

# **Post Graduate Management Students and their Universities as Equivalent to Customers and Providers**

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by

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Management Thought Assignment

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## ***Management Thought***

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***‘The best way for understanding the relationship between post-graduate management students and their universities is as equivalent to customers and providers.’***

***Discuss the merits of the view that postgraduate management education is just like a market, like any other, and compare it with at least one alternative way of conceiving of postgraduate management education.***

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It is perhaps fair to think that the best way to understand the relationship between post-graduate management students and their universities is to equate it to a customer-provider relationship. But, this view is certainly not the best view.

The relationship between student and University is very much a customer-provider relationship in the sense that the student invests time and money in earning an education. The University has a responsibility to provide as good an education as possible for the time and money invested. The University holds a responsibility to more than just the immediate students in any class; it is a continuing responsibility to all those who hold such degrees from the University, and to all those who are members of that University in other faculties or positions. The 'product' a University provides has value in two major ways.

First, in terms of depth and standard of education provided i.e, the knowledge, training and information imparted in the course of the educational process, the customer-provider relationship cannot and should not be to the detriment of the standards and reputation a University holds. For this reflects upon not only those who are there now or may be there in the future, but also upon those who have been there before and who remain associated with the University as members.

Second, in the 'brand value' of the type of degree being awarded and the reputation of the university which confers it, and what that degree and its value implies about the person who holds such a qualification.

My teachers in Melbourne often reminded me that receiving a degree from the University is not just recognition of having undergone a course of study, it is, in the traditional and formal sense, being accepted into membership of the University. In this formal sense which many older Universities abide by, a University is a college; a group of scholars in a formal body, and this group consists not only of staff and present students, but also of all those who hold a degree from the institution. Thus I am not only a 'graduate' of the University of Swinburne, I am also a full and formal member of the University and will remain so for as long as I do not formally renounce membership. That is why I have the right to attend and participate in University processions, to wear the formal robes and append the

name of the University to my titles as a right of membership. I have earned that right by 'qualifying' for my degree, and that 'qualification' is the key issue here.

This may perhaps seem like an archaic way of looking at the relationship, but it has relevance even in a 'market' view of education. When we 'buy' a degree we do not just buy the education and training that the educational process provides; we buy the recognition of having attained an intellectual standard and professional capacity consonant with holding such a qualification. Bearing in mind that it is a 'qualification'; something you 'qualify' for and not just buy. When you buy a product like a luxury car, it carries with it a certain cachet associated with a brand name, but at the end of the day all you are promised for your money is four wheels and a set of seats; the cachet is implied and is never part of the actual business contract between you and the manufacturer. As long as you can afford it, you can pay your money, slip behind the wheel and drive away; the brand image implies certain things about you as a driver of such a car, about your social and financial status and taste, but it is implicit and not explicit.

Now with a university degree, the cachet or status is more explicit, for one very simple reason, which is the key difference between a degree and other products. That is, having made you toil through reams to get here **you cannot buy a degree**. This is where all the 'market' models of education fall down. In this relationship between 'customer' and 'provider', the mere offer of money does not and cannot promise delivery of the product. You can pay your fees in full, but still fail. You would have attended all the classes, learnt all that they have taught and gained all knowledge and qualify for the degree. If you do not qualify for your degree you will not get the recognition and status that comes with the degree.

In any customer-provider relationship the deal is simple, if you have the cash you can buy the product. Here, because the degree is not just an education, because the degree implies attainment (through examination) of a certain standard that ranks you on par with all others who hold such degrees. The conferment of a degree is not the automatic result of having invested time and money. The University **promises you an education**, and in terms of that education you are entitled to think of yourself as a customer. However, the University

**does not promise you a qualification.** You will have to earn it and earning a qualification is not by any stretch a customer-provider' relationship for all the reasons mentioned above.

A product that comes of a market enhances ones lifestyle in terms of ease and comfort or even to help reduce work load but it cannot be seen to have intrinsic value when there is the maintenance factor to consider.

It is much more short-term and seen as an accessory that provides immediate acceptance and satisfaction.

In the context of what has just been explained, it is not sufficient to view the relationship between universities and students as providers and customers. The relationship goes well beyond the boundaries of customer-supplier relationship which more than often ends at the point of delivery of goods and receipt of cash.

One could also argue that postgraduate management education should only be considered a market to the customer if the knowledge becomes a saleable product and the idea becomes relevant and applicable to the customer (Huczynski, A., 1996:216). In that respect, Postgraduate education could indirectly be viewed as a market like any other. It perhaps fulfills the customer – provider relationship in that sense.

