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**Initiative for enhancing the student experience**
Conference paper

Glandinning, I. Dunn, I. Butler, C. and Hood, S. (2008) Initiative for enhancing the student experience' Elate Conference Proceedings, Coventry University June 24: 42-52

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# Initiative for Enhancing the Student Experience

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*Abstract*

A Student Experience Enhancement (SEE) Unit, the first team of its type within Coventry University, has been established in the Faculty of Engineering and Computing. Through this paper the SEE team members aim to disseminate information about the Unit to other people interested in improving student support systems and particularly people considering embarking on similar initiatives.

The diverse drivers for the formation of the Unit are explored in this paper. The overriding aims are to improve the level of student satisfaction, make the Faculty a more pleasant place for study, enhance and enrich achievement and help to improve retention, by providing an appropriate level of support to serve the needs of different types of learners. It is intended that through a different type of engagement with students and staff to identify major roadblocks and minor inconveniences alike, and then to seek resolution.

The SEE team aims to explore different modes of engagement that will provide effective access to information about what "students", (more precisely, members of the EC Faculty Learning Community), perceive as good and bad about their relationship with Coventry University. However in order to bring about any necessary positive changes to services or systems, it is also essential for the Unit to communicate effectively with other people that can impact on experiences in the course of the "Student Journey". The SEE team relies on information, expertise and knowledge, from all types of University staff, but particularly people that have a student-facing role, both inside and outside the Faculty.

The paper summarises findings from initial research and activities that have been conducted by the Unit and provides some feedback on the experience of operation to date. There will be discussion of models designed to categorise aspects of engagement and highlight possible problem areas for the Unit to target. The paper will set out planned modes of operation for the SEE Unit and predict future directions.

**Key words:** Student Experience, Student Advocacy, Learning Enhancement, Student Journey, Student Services, Higher Education, Engineering and Computing

### *Background to the initiative*

This paper documents the progress and reports on innovative aspects of the initiative to establish a faculty level Student Experience Enhancement (SEE) Unit. The Unit in Coventry University's Faculty of Engineering and Computing (EC) was established in early 2008. The overarching mission for the Unit is to facilitate improvements to the provision of student services and support for the EC Faculty learning community, both within the Faculty and elsewhere in the University.

This is the first dedicated student experience unit for Coventry University, but other parts of the University may have such functions embedded elsewhere, typically in the programme

management teams. Many other universities already support similar specific activities, either locally within faculties or as part of the central student services. It is anticipated that the approach adopted by the SEE team and the lessons learnt in the process, could be of value to other faculties within the University and other educational institutions contemplating similar initiatives.
The Student Experience Road Map provides an initial overview of the scope of the Unit's activities (Figure 1), attempting to categorise different facets of the student experience. This model is being refined and developed as the SEE team itself develops and matures. As the Road Map describes, the SEE Unit is concerned with any aspect of the student experience and all stages of the Student Journey. Although the central "enrolled student" processes dominate the model and will be the main focus of initial activities, the Road Map deliberately includes the outlying Student Journey categories of Enquirer, Applicant, Graduate and Alumnus as members of the Faculty community. It is important to recognise that communication with a university during all stages of the Student Journey can influence many aspects of the university's success, including reputation, admissions targets, retention and achievement.

Strategic aims of the SEE Unit are to

- establish and operate the Student Experience Enhancement Unit in the EC Faculty, for the benefit of all members of the Faculty's learning community;
- encourage a student centred approach and culture within the EC Faculty;
- raise awareness of issues, identified from a wide range of sources, that impact on the learning community associated with the Faculty;
- consult with stakeholders in order to design and implement improvements to systems, practice and services within the Faculty;
- influence the wider University community to adopt a similar culture to that aspired to for the Faculty.

Strategic objectives of the SEE Unit are to

- establish a working protocol for the team by exploring examples of good practice elsewhere;
- proactively investigate all aspects of the student experience, phased over time according to the available resource, both utilising available evidence and by commissioning new surveys, to identify potential problem areas;
- provide a student advocacy service, responding to requests for help and support for all types of student problems, arising from staff, students or external agencies, as the need arises;
- actively liaise with members of the Faculty, including staff and students, to improve any systems and procedures that impact negatively on the student experience;
- directly or indirectly as appropriate, liaise with units and individuals outside the Faculty to promote and influence changes aspiring to excellence for the experience of all types of student inside and outside the Faculty

To set the context for this initiative, there follows a brief account of the background and history about the EC Faculty. This is followed by an explanation of the different modes of operation for the team.

