Campus spies? Using mystery students to evaluate university performance

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Background
This paper explores the appropriateness of using mystery customer programmes in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK.

Purpose
The main aim of the paper is to examine potential advantages and disadvantages of mystery customer programmes within HEIs, and to identify any issues that would need to be successfully resolved were they to be integrated into current quality assurance methods.

Sources of evidence
The main sources of evidence employed in this paper include a review of the extant literature and a small empirical survey of staff from a university business school.

Main argument
There are a number of advantages and disadvantages to using mystery customers in HE; however, mystery students could indeed be used to monitor large sections of university processes and services. For this to happen, a large number of operational issues would need to be resolved, including the development of standards of service for staff, recruitment of students, confidentiality, information utilization, the unions, costs and staff resistance.

Conclusions
The use of mystery students in HE today would appear to be a long way off; however, it may have a place, alongside peer observation and feedback questionnaires, to appraise service quality at the point of delivery. For this to happen, university management would need to develop a set of metrics to evaluate all aspects of service performance.

Keywords: Mystery students; Higher education; Service quality; Performance appraisal; Customer satisfaction

Introduction
Determining the quality of the service encounter has provided management with a challenge they have yet to consistently overcome. The main difficulties with such a task are associated with, inter alia, the heterogeneous nature of services, their perishability, their blend of tangible and intangible elements and the fact that consumption takes place simultaneously with production (Fitzsimmons & Fitzsimmons, 2004).
Customer satisfaction surveys, focus groups, complaints data, mystery customer programmes and peer appraisal are some of the traditional methods utilized by management to try to gauge the quality of their service delivery processes and people. Management clearly recognize that the service delivery process is important in relation to customer satisfaction (Wilson, 2000).

Mystery customers, the focus of this paper, are used extensively within service organizations within the UK to assess customer service, monitor front-line performance and to benchmark against competitors’ performance (Finn & Kayende, 1999). They should not be thought of in terms of management ‘spies’. Indeed, within the limited literature available on this subject, the general consensus is that operating mystery customer programmes provides a positive method of service performance measurement that is welcomed by ‘good’ employees (see e.g. Zeldis, 1988; Leech, 1995; Erstad, 1998; Wilson, 1998; Finn & Kayende, 1999; Bromage, 2000). As yet, however, their use has not been considered within the HE teaching environment.

It is the main aim of this paper to explore the possible role and use of mystery students within both HE teaching and service environments and to fill a substantial gap within the academic literature on both the concept and understanding of mystery customers. The concept will be described, and its perceived advantages and disadvantages identified. The practical implications of adopting the concept within the HE environment are then examined.

Mystery customers

The Market Research Society (MRS, 2003) defines mystery customers as: ‘individuals trained to experience and measure any customer service process, by acting as potential customers and in some way reporting back on their experience in a detailed and objective way’. It is a form of participant observation, albeit that the observation is carried out secretly (Calvert, 2005).

Harvey (1998) recognizes two differing modus operandi. The first uses a professional who poses as a customer and evaluates various aspects of the service encounter using a checklist as an aide-mémoire. Based on the information noted in the checklist, a detailed report is then prepared. The second utilizes actual customers who are trained to make detailed notes based on their shopping encounters, which are then handed over to the service management at regular intervals.

The UK government in their recent Code of practice on consultation (GB. Cabinet Office, 2004) stated that mystery customer programmes can be used to gather specific and detailed feedback on areas of service and commends it as a simple process, but with limitations. The advantages and disadvantages are examined in the next section.

Advantages and disadvantages of using mystery customers

The scant literature on the use of the mystery customer concept identifies a number of advantages in its use:
• It enables the evaluation of processes not outcomes, and importantly, this evaluation occurs at the time of the service delivery—i.e. ‘measuring the service as it unfolds’ (Wilson, 1998). This avoids one of the main pitfalls of post-service delivery survey methods, that of ‘misremembering’ by the customer. It also enables a ‘customer’ to evaluate the service delivery process with a view to improving a process that can be seen to actively work against the provision of high-quality services;
• It recognizes the ‘genuine desire among employees to provide good customer service’ (Erstad, 1998);
• It collects facts, not perceptions. This allows an objective view to be registered, again negating another weakness of customer surveys—i.e. that customers only remember their overall impression of a service and not the details (Wilson, 1998);
• It is an integral training tool, in that it can be used to identify training needs (Bromage, 2000);
• It can be a positive, motivational tool for employees (Zeldis, 1988; Erstad, 1998);
• It can bring immediate service improvements with continuous improvement possibilities (GB. Cabinet Office, 2004).

Some of the disadvantages include:

• It can be viewed as threatening to employees, in that staff may view the use of mystery customers as management checking on their performance with a view to instigating some form of disciplinary action, rather than as a trigger for staff training and development (Erstad, 1998);
• It only reviews processes and not their outcomes (Wilson, 1998). This can be problematic for many services that, as already stated, are a mixture of tangible and intangible elements, for example, the restaurant’s service was excellent, but the meal itself was substandard;
• For the employees the novelty of the process can quickly wear off and so any advantages may be short-lived (Wilson, 1998);
• The memory demands placed on assessors could affect the accuracy of the surveys (Morrison et al., 1997);
• As with all sampling techniques, it offers only a ‘snapshot’ of the service process, which may or may not be representative (GB. Cabinet Office, 2004).