A postgraduate management 'education' can easily be seen as a market, provided you take away the examination and qualification parts of it. You pay to be taught certain things, and having taken your money the University provides that teaching. But a postgraduate 'qualification' implies that you have attained a certain proficiency in those matters, that you have achieved a certain intellectual standard in management thinking and knowledge. That in itself does not constitute a market relationship.

A postgraduate education from a University is not about providing self-help techniques that are effective and quick. It is about research, generating ideas, finding data and other works that are basically theoretical by nature. 'Academics obtain recognition from their academic peers who evaluate work largely in terms of publication of various kinds' (Huczynski, A., 1996:175).

A postgraduate management education offered by the provider can be also seen as the platform where academicians gather to do their research, conceptualize theories based on experiments and facts. It is perhaps the place where 'raw' theories are viewed, expounded, developed into techniques and packaged by other providers (such as management consultants) in the market. The techniques are then converted into products i.e. the form of training events or seminars and sold in the marketplace with detailed documentation, promoted with glossy and expensive advertising (Huczynski, A., 1996:274).

As a consequence, there can be no doubt as to the many forms of short routes to knowledge through motivational seminars by reputable companies or Professors, short-term lectures and numerous self-help management books written by Management Gurus like Peter F. Drucker and John Naisbitt made available today. These 'markets' promote Management ideas and techniques that are realizable and quick through the 'illusion of buying cheaply into a bank of knowledge'. (Huczynski, A., 1996:181)

Academicians have often been viewed as disinterested in the practical business world. Both Managers and Academicians approach to new ideas, their perception and definition of their ideas or 'product' are different. It is also interesting to note and observe that the traditional perception of Academicians generating ideas based on research for managers of today have failed to address management needs. Hence the existence of a clear void of intellectual debate (Huczynski, A., 1996:172-176). A void that has since been filled by management consultants who can provide information that is quick and reliable.

However, the notion that Academicians are viewed to be disinterested is not necessarily accurate. One should perhaps view postgraduate management studies as covering a wide range of management theories that may not have addressed management needs because the focus was more on macro-organizational issues that may not necessarily have over-lapped with the organizational behavioral aspects that are informal. The knowledge shared may yet represent only one component of knowledge that provides the 'vehicle' to shape the way which problems and issues are defined and conceptualized.

I would say that in effect, a more efficient way of organising the system would be to separate the 'education' and the 'qualification'. Have the universities to teach and prepare students for an examination, for which students pay a fee. Then have a separate body, which

examines and qualifies the students, and awards the degree. In that way the 'educational' relationship would be almost purely market-driven, where students compare the quality of education received versus fees charged.

The 'qualification' section meanwhile would be more of an independent certification process, sort of an ISO 9000 for the intellect; it implies a certain level of attainment which you achieve and prove through examination, which cannot be simply bought for money.

Probably the best example of such a system is right here in Malaysia, using the example of the Law Colleges, which prepares students to take the University of London external law exams. None of these colleges award degrees, they do not implicitly offer the degree for the fees that you pay, only knowledge. The knowledge is attained only if you pass the London external exams and finally the degree from the University. That particular market for education is probably the purest 'market' model around, closely followed by the pre-university colleges that prepare you for the A-levels or various types of matriculation.

An alternative way to best understand the relationship is to view the institution as the provider of knowledge to various customers that are mainly managers themselves. The Provider provides Postgraduate management ideas that are used as reference points, which contains insights that are valuable and useful. Postgraduate management ideas continue to be used by Managers, alongside with new or contemporary management ideas. They are viewed and treated as ideas that compliment and coexist together. And contribution such as these Management ideas continue to have a major impact on Managers today (Huczynski, A., 1996:269-271).

Having mentioned all of the above, it is important to recognize the distinction between business and the academic world. Business is always profit orientated and money motivated. The 'game' for them is to introduce new products, ideas, meet the needs of the customer and sustain competition. In the practical fast-moving business world, Managers rely heavily on information that is quick but not necessarily incomplete to make. Hence, for the company, there is the clear and consistent fear of the future as the future depends entirely on profitability decisions (Huczynski, A., 1996:176).



The success of a postgraduate management education is not to be based on customer acceptance but should to a large extent be based on its coherence and consistency to facts that are proven, practical and attainable (Huczynski, A., 1996:272). The rewards are long-term as it focuses more on values.

No doubt, the survival of a University is highly dependent on its credibility and reputation. It is also dependent on the student's applicability and success rate in life, for the student carries the name of the alma mater wherever she or he goes.

I am enough of a traditionalist to believe that a university 'education' is far more than technical and intellectual training. To turn universities into cram schools for external exams would take away so much that is valuable about a good university education. Having said the above I doff my professional's hat and confess that I would hate to see the day universities become purely market-driven and the pursuit of knowledge becomes a money paper chase.

## **References**

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