Abstract

A framework for relationship-based higher education management

Based on the stakeholder view the paper points out the importance of the relationship between higher education institutions and their stakeholders. With a special focus on this relationship, the author describes the student lifecycle with a broad and strategic view toward establishing and improving a long-term relationship. Within the framework of life long learning, students should return to the higher education institution many times to update their knowledge. Therefore the author describes the different tasks and important aspects of relationship-oriented higher education management within his concept of student relationship management.

A framework for relationship-based higher education management

1. Introduction

The competition on the higher education (HE) market, due to the increasing number of public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as the Bologna process as driving power of a new European Higher Education Area force institutional changes. Based on this and new HE regulations in many European countries HE is in a change process. More market and stakeholder orientation leads to competition-oriented HE-system, to new profile development at the institutions and underline the need of (for HEIs) innovative management instruments. HEIs are thus in need of modern management approaches and tools to cope with this "competitive stress". The question of exactly how these concepts are implemented is the particular challenge faced by an expert organisation (Pellert 1999) on the way to further developing the organisation of HEIs and the corresponding professionalisation of the management. In the same time HEIs have demonstrated a certain amount of resistance against the adoption of new models as well as reform ideas. In many cases, Humboldt's ideal of autonomy runs counter to Machiavellian objectives and limits as well as the state and governmental influence (Clark 1983). Thus, there is a conflict of priorities between the impulse for renewal and the necessity for control on the policy, institutional, instrumental and individual levels (Hödl, Zegelin 1999, p. 12ff.; Cordes, Westermann 2001, p. 7ff.; Fröhlich, Jütte 2004, p.10f.).

HEIs are knowledge-based expert organisation with a strong focus on teaching and research. Nowadays academic services as the third pillar arrived in the thinking of HEI leaders and become more attention within HEIs. Education and research activities are de facto services to the public, to companies, students etc. Through the strong competition on the HE market institutions are constraining to search for competitive advantages. Knowledge production alone is not enough. This limited mission of HEIs has to be changed. Through the integration of a service culture the origin tasks of HEIs get an additional support to be successful. In this "service mode" HEIs have to change they attitudes to be an ivory tower and should be transformed to a relationship-based organisation.

The relationship management approach is theoretically based on the idea of the stakeholder-value and customer relationship management. HEIs have to clearly know their stakeholders and need specific strategies to use the relationship to them in a proper way. This framework is a theoretical model. Some of elements are already implemented at the Danube University Krems, Austria. The University as a state university has over 70 percent of her annual budget from third party mainly postgraduate study programme fees. As Europe "model project" a state university offering only postgraduate programmes, the Danube University is one of the most entrepreneurial universities within Europe's higher education landscape. Therefore following the framework of relationship management as well as the first experiences with this model at the Danube University Krems theoretical and practical issues will be discussed.

2. The Rules of Relationship Management

The orientation and "changes in knowledge transfer," (Müller-Böling 2000, p. 5ff) from teaching to learning, refer to a customer orientation in such a way that the "potentials and processes are coordinated with the learning prerequisites provided by the students." (Hansen 1999, p. 371) An example of this is the new flexibility of times and places of learning or the use of E-learning. The improvement of an institution's services takes place by orienting the services towards the students, as well as through the better use of students as external factors. This customer orientation is reflected in the main processes of HEI, i.e. teaching and research,

as well as in the perception of students, strategic partners and enterprises as customers. The core competence of HEIs is still knowledge development, transformation and sharing. In the same time HEIs should become a "partner for life" through life long learning. As a knowledge service organisation the HEI is not prepared for this shift. Alumni management, technology transfer centres or continuing education centres are first grassroots trials to set up based on the core competences teaching, research and academic services knowledge new relationships and develop competitive advantages for the own institution.

