

The Student Journey Project: Findings So Far

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Abstract:

This paper reports on the 'Student Journey Project', a 3 year £48,000 cyclical project running from 2012-2015. The Student Journey Project is a qualitative, longitudinal project which utilises a small number of student case studies to try to understand what the 'real' student journey is like at MMU, covering the learning, living and social & community experiences (including what areas and topics are of particular importance to our students). It is envisaged that information from the project will be used to help highlight, prioritise and target improvement works.

The project is jointly run by the Student's Union and Business Improvement Team. Young *et al* (2007) argue that institutional practice in the UK has been slow to reflect the 'Adaptation Perspective' (Zepke and Leach, 2005) popularised in pedagogic literature, which encourages institutions to move towards adapting to the needs of students, with course content, teaching methods and assessment reflecting the diverse demands of the students. The Student Journey Project is designed with this approach in mind, with the action research methodology designed to capture and respond to the student voice. We argue that student engagement and success is crucial to discussions of quality assurance in higher education as outlined in the QAA strategy 2011-14.

Background Literature:

The main aim of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is to 'safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education'. A focus on the student experience is at the forefront of quality assurance of the in the UK and this has become heightened within the new fee regime. More generally when evaluating quality assurance we have to take into

account how students engage, and how this can be supported by institutions (Coates, 2005). Kuh (2003) defines student engagement in two ways; firstly the amount of time and effort students put into academic pursuits and other activities research links with high levels of learning and development (Chickering & Gamson, 1987;). The second is how institutions allocate their resources and organise their curriculum, other learning opportunities and support services (Kuh, 2003). Essential to student engagement are students' expectations, and subsequent perceptions, of the student experience (Lowe & Cook, 2003).

As this presentation reports on the findings of the first year of the research, our focus is on the first year experience, which tends to be dominated by transition to university life. Within the pedagogic literature Tinto's (1987) theory of student integration have proved the most influential theoretical models of transition, with retention and progression viewed as being largely determined by the student's ability to integrate into the academic and social aspects of university life. While useful, this model is predicated on a traditional US campus-based university experience that is not necessarily representative of the mass HE system of contemporary Britain. Mass higher education, or 'massification' of HE both within the UK and internationally, is continuing to change the nature of the university experience. The 'de-personalisation' (Thomas and Hixenbaugh, 2006) caused by greater class sizes, for example, and the lack of individual attention and support have an impact on all students.

Taking this into account, more recent research has identified the four principal areas of transition to the first year at university to be: academic; personal and social; geographic and administrative (Whittaker, 2007). The major issues surrounding academic transition focus on the student's need to adapt to styles of teaching and learning that are different from their prior educational experiences, which require a new level of independence. Lack of preparation and wrong choice of course or institution can also hinder successful integration (Yorke and Longden, 2007), as can lack of interaction with other students and academic staff.

Social transition is also highlighted as an important dimension in terms of retention and progression. While previously seen as outside of the remit of HE institutions, Universities are increasingly developing approaches to address this issue, with establishing a sense of belonging to the university as well as personal ties viewed as essential in the personal and social adjustment to university life (Yorke and Longden, 2007).

Whittaker (2007) links issues associated with geographic transition with the potentially alienating and overwhelming impact of large campuses and high volumes of students. They are particularly relevant to students who are living away from home and coping with geographical adjustment to new living arrangements, a new city or a new country.

Administrative transition centres on issues surrounding enrolment, managing timetables, keeping track of information and submission due dates, and maintaining contact with academic staff.

Any interventions designed to ease transition into HE need to take into account the needs of different learner groups. However, we should avoid generalising or stereotyping on the basis of gender, age, educational background, class, ethnicity, disability, etc (Whittaker, 2007), and instead understand the actual diversity of the student group, which is more complex than these factors alone. Yorke and Longden's survey (2007) of the first year experience for the HEA has suggested that students from widening participation backgrounds experience HE in much the same way as those from more traditional backgrounds. Interventions to improve the first year experience should therefore be designed with all students in mind.

Project Background:

The Student Journey Project was initiated as an eight-week pilot at the start of the 2012/13 academic period through MMU's Services to Students Task & Finish Group. The remit of this group was to 'Identify the student journey for different segments of the student community and identify the academic 'touch points''. Approval and funding was provided following the short pilot for the longitudinal, three-year study with the aim that this would provide a test-bed for developing a journey mapping model and approach that meets the specific needs of MMU. Following the three-year project, and the value demonstrated therein, a decision will be made whether to embed a journey-mapping model at MMU.

The project is internally funded from three sources (year one: centrally; years two and three: jointly by the Services and Student & Academic Services Departments) and project governance is in place to ensure that each area of the university is represented and has insight into the development and progress of the research.

It is important to note that the project has been designed to capture intelligence relating to all aspects of the student experience, which we know to be multi-faceted, not just the academic or learning experience but also the living and social/community experiences. An additional driver for the methodology and approach were that it should be robust enough to both withstand and capture the inherent complexities within the institution; chiefly the diversity of the student body, the fragmentation of the campus and the uncertainties of significant change to the HE funding system.

Customer journey mapping is a technique used to gain understanding of customer needs mapped against organisational performance. Customer journey mapping (referred to as student journey mapping henceforth) provides a compelling visual image of what it is like from the customer perspective to interact with an organisation, i.e. in this case what it is like from a student perspective to interact with MMU, and the points at which the organisation meets or fails to meet expectations. Note: although this technique was developed for marketing purposes in the private sector, this has been adapted for usage within the project and there is not an inference that students are customers.

