

The Student-As-Customer Debate Towards a Transformational Higher Education: Quality, TQM, and Stakeholder Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the student-as-customer metaphor in HE, interrogating its origins in Total Quality Management (TQM) principles, managerialism, and marketisation, and its implications for pedagogical practices and HE missions, as well as the fragmented debates surrounding its adoption. This study systematically reviewed the literature and synthesised scholarly perspectives across conceptions of quality, TQM implementation, and conceptualisations of the student role. The student-as-customer metaphor foregrounds a fundamental tension between academic autonomy and market accountability. While proponents of the metaphor cite enhanced institutional responsiveness and student empowerment, critics argue that it threatens pedagogical integrity, commodifies knowledge, and erodes the transformational agenda of HE. The study indicates that recontextualising the metaphor in HE from a public good to a private commodity may affect educational outcomes, calling for a balance in stakeholders' perspectives.

Keywords: Student-as-customer, quality assurance, total quality management, stakeholder governance, educational transformation

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) globally are undergoing critical transformation to fundamentally reshape the institutional identity, students' learning experiences, stakeholder relations and general academic practices (Marginson, 2016). In the midst of this paradigm shift is the increasingly polarised debate on who the student is and how student identity within the higher education (HE) landscape should be conceptualised. The metaphor of student-as-customer is known to have emerged in HE due to the introduction of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles and marketisation of HE in contemporary educational discourse (Tight, 2013; Guilbault, 2018). It is rooted in and traced to the broader neoliberal reforms that increasingly repositioned HE from the public good to a privatised commodity (Collini, 2012). Harvey (1995a) posits that TQM and QA systems focus on accountability and continuous improvement, however, due to their customer-centric philosophy, they misalign with the traditional purpose and pedagogical practices of HE.

Some implications extend beyond terminology in referring to student-as-customer. This metaphor can influence institutional policies, reconfigure QA mechanisms, shape how academics and students relate and affect pedagogical approaches that can be adopted, thereby affecting students' learning outcomes and experiences (Nixon et al., 2018). Despite existing literature that focuses on the metaphor of the student-as-customer, the debate remains

increasingly fragmented, with little middle ground (Tomlinson, 2017). These fragmented positions have obscured nuances and contextual factors that shape how the metaphor operates in practice. To understand the student-as-customer metaphor, it should be examined within the confines of TQM implementation in HE. Redding (2005) believes that TQM's migration from industry to education brings with it assumptions such as customer, process, product, QA, and quality control that are alien to the academic context, resulting in resistance that threatens the sustainability of HE.

While there is substantial literature on TQM in HE and the student-as-customer debate, there exist critical gaps. There is limited extant literature on its integrative analysis that combines quality conceptualisation, TQM principles, resistance, and student role conceptualisation in a single analytical framework, and most literature treats them in isolation (Tomlinson, 2017). In addition, most extant literature argues either for or against the metaphor without interrogating the conditions under which the metaphors might be more or less appropriate (Pitman, 2016). Finally, there is literature that acknowledges the empowering purpose of HE (Harvey & Green, 1993), which can become marginalised in debates that focus on technocracy. There is a need for scholarly work that maintains focus on reform while engaging with practical realities of contemporary HE, such as funding constraints, ranking pressure, stakeholder accountability and HE sustainability (Barnett, 2010) for the public good. Two questions were formulated to address this: 1) What are the various conceptions of quality in HE? 2) What are the arguments for, against, alternatives and balanced perspectives to the student-as-customer metaphor?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

HE globally is known through the Humboldtian model as a public institution that are committed to the integrated pursuit of truth, knowledge, service and the grooming of well-rounded citizens (Krull, 2005; Atalay, 2018). Universities were therefore insulated from market pressures and mandated to serve the broader common good that produces graduates who can contribute to a country's intellectual and cultural gap, and not only to economic conditions (Paricio Royo, 2017). However, the traditional nature of HE has been disrupted by forces of neoliberalism. According to Atalay (2018), studies in the Turkish context show a rise in New Public Management (NPM) strategies that are reorienting HEIs to focus on performance measurement. This paradigm shift is that HEIs are rethinking themselves as competitive service providers, where academic qualifications are reenvisioned as personal economic investment, and the HEI's social mandate is subsumed to the goal of graduate employability (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Barnett, 1990). This reconfiguration of HE has changed the HE relationship with its key collaborators, who have diverse and competing interests in the HE outcomes, which is why the traditional nature of HE cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of a single interested party (Holmes, 2013; Savga et al., 2018). An empirical study by Xu et al. (2018) highlights that students perceive their role in HE as plural, where they serve as the co-producers of knowledge, products of HE, citizens of HE, and recipients of knowledge, which challenges the framing of HE as a commodity.

