

EXPLORING FRONTLINE CONFLICTS AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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HIGHER education plays a crucial role in knowledge-based economies. In the New Economy, only complex and multi-colour higher education institutions can meet the varied expectations and challenges of the ever-changing environment. This paper explores the frontline focusing on the conflicts at higher education institutions. It is assumed that there is a close relationship between judging the quality of services and the quality of frontline since an immediate message about the culture and values of the service-provider is conveyed to the customer by the behaviour perceived in the frontline. Based on both qualitative and quantitative research, this paper aims to draw general and practical conclusions about the following:

- a) *What are the main causes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for users in an educational context? How does frontline judge its position, how does it rate its own activity and what do students think of this?*
- b) *Which are the critical areas, causes of conflicts between students and the frontline?*
- c) *How can jay-customers be typified and how can they affect the service process? The exact definition of behaviour-types may facilitate proactive provider behaviour.*
- d) *The study intends to prove the importance and feasibility of experimental research, a useful method to refine results.*

Key Words: *Higher Education, Frontline, Jay-customers, Conflicts.*

Background and Aims

Higher education plays a crucial role in knowledge-based economies. As the economy of a country and its higher education system are closely connected, the development of either one boosts that of the other, too. Higher education has become very important and complex as regards its social, political as well as economic role.

In the New Economy, only complex and multi-colour higher education institutions can meet the varied expectations and challenges of the ever-changing environment.

Education is equally important for the state (because of its external impacts), educational institutions (because of government subsidies) and for the individual (because of its direct financial returns and consumer capital that improves consumption quality of participants). The consumer behaviour of educated people tends to be more sensible, they strive to protect their health and their housekeeping efficiency is also higher. Thus, education enhances both market and non-market productivity; it has more to offer than solely financial rewards. (Varga, 1998).

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In education services, consumer satisfaction has gradually become of central importance. Satisfied customers mean both short and long-term competitive edge for service-providers.

Higher education is a very complex, customer-oriented activity. Direct customers are the students (Harker et. al. 2001), (Conard és Conard 2001), (Shash et.al., 1999), (Corbitt, 1998), (Brownie et.al., 1998), (Joseph and Joseph, 1997), (Little et al., 1997) and the family, while end-users are the profit-oriented and non-profit spheres of the given society.

The fact that short-and long-term interests of students are frequently conflicting often causes discrepancy. International professional literature of education marketing takes a more comprehensive view of the demand-side of the education market than classical literature.

The main target group is obviously the student population but the demands and expectations of other target groups must not be forgotten, either.

The consumer of higher education is the student and his family, including the so-called helicopter parents (McKnight, Paugh, Parker, 2009), who are known for always hanging around their children trying to supervise or organise their life, consequently frequently turning up at higher education institutions with critical remarks.

The output efficiency of higher education institutions can be measured in several segments (Aldridge, Rowley, 1998), (Oldfield, Baron, 2000), (Kelsey, Bond, 2001), (Arambewela, Hall, Zuhair, 2005). Currently enrolled students evaluate the process itself, while graduates assess the result. The extent of satisfaction of current students reflects the actual situation, which naturally changes with time for dual reason; on the one hand, the evaluation of the same service changes when expectations change, on the other hand, the quality of service also changes due to alterations and improvements at institutional level.

Time plays an important role in the case of graduates, too. Their opinion is probably influenced by their position in the market, which might change in the course of time. Their satisfaction strengthens loyalty, assistance, and recommendation to others. (Meszlényi, Dombróczy, 2004).

The relationship between the student and the institution is special. Students are fully involved in and influence the service by their capabilities, motivation, and attitude. Moreover, the quality of higher education service is fundamentally influenced by the performance of the student putting strong impact on the quality perceived by other users. (Bay and Daniel, 2001). In education, the fact that the performance of the consumer is also evaluated, may lead to conflicts.

Traditions are very important. Higher education institutions are hierarchical; their organisational culture is based on traditions. They tend to resist changes and typically, expectations of the market are only of secondary importance for them. (Sirvanci, 2004). At the same time, there is need for professional management, which means a break-up with classical institutional management styles. "Managers" democratically elected on the basis of academic competences together with incompetent senates and traditional (non-market) values form such a mixture, which makes flexible, service-and market-oriented operation virtually impossible. Despite all this, professional management is a must for Hungarian institutions, as lagging behind competitors in this fierce competition might jeopardize their position in the market; it means a serious disadvantage that is very difficult to overcome. (Dinya, 2005).

Higher education is a multipersonal, frontline-intensive service. Perceived quality is the result of effective cooperation between the frontline and back office thus choosing the appropriate staff is essential if balanced quality performance is the aim. However, in state-run higher educational institutions this process (i.e., carefully selecting frontline staff) meets with considerable difficulties.

