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## THE EFFECT OF STUDENTS-AS-CUSTOMERS CONCEPT ON THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITIES

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# THE EFFECT OF STUDENTS-AS-CUSTOMERS CONCEPT ON THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITIES

## Abstract

In the field of education, particularly in higher education, marketization refers to higher education institutions using marketing practices in their policy and academic service, and mainly by regarding students as customers. Several factors have shifted the perspectives toward the students-as-customers approach. The main causes are the increased competition, decreased government funding, and the increased cost of education. However, adopting the concept of students as customers resulted in a misconception of the relationship between universities and students and many reviews perceive it as degrading for the educational standards. The aim of this paper is to clarify the issue of whether students should be regarded as customers by explaining the higher education quality standards as perceived by all parties pertaining to the educational path and examines the students' performance and satisfactions at all levels.

## Keywords

Students-As-Customers Concept, Quality of education, Marketing Metaphor, Marketing Practices, Higher Education, Service Quality, Customer's satisfaction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, there was an urge to sell public and private goods, as they were regarded as products, and it became a need to sell them in their market. Similarly, and also due to globalization, higher education institutions face community challenges and are pressured to fulfill social needs as part of their role in the industry to assist the whole community including students and customers (Ngoc et al., 2021). In the education industry, particularly in higher education, marketization is employed when, in this field, students are regarded as customers and when higher education institutions apply marketing practices in their own policy and service offering. Thus, in higher education, most universities embraced the approach of student-as-customer as students were perceived as consumers with an intention to purchase a degree, thus, marketing has become the appropriate tool to sell this degree as a product (Safdar et al., 2020). In fact, there are many changes and factors around the world that were the indirect causes that resulted in the shift in the academic perspectives toward adopting the “students-as-customers” approach. Among those factors causing this change, the increased competition among institutions can be listed, the decreased government subsidization, and the rise in education fees. Moreover, as the academic market became highly competitive, students became consequently exposed easily to many alternatives, requiring the implementation of a different policy in higher education aiming at a greater market share gain, new students’ attraction and retention.

In the educational field, education is perceived as a type of service therefore, universities regarded as the party providing the service, and consequently students were considered as customers, implicitly or explicitly. Boulto & Lucas (2011) explain that adopting this redefinition of universities and students’ relationship will help redefine in the contemporary economy the relationship between specific technical skills acquisition and their implementation in specific roles. Consequently, this relationship suggests the viewpoint of an “in-out” correlation between the current demand for skills and university education. By treating students as customers, education is seen as an economic commodity, and student perceived as an economic being whose needs should be always fulfilled (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). As a result of embracing this marketing metaphor, the whole educational sector has been impacted. Particularly, universities that regard themselves as suppliers of knowledge and perceive students as customers of knowledge, based on this concept. Also, several universities went even further by viewing their students, not only as customers but also as associates in the pursuit for knowledge.

However, adopting the concept of students as customers resulted in a misconception of the universities – students’ relationship, suspecting the appropriateness of the of these marketing metaphors implementation that show indiscriminate in student-university relationships. Koris & Nokelainen (2015) explain that nowadays, the debate pertaining to the intrusion of the student-customer orientation into higher education is diverged. It is evident that the framework in universities is different than the ones in other institutions where business principles may be applicable, and as the product outcome is intangible, this only adds serious challenges to the adoption of this concept (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). Therefore, many reviews disapprove it and perceive it as degrading for the educational standards and harming professor-student relationship, from one side (Koris & Nokelainen, 2015), oppositely, other reviews consider that the concepts of students as customers is self-evident, and students should be normally treated as such.

Somech and Bogler (2002) justify that only a naïve implementation of the ‘student-as-customer’ idea in higher education would lead to negative effects conflicting with the students’ best interests. Therefore, to avoid similar impacts, such as failing the ‘student-as-customer’ and leading to counter-productivity in institutions, the notion of the ‘student-as-customer’ should be interpreted with a degree of sophistication in service as complex as higher education. Consequently, the main concern should be directed toward assessing whether the adoption of processes and contents of the ‘student-as-customer’ results in a degradation or improvement of the education quality delivered to higher education students from one side, and service quality from another side, and consequently to the decline or enhancement of students’ satisfaction (Somech and Bogler, 2002).