The maps can be used for all stages or segments of the student journey at MMU – starting from the very first time a potential applicant visits the MMU website right through to graduation and alumni and everything in between (covering academic, administrative, social and services areas). The journey maps provide rich, contextual information about the student experience at MMU – highlighting both good and poor student experience at all these stages. Evidence of good experience can be used to identify good practice and to champion and apply it elsewhere within the University. Evidence of poor experience can be used to target those areas for improvement. The value of the data captured and mapped in this way is that it provides service areas with contextual, diagnostic data which will lead to greater prioritisation of key issues and greater insight into the interrelationship of key processes and systems and their combined impact on the overall student experience.

Project aims:

It is expected that the project will help to improve the student experience in the following ways:

- Longitudinal study provides an ongoing and full lifecycle narrative, which will inform continuous improvement measures to improve the experience of new cohorts year on year.
- The journals provide a platform for students (as participants) to define their priorities in terms of what is most important to, or has the most impact on them and their learning experience (both good and 'poor' practice as defined by them).
- The methodology engages students as partners (as 'experts by experience') in helping to reshape practice. We believe this approach - with students as active participants - will lead to greater engagement, ownership and satisfaction levels.
- Provides a qualitative narrative that enhances the monitoring and measurement of institutional thresholds and standards (e.g. those set out in the MMU Commitment or student charter).

Methodology:

An action research approach has been adopted which allows for collaborative reflective enquiry, which emphasizes participation as a catalyst for change (Cohen *et al*, 2000). This enhancing methodology will allow the student voice in qualitative form to help inform and improve strategic decision making as well as evaluating its impact. Its impact will be measured by the acceptance and embedding of this methodology into existing institutional performance-enhancing processes and frameworks.

The core methodology is a qualitative sample of 15-20 students, who all commenced their first year of study at MMU in Sept 2012. The panel has been selected to provide a variety of diverse students; achieved by recruiting students based on a number of criteria (including demographic factors, course type, study location, disability, parental or caring responsibilities and domicile). This was achieved through a classification questionnaire and selection process. The panel provide individual case studies rather than being representative of the MMU student population, which could not be achieved though this type of qualitative study.

The panel itself can be ‘segmented’ into four core ‘types’ (detailed below) where commonalities exist:

1. **Traditional:** young (18/19) full-time undergraduates living in halls
2. **‘Hybrid’:** young (18/19) full-time undergraduates living at home & commuting
3. **Non-traditional:** mature (23-41) / part-time / local & commuting / postgraduates
4. **International:** EU / Overseas / Exchange or Erasmus

The research is generated through student journals. Panel members submit a private monthly journal (using the WordPress platform) to capture in relative real-time (i.e. without relying on recall) what they are experiencing and the impact that it is having on their overall perceptions, satisfaction and success. This also allows us to see what is at the forefront of students’ minds at any given stage and to understand the impact of other issues such as social isolation, financial hardship, conflicting commitments such as work or family, for example, on the core learning experience.

The journals are supplemented as required by additional research techniques including in-depth interviews, focus groups and other identified methods to probe further into important areas or extract key information.

Analysis:

The overall student experience has been segmented into three core categories or ‘needs’ of students in order to evaluate the interplay and relative importance to, or impact of, each area on the overall student experience:

1. **Learning Experience:** e.g. transition & induction, timetabling, taught sessions, placements, learning resources, assessments
2. **Living Experience:** e.g. halls, living at home, commuting & travel, funding & finances, parenting or caring responsibilities, safety/security, health & wellbeing, work, juggling multiple commitments
3. **Social & Community:** e.g. academic community, course mates, halls and flatmates, students’ union activities, clubs and societies, local communities

The resultant data is analysed using the NVivo software package, which enables detailed and accurate coding of qualitative material (Bryman, 2008: 568) and facilitates easier organisation and analysis as ideas and relationships emerge. The treatment and analysis of the qualitative data is iterative, manual and highly labour intensive. The data has to be organised and ‘coded’ manually at multiple levels, which the coding framework (based on the three core categories above) facilitates.

Triangulation:

Underpinning the qualitative data is existing external and internal quantitative, or other research data, pertaining to the assessment and feedback experience. It is a key objective of the project that relevant internal and external data sources are drawn upon and triangulated to support the research. While this quantitative data may provide an important framework and statistical validity, a key strength of the research is its qualitative methodology, which seeks to explore the meaning behind statistical reports by providing an insight into the student experience from the students’ own perspectives and in their words. The use of self-completion journals is crucial, as it ensures that participants are able to describe their experiences and expectations unmediated by interviewers or facilitators, and provides an insight into behavior that is difficult to collect using other methods (Bryman, 2008: 226).

Findings so far:

During the first year of the project emphasis has been on developing a framework within which to carry out analysis of the data (as described above with reference to NVivo and the coding framework). As we have begun to code the data from the 2012/13 academic year initial findings are emerging as summarized below:

- The overall *learning* experience has the most emphasis within the overall journal entries.

- There is a different emphasis in terms of what affects students most within the learning experience however for commuting students vs students in halls or traditional students vs non-traditional students.
- Over time we can see different emphases for Terms 1, 2 & 3 as our participants progress through their journeys.
- Whilst *learning* overall has the most emphasis in the blogs, the issue of *friendship & community* (within the social & community category) has the most coding references. This is an important ‘need’ for all students embarking on the first year of their programme, even though it may take a different shape for different student groups. Feelings of belonging & connectedness are key.
- An interesting difference between commuting students and those in halls is that the former group focus more on *academic support, assessment & feedback* and *learning spaces & resources* whereas the latter focus more on *teaching, assessment, group work & independent study*.
- *Other commitments* is the major theme for commuting students. With jobs, family responsibilities and travel/commuting to juggle with their studies, this is a clear differentiation in terms of their ‘student experience’.

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