

Mapping the Student Experience: A Framework for Assessing Student Support, Success, Community and Voice. *A Practice Report*

Tom Lowe

University of Portsmouth, United Kingdom

Sophie Wright

University of Southampton, United Kingdom

Abstract

A challenge persists in modern higher education regarding gaining an understanding of the activities and services that facilitate student support, student success, student community and student voice. As modern universities continue to grow in both size and complexity, gaining an understanding of the operations for enhancing and supporting both students' experiences and outcomes grows in importance for resource allocation and supporting student success for university administrators. These exploratory or audit-based activities attempt to gain an understanding of students' engagement, time pressure and, relatedly, their calendar journeys throughout their higher education, with an aim to create coherence as opposed to chaos in students' journeys. This case study shares a tested practice from a UK higher education institution of a method to map the so-called 'student experience' across a whole university. This framework for mapping student engagement activities takes an asset-based approach beginning with the core activities which lead a student to graduation prioritising activities by time of students' engagement. This framework is inclusive of the core student experience and the optional, complementary extracurricular activities (Student Community), supporting services (Student Support), and enhancement activities engaging students in the development of education (Student Voice) to gain oversight of complex institutions. This case study offers a transferable framework for use in institutions globally with potential to be implemented as a management tool for administrator and faculty member understanding of the student experience with a view to make enhancements to support student success resourcing and interventions.

Keywords: Student voice; student community; student experience; student support.

Introduction

The modern university is a complex organisation, where increasingly diverse student-facing services, activities, and roles exist for students to engage with. Developing from traditional university foundations, which focused primarily on the teaching of students and academic research, the role of university has since evolved to include student pastoral and other support services; extra-curricular communities, and employability building activities to support satisfaction, attainment, and retention. Alongside these, a whole host of processes, such as admissions, student records, and other administration, including student finance and accessibility support, all of which work together to support student success. Pictured holistically, within a contemporary university there is an endless number of services, departments and learning opportunities for students to engage in, supported by hundreds of staff, management structures and differing strategic priorities. Collectively, many institutions



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have become eclectic engagement webs of activities almost impossible to navigate for not only students, but also administrators and members of faculty. Therefore, when an institution wishes to explore students' experiences and engagements as a means for assessing enhancement within such complex institutions, there is often a desire to be able to review the entire student-facing, or student-serving, activities to enable greater reflection on student time and wider experience. This practice report provides one framework for enabling such a holistic assessment of 'the student experience', through a case study of practice innovated at a higher education institution in the UK. Through mapping and auditing practice, this tool can benefit universities in resource distribution and joined up thinking, and support students to have a better supported and less erratic student journey.

Literature

Focusing on students' experiences and engagement in higher education is increasingly a major priority of the modern university globally (Quaye et al., 2019; Tight, 2020). Conversations relating to improving student outcomes (Thomas, 2020), student learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987), and student success measures (whether attainment, retention or completion) have been prioritised both prior to and following the global pandemic (Pownall et al., 2022). Alongside activities to support the agenda of student success, responsibilities of modern university increasingly facilitate and provide services to support students' mental health (Agteren et al., 2019), as well increasing facilitating opportunities to benefit student transition of study for an increasingly widening demographic and diversity students (Garrad & Nolan, 2022). Additionally, university life is more than learning, where students and institutions prioritise recreational and career development activities, which aim to improve students' satisfaction and provide activities for students to create support networks, improve employability skills and to gain a sense of community on campuses (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Spire, 2023; Strayhorn, 2018). Furthermore, these activities are also complemented by an increasing emphasis on students' feedback and becoming engaged in their education through activities such as Student Voice, Student as Partners, and student engagement in governance activities (Brand & Millard, 2019; Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2019; Lowe, 2023). All these activities combine to contribute to an enriched but incredibly complicated student experience when viewed holistically. Universities have already, or are increasingly, moving to become more student-centred, where the above areas of engagement activity are receiving further resources and scrutiny. However, as the activity and staffing numbers grow, there is also a need for administrators to have a greater understanding and large-scale oversight of these activities within these complex organisations to prevent a chaotic student experience and support student success. Additionally, members of faculty, who are often the first port of call for student queries whatever the area of the university, need resources to appropriately signpost students to support.