The aim and objective of this paper is to clarify whether students in higher education institutions should be regarded as customers or not, by defining this concept within the market, exploring the environment, the situation of market and customer orientation, based on studies conducted on universities situated in different countries, mainly, U.K, Australia, Pakistan, Vietnam and Poland. It also elaborates about the quality standards as perceived by all parties pertaining to the

educational path, discusses the students' satisfactions at all levels, and then concludes with a summary of findings of literatures, provides some recommendations and highlights limitations and future research.

## 2. QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In order to define the quality of education at universities it is important to define, first, the role of universities. As Boulton & Lucas (2011) state, universities deal with the universality of knowledge directing all aspects pertaining to community members, be it biological, mental, emotional, objective or subjective. Their focus also goes to their social, cultural and economic organizations and the way they all interact with each other. In addition, universities are institutions that endeavor to solve complexity by making it clarified, reveal all what is hidden from people and also unveil what people share between each other and among groups in order to determine what distinguishes each within and from other groups (Boulton & Lucas, 2011).

Nevertheless, as the education process takes years of interaction and involvement from all parties and exchange of information among them, which suggests that quality in education begins at the school level, which is missing in regular transactions performed in industries of other services (Koch & Fisher, 1998), Madu & Kuei (1993) differentiate between managing quality in the education context and manufacturing or service industries, as it is a quite different perspective when dealing with managing quality. As a result, in order to improve the quality at higher education institutions, the characteristics of it should be clearly set and identified. Owlia and Aspinwall (1996) pointed out that it is necessary to find out the characteristics of quality when the aim is to measure quality in an aim to improve it. Also, it is important to characterize the quality for the measurement of the education process particularly emphasizing on the perception of education quality in universities that doesn't belong only to two parties that are student and college, but also perceived as quality by different groups of customers, namely the students, and also by parents, faculty members and employers (Cheng & Tam, 1997). In this context, an Input–Process–Output (IPO) framework was established by Chua (2004) to classify these perceived qualities. Where 'Input' refers to the requirements for the acceptance and selection of students, 'Process' refers to the teaching and learning practice involving the content and delivery of course unit, the accuracy of curriculum content, the professor's level of knowledgeability, the concern for students and the appraisal, and 'Output' refers to rewarding part pertaining to finances, employability, academic rankings and finally academic performance. In the "Perception of Quality in Higher Education" by Chua, students in Australian universities proposed simple yet valuable suggestions assisting in improving the process of the education system to achieve quality output, as having caring professor, encouragement for lifelong learning, partaking in designing the curriculum and allowance for provision for students support services. In parallel, Somech and Bogler (2002) observed that changes regarding the quality teaching like contents, feedback, assessment inspired students during learning process and more open communication made parents at ease and when applicability at the level of knowledge and suggested integrating of soft skills into the courses by universities got students more prepared for entry into the workforce.

However, there are some factors possibly disregarded by academic and administrative staff, as the different classifications of students representing different goals in studying and different perspectives of their role as customers. Eagle & Brennan (2007) explain that new students, whose goal is becoming qualified for the world of work, differ from working mature students who have considerable work experience perceiving diploma as part of his career path and professional development. In addition, international and domestic students differ considerably in their objectives and perception of educational quality (Gatfield, Barker and Graham, 1999). Empirical studies have shown that most students see a degree as a path into a better career but also many students show indifference regarding high academic standards, and consequently, the perception of quality encompasses more objectives than just the constraints of the classroom (Rolfe, 2002).

It is highly important to acknowledge that each party in the learning process has a perspective and interest therefore, parents, students, faculty members and employers comprehend the notion of quality of education at universities in different ways. For instance, quality for parents relates to input, such as schools ranking and reputations and output like employability and academic placement, students relate to the educational process as courses and teaching and outputs, employers relate to the output as the competence students add to the workplace, and faculty members perceived quality as relating to the whole education system the three parameters: input, process and output (Chua, 2004).

