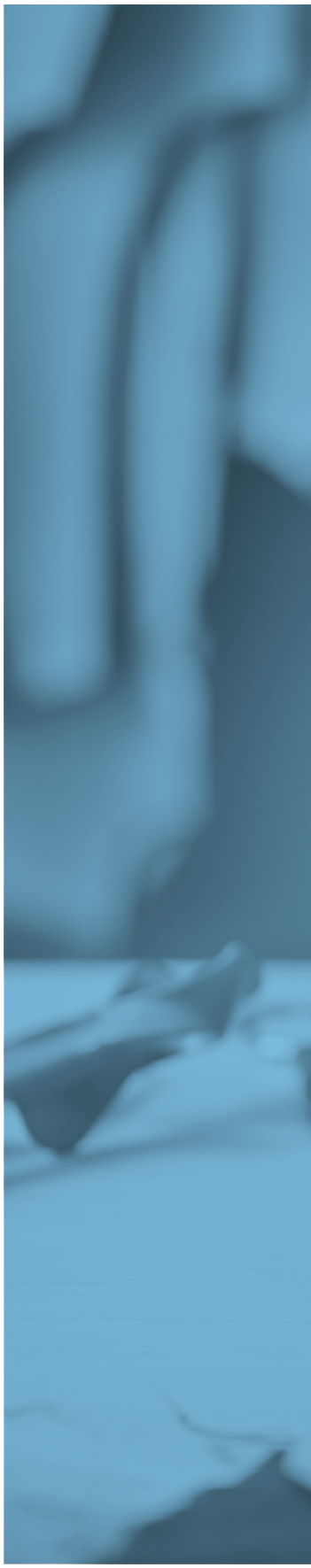
This time it's personal

Baback Yazdani describes how one UK business school has embraced the concept of the 'personalisation' of business education



"Personalisation" is increasingly demanded by students at all levels of study. It stems from the fact that an individual's needs, wants and preferences in any given setting will differ slightly from those of other individuals.

In an educational situation, personalisation means a multi-dimensional and multi-layered tailoring of the overall student experience for each and every student. This is a far cry from the still-dominant model of education designed for the industrial age and characterised by Alvin and Heidi Tofler in their book *The Revolutionary Wealth* in 2006 as the "factory model" of education.

In the globally competitive environment of business education, relentless innovations have created many niches but the bulk of business education remains locked in the paradigm of mass provision. The mass-education model has proved successful so far; but very few business schools have been able to provide a personalised experience to all.

Personalisation is important to the individual student in terms of:

- the modes of study and the mix of subjects needed to complete a programme
- individual learning approaches or styles
- what students aspire to be and become in their long-term careers and goals
- identification of their individual careers paths and preparation for them
- experiential development and connectivity to the business world

In short, personalisation is important because we recognise that every student is different and they need the educational system to treat them as individuals and not put them through a mass-processing experience.

Analysis of direct feedback from students at programme, school, university and, indeed, national levels shows that there is an unmet demand for personalising the entire student experience and tailoring to the individual's needs. At Nottingham Business School (NBS), part of Nottingham Trent University (NTU) in the UK, we set about responding to this challenge in 2012 and started to prepare our entire system of education to become increasingly personalised.

In order to create a cohesive framework, personalisation at NBS was defined as a multi-dimensional tailoring of every student's total educational experience on four dimensions/axis with the individual student at the centre (see Figure 1 overleaf):

- knowledge
- learning approaches
- experiential learning
- career development

Many universities do indeed provide a level of personal choice for students, particularly through options and voluntary participation in extracurricular activities. But NBS sees this approach as insufficient and *ad hoc*. Hence the NBS framework was developed and designed to be systematic and comprehensive.

Personalisation for students at NBS therefore consists of "developing a joint understanding and a specific agreed plan, between the student and the school, for each student's needs with

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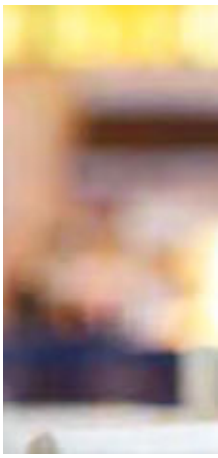