This dissertation explores the frontline focusing on the conflicts at higher education institutions. It is assumed that there is a close relationship between judging the quality of services and the quality of frontline since an immediate message about the culture and values of the service-provider is conveyed

to the customer by the behaviour perceived in the frontline. In an educational context, the service-provider (frontline) and the users (students) get involved in sorts of interaction. In best cases this happens according to the expected standards, but conflicts are rather frequent. Conflicts may arise from certain interactions between providers (teachers and administrative staff) and individual students, which might influence the quality perceived by other users (group members).

Conflicts may be caused by the non-standard behaviour of the provider as well as unexpected user attitude (*jay-customer misbehaviour*). For the sake of customer-satisfaction, particular stress has to be placed on handling disturbing factors and conflicts.

As for interactions between the frontline and users, Lehtinen (1983) draws our attention to the moderating effect of personal differences both on performance-styles (of providers) and on consumption-styles (of users). *If one fails to handle this, the resulting misfit is a very common source of conflict in the frontline.*

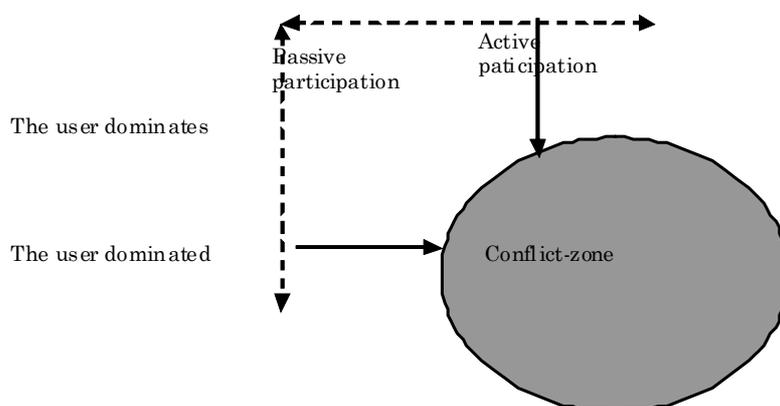


Figure 1

Source: Eiglier-Langeard (1991), p.38.

Jay-customers through their unplanned, unexpected behaviour increase the unpredictability of the service. Their conduct can influence service quality in either a negative or positive manner. *In the research the focus is on the moderating effect (functional or dysfunctional) of jay-customers as it was found that standard service-marketing and management literature does not cover this aspect thoroughly. The key to the quality and performance of the frontline is frontline management. Competition has shifted from standard service management to the management of extraordinary situations and thus, handling jay-customers. Conflicts need to be fully understood because "they highlight problem areas where (improvement) decisions cannot be avoided".* (Zoltayné, 2005).

The service model (Eiglier-Langeard 1991) summarizes factors we must be aware of and able to influence for service-marketing strategies. The researcher adapted the base model for higher education services (see Figure 2) where the study focused on possible causes of conflicts.

This research deals with frontline audit (Veres, Jäckel, 2003). Frontline audit, as a complex methodology, is a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Aim of the research was to explore service interactions, model and measure mechanisms of action as well as to identify how bilateral performance risk can be reduced in services that may involve – according to LaLonde, Zinszer (1976) – pre-transactional, transactional, and post-transactional risks. This investigation focuses on higher education but also touches upon other frontline-intensive services to make our findings useful for a number of areas.