Again, if HE is primarily structured around customer satisfaction, it affects students' academic performance, which is self-defeating, therefore impacting the quality and academic rigour (Safdar et al., 2020). Quality of learning in educational research centres on cognitive and intellectual development and active engagement, while customer-defined quality centres on privileges, convenience and measurable short-term returns (Paricio Royo, 2017). Marsh and Roche (2000) further challenge the assumption that students prefer lenient grading, instead showing that students value being intellectually stretched through rigorous assessment, which fosters genuine learning. A study by Atalay (2018) in a study on Turkish private universities found that academics feel pressured to inflate students' grades, reduce coursework and simplify

students' assessment in imperatives grounded in the student-as-customer logic of the universities.

Researchers have highlighted the concerns regarding grade inflation and declining academic rigour in the extant literature. Clayson and Haley (2005), in a review of multiple literature, pointed out that students-as-customers could adopt a short-term orientation that prioritises grades over learning. However, Nonis and Hudson (2005) argue that students' self-reported estimated hours needed for their study for higher grades were higher than those required by the universities and do not reliably translate into higher grades. Furthermore, Safdar et al. (2020), in a quantitative study, identified that the student-as-customer phenomenon is negatively associated with students' academic performance, where the student identifies and grade-focused motivation act as constructive predictors. Students' surveys are considered a useful instrument for the improvement of service quality, but equating satisfaction with educational quality and rigour is considered not methodologically sound (Redding, 2005). This is because customer satisfaction is seen as a short-term perception of a single experience instead of a long-term outcome of the complex transformational process. Several studies opine that HE must adopt and maintain academic rigour by resisting uncritical adoption of the student-as-customers phenomenon and rather focus on clear articulation of students' role in knowledge co-production that aligns with HEIs' quality frameworks and standards that are considered best practice (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Paricio Royo, 2017; Xu et al., 2018)

3. METHODS

The selection of the articles was based on keywords in the title of the article, the abstract, or the main work that were in English. The PRISMA methodology focuses on the following steps: determination of the data source; the selection criteria of the study; the data collection process; eligibility; and the data item. The review process also adopted the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklist to complement PRISMA in ensuring the methodological rigour of the study, as indicated in Figure 1 and explained below.

