

Beyond the Survey: Service Design Approaches to Inclusive Programme Review

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Abstract

The paper outlines the potential of service design as an approach to transformational review of students' experiences on University degree programmes. The paper presents the Inclusive Programme Review method that has been developed as a human-centered approach to understanding holistic student experience during their programme of study. The focus of the paper is on the divergent stage of gathering insights through collaborative generative sessions between students and programme teams who co-create boundary objects as a means of communication and shared understanding as well as a stimulus for value-add improvements on the degree programme. The paper challenges the dominant methods of transactional student surveys that generate impersonal facts, depriving educators of a deeper understanding of their heterogeneous cohorts. The aim is to explore the potential of service design, in particular through persona co-creation and emotional journey mapping, to stimulate empathy and purposeful student-staff engagement complementing survey results and feedback forms. The paper showcases the utility of these service design methods not only within formal curriculum design, but also in the overall management and practical delivery of degree programmes. The innovative practice presented here celebrates students' agency and empowerment for change and contribution to their University experience. This practice is outlined step-by-step, and accompanied by reflections and visual representations, so that any educator is able to apply it to their own context.

Keywords: Service Design, Persona, Journey Mapping, Boundary Objects

1. Introduction

Service design has the potential to innovate in the established order of hearing and acting on student voice in reviewing Higher Education (HE) programmes. Using the right tools, with the right mindset, allows us to access a much richer vision of how students experience our programmes.

The Office for Students (OfS) requires HE providers to take inclusive and supportive approaches to ensuring that students have an excellent student experience, and to incorporate student voice in education design and delivery. Thus far, this experience has been largely measured by surveys, focussing on quantitative data, particularly the National Student Survey (OfS, 2023). University degree programmes are regularly and similarly quantified through internal student surveys. This accepted default does bring some advantages for benchmarking purposes.

Both the NSS and most module surveys include qualitative comments, and these are accompanied by feedback from student-staff committees. These are, though, limited in scope and suffer from a lack of context and cohort-wide representation (Bovill, 2017). There are power imbalances in formal committee discussions and, at best, they can only paint a partial picture. Klemenčič (2015: 11) makes an argument about the flaws in quantitative survey grounded rhetoric in universities pointing out that this methodology cannot truly capture the dynamic nature of student experience and the context in which it occurs: “Survey questionnaires are based on preconceived categories as to what the institutional researchers expect the correlations to be between educational provisions and university circumstances (the independent variables) and student experience and engagement (the dependent variables).” These quality assurance systems rely heavily on what students *think and say* to provide baseline data about the ‘what’. Human-centered design approaches to understanding student experience, however, offer a much richer picture enhanced with tacit and latent knowledge answering the ‘why’ that cannot be understood from surveys or committee discussions. This paper draws on the vision of the learning experience design discussed by Grabill et al. (2022) which emphatically centres ‘people’ in the education ecosystem and extends the importance of empathy and holistic appreciation of education journeys through service design approaches.

We focus specifically on the persona profiling and journey mapping tools (Stickdorn et al, 2018) that are applied through generative sessions with students themselves and open up new discoveries about students’ feelings, hopes, dreams and expectations. The paper proposes service design methods as a complementary and inclusive approach to enhancing programme experience. The innovative practice presented in this paper is based on a scholarship project *Investigation into service design approach to the annual programme review practices (2018 – 2022)* that was run as an iterative action research project across three UK Universities (Table 1) with participants from a range of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes (Newton, 2019a; Newton, 2019b; Newton, 2022: 159-172; Newton, 2023a; Newton, 2023b).

