

University Welcome – the Student Experience Programme

By 2000, the University of the West of England (UWE) overtook many of its old university rivals to become one of the leading new Universities. It doubled in size from its 1992 pre-incarnation as Bristol Polytechnic, establishing an enviable record in league tables for teaching. Quality Assurance Agency scores were consistently regarded as excellent and a healthy application record took the University's market share from just under 1% pre millennium to 1.4% by 2002.

By 2005 things were changing. A greater climate of transparency in Higher Education was revealing cracks in the University's strategy as rapid growth meant the University resources were more stretched.

The National Student Survey results revealed student satisfaction to be low, despite its excellent teaching ratings and popularity as a University.

In 2005, the University of the West of England (UWE) teamed up with Spirit of Creation, a specialist service designer focusing on the "customer experience". The University commissioned 11 reviews using the SoC methodology to assess the impact of the key drivers in the national and educational environment:

- Economic
- Social
- Technological
- Legislative
- Pace of change itself

The outcome was a recommendation to set up a series of service design projects under the label 'Student Experience Programme'. The aim of the Programme has been to meet the needs and new expectation of students now paying fees of £3,000 for the first time. These needs and wants were simply categorised by the head of the Student Union as:

1. Fun, growth & life learning
2. Friends, connections and networks
3. Qualifications
4. Employability

The aim was also to establish a pool of talent, the facilitation know-how and a set of Discovery > Generation> Synthesis and Enterprise (DGSE) tools to redesign and innovate services for years after the SoC had left.

Detailed but swift analysis as part of the Student Experience Programme showed that the university could do more for its students in quite specific terms related to their needs for fun, friendship, qualifications and employability. Of concern to the University was that, nationally, one in five of students dropped out of University most before Christmas of their first year. In UWE's case this meant that 1400 out of 7,000 students arriving on 15/16 September would drop out over the 4-year study period.

A “Welcome Weekend” project was commissioned and work by many members of the UWE teams started immediately with a series of service design workshops that identified the major contextual factors, key groups at risk and the most important issues affecting students on arrival. A student-centred journey-mapping provided the means to co-ordinate central policy, system and process and create better touchpoints for staff and students.

One team in the University identified the time and resources of key people who were then persuaded to devote time in sessions to ideas generation across service department and faculty boundaries. In the process the Generation teams became familiar with the “grammar” of service design, or the way that from a finite set of rules an infinite number of sentences can be derived, and were able to identify many student experience issues both generic to Higher Education (such as importance of freshman way-finding) and University specific.

In twelve weeks from the start of the “student experience” project, the Welcome Weekend team observed and analysed current methods and processes, brainstormed services to fill the service gaps and began to develop the first Blueprint with pictorial support in the form of storyboards.

As each stage was designed, the University undertook quite brilliant marshalling and shifting of resources to ensure that the necessary components were sourced and assembled with all the precision of a military or engineering operation. Where necessary, trade-offs between time and money were agreed and the end result was a outstanding Welcome Weekend, according to student feedback and to the increase in numbers of students retained.

The dozens of features listed here are not new but it was the organisation and sequencing of them, which was different. The main elements designed to address the students’ 4 needs and wants described above, included:

- An invitation to the Welcome Weekend
- Timetables, maps and Guides
- Directions to the campus and car parks
- Marshals to ensure that all were directed to the right place on arrival
- Hundreds of Student Ambassadors, properly briefed to meet and greet the 7000 newcomers and families and significant others
- Student baggage handlers to lift luggage into new accommodation blocks
- Scheduled meetings with Faculty staff
- Introductions to job shop, financial help centre & Student services including careers
- Entertainments and hospitality including food, drink, music, and opportunities to socialise helped by lanyards and badges for accommodation and faculties to help recognition and introductions. A Big brother Chair for public reflections, karaoke and hot air ballooning – the list goes on and on.

The immediate benefits for students and staff were

- Smoothest possible transition into undergraduate life
- Hugely impressed students, parents, significant others, based on interviews
- Very positive reactions from student ambassadors, admin and teaching staff who supported participated throughout
- Full support and endorsement from Students Union and University Management Team

The effect has been lasting and positive

- £120,000 saving in procurement and avoided duplication of paper, brochures, printed materials commissioned by four different parts of the university and sourced from 7-8 different suppliers working to different brand specifications.
- Undergraduate Welcome Weekend extended to Welcome Week and now Welcome month (mainly on-line) for the 30 days before start of first term
- Welcome Week now Welcome Month for the 30 days, mainly face-to face, immediately after start of first term.
- Opportunities for further efficiencies as the overlaps & underlaps between undergraduate and post-graduate, full and part-time, domestic and international become clearer

Other significant medium term benefits include:

- Open days completely have been redesigned to reflect the learning of Welcome Weekend
- Open Days programme now plotting transitions and progressions and promoting 'whole journey' over 3 years, based on a "map of maps" which shows all the interlocking journeys, and how these are serviced using the full gamut of UWE's facilities
- Graduation Days now being redesigned and shortened, better events for less cost
- Undergraduate Welcome (UK domestic) now copied for
 - Undergraduate international
 - Postgraduate UK
 - Postgraduate International
 - Part time – Personal
 - Part time - Continuous Professional Development
 - Clearings
- Welcome Culture and ethos now permeating all faculties and services teams in university
- Student approval scores shifting upwards
- *Attrition rate down from 21% to 9% * this January*
- Large positive shift in NSS score
- University positive brand shifts

The most significant shift and long term benefits are to do with UWE taking control of its own service design destiny.

UWE has taken control and responsibility for all of its student-centred service design. As was planned from the beginning the University is now running its own 'engine' of service design, without any further outside help. The benefits will carry on building for years and increasingly devoting time and attention to the other parallel streams of student needs.

Two of the most important – academic richness and employability gains, initiated as part of the 11 reviews three years ago, are the Graduate Development Programme (GDP) and Employability. Here the work now underway will smooth, improve and reinforce transitions & progressions from one stage and level of university life to the next, one year to the next and out into life after university.

1. Graduate Development Programme
 - Peer to peer, facilitated learning
 - Progression from level to level carefully planned to shift resources to areas of need
2. Employability

- Closely integrated with GDP are a series of Employability research and development projects where service design techniques have been used to develop a prototype now in test with a CBI evaluation panel.

* This year referring to the national student survey in Times Higher (THES) the University of the West of England ranked joint 44th out of a total 109 universities, having been in the bottom quartile 2 years ago. This means that not only were UWE in a leading set of modern universities but also ahead of some well known traditional universities including Bristol. While in fairness the results are due to a number of things including better response rates, plus a focus on feedback to students as much as the emphasis UWE has placed on the student experience programme, UWE should see further improvement to come as the focus pays off.