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It's not about us: it's about them

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Overview

This chapter reviews some of the changes that the UK higher education system has seen over the last 15 years or so. Policies increasing access to higher education and introducing tuition fees, in particular, have combined with the impact of new technology and a society that is increasingly consumer-orientated to demand that universities and colleges pay attention to greater student diversity, learning that is independent of time and place, and the need to provide a student experience that goes beyond service and exceeds expectations. While there is a great deal still to be done before institutions become real players in the emerging 'experience economy', progress has been made on integrated models of service delivery, the provision of inspirational venues in which students can interact with the institution and its staff, and attempts to use technology to enhance the student experience. This chapter explores some of the background to such initiatives, thus providing a context for the examples covered in the rest of the book, and suggests some themes for future development.

Introduction

It really is not about us. It is about them – our students. Many of us employed by universities have been so for most of our working lives – and we are also products of the higher education system in which we work. We have no problem getting to grips with what a university is, how it works, what schools, faculties and departments it might have, how they inter-relate and where we go to get done what we want done. We know what a university should be like. For students, and this applies to myself when I think back to my undergraduate days, this is often not the case. Many students, particularly but not exclusively the large numbers of 18-year-olds now entering our universities, find the university bewildering and the vocabulary

alien. For the mature student, who may have delayed interaction with the university until later in life and who often engages with us on a part-time basis, there is a similar lack of familiarity. It can take some new university entrants a year or more to understand the university and its service offering. In the modern world, many of these students are the first in their family to attend university; there is no family knowledge of university structures, vocabulary and processes. In addition, many of these students are attempting to study full-time while engaging in full-time employment.

Simplifying the availability of, and access to, our support services is therefore more important now than ever before. The suggestion in this chapter, and throughout this book, is that by taking a student view we can not only improve and simplify but also transform the experience of students as learners and members of our institutions. This is not always easy for us, as comments from teachers who participated in the Higher Education Academy ESCalate project (Campbell et al., 2007, 32, 97) on the differences in perceptions about learning and teaching between staff and students indicate:

Our discourse of teaching and learning is not one that students necessarily have. . . . Most staff are the successful product of a traditional learning approach and find it hard to put themselves in the shoes of the students who learn in different ways to themselves and in the case of direct or recent school leavers who have grown up with a different technological and education culture.

It is clear that transforming the student experience needs leaders in institutions, and in information services, who can see beyond operational effectiveness and who have a vision for new staff structures and service configurations driven by the needs of students rather than the needs of the institution, or their chosen profession.

Government policies increasing access to higher education and introducing tuition fees have affected the demand for, and the competitiveness of, higher education and are partly behind the need to take a fresh look at the student experience. The improvements described in other chapters of this book show a range of responses to government policies and societal and technological trends, with the common aim of improving the quality of the student experience. Government intentions, independent of which political party is in power, have been clear for almost two decades. In a 1991 white paper (Bekhradnia, 2001) stated:

The Government's policies for schools, and in particular examination reforms, are encouraging more young people to stay on in school or college after 16 and

then to apply for a place in higher education – by the year 2000 the Government expects that approaching one in three of all 18–19 year olds will enter higher education.

Growth in higher education numbers has been with us for some time.

From elite to mass higher education

We have seen significant sector growth over a long period, both in the number of universities and in the numbers of students that attend them. There are now more universities, each with more students, than ever before.

The removal of the binary divide in 1992, when existing polytechnic institutions in the UK became universities overnight, and the subsequent granting of university and university college status to a greater number of institutions over the past ten years has seen the number of UK universities roughly double since 1992. The key effect here is a larger and hence more competitive sector.

The growth in student numbers has been significant, producing a dramatic shift from an elite to a mass system of higher education (HE). This growth in student numbers has been a feature of HE for many years now: for example, between the academic years 1988–9 and 1993–4 there was a 67% increase in full-time undergraduate students (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2001). Student numbers have continued to increase in more recent years: for example, between 2005–6 and 2006–7 the number of students in UK HE institutions increased by 6%. This recent growth was accompanied by a growth of only 3.1% in academic staff numbers and 1.9% in non-academic (or professional) staff (Higher Education Statistics Agency, n.d.). The slower rate of growth in academic and support staff numbers is a factor causing universities to devise innovative ways to improve the student experience. Innovations that invest in technology and systems, which are usually one-off capital costs, such as self-service access to information, services and resources, rather than people with their accompanying continued financial burden, not only improve the student experience but also improve access and can be cost-effective.

