

# THE GATEWAY TO STUDENT LIFE EXPERIENCE A PRODUCT-SERVICE DESIGN APPROACH

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## ABSTRACT

When thinking of attending a Higher Education Institution (HEI), a whole new experience comes to mind. Finding lodging, eating at the student restaurant, getting support during times where things get difficult, participating in fraternity life, and so much more, are all comprised in a term that we coin ‘the student life experience’ (SLX). This experience starts the moment you apply for an HEI and holds just as much value for your studies, as the actual studies themselves. At the University of Antwerp, auxiliary services provide necessary means for students and their experience in- and outside of the lecture hall. This wide range of services is essential to the quality of the university. Optimizing these services, makes a university stand out amongst others. Not only is it important to understand that balance and in particular to optimize the perception and interaction regarding the Student Information Point (STIP) that acts as a gateway to these services. The paper proposes a product-service design approach rooted in broad student involvement and open communication.

*Keywords: Higher education, auxiliary services, student life experience, service design*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The University of Antwerp (UAntwerp) counts 21,133 students (including doctoral students) divided over four different campuses throughout Antwerp and its suburbs. Their SLX starts at the moment of enrolment when they embark on a new journey for the next couple of years [1]. They will eat, converse, party, and, obviously, do a lot of course work. SLX covers all of those experiences outside of the classroom or educational processes, such as cultural and sports activities, finding lodging, coaching, financial or emotional support, eating in the university’s restaurants, etc. All these experiences are facilitated through the auxiliary services by the university’s Student Oriented Services [2]. The Student Information Point (STIP) functions as a gateway between the students and the Student Oriented Services. However, a survey [3] has shown that only a small percentage of the students use the auxiliary services. In order to extend the services’ appeal, interaction is encouraged with the auxiliary services and STIP, which should result in improving SLX. By focusing on both accessibility as well as service aftercare, innovative service performance should result from the input by students.

We can define two major stakeholders: the student population of UAntwerp as well as the university itself. Both can be broken up: on the one side, the students can be divided into three groups based on their motivation concerning supporting activities. First of all, there are students who are indifferent to these services. Often they do not know of their existence and will not interact with them unless it is absolutely necessary, for example, when a student has to request for special facilities (as in the case of dyslexia). Next, there are students who through STIP use these services occasionally or who will interact with them on a more regular basis. However, regularly these students do not know that all these services are interconnected, which can lead to misunderstandings and poor experiences. Finally, there are the student representatives. These students commit themselves to improve the inner workings of the university. These elected students can be grouped into smaller subcategories, but all of them are fairly up to very familiar with the operational side of UAntwerp.

On the other side, there is the university itself. Our focus rests firmly with the Department of Social, Cultural and Student Oriented Services. This department organises the auxiliary services which can be divided in seven groups (Figure 1); Culture, Sports, Student Associations/Coaching, Catering, Social & Housing Services, and the Study Advice & Student Counselling Service (DSSB). STIP functions as a gateway to each of these groups, although the students can approach the services directly (thus bypassing

STIP). STIP acts as a physical information desk on campus and directs the students to the right service solution. Students can come into contact with services such as Culture, Sports and Catering without the help of STIP. However, the Social and Housing Services and Student Advice and Student Counselling Service are less accessible, and access requires mediation through STIP. Specifically, STIP will process the students' requests and regularly schedules appointments. The current system is the result of organic growth within the university, which makes it less obvious to restructure and realign STIP to the needs of the students.

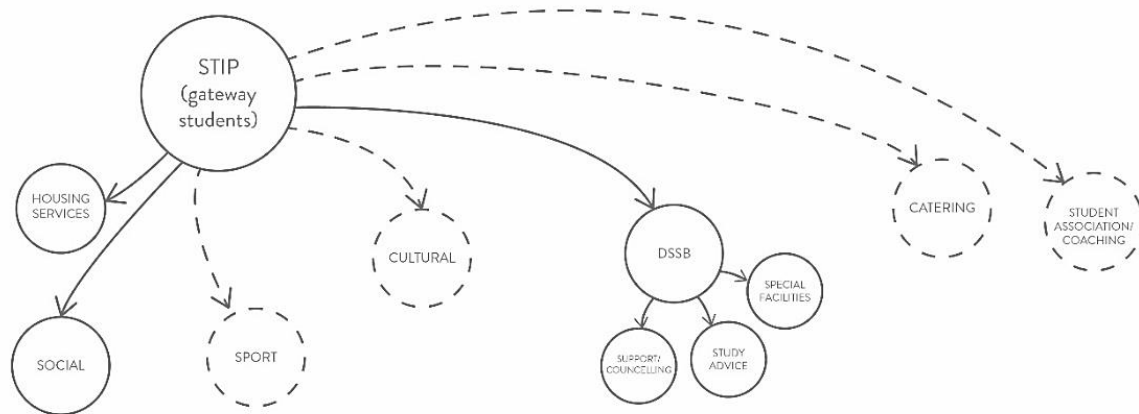


Figure 1. Simplified overview of the auxiliary services at the University of Antwerp

