

A SERVICE APPROACH TO COURSE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Like many other organizations in both the private and public sectors Higher Education (HE) Institutions are facing challenging and traumatic times as the UK becomes further and mired in the worst economic situation for 60 years. The resulting political, economic and social pressures have led to an increase in politically driven policy reviews and strategic re-alignment that may well change the nature of Higher Education courses and delivery formats for many years to come. There has been a significant shift to-wards greater customer focus that echoes many other government departments with the imperative to drive employability focused curriculum changes increasing.

The results of these debates has understandably led to a large number of valuable recommendations being put forward and it is difficult to predict how Universities will react. Without doubt the impact of these pressures on the strategic planning and day-to-day operations of HE Institutions cannot fail to be significant as they contend with major structural, financial and supply chain constraints in an ever increasing competitive marketplace. In this paper we begin to explore how HE education can start to address the issue of delivering value to students by examining how a shift to a paradigm based on lean service design and delivery can add value to course develop processes and outputs.

Keywords: Service design, higher education, student experience, course development, program development, innovation

1 CUSTOMER FOCUS, VALUE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

It is clear that the notion of customer centric thinking has become one of the key issues being discussed by policy makers over the last eighteen months (DIUS 2008b and 2009,) with a focus being specifically placed on increasing the accessibility for older students (Pollard, Bates, Hunt and Bellis 2008) or those with special needs (NSF 2008) and delivering courses that enhance the employability of students and the business performance of organizations (BERR 2008, DIUS 2008c 2008d, Scesa and Williams 2007 HEW 2008, NSF 2008, Tomkin, Cowling and Hunt 2008) a point underlined by NSF (2008 p37) who note that “*it is nonetheless clear that the link between higher education and better job prospects is high on the agenda for many students*”. They go on to argue (NSF 2008 p40) that this imperative increases with international students who provide a vital income stream to many HE institutions.

It would appear from both the DIUS (2008c 2008d) and NSF (2008) as well as Pollard, Bates, Hunt and Bellis (2008) that many international and domestic students feel that such outcomes are not being delivered and that overall the experience they are receiving is not acceptable or value driven. This though is at odds with Ramsden (2008 p1) in his influential report for the Higher Education Academy where he argues that “the quality of our students experiences is among the best in the world” and that the quality of UK HE courses is still perceived internationally as having high value both in academic and employability terms. However he does go on to confirm that as the student profile becomes more diverse so their expectations and wants become harder to categorize in broad or general terms. As a result the need to communicate with them in a fuller way is vital if improvements are to be made to their experience and HE Institutions are to compete at a global level. What is important in the context of this paper is a recognition by Ramsden and the NSF as well as others (Brain, Foreman, Reid and Shaw 2007, Jacklin, Robinson, O’Meara and Harris 2006 and Shofield 2007 for example) that providing a valued experience to students is a key objective of HE Institutions in future strategic developments and that failure to embed such a paradigm in HE cultures and processes could lead to serious revenue and influence problems in the future.

The question then for HE executives is what is customer value in a student context and how can it be designed in and delivered by the courses and processes that form the operational heart of their organizations. Value and the notion of the 'Customer' in the public sector is a complex issue (Gillian and Wistow 2006, Wright and Taylor 2005 Angelis J., Watt, C, Macintyre 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009) and it is not the objective of this paper to provide a definitive answer to the debate. However we believe that it is vital that HE institutions begin to address and embrace such concepts of creating value for customers and the delivery of clearly defined and competitive value propositions if they are to prosper in the highly competitive global marketplace. It is therefore vital that they are able to identify who their customers are and what they want in terms of educational output and overall experience. Johnston and Clark (2008) argue that customers are essentially autonomous, powerful and knowledgeable people, driven by actual or perceived wants and needs. They are usually able to define what they believe is valuable and assess, who will be able to deliver that value they want at a price they are happy to pay. In a traditional commercial context these buyer-supplier relationships are clear and understandable to all parties and if a customer is not happy refunds or exchanges can occur quickly or an alternative provider sought from a large array suppliers. However in the public sector such tight lines and power relations are not always so easy to understand and the imperative of want over need may not be so overriding (Angelis J., Watt, C, Macintyre 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009). This issue is made more complex because HE Institutions like other public sector providers are there, at least in part, to provide services to citizens that are seen to be in the public interest, (Gilliat et al., 2000) and as such are accountable to some degree to the public as a whole not just to individual customers. This is illustrated by Potter (1988 p151) who notes that in the case of any public sector service "the interests of individual consumers must constantly be juggled against the interests of the community as a whole".