Locally to the UK, statements are made in individual university strategies or in national policies, that students should receive a high-quality experience at university (Office for Students, 2022), yet often, the wording homogenises individual students' experiences into a singular 'student experience' (Lowe & El Hakim, 2020). This sees conversations dominated at individual institutions relating to 'the student experience', and mapping of 'the student journey', which negates the fact that no individual student has the same engagement journey in higher education. Although many institutions have process-mapped their student journey individually within departments, written student experience and success strategies, or created new student staff-facing structures and leadership roles, there are few tools available in the literature that consolidates student affairs areas together for assessment. This practice report begins with the assumption that every student's experience will be unique, and their engagements with different activities and services will vary as they progress. However, providing an overarching view of potential points of contact for a student and viewing the multiple opportunities to engage can aid with developing a greater understanding of student affairs and support decision and policy making within institutions. There are risks already being reported by students that different services and staff within institutions are over-engaging students, through email bombardment and drawing upon students' time. There are also concerns that activities are competing for students' attention at the same time, with services running campaigns and asking for student engagement in the same weeks, or even, resource being directly duplicated for the same purpose as large institutions. Finally, this can lead to a chaotic student experience where students switch off from university communications, therefore missing vital information and potentially decreasing their chance of success through disengagement in areas such as emails.

Rationale

For the purpose of this framework, student engagement activities, staffing, and services at the university will be split into four areas which impact, support, or enhance the student experience. Student engagement activities include any interaction the student has with the University or Students' Union, from mandatory course elements which students need to engage with to pass their degree, to optional enrichment opportunities such as student voice and extra-curricular opportunities. Therefore, this practice report defines student engagement literally, as any physical engagement (in person or digitally) with the university,

whether instigated by the student or a staff member. At the UK institution which piloted this tool, the project leads had oversight from the institution's student experience committee for strategic sponsorship and input.

Areas of Activity

The four areas of activity covered in this rationale are as follows:

- 1) Student Support
- 2) Student Success
- 3) Student Community
- 4) Student Voice

1) *Student Success*

Student Success areas of activity cover core activities with which all students need to engage to pass each year of study, complete their degree, graduate, and gain the students' desired graduate outcome (often graduate level employment). These activities include course related activities mainly, but the university may choose to include core careers activities in this area to ensure a holistic understanding of opportunities to improve graduate employability metrics. Other non-academic processes supported by student record teams such as re-enrolling each year, and choosing modules are also core to the success of students. This category could also be seen to begin prior to enrolment and therefore include application activities.

2) *Student Support*

Student Support areas of activity cover all activities which offer support, advice, and guidance to students during their degree. Much of this activity takes place in Student Services, but also includes information giving services such as Student Records, Timetabling and Finance which support students with queries, times of crisis, and additional support. Student Support activities are separate to Student Success as these activities are not core to a student succeeding, but are there for support if a student needs it during their degree. These should also include the support role of academic staff, who are often the first contact for supporting students in need, as well as campus security and other staffing groups who may triage or signpost to other staff, such as university counsellors.

3) *Student Community*

Student Community areas of activity cover all additional activities the University funds which offer enrichment opportunities to improve student retention, satisfaction, belonging, and employability. Many of these activities are coordinated by the Students' Union, sports centres, careers and volunteering services, and music activities, as well as additional activities offered alongside the curriculum, such as course excursions and Study Abroad programs. Student Community activities are separate to Student Success as these activities are not core to a student succeeding, but they offer considerable enhancements to our recruitment and student satisfaction offer.

4) *Student Voice*

Student Voice areas of activity cover all activities that the university commits purposeful resources to in relation to listening, speaking with and responding to, students' feedback on their experience. This can include student survey activities, student voice activities (such as elected student representation initiatives), and students and staff working on pedagogical research projects as partners. These activities have grown in number over recent years, as there is an increased emphasis on students' experiences and satisfaction.

