



# 'Nudge, Nudge' - Interventions, apps and the future of supporting students





We are often oblivious to how the rest of our organisation works. It is not until something breaks or forces you to stop, that you realise how interdependent we are, not only as people but as parts of a bigger organization.

**An organisation based on a certain normality, a certain rhythm.**

A normality of human contact, of meetings and processes. Of rhythms guided by timetables that allow us to use buildings, to induct, teach, assess and graduate our students.



When viewed in this way we can see that the organisation of the academic year has very little to do with the way we learn and at least in the UK, everything to do with the origins of Universities. Born out of the calendar of the Church and the passing of the seasons our Autumn to Summer academic year is the invisible scaffolding upon which the University lifecycle is supported.



How we learn in the real world and how we are timetabled to learn in Higher Education are two very different things. If we are learning to swim or ride a bike we don't get thrown in the deep end or have our stabilisers taken off whether we are ready or not at the end of a twelve-week period.

Much of University life is dictated by servicing this academic lifecycle. One cannot meaningfully timetable learning to swim from start to first strokes, but one easily can timetable, 'Introduction to Taxation'.

When the spotlight turned in 2010 onto the, 'Student Experience', a focus of interest ignited by the introduction of £9,000 tuition fees in England, it was bright shiny new buildings that came to define that experience. The existence of a 'student lifecycle' that was actually something related to but not determined by, its academic cousin, was still left barely recognised in the shadows.

But we ignore it at our peril. Establishing systems of support, intervention, advice and guidance that fail to take into account how students are impacted by and react to the academic lifecycle; mean that we fail our students. Fail to help them achieve their potential. Fail to help them experience success rather than failure.

For first years it can read – application, anticipation, transition, induction, first assessment, feedback, exams, progression, transition. Running in the background will be issues of making friends, becoming a 'student' who lives at home or away, money, work and identity.

Similar timelines can be constructed with ease for second and third year undergraduates, postgraduates and International Students.

By tracing a metaphorical finger along the timeline of the academic year, one can trace a number of crucial landmarks in a student's journey towards graduation.



But these simply cannot be left as, 'nice to knows'. We ignore them at our students' peril.

Of course, each student is an individual, they are not pre-programmed to respond to their lifecycle in an identical fashion. However, ask anyone who works on the frontline in our Universities; on enquiry desks, in student services, as personal tutors; the same issues will come up time and time again at predictable times of the year. Yes, they may be articulated differently, they may trigger differing responses in different individuals; yet underneath they have the same origin. The first essay question, the first piece of feedback, when the last of the student loan has been spent and there are weeks until the next one, etc., etc.

But what can we do with this knowledge? How can we translate it into an effective way of understanding the timing, form and content of successful student support?

Timing as they say, is everything. Too late and it is well, too late. Too early, then it has no context, no urgency, think giving exam revision advice during Induction week.

The standard academic term or semester can pass by in a flash. You only have a meaningful eight or nine weeks to teach, assess, reflect and examine. Add to this that most systems of support, advice and guidance tend to be activated by referral from a personal tutor, lecturer or friend. A very useful antidote to the, 'build it and they will come' assumption behind systems of student support is the truism that, 'students don't know what they don't know'. In other words, don't rely on students just self-referring.



Interventions from today's data driven personal tutors with access to screens full of red flags warning of student disengagement can arrive on the scene too late. Depending on how you create your, 'algorithm of concern', signs that a student is not attending, nor going to the library, nor using the VLE will only turn red for, 'danger of dropping out' some weeks into the term.

Allow more time to pass for the student to respond if they are so minded, to an invitation to meet with their tutor, add some more for them to make an appointment for the appropriate input of professional advice and guidance and finally top it up with waiting for the impact of the support to manifest itself positively on the tutor's screen. In other words, driving all support via a personal tutor runs the danger of being delivered simply too late to have any real impact.



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But all is not lost. By using knowledge of the lived realities of the student lifecycle one can deliver appropriate information in such a way as to be both received, looked at and acted upon, without waiting for any red flags.

Nudge theory can really help here. Information given at the exact time and context it is needed even if the individual receiving it has not actually asked for it, can be very effective.

### Context is everything.

Simply compare the impact of giving out exam revision advice during Freshers Week with giving it out alongside the exam timetable. The information and the need it for then coincide. Certainly, there may be some redundancy in that some students may not need it, but many will.

It isn't just a question of getting the timing right, the form and the content have to be equally as nuanced and appropriate.

Referring students to a hardcopy handbook or even a page on the University website is not going to be as effective as pro-actively sending it reconfigured into say a short Youtube video, to the student's mobile via an app that they know, use and trust as the single source of information that they need for their University life.

There is a very crude rule of thumb when it comes to the use of devices in Higher Education. 'If you can put it in your pocket, it is for communication and instant access to information; if it has a keyboard then it is for learning'. Crude, but with a large element of reality.

In other words, the best way to, 'nudge' a student towards timely advice, guidance and information is via an app on their mobile. The most effective app is one such as CampusM which the student knows to be the single source used by the University to direct personalised information and support. One that is capable of channeling all the information a student needs to successfully steer their way along their student lifecycle.



The logo for ExLibris campusM features the word "ExLibris" in a dark grey, sans-serif font. Above the "i" in "Libris" is a multi-colored arc (rainbow) that curves over the letters. Below "ExLibris" is the word "campusM" in a red, sans-serif font, with the "M" being significantly larger than the other letters.

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