Moreover, many stages are involved in the learning cycle and educational path, at each and every stage of that learning cycle the strict aspects of a 'quality' education should embrace the processes, from beginning the learning journey to the student's withdrawal from the system and Chua (2004) explains that this perception of quality is a dynamic process measured at any particular point in time.

Finally, academic quality is a way of describing how well the learning opportunities available to students help them to achieve their award. "It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided for them" (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2004).

### 3. THE CONCEPT OF THE STUDENT AS A CUSTOMER.

The constant survival struggle based on "market share" steered universities toward the shift to implement the practices of the marketer acknowledging that the key to sustain growth is to adopt the principles of marketing. As higher education institutions are enduring problems with their low retention rates, market pressure and increased competition, and high expenses in procuring new portfolios, universities have been putting more efforts in marketing and allotting higher budgets in order to recruit students and be able to retain them. This idea has been emphasized by Guibault, Melodi (2016), stating that higher education is a growing and competitive business where the problem of students' retention at most colleges and universities is becoming a growing and costly issue. As a result of reduced government subsidy and larger social focus on consumer choice, students in all countries are covering a bigger share of the total cost of their education fees than in the past, largely due to the increased economic accountability of these institutions (Marceau, 1996). Even in developing countries, Poland and Vietnam precisely, higher education institutions are marketing instruments to attract more students and partners as part of their development activities which is believed to be effective in enhancing their national reputation (Ngoc et al., 2021). Consequently, the implementation of marketing principles within the higher education sectors led to the shift to the concept that students that were perceived as the "revenue stream" by university authorities were actually customers (Aliff, 1998).

Sax (2004) explains that in "Students as Customers", the word "customer" derives from the Latin "consuescere", which means "to become acquainted with". Furthermore, it is thoroughly related to the words "custom" and "accustom", so the etymology of the word "customer" offers something almost the opposite of your current associations, the word goes back to the 15th century, a time when, although there were a few stores, there was a lot of activity in the market (Sax, 2004).

Kanji and Tambi (1999) state that as students are settling fees against a service to be delivered therefore, they should be treated as customers, but Sax (2004) emphasizes the importance of insuring depth and intimacy in relationships with students that improves the concept of financial exchange for a service as the relation between a provider and customer needs not always be superficial. Lammers et al. (2005) explain how important it is to ensure that students understand the implicit agreement and the function of academic and administrative staff in assisting the student's learning prospects. In addition, students paying fees is not similar to a transaction of a simple exchange of money in return for a product or service, as universities do not only provide education services, but also control and set standards by not awarding certificates to students who fail to meet these standards (Sharrock, 2000). Therefore, tuition enrollment promotes learning but does not cause it (Halbesleben et.al, 2003).

In the general cases of market organizations, research has shown a market orientation relating customers' need and the organizational strength, and viewing competition from customers' perspective can empower the organization to face competition and uphold superior value (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Narver & Slater, 1990). Similarly, In Higher Education case, using the market / customer orientation is also an important matter as Conway, Mackay, and Yorke (1994) show that higher education institution should embrace the concept of market orientation in their strategic planning for a higher customer satisfaction, loyalty, long-term customer engagement and retention.

When universities treat the student as a customer, higher education embraces a wider scope where perception of quality of service is required, which involves in addition to academic or teaching criteria, the extent of contentment of the student in his experience, the extent to which the student enjoys campus life, where comes the role of student services, including administration of investing serious responsibility in this respect (Pitman, 2000)

Nowadays, as the conceptualization of university degree changes from being a desirable target to a basic need, in order to progress in the midst of high competition new economies universities have used their marketing departments to exploit this marketing opportunity. In U.K, they have capitalized on these changes in the economy and have invented the term “life-long learning” as a “marketing hook” to guarantee continual selling (Kanji & Tambi, 1999). This comes in understanding that employees need constantly to be upgrading their competence and skills in order to compete in the marketplace.

