EXPLORING STUDENT-CENTRICITY IN CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Educational institutions have a growing focus on student-centricity along with the rise of customer-centric and user-centric approaches in organizations. Customer-centricity helps organizations to focus on what really matters: how to create value for and with their customers.

In South-East Finland University of Applied Sciences (Xamk), there is a recently crafted pedagogical strategy to focus pedagogical development activities and resources on future-oriented learning. One of the key elements in future-oriented learning is student-centricity, which means for example flexible learning tracks, career guidance and other student welfare activities. To support future-oriented pedagogy, university-wide curriculum development process is carried out during 2019. This research paper presents how student-centricity is perceived and developed in university-wide curriculum development process in Xamk. The data is collected in multi-disciplinary workshops in university campuses in early 2019.

Key findings show that student-centricity in curriculum development is related to elements in curriculum structure and pedagogy as well as university or unit culture and practices on collaboration with students and other stakeholders. Also suggestions on student-centricity development measures are presented.

Keywords: Customer-centricity, student-centricity, curriculum development.

1 INTRODUCTION

Service-centered dominant logic (SDL) of marketing implies that services are the main instrument of exchange and customer is a co-creator in a service process [1]. Thinking of our daily hairdresser or public transportation services phase by phase, we recognize how the customer participates the process in several ways: surfing the internet for alternatives or timetables, booking time or buying tickets online, discussing with other customers or passengers, perhaps helping them in some ways, influencing their service experience and so on. The value of a service is not embedded only in the moment of exchange but rather the whole process of customer involvement and use [1]. Developing service value comes through understanding the use of a service.

As the economy shifts more and more towards services, customer experience management becomes a key driver for businesses. However, business research indicates that even if businesses consider themselves delivering superior experiences for their customers, only small part of their customers report experiencing superior service. In Bain & Company survey on 362 firms, they found that 80% believed that they were delivering superior experiences for their customers, whereas only 8% of their customers said they were really delivering. They suggest two main reasons resulting to this delivery gap. Firstly, most growth initiatives that companies do, being new customer acquisition or process effectiveness, often damage the loyal profitable customer base that is the most important source of sustainable growth. Secondly, it is extremely hard to understand what customers really want. [2]

Service design is a practice of designing services in a user-centric way ie. by being able to experience services through customers’ eyes. It “uses a holistic and highly collaborative approach to generate value for both the service user and the service provider throughout the service’s lifecycle.” [3] [4] Understanding users requires combining various methods to collect knowledge about what users know, feel and dream. Sanders has pointed out the relationship between the various forms of data gathering and their ability to access different types of understanding of the user experience. Explicit knowledge about what people say or think can be accessed through questionnaires or interviews. Observable knowledge about what people do or how they use a service can be accessed through observational techniques. Tacit knowledge about what people know feel and dream or latent needs are often difficult to express in words or observe. Instead they can be accessed through generative
methods, making artefacts such as drawings, collages and models and telling a story about them. This helps people reflect on, re-live and re-feel their experiences, and so make them more aware. [5]

The service reality reveals that there are usually several customer groups with different needs and expectations. In addition to several customer groups there are also other stakeholders influencing the service and co-creating value. In the public transportation example, there could be bus and metro companies, drivers, online service providers, traffic control systems, road maintenance, train cafeteria personnel and so on, that all have an influence on how the service can be experienced on a particular day. To develop a service, all these stakeholders should be involved in a process of co-creation. [4] Akaka, Vargo and Lusch [6] conclude that services consist of ecosystems with various stakeholders interacting on personal, social and cultural level. They suggest that service development should focus more on building relationships and interactions of these networks than the actual outputs.

South-East Finland University of Applied Sciences (Xamk) is a multidisciplinary university of applied sciences working in four campuses all located in different towns in south eastern Finland. Xamk was created through a merger of two universities of applied sciences in 2017, when also curriculums were renewed to fit a new university standard. Xamk pedagogical strategy was crafted in 2018 to focus pedagogical development activities and resources on future-oriented learning. One of the key elements in future-oriented learning is student-centricity, which means for example flexible learning tracks, career guidance and other student welfare activities. Due to environmental changes and the new pedagogical strategy there was a need to develop all curriculums further to enforce collaboration and synergy through campuses and study programs, as well as to be able to deliver on future-oriented learning. Curriculum development process is carried out during 2019 by curriculum coordinators (79), who work mainly as principal lecturers and study program coordinators. The process is led by education directors (14) and coordinated by the author.

2 METHODOLOGY

The paper examines how student-centricity is perceived and developed in university-wide curriculum development process in Xamk.