Customer orientation as the motto of reform efforts at higher education institutions is more and more often the subject of scientific studies (Bastian 2002; Krulis-Randa 1996; Meissner 1986, p. 125ff.). The approaches, for example, of Hansen, Sinz or Müller-Böhling, (Hansen 1999; Sinz 1998a; Müller-Böling 2000) to turn the HEIs into a real service provider are becoming more and more accepted within HE organisations and the relevant ministries. These demands are reinforced by the causality between services and the HEIs (Bastian 2002, p. 11f.; Heiling 2003; Hansen 1999, p. 369ff):

- Services are immaterial. At the higher education institution, they include research (in the sense of the progress of knowledge) and teaching (as knowledge transfer) (Sinz 1998b, p. 3; Hansen 1999, p. 371).

- Services are largely about experience and trust, and are thus *a priori* not entirely measurable (Wochnowski 1999, p. 287ff). For example, the evaluation of the quality of teaching only takes place during or at the end of studies (von Lüde 1999, p 135f). Students must trust the HE institution to follow through on the evaluation results.

- Services, moreover, require an external factor – these are the students at the higher education institution – which actively participates in the production process of the service and thus has an influence on the quality (Hansen 1999, p. 371).

A fundamental difference between HEIs and service enterprises is the educational task. Different target groups have divergent demands with regard to teaching and research. Thus, an orientation towards any individual group of customers – students, the state, providers of third party funds, etc. – is, strictly speaking, only possible to a limited extent. Instead, the HEI has to consider the interests of all the social stakeholder- and customer groups (stakeholder approach) in the course of any educational task (Stegner 2000, p. 1f.; Franck 2000, p. 19ff.; Hödl, Zegelin, 1999, p. 5).

Besides their educational tasks, higher education institutions also have to pay attention to the particular logic of the relevant market at any given time. A transition from a sellers' market to a buyers' market occurred. This transition forced higher education institutions to critically examine their own potentials and processes and to better orient themselves to the various demands (Thielemann 1997; Schäfer 2003, p. 144; Rothschild, White 1993, p. 20f.; Stauss, Balderjahn, Wimmer, 1999, p. 1). In a sellers' market, there is little incentive to orient potentials and processes towards the expectations of different groups of customers by means of a service orientation (Schrader, Eretge 1999, p.104). A shift from sovereign institutions demanding services, such as education ministries, to potential students has just begun in recent years. For example, the Western Hungarian University in Sopron offers a business administration study programme in German. This educational offer appeals to both Hungarian students as well as those from neighbouring countries.

One finds different approaches to the theoretical examination of the education market as a buyers' market. Ruch calls this "trusting the marketplace" (Ruch 2001, p 68ff), Slaughter and Leslie even speak of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter, Leslie 1997), and Keller sees a "management revolution" (Keller 1983, p. 16ff) at HEI. These considerations indicate a shift from a transaction-oriented and knowledge-based to a relationship-oriented perspective in HE

management. The advantages of a relationship orientation are systematised by Hennig-Thurau and Klee (Henning-Thurau, Klee 1997, p. 737ff) in the following way:

Social Benefits refer to the forming of social relationships between customers and companies. In the context of higher education institutions, this finds its expression in the social integration of students into the higher education institution (Tinto 1993), as well as into the higher education institution's community as a network.

Confidence Benefits, on the other hand, result from the degree to which students and graduates have confidence in the action of the higher education institution and its members.

Special Treatment Benefits result from the degree to which customers experience individual care by the higher education institution.

Identity-related Benefits in the context of higher education stand for the advantages that result from the public prestige and image of the higher education institution and the positive consequences they have on professional life.

Customer orientation does not automatically ensure the customer base, but it does create a necessary condition for such a base. It has to be clearly stated that periodic satisfaction ratings and evaluations of teachers and courses are a necessary, although not the only, requirement for building long-term relationships between students and any given HEI. Today, due to the lifelong learning approach, we assume that students will not only study at the HEI once, but they will have recourse to the (teaching) services of the HEI again and again over time. Thus, the relationship takes on the character of companions for life. However, HEIs are not yet prepared for this kind of commitment. Continuing education in sciences is still underdeveloped as a basic support and participation of HEIs in the LLL-process, particularly at public HEIs. A reorientation of HEIs is necessary here.

