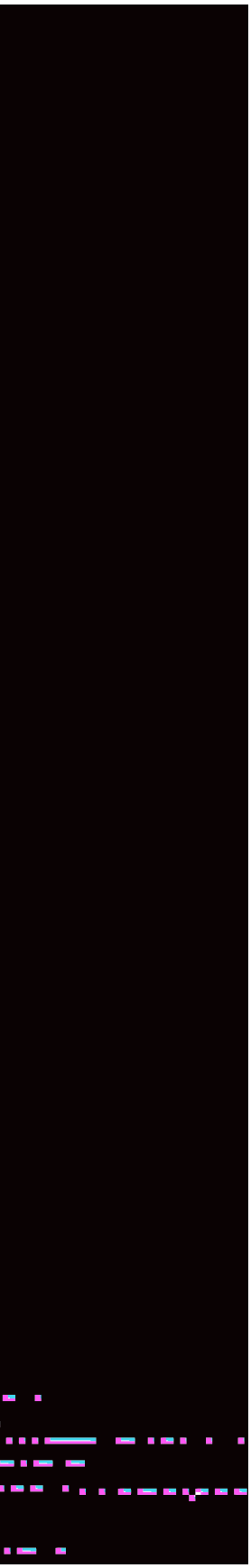
Demystifying Student Experience

In March 2023 EFMD hosted a Student Experience Workshop, with the theme of 'Creating Value Beyond the Curriculum: Wellbeing and Engagement'. **Stephanie Lambert** reports on the importance and increasing awareness of student wellbeing



How do we create a high quality, positive student experience? That is a major question that affects nearly everyone working in Higher Education. Student wellbeing and engagement can make the difference between an individual being a high-achieving graduate or not completing their studies. Yet, all too often other aspects of education in institutional strategies take precedence.

To tackle the issue head-on, in March 2023 EFMD Professional Development hosted the first in-person iteration of our Student Experience Workshop. The theme was 'Creating Value Beyond the Curriculum: Wellbeing and Engagement'. Over one and a half days, 21 participants representing 13 countries met in Brussels to learn and share aspects of these two key facets of student experience, and the interplay between them.

The term 'student experience' is reductionist to say the least. Not only is the subject matter complex (Where does experience start and end? What does it include? Where does it happen?) but it will manifest differently depending on your viewpoint. In the EFMD Offices we gathered together Programme Managers, Directors of Student Experience, Study Advisers, Student Services Managers, Department Heads, Vice-Deans and even representatives from psychological services, to dissect the issue. Being in the room together created a brilliant opportunity to scrutinise what student experience meant through different lenses. We discussed, in depth, how we could foster purposeful learning journeys for business and management students. Some of the thoughts we had, and the key themes we went over, are captured here.

Learning beyond the classroom

Ultimately the key stakeholders of our institutions are the students themselves, a heterogeneous group representing different backgrounds, learning styles, motivations and desired outcomes. One thing students should have in common is the expectation to learn, develop and to be supported in that journey. As universities we want students to graduate with a meaningful education, ultimately reaching their full potential. Degrees should not only equip students with knowledge, but also with the skills and behavioural competencies to thrive in the workplace or for onward study.

The visions and strategies of business schools focus on creating well-rounded leaders and individuals who aren't only driving organisations to success but are working towards the good of a larger society. Many strategies champion diversity, encourage entrepreneurial confidence and highlight the honest responsibilities of leaders. And there are plenty of business schools that claim to furnish students with the ability to manage their professional and personal lives in a conscientious way too.

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Education can teach this, but these parts of personal development are often nurtured somewhere beyond what we teach as part of the curriculum, and are rooted in other parts of the student experience.

Many of our students will expect support around careers, wellbeing, student living, study skills to name but a few. Student experience can be considered as a sort of tangible return on a large investment in terms of time, effort and finance (especially in contexts such as the UK with increased fees and cost of living). They are often throwing their life and soul into their education and we need to recognise that.

In the wake of the pandemic there has also been a spotlight on the mental health of our students, and questions arising over the level of care that can be expected in educating predominantly young adults. While this problem already, and has always, existed there is thankfully now a heightened awareness around the issue. There is much more open discussion, and action focused on how individuals are treated in regard to race, gender and neurodivergence and many other nuanced parts of lived experiences. The make-up of who each person is as an individual can fundamentally change their lived experience. By recognising people as diverse individuals we can all the better guide them on their path through education.