## *Faculty Context*

The Faulty of Engineering and Computing at Coventry University has over 4,000 enrolled students (about 3100 full-time equivalent), making up about a quarter of the University's population and about 350 staff. The Faculty was established in 2005 by merging the entire School of Engineering, School of Mathematical and Information Sciences and the Built Environment portfolio from the School of Science and the Environment. Since that time there have been many changes to management, organisational structures, programmes and systems, some internal Faculty decisions and others arising from central University policy changes. Unsurprisingly, different parts of the Faculty are now spread across many buildings within the City centre campus, which is not ideal for communication or management purposes.

Significant funding amounting to £60 million, has been secured to provide a new building, and developments to an existing building, for the Faculty, with expected completion in 2011. It is essential that the facilities in the new structures are appropriately thought through to meet the expected teaching and learning requirements from 2011 onwards. This provides an ideal opportunity to review all aspects of the Faculty's provision, particularly teaching and learning, and to design the new building according to the emergent strategy.

Members of the Faculty's Learning, Teaching and Assessment advisory group are serving as champions for development of an innovative approach to teaching and learning, known as Activity Led Learning (ALL) (see Annex 1), by mediating and consulting across the different parts of the Faculty, conducting research and leading pilot studies into ALL (Wilson-Medhurst, 2008). The internal pilot studies in different subject areas are helping to identify what practices work well in particular types of learning situations within the Faculty's own provision.

In parallel the Faculty's future direction is being influenced by visits to Universities in different parts of the world, including Europe, USA and Australia, where Problem Based Learning (PBL), and other approaches embraced by the ALL approach, have been successfully adopted. In this way the Faculty policy is being developed, in part by learning from the experience of other universities with similar approaches.

The SEE Unit was founded as an essential part of the Faculty strategy towards a student focused approach, during the early discussion and initial development of the new teaching and learning strategy. The philosophy behind both initiatives is based on a culture of continuous improvement, which will be discussed later in this paper.

## *SEE Unit*

The Unit is based in the External Relations area of the Faculty. Initially just three permanent members have been assigned to the SEE Unit, a Finance Liaison Officer, a Faculty Assistant Registrar and an Academic Manager for Student Experience, each normally takes the lead on issues within their area of expertise, but the team functions together to provide mutual support and build the intelligence. Student ambassadors will be employed as required to support the Unit's activities. Many other agencies and individuals, from inside and outside the Faculty, are being consulted and involved as appropriate. The Academic Manager for Student Experience coordinates the team's activities. Oversight for the Unit is provided by the Associate Dean (External).

The team works in three ways: firstly providing a student advocacy service; secondly negotiating and mediating on known prioritised issues to achieve long term improvements; thirdly, proactively seeking information from a wide range of sources to identify and investigate good practice and problem areas, which will be utilised to inform Faculty policy and to drive changes to systems and practices. The three modes of operation are described in more detail below.

**Responsive**

The Unit provides a **Student Advocacy** service for assisting students and staff with difficult problems that arise, a "rapid response unit". Evidence arising from ad hoc problems may point to wider systemic defects and therefore may contribute to longer term planned and pro-active activities.

The Advocacy service serves to support, supplement, enhance and strengthen existing support provision. Staff and students are encouraged to use the Unit for

- referral for support for specific issues that fall outside the normal remit of programme support;
- recording ineffective processes or problem areas that impact on the student experience;
- investigations involving surveys of staff or students;
- procurement of external services or support from external agencies and organisations.

**Planned**

Maintenance of a prioritised list of documented problems and agreed activities, typically informed by the student and staff feedback, arising from the advocacy service, surveys, CCC's, staff suggestions;

Investigation of problems raised and consultation about good and poor practice, problems, suggestions;

Negotiation and mediation about proposals for corrective actions and long-term improvements to systems and processes;

On-going change management, monitoring and evaluation.

