Exploring the pupil-student transition through customer journeys

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Abstract

Being a first time student is not only exciting, it is also like travelling to a new and far-off place. If you are already a resident, then it is hard to grasp what it was like arriving for the first time. This paper presents a project at Karlstad University investigating the experiences of first time students. 13 students from the teaching programs kept diaries for ten weeks concerning their experiences related to the first time at the university. The findings suggested, for example, an overload of information on the first day, a complex web structure, and highlighted the importance of social connectedness as well as the importance of designated facilities to help the students find stability and to focus on their studies. The project suggested low hanging fruit that could be fixed immediately and formulated new areas to be investigated and developed. Further, the information visualizations showed important in order to get things done.

KEYWORDS: case, student, university, customer journey, experiences

Introduction

Starting university level education involves getting accustomed to academic habits and structures, and taking full responsibility for your own studies. In addition, the student has often moved to a new city, doesn't know the campus and has little or no prior knowledge about the expectations of academic life. Admitting new students at a university implies having control over who starts what program, when and where. Administrative routines involve a combination of systems that include registration and teaching, and other different functions at the university. This case description explores how a service design project was initiated to connect the administrative systems with the experience of being a first time student at the university.

Karlstad University (KAU) is one of the youngest universities in Sweden, with approximately 16 000 students enrolled in humanities and fine arts, social and economic sciences, natural sciences, engineering and technology, healthcare and teacher training. For some time KAU

had conducted a dedicated effort to improve how it welcomes first-time students at the university. The university's support functions had held several projects with the purpose of developing efficient and better solutions: from the student, teacher and administrator's perspectives. However, overall experience was that too often the "customer perspective" was missed and that the solutions became isolated from each other and were not part of a whole. The person responsible for incoming students began to look for approaches and methods that could include students' perspectives.

Service design is considered to be an approach that brings an outside-in perspective to an organization (e.g., Stickdorn & Schneider 2010). Further, there are specific tools that are helpful in capturing, analyzing and communicating the users'/customers' experiences. The ambition in this case was to explore methods of service design as an outside-in way of working, and if possible to appropriate specific methods for continuous use within the organization. Customer Journey (CJ) was selected as an appropriate technique for communicating customers' experiences through visual output (Parker & Heapy 2006; Zomerdijk & Voss 2010; Segelström 2011). In-depth and qualitative user research is needed to construct a CJ.

With the ambition to include and understand the student experience from an outside-in perspective the project "Follow a student" using a service design approach was initiated during 2014. A project manager with background in service design was appointed (the first author). Parallel with the pilot project initiated by the administration, the issue of student experience at KAU was brought in as a case-project in the courses User Innovation I (15 ects) and User Innovation II (15 ects) on advanced level fall term 2014 (held by the second author). This paper focuses on the pilot project.

In the following sections, how the project was carried out will first be presented, followed by the outcomes,, then further reflections on critical issues in the process will be discussed and the paper ends with a conclusion that includes implementations and future work.

A case study of beginner student experiences

The purpose with a CJ is to get an understanding of the service from the customer's -- in this case student's -- perspective. Thus in-depth and qualitative user research is needed to construct a relevant CJ. Since this project set out to understand the experiences of first year students it was important to start on their first day at the university, although the overall experience might be related to the previously completed acceptance procedure, which was part of the student project. The plan was then set out to collect their experiences for ten weeks, the first half of the term, in order to be able to collect data from the first day to the first examination. Stakeholders in the project were representatives from the administration, the marketing department, the university board, and the User Innovation I and II courses.

A combination of qualitative service design research methods were selected with the purpose of gaining increased knowledge about the students' experiences. The initial plan of shadowing students was discarded, instead the participants were to keep diaries, take photo/videos of their contexts and experiences to document and share their first term at KAU. After the first ten weeks, an individual interview with each participant was planned.

The project manager (??) met with the students on their first day and told them about the project and how to write their journals and document with photo/video. The instructions were based on the aim of putting the results into a CJ. "Write daily and not too long. Perhaps not unlike a Twitter post." The posts were to be sent to the project manager on a regular basis.

Pre-interview analyses were conducted based on the diary entries. The participants' individual CJ were constructed representing each participant's experiences of becoming a student. The CJ was used as visual support in the interview, to create focus on specific experiences and make the interview more detailed.
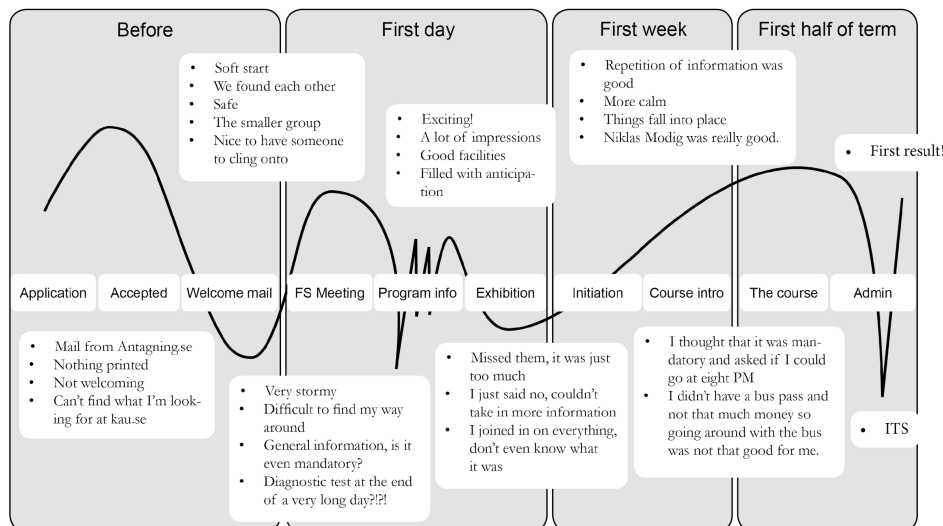

Figure 1 Common student customer journey of first 10 weeks of study

After the interviews and a meeting with the course responsible person for the student project a final synthesis of the findings was conducted. Placing the CJs side by side showed how a single experience could change the direction of an entire journey. The visualizations also showed that the participants had similar experiences at similar points in time and thereby it was possible to visualize a common journey (Fig 1). Three common experiences described how stressful the first week was, the importance of fellow students, and how the learning platform (ITS) proved to be problematic at times.