The shake up to education on a global scale, brought on by COVID-19 drew the spotlight onto the wider student experience. Suddenly lecturers were speaking to a hundred people in their bedrooms, an invasiveness that made it hard to ignore student's lives outside the lecture hall. Students missed out on so much during this period, we have often been scrambling to fill those gaps as they returned to education in person. But it helped us see the importance of that wider student experience, the value of being in a room with others, of socialising on campus, or the serendipitous conversation you might have with your professor.

The extra enrichment of a full student experience creates the comfort and freedom to inspire people to better things.

The bigger picture: where student experience fits in

One of the challenges raised by the participants at our workshop was around where student experience was steered from within institutions. There are a number of players in each establishment in student experience, with competing tools for management and coordination (or lack of) between departments and services. It takes a team that reaches to every part of the campus, who can oversee various aspects and bring focus and unity.

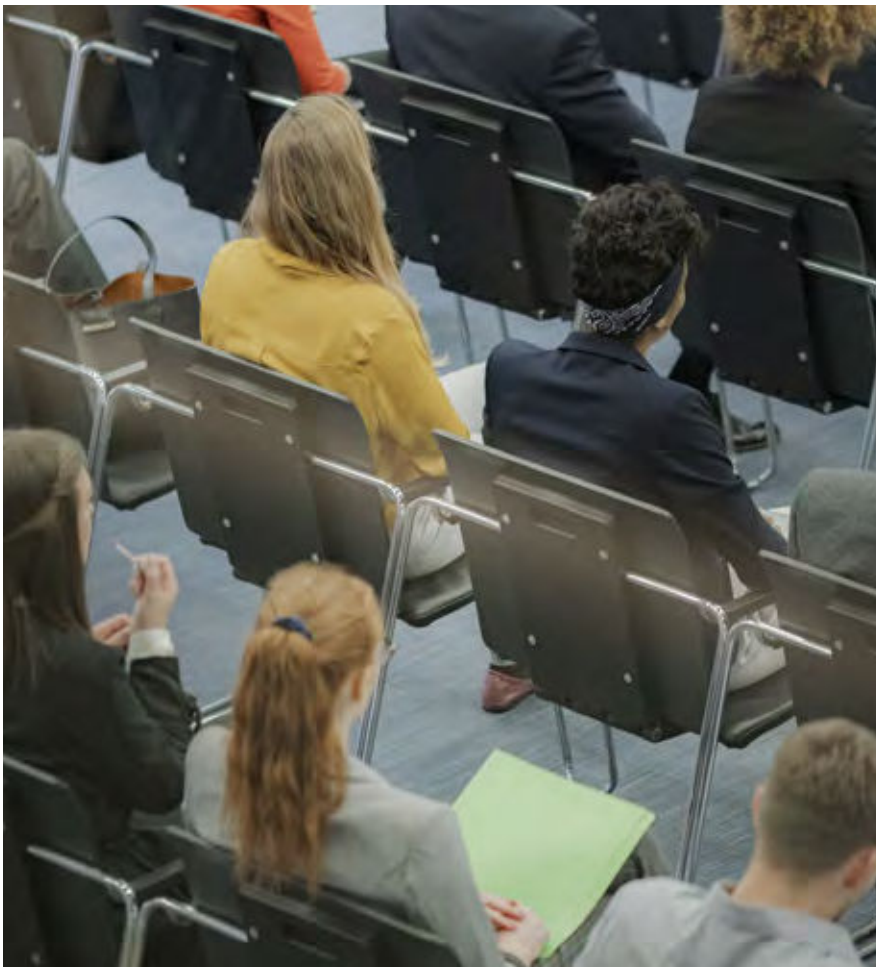
> *Every institution needs to make decisions over strategic resources*

One example discussed at the workshop was the role of IT and data technology services. Allowing the tracking of 'engagement' on learning platforms, logging attendance, student journey mapping tools, and effective administration tools were not only jobs for those in student-facing roles, but ones that needed to be enabled by fit-for-purpose technology. And, of course, the personnel to facilitate the relationship between departments.

