

# IMPROVING THE DESIGN STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the past few years universities across the UK have been concerned with their “student experience” placing a great deal of importance on a quality experience for all. This paper describes a study of the Student Experience within a design education context, which investigates the nature and elements of the Student Experience within the department of Design Manufacture and Engineering Management (DMEM) at the University of Strathclyde. The main aim of this study was to investigate the holistic Student Experience, from pre-degree to career, identifying its key elements and allowing priorities for improvement to be identified and implemented. This paper provides a description of the study and its findings together with transferable methods and lessons.

*Keywords: The Student Experience, capturing, improving, design education*

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The term “Total Student Experience” was first coined by Harvey in 1992 [1] and defined as “all aspects of engagement of students with higher education”. This term embraces the notion that learning does not only take place in the class room and that students’ time in higher education is about a whole range of experiences [2]. Evaluation and improvement of the student experience has become a dominant theme in higher education research with many conferences and journals focusing on it [3,4]. Universities and higher education funding bodies recognise the importance of the student experience with many surveys being commissioned on the subject [5,6,7] whilst others such as the University of Manchester have opened “Student Experience Offices” devoted to monitoring and enhancing the student experience [8]. UNITE [9] have published an annual report on the student experience since 2000 providing valuable statistics relating to all aspects of the student experience. This paper provides an overview of one academic department’s study of their student experience, through sharing these findings and experience others may benefit.

## 2 THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE – SHARING DMEM'S EXPERIENCE

### 2.1 Methodology

The study spanned six months and consisted of three main activities, these activities were conducted by a “working group” of four academic staff constructed specifically to investigate the student experience. Tasks undertaken by the team were:

- Investigating the student experience
- Capturing and mapping the “Student Experience”
- Identifying Priorities and Recommendations for Implementation

### 2.2 Investigating the Student Experience

A broad investigation of the Student Experience covering current literature, consultation with CAPLE (Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement), participation in appropriate events and meetings i.e. First Year Student Experience Symposium, Teaching and Learning Group was undertaken. This activity was on-going throughout the six month study.

### 2.3 The Student Experience Map

The purpose of the “student experience” map is to illustrate the constituent elements of the DMEM student experience. Initially the map was developed by the working group through brainstorming and classifying the constituent elements of the DMEM student experience. This version of the map was developed further through consultation with CAPLE and a representative cross section of students by means of a Focus group. The process to develop the map took approximately one month with the final map being shown in figure 1. The map captures the entire student experience of DMEM students from before students join the department i.e. Pre-Degree through to Career. It is clear there are many generic elements that would exist in design and general education contexts. Important main elements highlighted on the map are:

- Pre-Degree – studies have shown that expectations are key to student performance [10]
- The Learning Environment – the largest element of the map
- Support - both academic and personal support the map highlights the important roles of peers, friends and family.
- Career – all students have particular career aspirations which ultimately shape their experience.

### 2.4 Priorities for Improvement

Three main themes, each addressing three priorities for improvement were identified. These were distilled as a result of reviewing the “Student Experience Map” with the departmental staff and student community. The themes and their priorities are:

- **Careers** – placements, DMEM graduate network, Personal Development Planning (PDP)
- **Coordination and Communication** – balance/workload, feedback, peer and other support
- **Current Good Practice** – projects, teaching delivery, resources

Effective and efficient coordination are critically important in every environment and affect all aspects of the student experience. A good career is the ultimate goal of all

students therefore, play an important role in the student experience. It is essential to reflect on areas of current good practice and strengths in order to develop these areas further. Figure 2 shows all of the priority areas organised in a “triangle of priorities”.

### 3 FINDINGS - RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Findings in the form of a number of key recommendations for improving the DMEM student experience were developed in conjunction with a student focus group and CAPLE. The priority each impacts is shown in brackets.

