

Keeping Products of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) of Relevance to the Industry – A Reason to Stay in Touch with Alumni

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Abstract

This paper aims to show how important it is for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to be involved in the Continuous Professional Development (CPD) of alumni. The authors provide a model to show the value added to the product by CPD. This paper proposes ways in which institutions can make the best of the relationship with the student at each level proposed in the model. The major findings were that HEIs should get involved in CPD for its Alumni and CPD provides increased value to products of HEIs. Implications were that HEIs have a role to play in the CPD of their Alumni. This is the first study to introduce the Value- Adding CPD Knowledge Cycle Model.

Keywords: HEI, Products, CPD, Students, Graduates, Alumni

1. Introduction

With the increased number of universities in Ghana, higher educational institutions (HEIs) have to think of creative ways of becoming the preferred choice for prospective students. Private universities in particular, are highly dependent on tuition fees and student numbers. It is in the interest of private universities to find ways of building lasting relationships with students that will result in 1) Positive referrals; 2) An opportunity to coast on the image of successful alumni; 3) Partnership with alumni on developmental projects and; 4) An opportunity to continually serve alumni with re-training opportunities. This paper will focus most on the fourth reason given above.

There is an on-going debate on what the appropriate metaphor is when it comes to describing students who have been called customers (Bejou, 2005; Eagle & Brennan, 2007), products (Emery, Kramer & Tian, 2005), learning workers (Albanese, 1999), partners (D'Eon & Harris, 2000), citizens (Svensson & Wood, 2007), coworkers (Franz, 1998) and partial employees (Hoffman & Kretovics, 2004) to mention a few. There are others who argue that it is inappropriate to use such metaphors because of the confusion and expectation that it creates (Schwartz, 1995; Sax, 2004; Finney & Finney, 2010).

In this paper we focus on the student being the product of Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). As stated by Emery, Kramer and Tian (2001), "the product approach demands that, business schools treat students as their products; they assume the responsibility to train students to become qualified products that can meet the criteria of various industries." The product approach focuses on positioning students as products that meet the need of the market or industry.

Since the 1990s there have been more private universities in Africa that rely less on the state for funding and more on tuition fees (Varghese, 2004). These private institutions are compelled to become more market sensitive in order to brave the increasing competition for students. Apart from this, in recent time, there has also been the general marketization of education all over the world even in countries such as China which has increased competition and caused course and curricula to be driven by the market (Mok, 2000). The customers in this case are the industries that employ the graduates. In these challenging economic times there is a societal pressure to focus on affordable tuition costs as well as the availability of education programmes with immediate employment value to prospective students (Lake & Pushchak, 2006).

Because of the above developments (marketization of education and economic challenges) it has become important for HEIs to market themselves to their customers. Marketing is the management process of identification, anticipation and satisfaction of customers' requirements profitably (CIM, 2009). Since the industry is the customer in this case, the HEIs should be able to identify, anticipate and satisfy the needs of the industry. In order not to suffer from marketing myopia and eventually become wiped out by competition, HEIs must focus on their customers and not just their products (Levitt, 1975). Employer engagement is vital in developing skills for productivity (Huges, 2003). Collaborative research will therefore provide the foundation for relevant programmes to be developed. For HEI education to translate into work-based competence it is necessary for HEIs to be abreast with what the industry defines as competence.

HEI Interaction with industry should be frequent and purposive. Industry is dynamic and even after students have been educated in HEIs there is the need to follow up with Continuous Professional Development (CPD) (Gbadamosi & Evans, 2008). As acknowledged by the Institute of Internal Auditors (IIA), "In today's fast paced audit environment, a complete training programme and CPD are essential to the success of internal auditors" (Burton & Razaee, 1994). Even professional bodies have begun to think of collaborating with HEIs to provide Lifelong Learning to their members. The IIA accepts college courses as an activity that will contribute directly to the professional proficiency of Certified Internal Auditor (CIAs) (Burton & Razaee, 1994). Close collaboration will help HEIs to provide programmes that meet CPD and needs are directly related to industry. In anticipation of the needs of industry, HEIs ought to be sensitive to the changing dynamics of industry and provide relevant training to help employees to cope with the changes and work effectively regardless. The knowledge so provided through CPD and HEI programs should translate into work-based competence for it to become sustainable.

Once customer needs are met positive referrals will be inevitable. HEIs need positive referrals because there is keener competition and less public funding available.

