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# THE CENTRE TAKES ON THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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# INTRODUCTION

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**THIS WHITE PAPER FOCUSES ON HOW THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY IS TAKING A MORE PROMINENT ROLE IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE.**

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A number of factors are influencing the decision-making in universities as to how they manage and enhance the student experience. The overwhelming impetus is to run more activities from the centre and to make a sharper distinction between what is owned and operated by the centre and what remains with the academics. We look at why this is happening, how universities are responding to the pressures, what implications this has for the future configuration of universities and how universities should approach the change journey.

We hope the paper makes for interesting reading.

We would welcome your feedback to:  
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“ Managing the student experience successfully is going to be one of the most important things that universities do over the next 10 years and has profound implications for what the university of the future will look like ”

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## TRADITIONALLY, THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE WAS THE PRESERVE OF THE ACADEMICS.

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**Traditionally academics had the relationship with the student not only on a day-to-day basis as part of the teaching and learning process, but also in terms of looking after the student’s pastoral needs.**

More recently, across the UK, the central university is consciously taking a greater role in the student experience displacing the academics and departments/schools in the process.

There are a number of factors underlying this move ranging from external governmental and regulatory pressures to the view that students as consumers are demanding a better return on their investment. We think that this shift in the balance of power is undoubtedly the correct direction of travel and should bring significant benefits. However, the final outcome must be to make the relationship with the student more special by getting the right people to manage each element of it in the best possible way. The academics should look after the teaching, learning and research with the central university taking care of the rest.

The central university must be equipped to deliver its side of the bargain. Its challenge is to demonstrate the capability, deliver the goods and manage the change process so as to avoid open warfare with the academics.

Managing the student experience successfully is going to be one of the most important things that universities do over the next 10 years and has profound implications for what the university of the future will look like.

### Why is the central university stepping in?

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A combination of factors seems to be dictating the actions of universities. These factors, when taken together, are leading the universities to pull more activities into a centre that can co-ordinate, manage, monitor and report on them. Universities feel that they will be more able to demonstrate consistency, transparency and effectiveness when they have certain activities housed under a university-wide body.

There are a number of drivers in play. Unfortunately, universities have a degree of control or influence over relatively few of them.

### The student experience – more than just having a good tutor

Over the past couple of decades it has become apparent that the student experience goes beyond the simple delivery of quality teaching. There is no doubt that this must lie at the core of the student experience, but in the days when the academics owned the student experience it tended not to venture much beyond these narrow boundaries. Now, when there is intense pressure via league tables and the National Student Survey, and the competition for (profitable) international students is so fierce the universities are having to look at what else they offer outside the classroom. This leads them to look at the whole student journey from the initial contact/enquiry, the handling of the application, “keep warm” activities, making the offer, induction through to graduation and alumni relations. Between freshers’ week and graduation, there are a whole host of other areas where universities are seeking to gain an advantage over their peers: IT provision, student accommodation, the quality of the campus and libraries, support for learning difficulties, student finances, careers advice, work placements and social activities. The list is almost endless. Sometimes a university has a physical location that is particularly attractive or it can rely on the appeal of the town or city where it is located to act as a magnet. Others are not so fortunate and have to trade solely on what the university itself can offer. In either case, we have seen universities taking a good look at the overall package they offer the student and deciding that, for a good part of it, the central university needs to intervene to maximise the offer.

“ We believe that there will be higher expectations from students of the entire experience. Whether this comes from a consumerist attitude is largely immaterial ”

### Students as consumers

There is a view that fee-paying students are becoming more “consumerist” in their outlook and are no longer satisfied with the “good natured amateur” approach of the academics when it comes to the entire student experience. They have entered into a commercial arrangement with the university and whereas in the past they could overlook some deficiencies in the experience as it was “free,” this no longer applies. Their demands exceed the capacity and desire of the academics to deal with them. These demands are accentuated in the current economic climate by a lack of graduate jobs, with reports that graduate positions are down by as much as one third in 2009 compared to last year. In addition, more employers are dictating a certain level of degree in order to apply. Anyone achieving a lower degree in this environment then feels doubly disadvantaged and targets the quality of the teaching, the learning facilities, and the lack of contact hours with tutors as a grievance. Anecdotally, universities report an increase in parent- or guardian-inspired complaints of this nature. Complaints are indeed up over the past few years, rising by over 20% in 2008 with projections of another rise in 2009. Universities, however, are keen to point out that they do not isolate students from wider society and view their behaviour as being part of a shift in western society in general. People have been encouraged to view themselves more as a consumer of services than mere recipients of what the producing organisation wishes to give them. The introduction of tuition fees has upped the ante in this regard, but universities take the view that this is not a student issue per se.