- Prepare semesterly integrated assignment/assessment schedules for each year group. Making these available early in each semester will facilitate students in their time management. (Workload Balance)
- Implement coordination meetings for each year group to take place in advance of each semester. Fundamentally, these meetings will review assignment timings, smooth out timetabling issues and identify possibilities for Joint Assessment between modules. (Workload Balance)
- Introduce short, general, feedback sessions to discuss performance and progress with each individual student, to take place at mid-semester. (Feedback)
- Introduce web based student forums to allow students to discuss modules together (Peer Support)
- Introduce an annual Exhibition of 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> year work allowing individual students can showcase a limited number of outputs to peers, friends, family and staff (Peer and Other Support, Projects)
- Implement PDP for all students once a year. This could be integrated with semesterly feedback sessions (PDP, Peer and Other Support)
- Arrange annual Placement Recruitment Event bringing together prospective employers and students. (Placements, Peer Support)
- Develop DMEM Placements Network on the DMEM intranet allowing both students and companies to advertise (Placements)
- Implement DMEM Graduate Network “DMEMReunited” (Peer and Other Support)
- Showcase quality work from all years and update on a regular basis. Investigate alternative methods for showcasing work. (Peer Support, Projects)
- Provide staff with the means to continually study and implement best teaching practice (Teaching Delivery)
- Investigate methods for providing more flexible teaching (Teaching Delivery)
- Staff should be encouraged to attend student social events (Peer and Other Support)
- Make students more aware of what is going on in the department i.e new initiatives, staff changes through news letter or web (Peer and Other Support)

These recommendations have been prioritized and are currently being implemented.