**Quality in higher education**

There is a debate within the literature on exactly what the outcome of a university education is and whether students are ‘customers’ or not (see e.g. Emery et al., 2001; Watson & Crossley, 2001; Palacio et al., 2002; Constanti & Gibbs, 2004). However, Crawford (1991) argued that within the UK, HE students should be considered to be the ‘primary customers’ of a university. This position has been strengthened in recent years, as they are now liable for the payment of ‘up-front’ tuition fees.

Regardless of whether students are viewed as customers or not, they are the direct recipients of university services and their experiences and their improvement
should be at the forefront of any monitoring of HE quality. There are two main ways to monitor service quality at the point of delivery in HE, namely student satisfaction surveys, and inspection (via peer observation), although a small number of HE institutions have also introduced comments/complaints cards as a further means of gaining feedback. Surveys, particularly those conducted electronically, do not generally have a high response rate (Blackmore et al., 2004). The resultant information is supposed to provide local and central management with information on which to act (Harvey, 1995). Unfortunately, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that these surveys have been conducted in order to satisfy assessment bodies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) and the Higher Education Funding Council for England and Wales (HEFCE), rather than to bring about improvements in modules, courses or university services in general. Furthermore, the validity and reliability of the data remains a contentious issue with academics and faculty managers (see e.g. concerning questionnaires, King et al., 1999; Ramsden, 2000; Rowley, 2003, and concerning peer review, Landy & Farr, 1983; Murphy & Cleveland, 1995; Bingham & Ottewill, 2001; Greguras et al., 2001).

The use of mystery students can address some of these criticisms and given the findings of Finn and Kayende (1999) that using mystery customers’ data can provide more reliable information than traditional customer surveys, and that it is best suited to assessing objective characteristics, it would seem an appropriate tool to be both adapted and adopted by HE institutions to measure their service offerings (academic and support) against preset standards.

**Mystery students within higher education**

The idea of using mystery students within HE, *per se*, is not new. A number of universities utilize their services to monitor the performance of support services, for example, the University of Central Lancashire uses them to get feedback on their catering services (University of Central Lancashire, 2004). However, the idea of using mystery students within HE to monitor the performance of people and processes across the whole range of a university’s service offering, particularly, teaching and learning, is both new and controversial.

A mystery student is defined as a trained person who monitors and assesses the quality of the teaching and learning experience and the processes and procedures used in the delivery of university services.

This paper proposes that mystery students could be used to monitor large sections of university processes and services, including IT and technical services, library services, and administrative services, including recruitment, admissions, enrolment and day-to-day administrative operations, as well as determining facts regarding teaching and learning. It accepts that typically mystery students could not judge the quality of any lecture’s content, in the same way that a patient would not be able to judge the quality of a doctor’s diagnosis unless medically qualified to do so. A typical mystery student could be asked to evaluate a particular lecture given by a particular tutor on a particular module at a particular time.
Provided a university had in place standards of service for teaching staff, a mystery student evaluation sheet for such a lecture would be able to provide information on, *inter alia*:

- lecturer punctuality;
- lecturer audibility;
- PowerPoint slide clarity from back of lecture theatre (where appropriate);
- adequacy of lecture theatre regarding seating, lighting, technology and cleanliness;
- duration of lecture;
- lecturer handout materials.

Likewise if a university had in place standards of service for its various support services, a mystery student evaluation sheet for such services would be able to provide information on *inter alia*:

- time taken to answer the telephone;
- problem resolution or otherwise;
- length of time waiting in line for service;
- attitude of staff;
- observance to any service script.

The above has demonstrated that data from mystery student evaluations can obviously provide university management with important information on service performance. However, this could only be achieved if a number of operational issues (standards of service have already been demonstrated to be a necessary prerequisite for a mystery student evaluation) can be addressed. It is these issues that are addressed in the next section.

**Operational issues**

A number of issues surrounding the use of mystery students within HE would need to be resolved if they were to be successfully implemented within the sector. Such issues include: standards of service, recruitment, confidentiality, use of mystery student reports, unions, costs and staff resistance. Each of these issues will be addressed in turn.

**Standards of service**

Since mystery students would record objective performance against preset standards, it is important that a service has in place such objective standards against which their performance can be measured. Unfortunately, at the time of writing, this is not the case for the great majority of services provided in UK universities. However, the UK government together with the HE Academy is currently consulting all UK universities about the setting of standards for teaching and learning. It is surely only a matter of time before such standards are in place. It will be up to the management of each university to develop standards of service for their support services in consultation
with their staff. Only when appropriate standards have been set would the adoption of mystery student programmes be possible.