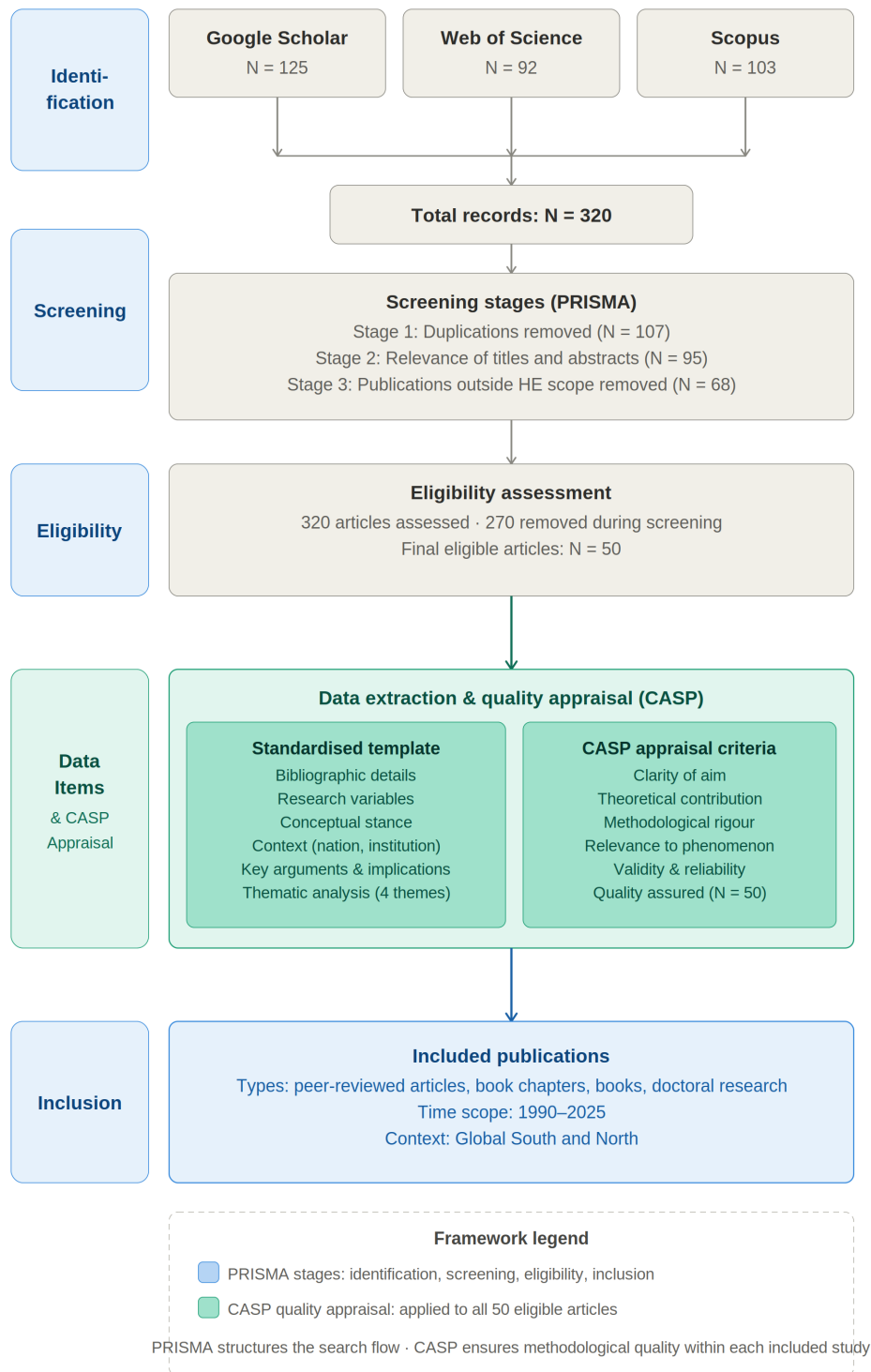


Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram illustrating the search, screening, eligibility assessment, data extraction and CASP quality appraisal of the systematic review.

3.1 Selection Criteria and Eligibility

The selection criteria for the extant literature used in this review are between 1990 and 2025, spanning years of HE reform during which its growth accelerated (Agyemang et al., 2026) as indicated in Figure 1. The articles selected for the review focused specifically on marketing and TQM principles in HE, which were considered from across the globe. The researchers

conducted a structured search across recognised major databases, including Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar. Keywords such as student-as-customer, student consumerism, quality in HE, TQM, student satisfaction, and managerialism in HE were used to capture variations of the debate. Regarding the Inclusion and exclusion criteria, this study reviewed peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, and doctoral dissertations published between 1990 and 2025 that explicitly engage with the phenomenon under study. Studies conducted outside HE, articles not in English, articles not within the stated period and articles that lack substantive engagement on the study phenomenon (mentioning the keywords with critical analysis) were avoided. Again, studies that focused on areas such as the brand image of HE, student mobility, and tuition fees were excluded.

3.2 Study Selection

The initial search yielded 320 submissions across the three databases – Google Scholar, Web of Science and Scopus. The step involves the elimination of the duplicated articles that were found across the three databases, which were 107. Step two focused on the relevance of the articles by reading through the title, the abstract and the conclusion to ensure their suitability to the study. A total of 95 articles were eliminated after step two. The third stage had to do with removing articles that were published outside the scope of HE, which saw 68 articles removed. This brought the total number of eligible articles used in the review to 50 publications that met the inclusion criteria.

3.3 Data Items

This study used a standardised data extraction template to capture the bibliographic details (author and year), research variables, conceptual stance (supportive, reconciliatory, critical and alternative metaphor), context (the nation/regional focus, stakeholder perspective, type of institution) and the key argument and implications for policy and practice in HE. The thematic analysis identified three overarching themes – conceptualisation of quality in HE, TQM in HE, the emergence and evolution of the student-as-customer metaphor. In ensuring the quality, validity and reliability of the data, each of the publications was assessed by adopting the CASP (Singh, 2013; CASP, 2018; Long et al., 2020).

4. ANALYSIS

Given that the debate spans multiple disciplines, national contexts and methodological traditions, a systematic rather than a narrative review was considered most appropriate, since it minimises selection bias and enables the reviewers to trace how quality, TQM and the student-as-customer metaphor intersect across three decades of scholarship. The combination of PRISMA and CASP also strengthens the credibility of the synthesis by ensuring that only publications meeting explicit quality thresholds for clarity of aim, theoretical contribution and methodological rigour were retained (Singh, 2013; CASP, 2018; Long et al., 2020). These themes structure the Findings and Discussion sections that follow.

