Service Design and Learning Experience Development in Higher Education

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Our case study presents a Service Design (SD) development project and its results from a Hungarian private university to improve student learning experience (Lx). It aims to assess the applicability, success criteria and challenges of the SD methodology in the chosen higher education institution.

1.   Introduction

The intensifying competition on the education market, pressures from national and international higher education rankings, as well as the need of attracting financial resources, are pushing universities to do more. Higher education institutions have to prove their relevance on a day-to-day basis. Service Design (SD) can be a tool to approach this challenge with.

Our case study, presented in this paper, reports about a SD development project and its results from a Hungarian private university to improve student learning experience (Lx). The aim of the research was to determine the characteristics of a SD project, to investigate the hindering and supporting factors of such a project, and to assess and evaluate results and impacts of the project. As we were conducting this case study research we were hoping to gain insights and define learning points that can inform other SD processes in the field of higher education.

A quick overview about SD in the professional and academic literature is followed by describing the study data and the methodology used for its collection. Next, the SD case is presented in detail, explaining how the project was initiated and implemented as well as the nature of various roles the actors played in the case. Finally, the study provides an analysis of the project and identifies success factors and barriers in the process.

2.   Service Design

According to Stickdorn and colleagues (2018) SD can be defined as a mindset, a process, a toolset, a cross-disciplinary language and a management approach as well. Its purpose is, however, unequivocal: it helps seeing an organization's services from a customer perspective and to create ideal service experiences based on genuine understanding. The practice of SD builds on design thinking that is „an analytic and creative process that engages a person in opportunities to experiment, create and prototype models, gather feedback, and redesign" (Razzouk & Shute, 2012, p. 330). SD is method for open service innovation, that invites the customer into the design process,

the service provider and the customer learn tacit knowledge form each other and that knowledge is applied to make a new service offer or to refine an existing offer (Edwards et al., 2015).

The SD methodology is human centered, collaborative, iterative, sequential, real and holistic. It is based on rich research data using tools as personas, journey mapping, system mapping, service prototyping, business model canvas, collaborative workshops and 'touchpoint' analysis, which tools are suggested to be applied in a complementary manner (Stickdorn et al., 2018; Trischker & Scott, 2016). The iterative and sequential model usually follows the process of 1) research, 2) ideation, 3) prototyping and 4) implementation, providing a firm frame for practice (Stickdorn et al., 2018).

Although, the concept of SD is seemingly promising, there can be pitfalls worth taking into consideration, especially due to the nature of the human-driven aspect of services. Cook and colleagues (2002) warn us about the determinative effect of how a service is perceived and remembered, which can be different from the actual experience, thus, the service encounter has to be managed. However, finally, the experience is mostly defined by the employees of the service organization. That is why the acceptance of quality standards and culture from all colleagues is of utmost importance, and organizational change management (Kotter, 1996) has to deal with the change of employees' thinking and practices.

A controversial phenomenon is that students who feel like *customers* of the university are reported to feel more entitled to complain counterproductively. Research suggests, that instead of such definition of students' role, the effort to improve satisfaction is key to higher student involvement with education. (Finney & Finney, 2010).

3. Methodology

Our research applied case study methodology (Yin, 2009). The investigation was carried out over the autumn of 2019. Analysis was built on an initial inquiry interview with the leader of the development project, who is also the manager of the consulting company, followed by an interview with the service designer consultant, two interviews with middle and one with high level managers of the university. Eight pieces of written materials (research reports of the SD based quantitative and qualitative data collections) were also included in the analysis. The interviews were semi-structured (Kvale, 1996). Interviews were individual, however, one joint interview (vice rector for education and leader of the Study Administration Centre) took place, too; each interview lasted more than one hour.

4. The case

The development project aimed at improving students' learning experience (Lx) at the Hungarian Kodolányi János University was requested by the university's rector and management in December 2017 after an SD workshop of Qualitas, the university's representatives had participated at. Qualitas is a consultancy company specializing in public, higher and further education that provides a dedicated SD programme, called LxLab. The university was committed to carry out this development programme with

an external partner that can be an independent party. However, the leader of the project, Mr. Baráth has been offered a part-time job of 0,25 FTE at the university later on. He analysed and presented the results in a written report as well as in a presentation held for the Education Committee. Mr. Baráth's role was also to make the leadership and the faculty familiar with the SD principles, to create understanding about and engagement towards the approach.

Since Kodolányi is a private university, which is fully funded from tuition fees, there is a high pressure from students' side to be responsive towards "customer expectations". The main goals of the project were to uncover 1) how students perceive their learning process at the university, 2) what their impression is about its operation, 3) how far they are satisfied with the services provided, and to see 4) on which areas they wish for changes and improvements.