**Pro-active**

Organisation and management of events, surveys, interviews and focus groups to identify areas of weakness and strength in all areas of the student experience;

Construction and proposal of strategies for new working practices and system improvements;

Promotion and support for timely adoption and implementation of improvements to systems and procedures that affect any aspect of the student experience.

Investigation of potential sources for scholarships, bursaries, prizes and other opportunities, such as student competitions;

Organisation of events that contribute towards enhancement of the student experience;

Initiation of contacts with external agencies and organisations to promote the Faculty provision and facilities and to support recruitment.

The team members liaise with other parties, inside the Faculty, elsewhere within and outside the University, that have interest in the areas of concern or can help to bring about positive change in any student focused matter.

*Activities to date*

The Financial Support Officer was an early pioneer for the SEE Unit, having successfully operated in support of students with financial difficulties since January 2005. The effectiveness of this financial advocacy service was part of the inspiration for the formation of the SEE Unit, of which he is a key team member. It is worth reflecting here about the mode of operation and evidence of success of this service.

The financial advocacy service within the Faculty was the first of its kind within the University. The motivation was to reduce the Faculty debt provision through early engagement with the students and or their sponsors to resolve problems with tuition fee payments and invoices. This service provided staff and students with a viable contact point within the Faculty and the tuition fee debt provision has decreased significantly year on year since it was introduced. The success was based on providing one to one consultation with the students. The sensitive nature of the casework necessitated the utmost discretion and confidentiality to ensure privacy and gain trust. It became quite evident that students would seize this opportunity to discuss other issues causing concern, which lead to the formation of the SEE unit.

The Faculty financial advocacy service continues to liaise with contacts within the University to improve systems and procedures. Solving problems can be a long process due to the complex issues arising, most of which require corrective actions in other areas, typically Student Support, Registry, International Office and central Finance. Communication is ongoing with contacts in these areas to ensure processes become streamlined and increasingly customer focused.

Design of the Student Experience Road Map (Figure 1) was necessary to establish the remit of the Unit and to identify the scope and range of potential activities for the team members. This has been utilised to good effect in discussions about SEE with people both inside and outside the Faculty.

Members of the SEE team and others within the Faculty have spent a considerable amount of time amassing evidence of how other universities operate with regards to the student experience. This has principally involved discussing with Deans for Students or their representatives, the equivalent of Directors of Student Services and in some cases Pro-Vice-Chancellors responsible for the student experience. Other visits have involved a direct discussion relating to pedagogy and the impact on the experience and others an exploration of learning spaces and the impact that they have both on learning and experience.

The following paragraphs provide a few key phrases to summarise views from some of the visits.

> Boston University (USA) spend a great deal of effort to engage academic, and other staff, in social engagement with students in the belief that this creates and environment where academic and pastoral issues can be shared more openly.
>
> PACE (USA) have reclassified their student services as an academic area and use for example their housing officers and residence assistants to deliver credit bearing life skills classes. Interestingly the Director of Residences is mandated to be experimental and whilst ensuring good continued occupancy, does not have this as his principal objective. He believes that happy students stay in University residences

and at the University, but has a realistic view about enforcing accommodation contracts. He characterised this with the non-original statement that 'It is easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission'.

NYU (USA) have made sure that their student facing advisors have access to all systems and are trained to respond to all questions, not only their organisational functional responsibility.

Aalborg University (Denmark) organise the curriculum so that their students work on real projects in groups at all levels and stages of their course and provide space for the group to operate, effectively granting them a level of autonomy supported by a project tutor who has both an academic and pastoral role.

Strathclyde University, Department of Mechanical Engineering, form the students into work-groups from day one of induction and the groups then work together for the first three semesters. Lecture theatre spaces have been modified to ensure that the seats are arranged for groups of four people to communicate, an easy tracking mechanism for attendance. The basis for group membership is location in accommodation and social and academic background.

University of Southern Denmark, have adopted a problem based learning approach and have a very realistic view that they are in competition for student time. Specifically the students need to work, live and study and they ensure that nothing is taken for granted.

The University of Massachusetts (USA) have a large team of advisors, often senior students and some full-time employees who are academic advisors to junior students to ensure that their programmes are on-track and indeed that they are on the correct programme.