The potentials, processes and outcomes of a HE institution form the basis of its relationship orientation. Hansen emphasises that the higher education institution's processes and potentials are rarely coordinated because "the desired outcome quality is not always clearly defined and because the potentials and processes are not interpreted clearly enough as determinants of the outcomes" (Hansen 1999, p. 377). Therefore, attention has to be paid to coordination in the development of the SLM model. The organisation of potentials and processes of the production of services determines the quality of the outcomes.

In service-oriented fund appropriation systems, students are the capital for HEIs. Something similar applies to alumni, who open up attractive cooperative and financing opportunities for HEIs above and beyond the students' studies. Thus, one of the paramount tasks of the higher education institution is to structure its relationship to these two groups without restricting students' freedom in the process.

A relationship is based on strategy, processes and people to manage the interaction with stakeholders in an organised way. New information and communication technologies like internet, data warehouse solutions etc. are able to support this triangle and improve their performance.

First of all, relationship management stands for the development and implementation of a new stakeholder-centred higher education strategy. A reorientation of all the processes and responsibilities of HEIs towards stakeholders has to take place in order to implement relationship management. Relationship management is a higher education strategy aided by state-of-the-art technologies that is used to optimise the quality of the relationship between the higher education institution and her stakeholders in the long term. The task of relationship management is therefore to analyse, plan and structure the connection channels of the stakeholders. Along the lines of McKenna (1991, p. 86ff) and Diller (2000, p. 20ff), the basic principles of Relationship Management are follows:

Intention of a unique relationship: The objective is to set up a special relationship, which has the goal on beneficial cooperation for all involved bodies.

Individuality towards stakeholders: Different segments of stakeholders should receive different service options.

Information on stakeholder: In order to be able to fulfil the first two points, it is imperative to obtain, store and analyse as much comprehensive information on the relationship and stakeholders as possible.

Integration of stakeholders: According to the stakeholders' role they should be connected to the HEI in the best way.

Interactions with stakeholders: It is only possible to gather data and information or to build up a relationship to stakeholders at all through interaction with them.

Investment in stakeholders' relationship: All of these steps cannot be realised for free. Relationship management also requires the readiness to commit oneself financially. In view of the target successes and outcomes, these are more than just costs involved, but an investment in stakeholders and thus in the future of the HEI as an organisation.

This six I's are the basic driving forces for a strategic relationship management. The framework for relationship management is finally based on these rules and has to follow this by creating single tasks and actions to improve the effectivity and efficiency of the relationship to the stakeholders.

