



MAKING A VIRTUE OUT OF A NECESSITY



For Universities these are the worst of times and yet the best of times.

Money is tight, pressure is all around, headlines scream, government demands and yet students still come. Their lives and learning are enhanced, knowledge is created, communities supported. Universities have never had so much to do. Multiple hurdles have to be jumped with less resources available. 'Doing more for less' has gone to University but has yet to successfully graduate.



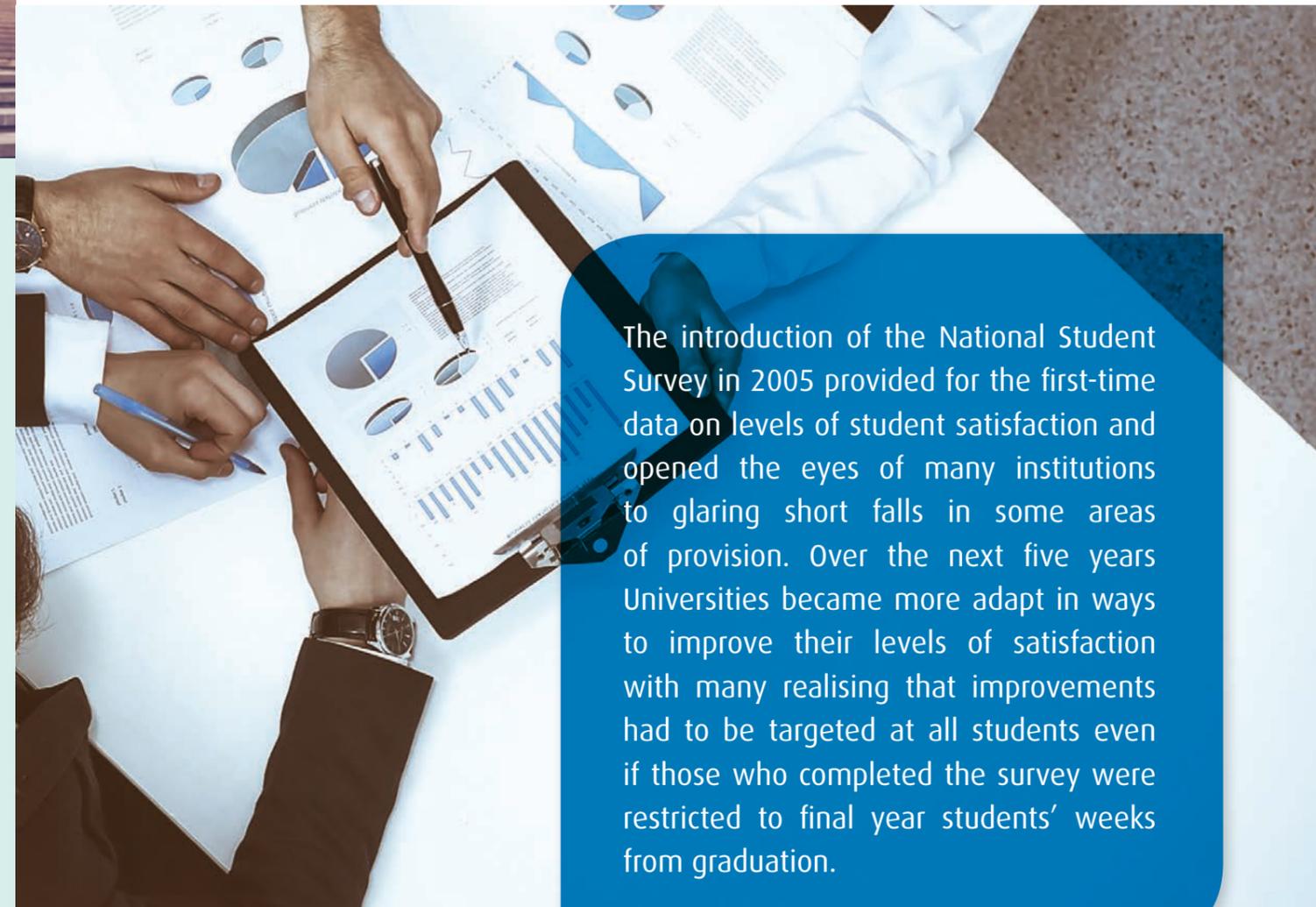
Never has so much data either actual or potential been within the grasp of students, academics, professional services and senior managers as it is in today's University. For decades reporting tools had pointed outwards to the institutions of both National and Local Government.