The project is defined as an ongoing development process and has two data collection periods completed (2017, 2019). With a SD methodology-based questionnaire (created and validated in a previous research and updated with the university's participation after the first data collection) students' learning experience connected to interaction points, their customer satisfaction index (CSI) and the net promoter score (NPS) was measured. Students were asked about the importance of certain touchpoints and how good their experience is with those touchpoints. Additionally, open questions were offered to gain further insights. The questionnaire's fields of investigation were as follows: operation of the university programs, forms and attributes of learning, forms and attributes of teaching. After the 2017 data collection a SD workshop was organized with 4 groups of students using inspirational board, montage and value proposition canvasing as applied techniques. Further individual and focus-group interviews were suggested as well as a longer workshop, but the leadership of the university thought it would be too resource-intensive for the first periods of the development programme.

The process has been wholeheartedly supported by the leadership, and the Study Office has assisted the data collection prominently. Support of the faculty wasn't unanimous, as many of them expected extra workload connected to the project. Those who were reluctant to fully support the project argued that for them it was obvious what the students' problems were; there was no use putting extra effort into the inquiry. Nevertheless, as it was a leadership decision colleagues had to comply with, as this project had a strategic importance for the university.

Students' involvement manifested almost exclusively in the fill-out of the surveys (with relatively low response rates, slightly above 20% in both periods). From the students' side the experience with SD is still a question: students were the first to be involved but the last to know about the results. Now it is the university's aim to find a well working system for providing feedback about the results and impacts of the students' contribution in order to strengthen engagement with this ongoing development programme.

Outputs are the written reports about the survey results, educational materials about SD, the questionnaires and the survey reports are accessible via the Moodle system for all the teachers and university staff. As it was a supporting document for the currently running accreditation process more than half of the teachers had saw the results. The reports had been discussed in meetings of several departments as well.

Changes have been made based on the survey's feedback 1) in the system of thematic weeks (new initiative of the university), 2) the distance learning program, which is a strategically key program of the institution and 3) in the student administrative services.

Changes in effect of the SD project can be regarded as process innovations, fine-tuning of the current operation. Systematic innovations are expected to come later in the programme.

The 2019 report contains a comparison to 2017 results, however, the composition of the respondents changed, thus, the improvement in the measured outcomes should be handled with caution. Nevertheless, the overall, institutional-level NPS changed from -9 to +18 and NPS for second degree programmes (also a distinctive program of the university) changed from -12 to +10.

5. Discussion

The university's general experience with the SD process was positive. One of the main success factors of the project was the successful data collection, as it led to insights not anticipated by the university and provided actionable feedback. The involvement of students' opinion made sure the university targeted the most relevant and urging issues in its development efforts. The commitment of the leadership to go through with the SD project against the objections of some of the teaching staff also had a great role in making the initiative stick; with the results of the project this commitment got reassured.

For educators at the university the project and the inquiry phases were not demanding due to the chosen methodology. The implemented changes even brought simplifications (decreasing number of thematic weeks) and improvements (trainings for online teaching) for them. As these improvements targeted shortcomings that they as individuals struggled with, they evaluated the changes as beneficial.

It is also necessary to mention, that personal relationships and learning about SD through these relationships seem to be quite essential to the initiation of such an SD project, as SD was not a familiar practice in the higher education sector at the time. The firm's owner, Mr. Baráth got to know SD through his daughter, who met the SD methodology during her university studies. He has a very good personal relation to the rector of Kodolányi university, contributing to why the university saw SD as an attractive approach.

Another external impact, beside the general constant market pressure, was the currently ongoing university accreditation process, that on one hand, made the reports valuable, as they could be utilized right away, on the other hand, the university got positive feedback and reassurance for using such an innovative approach.

In summary, we can conclude that in case of this unfamiliar tool and ideology quick wins were key to win the colleagues of the university and to involve them in a longer engagement with customer-centred thinking and design.

Challenges of the SD based development can be found around the depth of engagement of the university staff for fundamental change in their work practices. Changes in the first development period seem to be successful because these did not ask much from the staff, but through incremental changes they did have a genuine impact. Moreover, the successes of the project might mean for some, that further interviews and workshops are not needed.

Students' destructive and not well defined feedbacks also raise questions, as the university does not want to encourage a culture of complaining. It has to validate and look behind results and channel eventual negative energies into collaboration and co-creation with the Welfare Office. Which raises the question: how far can students actually shape the frames of their education? Does the university have the regulatory background for all the needed changes? Do educators comply with the suggested changes? These are questions only SD tools, that provide interaction, common ideation and negotiations, can help to answer; that are much more resource-intensive as everybody has to be involved.

6. Conclusion

The case of Kodolányi University provides us with a detailed and practical example how SD can be introduced to a higher education institution. It shows us that it needs steady management engagement and quick wins to persuade the whole collective of an organization that putting energy into such a project is worth it. However, it also seems, that higher education might be the field for incremental change rather than disruptive developments. Altogether, the SD approach was impactful at the discussed university, but arising obstacles make the toolkit of change management indispensable in the project. Further investigations should follow regarding changes, the Covid-19 epidemic brought to or took from the university's student-centred mindset and how the SD thinking stayed with the organization. Research is planned to be extended after the pandemic, when students and teaching staff of the university are going to be involved.

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