However although some degree of blurring will always exist in under-graduate education the relationship may be easier to define than other sectors such as the National Health Service due to the introduction of tuition fees at under-graduate level and the full fee nature of most post-graduate courses and international student education. This combined with significant financial and political pressure on Universities and Colleges to ease accessibility has led to a much more recognizable commercial model of competition between Institutions where students can act in a more traditional consumer fashion and specify value. Unfortunately our own cursory field work with a number of HE institutions is beginning to build a worrying picture of organizations that possess a very limited understanding of what value is and how to deliver it to students. We would argue that the key for them is to remember that value needs to be defined by the customer, not the provider and should be seen not only in terms of the end product or outcome but the sequence of processes that are involved in the delivery of the total service or product. For this to take place in an effective and efficient way there needs to be a clear view and understanding of the customers and their wants and needs (Bateman et al. 2007, Drummond-Hay and Bamford, 2007) As has already been mentioned recent research (BERR 2008, DIUS 2008b 2008c 2008d, Scesa and Williams 2007 HEW 2008, NSF 2008, Tomkin, Cowling and Hunt 2008 Ramsden 2008) students appear to be defining this 'value' in two key ways. First in terms of providing them with direct or transferable skills that will help add value to their personal employability profile and secondly, and more intangibly, delivering a more challenging, stimulating, inclusive and satisfying experience. What this will mean will vary from student to student, Institution to Institution and course to course but we believe that it is vital that any business model and subsequent strategic initiatives be grounded firmly in, and reflect, the context specific value requirements of students. As a result we argue that it is time for Universities and Colleges to fully embrace the concept of student as customer. They need to understand what their own core competencies and capabilities are and how they can be aligned and developed to form a value proposition that will have meaning to prospective students and enhance their competitive situation. They then need to design their operations accordingly based on delivering a customer focused service experience.

2 DESIGNING FOR EXPERIENCE

Before describing our proposed model it is important to understand its place in a strategic context as any such operationally focused process needs to echo the strategic intent of an organisation for it to have meaningful impact. As Finkelstein et al. (2006) in their seminal work note strategy is cyclical in nature and formed from a series of sequential processes and outcomes that start with an in-depth

understanding of an organisation’s core competencies and capabilities leading to a compelling yet realistic vision. This combined with a detailed analysis of the competitive environment and the organisation’s ability to compete leads to the formation of a firm’s value proposition: the configuration of services and products that deliver value to customers. They go on to argue that everything that is subsequently designed and operationalized via the business model and then specific initiatives must be focused on delivering this value proposition. As Figure 1 illustrates it is within the business model context that our model is placed, firmly focused on delivering an HE Institution’s Value Proposition. We would argue that it is inadvisable for an institution or organization of any sort to develop and implement a new customer focused process without first having a clear understanding of what their value proposition was and the implications of this in a wider strategic context as it will surely lead to the creation of contradictory, confused or inappropriate products and services. As such our model assumes this level of strategic clarity has been reached.