Mapping Phases

Phase 1: Audit of activities and services

The first phase of this framework involves compiling a list of activities that engage students. Start with creating a separate list or grid for each heading outlined above, then, beginning with the activity which engages the most students, compile the details of the activity (see examples below). For example, under Student Success one would expect to find the curriculum, closely followed by the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which arguably engages all students, because students are required to engage with the curriculum and assessments to complete their degree. Start broadly as shown, and then continue to complete the sections in greater detail to provide a more detailed picture of the university (e.g., Campus Security under Student Support, or University Gym under Student Community). This phase builds a foundation for later phases below. Information to consider

providing for each area includes the title of the area of activity, roles responsible, the location of that services (both physically and online), the staff location (department and line management) and a short description of the activity. Two examples are included below, generalised for the UK higher education sector.

Phase One Example

1. Student Success:

1a. Activity: Curriculum

The curriculum is by far the most important and largest student engagement activity for every student at a university. Students must engage with their curriculum through the attendance of lectures, seminars and tutorials, and pass assessments across their degree. The curriculum for many students could be their only engagement (and therefore entire student experience) at the university.

Location: Faculties

Staffing: Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic); Deans of Faculty; Heads of Department; Course Leaders.

Front desk: Faculty of Health Sciences Help Desk; Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Help Desk; Faculty of Business and Law Help Desk.

Online support: Telephone, VLE pages or email.

1b. Activity: Information Technology, Library and VLE

The information technology and library resources and infrastructure of the university is probably the second most important and core engagement area to ensure student success. To succeed at the university, students will have to continuously engage with our IT and Library resources and information banks, including the VLE. The Department of Information Technology and Library Services is responsible for these areas, however, clear partnership with the faculties. At the core of these services is an online record and enrolment process, as students engage with this from application to graduation.

Location:

Department of Information Technology and Library Services

Staffing:

Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Operations); Director of Information Technology and Library Services; Library and IT Area Managers; Help Desk Team; Service Desk Team.

Front desk: Main Desk in University Library

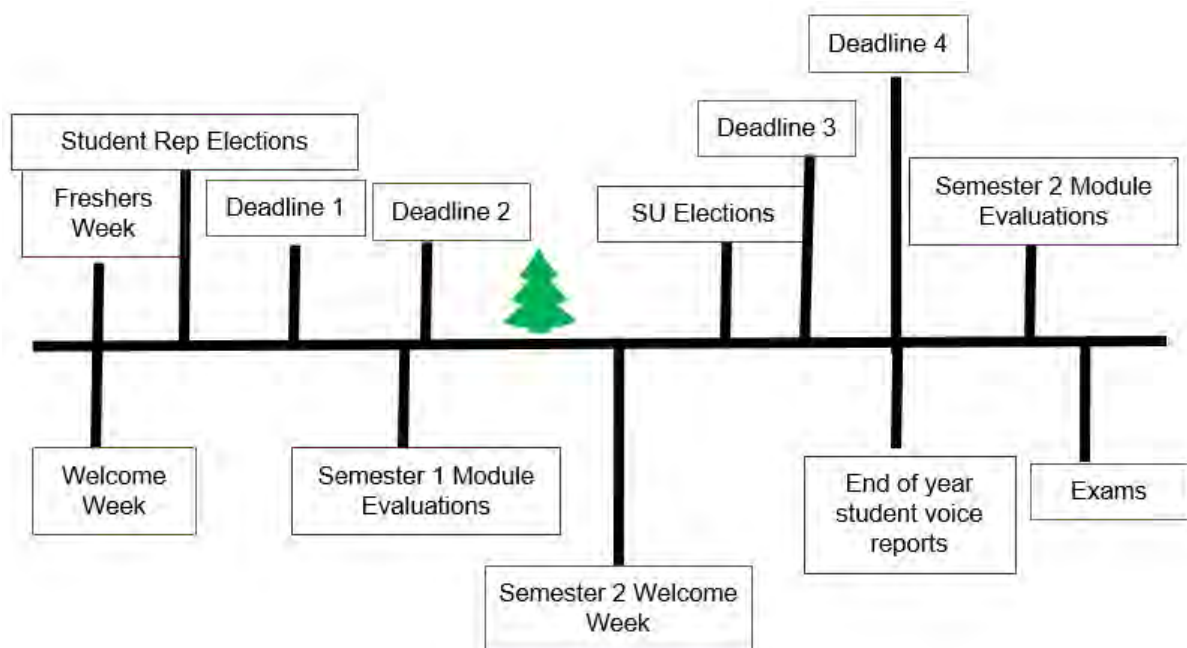
Online: Service Desk (IT) & VLE Pages (VLE)

