

AMOSSHE Future of Student Life & Services Series



Discussion paper: 'The Future of Student Services Lies in Private Provision'

Introduction

1. AMOSSHE launched a series of strategy and policy discussions '**The Future of Student Life & Services**' in June 2012. The first 'Future of Student Life & Services' event, a **policy breakfast*** took place from 8-9.30 am on **Friday 22 June** 2012 at Regent's College London. The topic was 'The Future of Student Services delivery lies in the private sector.' Alex Bols, Executive Director of the 1994 Group, chaired the 10 strong discussion group of representatives from mission groups, funding councils, commercial service providers, and heads of Student Service in higher education institutions (HEIs).
2. Participants debated the following questions put forward by AMOSSHE members:
 - a. What can the private sector offer Student Services in a future where customer expectations are higher and income to universities is generally lower?
 - b. What are leaders in institutions looking for in the immediate future? How can private involvement help?
 - c. Given that 'core' student life and services functions are often critical to institutional missions are there risks to outsourcing elements of the student experience to private organisations? What are these?
3. This paper outlines the themes explored during the 'Future of Student Services Lies in Private Provision.' It attempts to bring together the differing views expressed. The paper does not represent AMOSSHE's, or indeed any of the groups in attendance', policy stances or convictions. The paper is intended as a record of the issues considered and a starting point for further conversations.
4. The session concluded that, for the moment, the future of Student Services does not lie solely in private provision. Using private providers to deliver the entirety of Student Services would be inappropriate. However, both the present and future of Student Services lie in part in engaging proactively with private provision. There are opportunities to maximise the quality of services delivered to students through working with private service providers, combining institutional strengths with external expertise to shape the future of Student Life & Services.

Discussion

Public versus private

5. The public/private divide so often referenced when discussing UK higher education (HE) is disingenuous. All institutions are, to some degree, private. They are autonomous bodies, each with their own financial structures and accountability. Moreover, the differences between institutions are not just about the public/private perception; each HEI's autonomy is tied to its mission and vision.

6. Attendees representing the HE sector tended to assume that using the private sector for partial support unequivocally meant outsourcing to replace services or staff. Private and commercial providers disagreed, pointing to deliberate designs to interweave their products with university environments and services.
7. All attendees were conscious of a steer in national policy drivers, in particular in the devolved administrations, toward shared services. The group felt that this presented opportunities for generic tasks and roles such as payroll, but that some services are unique to an institution's ethos and should not be shared.

Quality

8. Student Services are critical to every institution's risk management, and need to be carefully controlled. Added to that, focus on access means that admissions and Student Services become financial guardians at institutions. If that is the case, admissions and Student Services also represent key financial concerns for institutions. The risks of contracting out provision may therefore be too great for an HEI to bear, and institutions may need to retain control of all elements of their services. Contra to this, private providers might be better placed to measure service provision against key performance indicators (KPIs) than HEIs, and could be held to account by the contracting institution. Centralised private services could improve professionalism and frameworks, but lose the unique understanding that internal teams have of a university's situation and its students' particular experience(s).
9. Private provision can address gaps in expertise at institutions, and should not be deemed intimidating or inhibiting because of this. It can supplement institutional limitations, and enable Student Services to focus on their existing strengths. The professionalism and external validation of some private provision may offer benefits beyond those available within an institution's limited support service expertise.

Efficiency

10. The support that the private sector can offer is almost limitless; companies exist and are constantly being developed across the spectrum of student support providing imaginative solutions to the gaps in and burdens of management at institutions. These options can improve the accessibility of services to students. Institutions could use this as an opportunity to expand their market and respond to widening participation agendas.
11. Attendees felt that for all the positive rhetoric about efficiencies in terms of improving services, they perceive a reality whereby efficiency drivers are purely about saving money. Any other improvements to efficiency and quality as a result of using private providers could be deemed by-products of savings agenda.