Now Institutions have to sell themselves to attract students with differentiating Unique Selling Propositions. HEIs must move beyond becoming sales oriented to becoming marketing oriented organizations in which case they are not only interested in selling products to generate income to sustain their activities but would rather tailor their activities towards satisfying the customers (industry). In this case HEIs should focus on producing graduates that are needed by industry instead of trying to sell graduated they have produced without the involvement of industry.

Once a student has passed through the corridors of an institution he/she will always be considered a product of that institution. The question will be whether the knowledge and skills that the student has acquired will continue to be of use to the industry he/she goes to serve. Unlike an inanimate product that is discarded at the end of its shelf life, the graduate must constantly reinvent himself/ herself to remain relevant to the industry. With the dynamism that characterizes most industries today, knowledge and skills acquired in university can quickly become outdated and the graduate (who is the product) will need to be "re-launched", "remodeled" or "upgraded" to meet the needs of the industry. This makes a case for universities being actively engaged in activities that promote Lifelong Learning, Lasting Relationships and Continuous Professional Development.

An institution that wants to continue to be involved in the development of its products (i.e. students) to ensure that they continue to meet the needs of industry, should continue to keep in touch with its alumni and draw them in, to take new courses that will continue to make them relevant and valuable to the industries they serve. The graduate development model below describes how valuable the skills and knowledge of students are to the industry as they vigorously pursue continuous professional development that is relevant to industry.

2. Value- Adding CPD Cycle Model

In Figure 1 is a model that depicts how CPD increases the value of the product (the student/graduate). It also shows the cycle the product goes through (from introduction to decline). The model is adapted from the original product life cycle model derived by Raymond Vernon for international trade in 1966 and adapted by Theodore Levitt for marketing in 1965.

2.1 The Stages of the First Twirl

The first twirl (indicated in blue above) is a unique one because it begins when the student has just entered the institution. The reason for beginning for this point is that, the student bears the institutions brand once he/she has gained admission and begins his/ her studies there. Once the student graduates the student continues to identify with the institution as its graduate and alumnus. At the initial Introduction Stage students enter the university setting for the first time. They are 'introduced' to the university environment for the first time. During this stage they are not yet of much value to the market. Using a 4-year undergraduate programme as the reference point, the first year in university could pass for this stage in a student's life.

The second stage is the Growth Stage. Students have now come to terms with the university life and are actively engaged in developing themselves by submitting themselves to the rigor, policies and procedures the university has designed in order to make them relevant to the market. Students begin taking up vacation jobs and attachments to acquaint themselves with the market. Students are at this stage during the second and third years of their existence in the university. Though they may not contribute as full-time workers they are of some value to industry because of their vacation jobs and attachments.

The Maturity Stage starts in the final year of the student's time in the university when students begin to apply their knowledge to the market through their internship and their project work (especially if the project findings go to directly benefit a company or industry). The maturity stage extends to when the student graduates and works in the industry with his newly acquired skills and knowledge.

Given the dynamism of industry and the length of undergraduate training (between 3 to 4 years), within a relatively short period, the graduate may enter the Decline Stage and will need to undertake CPD to remain valuable to the industry. This is even more relevant for courses that span several years. If the student/graduate/product undertakes CDP at this stage he will not move to the withdrawal stage.

At the Withdrawal Stage the introduction of new theories and techniques, make the original information and skills students have been equipped with, less relevant to the industry and may not be as useful to the graduate in his/her work.

Each twirl of the spirals (indicated in brown), after the first one (indicated in blue), represents the improved or 're-launched' graduate as he/she undergoes CPD to remain relevant to the industry he/ she works in.

To remain marketable and relevant, the product (that is the graduate) need not reach the stage of withdrawal before upgrading his/her skills and knowledge. In the event of retrenchment, it is the dead wood that is disposed of first. To prevent such an occurrence, products must stay on top of the game and improve themselves through Continuous Professional Development (CPD).

2.2 Stages After the First Twirl

Subsequent to the first twirl (which represents the graduate's first higher educational training) the stages take on a slightly different meaning as explained below:

At the Introduction Stage the product becomes newly acquainted with the new knowledge. The Growth Stage represents the time when, the new knowledge is being tested on the job. During the Maturity Stage the highest value is gained because the knowledge has been fully applied and its benefits are being seen. At the Decline Stage, the changes in industry require that new knowledge is acquired to remain on top of the game. It is at the beginning of this stage that one should upgrade his/her knowledge (undertake CPD) to remain valuable to industry. If one undertakes CPD at this stage he/she moves on to the next twirl without reaching the withdrawal stage. At the Withdrawal Stage, the industry has been exposed to newer knowledge and therefore, the product's knowledge and training has become less relevant.