Phase 2: Student Journey Mapping

Following Phase 1, there is an opportunity to map these activities chronologically next to a calendar of the academic year. By beginning with placing in Student Success areas of activity on the map, then building on this to include Student Community and Student Voice activities one can begin to assess the busy and quiet periods in the academic year for students. This valuable activity is also beneficial for joined up thinking, as it may highlight that certain areas of the university are activity engaging students at the same time as another, creating a conflict on students' time, impacting engagement. Equally, it might highlight times at which a student has no opportunity to engage with the university and might, therefore, feel disengaged. Below is a simplified example mapping students' assessment deadlines with Student Voice activities across one academic year.

Figure 1

Example Student Journey Mapping (Including Student Voice and Curriculum)



Phase 3: Auditing numbers of engagement and time

Following Phase 1 and 2, there is an opportunity, should an institution wish, to allocate numbers (or percentages) of students engaged for each activity assessed. This is a valuable opportunity to assess the reach and demand on such activities as advice services, different extracurricular activities, and student feedback initiatives. Exact numbers or percentages can be applied to support the initial orders in Phase 1, as well acting as a tool to see peak times for student engagement in certain services. Taking this phase further, collecting student ID numbers per activity or engagement services can provide demographic data for future assessment, so the accessibility of services and activities can be assessed to support inclusion agendas.

Phase 4: Auditing of funding per student engagement

The final phase involves drawing together Phase 1 and 3 together, to assess the cost of each engagement area. Although it will be difficult to assess impact when working in student-facing activities, the exercise may hold value in instances where areas of high engagement and need, receive less funding, than areas of small engagement and need. However, it is important to stress here that numbers – number of students engaged or financial resourcing - do not always accurately convey the importance and impact of an initiative on a student's experience. The authors of this practice report are yet to complete this phase, but they feel it would hold value when strategically assessing resources.

Benefits to Mapping

There are many staffing groups in a modern university who this mapping activity benefits. The foundational information in Phase 1 enables a further assessment not available in most budgeting exercises, of assessing the line management pathways and location of online and in person 'help desks' for alignment. Phase 2 additionally benefits members of faculty, as well as anyone who supports students' in their university journey, by offering a university-wide timeline to increase knowledge capacity of other engagement activities their students may be engaged with. This works to break down siloed thinking, and for administrators of middle-top tier, to organise spacing of activities to prevent several activities drawing upon students' time at once, or alternatively, to find gaps in support in the academic year. With little effort after completing a full university map, a student-facing version could feasibly be developed to support students with navigating and planning their time. Finally, middle-top tier administration benefit from Phases 3 and 4 to assess and distribute funding across the student journey in regards to student engagement in numbers.

Conclusion

This case study offers an adaptable framework for auditing student engagement activities, staffing and services holistically across a university, to provide a tool for colleagues supporting student success in their institution. The users of this framework can make context specific decisions and adaptations to the framework for themselves, regarding the placing of certain activities, staffing and services under different headings. Additionally, colleagues will adapt the phases or have a closer focus upon a certain degree of study, academic school or professional services department. However an institution chooses to adapt and adopt the framework, it is critical to place students at the heart of discussing these activities, as students are often the only stakeholder who experience almost the entirety of the university's services. Using a framework such as this may assist with a broader view of the student experience than the departmental siloed-thinking and could be critical for student success planning.

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