The University of Queensland (Australia) make use of space to provide a focal point to first year students and provide and academic tutor, the cohort manager, who has an office based openly in the area, ensuring that the students have immediate resolution to pastoral problems. The space also houses subject tutors, again these are senior students, who provide permanence of academic support for common modules. The space is configured in three modes, booths for group work, equipped to a high standard with presentation equipment, café style seating around tables and soft areas which positively encourage the students to rest, but within the University.

SRH Heidleberg (Germany) has designed a teaching building rather like a conference facility, with whole walls of classrooms being glazed. They claim anecdotally that this has resulted in the students having much more pride in the spaces and recognising that they are 'on show' being more 'alert'.

University College Gjovik (Norway) have renovated an old space and turned it around to create a focus and space where students can eat, work and study in groups.

Queen's University (Canada) have made extensive use of learning spaces to encourage group based activity and use students to manage the space for other

students, levels of minor vandalism have been eliminated and students feel much more responsible for their learning environment.

Many other universities have been visited and each has added something to the overall view.

Some organisations outside academia with a good reputation for customer care have been explored by the team members. Although there is a clear distinction between providing a customer focused service culture and student support requirements within a university, there are many areas of similarity and parallels that can be drawn. The organisations being actively investigated include a retailing chain and a local government organisation.

Many existing sources of information about student perceptions have been studied and summarised by the Unit, particularly results from student feedback mechanisms including the annual National Student Satisfaction survey and more detailed local information through Faculty course consultative committees and module surveys. Particular priority is being given by the Unit to target and further investigate any student experience aspects where problems have been identified, for example, all facets of student placements.

The most important intelligence source for the Unit is members of the Faculty's learning community, particularly students and student representatives, but also any Faculty staff that have direct contact with students. It is essential that there is understanding about the Unit's role, but also confidence in the operational aspects and in the team's motives. There has been some awareness-raising within the Faculty about the Unit's purpose and scope of activities at the management level and to some student groups, particularly student representatives. To brief and consult with the wider staff community, a full Faculty away-day about the Student Experience is scheduled in July 2008. The student engagement activities will begin to roll out during student induction week in September 2008.

Few people involved in process improvements would argue that the processes required to manage and deliver changes are as important as the changes themselves. The team members have made a study of a diverse range of change management and improvement models in applied in different contexts to inform their policy about operational engagement.

### *SEE Unit Vision*

The strategy to be adopted by the Unit was largely informed by good practice elsewhere, but was designed to surmount significant obstacles and to address the Unit's resource limitations.

There is a disparity between the time and resources available to the initial SEE team compared to the enormity of the scope of the student experience. Moreover, the team members have other demanding responsibilities that can at times consume time intended to be dedicated to the SEE Unit. To overcome this problem, Student ambassadors (SAs) will be utilised as required for specific activities to supplement resources available to the SEE team, these are carefully selected individuals enrolled on courses in the Faculty who are also employed casually by the Faculty to help with various activities.

From the start of the 2008-9 academic year a student advocacy support desk will be staffed at regular and advertised periods by a team of carefully selected and trained SAs. This is a practice used very successfully at other universities studied by the team, for example PACE

(USA). SAs will also be employed to assist the process of consultation to obtain student feedback and with recording and management of the information collected.

In many ways the SEE Unit's mission is about investigation, facilitation, leading to management of change. However no direct authority has been vested in any of the SEE team members to make changes either inside or outside the Faculty. The operational arrangements for the team reflect this reality, but still demonstrate how positive change can be delivered. For the team to gain credibility there needs to be clarity about the team's mission and confidence from the learning community about the ability of the SEE Unit to deliver appropriate improvements and innovations.

Certainly in a higher education context there are many factors that prevent rapid changes. Kolmos and de Graaff compare the management of a university faculty to "the navigation of a super tanker….The inertia of mass precludes any abrupt change of course" (Kolmos and de Graaff, 2007:35). This analogy clearly reflects the experience of the SEE team.

Knoster (Knoster, Villa, Thousand 2000) proposes six elements that must be in place for effective management of change: vision + consensus + skills + incentives + resources + action plan

Knoster asserts that any missing or incomplete element is likely to lead to failure. When attempting to translate this into the context of a university faculty, some of these aspects are easier for an SEE Unit to address than others.