Growth in student numbers is not limited to UK students. Recent growth in overseas student numbers is even more remarkable than domestic growth, as evidenced by this recent answer to a parliamentary question (*Daily Hansard*, 2007):

Over the last five years, the number of UK based students at English higher education institutions increased by 200,000 (14 per cent) to 1.67 million and

the number of overseas students at such institutions increased by 80,000 (40 per cent) to 275,000.

Bill Rammell

This statement goes on to confirm that further growth is to be expected:

Against that background, we expect many more students from both the UK and abroad to participate in higher education over the next five years.

Bill Rammell

It should also be noted that HE growth is strategically important to the government, both economically and socially: an educated workforce enables UK plc to be more competitive in the global marketplace, and widening participation in higher education and developing a more inclusive society means greater numbers participating in and hence contributing to national competitiveness (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008). However, there is evidence that the strategy of widening participation has been only partially successful and that many of the additional students in universities are more of the same middle-class entrants. Widening participation does, however, in its own right provide a rationale for rethinking student support.

Higher education is clearly a booming industry but, as in all periods of expansion in all businesses, high rates of growth have consequences. Greater student numbers of all types have clear consequences for the range of support services to be provided, and for the methods deployed to provide these services effectively and efficiently. At the very least, more students put additional pressure on current learning support services, but there are also more subtle effects such as increasing pressure on service providers to innovate, to address not just increased numbers but the resulting greater diversity of student needs. The key effect here is that more students and greater diversity drive innovative service delivery and greater personalization of services.

The introduction of fees

The funding of the developing mass higher education system in the UK has been a major battleground between university vice chancellors and the government for many years. The Blair government 'solved' this problem with the highly contentious introduction of tuition fees. For the first time in the history of UK higher education, students were expected to make a financial contribution to the costs of their

tuition. Many involved in higher education were opposed to this development. However, despite initial opposition tuition fees have now become part of the accepted higher education landscape. It is unlikely that England will reverse this development (as happened in Scotland).

The argument is now moving to focus on fee levels. It is expected that, following review in 2009, the fee system will be further developed to allow universities to levy fees at a rate of their choosing within a limit set by legislation. Interestingly, the current system was established with a cap of £3000 per student per year, and did have an option for universities to set a lower fee. Only a few universities differentiated themselves by setting lower fees. If the introduction of fees was an attempt to establish a 'market' for higher education, as many would argue, it clearly failed. However, fees have moved the sector closer to the idea of a market in HE, and a variable fees regime that does result in significant variations across the sector, if introduced, will complete that move. Despite the limited market that has resulted thus far, the reality is that the introduction of fees has produced more market-like behaviour with students being more critical than ever before of the 'services' that they receive at university and clearly regarding themselves as 'paying customers' – as evidenced by recent litigation from dissatisfied students. The outcome is that while HE may not be a true market just yet, students are more likely to view themselves as consumers than ever before and there is no doubt that the introduction of tuition fees has contributed to rising student expectations. This attitudinal change has been driven partly by tuition fees but also by a more sweeping change to consumer society in the UK, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Forget analysis: think about synthesis

The massification of the sector and the introduction of tuition fees clearly have strategic implications for universities (Scott, 2005). It is worth considering here how institutions might respond strategically. Proving a direct link between a cause, such as the introduction of tuition fees, and an effect, such as greater student expectations, is not attempted here, but it is clear that the causes discussed have been highly influential in creating a changed environment around students and their HE experience. It is also clear that this will inevitably influence strategy and policy in our institutions. However, direct attribution of a single cause to a consequence is, in the author's view, often pursued with unreasonable vigour in our institutions, as we tend to rely predominantly on analysis to provide clear 'scientific' rationales for action. If only things were this simple.