2.3 Levels of Value (y-axis)

Each twirl of the spiral shows a different level of CPD undertaken that brings about a commensurate level of value (indicated on the y-axis). The desired spiral is an increasingly upward spiral that shows quick retraining immediately there are signs of decline. The introduction stage is short lived in

subsequent twirls because once the graduate is working, the new knowledge is almost immediately used on the job.

In the case where one does not engage in CPD, the spiral becomes smaller and moves downward indicating lower value. The dynamism of industry implies that even if one stands still one loses his/her relevance in the industry.

2.4 Strategies for Maximization of Value at each Stage of the First Spiral

The institutions can make the best of the relationship with the student at each level especially during the first spiral. At the Introduction Stage there should be effective branding and communication that inclines students towards accepting the rigor and structure of the institution so that students can acclimatize and bond quickly with the institution. To create fond memories and a good impression, good customer service and prompt responses to student enquiries should be the norm. It is important to establish the structures and rules that ensure effective academic work at this stage.

To maximize the relationship with student during the Growth Stage, there must be the maintenance of good customer service. As student service quality is maintained, additional features and support services may be added such as student counselling, one-on-one tutorials sessions and faculty mentors for students. There should be empathy towards students who are struggling with course work and acclimatization such that resources are made available to them to help them rise to the occasion. The institution would help students transition smoothly into this stage by providing support services that help students get into contact with industry through vacation jobs and attachments. More daring institutions could make vacation jobs and internships count for some academic credit to the student.

At the Maturity Stage, students begin to apply their knowledge to the market through their internship and their project work. Since students are now on their way out of the institution, this would be the time to have incentives for those to make positive referrals and recommendations that encourage others to choose the institution. It is also important to introduce students to alumni services and to add their particulars to a database that can be used to keep in touch with alumni.

The Decline Stage affords the institution the opportunity to market pertinent programmes that will keep students relevant to the industry they find themselves. It is at this point that the use of the alumni database can be done to effectively contact students on what career professional development programmes are being offered.

2.5 Limitations of the Model

The explanation of first twirl of the model is based on a 4-year undergraduate programme. This limits the application of the model in some ways. The first consideration is that there are students who could mid-stream (in second or third year). Secondly, the model also does not make provision for shorter programmes (2-year and 1-year programmes). Besides the two exceptions above there are also students who defer their programme of study for a number of years. These students are also not catered for in the proposed model.

2.6 The Implementation Implications of Model for HEIs

2.6.1 Close monitoring of and collaboration with industry

HEIs need to be abreast with the developments of industry in order for products to come back to be re-launched. Close collaboration with industry will help in the creation of relevant top-up courses. If HEIs are highly sensitive to the present needs of industry, then they can craft courses that industry will recommend to its professionals (Burton and Rezaee, 1994). According to Bruton & Rezaee (1994) professional bodies such as the American Institute of Profession Accountants and Institute of Management Accountants require CPD for their members who perform internal audit functions. HEIs could carefully design various courses that meet the needs of various professions such as Supply Chain Management, New Sales and Marketing Techniques, Customer Relationship Management Strategy, Health and Safety in the Oil Sector, Risk Management and Customer Satisfaction.

2.6.2 More career focused alumni relations

Alumni Relations should move beyond nostalgic reunions and fundraising events to being more focused on monitoring and encouraging career advancement as well as lifelong learning. Alumni Relations can be used as a platform to advertise CPD possibilities that exist in the institution. For example, there can be a seminar on new international accounting standards and procedures that is held

every other year. This could serve as both a reunion and a self-improvement opportunity. Depending on the quality of the programme and the bonds created, it could be a much anticipated event.

2.6.3 Worker-Friendly study options

The CPD course offerings that the institution develops should be worker-friendly since the products being targeted are already actively engaged at work. Programmes that are targeted at alumni should be in the form of modular programmes, sandwich courses, short-term intensive residential courses, workshops, seminars, short courses and evening courses, to mention a few examples.