Before any change can be agreed the ownership needs to be identified. The Owner would normally be a senior manager with due authority and budget responsibility. Typically within the EC Faculty this would be an Associate Dean, but complex changes may have multiple stakeholders across different parts of the University. Initial ideas for improvements could be proposed by anyone involved the change process, but need to be developed through negotiation then "sold" to the Owner and other parties involved, by mediation.

Knoster's vision is the emergent idea for the proposed solution. Achieving a consensus within a university context for any plans for changes should involve the consultation process with the Owners and all stakeholders involved, but with particular consideration for learners on different stages of the Student Journey (Figure 1). The SEE Unit's role is to document the problem and the process, facilitate the mediation process and help to create an action plan, fitting this to a realistic timescale. The timely delivery of necessary skills and resources are covered within the action plan and agreed with the Owner and budget holder. This change control model requires the SEE team to monitor the implementation of the agreed change to ensure effective delivery and, if required, introduce minor refinements over the longer term, which would emerge though continuous monitoring.

The remaining element from Knoster's model above, incentives, possibly creates the most difficulty within an HE setting, but could help with the successful delivery of improvements. Within a UK university setting, incentives are unlikely to be in the form of substantial pay rises or promotion for all involved.

Different types of incentive-led approaches to facilitating changes successfully adopted by many organisations outside academia can be applied to HE. The following list suggests how members of the learning community can benefit from the SEE Unit's endeavours.

- A more collegiate working environment, less stress and hassle;
- Empowerment through involvement in decisions, greater satisfaction about work or study and enhanced feeling of self worth;
- Less disputes about procedures, clearer and more effective processes, better communications resulting in more effective use of available resources and less of a treadmill approach;
- Students would benefit from happier staff: enhanced support and guidance, improved retention and achievement;
- Support and technical support staff and student ambassadors more integrated into the "Community of Learners", more involvement in student support activities;
- Local Faculty successes possibly influence processes in the University as a whole.

The University has responded to a number of drivers in the recent past, which have helped to improve and assure quality and standards. Clearly, the largest influence has been from the Quality Assurance Agency. However there have been other initiatives that have been adopted piecemeal by the University in order to encourage improvements to processes and quality, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and more recently 6-Sigma. Two different business process improvement approaches have been studied is some detail, by the team. Firstly, as Martin and Arokian (2006) proposed, "Lean Principles" can be usefully applied to HE. Secondly, although rather heavy to adopt wholesale, there are very many relevant aspects to the Capability Maturity Model Integration for Services (CMMI-SVC), currently being developed by the Software Engineering Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. Further discussion of this research is the subject of a future paper from the Unit.

### *Engagement and Operation*

The modus operandi for the Unit relating to the pro-active aspects of the team's role can be summarised in the following eight categories of change management activities:

1. Definition and awareness-raising
2. Consultation, outreach activities
3. Information capture and management
4. Analysis, Interpretation
5. Identification and documentation of action areas
6. Authorisation for change
7. Management of change
8. Implementation, refinement, monitoring, review and evaluation

The final activities are important to ensure any "teething problems" arising from implementation are identified early and that timely adjustments are made. Monitoring and reviews provide for continuous improvement.

### *Conclusions*

The SEE Unit is in the early stages of its difficult mission to make a difference to the student experience within the Faculty and beyond. The strategy and initial operational arrangements have been established and the team members are now involved in awareness-raising activities. Student representatives have expressed enthusiastic support for the Unit, which is very welcome. All three strands of the Unit's activities are beginning to make some

impressions, for example aiding individual students with financial problems, influencing decisions about induction activities by listening to feedback, introducing new activities based on successful practice elsewhere.

The team members have been consulting with various parties to open multi-way negotiations about some well known recurrent problems. However it is clear that the sustainable solutions will take some time to be explored, agreed and implemented. Impediments encountered include office politics, silo mentality, reluctance to communicate.

To achieve sustained and excellent support systems for Faculty students requires an ethos of non-competitive collegiality across all staff in the Faculty and hopefully in time this will extend to all parts of the University. This involves actively collaborating and cooperating, aspiring to make systems work more smoothly and more efficiently.

Prioritisation is important to ensure that activities are proportional to the available team resources and that activities initiated are followed through to completion. The initial focus for the Unit is on improvements to the experience for enrolled students. The plan is to extend activities to encompass all Student Journey categories. Clearly the future of the Unit will be influenced by the perceived effectiveness and useful outcomes that result.