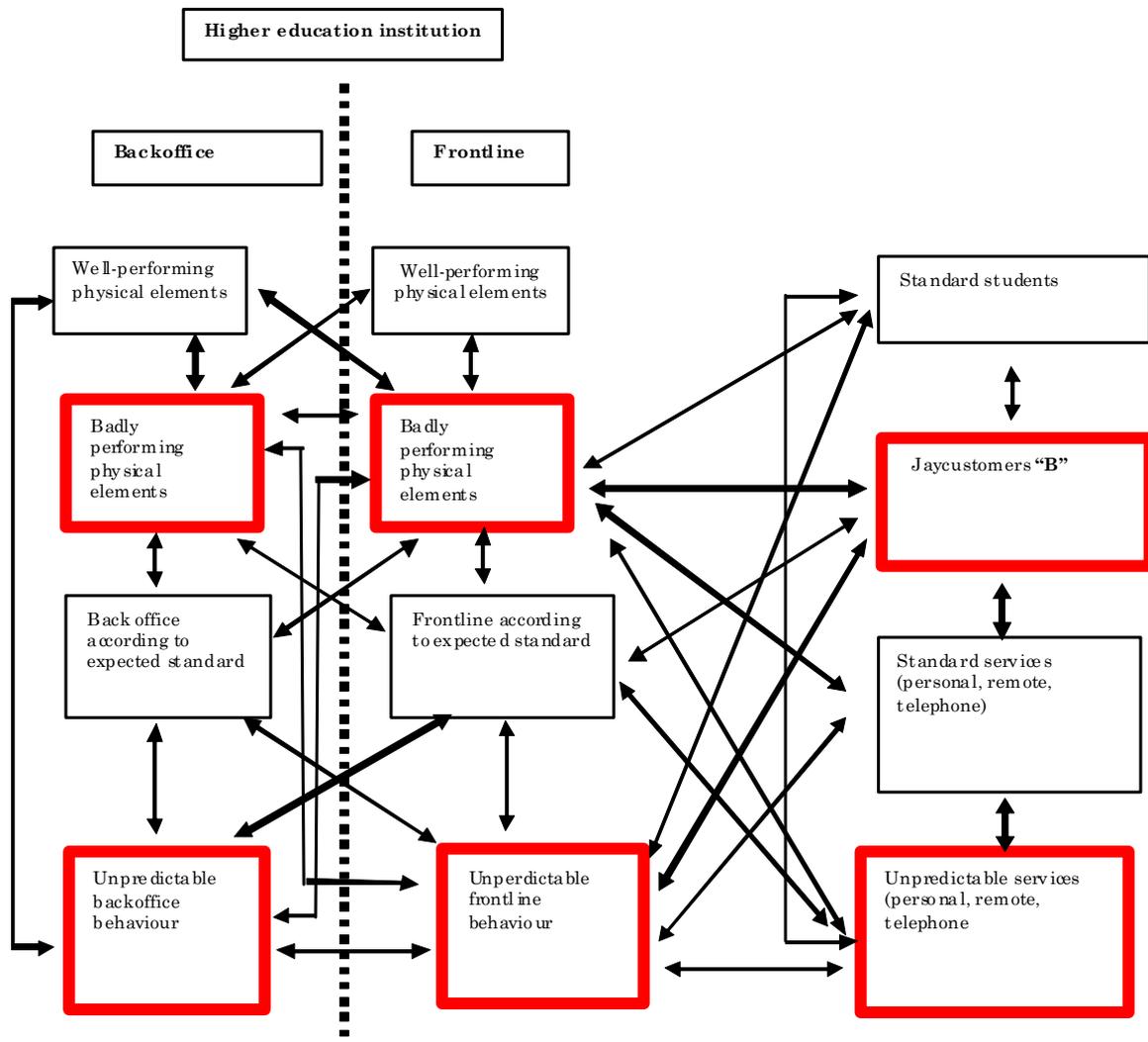


Figure 2: Higher Education conflict map based on the base Model of Service Marketing.

Source: Edited by the Author of this Dissertation.

Aims of the study are as given below:

- (1) Scrutinizing professional literature, this intends to explore and analyze state-owned higher education services in order to highlight where and how problems arise. Aim was to collect information that helps representatives of the field adapt customer-oriented attitude and so, facilitate quality-improvement of higher education services.
- (2) The study concentrated on interactions of higher education services, exploring the causes and measuring the effect of conflicts (critical incidents). The study intended to identify how bilateral performance risk could be reduced in frontline-intensive services burdened by the human factor.
- (3) Based on both qualitative and quantitative research, the study aimed to draw general and practical conclusions about the following:
 - a) What are the main causes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction for users in an educational context?

How does frontline judge its position, how does it rate its own activity and what do students think of this?

- b) Which are the critical areas, causes of conflicts between students and the frontline?
- c) How can jay-customers be typified and how can they affect the service process? The exact definition of behaviour-types may facilitate proactive provider behaviour.
- d) The study intended to prove the importance and feasibility of experimental research, a useful method to refine results.

Research hypotheses were as follows:

Principal hypothesis: At higher education, in frontline-intensive services burdened by the human factor, the key to customer satisfaction is handling unusual, irregular situations where actors are “asymmetric” in terms of information, power and interest.

Further hypotheses:

H1: Students and frontline participants (teachers and administrative staff) have dissenting opinions about perceived quality.

H2: In higher education conflicts arise from the difference between the expectations and values of frontline participants and those of students.

H3: Conflicts in high-contact, higher education services are mainly information-related conflicts that generate first of all from lack or misinterpretation of information

H4: Jay-customers can be typified.

H5: The so-called “jay-customer misbehaviour” is not exclusively negative for service-providers as irregular behaviour directs attention on critical areas where improvements should be made. This way, conflicts are functional and serve as warning for the system.

Research Objectives and Methods

One particular deficiency of satisfaction surveys in an educational setting is that the applied research models are descriptive rather than explanatory, i.e., they do not look behind the reasons of dissatisfaction. Consequently, result-based developments do not occur where needed, thus they do not achieve the desired effect (Veres and Mihály 2007). Education as a transaction is an area of services that limitedly tangible. Also, institutional regulations and general belief – in fact, because customer orientation of students has become a key issue – increasingly emphasize the service provider character of educational institutions. Therefore, research into the satisfaction of actors can greatly rely on related findings of services marketing.

Another important argument of this research approach is that handling extraordinary situations or problems is much more important than the correctness of standard processes. Customers are namely more sensitive to the former, since they consider the observance of standards as a kind of “must be” expectation. Extraordinary situations (like the ones brought about by jay-customers) are dangerous because solid satisfaction, which has been present, can be changed into an instable, transient state that then needs to be stabilized by the service recovery process.