There also appears to be an interesting split between the post-1992 universities and those represented by the likes of the Russell Group and the 1994 Group. The latter stress that the student has obligations beyond those of the ordinary consumer. They are expected to be active members (albeit perhaps junior ones) of the community of learning, contributing to the greater body of knowledge for knowledge’s sake. Hence, they would resist moves to treat students purely as consumers and to organise the student experience around that assumption. Such a relationship would be too passive, allowing the student to minimise their role in the whole experience and placing the onus on the university to deliver. The university reserves the right to refuse a student an award if it feels the criteria have not been met. It will provide all the advice, guidance and instruction necessary, but at the end of the day the student has to make the necessary contribution. We have come across such universities where the student body itself has rejected the notion that they are consumers, so this may not be an entirely aspirational goal of such universities.

The post-1992 group, as their heritage would indicate, draws a far straighter line between getting a qualification and the application of that qualification and are swift to promote their graduate employability figures. Confusingly, the recent RAE results and associated funding distribution blurred the line between the traditional centres of research and the centres of vocational teaching. Universities are going to need to be crystal clear in their messages to students about how they can expect to benefit from the experience on offer. If that means drawing a distinction between those institutions that treat students as consumers and those who reject the notion, so be it. This may be seen as a retrograde step by some, re-establishing the historical distinctions between universities, polytechnics and higher education colleges, but that at least would have the benefit of clarity of purpose.

We believe that there will be higher expectations from students of the entire experience. Whether this comes from a consumerist attitude is largely immaterial. Those universities that consciously decide not to treat their students like consumers will nonetheless have to prepare to engage with them as they behave like consumers. The implication is clear: the student experience needs to be placed in the hands of professionals where consistency and predictability can be delivered. This inevitably means that the centre needs to take the leading role, and to provide the resources and capabilities to do so.

### External pressures

Over the past few years the pressures from government and regulatory bodies have increased considerably. Targets and guidelines are set for student numbers, widening participation, and levels of bursaries with financial penalties or other sanctions threatened for failure to comply. The logical response is to have a central view of how to achieve the target and a central mechanism to monitor progress. It is sub-optimal to delegate this out to academics and departments as the risk of not meeting the targets is too high.

Similar pressures are created by league tables and the National Student Survey. Both are used more widely now by prospective students in selecting their universities and universities have no qualms in boasting of their positions in the tables. They are also becoming more adept at putting the best possible spin on their place in the rankings. Anecdotally, both surveys are susceptible to a judicious tweak here or there that can send an institution up the tables. Inevitably, the centre will be best placed to direct the traffic to ensure that such an outcome is achieved.

“Recruitment done centrally strengthens the university brand as it can be done consistently across all areas”

### **Academic time for academic endeavour**

As the student experience grows in scope the burden of delivering and enhancing it grows in proportion. Academics have for a long time complained about the increasing administrative workload and evidence points to the fact that it is displacing time spent on teaching and personal research. If we accept that these are crucial to the overall quality of the student experience then it makes sense to put in place processes and resources that maximise the time available for them. Students paying something called a “tuition fee” can be justified in expecting some tuition in return. Perhaps it is time for universities to rename this student charge to something more in line with what will actually be delivered. In the meantime, there is an ideal opportunity for the central university to step in and take on those aspects that have been impinging on academic time. We detail later on what these areas could be, but the principle must be clearly established that the centre should take a proactive role in carving out time for academics to devote to teaching and other endeavours that enhance the student experience in their sphere.

### **Where is it happening on the ground?**

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Universities have felt the pressures and are responding in a number of areas where they feel that a stronger central point of view on a number of issues brings great benefits.