The soul of the information technology revolution, in particular, the Internet is the chance gave HEIs to choose how they interact with their stakeholders. The Internet open up the possibility to create better relationships with stakeholders then has been previously possible in the offline world. By combining the abilities to respond directly for example to potential student requests and to provide the same stakeholder group with a highly interactive customized services, HEI have a greater ability today to establish, nurture, and sustain long-term relationships then ever before. This is also needed by opening the gates of the ivory towers as HEI are named before. Gibbons at al. describe this as the mode two knowledge production.(Gibbons at al., 1994) Whereas Mode 1 is seen to be discipline-oriented, homogenous, stable and more hierarchical organised, Mode 2 is seen to be transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, heterarchical and transient. In Mode 2, value, sustainability and social acceptability are fundamental criteria in the evaluation of quality. In Mode 1 it was the academic communities that "spoke" to society. Under Mode 2 society "speaks back" at the academic communities. Thus, the conventional academic model of 'open science' and disciplinary based research driven by internal reflection is challenged.(Arbo and Benneworth p.40) The connectivity between HEI and their stakeholders is more complex and therefore a strategic management of the different relationships to different stakeholders' groups is needed. The hybridisation between forms of knowledge and forms of organisations, and previously separated realms of society are becoming more and more intertwined. Figur 1 shows the complexity of stakeholders' relations in Mode 2:
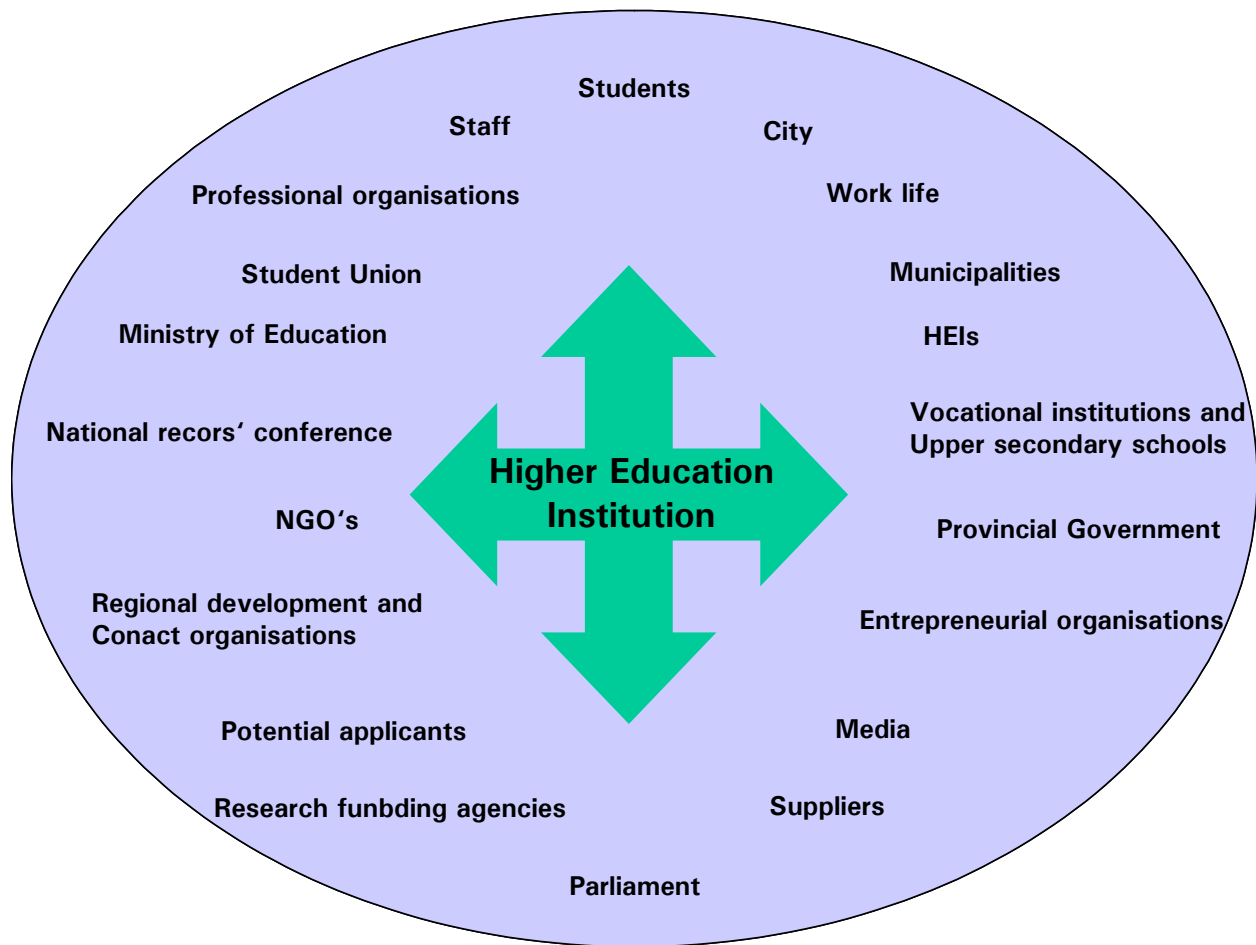
Figure 1: Relationships of Higher Education Institutions in Mode 2

The named relationships in figure 1 could be divided into HEI to governmental bodies, to business and to customers. All tree groups need different relationship strategies and activities. The success of HEI is significantly determined by the quality of this touch points to the outside and inside world of the institutions. To mange all this different levels and highly differentiated relationships a systematic framework is an absolute requirement.