The questions are: How does frontline judge its position? How does it rate its own activity and what do students think of these? How satisfied are they with the quality of the educational service and the job of frontline staff based on frontline experience? Which are the critical areas and which are the well functioning ones? Where is a change absolutely necessary?

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Methods:

Research was carried out in four phases:

- (1) Exploring causes of satisfaction/dissatisfaction of participants (with the help of thematic qualitative interviews and questionnaires).
- (2) Exploring and evaluating critical situations, conflicts (with the help of thematic qualitative interviews and questionnaires).
- (3) Classifying jay-customers in higher education and studying the influence of their conduct on the service. (thematic qualitative interviews and two-dimensional scaling)
- (4) Studying student-teacher interactions and group dynamics (experiment-observation- follow-up questionnaire)

Research project modules:

I. Exploratory research involving frontline employees and customers

1. Interview on the quality of frontline work:
 - Frontline employees (teachers and administrative staff) – How do they see their own performance?
 - Customers (students) – How do they find the work of the frontline employees?
 - a) Most frequent conflicts which users have to face were explored. With the help of surveys and qualitative methods teachers and administrative staff were asked about the same.
 - b) Possible ways of jay-customer classification by frontline staff were explored (control research in the case of HORECA services in order to classify jay-customers)
 - c) In this module frontline procedures and psychological mechanisms of action were explored with the help of surveys and qualitative methods.

II. Questionnaire Surveys

1. Satisfaction research among students
2. Assessment of conflicts based on evaluations from frontline staff and students.

The statistical apparatus was used to confront conflicts on two different sides (student – administrative employee and student – teacher). The question of this study is to what extent the same situation viewed from the various sides is identical or different. How do students and employees of the frontline see and judge the same problem?

III. Two-Dimensional Scaling (TDS)

This is a process that shows the perceptions and preferences of respondents on a diagram. We assume that the axes of the spatial map make reference to the psychological basis or the dimensions based on which respondents form their perceptions and preferences of stimuli in frontline conflict situations (Malhotra and Simon 2008).

IV. Observations

Observations of frontline processes by participants, while paying particular attention to the behaviour of and response from jay-customers.

V. Experiments

Out of the possible research strategies experimental simulation (Abelson, 1968) was used, which is the middle path between field and laboratory testing.

With this experimental method teacher-student interactions were studied by creating two conflicts in the educational process. In these situations there was a teacher and one or more students who had been informed about what is going on. This aimed to test reactions and communication when students in the experiment had no prior information.

Results

1. The first phase: Exploratory research involving frontline employees and customers

(A) Summary based on the interviews with the teachers: Teachers regard their current situation as relatively satisfactory, although uncertainty is much more tangible in terms of the outlook for the future as the consequences of changes underway are not yet known. Mass education is widely seen as an obstacle to relationships based on a closer working relationship between teachers and students. Quality education is little more than wishful thinking, given the huge difference in the basic knowledge of masses of students. Teachers seem to agree that surveys aimed at the assessment of the level of student satisfaction. However, distortions stemming from survey findings need to be eliminated at the implementation level. In the current system, students are not held to account for their views expressed in their assessment of teachers, while teachers themselves are exposed to a climate created by unfavourable assessment purely because their requirements vis-a-vis students are strict or they prioritize quality in student performance.

Caution is also a phenomenon to be reckoned with in the context of quality control. There seems to be consensus in the sense that rules in areas where form and administrative work is an applicable ingredient are necessary, but to have strict regulations regarding the manner in which teaching is to be performed is not a particularly wise thing to do.

(B): Summary based on the interviews with the administrative staff: The most serious problem for frontline administrative staff is workload. Workload is not evenly shared by specific areas, a phenomenon that is perceived to be problematic by many. An even share of workload is to be interpreted in the context of work and time alike. Responsibilities, specific lines of authority, procedural requirements, and flow of information are all in need of regulatory principles, while the existence of some strict rules is seen as posing an obstacle to their application rather than something that enhances work efficiency. A source of tension among staff is the absence of incentives. Salary and performance are unrelated factors.

(C) Summary based on the interviews with the students on frontline quality: Students are, broadly speaking, satisfied with the quality of tuition, while they are dissatisfied with the administrative side of tuition-related activities. Students are at a loss for where to find help in specific problems, being unaware of options available for handling such affairs. One of the top priority issues is the lack of information as well as conflicting information. Equally problematic is the handling of administrative affairs. It is seen as a slow-moving, badly organised process. The precondition of a survey to be conducted in the field of student satisfaction levels is anonymity to be granted to participants.

2. The second phase: Exploring conflicts in higher education

At this stage efforts were focused on the detection of *the most frequent critical incidents between students and frontline staff in higher education*. At which level are conflicts generated and what are the most frequent reasons? *How do frontline staff and students look at the seriousness of*

these critical incidents and what do they think about the effect on specific groups of people of those critical incidents?