Table 1: Summary of participants

Degree programme	Programme type	Academic Year	No. of participants
MSc Management	Postgraduate full-time	2017/2018	17
MSc Management	Postgraduate full-time	2018/2019	33
MSc Management	Postgraduate full-time	2019/2020	26
MSc Management	Postgraduate full-time	2020/2021	7
MSc Entrepreneurship and Innovation	Postgraduate full-time	2021/2022	9
PG Certificate of Academic Practice	Postgraduate part-time	2019/2020	10
BSc in Business and Management	Undergraduate full-time	2019/2020	17

2. Higher Education and Service Design

Service can be characterised as a value exchange where the service provider delivers an activity that creates benefits for the service user who interacts with the provider co-creating the value and the experience that comes with the process (Penin, 2018). In HE, people are the key component of the process and both administrative and academic staff are key to service delivery and its quality perception. Vargo and Lusch (2004) emphasize services as the basis of human exchange and characterize their process nature rather than ‘service as an output’, the deployment of dynamic rather than static resources and as a collaborative relationship between the provider and user. This framework can be translated into the education sector where the student progresses through a series of processes during their studies accessing resources such as knowledge transmission, opportunities to develop skills, and academic and pastoral support in a collaborative way with the network of academic and administrative staff. To do this well, Downe (2020) argues that good services are designed, curated intentionally with empathy and care rather than accidental occurrences of steps that we have put together due to legacy, bureaucracy or ignorance.

Service Design (SD), and particularly its application to HE, is an emerging discipline. Meroni and Sangiorgi (2011: 203) draw attention to the duality of the human dimension of service design; on one hand the human-centredness of service design is demonstrated through the methods that inquire into human experiences, and service design demonstrates the capacity to engage people in transforming the service and their experience. The values of this concept are strongly aligned with the principles of students as partners (Harrington et al., 2014) where students are engaged in their learning and in the design of their learning experience not only through pure inquiry into them as research subjects but as co-producers of the value in the learning process. The methods of service design are concerned with capturing the materiality of the services and offer powerful means of visualisation and creation of artefacts that function as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer, 1989) between the service provider and user (Stickdorn et al, 2018).

The main gap addressed by the practice presented in this paper is in evaluating the utility of service design methods in academic programme evaluation. There is limited literature on using SD approaches to focus on university student experience across a

whole curriculum and programme delivery (Doherty and McKee, 2022), though there are more examples of SD being used in module and learning activity design (Ostrom et al., 2011; Tan et al., 2019) and application to student enrolment and registration (Baranova et al., 2011).

2.1. Inclusive Programme Review Method

To develop a coherent and actionable toolkit from the diverse palette of SD techniques, and to show their applicability and value to programme review, one of the co-authors led a team in creating the Inclusive Programme Review (IPR) method (Newton, 2019a; Newton, 2019b; Newton, 2022: 159-172; Newton, 2023a; Newton, 2023b).

The core principle of the method is summarised below:

“This method facilitates an enriched understanding of student learning journeys through University degree programmes taking into consideration their emotions, dreams, frustrations and fears. These insights move educators away from questionnaires and evaluation forms of individual modules ... and offer a more holistic insight into what students experience and how it all makes sense to them as a learning journey”. (Newton, 2023a).

The method is inclusive as it extends the concept of students as partners in HE and explores how the ideal of co-creation can be achieved. It responds to Bovill’s (2017) reflection on projects typically involving only a small and unrepresentative selection of students who come forward as volunteers.

The IPR method has been designed to include whole degree cohorts, meaning *all* students who study on a certain programme *together with* the programme administrative and academic team. The objective of the method is for all of these people to evaluate a university degree programme through participating in service design processes, and co-creating possible improvements and innovations. This paper draws attention to the stages of problem definition demonstrating the utility of SD qualitative research methods. This stage enables the programme team to gain insights from divergent thinking practices through student persona profiling and student journey mapping. It builds on the comprehensive approach to student experience outlined by Grau and Rockett (2022) who include persona profiling, empathy mapping and students journey maps in their Design Framework for Student Engagement.

Persona profiling is an empathetic technique that helps service providers synthesize, embody and humanise their research about service users and facilitates the understanding of the users’ goals and motivations, aspirations and frustrations in relation to the service provided (Williams, 2023). Persona profiles have, for example, been applied in the improvement of feedback to online learners (Lilley et al., 2012), in redesigning library user experience (Lewis and Contrino, 2016) and in curriculum redesign of a law degree (Doherty and McKee, 2022). Journey maps are often used to depict the persona’s experience as a sequence of actions that evoke certain emotions (Stickdorn et al., 2018). Journey maps provide a visual account of the human interactions that occur, as well as of the interactions with systems and processes,

during the service delivery. They are portrayed on a timeline determining the progress of the service from the beginning to the end. In Andrews and Eade's example (2013), a Birmingham City University library project used journey maps enabling an in-depth understanding of students' engagement with and expectations of student-informed library services.