The data was collected in multi-disciplinary workshops in university campuses in early 2019, aimed at curriculum coordinators and education directors. The goal for the workshops was to introduce service design tools to enhance student-centricity in curriculum development process as well as to share good practices related to student-centricity among different study programs.

Four similar workshops were held in early 2019, one on each university campus. Altogether 67 curriculum coordinators and education directors participated the workshops. All shared good practices were documented on flap board as they were mentioned and all flap boards were then photographed. To analyze the data all good practices were copied to post-it notes as they were said and organized to themes. Eight themes were formed: curriculum structure, pedagogy, guidance and counselling, student feedback, team building, integrated practices, collaboration and joint events. These themes were then organized into a mind map with connecting links between themes. Interconnected activities were identified and all material organized to three themes: curriculum, student understanding and stakeholder collaboration.

3 RESULTS

The results show that student-centricity in curriculum development is connected with curriculum structure and the development process itself, gaining student understanding during studies, and establishing and maintaining a culture of collaboration with internal and external stakeholders.

3.1 Student-centricity in curriculum structure and curriculum development process

Student-centricity in curriculum itself was related to clarity, close relation to working life, opportunities for individual study tracks and equality as well as enabling pedagogies. Curriculum development process was student-centric when students have various opportunities to comment and give feedback about their studies. Also graduated students (alumni) were included in the feedback process.
3.1.1 Student-centricity in curriculum structure

From student perspective, curriculum is a tool to comprehend the entity of a study program, the structure that needs to be followed and the choices that can be made. It may enable a student actively plan and carry out studies according to their own needs and life circumstances. Therefore clarity was emphasized in the course and study program descriptions but also in the modular structure of the curriculum. When one course equals five ECTS and a module consists of approximately three courses with fifteen ECTS, the curriculum is structured into understandable parts.

Curriculum should be developed based on working life needs for it to be student-centric. Curriculum should be built based on real life cases that form modules and courses. The learning goals of each course should be based on real needs in working life and help eventual employment. Curriculum should enable students to combine their work with their studies and benefit from the knowledge and skills they have gained in previous studies or jobs.

Curriculum that allows students to speed up their studies was perceived student-centric. This was established by placing basic studies and studies common for all students in the beginning, enabling thesis work at all times with weekly idea seminars and having several free choice modules in complementary competence for students to choose freely from all the courses available at Xamk but also online university portals. The availability of Xamk general studies available during all terms in all campuses as well as online for all students was reported to increase student-centricity by enabling speeding up studies but also providing equal opportunities for all. These studies include communication and language studies, research studies, entrepreneurship studies, digitalization studies, Russia-studies and mathematics studies, and their quantity and variety were increased with the current curriculum development process.

Also certain university-wide general principles and tools were perceived to increase student-centricity. Joint grading principles and student workload calculation models supported equality of all students regardless of their campus or study program. Material banks helped collect all course materials on one subject together for all teachers to use and enabled benefiting from other teachers’ knowledge and experience and created uniform study experiences throughout the university. Example lecture structures such as mass lecture combined with small group workshops helped teachers to plan their work better and focus more of their time on student guidance where it is required.

Curriculum enabled various student-centric pedagogical models such as problem-based learning, project-based learning and simulation learning.

3.1.2 Student-centricity in curriculum development process

Student-centricity in curriculum development process included various ways of collecting student feedback, such as questionnaires, interviews and development forums with practices varying from short group interviews or focus group discussions to 2-day co-creational workshops. Co-creational workshops used a scheme such as futures wheel and were combined with pre-tasks such as defoi. Simple workshop schemes were also utilized to facilitate participation, such as SWOT or must – should – nice division for development ideas. Online platforms such as padlet were found useful to facilitate online workshops. Curriculum drafts were posted on corridors for students to comment with post-it notes and markers while passing by.

Various methods for student feedback were integrated into studies. Contact lessons of an obligatory course Study and Career Planning were used to organize development forums and workshops. Entry interviews, personal study plan (PSP) meetings as well as practical training reports and feedback meetings were used to collect student feedback and gain student insights. Thesis topics were issued to research alumni on where they work and how well they consider the skills and knowledge gained during their studies match with the requirements they have faced in working life.

3.2 Student-centricity in gaining student understanding through studies

Student understanding was built by collecting data with various data collection methods during studies. Used methods varied from data collection with questionnaires and interviews to more collaborative and study-integrated forms. The goal was to build a culture of open discussion throughout the studies.