The Relationship Management Model

The crucial point is what higher education manager need to know about their stakeholders and how is that information used to develop a complete relationship perspective. Following, throughout a specific example of one stakeholders' group the relationship management model will be introduced. For this the students as one of the key customers of HEIs was chosen. The target audience contains the whole student life cycle from first contact with potential student till the graduate status and alumni phase. The basic model includes a set of seven basic components (Winer, 2001, p.91)

- a data of target audience activity
- analyses of the database
- given the analyses, decision about which target audience to target,
- tools for targeting the audience

- how to build relationships with the targeted audience,
- privacy issues, and
- metrics for measuring the success of the relationship management program.

An essential first stage to a entire relationship management solution is the creation of a target audience database file. This is the groundwork for all relationship based activities. In the case of students are this student records but also seeking for historical student contact data from student service center. What are the important information? Preferably, the database should include information about the following:

Transaction – this should contain a whole study history with additional details (class attends, study and research profiles, university activities like sports or jobs e.g. at institute, center)

Student contacts – nowadays, there is a rising number of student contact points from various channels and environment. This should not only include marks and number of semesters, but any student- or HEI-initiated contact (student request for a dormitory place or HEI invitation to a conference etc.)

Descriptive information – This means e.g. origin, age etc. and it is for segmentation and other data analysis purposes

Response to communication stimuli – This part of the information file should contain whether or not the target person responded to a communication initiative triggerd by the HEI or any other direct contact.

The basis date sources shows following figure:

Listbroker/Adresses

Student Data Warehouse

Prospective students/ Alumni

External Data scholarships/Funding Program

Finance

Infrastrukture

Marketing

….