2.2. Generative sessions

The generative sessions are the most intensive part of the IPR method. They occur in the initial stages of the programme review with the objective to defining the actual problems and challenges the students have encountered, allowing correct framing and solid groundwork for idea generation and the later implementation of improvements. Generative sessions form an opportunity to carry out further research into the students' perspectives and to triangulate the results with more traditional survey data from other forms of feedback. Sanders (2000) argues for the power of a generative approach in "bringing every-day life people into the centre of the design development process, respecting their ideas and desires". Generative sessions have their origin in participatory design (Visser et al., 2005) using simple steps to allow group participants to reflect on and re-feel their experiences through creative processes. Stickdorn et al. (2018: 124-125) refer to such sessions as co-creative workshops since they are strongly anchored in the service design principle of "engaging users in the design of services considering their experiences as a fundamental resource to improve service provision" (Sangiorgi et al. in Sangiorgi and Prendeville, 2017: 56). The approach uses non-judgemental open questioning leading to deeper exploration of student feelings and experiences on the programme beyond the in-class curriculum. Such contextual knowledge is essential for arriving at the root of the problems instead of addressing problem symptoms.

Discussions of student experience on programmes will necessarily and frequently use terms such as 'our students' and even 'the programme'. Terms like these can be problematic. In staff discussions, the perspective of that experience will differ significantly from student perspectives, even if it is informed by the sort of incomplete quantitative data discussed above. Staff themselves will have markedly different sets of mental models, views and archetypes that are called to mind by these terms. The results can be a failure to appreciate hidden assumptions and talking at cross-purposes. The expected outcomes of generative sessions are typically artefacts that can function as 'boundary objects'. These objects carry accumulated insights from the users as a means of communication between all stakeholders enhancing a *shared understanding* of user needs and expectations (Stickdorn et al, 2018).

In the IPR method, the cohorts were invited to split themselves into self-selected groups of 4-5 students. The groups were provided with a variety of creative material including paper, newspaper images, pipe cleaners, craft kits, Lego, Post-its etc. that allowed for a more playful and relaxed atmosphere and provided opportunities for all to express themselves in a variety of media, not only through text and words.

2.3. Co-creating personas

In the first part of the generative session, students are asked to create a typical student of the programme. They are encouraged to find a photograph from a newspaper cut out selection, allocate a name to the persona, describe their family and cultural background, their motivation for study, their expectations, fears, hopes, ambitions, things they are good at, things they struggle with, hobbies, etc. The student groups are prompted, using open dialogue, by the facilitator, who is typically the programme director or leader. Trust is paramount and students have to feel respected. Play has an important role in giving students a serious task delivered through this playful approach. This encourages a state of flow achieved through challenging and yet attainable instructions with clear expectations of the outcome and with the emphasis on enjoyment (Rieber, 1996). Students feel in control of the task and get completely absorbed in creating their persona that represents an amalgamation of their individual characteristic (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Students co-creating personas



Students fed back that their engagement with the IPR method was both enjoyable and thought-provoking. A student participant pointed out: “I was really interested in learning about this methodology and found it very interesting to create a persona whilst trying not to project too much of ourselves into it and to be as objective as possible in order to reach satisfying results.”

Students produced a true diversity and heterogeneity providing some deep insights into their inner worlds, their fears, hopes and dreams as well as insights into their family background and their social status. They creatively embraced the process and portrayed many of the persona’s characteristics with the variety of material to convey symbolic meaning as well as text (Figure 2a, 2b).

The persona artefacts are already very rich. They are multi-layered, multi-faceted and informed by experience and dialogue. They present a much more rounded picture of the sorts of people who are taking our programmes. Their effectiveness as boundary objects is strengthened through the narratives that students develop when presenting the personas to the rest of the class and the programme team. This open debate evokes a sense of bonding and mutual appreciation as student teams realise similarities as well as striking differences and learn about the diversity in the class through different lenses. Even the usually quiet students are engaged and some step up to present in front of the whole class and staff members.