However, Halbesleben et al. (2003) highlights the conflict arising when student enrolment is treated as a simple commercial transaction. In some cases, students think they are entitled to claim the desired qualification as a right against their payment. Also, the approach affects the students’ perspectives regarding education as they start ignoring their contribution in the field, because of the superiority generated due to the belief that their demands have to be fulfilled (Safdar et al., 2020). Thus, the concept student-as-customer may demoralize the student’s sense and learning, as addressed by Clayson and Haley (2005). They discussed that students perceiving themselves as customers for an educational service, might put the blame on the service provider each time their results or achievements were dissatisfying and not up to their expectations (Clayson and Haley, 2005) giving themselves the freedom about attending or skipping classes while professors and administrators are held accountable for any performance shortage. Normally, this leads to a trivial argument that if the student is regarded as a customer, he must be given what he wants based on the saying that “the customer is always right”. Nevertheless, Halbesleben et al. (2003), stated that this philosophy by Harry Gordon Selfridge in 1909 is no longer universal even in industries other than education. Consequently, applying the perspective of students as customers doesn’t indicate that university administrations are becoming loose in academics and accepting that all students must be given ‘As’ to be pleased.

During the learning process, where student is an active partaker, the experience cannot be associated to a selling transaction, and the experience reported by a student is clearly different from that of a consumer’s after the product has been delivered (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). Evidently, there are big differences between the transactions of purchasing a car and purchasing a university degree. Svensson et. al (2007), explain that the ownership of the car or product will be transferred to the customer's just upon purchase and regulation of the payment, but, in universities the exchange transaction doesn’t happen at the settlement of the payment as students need to be evaluated and assessed students. Normally, University students are obliged to perform to the fulfilment of the university with the product called “university education” before they are eligible for more of that same product, and this relationship is unique. This is the fundamental difference in the two relationships making the customer-supplier relationship for students and universities inappropriate and unacceptable as Svensson et al. (2007) insist that, purchasing a car is completed upon “product payment”, whereas, a higher education degree is achieved based on “product performance”.

#### **4. THE EFFECT OF STUDENT-AS-CUSTOMER CONCPET ON SERVICE QUALITY AND CUSTOMER SATISFACTION.**

As it was discussed before, in the field of education, managing quality is quite different compared to other fields and normally the process should be controlled differently from that of manufacturing or service industries. Also, perception of quality in universities is not only restricted to two parties that are the student and college, but it is perceived by different groups of customers, namely the students, and also by parents, faculty members and employers. Therefore, unlike transactions completed in industries or any other service, the education process is long termed as it takes years of information exchange, interaction and involvement. It is also important to highlight that the learning cycle in higher education involves many stages, and the same aspects ‘quality’ education should be comprised at each and every stage of that learning cycle, from the starting years of education till the student exits the system as at any stage, this focus indicates that the process is not just static but in fact, it is dynamic (Chua, 2004).

The unstable nature of the higher education marketplace imposed a change of prospects on college administrators who were encouraged to adopt the same customer-oriented doctrines in delivering their services, applied by profit-making institutions by focusing on antecedents to student satisfaction. Kotler and Fox (1995) state that institutions that were able to grasp that concept will have higher chance reaching their objectives in a more effective way.

Whenever students are regarded as “consumers” of higher education services, satisfying them becomes of high importance to institutions that want to attract and recruit new students (Thomas and Galambos, 2004). Hence, they explain that once students’ perception of services is known, institutions may be able to adjust their services in a way that positively impacts students’ perception of service quality and satisfaction level. Therefore, when higher education institutions were perceived as a business-like service industry they started meeting students’ needs and sometimes exceeding them. In addition, students’ satisfaction with their educational experience is undoubtedly a desired outcome in addition to learning. As a result, universities that are aware that educating people requires a huge boost of motivation and intellectual skills and has a fundamental role in the students’ lives, provide students with excellent learning environments, competent educators, and appropriate support services.

Shank et al. (1995) explain that educational services offer intangible, perishable and heterogeneous services while professor pay efforts in educating, simultaneously “produced” and then “consumed” by the student who is also part of the teaching experience beside the teacher. Therefore, students’ satisfaction results in positive word-of-mouth which leads to students retaking other courses and attracting new students, due to loyal peers encouraging their acquaintances and friends (Helgesen and Nettet, 2007). According to Seymour (1993), developing many happy satisfied customers, no matter to which category they belong, whether students, parents of students, alumni which are the primary target of universities. Hence, perceiving students as “customers” is only advantageous, although not much favored, as it only a fact that without students, not only tuition revenues will drop, but also there would be no existence and need for institutions that will no longer have their people to provide services and grant knowledge and counseling.