Understanding customers and service

12. Traditional university attitudes to were described as 'my services, my way,' but the group recognised that this is not appropriate in the 'new HE market.' The tradition of providing reactive face to face student support might be a luxury the sector can no longer afford, and heads of service must explore alternative models. Institutions must learn from the private provision utilised across the sector, even when developed for different contexts or situations to their own.
13. Student expectations are often 'blamed' for university managers turning to private solutions. Such expectations are a 'big unknown' and cannot be presumed. It is likely that student ideas in the future will be broad and could be poorly informed; their

expectations may only be greater than in the past because of press coverage and manipulation. Student Services must focus on responding to known service need and quality rather than presumed expectation.

14. 'Students as partners' and 'student engagement' are increasingly prominent themes in institutional and national approaches to all aspects of HE and the learning experience. The group wondered whether this approach might usefully inform decisions about utilising private provision, but recognised that such influence would need to be carefully monitored and managed.

Location and scale

15. Attendees questioned whether Student Services expertise needs to be provided locally, or whether national support services may be appropriate for some services. This could mean that groups of institutions with shared values but differing geography could pool resources to utilise one or more specific private providers.
16. The size of an institution might drive its decision making about the levels to and service areas in which it engages with private provision. Opportunities to develop in-house expertise might be greater in larger institutions; however it is those larger institutions that may be able to invest in private provision at a scale offering genuine economies and benefits.

A core/periphery paradigm?

17. Institutions might take decisions about utilising private sector expertise based on those services that they deem core and peripheral to their mission. There was concern that providing all services in-house is effectively 'building a town within a town.' Some felt that 'core' services should be retained within institutions and no parts of the 'core' utilise private provision; others recognised that private provision could be embedded within an institution's own delivery to enhance 'core' services.
18. One suggestion was to charge a 'basic' fee for core services, adding additional service charges for those students wishing to access 'peripheral' services. This could create not just a sector of extremes, but institutions with internal extremes of rich and poor. It would directly obstruct the community and family building that many institutions strive for, and require judgements about the amount of use any one individual could expect from a service, even where they have paid for it. All attendees felt that institutional duty of care took precedence over any private provision driver or policy agenda. It would be unacceptable to deny a student welfare services based on fee payments.
19. Concerns were expressed about employing a core/periphery paradigm when making decisions about modes of service provision. Accessing what might be deemed 'peripheral' services can be key to a student's development and experience, making that core to their individual student journey. Some support services not immediately obvious as core to institutional mission are core to student lives, and without that provision students may be unable to engage with the university, eg, nursery or health care.

Leadership skills

20. A shift to greater utilisation of the private sector in Student Services delivery presents leadership challenges for heads of services. They will need to become more open to exploring different provision routes, develop contract management expertise, and develop an understanding of the tools needed to work effectively with private providers.

Final comments and observations

21. Private provision can offer much to improving Student Life & Services, but needs to be carefully managed. In particular:
 - a. More KPIs and firm evidence are needed to enable managers to take responsible decisions about the scale and services that they work together with private providers to deliver.
 - b. Institutional leaders will need different skillsets to effectively navigate and deliver provision.
 - c. Each partner HEI and private service provider needs to understand the purposes, strength and weaknesses of any collaborative venture, including whether collaboration needs to be based on physical location or cultural values.

22. The session concluded that, for the moment, the future of Student Services does not lie solely in private provision. Using private providers to deliver the entirety of Student Services would be inappropriate. However, both the present and future of Student Services lie in part in engaging proactively with private provision. There are opportunities to maximise the quality of services delivered to students through working with private service providers, combining institutional strengths with external expertise to shape the future of Student Life & Services.

Editors note: AMOSSHE

1. AMOSSHE is the UK HE Student Services Organisation. AMOSSHE informs and supports the leaders of student services, and represents, advocates for, and promotes the student experience. 145 higher education institutions (HEIs) are members of AMOSSHE with some 500 named individuals associated with membership.

2. AMOSSHE is critical to the Student Services landscape and policy discussion because:
 - a. AMOSSHE members shape the student experience in higher education;
 - b. AMOSSHE empowers Student Service leaders; and
 - c. AMOSSHE is a key voice of student experience leaders.

3. AMOSSHE advocates for Student Services leaders and ensures that their voice is heard on key policy and strategic development issues in higher education. AMOSSHE provides timely policy briefing for members on all major developments relating to the student experience, and submits influential responses to national consultations. All consultation responses are available at www.amoshe.org.uk under 'Publications.'