(A) The most important conclusions, drawn from research in terms of conflicts explored, are as follows: Conflicts are a phenomenon experienced frequently between frontline staff and students. The most probable reasons for these conflicts are related to circumstances determined by an ever-growing number of student intake, which leads to an increasingly unmanageable mass of administratively processed students; lack of efficiency regarding the flow of information, coupled with an existing uncertainty in terms of where reliable information is to be retrieved. Excessive workload affects teachers and students alike. Tension and overreaction is paramount; students and even teachers are often in need of motivation and they fail to prioritize quality. The absence of mutual respect is often tangible in the context of teacher-student relationships. Most of those surveyed seem to agree that functional conflicts, i.e., those that draw our attention to the inadequacy of education-related services, are a necessary ingredient. It has been mentioned several times that the number of conflict-related incidents is higher every year, the reason being the absence of entrance exams, which means that no limits are put on the number of those accepted, provided they have the achievement results required for acceptance.

(B) Assessment of critical incidents in higher education, survey based on questionnaires (first version based on multiple choice tests): Based on thematic, qualitative interviews, two parallel questionnaires for teachers, other members of frontline staff and students were compiled. They were provided with a set of imaginary conflicts which they had to assess by using grades on a scale of 1-5. The second part of the questionnaire the task set for participants was – in a way similar to methods used in the critical incident analysis (CIT/CIA) – to describe additional conflicts from the vantage point of all three groups (teachers, administrative staff, and students).

Conflicts between teachers and students were broken down to situations such as conduct in class, assessment of tasks during the semester, exams, dissertation, general issues, and conduct unrelated to issues of education and teaching.

During the processing of data non-parametric tests were used.

Main conclusions drawn from “test” survey findings are as follows: During the surveying process the content of questionnaires were modified by using more accurate wording. Despite those modifications, it remains unclear who exactly considers a situation a conflict if and when that situation is interpreted as a conflict by one of the parties involved. Therefore, the process of conducting a survey aimed at the exploration of conflicts was repeated. The researcher decided to come up with a new grading system, also looking into the problem of what effect particular conflicts have on other users, i.e., groups. The questionnaires during interviews with individuals was further fine-tuned. The researcher explored the possibility of situations that had not yet been included in the questionnaires. Based on these findings, a new questionnaire, was developed and survey was repeated.

(C) Assessment of conflicts between teachers and students – a second survey via modified questionnaires: Questionnaire was re-made on the basis of test findings. Grades were also modified. The new grades denoting the intensity of conflicts were on a scale of 1-4. Grade 1 was for the absence of conflicts, grade 4 was for serious conflicts. The survey was aimed at teacher – student conflicts only, adding questions with the aim of exploring both the effect on a group of conflicts between the two sides and its extent. The question here was how teacher – student conflicts affect quality as perceived by other users present at those conflicts.

All in all, the most remarkable differences in the way views were expressed are related to the classes themselves, the starting and ending of classes. The majority of teachers interpret these circumstances as being more serious compared to how students view them. Students, when trying

to see this issue through the eyes of teachers, are of the view that it is not so much of a conflict for teachers as in fact it is.

3. The third phase: Jay-customers in higher education, two-dimensional scaling

In this model, customer group “A” is described as a group of average students who take part in the process according to the expected standards of an educational service. Customer group “B” includes students who do not behave according to standards. They are part of the process but their behaviour may disturb it in some way; they may cause conflicts, affect the provider’s behaviour and influence the satisfaction and the opinion of customer group “A” of the service.

Lovelock (1994) and more recently Harris and Reynolds (2003) termed members of customer group “B” as jay-customers. According to Lovelock’s definition of this type of behaviour, an individual’s tactless, negligent or undisciplined, offensive behaviour disturbs the provider and the other customers in the service process. In a more subtle form, Fullerton and Punj (1997) note: “Aberrant consumer behaviour is behaviour [...] which violates the generally accepted norms of conduct”. Consequently, jay-customers disturb the service process in some way, thereby influencing its quality, but they also affect the quality perceived by other customers who are present.

If we accept, and in educational services we have to accept (see e.g., the difficulties in selecting frontline employees), that the behaviour of teachers and the administrative staff does not in all cases meet expected standards, then we need to think of certain jay-customer types as not only individuals with aberrant conduct but, on the contrary, also as people who demand higher quality service through their behaviour. In fact, non-standard behaviour may even have benefits. Schneider, Bowen (1985) as well as Schneider, Parkington and Buxton (1980) assume a strong link between customer and provider behaviour. This confirms our view concerning jay-customer typology. Their conduct can influence the service quality in either a negative or a positive manner. For this reason, this research considers jay-customers as not negative characters only.