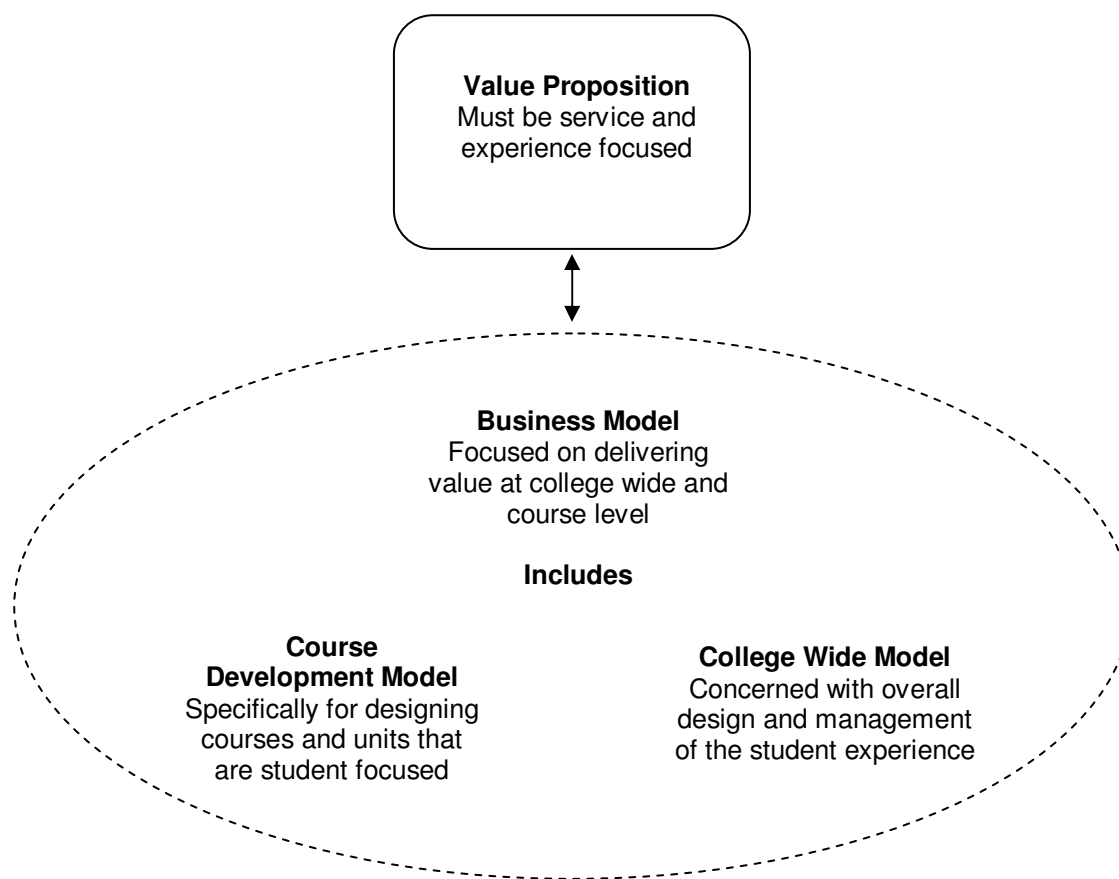
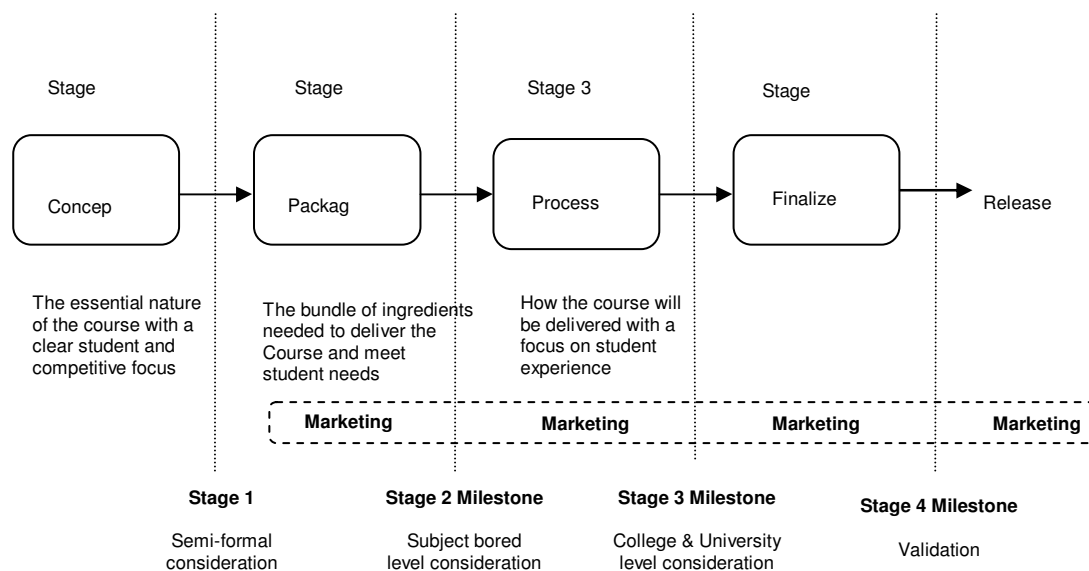


Figure 1. Strategic context of the course development model

Our own initial research suggests that at present the process of new course development at HE institutions is commonly led by either pressure from senior management in the belief that new courses will generate extra income or by the personal desire of members of staff to expand the number of courses within their area of expertise, often without any real understanding of what the market is demanding. In addition those proposing new courses are rarely required to provide a detailed explanation of the offering or demand for the course until the validation process is well underway. Such back loading of the design and development process means that many courses could be developed without any real thought being given to the students’ wants or experience expectations leading to low uptake or high levels of student dissatisfaction. The overall intention of our model is to

help HE institutions tackle this problem by taking a lean service based view in the design and development of new courses. This is a move away from a seller centric and product creation orientation to one that is focused on generating positive student experiences through the delivery of value as defined by the students while echoing the strategic intent of the organization, so ultimately generating a significant competitive advantage for the Institution. The fundamental elements of our model are based on the three core constructs of any service identified by Johnston and Clark (2008): the service concept, package and process, however they have been developed to fit within a HE context (Figure 2).



