By Invitation

Are university students products or customers?

Much depends on how the mission of a university is defined

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For The Straits Times

The Times Higher Education World Academic Summit begins today in Singapore, including the launch tomorrow night of the World University Rankings 2019. But how should we value a university education?

Discussion about proposed changes to the pathway to legal practice in Singapore is tended to focus on whether this will make it harder to become a lawyer. They are literally rating the bar" guipped one wag.

But a central recommendation is to separate a legal education from legal practice. At present, there are graduation requirements that drive students to get a six-month training contract before they can be called to the bar. They then go on to become business people, entrepreneurs, artists, and so on. Such students, who only want the education — and the credential — will be able to complete a more rigorous bar exam and get on with their lives.

For those who really do want to practise law, the new regime should make it a little easier to get a training contract, while also ensuring that this period is extended from six months to 12 months from 2020 to better prepare them for a life in the law.

At a deeper level, this change acknowledges a profound ambivalence in the purpose of universities and how we think of our students. Are universities the means by which a society produces employees to fill specific roles in the economy? Or do they cater to the needs and desires of individual students (and their parents)?

Put another way, are students products or are they customers?

THE STUDENT AS PRODUCT

The comparison of universities to factories is often traced to educational reforms in Britain under Margaret Thatcher. The 1983 James Report proposed that universities be run more like businesses, with vice-chancellors identified as chief executive officers and reporting key performance indicators. But the perception of students as products is far older than that. During and after World War II, for example, US forces toyed with the idea of using higher education to instil a desire for democracy in the German population. The prototype’s guise was the "idea factory", as Billings Ted (my wife) wrote in her doctoral thesis. At its heart, this view of universities builds on earlier conceptions of education — now largely discredited — as the filling of empty vessels. That metaphor dates all the way back to Aristotle, but few would defend it today, at least with regard to universities.

Nevertheless, institutions of higher learning are routinely said to provide a "pipeline of talent" — implying that our students are some kind of natural resource, to be refined and channelled as needed. This might make sense as a way of thinking about how to allocate funding and structure incentives at the national level, but it should not necessarily be how we profess to think of our students.

The students do have a T-shirt from my own student days that proclaims "I am a piece of value-added human capital" — though this was meant to be ironic. For the most part, the student-as-product is invoked as a critique of higher education, not a model.

THE STUDENT AS CUSTOMER

This critique often arises over the financial pressures facing many universities. Access to and the desire for higher education expanded, a greater proportion of that cost was transferred to students.

The result is that they are now referred to as customers or consumers. This is not new. It seems, in the United States, where education is a $1.5 trillion industry, students are already treated as customers.

Yet such language also has deeper roots. Indeed, it goes back to the earliest universities in Europe. The first, Bologna, initially consisted only of students, with teachers being hired on an annual basis as the students deemed them necessary.

The metaphor of the customer is a healthy one if it encourages students to seek value for money and academics to provide that value. Such a view increases the agency of the student, but also safely redefines education as a service rather than a public good.

There are many problems with such an approach, however. Not least the manner in which it drives universities (and donors) to produce ever higher rankings that will impress potential students and faculty.

As Singapore’s International Academic Advisory Panel warned in its report last June, such rankings can imply that there is only one correct model of university — a fundamental misconception about tertiary education.

It also distorts the student-teacher relationship, suggesting that it is transactional. I have something, knowledge, wisdom, perhaps that you have to pay me in return to you. There are, to be sure, some students like this. Indeed, executive programmes targeting professionals occasionally adopt the language themselves.

Students have shown that greater identification as a "customer" correlates with poorer performance as a student. Like the student as product metaphor, it corrodes a passivity on the part of the student recipient of the university’s output. Such an image is odd with the active and engaged individual envisaged by most institutions of higher learning.

THE STUDENT AS CLIENT

The fashion in certain parts of academia is now to see our students as “clients”. The invention, it seems, is to draw an analogy with other professions that serve clients — lawyers, for example. A client has more invested in his or her relationship with a professor than a customer.

Yet it still implies a relationship of service, and a degree of individualisation that may be unwise.

A study of business students themselves found greater identification with the metaphor of students as "producers" or "intellectual partners". These labels have the benefit of emphasizing the joint enterprise that is university education without elevating the role of the professor as a kind of guide and mentor. In many ways, it is a modernised version of a far older and quite literal description of the younger person being educated into a profession: an apprenticeship.

"Apprenticeship" is particularly applicable to doctoral studies, which provides training for future generations of academics — and is vastly preferable to the alternatives sometimes bandied about, such as “disposable” or "slaves”.

CHOOSE YOUR METAPHORS

The use of these various metaphors is of greater than linguistic significance. How you think of students shapes policy choices by governments, where and what students actually choose to study, and how you colleagues and teach.

The problem with all such metaphors is that they presume to decomposing impossible: describe students with a single term. Each student is different and each student’s journey is different. Indeed, that is the point of a university. A balance in the name itself, which comes from the Latin ansus versus "tutorio in one". The institution itself is a whole, but is made up of diverse individuals, faculty, students, and alumni existing as a single community.

In different outfits, our students might see themselves as customer or client, partner or apprentice. As we open our campuses to more lifelong learners, in any given classroom there will be students seeking very different forms of value — and contributing in their own ways to create a richer experience for all.

The idea that a university is a place you go to "get" a degree, will, in time, be replaced by an understanding that none of us ever stop learning and changing.

The constant is that the mission of a university should be transformative. Our graduates should emerge with skills, but also ideas and values. The best will be creative in ways that cannot match. And, with luck, they will return to spark and absorb their own knowledge in our classrooms.

So, for my part, I worry less about what students are and more about helping them work out what they will become. Let their own the choose their own metaphors.