In an educational service setting, jay-customer (jaystudent) types are defined as follows:

Jay-customers are individuals who through their unplanned behaviour interrupt or disturb standard processes taking place in the frontline of a service. They affect the perceived quality of the service by influencing the provider’s or the other customers’ conduct or opinion in either a positive or a negative manner. In general, the following are the jay-customer types:

- *Model Students:* They are the ones who read and study every written information/regulation letter by letter. They constantly remind the provider that according to the written regulations... s/he should have acted in a particular manner at a given moment. They demand that written codes of conduct and rules be obeyed. They create a conflict by slowing down, or disrupting the process. Their excessively positive attitude disturbs both the provider and the other customers. (Advantages: they pay meticulous attention and their remarks may shed light on erroneous performance, deviating from standards).
- *Agitators:* They are constantly dissatisfied with everything and complain to everybody everywhere. They wish to turn the other customers against the provider and create a conflict. (Advantages: their complaints might agree with similar dissatisfaction of other customers and the service process can be improved based on their feedback).
- *Violators, the skilful:* They have a behaviour that bypasses standards. They tend to push their own interests the most e.g., they arrive 30 seconds before closing time/the end of working hours and make an angry scene explaining why they could not arrive earlier and expect full service. (Advantages: they help to identify different jay-customers and help to prepare/harden the provider for how to handle such customers)

- *Roleplayers*, self-styled actors: These are people who constantly position themselves in any situation. They go to great lengths to get a better or more attentive service e.g., when standing in a queue they complain about terrible pains or sickness and expect exceptional, immediate service. They disturb both the provider and the other customers. (Advantages: their obvious behaviour may lighten the atmosphere).
- *Arguers*: They know everything, even better than the provider. They say what the provider should do, say etc. and when. They do not agitate but cause intellectual disturbance. (Advantages: they might be right or have a creative idea).
- *Idea Originators*: They are able to come up with a much better idea in every situation. They always have suggestions or revolutionary innovations. (Advantages: they might have ideas which could be utilized by everybody.)

At this stage aim of the research was also to find out where those surveyed place different types, to what extent they regard them as constructive or destructive users and what types of conflicts their conduct might generate. Conflicts that might be beneficial to the service provider by highlighting certain deficiencies (functional conflicts) and those that have no other effect than the disruption of activities through which service is to be provided (dysfunctional conflict).

All in all, survey findings underscore the importance of the definition of conduct types that differ from standards which constitute the norm (unpredictable jay-customer), while their conduct also needs to be carefully studied in order for development-related decisions to be made at the right place and in the most appropriate manner. Research findings show that four out of six behaviour types tend to generate functional conflicts, i.e., the provider of services will benefit from a thorough study of expectations and attitudes. However, the use of a two-dimensional scale has not always been highly efficient, therefore, further fine-tuning is still necessary. The researcher's hypothesis (which runs counter to widely held views voiced in the professional literature) that the attitude of jay-customers has effects other than negative on service providers, has been substantiated by research-based evidence as a result of both thematic, qualitative interviews, and the use of two-dimensional scales.

The interpretability of two-dimensional scales is, however, limited by the discrepancy in research findings, therefore, conclusions can only be interpreted together with additional findings, there being no evidence to substantiate their statistical value independently.

4. The fourth phase: Experiment used as methodology in frontline research

In the fourth stage, the researcher performed experiments, completed observations, and conducted post-qualitative, questionnaire-based surveys along with interviews aimed at focus groups.

This module was to prove the importance and applicability of this experiment to be used as a methodological alternative with the aim of achieving a more accurate, fine-tuned interpretation of current research findings. The use of this experiment might be considered a new methodological alternative in research carried out in the field of higher education through exploring frontlines.

The question in this context was whether students have an identical view on the seriousness of a conflict and it was also meant to identify specific student-related conflict management strategies (indifference, refusal to find a solution, or cooperation between the teacher and the group), whether students act in compliance with the framework shaped by the teacher or have a tendency of changing that framework in order to find a solution to a conflict. The problem of student-student contacts was looked into to explore whether the aim here is cooperation, elimination or intensification of a conflict, i.e., the extent to which students are active and interested in finding a solution to a particular conflict. The experiment was aimed at a specific conflict in which group dynamics was monitored.

To analyse interaction, the (IPA) categories introduced by Bales were used. Here interactions can be classified by using 12 categories. Function-based communication can be divided into two principle groups: instrumental (task-oriented behaviour) and expressive (socio-emotional behaviour). The first three categories are those with a positive response. Their counterparts constitute negative responses. Positive and negative responses together make up socio-emotional behaviour. Categories describing attitudes to the task at hand are also to be divided into groups consisting of three elements.

The study also examined the shaping of students' groups and looked into factors that motivate the interests of individual groups. The aim of the experiment was to explore whether a situation like this leads to cooperation.

The study also looked into what interests motivate those who are part of a conflict: whether it is a solution to be found, further conflicts to be generated or the reputation of the other side to be damaged. Interest groups that are formed among students (motivated students who prioritize the acquisition of knowledge, students who prefer "soft options" and those who remain indifferent) were examined.

The experiment was conducted in the form of a lecture delivered to full-time and part-time students respectively. The experiment having become known, it was not possible to conduct more of the same experiment in the same higher educational institution as the situation was no longer adequate for objective testing. Findings were interpreted in a qualitative manner. During the assessment process, the necessary structuring models available were used. In order for us to be able to use the Bales interaction analysis, further analyses by two independent specialists and their comparison were equally needed, which was to result in an overall assessment of findings. Cooperation and various communication alternatives used in the process of self-assertion were thus substantiated by actual numbers.