Attempts to identify single causes and manage situations by taking specific actions can often, due to the interconnectedness of our activities, make the situation worse. The point here is that the system is inherently complex, and the student experience is also highly complex, involving all of the interactions and events that make up a student's life experience while at university. Many factors interrelate and interact. It is this interconnectedness that requires an integrated holistic approach to improvement, rather than a piecemeal atomistic approach. Rather than using analysis as our main tool, we need to make use of synthesis.

Taking a holistic approach to student experience issues does inevitably mean that we have to work across several structural silos. The structures that we have historically created ensure that fragmentation of thinking and action is built in to the system, and while we might attempt to deal with this through the formation of student experience committees, real 'joined-up' non-partisan working is doomed when the co-operating parties know that they will be competing for resources in the annual budget round. Taking a holistic, joined-up view does not come naturally to us, partly because of our structures but also because of our tendency to seek refuge in analysis as our default approach, which has been driven by a managerialist culture of facts and accountability. Indeed, as Taylor (2003) points out:

The fact that professional academics, trained to deconstruct and reflect upon the ways in which power is exercised, have failed to call managerialism's bluff is particularly worrying and again cause for concern.

The student experience is of such a complexity that analytical approaches are unlikely to produce the transformational thinking that we need. Rather, an approach based on synthesis, that looks for connections and synergies between activities, and that unites resources (and resource holders) in the common interest of transforming the student experience, is what is needed.

In the area of student support there are three factors that, in my view, benefit from taking an approach based on synthesis. These are:

- the staff that work in the services
- the technologies that are deployed
- the physical and virtual environments that we create.

These three factors benefit from being considered together, rather than separately as they are in many organizations: see Figure 1.1 (from Watson, 2005). The skills, attitudes and behaviours of our staff are deeply affected by the technologies that

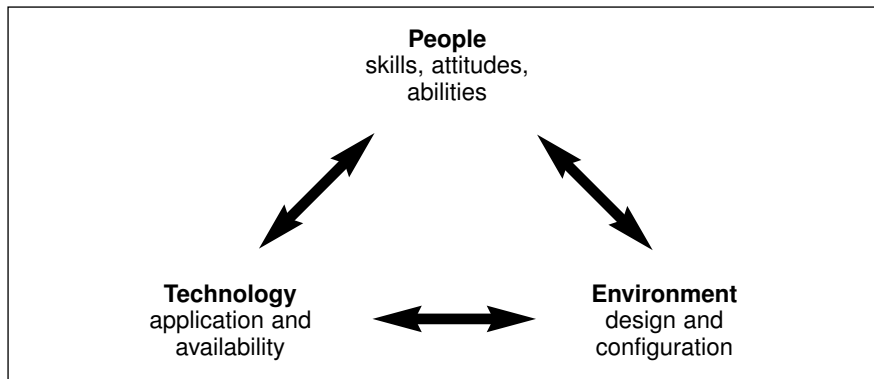


Figure 1.1 Synergy – a strategy of synthesis (from Watson, 2005)

we deploy and how we make them available, and also by the design and configuration of the environments in which they work. An approach based on synthesis, which considers people, technology and the environment, brings out synergies between these areas of investment. For example a strategy of self-service can use the best technology available but is unlikely to succeed without staff that embrace it and physical space that enables easily understood access to, and use of, the facilities.

Looking forward

We know that of the many factors affecting the experience of students in our institutions, only some are within our control while others are to do with personal circumstances and relationships. We must therefore capitalize on those things that we can control, and improve and use them thoughtfully – not as short-term fixes but as long-term strategies to achieve our high-level hopes and aspirations. The issues of complexity, synthesis and synergy, in my view, mean that we must take a forward-looking rather than a data-focused, backward-looking view. While the data sets we have might point to some general lessons for us, more often they tell us what not to do rather than what to do. To find out what we should do, we need to concentrate on what we wish to create. Transforming the student support offering in our universities is a creative activity requiring imagination and risk-taking. We need to adopt a creative world view, as expressed well by Land and Jarman (1992, 166):

... the reference point is the future, not the past. We don't need to fall back on the past for our decisions. Choices are based on alignment with our purpose and our vision for a different world.