There is an increasing prevalence of senior posts with a specific responsibility for the student experience. These go beyond the traditional role of PvCs of Teaching and Learning and beyond the administrative role of Head of Student Services. They look at everything the university does through the lens of the student experience. They are not an extension of the student representation provided by the students’ union, and nor are they a mechanism for translating the university’s plans and actions to the students. Their precise role varies from institution to institution, but they all have a clear remit to establish the student experience as something the university as a whole needs to take an active interest in managing and influencing. A rapid scan shows such posts in operation at the universities of Exeter, York, Brunel, Abertay Dundee, Robert Gordon, Oxford Brookes, Birkbeck and Birmingham. There are undoubtedly more and this is a trend we expect to continue as existing roles are reconfigured to focus on the student experience and new roles created.

Recruitment done centrally strengthens the university brand as it can be done consistently across all areas. Core messages about the strengths of the university, what the university expects from its students and what the student experience will be like can be delivered better from a small team of experts. An academic, by contrast, may have a greater interest in getting students onto his or her under-subscribed course than promoting the university as a whole. If done properly, it should save money as there is no need for four departments to each occupy a different booth at a university fair. We have also seen universities empowering their international recruitment teams to make offers on the spot to high quality candidates rather than risk losing the application as it works its way back to the UK for processing and a decision.

“Skills that demonstrate the employability of a student to an employer can be deemed extra-curricular and hence naturally fall within the remit of the centre”

The Schwartz Report requires admissions to be fair, transparent, robust and professional and universities have taken this on board. A central admissions service should achieve consistency across all areas, also saving money and reducing claims of unfairness from applicants. Consolidating the expertise into a professional team will enable better identification of fraudulent applications and plagiarism and ensure that the university's strategic position on the quality of admissions is maintained. Done correctly it will boost retention rates and lead directly to a richer student experience as students are better matched to the requirements and expectations of the programme.

There is an obvious pecking order in centralising the admissions. All undergraduates are fed to universities from UCAS so there is a natural collection point for the incoming applications that can then be processed with a clearly defined rules-based approach. The 5% or so of genuinely interesting or unusual candidates can be forwarded to the academics for further consideration. Some universities are now moving admissions for post-graduate taught students to a more central basis. Again, clear criteria must be agreed with the academics, but probably 90% of the applications can then be dealt with by a central team. The last remaining preserve of the devolved decision-making on admissions is with the post-graduate research student. It is hard to envisage a situation where this would be taken out of the hands of the prospective supervisor, so for the time being this will remain with the academic. Similarly, exceptions can be made in the post-graduate taught arena for prospective medical students, or even for undergraduates who are required to demonstrate a portfolio of work (e.g., fine art, architecture). However, our view is that the guiding principle should be one of justifying an opt-out from a centrally-run admissions system rather than having a choice to opt-in.

Employability is also an area where the case for greater central involvement can be made. Who is responsible for creating an employable graduate? Where employability is clearly a function of the degree (e.g., medicine, veterinary studies, applied golf management studies) then the onus will rest with the academics. Where the subject is less vocational, then a clear decision should be made as to what needs to be embedded in the curriculum and what is “extra-curricular.” The dividing line is fluid and each institution should establish what its own priorities are and put clear accountabilities in place. Elements that typically fall into the curriculum are those skills prized by prospective employers: problem-solving, enquiry-based learning, creative thinking, data analysis and interpretation. Skills that demonstrate the employability of a student to an employer can be deemed extra-curricular and hence naturally fall within the remit of the centre. Such elements would include CV writing, interview technique, providing work experience, careers advice to match students with employers, psychometric testing, personal presentation, working in teams, and how to excel at aptitude tests. All these are better off delivered at the centre.

In addition there are numerous areas where central provision has been in place for a long time or where it is being established. The criteria for having the centre provide the service must be clear: efficiency, consistency and allowing the academics more time for academic endeavour. Areas such as student support for visas, additional learning needs, study support, student finances, timetabling, and accommodation all fit these criteria.