The outcome of this first part of the generative session is a plethora of diverse student profiles that bring to light important themes not typically expressed in a survey. In the IPR iterations, students emphasized their feelings of self-doubt and lack of confidence. Many pointed out family pressure and expectations not aligned with their own dreams and aspirations. Future planning for ambitious career destinations seemed like a daunting chore that brought about a lot of confusion and more self-doubt. There were frustrations related to groupwork and uncertainties about how to be a good student in the British system. However, there was also a lot of joy related to meeting new friends, learning new sports and discovering new places. One of the comments recorded from such session was:

"...at the end of the day we're human beings, we're not just robots so you need to think about the student well-being first..." (postgraduate student, 2019).

For the staff who are in the position of the designers, the key message is to embrace the cohort's diversity and move away from generalised terms such as "the management students" or "the postgrads" or at least to have a more informed understanding of the detailed characteristics that help make up the cohort, and the emotions and life stories that frame those characteristics.

2.4. Co-creating emotional journey maps

The second part of the generative sessions proceeds to create an emotional journey map of the persona. Service journeys are one of the essential tools in service design. They provide a visual representation of the service delivery over a certain time element and uncover the key steps and key moments of joy and service satisfaction as well as frustration and possible service abandonment. They make visible, elements of the journey that are invisible and often ignored. They also present a user's eye perspective of a service that can involve multiple providers who never see this bigger picture. In a HE context, this will include programme leaders, module convenors and teaching staff, the departmental professional service team, but also registration, careers, library, and wellbeing services. Mike Press (in Stickdorn et al., 2018: 43) refers to the journey maps as "powerful boundary objects that enable conversation about the service".

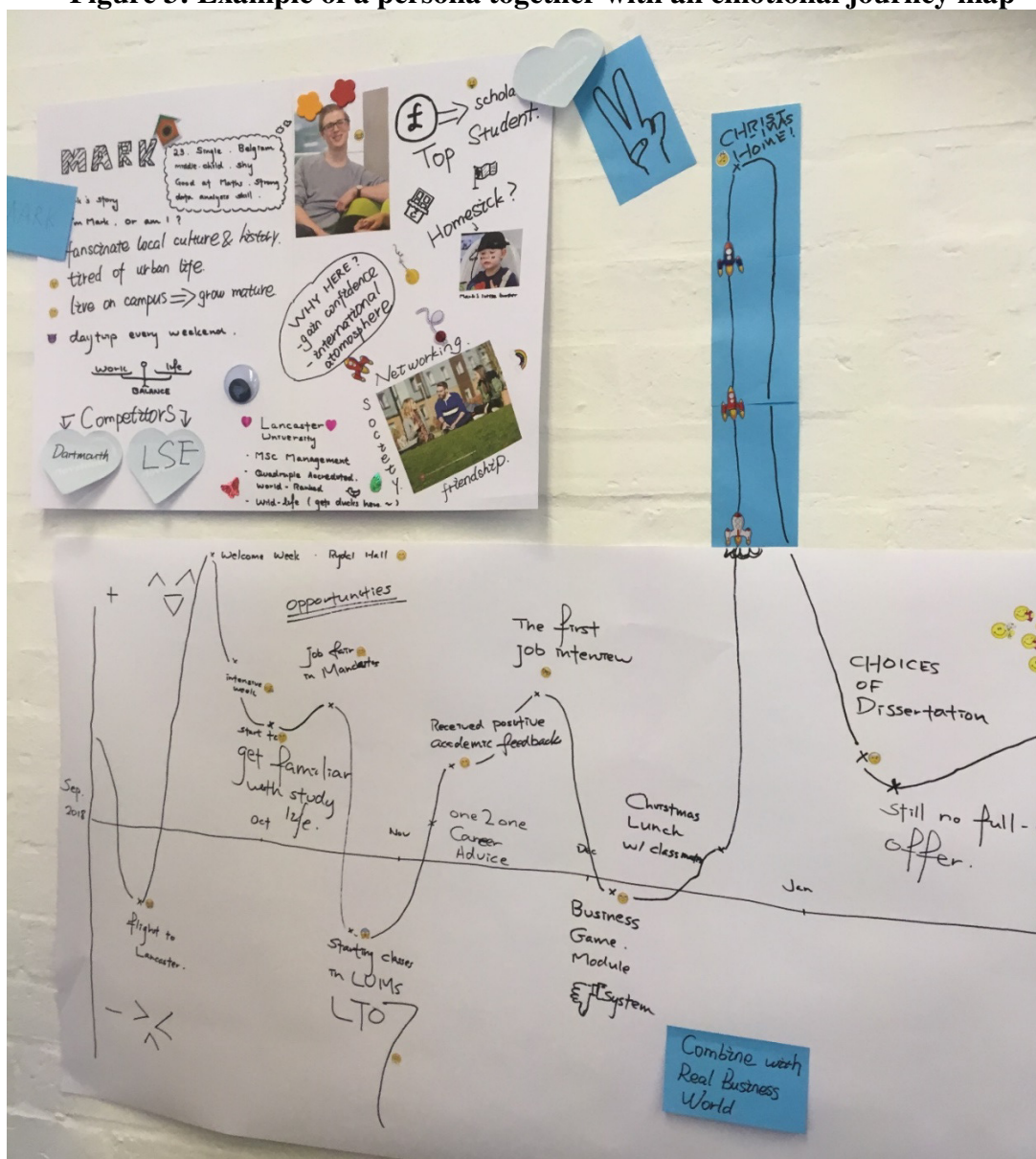
The journey maps that students are asked to produce about their persona focus on the emotions associated with the persona's journey through the university degree programme from the moment of arrival up until the generative session delivery, or alternatively to a certain point during the degree that the programme team sets up as an