Teaching

Research

HE Core Processes
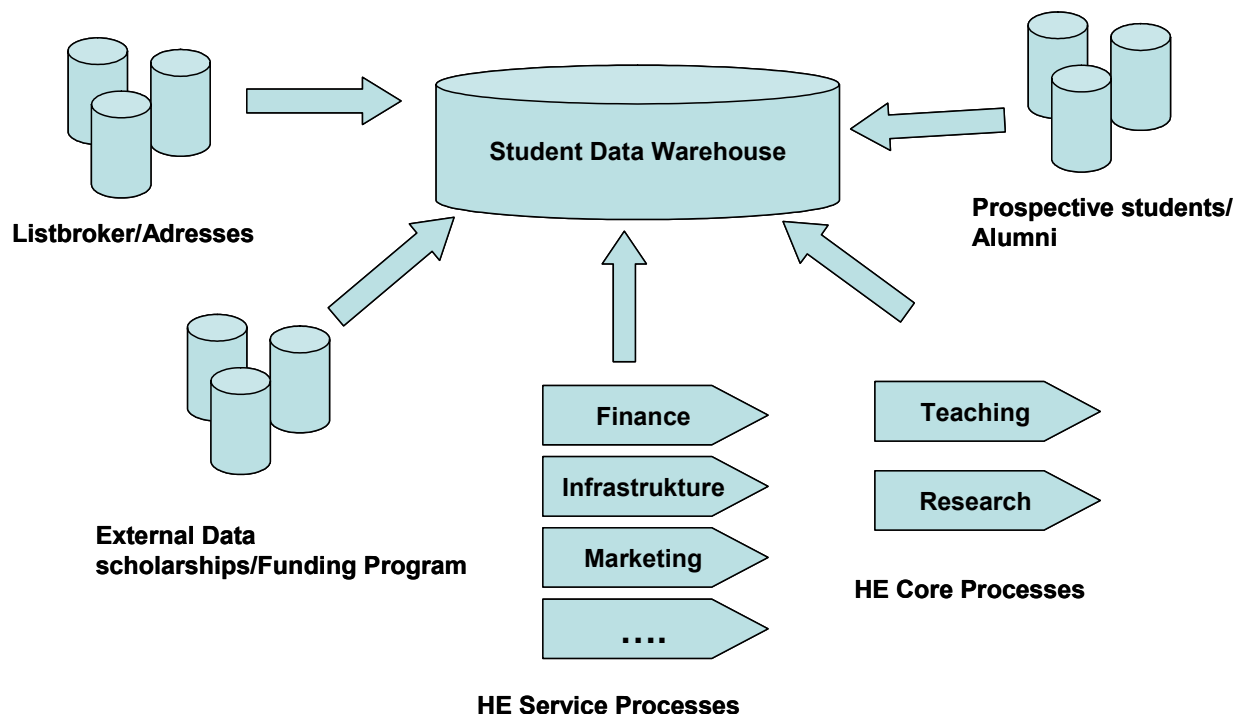
HE Service Processes

Figure 2: Student Data Warehouse

Traditionally, student databases have been analyzed with the intent to define drop-out rate, average length of study, ratio of male and female etc. If HEI would like to play a better

role in lifelong learning (LLL) process and would like to bring back graduate students several times to the HEI and not only on class reunion purposes, then have they to think about marketing campaigns for LLL programmes. Or even use the data to develop tailored and customized programmes for job professionals. But also to targeting most appropriate alumni for sponsoring and fundraising activities more detailed knows HEI this target audience more profitable could it be used. This is a change in the view of students not only to interact with them once in their life but several times and develop a lifetime student value through different common activities and exchange processes. This could lead to increasing number of HEI services, increasing study fees and HEI income, reducing HEI product and services marginal costs or reducing student acquisition cost e.g. for LLL programs.

In the case of the Danube University Krems the university has seventeen different date bases. More or less every department has his own date base. A wide range of different IT solution from a single excel list over a self developed access date base to other professional solutions. Finally – after a project over tree years – the university has now her single date base integrating all corporate units and data entities in one large data base by using the same interface and programme to support the relationship between the university and her clients, students etc.

The next step in the framework is to find the fit between HEI services and study programs and the right customers for this. The main problem is that to know the needs the best way is to have direct and high frequency interaction. Through this the HEI is able to gathering the right and state of the art information. Figure 3 shows the different HEI units and the interaction's "attitude" of the units. The most important part for collecting data is the upper left-hand box. Upper right-hand units as well as lower left-hand units have some disadvantages by the date development. Lower right-hands box unit is highly addicted from the other boxes. The rectorate is less involved by gathering data but using data for strategic decisions is very important to have the valid and right information for decision making. Therefore the rectorate should force the other units to the data base development.

student interaction

		direct	indirect
interaction frequency	high	teaching staff, programme director	dean of faculty marketing dep.
	low	student administration, student service center	rectorate

Figure 3: Student interaction matrix

The next step is to find the fit between HEI services and study programs and the right customers for this. This means a consideration between services and products and the customers (students, alumni etc.). This could be a selection for a marketing activity for a newly established programme. Behind of the motivation for such selection could be various and focus not only on teaching: new fundraising project, lobbyism etc. the point is that without knowing the potential target audience all this actions and activities can not be made in a effective and efficiency way. But even the HEI made the right target audience selection the targeting actions are also essential. Mass marketing approaches such as television, radio, or print advertising are useful for generating awareness and achieving other communication objectives, but they are poorly-suited for relationship management due the their impersonal nature. This is one of the reasons why the Danube University decided to use more unconventional approaches especially in HEI such as direct mail and telemarketing and internet marketing as a new portfolio of marketing activities. Peppers and Rogers (Peppers, Rogers, 1999) have urged for business companies to begin to dialogue with their customers through these targeted approaches rather then talking "at customers with mass media. After nearly ten years HEI is discovering the possibilities of one to one marketing as well.