5. FINDINGS/RESULTS

This study analyses the various debates focusing on its origin from TQM, its implications for pedagogical approaches and outcomes and the diverse views of stakeholders due to their influences on HE policies and practices.

Conceptualisation of Quality in HE

Multiple Dimensions of Quality

Quality in HE is ambiguous, defying a singular definition, and instead focusing on multiple interconnected dimensions and contexts. The research participants across the publications reviewed view quality through multiple lenses – quality as transformation, quality as fitness

for purpose, exceptional standards, and value (Watty, 2003; Nabaho et al., 2017). The transformational view of quality, identified by Harvey and Knight (1996) as the 'meta-quality concept,' encompasses all other quality notions while addressing the fundamental purpose of HE. Quality as transformation has a positive effect on students' innovation, empowerment, value-added, employability rates, and knowledge acquisition (Harvey, 2016). This stresses the use of instructional strategies that develop students' critical thinking abilities, requiring academics to have the needed experience, capabilities, skills, and content knowledge to fulfil their mandate.

Quality as Fitness for Purpose

The standards for developing and choosing what to teach should be based on what is taught at universities (Maphosa et al., 2014). This idea of quality stresses the ability of institutions to compare their results and performance to those of other universities and to external quality assurance (EQA) standards in ensuring best practices in Africa and beyond. Individuals involved in research studies often assess quality based on global standards of technical subject comprehension; however, Harvey and Knight (1996) warn that this perspective may undermine excellence. Fitness for purpose aligns with providing students with highly employable talents alongside practical and analytical abilities (Giannakis & Bullivant, 2016). To determine fitness for purpose, both EQA and internal quality assurance (IQA) must assess whether established goals and objectives are reasonable and suitable. Woodhouse (2006) suggests that quality as fitness for purpose could serve as a notion 'of all seasons' since it encapsulates other quality concepts.

Quality as Value for Money and Responsiveness

Quality, as value for money, links directly to consumerism concepts. Legislation and policy discourse in HE practices have been influenced by market pressures, which address concerns of institutional responsibility and economic rewards (Tomlinson, 2017). The framework of value for money could serve as an enabler that gauges the worth of HE through transactional or exchangeable interactions between partners and universities. However, Quinlan (2021) challenges the assumption that students prioritise value for money. Quinlan's findings question the consumer identity thrust upon students and suggest that if regulatory bodies and HEIs are to define quality using value or value for money, precision in the definition becomes crucial. Nabaho et al. (2017) add that quality encompasses responsiveness, addressing the nexus between education and work by producing graduates meeting labour market readiness, thereby responding to societal needs.

TQM in HE

Origins and Development of TQM

TQM, one of the systems under QA, emerged in the 1980s-1990s, previously developed for manufacturing and corporate industry (Bogue, 1998). Shah et al. (2011) assert that literature sometimes characterises TQM as a fad, but it embraces the entire organisational sphere, and most practices remain in use. W. E. Deming's work forms the basis for the development of most of these systems, such as the relevance of customer satisfaction, accentuating system analysis and continuous improvement (Bogue, 1998). Harvey (1995a) opines that there is not a single clear definition for TQM, however, Deming and Juran started the new thinking around quality, moving it from an exclusivity focus to a customer needs and expectation focus (Redding, 2005).

TQM was perceived as improving the industrial sectors by flattening command hierarchies, but bureaucratic and impeding academic freedom in HE (Redding, 2005). Again, the adoption of TQM in HE is assumed to lack paradigm shift qualities and fail to become a significant force in HE (Redding, 2005). Harvey (1995a) elaborates that TQM operates by instilling a quality

culture as an institutional lifestyle, establishing mutually beneficial customer-supplier chain relationships, promoting teamwork and engagement, creating organisational structures that support improvement processes, employing statistical techniques, and building quality into the processes of the institutions.

Resistance to TQM Implementation in HE

The application of TQM principles in HE faces substantial resistance due to several fundamental incompatibilities. The identification of student-as-customer, fear of managerialism threatening academic autonomy, and 'management by fact' being perceived as oxymoronic (since 'fact' becomes a means to impose individual will on others) constitute primary objections (Bogue, 1998; Halbesleben et al., 2003). As Bogue (1998, p.12) states, "it is not an exaggeration to say that it is possible for some students to be highly satisfied yet remain relatively uneducated". With Owlia and Aspinwall (1997) arguing that TQM principles do not fit the HE context and culture due to these specific incompatibilities, 1) the consistency and continuous improvement analogy not applying to students (products), 2) reducing variations in teaching and learning processes impedes creativity, 3) benchmarking focuses on best practice mimicry, deemed unacceptable, and 4) the student-as-customer metaphor proves most problematic. Harvey (1995b) notes that TQM adoption and implementation in HE may fail due to its customer-driven quality approach and customer/product identification issues. Again, academics view TQM principles as most ideal for improving admission procedures, campus security, administrative functions and facilities maintenance (Harvey, 1995b; Bogue, 1998). Negative academic reactions to student-as-customer stem from misalignment between academic principles and TQM principles (Harvey, 1995a; Redding, 2005).