At the heart of this creative worldview is the thought that we ‘don’t need to fall back on the past for our decisions’. In other words, what we think the student experience should be like, in our richest picture of it, should be what we use to make decisions – and not mere data about past events. Taking such a forward-looking, integrated, holistic view not only acknowledges the complexity of factors affecting the student experience but also suggests that we need to look across the departmental silos of library, IT and student services. Taking this broad view, as many examples in this book illustrate, enables us to find solutions that arise not just within but also at the interfaces of these separate services, increasing the chance of finding simplicity within our complex structures and helping us deal with the unexpected.

Indeed, dealing with the unexpected may be the biggest challenge that we face. Taleb (2007), in his book *The Black Swan*, highlights the increasing frequency of unexpected world events in these early years of the 21st century. These events, such as 9/11, might not initially be perceived to have direct effects on higher education UK but, over time, they do – for example via the tightened visa regulations which are a reaction to the growing threat from terrorism. A creative worldview is a form of preparation for the consequences of such events – when faced with the unexpected, knowing where you wish to go is the best planning you can have.

Do structures matter?

An obvious response to the call for a holistic approach to the student experience is to converge, merge or integrate the departments that contribute to the student experience. Integration does make sense and can take different forms. An initial look at the issues in this chapter might suggest that structural integration is an obvious answer. However, the structural silos that we have in our institutions have, in many cases, long histories and are steeped in institutional politics. Often the energy and human effort required to combine these silos operationally, and more important culturally, exceeds the gain and should only be attempted by the brave or, some would say, foolhardy.

A focus on students clearly provides the imperative for an integration strategy: integration has to be about simpler, more easily understood services that are more widely available. The focus of integration, therefore, should be at the point of delivery. For students it does not matter how complex the organization is in the back office, provided that services are integrated at the point of delivery. Students should not have to understand how the university is structured in order to access its services.

So how can integration at the point of delivery be achieved? There are examples throughout the HE sector that illustrate what is possible. One route is through a service integration strategy driven by a single (physical and virtual) point of contact with the students, whereby a single desk, and web enquiry service, provides top-level access to all services for students – a strategy attempted, partially successfully, at Glasgow Caledonian University.

Integration of systems can be as important as physical service point integration. Technology is an important force for integration, in terms of sharing data and combining access to various services online. The holy grail of at least an integrated virtual learning environment, student record system, library collection management system and finance system has been vigorously pursued by many institutions and, when done well, can help unite the services offered. However, as with services, systems have a range of different ‘owners’ in institutions – and how should library systems relate to student record systems and HR and finance systems, and what happens when there is a new system development such as the MLE (managed learning environment) vying for a position in the systems hierarchy? Developments with portals did help to move the debate from systems to services, by integrating offerings on a common presentation screen, and Web 2.0 architectures can take this further. However, as with departmental structures, system structures and their ownership can become the issue and prevent progress with the real problem – what the student sees and interacts with.

The development of space in libraries and learning centres (see Chapters 5 and 6) can also aid an integration strategy. Open-plan, technology-rich spaces attract students, and where students are is where most student services want (and need) to be. A strategy that does not coerce departments such as IT and student services to merge with the library but makes space available in the modern library building for service delivery enables integrated access to services.

The service expectations of a diverse student body, the impact of new technologies and the importance of the emerging experience economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) are all factors that affect the way staff and students view facilities and services within the institution.

The student experience

What happens to students during their time at university clearly has an impact that shapes their lives. We used to take pride in the fact that students were treated as individuals, but in the 21st century mass system of education, this can no longer be the case. However, paradoxically, the student experience is now more important to

the success of not only individual students but also to the universities they attend than ever before (Shepherd, 2008):

The national student survey – which asks students to rate their university and then publishes the results – has created a certain pressure. This [higher education] is now a very competitive environment.

Setting aside for now the issue of whether post-experience surveys such as the national student survey (NSS) have any real value, it is clear that their very existence is a key driver for universities in improving the student experience. An institution's position in the resulting league tables from this and other surveys lies behind much current university investment. Indeed, those that can ill-afford to invest continue to do so in response to this new-found competitiveness, as Shepherd (2008) highlights in respect of investment in buildings:

And some, despite being millions of pounds in the red, still plan to spend millions more on buildings and refurbishments. This at a time when recession is thought to be around the corner, and borrowing money is getting more expensive.