Of course are relationships not built and sustained with direct e-mail themselves but rather through the types of programs that are available for which e-mail may be a delivery mechanism. Let go back to the idea of LLL. If the HEI seriously would like to be a partner in this process then the institution needs a retention program as well. Retention means in this context that HEI is offering for students and alumni (or for other potential target audience) special services. Through this, the HEI is able to increase retention rate.

There is now question for the relationship between satisfaction with products and services and the institutional success. New quality management tasks at HEI are looking for this issue e.g. student satisfaction with teachers and teaching programs. HEI already understood that the institution must constantly measure satisfaction levels and develop programs that help th deliver performance beyond targeted audience expectations. There are different way to focus on retention like loyalty programs (we know this from "other parts" of our life like frequent travellers by airlines etc.). Customization is also a good example. Some HEI are already challenging this by running in-house-programs for different companies. This means that the institution is focusing on the needs of the company and offering a tailor-made programme for the company employees. Community building activities are also typical examples for retention orientation. The best example is alumni management. One of the services within the alumni work is the network services of the organisation.

The relationship management system depends upon a database of the target audience information and analysis of that data for further effective targeting of marketing communications and relationship-building actions. There is an evident exchange between the ability of HEIs to better deliver services and the quantity and quality of information needed to enable this delivery. Particularly, with the popularity of the Internet, many HEI stakeholder groups are concerned about the amount of personal information that is contained in database and how the HEI is going to use this. Thus, the privacy issue extend all the way through the seven steps of the framework.

The new idea of relationship oriented HE-management means that new metrics used b HE-managers to measure the success of the HEI services and products have to be introduced. Up to now metrics at HEI are manly developed from a administration and less from a manager point of view. This information management and decision making

support systems are still underdeveloped. The Danube University Krems uses a software tool which is able to measure the success e.g. a direct mail by counting the response rate to the mailing activity. An other good example is the student acquisition costs. Most of the HEI in Europe couldn't deliver this information. But all such measures imply doing a better job acquiring and processing internal data focus on how the HEI performing at the stakeholder level.

4. Conclusion

In future, HEIs have to use the relationship capital of students and alumni in a better way. If alumni are the only group considered as customers of HEIs because, as former students, they can support the university via sponsoring and other contributions, it is already too late. Instead, the alumni work has to begin when the students first make contact, even before they begin their studies. The potential relationship with alumni can only be used if the process of forming the relationship is seen not as a purely isolated activity, but as part of a process in the sense of a full life cycle. Therefore a shift from knowledge to relationship orientation is essential. The model of Student Lifecycle Management was presented for this purpose because it increases the emotional attachment between students (who become graduates and then alumni) and the HEI. The relationship can be structured better and used over the long term due to the orientation towards the various life stages of students.

Finally, the customer-oriented management is about creating framework conditions that make it possible to proactively proceed in the service processes of the HEI (Homburg, Sieben, 2000, p. 490f.). It is necessary to systematically stimulate customer relationships towards segment-specific strategic objectives so that the desired success and an ideal type of relationship can be assured in each stage.

The special service character of education has already been addressed more than once. Direct contact to customers is advantageous for achieving the objectives in each stage of the relationship. If direct contact with customers is maintained, it is much easier to collect data on the customers' subjective perception of the educational service. Indirect contact would increase the complexity as well as the expenditure of the information exchange (Winer, 2001, p. 93f.). The high intensity of the relationship, particularly between students and the HE institution, also makes it possible to regularly collect data on, renew, and adjust the relationship. The elementary categorisation of the individual stages also becomes easier. Therefore, it is important that the system is understood not as a rigid conception, but as a flexible instrument for optimising the relationship in the sense of Student Life Cycle Management.

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