Evolution of the Student-As-Customer Metaphor

Literature demonstrates TQM's unsuitability with HE ideologies due to its customer-driven approach, which ignited extensive debates among researchers regarding HEI customers and student roles. The student-as-customer notion dates to World War II, when the US believed HEIs could educate Germans about democracy. This preceded the era in which Margaret Thatcher proposed vice chancellors become Chief Executive Officers who should report on key performance indicators, comparing HEIs to factories in Britain (Cheah et al., 2024). Although HEIs were created to promote individual intellectual thought, quality teaching and learning, and independence from powerful interest groups, HE has witnessed neoliberal philosophy positioning it as a market/service.

Most neoliberal HEIs identify student-as-customer, with academics assuming service provider roles through HE market commodity normalisation (Atalay, 2018). The student-as-customer metaphor, though generally unacceptable, spreads largely due to HEI funding mechanisms where students increasingly pay partial or full fees (Atalay, 2018). These arrangements became necessary because governments could not meet the increasing demand and needs for HE (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). Existing literature is divided on student identity and role (Eagle & Brennan, 2007). Increasing research refers to student-as-customer or consumers, while investigating satisfaction and dissatisfaction issues among HE customers (students) (Mayanja & Tibaingana, 2020).

Arguments for the Student-As-Customer Metaphor

Guilbault (2018) maintains that the student-as-customer notion benefits HE if students demand due value from academics and HEIs deliver this value. This arrangement positions HE as a private/economic good rather than a public good. Mark (2013) states that customers are currently not passive but participative and co-producers of products or services, relating to students supporting Guilbault's (2017) thinking. Guilbault (2018) posits that new marketing school thinking leans towards participatory and societal thinking processes instead of the passive 'customer is always right' analogy. He also asserts that it is critical to educate students

on their co-production and knowledge co-creation role, since continuous metaphor rejection stems from archaic customer notions (Guilbault, 2017).

Eagle and Brennan (2007) counter negative literature views, arguing that HEIs resemble any other industry and must focus on customer satisfaction. Students, according to existing evidence, are not short-sighted in demanding reduced academic standards or ease in qualification acquisition. Moreover, students believe in hard work for qualification acquisition, acknowledging they are not HE's only stakeholders and the government remains a major HEI financier. Eagle and Brennan (2007) recommend that HEIs educate students on their student-customer roles. However, knowledge co-creation and student engagement systems existed regardless of customer metaphors, since HEIs exist for transformation (Botha, 2000; Harvey & Green, 1993) as critical QA factors. A study of Brazilian HE, which involved 210 undergraduates and 34 executive MBA students, reveals that students prioritise short-term educational benefits over long-term benefits, contradicting the assumption that students lack foresight (Ikeda et al., 2009). In a more nuanced stance, Pitman (2016) argues that the metaphor of student-as-customer may have both advantages and disadvantages for HEIs and stakeholder benefits. It is therefore viewed as a valuable resource to HE, where public funds are safeguarded in zero-sum games, and whether students should be considered as customers. This bridges the public-private nexus if the student-as-customer exclusive status is understood for effective, sustainable HE policymaking.

Arguments Against the Student-As-Customer Metaphor

Student-as-customer metaphor assumption strains institution-lecturer-student relationships, positioning HE as institutions with knowledge or wisdom for sale, mostly resulting in poor student performance (Atalay, 2018). Atalay (2018) points out that neoliberal era academics lose their essence, kowtowing to learner demands, sharing instances of gross student disrespect toward academics and academic firing based on customer (student) satisfaction surveys. Atalay (2018) identifies that allowing students to be customers creates antagonistic behaviour among HE partners, making HE obsolete. Granting student experiences are key for quality education, making them HE's main focus proves problematic, since the 'customer is always right' concept causes HE activity restructuring based on learner curriculum decisions.