Clearly Echoes Strategic Intent of UCA and Needs of Students and Stakeholders

Figure 2. Course Development Model

An important point to note is that our model is not only a service based process focused on delivering valued experiences for students it is also designed to spread the development process more evenly across four milestone stages. The reasons for designing it this way are simple. First to help ensure that much more detailed consideration is given to new courses from the earliest moment so helping to ensure that unsuitable ideas can be filtered out before too much time and money are committed to them. Secondly to allow the marketing of new courses to take place far in a more meaningful way as greater detail will be available sooner in the processes and finally to help those developing new courses to focus on the student service experience in a step-by-step logical and detailed manner.

The first step in this process is to consider the course Concept. At this stage proposing staff will be asked to initially define the essential nature of the course, who it is targeted at and detail how it supports the strategic intent of the HE Institution so providing a conceptual framework within which a more detailed concept can be developed. This will entail staff outlining what they believe the value and benefit of the course will be to a wide range of stakeholders including students, employees and the Institution. They will then go on to summarize the overall operation of the course in terms of delivery and potential risks before discussing specific outcomes, both tangible and intangible before finally describing the direct student experience they believe needs to be delivered. Once the concept has been refined and agreed proposers move on to the second stage which relates to providing a detailed outline of the course Package, which as the Model in Figure 2 illustrates this is essentially the bundle of ingredients that are needed to deliver the course to students in the most valuable way. In this phase staff would need to first outline both the overall course structure detailing the relationships between units and the concept as well as to other courses already offered before providing specific unit breakdowns. They will then be asked to provide further detailed information regarding support

materials (i.e. availability of information, media and equipment), teaching staff (i.e. experience, research interests availability), learning environment (i.e. location, atmosphere, quality, access, technology) and supporting facilities and staff (i.e. teaching/tech support, admin, external specialists) as well as a more detailed cost/risk analysis of the providing such a package.

Once this stage has been formally agreed staff would then move onto what may arguably be the most innovative phase of the process, that of describing the service process itself. Fundamentally this is the element of the design process that focuses on detailing the very nature of the desired course delivery and student experience and as such staff will not only be required to summarize this but provide detailed information on five key elements of the delivery and experience process. The first deals with the Process Environment and will need to cover where the delivery will occur and what is needed within that space to provide a good experience to students leading to the second element, the Nature of the Staff/Student Relationship. This will need to describe how the staff-student relationship will be managed and its value to the overall student experience. The next element, the Nature of Unit Delivery, relates to specific issues such as the degree of face-to-face delivery compared to self-directed study, how much reaching will be customized versus generic, and whether delivery will be predominately classroom/studio based or remote (i.e. e-learning/distance learning). Proposers will then be required to address two more elements, Specialized Delivery Processes (i.e. additional skills, environments and facilities) and Support Processes (i.e. admin, technical, language, special needs) before conducting a cost / risk analysis of this stage. Once formal agreement has again been reached the course details can be finalized if required before validation and implementation. It is important to note that all points of this development process evidence will need to be provided and staff must show how the new course clearly echoes the strategic intent of the Institution and the needs of students and key stakeholders. In addition it is critical that the Institution supports staff with the resources they need to fully design and

3 NEXT STEPS

We fully recognize that at this point our work is almost purely conceptual in nature and that for it to gain validity in both academic and organizational realms it must be rigorously tested in the field. The next stage of this process will first require the theoretical model being developed into a workable tool kit that will support staff in their design and development process. This is being undertaken at present with the intention that the tool kit be created in a multimedia context to help shift staff perception of the process away from 'more bureaucratic paperwork' to one that is positive and useful in nature. Once this has been achieved we will be undertaking trials of the toolkit across the various campuses of UCA over the next 18 months to investigate the tool's value and robustness. Although the trial will cover an 18 month period this will be broken down into three six month sections to allow for feedback, review and refinement of the tool and support processes to occur. We will also be monitoring market interest, student feedback and revenue streams related to courses developed by the toolkit compared to those developed in more traditional ways so we can begin to assess the value of our process in the wider strategic context.

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