end point. Students use a large sheet of paper with a timeline in the middle, recording positive emotions on the upper half of the sheet and negative emotions on the lower half. The main prompt is simple: 'What has it felt like to be on this programme since 'the persona' arrived at the University?' Overall, students have reacted very positively to being invited to talk about emotions and commented:

"I think it's good to have the emotional side too because I think especially with our degree it's just like go, go, go all the time." (postgraduate student, 2019)

Students are encouraged to reflect and record the emotions associated with certain events or activities onto the map. The focus is on whatever students recall and attribute to the persona's journey through the programme (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Example of a persona together with an emotional journey map



As with the persona profiles, the narratives that students produce alongside the artefacts of the journey maps enable the shared understanding of the programme journey. This moves away from focusing on individual modules to their lived-experience encompassing the time outside the classroom that impacts on students' learning (Figure 4). The journeys give a unique opportunity to identify the pain points and really understand why the frustrations or fears occurred, what preceded them and what other associations were made in relation to other components on the map.

Figure 4: Students debating the emotional journey map



Being able to zoom in to the moments that are recorded on the maps allows us to enquire more deeply into what was happening then, how this affected the students, what did they do to recover the situation, who helped them, etc. As previously mentioned, it is essential for the programme team to approach this without judgement. There is no space for comments like 'well, that is just the way it is at the University...'. Students have to feel that they matter, and to be empowered to speak with agency and confidence without being judged and measured. Only then do the journey maps fulfil their value as boundary objects and we develop a shared understanding, particularly rare and valuable for staff, of what 'doing this programme' involves, looks like and feels.

The type of information students shared in the IPR iterations covered a very broad spectrum of their student life. Recording the events with an emotional association allowed for visual expression of their hopes, expectations, and struggles in relation to their programme of study. As well as its value as feed-forward, the process of co-

creating artefacts with this sort of visual power seemed to have cathartic effect amongst the students who commented:

"It is kind of comforting, in a way, to know that everyone is going through it together and that you're not the only person that feels sometimes, how am I going to get through this and stuff. " (postgraduate student, 2019)

The final step of the generative session tries to identify the key areas for improvement so that the persona's journey would be smoother and more enjoyable. This is a powerful concluding activity when students usually suggest improvements of significant value. In this stage it is again crucial to adopt a coaching and questioning approach to tease out what would the improvement look like, how would that affect the students' lives, how might they contribute to making it a success and how will they know that the improvement has worked. This co-created way forward puts students into the position of agents and develops a strong sense of belonging and commitment to the future of the programme.