Nixon et al. (2018) stress that student-customer relationships damage pedagogical styles, inflicting them with unthoughtful neoliberal agendas. The notion of students-as-customers in HE is founded on a chronicle of narcissistic satisfaction and dissatisfaction that boosts ego, embracing it as the uppermost love object, threatening higher and tertiary education quality. It affects students by depriving them of opportunities to wilfully recognise differences between the self and the external world. It affects academics by naïvely adding 'omniscience' to student-as-customer orientation (Franz, 1998), thereby quenching prospects to unearth weaknesses in the trusting and equally respectful rapport needed for HE as 'public good with moral duty' (p. 29). In essence, 'if the university exists for me, I will, I should, get high marks' (p.29). Nixon et al. (2018) postulate that HE, where students are customers, affects pedagogical theories and content development based on students' desires at market prices, weakening intellectual complexity and critical and cognitive reasoning skills.

From a Socratic lens, Furedi (2010) views student satisfaction as irrational because students need intellectual pressure, challenging their problem-solving skill experiences, which customer satisfaction does not offer. He adds that the academic process of intellectual development becomes flawed if learners view themselves as customers, and commercialisation proves deadly to HEI survival by affecting academic integrity and independence. This compromises grading systems, affects intellectual values, and creates academics not wanting to be seen as

awkward, 'demanding,' or 'hardmarker' (p.5), utterly disapproving of student-as-customer narratives. Drawing on Fromm's philosophy, HE students currently prefer getting degrees to education based on learner and self-development ideologies. The implication is that HEIs develop 'having' cultures (based on a consumer-led society) instead of 'being' cultures (promoting 'good' education and deep learning actualisation), weakening HE philosophies. Tight (2013) asserts that students-as-customers make HEIs assume producer positions of products and services, with students-as-consumers.

Banwait (2017), not supporting the metaphor, states that student-as-customer terminologies should be avoided because they reorient HEI focus toward branding, image, population growth, and unique selling propositions issues, which border on marketing student experiences. Rather, academics should be encouraged to attract and involve students in accountability processes. Students being viewed as customers destroys actual teaching experience value fundamentals, 'the focus is the price of the experience rather than its value' (p. 20). Teaching quality, according to Banwait, is realised later in student life, so it cannot be based on student evaluation. Focusing on students-as-learners, not student-as-customers, helps recentre 'student-as-the-learner' discourse, who becomes an active contributor to the learning process and a knowledge co-creator. Customer expectations, satisfying the customer, ensuring quality control, and meeting specifications and measurements do not agree with HE quality principles.

Alternative Metaphors and Perspectives

Halbesleben et al. (2003) identify that many researchers promote student-as-customer and HE-as-service notions. They argue that students should be viewed as labour contributors to their education, that is, 'the metaphor of student-labour-contribution.' Franz (1998) in "Whatever You Do, Don't Treat Students As Customers" lists five reasons why HEIs shouldn't treat students like customers - 1) lectures turning into popularity contests, 2) teaching styles becoming more focused on entertainment, 3) grading standards going down, 4) academics being more interested in pleasing students than teaching them, and 5) programs being based on what students want. Tight (2013) posit that the student-as-customer metaphor has competing framings, such as student as pawn, student as client and co-producer, which all carry distinct implications for how HEIs, academics and regulatory bodies relate. This analogy suggests using different metaphors, such as students-as-partners in the developmental process.

Cheah et al. (2024) suggest that HE students must engage not only with skills but with values and ideas as well. He believes students should be allowed to choose their own metaphors, but must be helped with their self and professional identity. Owlia and Aspinwall (1997) view the metaphor/vocabulary as less important than HEI actions. Therefore, whether students are referred to as 'customers,' 'consumers,' 'clients,' or 'co-producers' is not relevant as long as their needs are being addressed. Sirvanci (1996) points out that for HEIs to improve, they must identify their customers if using the (Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA) criteria for measuring HEI performance, because customer satisfaction forms 25% of the MBNQA criteria. He adds that students-as-customers cause HEIs to create impressions that students are the ultimate objectives, neglecting other interested parties.

Balanced Perspectives: Recognising Complexity and Nuance

Naidoo and Williams (2015), like Pitman, identify both negatives and positives of the student-as-customer metaphor. They view HEIs in recent years as being in a dilemma of satisfying market forces and government regulations. According to them, students-as-customers would empower students in the short term but deprive them of the knowledge required in the long term, making them passive learners and not developing their intellectuality, a point supported in the literature. Another point made is that the destruction of the student-as-customer metaphor can lead to social and cultural constructs of HEIs. HEIs have to redesign their curricula to

reflect consumerist frameworks, serving as impediments to innovation and quality academic standards while also making it difficult for academics to 'call truth to power' (p.220). On the advantages of students-as-customers, there has been the development of supervision of teaching, course evaluation, evaluation of lecturers by students, and reporting channels to address students' complaints. These structures serve as checks against abuse of power.