In the beginning of the studies, during orientation program, students were asked their opinions about study program, modules and courses as a group. Time and effort was put to team building to enable

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peer support and guidance. In online studies this was supported by online platforms such as padlet. Presenting own professions to other groups supported team building and collaboration between study programs, for example healthcare students providing first-aid training or performance tests for engineering students. Senior students coached first year students through mentoring and tutoring practices.

Students made their PSP and had a meeting about it with their study counsellor. Guidance and counselling was offered according to student preferences, online and face-to-face, during and outside office hours, in groups and individually.

During studies students were able to comment individual courses and modules either in written or by having a feedback discussion during or after a course or a module. During courses students would also assess and get feedback from peers.

Development forums for students were organized twice a year, offering students the opportunity to give feedback and discuss about their studies and study program together with teachers, study program coordinator and education director. Also language teachers, research and development personnel and company representatives were invited to development forums. Coffee and cookies were offered to make the event more relax and encourage students to participate.

Practical training reports was perceived as an important source of development ideas. Practical training together with students from other study programs enriched the working life experience. Feedback discussions were held after a practical training period together with students and company representatives.

Thesis start meetings were one way of bringing the student, the teacher and company representatives together, which supported the thesis but also helped build networks and collaboration. Public thesis seminars helped companies to join them as well. Collaborative thesis seminars with other study programs helped to understand the other field better.

In the end of the studies students answer a national questionnaire to give feedback on their studies. Also learning diaries and joint reflective discussions were used to give ideas for developing the study programme. 1-5 years after the studies the employment of the graduates was monitored and they were interviewed relating to their satisfaction on their studies. The importance of alumni collaboration was pinpointed with the fact that many of the current master degree students used to be a bachelor degree student earlier.

3.3 Student-centricity in culture of collaboration with internal and external stakeholders

Close collaboration with working life, businesses, organizations and networks supported student-centricity in helping education fit working life needs and enabling work-based learning within education. Collaboration included networking and relationship building activities, joint meetings relating to thesis work and practical training as well as joint events such as innovation and futures workshops, seminars and lectures. Delfoi research and futures workshops were considered as important tools in working life collaboration.

University alumni were also an important stakeholder group combining understanding on working life as well as education. Various forms of collaboration was identified. Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data on alumni satisfaction and employment monitoring. Alumni collaboration was used to build joint seminars for students and company representatives.

Collaboration with other universities and education organizations was also considered important by improving quality of the education and enabling students more variety in building their complementary competence.

Collaboration with different people or departments of the university helped integrate contents such as languages or research studies into professional studies. Collaboration with research, development and innovation (RDI) department and separate research centers was considered important in enabling work-based learning and building joint events. Collaboration with open university department was mentioned to give ideas how to develop study programs based on working life needs. Teacher collaboration in planning courses and modules as well as co-teaching was seen important in understanding what others are doing and helping in clarifying studies for students as well. Regular collaboration with the student union was considered important in understanding student needs.
4 CONCLUSIONS

Key findings show that student-centricity is perceived and developed in curriculum development in Xamk through curriculum features such as clarity, close relation to working life, opportunities for individual study tracks and equality as well as enabling pedagogies. It is also supported with a student-oriented development process where students and other stakeholders have plenty of opportunities to influence.

Curriculum development is supported by continuous student understanding building throughout the studies. Various data collection methods and study-integrated feedback methods were described in the beginning of studies, during studies and in the end of the studies. It was not discussed how the data from various sources was combined or analysed. This might be due to the fact that analysis was not connected to student-centricity by the respondents or that combining scattered data in different forms is difficult and therefore not really done. This should be researched further in order to find ways to combine data from different sources for better analysis and conclusions. Building student understanding continuously supports also developing other service elements such as pedagogy or guidance. The use of generative methods, building artefacts such as drawings, was not mentioned in this data. Encouraging these methods might help understand student experiences better.

Curriculum development is also supported by constant collaboration with various internal and external stakeholders. Working life, businesses and organizations were mostly mentioned but also other important stakeholders were identified and collaboration described. However, the collaboration seemed to be based more on one-on-one relationships than co-creation. With co-creational methods the networks could be enhanced further. Questionnaires, interviews and observation as methods are not mentioned relating to the stakeholder groups. This could be researched further and perhaps added to the used methods to gain better understanding on stakeholder needs and expectations as well.

Student-centric features of curriculum or curriculum development process are supported and even preceded by continuous collaboration practices and culture with students and other stakeholders. By identifying stakeholder groups and encouraging collaboration further also curriculum development might be enhanced.

This research focused on good practices, so the challenge of developing curriculums so often that it makes their use difficult for existing students was not mentioned. However, our loyal profitable customers should not be overlooked when making better future curriculums.

REFERENCES


