A type of purposive sampling (Heterogenous) was used to focus on the business school staff and discover variations in opinion from one group
- All interviews were carried out in the same neutral informal environment where the interviewees could feel at ease. Prior to interview interviewees were given an explanation of what was planned for their data and this was repeated before each interview commenced. In both instances interviewees had the opportunity to agree or otherwise with the approach
- Alongside helping to provide a topic guide the literature aided in providing a framework using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of the data (combining raw data from interviews and student opinion from a recently unpublished piece of research) would indicate the potential of CRM in HEIs

### Results

A selection of the themes identified from thematic analysis of the interview data

| Theme                            | Interviewee quote  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Students are customers           | "They're paying a lot of money for an education and we need to ensure they get value for money"  |
| Students are not customer        | "We do pour knowledge, theory, and data materialled into a student's mind but far more important is teaching them how to use that how to apply it in a real time situation. So you can't do that if you just deal with people as customers"                                  |
| Significant cost attached to CRM | Maybe the university is a little bit sceptical about buying into CRM when there's this pretty new idea of a school like this to take on and invest a lot of money in when traditionally it would otherwise , invest money in research and that's kind of how it runs itself. |

### Findings

- Although opinion differed there tended to be strong similarities within job roles. For instance, strategic members of staff tended not to see students as customers but as "members of a cricket club" as one interviewee put it. They are not simply provided for but have rights and sort of "buy in" to the community - this is reflected in parts of the literature
- Operational staff, whose role included elements of marketing the university and its services to students, tended to view students more as customers and again this is reflected in the literature
- Where stakeholders were all in agreement is that communication throughout the business school (and externally) could be improved
- By critically analysing the stakeholder views it was clear that each party did not have the same desire to use CRM in the same way. Each party wanted to communicate or share with different parties but there was no collective desire for all parties to communicate with all of the other parties

### Discussion

- The data showed stakeholder opinion at the Business School is as divided as the literature itself in terms of whether or not students are viewed as customers
- One of the root causes of these issues appears to be a lack of an integrated models or theories of the institution-school-student relationship without which students and staff can find it difficult to understand their mutual roles and relationships in a complex environment
- Further research may look at how CRM can cater for a multitude of staff student relationships serving different purposes within the business school and what a "continuum" of relationships may look like