There were examples of where a place for improving student experience sat clearly within the curriculum, with some schools offering wellbeing modules for leaders as core or optional credit-bearing parts of their programmes. Not only was this for the benefit of the graduates, but also for a wider societal good in developing leaders that have an awareness of the importance of wellbeing in the workplace.

There were also deeper challenges in the room. Every institution needs to make decisions over strategic resources. Student experience comes at a cost in terms of staffing, finance and time. Whilst roles around student experience can be very rewarding, institutions also need to acknowledge the toll that some types of caring work can take. Participants at the workshop agreed that there needed to be a "transversal awareness of the importance of student care." It can't just be a tick box exercise, it must have deeper roots in our organisations.

Teachers and programme directors must consider if certain learning methodologies are relevant



That transversal awareness helps create added value and can perhaps answer some of those questions about resources. A strong student experience for example, can become part of the marketing arsenal of the institution more broadly. Thinking about the end product too, students who enter the jobs market as resilient individuals with a 'healthy life' approach, is something an institution can be proud of.

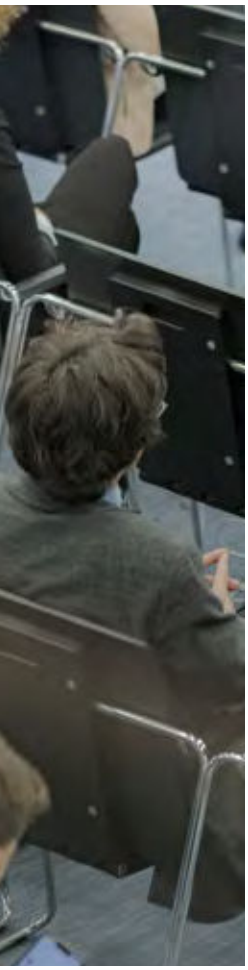
The smaller picture: engagement vs attendance

Whilst the larger scale of student experience was covered, there was also a deep dive into the detail. An emergent and unexpected theme from the workshop was understanding the role of engaging students in their learning journey and how they might drive their own student experience, especially in terms of attendance.

Since the pandemic we have seen a shift in how students show up in the lecture halls and classrooms. Faced with rows of open laptops one can't help but question whether the typing is detailed note-taking or alternatively a job application or doom scrolling through social media.

Difficulties lie in encouraging some of our less mature students into the classroom in the first place. And this was a challenge shared by the room, there was a collective relief as each member realised they weren't alone in this. With online lessons and lecture recordings available wherever and whenever, and (for some students) sped up at twice the speed, some students felt they could work smarter – or seemingly with less effort. Some of these behaviours have continued, even where provisions have returned to in-person.

If students aren't attending, then we need to ask why. Does the two-hour lecture add value? Where is it suitable? Teachers and programme directors must consider if certain learning methodologies are relevant, and if they are, then how is this value communicated to students? We agreed that attendance is not engagement, but it certainly holds weight in whether a student completes their studies, and the opportunities that they can open up for themselves by being present.



The whole picture: empowering the learner

Within our discussions we agreed that empowering the learner is the ultimate outcome of a good student experience. Rather than having students tread water through their years with us, we should be encouraging them to take ownership of their learning journey. To offer inspiration and support in equal measures, but help students find these opportunities for themselves.

Whilst we want to create a happy, shiny student experience we must not forget the role of challenge and difficulty in personal growth. The global pandemic brought this even more into the light. It is therefore vital that as we think more about that complete picture of how student experience fits into the wider student journey to make sure we get it right. How does a student access help if they need it? Where are the skills for dealing with adversity supported in our institutions?

The workshop provided new frameworks for thinking about these questions and also gave participants the chance to design their own interventions in the context of their institutions. We need to be able to map the student journey from setting foot in a university through to graduation, understanding the preconceptions, the challenges and the rewards they get on this journey as part of their experience. In our focused unpicking of the student experience, we found much more to examine alongside ideas and inspirations. The conversation continues!

The next edition of the workshop will in March 2024, more details can be found online, or email Virginie Heredia-Rosa at virginie.heredia-rosa@efmdglobal.org for further information.

About the Author

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