Conflicts have thrown light on the fact that most students in higher education accept requirements set by individual institutions and that outcomes can in both situations be interpreted by saying that the teacher – who stands for a set of rules which need to be complied with – was eventually supported by students. Moreover, this means that students expect compliance with "rules of the game" from their peers. They will not voice their views on a particular conflict as long as they are not part of it.

Summary, the Evaluation of Hypotheses

The study explored the frontline at state-owned higher education institutions. By using complex methodology, frontline processes were examined in order to improve quality and develop customer-oriented attitude. On scrutinizing relevant professional literature, the characteristics of higher education services were analyzed.

The primary aim was to identify why and where exactly conflicts arise and also measure the strengths of these conflicts. The researcher wished to learn how bilateral performance risk could be reduced in frontline-intensive services burdened by the human factor. In order to develop pro-active service behaviour, the researcher typified users of non-predictable behaviour in higher education and studied their moderating influence.

In conclusion, assessed research hypotheses are as follows:

Principal hypothesis: At higher education, in frontline-intensive services burdened by the human factor, the key to customer satisfaction is handling unusual, irregular situations where actors are "asymmetric" in terms of information, power, and interest.

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Qualitative interviews and quantitative research alike have proved that the major factors that lead to conflicts are information, power, interest and relationship related. They are present between frontline employees and students, in groups and also at organisational level. As conflicts might be the major reasons for customer dissatisfaction, identifying and exploring them are of utmost importance.

For the sake of customer satisfaction, disturbing factors must be handled. Conflicts may arise from unpredictable, irregular customer behaviour (jay-customer misbehaviour) or non-standard, improper behaviour of the service-provider. At the same time it is important to note that conflicts may also have positive influence when they motivate providers to improve the quality of processes. Provider behaviour in handling extraordinary situations is a very important factor in competition.

H1: Students and frontline participants (teachers and administrative staff) have dissenting opinions about perceived quality.

In the second phase of studied how conflicts are judged by target groups (frontline participants and students) on an average. In addition, the significant differences in their judgement was focused.

Overall, the findings suggest that the above hypothesis depends largely on the particular situation since with certain variables it turned out to be absolutely true, with some others only quite probable and with a few others not confirmable, at all.

H2: In higher education conflicts arise from the difference between the expectations and values of frontline participants and those of students.

Both qualitative and quantitative experiments have proved the hypothesis. For most students, the academic role of lecturers is not significant, only very few of them accept and appreciate it. Their principal aim in higher education is to get a degree with the least possible effort. Unfortunately it communicates a rather negative message: there is no need to transmit such (academic) knowledge. A further problem, from users' point of view is that providers are not aware of the interests that motivate students' participation in higher education. The fact that education is regarded as investment or rather, consumption by users may also lead to conflicts.

H3: Conflicts in high-contact, higher education services are mainly information-related conflicts that generate first of all from lack or misinterpretation of information.

Research has proved the hypothesis. Information flow is rather ad-hoc, there are no regular encounters, thus no regular interaction is possible between participants. Conflicts in administrative fields are often caused by differing interpretations of regulations from "above".

Quantitative research showed that on the one hand, for students it is natural and not a source of conflict if they do not want to actively participate in the service, but on the other hand, they do expect teachers to provide full service, including information. To make things more complicated, students cannot be obliged to take part in lectures, which could be the most proper and obvious venue for exchange of information.

H4: Jay-customers can be typified.

Research has proved the hypothesis. In educational service setting, the researcher distinguished 6 jay-customer types: model students, agitators, violators, role-players, arguers, and idea originators. Findings from qualitative interviews and quantitative research have shown that respondents accepted this classification. To be able to handle jay-customers and learn more about their behaviour, however, service providers should be given a more detailed, more precise description service by service.

H5: The so-called "jay-customer misbehaviour" is not exclusively negative for service-

providers as irregular behaviour directs attention on critical areas where improvements should be made. This way, conflicts are functional and serve as warning for the system.

Contrary to professional literature, research has proved the hypothesis. Quantitative research using two-dimensional scaling has proved that jay-customer attitude is more likely to end up in functional conflicts and eventually may lead to the improvement of service quality.

In this dissertation the frontline of higher education services were explored with the primary aim to identify conflicts. The moderating effect of jay-customers is obvious for all service-providers, therefore, their classification and detailed description is necessary for proper and successful provider behaviour.

Identifying and exploring conflicts and irregular user attitudes makes it possible that quality-assurance methods regulate when and where these defects are born.

New (or Partly New) Scientific Findings

(T1): *One of the aims was to test frontline audit research design in personal encounters.* The application of this complex methodological approach is considered pioneer in the practice of service marketing. As for the interaction between the frontline and users, research concentrated on the moderating effect of personal differences both on performance-styles (of providers) and on consumption- styles (of users). Frontline audit as a complex methodological approach is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The researcher focused on how service interactions affect satisfaction, with special attention to the moderating effect of various jay-customer types.