The head of the Department for Social, Cultural and Student Oriented Services suggests that 50 % of all student requests which are handled by STIP, are not related to their services. These requests are mainly course, faculty or another department related and should not be handled by STIP. This results in STIP employees having to refer students to other services on top of their own workload. This confusing situation affects the students' perception of the auxiliary services [4].

Bonnarens et al (2019) mapped out the different gaps that describe the unfamiliarity with and under/misuses of the auxiliary services (Figure 2). There are five gap types: listening, design and standards, service performance, communication and customer gaps. These types are placed on a timeline in four points of interaction with a service [5], the first one being pre-core service encounters. In this step, the two main gaps are listening and communication. Next, there is the initial encounter, with focus on the design and standards gap. Third, the core interaction step, which covers the listening, design and standards, service performance and customer gap. Finally, there is failure, recovery and feedback. This step contains a clear communication gap. The lack of communication and accessibility are at the root of dissatisfaction within these services [6] [7].

USER JOURNEY		Pre-Core Encounter	Initial Encounter	Core Interaction	Failure, Recovery and Feedback
GAP MODEL	Catering	Communication*			
	Lodging	Communication*			Communication*
	Social	Communication** + physical aspects*			Communication*
	Student Advice and Student Counselling	Communication** + physical aspects**			Communication*
	Sport	Communication** + physical aspects*			Communication*
	Cultural	Communication** + physical aspects**	Responsiveness*		
	Student Association			Safety*	Safety*

\* sig < 0,05      \*\* sig < 0,005

Figure 2. Gap Model (Bonnarens et al, 2019)

Why should the University of Antwerp invest in altering and adjusting their auxiliary services to its students' needs, aside from consumer happiness? Universities that provide solutions for their students, gain popularity among current and potential students [8]. By putting focus on the auxiliary services and enhancing that SLX, they can stand out among other universities. The article describes how qualitative and service design methods are used to improve these auxiliary services on campuses [9].

## 2 METHODOLOGIES

A student cannot judge the SLX as better if there is no commitment to improving the SLX. Therefore, it is important to understand the motivational drivers and students' current interactions with the existing services. We will specifically look for these motivational drivers by means of the following two methods.

### 2.1 In-Dept Interviews

First of all, in-depth interviews were conducted with six student representatives. As mentioned above, student representatives are highly engaged students who are committed to represent their peers in councils for a period of at least one year. There is an age range from nineteen to twenty-three years old, and all of the participants are from different faculties. Two of the participants are seated both in faculty student councils and in the Education Board, which is a central advisory body of the University of Antwerp. They are four female and two male participants (n=6). The duration of the interviews ranges from 28 to 64 minutes long. All participants were asked about their motivation, their engagement and their interactions with the auxiliary services. They were allowed to elaborate further on a subject matter where they deemed it necessary. The questions were devised so that the participants were forced to put everything they said in perspective. In these interviews, the focus was on the motivation, as specified above, and their extra interaction with the services of the University of Antwerp. By doing so, we focussed on an aspect that is not yet covered in the previously discussed context. However, this opened up a new avenue with regard to the transparency of the existing services and their operations.