The node of pedagogical autonomy and financial dependency in HE created a complex power asymmetry in the relationship between academics and students. In this dual dynamic, where students pay tuition fees, an implicit economic dependence does not translate to student-centred pedagogical practices (Freire, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2024). This reflects a fundamental tension between HE financial structures and the autonomy imperatives of critical pedagogy. There is, therefore, a need for harmony in the HE system, in which no stakeholder holds absolute power (Kezar, 2020). It is important to consider HEI implications as service institutions since this has legal implications globally (Kamvounias, 1999). The service identity of higher and tertiary institutions has led students to sue HE for various reasons (Adler-Paindiris et al., 2020; Straumsheim, 2016).

Another school of thought in literature suggests that higher and tertiary educational institutions should be institutions of ongoing transformation processes (Botha, 2000; Harvey & Green, 1993). There is, therefore, the need for a critical assessment of the system of students being considered as students, which used to be the case, regardless of whether they pay partial or full fees to universities, national regulatory bodies, international regulatory bodies, and HE stakeholders. Educational collaborators and bodies need to make the principle of the common good when dealing with this grey area. The tension between market forces and educational values, between student empowerment and academic integrity, and between accountability and autonomy defines contemporary HE's central challenge. Rather than seeking a definitive resolution, perhaps the way forward lies in maintaining productive tension among these competing values while ensuring that no single stakeholder, whether students, academics, administrators, government, or employers, holds absolute power over the educational enterprise (Macheridis & Paulsson, 2021). The purpose of HE's transformation should remain the central focus as these institutions of higher learning navigate the complex realities of accountability, market pressures, and stakeholder engagement in the 21st century (Brewis & Marginson, 2025).

6. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Quality in HE

Broad consensus across the review shows resistance to a single definition of quality in HE, with scholars agreeing on a multidimensional approach to quality that is shaped by the HE context, stakeholders' perspectives and societal expectations. However, the quality transformation framework by Harvey and Knight (1996) retains authority, with other scholars building on it rather than displacing it. The findings from the review indicated disagreement among scholars about conceptualising quality as value for money (Quinlan, 2021), with studies showing a tension and fundamental disconnect between regulatory and student notions of quality. Another area of contention is the concern about fitness for purpose, with some authors cautioning that anchoring quality to a global technical standard could risk privileging external benchmarks at the expense of context-specific excellence. However, fitness for purpose addresses these concerns by determining whether the set mission and objectives suit that specific HEI's context (Ketemepi, 2024). The study also identifies some unresolved tensions – firstly, there is an under-theorising of the relationship between transformation and accountability. The literature does not clearly show how quality as transformation, viewed as

a meta-concept, should be operationalised without it being reduced to measurable proxies, which contradicts its essence. Secondly, the reviewed literature does not adequately reconcile the diverse identities imposed on students, which extends the debate as to the conceptualisation of quality on which policy and practice should be anchored. Thirdly, the review reveals that even though fitness for purpose is considered a potentially unifying concept (Woodhouse, 2006), the mechanisms used in the measurement of both IQA and EQA of the goals of HEIs remain underspecified, especially in under-resourced contexts.

TQM in HE

The review indicates that, despite the industrial origin of TQM, it brought a meaningful reorientation to thinking about quality, where the focus has shifted from exclusivity and a producer-defined standard to meeting customer needs and continual improvement. The study also highlights that the core principles of TQM – process improvement, QA, quality culture and teamwork are relevant despite the contestation of their direct application. The main disagreement in this section is whether TQM is fundamentally incompatible with HE or just applied wrongly. Owlia and Aspinwall (1997) strongly disagree with TQM in HE; Harvey (1995a, 1995b) views it as less categorical incompatibility and more of a failure of adaptation, while Shad et al (2011) argue a conciliatory position where TQM embedded in HEIs has moved beyond the label, even if the explicit discourse has faded.

The review highlights a tension between quality culture as a lifestyle for HEIs, vis-à-vis academic freedom, but not the conditions under which quality processes can be designed to enhance rather than constrain academic discretion. The section also reveals an epistemological gap between genuine education and student satisfaction if student evaluations are not a true reflection of quality (Bogue, 1998). The articles reviewed did not offer an alternative measure to this gap. This study shows that the resistance to TQM in HE has remained stable across three decades. In placing the debate around TQM in the broader conceptualisation of quality and the student-as-customer metaphor as found in this section, it is evident that TQM is not a discrete management mechanism but an ideology through which market rationality permeates into HE governance structures, normalising the consumer framing that the existing literature reviewed is yet to dislodge.