It should be no surprise that in the same decade that has seen the birth of 'the Student Experience', 'value for money' and a growing crisis around student wellbeing and mental health; we have also had the advent of the National Student Survey, Teaching Excellence Framework, long term Employment Outcomes and the multi headed monsters that are league tables.

So, in a strange way we have to thank the insistence of successive governments that more and more data should be produced by Universities in order to create data lead choices and monitoring. Without such data all the league tables and Frameworks and the improvements they brought about, simply would not have been possible.

For years issues of 'retention', 'employability' and 'value for money' have been measured in fairly crude terms. But it was when they became contributing factors in league tables that Universities started to realise that data lead interventions at the level of the individual student could lead to improvements in their standings, that the cry went up for new monitoring tools.



The introduction of the National Student Survey in 2005 provided for the first-time data on levels of student satisfaction and opened the eyes of many institutions to glaring short falls in some areas of provision. Over the next five years Universities became more adapt in ways to improve their levels of satisfaction with many realising that improvements had to be targeted at all students even if those who completed the survey were restricted to final year students' weeks from graduation.

As Registrars and CIO's know only too well existing data such as HESA returns are too highly focused as their role is reporting to external agencies rather than informing an internal audience and guiding their actions.

The advent of £9,000 fees in 2012, led to a focus perhaps for the first time on the Student Experience, the monetisation of retention and the debate around the value for money delivered by a University degree.

Yet at that point in time Universities did not have the tools to hand to enable them to measure in the granular detail required, the multiple variables that go to make up the 'student experience' nor to accurately monitor retention and understand why and at what point they were vulnerable to losing students. Demonstrating 'value for money' was then and still is a major problem for Universities; examples yo-yo between the construction of new buildings and the earnings levels six months and now five years post-graduation.



The need to monitor the attendance of visa holding International students had a very important unintended consequence. Many Universities decided either for reasons of pragmatism or not wishing to discriminate, introduced University wide systems of monitoring and reporting attendance. So, without ever setting out to they had created a basic set of data that would go on to have a clear role in measuring and maintaining retention.

Just before the arrival of the £9,000 fee came a radical shift in the way Student Visas were issued and monitored. In 2011 Universities who acted as 'sponsors' for International students who required visas had to set up monitoring and reporting systems to ensure that visa bearing students both had enrolled and were attending classes. It was not just a case of monitoring but one of reporting students who were either 'missing' from class or whose visa had run out.



Back then monitoring attendance, issuing visas and dealing with International students were dealt with by different parts of the University and even by different parts of the same department. They were not joined organisationally or by communication trees nor by whole University policy imperatives. Up until that point there were no external pressures to join these elements together.

The next step was never going to be easy.



Typically monitoring systems were procured and installed via the CIO, attendance lists were created by and reported back on by in some cases, Academic Registries and in some cases individuals Departments or Schools or Faculties. Lists of students whose visas were running out were held by specialists in Immigration advice who could be located almost anywhere from Student Services to International Student Support to School Offices. The external pressure from the UKVI made Universities share the right data with the right people at the right time. Failure to do so would have major Institution wide consequences.

To the external observer a University seems to be a single organism with the single task of giving (or not giving) students degrees. But step inside the 'ivory towers' then Universities reveal themselves as highly siloed, complex, and unwieldy.



Yet it would be a mistake to see the innate 'unconnectedness' of Universities as wilful or deliberate. Indeed, it is only relatively recently that because of the need to respond to external pressures and internal questions with data, that the degree of 'unconnectedness' in Universities started to reveal itself as problem. The near impossibility of knowing exactly what every part of the University actually does, has made responding to the challenges of the last five to ten years of challenges, inevitably flawed.