### 2.2 Online Qualitative Workshop

Following the in-depth interviews, and due to the COVID pandemic, a workshop was held in MURAL, an online web application, that allows the users to write on Post-it Notes, to ideate and to brainstorm on a mutual online whiteboard. The workshop focussed on motivation and participation as well as the aforementioned terms "feedback" and "open communication". There were eight participants (n=8), two of whom are staff members of the Department of Social, Cultural and Student Oriented Services. The other participants are student representatives, two of whom were also part of the in-depth interviews. The participants' ages range from 19 to 23 for the students, and 32 to 35 for the staff members. Here we focus on three sections of the workshop. First of all, the ice-breaker aimed to link visual metaphors with the perception of STIP. This section had a duration of 20 minutes. This exercise was performed in two groups of three and one group of two participants. Within each group participants cooperated and debated their group logic. This was followed up with a debate between all eight participants. Next, a lotus blossom exercise [10] was done by the participants. After being asked about their motivational drivers, both intrinsic and extrinsic, the participants wrote these drivers down. Subsequently, the common denominators were looked into, and participants focussed on delving deeper into these drivers. At the end of this section, the participants had an open discussion about the collected answers. Finally, the last section was based on the previously gathered motivational drivers' "feedback" and "open communication". It comprises three stages. In the first stage, the participants were asked about their expectations regarding feedback within the university. The focus rested on the aspect of open communication between the services and the students. Then, the participants attempted to think outside the box following the prompt "How amazing would it be if...". After 5 minutes, both stages were discussed openly. The participants ended this section by elaborating on the Post-it Notes when they deemed it necessary.

## 3 RESULTS

### 3.1 In-depth Interviews

Each motivational driver is illustrated in Figure 3, indicated by the number of times they were mentioned during the different interviews shown in the grey and white boxes. The focus lies on feedback, open communication and witnessing progress since these were mentioned in all six interviews. Besides these drivers, there are also smaller factors in play that provide extra motivation, such as it being a learning experience or involving the sentiment of helping others. However, these are specifically linked to the representational aspect of their job description and not merely to being a student at the UAntwerp. We highlight one of the most prominent remarks from the interviews: *"I want to help others the way I expect to be helped, especially during my academic career"*.



Figure 3. The resulting motivational drives

When looking at the positive experiences of interaction with the services of the University of Antwerp, as shown in Figure 4, a number of factors are also mentioned as motivators, such as feedback, open communication and witnessing progress. These factors are mentioned in five out of six interviews.

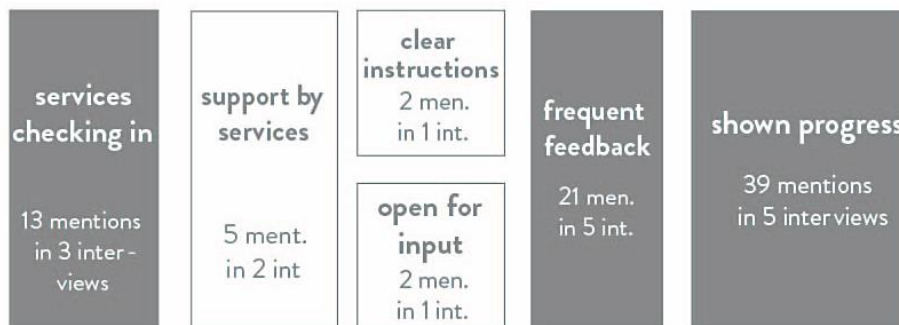


Figure 4. The factors contributing to a positive service experience

### 3.2 Online Qualitative Workshop

With regards to the perception of STIP, a clear pattern comes to the foreground. The four dominant metaphors are the headset (8 mentions), the pair of glasses (8), a glass of beer (5) and the hands (8). These metaphors were reported in all three group outcomes. In the open discussion, they are further explained. First of all, the headset is described as listening to the students and their necessities. Next, the pair of glasses represents the need for support and the sentiment of having STIP looking out for the students of the UAntwerp. Next, the glass of beer is described as down-to-earth and accessibility: i.e., the services and STIP must be at the level of the students. Lastly, the hands represent reaching out and supporting the students. Concluding this section, a general pattern regarding accessibility and support has arisen. In the section where we ask about the motivational drivers, similar results are reported. This can be observed in Figure 5, which maps the drivers in the grey and white boxes by the number of times they were mentioned during the different interviews.

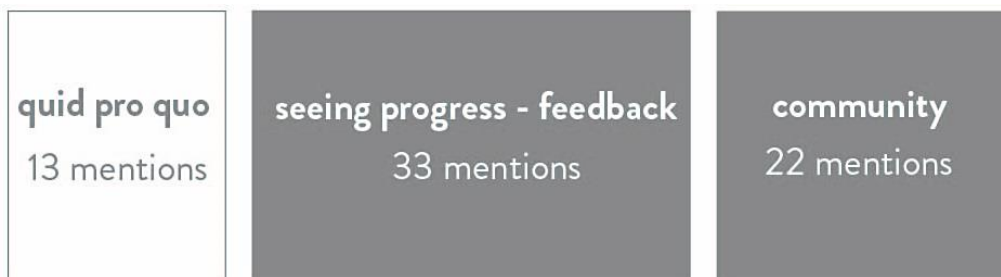


Figure 5. The resulting motivational drives - MURAL

Concluding the feedback section, six out of eight participants stated that in-house communication such as the student email and the electronic learning platform Blackboard are not efficient means of communication regarding the auxiliary services. These participants state that: “*Students perceive these messages as spam or advertisements, because they do not use their email account or Blackboard for non-course related subjects.*” This leads to a communication gap between service and student.