The key effect is that we now have a larger and more competitive higher education sector than ever before, and the bulk of competition between institutions is focused on the support of students and their overall student experience.

Society in transition

Earlier in this chapter I discussed the increased consumer stance taken by students as a result of the introduction of fees, but also hinted that there was something else affecting increased consumerism. Pine and Gilmore (1999) in *The Experience Economy* identify a progression over time from a society focused on the sale of commodities to one selling goods and then services. This change is clearly evident in the UK, where shopping has become a predominant form of leisure-time activity and the 'rights' of the consumer are a dominant force for improved quality of goods and services. Students are members of this culture. However the progression, according to Pine and Gilmore, does not stop here – beyond services lie experiences. There is a view that experiences transcend the need for goods and services, which is supported by Richard Florida (2000) in his work *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Working with focus groups of creative class people such as IT professionals, health

specialists, teachers and others (that is, the people who graduate from our universities), Florida notes:

Experiences are replacing goods and services because they stimulate our creative faculties and enhance our creative capacities. This active, experiential lifestyle is spreading and becoming more prevalent in society.

I cannot help but be struck by how fortuitous this is. Creative class people – those students who populate our universities – value experience more than anything else. This suggests that it may be more important than we ever imagined that we take seriously the quality of the experience that we provide. Adding this general societal shift towards a need for experiences to the pseudo-market produced by tuition fees suggests that the student experience may not only be more important than ever before but that those universities providing an excellent student experience are most likely to succeed in the competition for students. Could it be that students are more likely to choose their university on the basis of the support it offers outside the teaching that it delivers?

The technology effect

Universities have spent enormous sums of money on technology over the past 20 years or so, but exactly how beneficial this expenditure has been is unclear (Watson, 2008). One thing, however, is certain – today's students, the Google-eyed Facebook generation, are much more familiar with technology than students ever were before – they have technology-based lifestyles. And technology-based lifestyles are not the sole preserve of the young – on average, 57% of homes in the UK now have broadband access, indicating a broader spectrum of users in the general population (Allen, 2008). Students' expectations of the technology to be made available by institutions are very high. Importantly, these expectations are generally related to technologies that are personal and service-oriented rather than those, based on control and corporate systems approaches, that we currently provide. In relation to both learning and service the expectations of technology-capable students – which, it is acknowledged, does not include all students but does include many of them, and is also an increasing proportion of students – is for technology that enables them to contribute (through self-service and self-controlled pace of learning) and participate (through interaction and membership), and enables self-promotion and engagement through social software. Web 2.0 and social software services such as Facebook and MySpace give these digital natives (Prensky, 2001) a completely

different view of technology than the (largely) digital immigrants that currently run our IT services in universities. The challenge for universities is to find ways of providing technologies that students can relate to and want to use as they do the current public domain offerings. The Joint Information Systems Committee student expectations study (2007) tells us that (future) students do not want universities to invade their Facebook space, but this does not and should not prevent us from developing new technological approaches that engage students in new ways. One example might be a move from corporate virtual learning environments to modular Web 2.0-based personal learning environments that provide a greater choice of tools, content and services for individuals as learners.

Scrutiny: a new environment for improvement?

For many years universities have been driven to improve by quality watchdogs such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which regularly inspects institutions to ensure that they meet expected standards. The QAA is part of what Lord Broers (2005) calls the:

Faustian compact between universities and state [that] requires in exchange for state funding an elaborate process of scrutiny, evaluation, measurement and quality assurance, to persuade those who pay the piper that the tune is at least worth listening to even if not wholly understood.

While this quality drive continues, there is now a new kid on the block – student expectations. One outcome of students' extensive use of Web 2.0 software is their involvement in the 'recommendation revolution'. Websites that enable students to rate their university or rate their tutor are now ubiquitous and, when combined with the Facebook/MySpace opportunities for praise and criticism, represent a powerful new version of 'quality'. It remains to be seen what will damage the health of the university more – a poor report from the QAA or a flaming on Facebook. What's certain is that:

It just doesn't do to have grotty student halls, peeling lecture theatre walls, or unsightly leisure areas. Students are paying fees and can choose to go elsewhere.
(Shepherd, 2008)

And if you do, then thanks to the rapid spread of opinion on the web it won't be just your current students that know about it. Scrutiny based on the student

experience, expressed through opinions on the web, accompanied by the current 'surveyitis' in HE, brings a whole new perspective to university quality.