2.6.4 Creation of good experiences and fond memories (Umbilical Cord effect)

CPD opportunities may abound but, there should be an umbilical tug that draws past students back to their alma mater. The memories and experiences in the minds of the students should be pleasant enough to woo them back. Students who have endured administrative inefficiencies and other unpleasant experiences with HEIs may opt to re-train in another institution.

2.6.5 Creation of unique experiences

It is natural for people to get fed up with an overdose of their old undergraduate environment therefore, each CPD experience should have its own uniqueness that will be desired by the graduate. The atmosphere should be suitable for relevant industry centred training. It should take into account the fact that the graduates are no longer first year university students but professionals in their own right. As the graduates come back for continuous upgrading there should be an element of newness even in the atmosphere that will make coming back to the alma mater an appealing option.

3. Benefits of Engaging in CPD of Alumni

3.1 Unique Selling Points

Being known as an institution that produces industry relevant products serves as a good sales point. Products that acknowledge that their market relevance is mostly predicated on the training provided by a particular institution, act as salespeople for the institution. Their referrals will go a long way to attract others to train with the institution. If these training programmes are well crafted they have the possibility of becoming a strong selling point that can differentiate the institution concerned from the competition.

3.2 Income Generation

Once the training provided by the institution becomes highly acclaimed, it should be possible for the university to financially gain from running these programmes. Though there may be discounts for alumni, their positive referrals should also attract non-alumni to attend such training programmes. Once accepted as a permanent feature in the structure of a Higher Education Institution, there could be an outfit purposely assigned to running these programmes effectively and profitably.

3.3 Alumni Bonding

Continually engaging alumni will cause alumni to bond with each other and with the institution. This aids the building of lasting relationships that could eventually result in opportunities to coast on the image of successful alumni and partner with them on developmental projects of the institution.

5. Conclusion

Alumni of HEIs carry the brand of their institution and it serves the institution well to ensure that its products are relevant to the market they serve. To ensure products remain relevant it is essential for HEIs to get involved in the CPD of their alumni. Relevant CDP should increase the value products bring to their industry and keep the brand of the HEI flying high.

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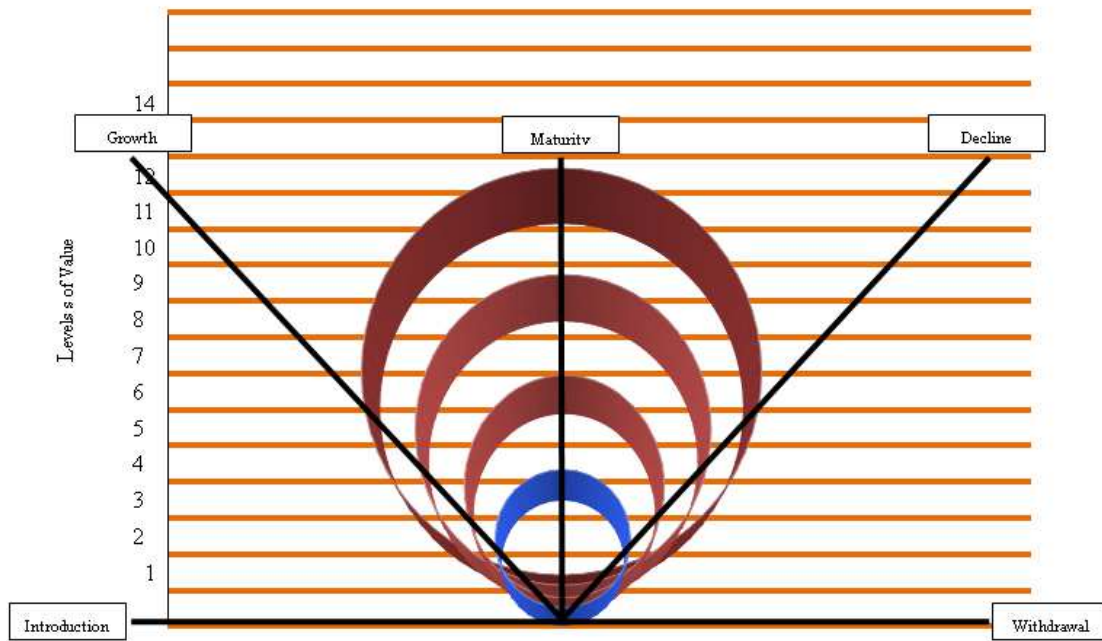


Figure 1: Value-Adding CPD Cycle Model (Adapted from Product Life Cycle Model by Theodore Levitt, 1965)

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