(T2): Another new approach in higher education services is *mapping critical incidents, classifying conflict-types and identifying their management level.* Based on findings of qualitative and quantitative research by Zoltayné (2005) and Langer (2006) I classified causes of conflicts in higher education as follows:

- a) Conflicts arising from dissenting values
- b) Information-related conflicts (from lack or misinterpretation of information)
- c) Hierarchical conflicts (power)
- d) Structural conflicts arising from process management;
- e) Conflicts of trust (relationship-related) arising from handling controversial issues

All these above mentioned causes of conflict may appear at personal (interpersonal), group or organisational level.

(T3): *Another original approach is the description of the Servuction model adapted for higher education, involving mapping of possible conflict sources.*

(T4): The careful and thorough study of international literature made it possible to explore the different types of users of non-standard, unpredictable behaviour in various services.

Professional literature defines non-predictable user attitude as an exclusively negative characteristic feature (Alpraum Kunde, Jay-customer), not taking into consideration the possible positive consequences jay-customers might cause for providers with their behaviour (e.g., creating functional conflicts motivating careful providers to improve their services).

A new approach in this study is that for the first time a definition for “jay-customers”, typify them, map and word the positive consequences of their behaviour with the help of thematic qualitative interviews and two-dimensional scaling has been provided.

(T5): In scrutinizing higher education frontlines, experiments as such, were applied for the first time. They enable us to get a deeper insight into the interactions between the frontline and users. In circumstances when participants are not informed about the artificial nature of conflicts, since communication is spontaneous we are likely to find results that would have not been possible with the help of qualitative interviews, either. Observations make it possible to evaluate reactions, comments, remarks, and body language of group members.

Applications, Conclusions, Limits, Suggestions, and Further Aims of Research

In this paper, the author argued for adopting customer-oriented attitude in higher education. The transformation of higher education in Hungary is not yet complete even if the Bologna Process has already been launched and put into practice. To measure the quality of higher education several methods are used internationally as well as in Hungary. With the research project modules, the researcher aimed to broaden the currently used methodological tools by applying new ways of conceptualisation.

In the Bologna Process, one of the central goals is quality assurance of higher education. Quality assurance is responsible for identifying and correcting any quality defects in a specific service. The results obtained with the applied research methodology in a higher education context can yield new aspects in service quality management. The findings can be used in practice in quality assurance of higher education and can be extended to research into other frontline-related services. In addition to the above, as a by-product of research, it will provide new insights into the human resource management of services in coordinating frontline and back office staff as well as in selecting and supervising frontline employees.

This research will be practically applicable, because it can help to develop proactive provider behaviour. If conflicts are defined in an inappropriate manner, it may cause further conflicts. Exploring conflicts will make it possible to focus quality development procedure where defects occur.

Based on research findings the following suggestions for policy makers in higher education were outlined:

- 1) Quality assurance is inevitable in administrative fields, in the case of routine processes
- 2) Exploring conflicts at organisational level is necessary. However, it is essential to get a deeper insight focusing not only the interactions between providers and users but also other causes and levels of conflict on the basis of the higher education conflict map.
- 3) It seems reasonable to identify and study jay-customer types according to the nature of higher education institutions.
- 4) In order to decrease post-transactional risk-sensation of students, it is advisable to gradually build in more up-to-date information into the process of education.
- 5) Providing efficient information and regular training for the administrative staff is inevitable; trainings should possibly involve teaching methods of handling conflicts successfully.
- 6) To adopt customer-oriented attitude at higher education institutions, it seems important to enhance the motivation of workers, as far as possible.
- 7) Introducing and operating the so-called alumni-system would provide a lot of useful information.
- 8) The selection and supervision of service-providers should be similar to that of for-profit services.
- 9) It seems a good idea to introduce the tuition fee again, applying the selection criteria outlined in the introduction.

The current research into the topic cannot be regarded as complete. Setting further research aims may facilitate a more complex elaboration of the issue. Although in this study, the researcher first of all dealt with personal encounters, personal relations, it seems important to extend the investigations further into telephone and remote encounters in a higher educational context.

When developing a *mystery calling test*, besides testing routine performance, one might as well study how extraordinary, non-standard situations are solved e.g., the limit of tolerance of the frontline staff.

Active (participating) observations of frontline processes may play a more important role in exploring critical incidents, especially the reactions and behaviour of jay-customers. Since frontline employees do not work only in front, to be successful and effective, they have to cooperate with the back office.

Process management provides the link regarding organisation and control between the frontline and back office. To further investigate these fields is another possible direction to take in exploring frontline conflicts at higher education institutions.

As mentioned before, the scope of higher education institutions where the investigations took place was rather limited, as they were mainly carried out in schools of economics. To provide more reliable data, it seems advisable to involve more institutions of the same kind and repeat the test several times as control.

A possible further direction of study is involving and comparing higher education institutions focusing on similarities and differences between various types.

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