How have universities responded to the challenges of transforming the student experience?

There are many examples of responses to the forces described in this chapter, in all three of the categories of service, systems and space. The quest for excellent learning support services and a remarkable student experience is a continuing one – it is a journey, and not a destination. Some of the emerging issues on that journey that we will need to address are:

- how to make effective use of IT
- how to unite real and virtual worlds
- how to capitalize on emerging technologies
- how to improve how we evaluate the student experience.

How do we harness the real power of IT for support and service delivery? Carr (2004) talks of IT no longer being strategic. We all have it, tons of it, and for most of us it does the same things. IT is now plumbing. For excellent support and service delivery we need plumbing that works – fantastically. So far we have systems that merely work. They don't exceed expectations and delight our students. As we struggle to cope with greater diversity of students and greater numbers than ever before, then, we really do need to harness the power of IT, and we do need to ensure that it is deeply embedded in what we do. From a service perspective this means concentrating on excellent service and not getting hung up on the IT aspects of delivery, and from a learning perspective it means having IT as plumbing that works and supports innovative pedagogy. Excellent plumbing facilitates excellent service by providing us with self-service opportunities that are always on and infallible.

Excellent plumbing also facilitates the personalization agenda. For example, it helps us move our thinking from one-size-fits-all virtual learning environments to personal learning environments that enable students to use modular Web 2.0 tools to build a learning environment that suits their life and learning styles.

Richard Florida's work on the rise of the creative class shows us that our students will not live solely online. They will continue to value place – especially those 'third places' that enable learning conversations and community engagement. A key issue for universities is what they can do to work across the real and the virtual so that these worlds are united and complementary and not divided. What emerging

technologies might there be that bring together the real and the virtual? One example is the shotcode – a variation on the barcodes used on retail packaging – which is used increasingly in museums. When a shotcode is ‘photographed’ by a mobile phone it takes the user to a website with further information. This clearly provides an opportunity to link the real and virtual worlds.

There are technologies that we know are almost there and will continue to be developed – airborne networks, radio frequency identification and immersive environments, to mention just a few. The key questions here are what to adopt, when to adopt it and, returning to the technology arm of the synergy strategy, how to apply it. Emerging technologies will provide, at least for a short period of time, a possible competitive advantage from IT that goes beyond plumbing – but it won’t last for long.

And lastly, what of evaluation? This is becoming extremely important both as a tool for student choice and as a driver of university strategy. How good is our current evaluation of the student experience (e.g. the NSS)? In general it is post-event and suffers from the negative effects of all other post-event evaluations: poor memory, grudges, lack of relevance to those completing the survey (outcomes usually only affect the next cohort) and formats that reflect more what the questioner thinks than what students might feel. There are two points here. First, we should be interested in how students feel about their experience – it is emotional and it is an experience. Second, we should be interested in sampling it as it happens. A system that samples the student experience in real time is not impossible. The experience sampling method (Hektner, Schmidt and Csikszentmihalyi, 2006) is one way of doing this that has been used extensively and successfully in psychological research, particularly in studies of happiness. There are clear benefits to such an approach, which gives students an opportunity to tell us not just what they think but what they feel about the experience as they experience it.

Conclusion

While we have made enormous progress in improving our support for students and consequently providing them with the best experience that we can, this is a continuing journey. One of the key points as we continue on this journey is that we should get the focus right, as described in this quote from Charles Dunstone CEO of carphone Warehouse:

When we fail, and we do fail, often you can trace that failure back to the fact that we became too focused on internal priorities. We’ve been thinking too

much about what's good for Carphone Warehouse and forgetting what it's like to be a customer.

Similarly for higher education:

When we fail, and we do fail, very often you can trace that failure back to the fact that we became too focused on internal priorities. We've been thinking too much about what's good for the university and forgetting what it's like to be a student.

After all, it's not about us. It's about them.

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