

Keeping it Lean – how can we improve services and maximize expenditure on the student experience?

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The ABS Policy Network is part of a series of events that are being held by the ABS across the UK. These events provide a platform for key stakeholders in higher education (HE) policy and business school practice to engage in debate and discussion around pressing issues. The Policy Network aims to directly engage with stakeholders, to influence policy, and to increase media profile.

This second annual series of events focus on one central question:

“Is it Possible to Balance Student Demands with Business Needs”

That question has been broken down into focused sessions with specific topics. This event centred around the topic:

“Keeping it Lean – how can we improve services and maximize expenditure on the student experience?”

To help us negotiate these discussions, the ABS invited key players from stakeholders in the HE sector.

Profiles



Zoe Radnor holds a Chair of Service Operations Management Loughborough University School of Business and Economics. Her area of interest is in performance and process improvement and, service management in public sector organisations. Zoe has recently been a Management Practice Advanced Institute of Management (AIM) Fellow considering sustainability of Lean in public services. She has led research projects for the Scottish Executive, HM Revenue and Customs, HM Court Services, HealthCare, Local Government and Higher Education organisations which have evaluated how 'lean' techniques are and could be used in the public sector. She has developed a House of Lean for Public Services.



Len Shackleton is Professor of Economics at the University of Buckingham and Economics Fellow at the Institute of Economic Affairs. He was formerly Dean of the Westminster Business School and the Royal Docks Business School, University of East London.

Key Themes

Lean tools don't work in isolation

The context in which institutions are operating is important – reductions in government funding have led to the introduction of lean in many public services. Problems can arise when efficiencies and reduction of waste become the focus rather than effectiveness, value or flow. The notion of a user is paramount and it is important to focus on engagement of staff and users rather than just establishing and embedding certain practices. A good case study is how the University of Derby have identified 'failure points' in the student experience in conjunction with students. Lean tools will not generate long term improvement on their own – they need underpinning.

Correctly implemented, it should re-engage people rather than making them feel more distant or undermining of the value of vocation. Lean can successfully be applied in HE if you can find a way to engage and encourage individuals in the system.

Value can be more difficult to define in these public systems than in the private sector, but it can be done. Data is not used well enough currently in HE and can help more if used correctly.

If an institution's mission and how it is to be delivered are understood, then changes can be made. A shift in culture and staff are often both required.

Private / public sector

Business schools in the public sector can appear too homogenous, having emerged in the UK in response to incentives, rather than being designed. Universities need to bear some of the risk of encouraging business schools to become more entrepreneurial.

In order to be more closely linked to the business world business schools may need to become more or completely independent.

There is a perception that the academic area of the student experience is shrinking in the public sector, whereas this is the bit that the private sector focus on above all else.

Conclusions

Business schools, individually and collectively, need to be clearer about what they are trying to achieve. If this happens, accreditation and other processes can be collectively changed to support the incentives that we are looking for.