One final point for reflection that emerged from a study of organisations awarded for excellence in customer care: incentives are useful to encourage positive engagement with change. As the list of benefits provided earlier indicates, these need not be material or costly, but awareness of such incentives within learning communities can serve to facilitate the management of change.

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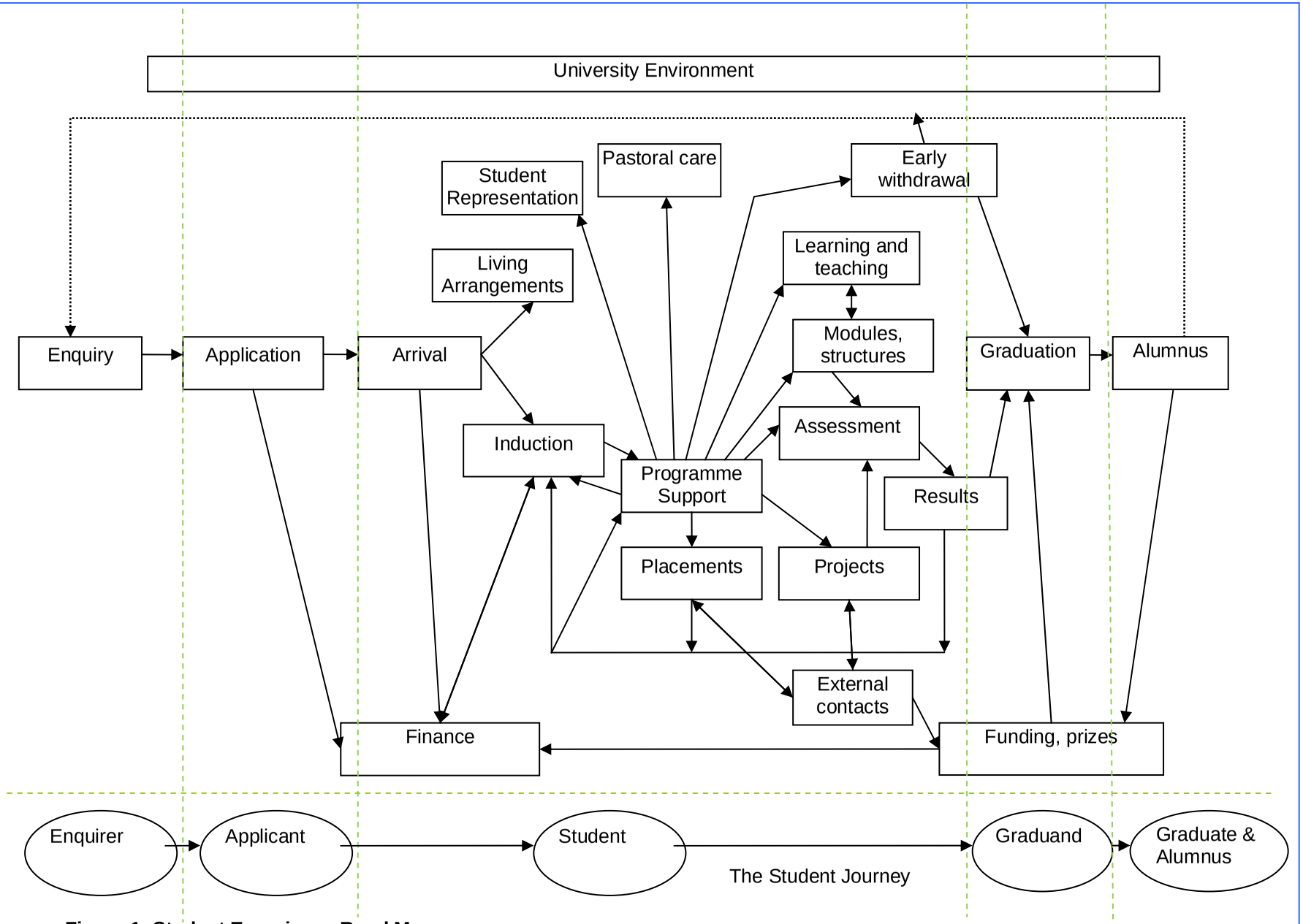


**Figure 1: Student Experience Road Map**