“Universities need to conduct an open and transparent debate about what is in the remit of the centre and what is the heartland of the academic”

## What are the implications?

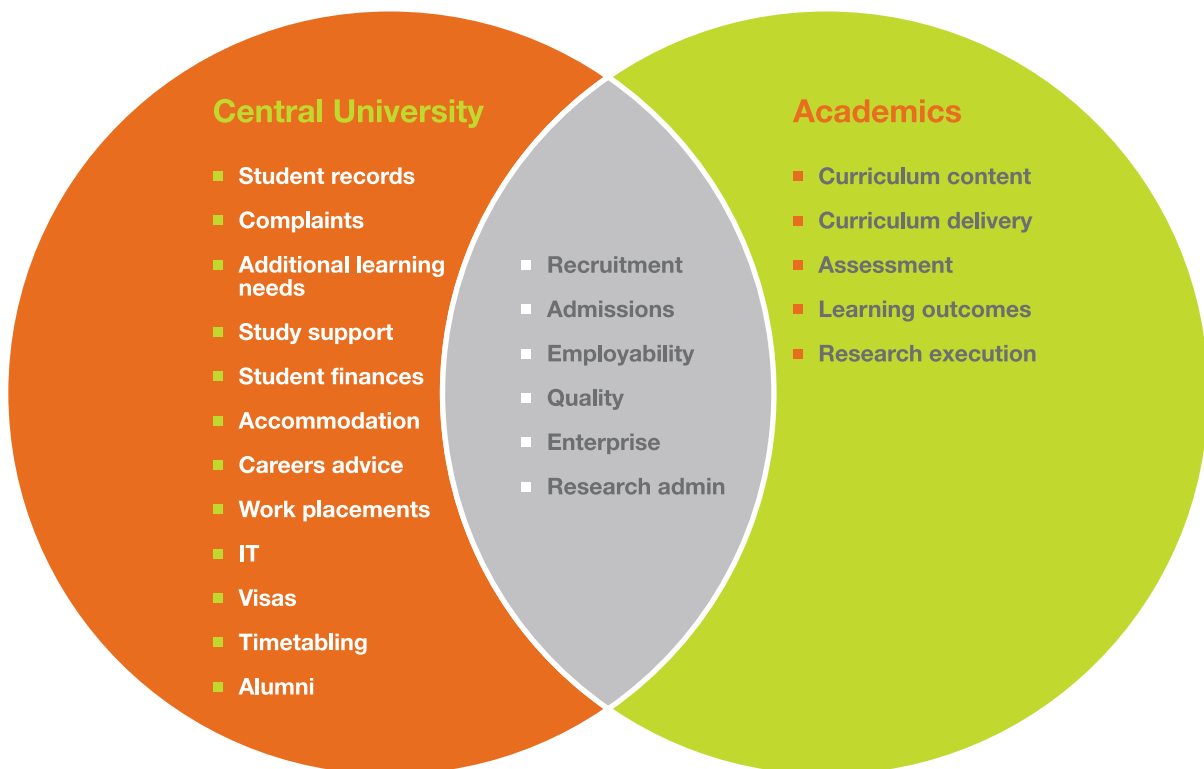
### Why does this shift towards the centre matter and what might the consequences be?

At the root of any debate on the pros and cons of the direction of travel is the age old division between academics and administrators. Crudely put, there is still a view from academics that administrators are an expensive, bureaucratic overhead who make life difficult for them. From the administrators the view is that academics are detached from the harsh realities of life and regularly fail to achieve research income targets but spend the money anyway.

However, we see a clear path through this impasse, and it is crucial that universities adopt it in order to avoid endless debate without resolution. Failing to do so will detract from

the key business of a university of teaching, conducting research and (increasingly these days) generating revenue from grants or enterprise.

Universities need to conduct an open and transparent debate about what is in the remit of the centre and what is the heartland of the academic. Below we have outlined where we see the line being drawn. As always, change is contentious where the focus is on the grey areas where either the academic held sway in the past or where the activity is seen as the very essence of the academic. Academics tend to jealously guard their relationship with students and see any dilution as dangerous (to both the well-being of the student and to their influence over the student's development).



“What we have seen is that most of the friction between administrators and academics is caused where expectations are misaligned and responsibilities blurred.”

Universities will be well advised to get rapid agreement on what lies wholly in the realm of the central university (e.g., student records, complaints, etc) and what lies with the academics (e.g., curriculum content and delivery, research execution) and focus their time on the areas of overlap. What we have seen is that most of the friction between administrators and academics is caused where expectations are misaligned and responsibilities blurred. For example, academics need to know who is responsible for providing learning support for their non-traditional students and who will provide them with the quality students they need to fill their courses. Administrators need to know what kind of complete student experience they can promote and have a level of confidence that the academics will deliver on their part.