Focusing on enhancing customer satisfaction at colleges and universities is crucial in developing systems. Kotler and Fox (1995) believe that universities becoming market-oriented to satisfy the wants and needs of its customers give students higher satisfaction and a better experience. In addition, having satisfied students help accomplish their goals as students who have a positive college experience are more likely to be satisfied than students who do not have a positive college experience. Moreover, they support their statement with an example of students who complain and are responded to immediately, even if the answer is not favorable, can actually become more loyal than students who seem happy without complaining.

Oppositely, it is believed that the concept of student-as-customer leads to ignoring the real value of the educational experience and shifts universities concerns toward satisfying the student-customer (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). Also, Safdar et al. (2020) believe that higher education institutions adoption of this approach has to be avoided as it hampers students’ learning and acceleration prospective. Another important argument against applying the students-as-customer’s concept is that the concept of student as a customer gives him the right to be granted against what he paid for the service, and sometimes what he really wants may conflict with the standards in education and its quality. Clayson and Haley (2005) observed some of the conflicting results that should be seen at the same time as obstacles prohibiting the perspective of viewing students as customers. They stated that students will be having shorter term academic perspectives expecting easy high grades in addition to their lack of responsibility, because based on their rights as customers they do not hold themselves accountable for mistakes and bad results but instead tend to blame their educators for the shortage and lack of success. Hence, universities should mainly focus on the main aim and role of the institution which is to provide their students lifelong learning and expose them by getting them ready to the career world (Calma & Dickson-Deane, 2020). Following this, Clayson and Haley (2005) were concerned about the misallocation of the academic curriculum and resources and what they called ‘adversarial relationships’ as student will be the judge from one side, creating and making the grading system biased in their favor as conflicts would be settled in favor of the customer. Moreover, Safdar et al. (2020) studied the customer orientation impact on student’s learner identity and grade goal, and found that customer orientation negatively impacts them. In addition, their survey results proved that this approach has also a significant negative impact on students’ academic performance. Therefore, the stakeholders should be aware of that jeopardy and impose strict boundaries while integrating marketing in their policy, as Driscoll and Wicks (1998) warn against the danger of overusing the customer-seller analogy and urge stakeholders to set limits in applying the marketing concept in universities.

To conclude, the difference between the relationship between the student and general marketing relationship is that university is based on level of interaction between the product, the consumer and the supplier and not just grounded on the purchase and use of a service, which requires a standard that is totally absent in the other systems. Svensson et al. (2007) state that inappropriateness arises in marketing metaphors when it comes to explain the student-university relationship and that the prospects inherent in the customer-supplier relationship are unacceptable in the student-university relationship. In addition, Shupe (1999) explains that there is a continuing change from customer to non-customer characteristics in the evolution of student-university relationships hence, the student-university relationship has no analogy to traditional marketing relationships such as customer-supplier or buyer-seller. Svensson et al. (2007) replicate the same concept and elucidate that the relationship may match ostensibly the customer-supplier relationship or buyer-seller relationship, but the fundamental qualities that support the student-university relationship do not support the application of marketing metaphors. They explain that this is caused by the fact that with time, the customer / the student becomes the supplier / provider of knowledge and the supplier / university becomes the customer / receiver of knowledge. Nevertheless, this is not witnessed in normal marketing relationships as the customer continues to be the customer and the supplier continues to be the supplier. Consequently, there is a paradox sensed in the process of adopting the customer metaphor and consequently, makes it suspicious and unsuitable.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The main reasons for universities not adopting the student–customer metaphor relate to the education process jeopardy in higher education institutions, conflicts of interests and degrading of the academic standards. However, these criticisms have not been supported by empirical evidence (Mark, 2013b) as the reasoning provided is based on an outdated perspective of marketing, mainly the perspective that “the customer is always right” that no longer leads in marketing. To support this claim, the example of a fitness member may be a good justification where the fitness center provides the equipment and trainers to the member who pays effort in order to achieve his set body target, healthy results. Nevertheless, members never blame the gym and request weight loss because they are paying for the membership fees and similarly, students have no right to ask for a high grade without working and earning it. Ultimately, (Cuthbert, 2010) suggests that a better perspective would be attained if the societal marketing concept is integrated when using marketing in higher education focusing not only on satisfying the student and meeting their needs, but also on the long-run consumer and public welfare.