The NSS in 2005 and the changes in Student Visa regulations in 2011 were political necessities that required a 'whole University approach'. Without which reputational damage would almost have been inevitable.

Simplicity is not however the answer to complexity.

The work of a University is complex and multi-dimensional. It cannot simply be reorganised so that whole functions can be organised in a clearly connected block as one would organise a car production line.

The tasks before CIOs, Directors of Student Services, Academic Registrars and PVCs Teaching and Learning such as 'retention', 'student wellbeing', 'employability' and who know what else just around the corner, have in common the fact they all have no single origin and hence no single solution. They are touched by every aspect of a Universities organisational being.

So, the only way forward is to embrace complexity via University wide solutions.

Student Mental Health is possibly one of the most challenging and individuated issues in UK Higher Education today. This very complexity has led to the realisation that the only possible approach is a University wide one.



Universities may be complex, but they are also creatures of habit. You don't need to have worked in a University for long to see the same issues come up at the same time of year, over and over again. Problems with timetables for the first few weeks, students struggling to deal with their first assignments, the stress of exams, students not returning after a break, the accumulating pressure to get a 'good' degree.

We forget the predictability of the 'student lifecycle' at our peril. For it gives us something to aim our increasingly data informed insights at. Make no mistake as we move into the 2020's we have never had so much data at our fingertips to inform, support and measure our interventions.

The rise over the last ten years of the Edtech industry in this country can give HE tools that it did not have the time nor the money to create for itself. Whether HE should be embarrassed that the most sophisticated tools are to be found in Primary and Secondary education in this country is a moot point.

Why?

Because as the HEPI/UNITE Student Insight Reports 2019 – 'The New Realists' states:

"The current generation of applicants and students is the most diverse ever, in terms not only of traditional demographics but individual identity. They need a broad, inclusive and flexible higher education experience that reflects this and meets their needs."

The data available to Universities today and into the future will be the product of collaboration between themselves and third parties working in partnership.

There will be challenges, there is still a journey of trust and understanding to be undertaken. 'Whole University' approaches must be informed by a realistic understanding of how things 'work'.

CIO's, Registrars, Student Services, Academics and others must allow the 'walls' between each other to be less opaque. Approaches that have been developed and work outside of Higher Education should not be dismissed merely because of their origin.

But, no matter how 'big' your picture nor how wide your 'left field' at the centre of everything must remain the student.



About the Author

BRIAN HIPKIN



In 2015, Brian established ReFRAME HE Consultancy Ltd, which focuses on the Student Experience and Edtech it draws upon his extensive experience as an academic, university Dean and HE consultant. For 4 years he was vice chair of AMOSSHE (the Student Services organisation). He has advised a number of leading Edtech companies on how they work successfully with Universities in the UK.

He has lead workshops, delivered keynotes and has written extensively on the student experience, HE Policy and Edtech. He has been a regular columnist, blogger and reviewer for a number of journals and magazines.

In 2015 he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) for his work in Higher Education. He divides his time between writing and consulting.



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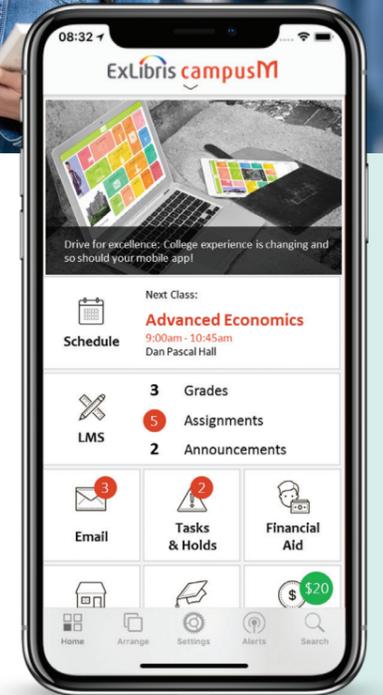
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