Clear criteria can be drawn up to reach agreement on such areas and we would propose using a combination of:

- Where can it be done most efficiently?
- Where can it be done most effectively?
- What will have most impact on the student experience?
- What solution will provide the most time to academics for academic endeavour?

Where the criteria may be in conflict, this is a case for the university leadership to step up and show clear direction. University vice-chancellors and their executive teams are charged with leading the university and such debates will separate the true leaders from the muddling administrators.

Universities also need to be less shy about saying that things will be done centrally. There is a deep-seated mistrust of “things done centrally” within the higher education sector, and in our view this comes largely from the centre failing to execute its activities in a professional manner. It is no use taking activities away from the departments and academics only to fail to do them better. We have heard centralisation being referred to as “university-wide provision,” “specialisation” and “strategic direction implemented via local partnership.” Central services are called “professional services.” There needs to come a time when the centre is proud of being a centre, when it can demonstrate leadership, professionalism and effectiveness and when it can remove barriers for the academics to get on with what they are paid to do. It will demonstrate the value it is adding to the university as a whole.

Once this debate is settled, the university of the future takes on a very different look and feel. The central university must be better equipped to deal with the new activities it is adopting. They must have the professional administrators, frameworks, processes, and tools to deliver. There must be an increasing career cross-over from academics to administration. Such a blended career should form a

greater part of a university's approach to managing its talent in order to ensure that two key elements remain in constant vision: delivering the student experience and the academic strategy. We must never forget that universities do not exist to provide jobs for administrators.

The university must not shy away from taking tough decisions on the cost base required to support its activities. In many universities there has been little investment in providing services from the centre, so in the short-term there may well be an increase in cost at the centre. However, we have seen many universities failing to bite the bullet and reduce the corresponding cost base in the departments as activities are transferred to the centre. Departments seem to be well-practised in reclassifying admissions support staff as programme support staff when savings are being sought.

Delivered effectively, the academics should appreciate the new set-up. It will be designed to allow them more time to focus on teaching and learning, executing research and, increasingly important these days, to generate research and enterprise income. However, there is a potential fly in the ointment for some academics. Once the centre has taken on all the non-academic parts of the student experience, any camouflage will have been removed. The spotlight will be squarely on the teaching and research of academics, and hence poorly-performing individuals will be far easier to spot. There is a school of thought that believes that a good degree of the resistance to the centre taking on more of the student experience is precisely because some academics need the cover of an enlarged role to mask deficiencies in their own teaching and research. Without this, they would be too exposed and some weeding out could occur. In future, academics will be recruited with this in mind and excellence in teaching and research will be a far more important determinant of who is hired and fired.

The journey to achieve this change will not necessarily be a smooth one. However, there are examples of universities managing the change well and aligning it with their institution's appetite for change. Some centres have been more assertive than others, but the direction of travel is clear. We believe that the differences between institutions are more a matter of timing than a disagreement over the endgame. The higher education sector is one where consultation and a collegiate approach are part of the fabric. For the centre to take on responsibility for more of the student experience it needs to be mindful of this heritage. The result has to be an equal partnership between the centre and the academics to improve the student experience. In our view however, this still enables the centre to direct the debate, articulate a strategic direction, show leadership where there is ambiguity or an impasse is reached, and not hand a veto to the academic community.

# CONCLUSION

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**THERE IS BOTH A “PUSH” AND A “PULL” DYNAMIC BEHIND THE GROWING ROLE OF THE CENTRE IN THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE.**

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**The “push” comes from the students. Increasingly, they want the management of their university experience to be handed from the academics and given to professionals.**

**The “pull” to the centre comes from a demand for efficiency where funds are short and the need for consistency and transparency across all university departments.**

The challenge is for the centre to agree who does what where, and to equip itself to catch the ball when the academics (hopefully with great pleasure) throw it their way. Maxxim Consulting are experts in the role of the centre in all types of organisations. We help universities define the best way to enhance the student experience. We work with them to deliver the support frameworks, structures, and processes needed to make this happen. We would welcome you feedback to: [info@maxximconsulting.com](mailto:info@maxximconsulting.com)







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