Student-as-Customer Metaphor

The findings presented in this section suggest that the emergence of the student-as-customer metaphor in HE was not organic but driven by political ideology, funding restructuring, corporate management principles and university rankings. The most substantial unresolved tension in this section of the study lies between structural necessity and normative resistance. This is because, although the literature acknowledges that fee-paying arrangements were born from genuine resource constraints (Naidoo & Williams, 2015), critics of the metaphor do not provide alternative funding architectures that would make the framing unnecessary. Again, the literature largely focuses on the relationship between description and prescription, where the debate is whether students are customers and whether their status as customers results in quality educational outcomes, is addressed unevenly in the studies reviewed.

7. CONCLUSION

This review reflects tensions between market pressures and the educational sector's intellectual agenda. Early critics caution that consumerist logics could undermine academic integrity, turning teaching into a popularity contest and eroding quality standards (Franz, 1998; Rolfe, 2002; Grayson, 2003a, 2003b; Furedi, 2010). Some authors have also argued that a customer-focused perspective is embedded in QA and therefore unavoidable, even if problematic (Sirvanci, 1996; Mark, 2013; Atalay, 2018; Guilbault, 2018). The intensification of

marketisation and the global prominence of university rankings have reoriented universities towards branding, image, and competitiveness, resulting in the need to integrate student satisfaction and loyalty into universities' strategies (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Badwan et al., 2017; Banwait, 2017). Other researchers have contributed to the debate by offering alternative metaphors – student-as-partners, co-producers, or contributors – to counteract the consumerist perspective of students (Tight, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017).

Individual studies in this review trace the metaphor's historical lineage from post-war US democratisation to Thatcherite managerialism to modern fee-paying regimes, but this lineage is not fully synthesised into a coherent genealogy of how the metaphor gained philosophical acceptability over time. This review therefore contributes by going beyond aggregating existing positions, foregrounding the cumulative incoherence that arises when varied conceptualisations of quality are applied simultaneously, and by highlighting the structural condition of contemporary governance in HE, which individual studies have not done. This systematic review traces the metaphor's evolution as a snowballing ideology and shows how successive structural neoliberal pressures have layered meaning onto a concept that emerged as an administrative term, turning it into a logic on which HE's governance is organised. By situating the metaphor within the broader conceptualisation of quality and the TQM tradition, this study shows that the student-as-customer debate is not confined. It reveals a deeper, unresolved debate over whether HE is a public good, a marketised service or a private investment, with experts and stakeholders calling for a balanced approach, as highlighted in this study.

This review provided three lenses on the debate (Critical, supportive, and alternative) by highlighting differences in their ontological assumptions about the main purpose of HE (a public good, a service market, or a collaborative learning community). Therefore, by situating the debate in the broader quality conceptualisation, TQM and HE context, this review indicates that the student-as-customer metaphor is a terminal expression of market ideology that permeated into HE through its governance reform and quality management system. This means that for any alternative framing of the metaphor to be universally considered, the structural conditions should be addressed, not simply the changing of vocabulary.

8. IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical Implications

This study, therefore, has implications for policy, practice and research. Theoretically, it offers a reframing of quality, a concept that remains contested (Harvey & Green, 1993; Naboho et al., 2011). Future studies should analyse how quality as fitness for purpose can reconcile market demands with academic integrity. There are also implications for student identity and engagement, as the persistence of consumer metaphors (Guilbault, 2016) requires a nuanced understanding of how students perceive themselves. Future research should investigate models of student-as-partners to foster active engagement and co-creation. Perspectives from sub-Saharan African contexts, such as Uganda (Mayanja & Tibaingana, 2019) and South Africa (Maphosa et al., 2014), highlight the need for context-sensitive approaches in the African HE context.

Policy Implications

The study also has implications for policy and practice in relation to market pressures (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). This demands that HEIs balance accountability to students with the universities' public-good nature. Governance reform (Kezar, 2020; Cheah et al., 2024) should prevent managerialism from reducing education to a transactional service.

9. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The approach is not without constraints. Restricting the search to English-language sources and to three databases (Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar) may have excluded relevant regional or grey literature, particularly from non-Anglophone HE systems. The CASP appraisal, while systematic, retains an element of reviewer judgement in rating methodological rigour, and the heterogeneity of study designs across the 50 included publications, ranging from qualitative case studies to conceptual papers, limits the extent to which findings can be directly compared or statistically synthesised. Future studies can explore alternative metaphors beyond 'customer'.

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