The themes highlighted in the journey maps enabled the staff-student team to think about the timing of certain activities related to homesickness and winter darkness. The struggles with exams helped to consider how students could be prepared better. The exhaustion and feeling of a rat race opened the eyes of the programme team to the amount of assessment on the programme. The life events associated with birthdays, trips with friends, times of vacations radiated positive vibes that the programme team was keen to accentuate. Suggestions included enabling the cohort to spend time together incorporating away days that were still focused on programme learning outcomes but were delivered away from the classroom.

3. Discussion

The main change to the standard annual programme review that has resulted from the application of the IPR method has been in the consideration for wider student voice representation achieved through the generative sessions that provided a safe space for constructive student engagement. The depth of insights collected through such engagement far outreached the traditional level of information gained in surveys and developed a profound cohort commitment to programme improvement as an integrated part of the university programme experience. The value of this innovative practice has impacted on the quality of the programme leading to significant increase in student numbers and much improved links with the alumni who regularly return to the programme as ambassadors and mentors. Moreover, the method has allowed for additional space for the programme team and cohort-wide student body to develop a collaborative partnership based on open dialogue leading to transformational change in programme quality empowering the students as change agents (Kuzmina et al., 2018). Carey (2013) notes that students are often consulted through individual feedback, but calls for much fuller and more genuine student participation in curriculum co-creation as a process of dialogue. The generative sessions demonstrate the potential to achieve what Carey (2013) describes as shared understanding and exploration of ideas outside standard practices of formal meetings with power imbalances. The generative sessions offer an innovative way to engage with students through the process of boundary

object creation that is underpinned by the notion of purposeful play (Zosh et al., 2017) generating authentic outputs through meaningful interactions between students and staff. The use of creative material creates a sense of playful allowance, letting go, where everybody can contribute. The IPR iterations have recorded significant increases in student engagement across cultures in large international cohorts where language can be a barrier to communication. One student pointed out the value of the session in developing closer links amongst peers:

"...even if I am an introvert, we got to know each other well... I was among friends rather than strangers..." (postgraduate student, 2019)

Student feedback confirms the importance of the fun element:

"I really liked both activities as they allowed us to step back and have a good think about our development since starting the programme and also the people we are surrounded by, whether they be students or administrative staff. I liked how fun it was as it made it easier for us to take part and share ideas, and to be more relaxed with each other. I think being in groups was also good as we could all add our own ideas and reflect upon them based on what others thought and said." (postgraduate student, 2018)

Lilley et al. (2012) point out that the data we currently collect about our students does not give us sufficient understanding of what is behind the statistics. Persona profiles have been shown to facilitate our appreciation of student diversity and the journey maps clearly help record and externalise students experience as well as facilitate generation of new ideas for improvements (del Olmo et al., 2022).

The generative sessions have provided a safe place for students' self-reflection and sharing each other's perspectives. This aspect has been equally valuable for staff. The shared understanding reduces the risk of basing decisions on partial or poorly informed staff assumptions. Students experience a sense of agency that evokes greater commitment to their programme of study:

"...I feel it positively included everyone, we were able to all of us get involved and contribute for the improvement." (postgraduate student, 2019)

IPR promotes the inclusive aspect of this approach and in the iterations of the generative sessions have been predominantly run with the whole student cohorts, the largest number being 60 students. This approach is scalable but there are obvious practical challenges in applying these activities to very large cohorts. The generative sessions have been also piloted with a small subgroup of the cohorts, which generated valuable insights for the programme teams, however, they failed to achieve the same cohort social capital creation as the complete cohort sessions.