## 4 DISCUSSIONS

After compiling the information from the context and the aforementioned methods, we can now focus on four insights. Firstly, many students are looking for a way to engage in the innovation of the auxiliary services and the university as a whole [11]. However, a year with an extra workload is the main reason why a majority of students do not pursue a roll as student representative. Yet, it is clear that interested students still want to participate in some manner.

Secondly, all results can be reframed as two loops: motivation-participation-synthesis-STIP-feedback [12] and awareness-contact-STIP-feedback. These loops are mutually reinforcing (Figure 6). Feedback anchors both loops [13]. It highlights STIP as the gateway to the services and generates word of mouth within the students' inner circles.

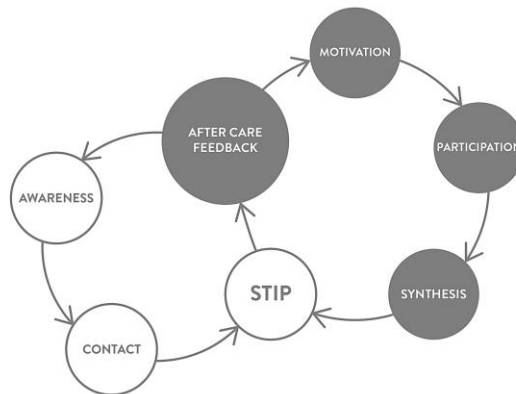


Figure 6. Two enforcing loops - Feedback as leverage point

Thirdly, we observe a matrix that encapsulates the four pillars of this interaction [12] (Figure 7). In this matrix, potential innovation ideas can be mapped. These pillars are placed in juxtaposition of each other. Horizontally, there is a difference between the intensity with which this pillar is executed. Both motivation and participation are on a student level, while the synthesis and feedback are on a service level. Vertically, the pillars are divided in emotional and physical, or passive and active. Motivation and feedback are experienced passively, while participating and synthesizing are active tasks. This matrix maps the innovative process to manage the gaps and find solutions that cover all four pillars.

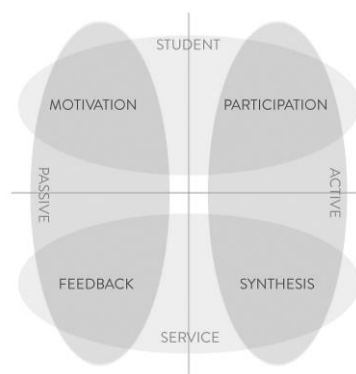


Figure 7. Four Pillar Matrix

Lastly, following our research, student life can be divided onto 6 different entry points for innovation (Figure 8). When looking at being a student at the UAntwerp, each of these entry points has their own respective potential for feedback, interaction and visibility, which are all essential to the quality of the SXL [12]. By utilizing these points, the auxiliary services are able to provide the necessary means for the student, while optimizing their inner workings to the fullest to receive the most efficient outcome.



Figure 8. Six Entry Points of Student Life

## 5 CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this paper continues along the lines of previously performed research [14] and is based on an in-depth reflection by stakeholders. It is based on students' needs and serves as a guide to approach the service innovation bottom-up instead of top-down. In this paper, the students' drivers are brought into focus. The challenge is to translate their innovative potential into actual or improved auxiliary services. Our research shows a prominent presence of the need for feedback in all stages of the process, especially during aftercare [13]. Research also shows that the misuse of their work capacity prevents the current services to execute this advice properly. However, by introducing/inducing feedback, the students become more aware of the inner workings of the services. With this insight, the 50% under/misuses by students of the auxiliary services should decrease. By decreasing the work overload, there is a greater potential for innovation and meeting the actual needs of the students. Besides efficiency, the overall perception and image of the auxiliary services gets a needed boost. This can be provided by the same feedback and aftercare that is aforementioned [3]. This feedback and aftercare can take on many forms. However, we observe that the communication of the auxiliary services should be independent of course related communication. The feedback in itself should be short and concise and ideally personalized to the users. The aim is to have students propagating a renewed perception through word of mouth after having experienced positive results with the auxiliary services [15].

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