As a result, the consequences of students as customers examined by marketing researchers should be using recent developments in the discipline. The view that students are not customers is only based on a naïve understanding of customers and research that doesn't belong to the marketing discipline, thus, the debate should be reframed. As stated by Mark (2013b), ‘there have been significant advances in customer theory and ... many opponents of a student-customer model may be basing their criticisms on an outdated conceptualization of the customer role’ and ‘customers are no longer viewed as passive recipients, but as active participants in service delivery and co-producers of the services they receive’ (p. 3).

## 6. CONCLUSION.

Marketing in higher education is a widely recognized strategy, but there is a constant debate about the concept with some still opposing the idea that students should be viewed as a customer in higher education. As discussed before, the main reasons for this objection is the concern regarding unfavorable effects of this approach on the quality of education, students' rights conflicts with university regulations and curriculum that affects the process for the whole period of studies. Nevertheless, the contemporary view of services marketing suggests that a customer focus does not lead to harmful results and that the reluctance to adopt students as customers concept is only based on outdated views that do not dominate in marketing anymore.

As Tierney (1999) says: A customer-centric approach inevitably risks breaking standards if the definition of such approach is to adapt in a blind way to the marketplace meeting simply all quirks of everyone joining classes. He surely agrees there are rights, that are robust and that universities and academics have to consider them, but also believe that they are held accountable and have to respect the responsibilities toward the universities community. He also states that “if

universities do not take communal measures, then the rise of “student consumerism” will be witnessed and will impact negatively the quality of university education”, Tierney (1999, p. 126).

In fact, the student-as-customer concept is neither defective, nor a solution for the higher education system, and it actually falls in the middle. When the concept of student-as-customer is to be applied, the right type of customer envisioned has to be well clarified as a student is a more professional customer than just a customer buying a simple consumer good. The doctor-patient relationships is a good example where a doctor recommends a dietary change in order to improve health, a target that can't be reached without a persistent effort from the patient and similarly the fitness-member relationship where weight loss can't be guaranteed without sustained efforts of the customer. Therefore, to resolve issues arising, it is crucial that students become aware of their rights as customer where outcome is always uncertain and success cannot be guaranteed, and about their roles and understand that efforts and cooperation are of high importance to reach the set goals over a considerable period of time. Thus, during the learning process, transparency and understanding of the relationship between the university and student help respond to requests and objections claimed by students.

## 7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH:

As the student-as-customer concept remain insignificant in higher education if it is built on a naive notion of the customer as a straightforward view with low-involvement purchase of a consumer good, future research should only adopt the recent marketing theories that have complex notions of the customer, particularly where the exchange process is long termed and where service is intangible, outcomes are uncertain and customer takes responsibility in the production process. Hence, emphasis should shift to ensure satisfaction of implicit and explicit needs of both students and other stakeholders. This can only be attained when students recognize the idea of long-term needs rather than their own short term wants.

Moreover, as a limitation, this paper has built its analysis on studies that have taken places in UK, Poland, Australia, Pakistan, Vietnam, and didn't scrutinize the concept of student-as-customer concept in the Middle East. Therefore, there should be future studies and surveys covering the Middle East area, exploring its diversity, cultural specificity in the higher education industry particularly, investigating the institutions management and marketing styles, and perception of students as a strategy to increase students' retention and enhance the quality of education in this specific region. In addition, the suggested study should tackle the universities business accreditations, such as AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), and investigate whether they promote or inhibit marketing practices, and adopting the student-customer concept, as part of preserving the educational quality.

Finally, although marketing concepts is being applied to higher education in the present days, further research is still required to evaluate their success. As higher education institutions are in constant growth and are continually facing new challenges, recruitment and retention of students should always be of high priority. Undoubtedly, disregarding the role of student as customer has consequences on students' satisfaction and retention, therefore developing and updating strategies may help meet students' needs and satisfy them as customers while maintaining high education standards.

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