

Input - student; process - lectures; output - employable graduate. As a student of accounting and finance, this is how I have been taught to view the world ... as a collection of systems.

So I can take my small part in the world - the University of East Anglia - and apply a systems approach. Just one thing though: human beings are an incredibly diverse species. Because we can think and act independently, we can foul up the system. What happens when the people don't fit your system? Should you change the people? Or should you change your system?

If students do not go to lectures, they are missing out on the process stage of the system. They cannot go on to become the employable graduates expected as the output of the system.

If students are not going to lectures, there must be a fault in the system. Is there something wrong with the input? If so, the input should be filtered to reject those students causing the fault. Students refusing to attend lectures should be rejected from the system.

But hold on! That fault diagnosis was not very systematic. Only the input stage was considered as a possible fault source. What if the real fault lies in the processing stage of the system: the lectures and lecturers?

Impossible! It HAS to be the input. Just look at these so-called 'students'. They don't know the meaning of the word. They spend 80% of their time in the bars, they skip lectures, they don't bother to read their text books. They don't learn ... they've got far too much free time. They spend too much money ... they're always in debt.

A university lecturer proclaimed to the press that most degree courses could be fitted into 2 years instead of 3. Personally, I'm having enough trouble with my course, as it is. If it were a 2 year course, I don't think I'd have survived the first term. And besides, there's a great deal more to university than the work. It would be virtually impossible to turn round and deny students the right to the social and leisure activities they have now. Shortening the course length would simply reduce the degrees' value, the university's standing, and the graduates' employability. Such a suggestion is ludicrous.

This lecturer also said there were too many 'paid nannies', by which he meant the services available to students. The U.E.A. Counselling Service has a staff of half a dozen to cope with 3000+ students.

If you have a burst pipe you go to a plumber, not an electrician. Surely the best people to look after students' welfare problems are those trained and experienced with students' welfare problems. Doctors, psychiatrists and the clergy all have their places ... but counselling is often more appropriate to a situation.

Most students arrive at university with proven study ability. In order to gain a place on the course, you have to get specified 'A' level grades. So university students CAN study by virtue of their proven abilities as shown by G.C.E. certificates.

Most lecturers have no formal teaching qualifications. Many do not have adequate teaching skills, and therefore many lectures are of a poor standard. Perhaps if lecturers were encouraged to take an interest in developing teaching skills, then students might develop better attendance skills.

The systems view of the university that I applied in the first paragraph is incomplete. It has to be enlarged to encompass all factors that have a bearing on a student's performance at university. This includes such things as surroundings and architecture. After all, who wants to spend three years studying in buildings reminiscent of prisons or mutated multi-storey car parks? Parental influence, political climate, employers' attitudes, the administration, and emotional factors: all these must be taken into consideration.

When you get to the crux of the matter, it all comes down to providing what the student wants. The administrative staff, the academic staff and the domestic staff are all indirectly the employees of the students ... the students are the clients for these peoples' services.

If you went to a butcher's wanting some sausages and were offered the chance of some bacon in 6 weeks' time, you would try elsewhere. Universities could perhaps be a little more helpful in meeting the needs of their clients.

It's a popular joke among lecturers that the university would function far more smoothly without the students. The truth is that without the students the university ceases to be.