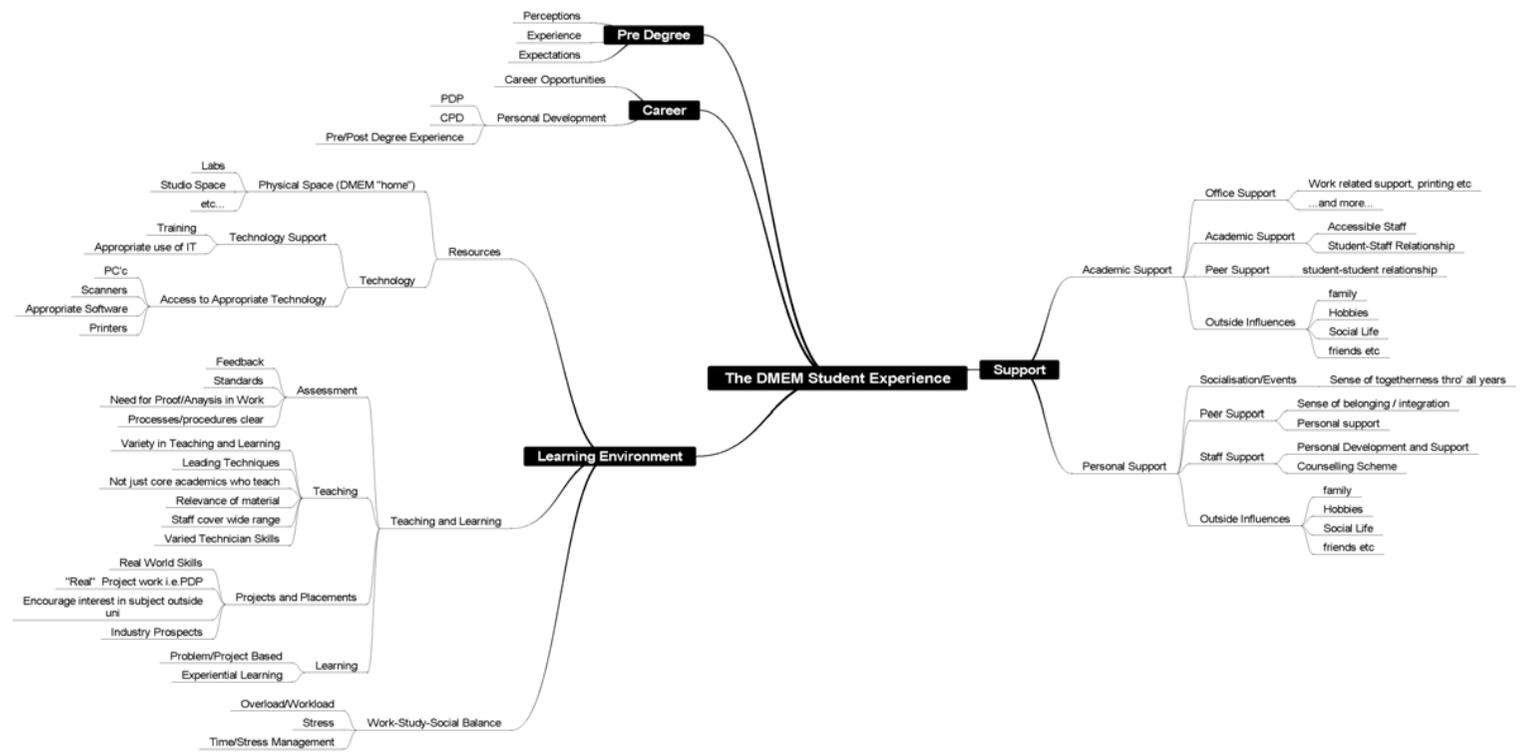


Figure 1 The Student Experience Map

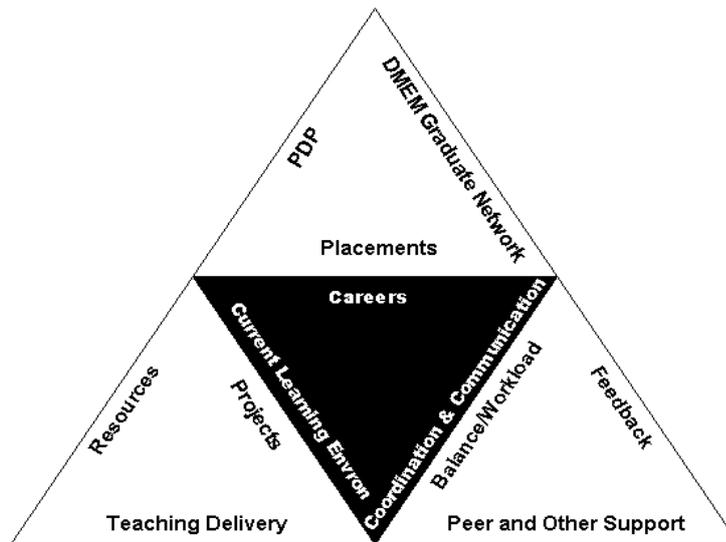


Figure 2 Triangle of Priorities

#### 4 DISCUSSION AND TRANSFERABLE LESSONS

This paper describes an investigation into the “Student Experience” within a design context. The findings of this investigation are presented in the form of a map of the student experience, identification of priority areas and recommendations for improvement. Whilst, this paper focuses on one academic department’s experiences there are many generic lessons that are transferable both within design education and the wider higher education arena. Sharing the details of these lessons and experiences will fast track others. Transferable lessons include:

**Overall Methodology** – a proven methodology is presented demonstrating key stages of application, these being:

- investigation
- capturing and mapping the student experience
- identifying priorities and recommendations for implementation

The approach undertaken at each stage is clearly described and could be adopted directly or adapted by others wishing to investigate and improve their student experience.

**The Student Experience Map** – the map was developed specifically to reflect DMEM’s student experience. However, there are many elements that are common with other design education environments and as such this map could be adapted by others to reflect their specific student experience. The method of presenting the student experience in the form of a map is an approach that can easily be adopted by others. Adopting this approach allows a snapshot of the student experience to be captured and presented at a given time. Mapping the experience facilitates the identification of strengths and weaknesses allowing prioritisation for improvement to take place.

Following implementation of changes and /or a given period of time new maps can be generated allowing continual review and enhancement of the student experience.

**Interaction with Experts in Academic Practice** – the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement at the University of Strathclyde played a vital role in this study. It is recommended that other academics wishing to undertake such a study interact with their own academic practice establishment or equivalent.

**Prioritisation and theming** – this study identified several concepts for improvement. Theming concepts and priorities makes implementation easier and improves their impact through exploitation of overlap.

**Recommendations** – many of the recommendations for improvement (presented in section 3) are applicable and relevant across higher education establishments and are not restricted specifically to design environments. As such these recommendations could be implemented directly or adapted by other institutions wishing to improve their student experience.

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