

Paula Sussex's speech to the NUS, Memberships Services Conference

I'm Paula Sussex and I'm the CEO of the Student Loans Company. I've been in the role for under a year so I think I still get to say I'm the relatively new CEO of SLC.

One of my very first acts as CEO was to appear before the Education Select Committee at an accountability hearing in October last year. I'd only been in the role about three weeks at the time.

It was a wide-ranging session that covered a lot of ground – perhaps some of you watched it.

One of the things that has really stuck in my mind from that session was a debate about the SLC's use of the word 'customers.'

At the SLC, we use the term customers to refer to applicants, students, sponsors & repayers.

A couple of members of the Committee challenged me on that. They made the case that as there isn't a ready market in student finance providers – as students in the UK don't have a choice of providers they can go to for their HE and FE funding – that for the SLC to refer to them as 'customers' simply wasn't right.

And while I agree with them that it isn't an ordinary customer-client relationship that we have, I made the point that I think it's healthy for public servants to focus on customer service and, therefore, the concept of having a customer to whom good customer service is owed. So I was very pleased when I saw the topic of this panel, because I think it's an important discussion. We'll no doubt hear a lot today about the relationship between students and universities. I want to also make the point that the SLC firmly considers students to be our customers and we're determined to improve the customer service we provide to them.

In the next academic year, the SLC will turn 30. And we're just about unrecognisable from the organisation that was set up nearly 30 years ago:

- We've gone from offering just one maintenance loan product to all UK students to over 86 variants of loan and grant products
- From fewer than 100 staff to over 3,500
- From just 180,000 customers to over 8.5 million

- We now manage a student loan book valued at over £136.7 billion

The SLC's mission is to enable its customers to invest in their futures through access to higher and further education. This expansion in the student finance system over recent years has enabled more customers from more walks of life to make this investment in their futures – which is both good for them and good for the UK.

But there is no doubt that its expansion has also added significant complexity to the operations of the Student Loans Company.

A 2015 McKinsey Report commissioned by the then Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS), noted that “SLC already has comparable size and complexity to a small retail bank” and we have only continued to grow since then.

Despite this rapid growth and complexity, we have also made some significant performance improvements over the same period:

- In 2018-19, our customer satisfaction (apply-to-pay) was 84.1% up from 78.9% in 2011-12
- We received just 2.5 complaints per 10,000 apply-to-pay customers (applicants and students)
- And just 0.8 complaints per 10,000 repayment customers

These are good results for our customers – but we know we can and must do better. The SLC has made some significant improvements to our customer service over recent years. Over the last two years alone we've introduced:

- online password reset – so that customers no longer have to call us to reset passwords if and when they forget them;
- electronic signatures – so that customers can sign their applications online and no longer have to print, sign and post their applications to us;
- online evidence upload for overseas customers – so they no longer have to post us evidence from overseas, which we know is timely and expensive;
- More Frequent Data Sharing with HMRC – so that when customers are in repayment, HMRC tells us on a weekly basis what they have repaid, meaning we can provide customers with much more up-to-date loan balances. (Until this year HMRC only gave us this information on an annual basis.)
- Introduction of social media direct messaging – In December 2017 we became one of the first government entities in the UK to introduce full customer service by Facebook and Twitter direct messaging. Meaning we're engaging with our customers where they are.
- All of the new services we develop and make available are 100% tested by students to assess usability and to explore opportunities for future development.
- Notwithstanding these important developments, it should also be recognised that we only assess customer calls on the quality of service

and content provided.

But we know our service still doesn't always meet the needs or expectations of our predominately digitally-native customers. There is more we can do and more we must do. A priority for me as CEO is to ensure that we're listening directly to our customers to find out what they want from SLC. I'm therefore implementing a series of SLC 'surgeries' where SLC will come to a university to hear directly from its staff and students about what the SLC can be doing better. This initiative, alongside others I have outlined, will help to ensure that we remain focussed on providing good customer service to students, graduates and all of our stakeholders across the UK.

Thank you