4. Practical implications for the programme review process

The paper proposes SD research methods as complementary to traditional student surveying. This does not mean replacing surveys, but rather, implies data triangulation and complementarity of the 'what' and 'why'. University committees and quality

assurance frameworks should welcome a diversity of insights in order to capture the attention of a variety of stakeholders. IPR addresses the shortcomings of statistical approaches highlighted by Klemenčič (2015) and captures the wider context of programme delivery. The multifaceted interactions that occur are visually depicted in the journey maps. Moreover, the qualitative data provide an opportunity to associate specific information to student personas, linking data to a certain student type. In this way the educators are able to enrich the review with factors such as differentiations of the needs of commuting students, heightened family pressures on students from family business background or increased mental health concerns in students from high-performing education systems. Such insights enable educators to carry out comparatives of changing student cohorts year on year in the context of particular cohort characteristics.

Well analysed and triangulated data, that has been collected through a variety of methods, better ensures our understanding of what needs to be improved on the programme and helps us focus on what really matters to the students. The generative sessions outputs are most effectively presented as a thematic interpretative analysis that provides inspiration for improvements. In persona profiles, we look out for common themes that occur across several personas trying to identify patterns that may be reoccurring in certain demographic or nationality. These may be further reinforced in the journey maps where the main themes will arise from extreme moments recorded in the lower section of frustrations and upper section of joy and satisfaction. For example:

- Reframing of employability and careers support – student persona profiles shared a common theme of low confidence, lack of the career readiness and confusion over one's future, which was also confirmed in student journeys showing low motivation for career support. As a result, career support was reframed as Professional Development with focus on self-reflection, development of networking skills and leadership capabilities. This concept was further advanced into a programme sense-making module with consistently high evaluation and attendance.

Focusing on the positive aspects as well as the challenges is paramount for good balance of programme improvements. For example:

- Wednesday is a play day – student persona profiles included multiple examples of sports, hobbies and appreciation of building new friendships. At the same time, the journey maps reported students' frustrations about the lack of time to pursue such activities. As a result, Wednesday afternoons were extracted from the academic timetable to allow for a mid-week downtime.

In addition to putting the improvements in place, it is essential to provide constructive feedback to the students who have been involved in the generative sessions in fostering their sense of agency. They have invested time and emotion to openly reflect on and share their learning journey and it is paramount to close the loop and showcase what happened as a result of their constructive openness. A simple 'You said, We did' Session (Figure 5) feeding back the improvements, as well as barriers to some of the more complex challenges that you may not have been able to address, is a rewarding

mechanism to remind the students of their agency. Such reporting can be summarised in a short presentation that will be also be valuable as an attachment to the more formal quality assurance documentation.

Figure 5: Example of ‘You said, We did’

Career support

We would like support earlier to prepare for the autumn job deadlines.

Ideally, we would like 1-2-1 diagnostic sessions as early as possible.

Can you make it credit bearing?



- We gave the module a new title to signal its broader reach: MNGT600: **Professional and Career Development.**
- We have carved out an extra week for the Intro week – we will now have 2 weeks for the overall induction and we will incorporate **1-2-1 sessions for everybody in this early stage of the programme.**
- **We didn't manage to make it credit bearing yet but we hope to do that for 2020.**

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have advocated for educators to consider what students are feeling, dreaming about, aspiring for; not just what they think and say when they are in the formal processes of feedback via questionnaire or staff/student committee. This can be facilitated by service design approaches that offer a different type of engagement with strong principles of human-centeredness and empathy.

The Italian design strategist, Ezio Manzini, summarises service as “an interaction between people” (in Penin, 2018: 65). University degree programmes are filled with interactions and service design approaches can make them more effective for everybody, students, staff, organisation and society. SD proposes a great variety of methods in order to understand how this interaction between people really works. The paper focused on generative methods as an authentic and inclusive source of complementary data on student experience.

SD offers an enhanced research approach to our own practice as educators, and a different form of reflection on our pedagogy. The qualitative methods applied through generative sessions create space for intimate engagement amongst students and staff resulting in a deeper understanding of what the statistical data may only touch upon. The richness of this research ought to be celebrated in academic environments. Application of the IPR method demonstrates the value of enriching research into

programme quality and student experience with qualitative methods practiced in design of good services. Additionally, the method of data collection through the generative sessions helps establish meaningful and authentic human connections essential for creating effective learning environments.

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