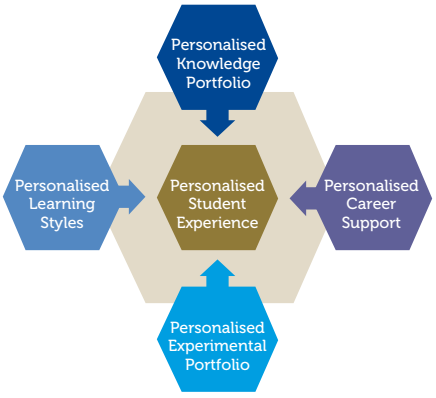

Figure 1:
NBS' multi-dimensional personalisation of student experience

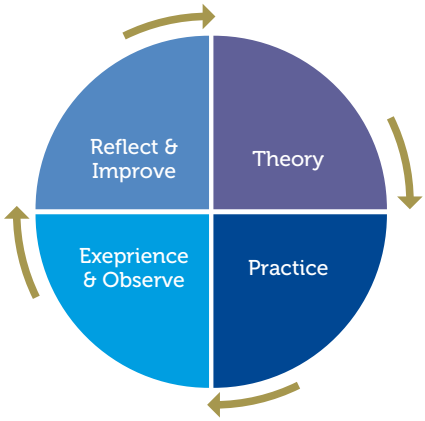

Figure 2:
NBS experiential learning cycle

respect to their study pathway within the overall limits of their course, their experiential learning pathway and their learning approach in order to enhance their success potential in their studies and future career".

NBS has always been well known for its philosophy of methodical and systematic integration of theory and practice and embedding the experiential learning cycle throughout its modules, courses and programmes as well as the industrial links that enable that. Our engagement with business and society informs our research and teaching, which in turn have a higher impact upon our world and allows more opportunity for innovation.

The manifestation of this philosophy is the NBS Experiential Learning Cycle, which has been fully developed and implemented in everything we do. In both research and education, theory and practice are tested in real applications, where observation and reflection allow us to adjust and improve theory, as shown in Figure 2, which depicts a continuous evidence-based knowledge acquisition cycle.

Personalisation at NBS has therefore been designed to include experiential learning and reflection as an integral part of the system. For full personalisation to be possible, a comprehensive set of experiential learning opportunities and support systems have been put in place. This is supported through the use of analytics, diagnostics, individual tutor and industrial mentors systems, and the overall provision of opportunities offered by NBS and NTU to all students.

Thus NBS offers a holistic system that personalises the total student experience and structures the provision of support systems to comprehend the student's needs and jointly arrive at a dynamic pathway and plan that maximises the student's potential.

Critical to the delivery of personalisation are a number of innovations that allow tailoring and customisation along the dimensions or axis mentioned above. These are:

- use of analytics in a student "dashboard" to maximise engagement
- use of a set of diagnostics to measure student strengths and weaknesses on a number of

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learning dimensions

- an Alumni Fellowship Programme that matches students' needs to NBS's extensive global alumni body
- an Academic Mentoring System that utilises analytics and diagnostics to support the student journey
- comprehensive provision of experiential learning opportunities embedded in the curriculum, including placements, internships, industrial and community project-based learning, high-quality international exchange programmes and adaptive learning tools

The student dashboard is an award-winning online resource designed to help each student and academic mentor to understand how well a student is engaging with his or her studies compared with other students on their course or programme.

The dashboard takes data from a number of university sources and creates a graph containing an average engagement rating for every student. This enables mentors and students to discuss individualised plans.

Personal academic mentors and Alumni Fellows develop a professional relationship with every student and really get to the root of a student's needs by understanding his or her experiences, exploring their aspirations and creating a personal development plan that reflects their goals. Thus the students act as "co-creators" of their individual learning, which is documented in a "personal e-portfolio".

In addition to mentoring, personalised learning also needs personalised experience to succeed. For this kind of learning to be really effective, it must include work experience at every level, tailored to a student's ambitions while also developing a range of transferable skills. Students must reflect on it and learn from it with the guidance of their personal mentor, creating a deeper learning experience. Providing a comprehensive set of opportunities for students to choose from also helps to improve the overall student experience and gives them the opportunity to develop according to their aspirations and skills.

Following two years of development, this year (2015-16) saw the roll-out of personalisation at NBS. Personalised learning has now been delivered to all 3,500 NBS undergraduate students as an embedded part of their programme. The same approach has been prepared and designed for all postgraduate and post-experience programmes and all students will be benefiting from personalisation from the start of the 2016 academic year.

All our internal metrics show a positive impact in terms of engagement and participation. The full impact of personalisation is being measured on an ongoing basis and is expected to positively impact student engagement and student satisfaction, progression, attainment and employability, which will be measured and analysed at the end of this academic year. NBS is confident the time for personalisation has come and others will follow this path.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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