



Examining Higher Education as a Service System

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Examining Higher Education as a Service System

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Higher education institutions are involved in a number of activities relating to teaching, research and outreach or knowledge transfer. In UK, USA and other developed countries, education services attract an international audience and represent a significant income to higher education institutions and the wider community in the regions where these educational institutions are based. Specifically, higher education teaching activities are moving towards a service provision model that emphasizes student satisfaction, employability and value for money. Research and knowledge transfer activities are moving towards a service provision model that emphasizes value for money and actual or expected impact to individuals, institutions and the society at large.

This research starts from the premise that higher education is a service system (or a system of systems more precisely) and that it should be examined as such in order to understand how it currently operates, how value is produced by its stakeholders, how it can be improved, how policy decisions affect it, etc.

This work reports on the outcome of two focus group sessions conducted in parallel as part of a service systems modelling workshop at the Centre for Service Research, University of Manchester, UK in September 2011. The aim of the focus groups was to analyse higher education from a holistic service system perspective and identify the relevant set of service systems together with their service entities and resources they consume, the value propositions from the provider and customer perspectives, and the service outcomes focusing on service quality considerations. The participants of each focus group were students, academics, employers and senior policymakers that are involved in strategy and planning. The participants of each focus group were provided with an initial brief on service systems modelling and they were asked to examine higher education as a system of service systems. The discussions were coordinated by a focus group facilitator and they were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed. Finally, the coding results from the two focus groups were combined into a single coding through a process of discussing the reasoning for each code selection and reaching a consensus.

Participants were asked to follow the Service Value Network (SVN) model in order to identify and categorise properties of the service systems, including service definition, service entities and value propositions. Participants were also asked to comment on how they understand quality, and how they will measure quality associated to each service system.

The results of the analysis of the focus groups discussions identified a number of service entities involved under the three main activity areas of teaching, research and knowledge transfer. Service entities identified include academic staff (lecturer, supervisor, and advisor), admin staff, student, alumni, applicant, library, student union, accommodation, transport, local council, government, funder, employer, business and society. Furthermore, the study identified a number of value propositions from the customer and provider perspective. These value propositions include knowledge provision, research skills provision, employment prospects, transferable skills, degree, training, employment prospects, student experience, social and behavioural norms education, income tax, information provision, innovation. Finally, the study identified a number of important service quality dimensions within a higher education service system such as rankings, number of graduates, publications, funding, quality of degree, knowledge, skills, social activity, facilities, jobs, probability of success and social life.

The study contributes by providing a comprehensive set of the components of a higher education service system model and confirmed our understanding of this system as a complex system. The initial results of the analysis provide a picture of the large and varied number of stakeholders, resources and value propositions as well as, of the diverse nature of service quality dimensions that exist in such a

system. Furthermore, the study provides an evaluation of the SVN model in terms of its suitability for capturing all the aspects of the higher education service model.

The next step for this research is the conduct of multiple additional focus group sessions that will examine parts of the model and each session, involving individuals with the same background and characteristics. In addition, specific aspects that will be exploited further is the service value lifecycle (or customer realisation of value) and service patterns.