**Recruitment**

Typically there are two options: recruit a professional who poses as a student customer or select actual students and train them in evaluation techniques. The use of a professional would not present any problems regarding the evaluation of support services, but they would find it difficult to merge into the general student body in evaluating a lecture or tutorial. Option two would negate this disadvantage. However, internal recruitment might present difficulties with regard to confidentiality and anonymity. These issues are addressed below.

**Confidentiality**

A mystery student would need to refrain from divulging their role to fellow cohort members and staff. Their ‘term of office’ as a mystery student would therefore need to be limited, perhaps, to only one academic year so as not to detract from their studies and also to avoid discovery.

Given the tight specification for evaluation, a particular lecture on a particular day at a given time, keeping the identity of staff a secret, would be impossible. However, the information provided and any actions taken would remain confidential between the manager and that individual. This puts further emphasis on the setting of appropriate standards, so that all staff are aware of the standards against which they would be judged.

**Information utilization**

University management would need to decide how they would use the findings of a mystery student report. To engage with the benefits of such a scheme, alleviate staff suspicions and promote the use of mystery students to staff, the programme would need to be linked to staff development, training and a reward and recognition system rather than to any disciplinary measures. It is important that results, good and not so good, are fed back to the people at the front line, so that behaviours can be either changed or recognized (Collins, 2004).

**Unions**

There are currently two main unions for academic staff in HE: the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) and the Associated Union of Teachers (AUT), as well as Unison for most support staff. Their position on mystery students may well have an impact on their members’ acceptance, or not, of such a scheme. However, the use of mystery customers in many service organizations where there are strong union presences suggests that this problem is not insurmountable.
Costs

A cost–benefit analysis should be conducted prior to piloting the use of mystery students in HE. There will be costs associated with recruitment, payment and management of the mystery student scheme. The question for university management is whether or not the benefits would outweigh the costs.

Staff resistance

In a survey of 40 teaching staff (approximately 25% of the total) within a UK university business school, as part of a wider research project on peer review, the idea of introducing mystery students was the most emotive and thought-provoking question for some interviewees. One interviewee expressed ‘shock and disgust’ that it could even be considered, with another claiming that it would be an attack on ‘academic freedom’. Another staff member was horrified and explained that when peer observation of teaching was first mooted, staff thought that it was a way for management to measure performance and that it would lead to penalties in some way. He felt that mystery students would be perceived by staff as threatening and would remove academic freedom and control from the lecturer, something he thought had been already eroded in many other ways. Other (mainly new) staff were either apathetic regarding the concept of using mystery students or happy for them to be used. Those who did not feel threatened by the concept of mystery students thought it was a good idea, provided that the standards against which they would be judged were clearly defined. Berta (2004) argues that those against the idea of mystery customers were the ones most likely to need it. However, staff participation in the standard setting process could engender acceptance and reduce resistance (Erstad, 1998).

Conclusion

There are numerous academic texts on the collection of reliable and valid data (see e.g. Bell, 1987; Creswell, 1993; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Almost all of these extol the virtues of ‘triangulation’—the use of multiple (at least three) data collection methods in order to corroborate findings. The same criteria should be applied to student feedback data. In this case, the mystery student process would be supported by more traditional student feedback methods such as module and institutional questionnaires and peer observation. In any case, the outcomes should not be about disciplinary action on the grounds of incompetence, but rather be linked to staff development and individual improvement. This will only be the case in those universities where the blame culture has been removed or superseded by a culture of constructive criticism. Where processes or systems are identified as constituting the problem, it is usually only management who have the authority to change them (Deming, 1982).

The use of mystery students is a controversial subject with the staff interviewed here split almost evenly as regards those in favour and those (vehemently) against, and indeed their introduction seems a long way off. Apart from overcoming staff fears
about how the results of such a survey will be used, there are a number of issues with regard to the recruitment and management of such students. Longer-serving staff will recall that, when first mooted a number of years ago, peer review was met with the same uncertainty and fear that the idea of mystery students is today. However, it is now accepted as a valid method of appraising teaching performance that is not misused by local and central management. Mystery student reports can both confirm findings from other sources of data collection and fill the gaps in management information. For example, Ramsden (2000) states there is little evidence to provide a link between peer review and improved teaching due to a reluctance on the part of peers to give negative feedback to colleagues. There will be no such reluctance on the part of mystery students.

This proposal is deliberately provocative and controversial; however, given the status of ‘the student as customer’, the use of mystery students to appraise service quality at the point of delivery should not be lightly dismissed. They can be used to appraise academic, administrative and general support staff, as well as the systems and processes used to support service delivery. If linked to the identification of areas for staff development and continuous improvement, the concept can over time be viewed as non-threatening. The ultimate scenario is that HE institutions should appraise teaching in particular, using a triangulation of methods—i.e. peer appraisal, feedback questionnaires and mystery student reports. Senior managers can also develop a set of measures that evaluates university service performances with regard to attaining service standards, student satisfaction via surveys and complaints, student retention and student success rates.

References
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Mystery customer programmes in HE