Project outcomes

The CJs clearly visualized the areas of improvement, which were both small and more complex issues affecting an entire CJ. The CJ highlighted particular experiences, such as when one student needed to cancel taking an exam due to illness but found no information on how to do this. Both individual and compiled CJs where presented to the university management. The visual strength in the CJs became very important in communicating the project results. One example was the strength in portraying individual experiences and their impact on the student's performance. There were also more general issues, for example when looking for information on the website many participants commented on how the information structure got in the way of finding what they were looking for, and how they instead used Google search to find pages at the university website.

Direct outcomes included suggestions for improvements in the admission and information letters, the amount of information given in the first day and how to communicate in case of

illness the day before an exam. More complex issues pointed out were, as mentioned, the information structure at the website or more indirect issues of having a sense of belonging from the beginning, together with understanding what is expected.

Throughout the project participants mentioned the importance of feeling safe and being able to focus on their studies. Mostly participants mentioned this on a positive note. However, one student who missed the introduction due to illness instead mentioned how the lack of safety early on had an impact on the customer journey.

Different teacher programs in various premises were represented in the study. Related to the importance of feeling safe, it seemed like those who had an appointed place to go to could better handle the anxiety of not understanding what was expected of them. In this place there were second year students that they could ask about things that caused anxiety. For students who did not have a steady facility, the study group was identified as a very important factor in their experiences, whereas the study group was less important for the group that had fairly high self-esteem, low anxiety, and also had group rooms booked by their teachers.

Another individual finding was that some of the students worked in parallel with their studies, and studying was not taken as seriously as working. For this reason, the level of stress increased when studies and work clashed.

Reflections and discussion

Throughout the work several issues are worth reflecting on. Although the deliverable was tied to a customer journey, presenting the general customer journey for stakeholders had a larger impact than anticipated. The visual effect of showing different problem areas was so powerful that many initiatives since have used the customer journey when arguing for change, i.e. budget.

Selection of participants

The ambition to have a more homogenous group of participants was helpful in the project. The experiences are still individual but comparisons could still made. The downside to trimming the group was that the results and the conclusions were limited to this. However, the results from the projects in the courses User Innovation I and II where a more heterogeneous group of students were researched confirmed the broader relevance of the results.

Method/process learnings

Having the start-up meeting of the project just before the program introduction was done intentionally in order to have as little effect as possible on the participants. However, the start-up meeting gave the students something that they would not have had without it - each other. This gave them an added feeling of safety that they would not have had without it. It is impossible to know how this influenced the result, however since the importance of a social context is one of the findings, it is most likely that it has been a positive experience for the students.

The project manager's lack of knowledge of "how things work" at the university had the effect that things were not taken for granted and on the contents of the follow-up questions.

When one of the participants had difficulties with understanding what was expected, it was still difficult not to give suggestions on how to solve the issue but instead exploring how the students themselves solved the situation.

In regards to the diary method, the participants were asked to write short daily posts, short enough to be compared with Twitter posts. The reason for this was that the participants should not feel that the quality and length of the texts could act as a barrier. However, for one participant the very short posts instead became the hindrance, and the participant who wrote every day had a lower quality in findings due to the lack of space for reflection. Unrestricted length of the text with a medium frequency proved to give the best results, especially when combined with the interviews.

In a similar way the instruction to produce images freely created a performance anxiety and thereby resulted in no images, whereas a clear task (picture of best / worst experience) resulted in a variety of images that depicted some of the findings really well. The images were accompanied by a reflection or description. The images together with the customer journeys also proved to be a good way to invite stakeholders to quickly understand the result of the study.

Conclusions

The purpose of the project "Follow a student" was to create a pilot project to explore beginner students' experiences, from a student perspective. It aimed to improve the administrative function's preparedness to welcome new students.

The outcomes show that this limited and qualitative project provided insights on several levels: some of them easy to address, others more complex and demanding proper development projects. At the moment there is no need to repeat the project at a larger scale; instead a similar project is now being conducted with the complementary aim to explore the teachers' experiences. The customer journey technique proved useful both as a means of communicating the students' experiences as well as a means to enhance the quality of the interviews during the research phase. This case description has described in some detail what kind of information is relevant to include, and how the information might be collected in a service design project.

Further, the project has pin-pointed that the student experience is influenced by many different things and as such can not be controlled only by administrative routines but needs attention from all functions at the KAU campus.

One of the major overall outcomes of the project was the power of the information visualization through a CJ. The student journey was immediately understood, and areas for development were clearly identified. The outside-in perspective brought via the service design way of working surfaced questions and problems that had not been seen before due to a deeper understanding of how the university works and where to go for answers.

Implemented and Future works

Following this study a number of issues have been attended to by Karlstad University such as increasing the number of mentors that take care of the students when they first come to the university, and adding an email address to use if one falls ill the night before an exam. On a larger scale, a project has been initiated to review the information structure of the website.

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