STUDENT LIFE BY SERVICE DESIGN

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Preface

A university is a unique living environment where all participants must feel comfortable, so that education and research can be optimally conducted. The university authority must therefore always ensure the well-being of students and staff in a scientifically informed manner. Actions are often taken in good faith, but this does not guarantee that initiatives will achieve their intended goals.

Several colleagues from the product design department at the University of Antwerp (Universiteit Antwerpen) have joined forces to develop the present book with only one message in mind: “university, take care of your students in a scientifically informed manner”. Therefore, they delivered relevant products, especially their HEI university services, and environments for the academy ready to be inplemented. I would recommend every campus to do so.

Well-being is an emergent phenomenon influenced by a complex array of factors, and its experience is highly individual. Today’s students live in a stimulating environment with numerous differentiated stimuli, diverse opportunities for rapid reward, and supplementary income (alongside everything else that causes distraction to young adults). Hardly an environment conducive to focus on studying.

The student community has also become highly diverse. Universities aim to be inclusive in all aspects, and everyone has high expectations. How can university services meet these demands?

A handbook for such a multidimensional issue is inherently multi-perspectival. Only through diverse disciplines can such a problem be addressed. There is, of course, not a unique, hence True solution to it, but one can go for an optimal answer. This is precisely what the editors have done: inviting experts from complementary domains to approach the topic from their respective specialties, students as well. It goes without saying that the aim is not to ascertain truth, but to develop adequate models that offer partial solutions to the overarching question of improving campus life, at least to the extent that a university authority has a say in it.

Every application is grounded in theory, and this case is no different. For an application to have a chance of success, it must start from a realistic framework. This book thus provides such a theoretical starting point. However, it is not a prerequisite to begin from there. Readers can select chapters and determine the order solely based on their interests.

When asked to write this preface, I did not need any time to consider. The authors are each expert in their field, but, more importantly, they are all imbued with goodness. In other words, their main interest lies in optimizing the campus interface to make the student's experience interacting with the university enjoyable and enriching. Of course, the authors are also researchers in heart and soul. Therefore, they aim to produce rigorous scientific work and publish about it. From the outset, it was abundantly clear to all involved that this is essentially the beginning of a grand humanistic project.

I sincerely hope that university authorities will take the time to read this work thoroughly and confidently implement the proposed services. The students will benefit, and campus life will flourish. A very satisfied student is often a high-performing student.

Gustaaf Cornelis, April 2024
Vrije Universiteit Brussel & Universiteit Antwerpen,
Philosophy of science and Science Communication

Introduction

Let us assume the following: you are a student, just graduated from high school. You are possibly adventurous by nature and enrolled at a university. Imagine all the possible hurdles and challenges that cross your path. How much stress would you experience? How quickly would you be able to find a routine in daily activities, such as eating and going to classes, etc.? How fast would you be able to build a network of peers and create friendships? Irrespective of who you are as a student or where you study, your primary focus when entering any higher educational institute (HEI) is to obtain a degree. But besides the cognitive endeavour, the emotional, attitudinal involvement and social adjustment are just as crucial and seen as an integral part of the 'learning environment' and 'learning experience'.

Making that one choice, finding a place to live, living alone, sustainably or as an Erasmus student, are only a handful of experiences students go through that are not even close to being a part of any curricular activity during life at, let's say, the university.

We didn't write this book by accident. It's something that is the culmination of years of doing instead of talking.

The Department of Student Affaires & Services (DSAS) – a service provider for over 22 000 students – and its chief of staff (Author 1) are on a mission. On their quest, they come across a service evangelist / design researcher (Author 2) and together push the throttle to make a journey at our university last. A crew of ninety-five Master's students (in Product Development) is assembled to embark on their first encounter with the notion of the services and the idea of giving equal attention to their design as the product counterpart. Somewhere along the ride, a determined education and policy advisor (Author 3) notices the endeavour and sheds light on the open sea of student life experience (SLX) and what becomes of students when designing their own.

This book attempts to make a statement of SLX opposed to the mere classroom-related educational innovation. In doing so, we involve staff from the Department of Student Affaires & Services in understanding and immediately applying the mechanics of service design and

empathizing with the end user of their services by means of a product-service system design methodology. The same method is then used to make students the designers of their own SLX, leading to inspiring concepts. The silver lining appears to be how designing your own services can spike metacognition among university students and staff. Besides strengths and opportunities, we also reveal possible weaknesses and related pitfalls for learning environments in higher education.

A brief guide for the reader seems fitting to introduce the chapters:

Chapter one introduces the topic of student life experience (SLX) as a conceptual framework. As a research agenda, it offers avenues into further designing and developing student services and their impact. The design process cannot be left solely to staff in the support services. A design process that creates truly great support services requires a participatory process built on co-creation and collaboration with the students for whom these services are created.

An HEI cannot afford to ignore the impact of its support services. Besides the beneficial effects for individual students, it is also an issue of student retention, reputation, and competition. Changing the traditional concept of a service transaction into a genuinely designed experience is not something that an HEI does overnight. In **chapter two**, we propose a product-service system (PSS) design approach to bridge the gap between students' expectations and their experiences. We encourage staff to imagine improved or novel services through design, and to permanently embrace change and creativity.

Chapter three provides an elaborate insight into the PSS design process, its consecutive steps, tools, descriptions, and respective goals. It becomes clear how design interventions with the support services staff lead to concrete service improvements and how these insights can be triggers for the students' design course. PSS design provides openings to empathize with the users (students) and their context, and it creates room for strengthening, professionalizing, and supporting the service innovation process.

With the aim of making the service delivery more resilient to present-day and future demands, we actively involved ninety-five students, applying the PSS design methodology. In this set-up, the students serve not just as active participants together with the support services staff in a co-creating process, but as the actual designers of the service experience that they wish to receive from their university. For the benefit of the reader, **chapter four** documents over twenty designs, covering the multitude of current and future services of the university.

In **chapter five** we try to better understand why and how certain student affairs and services (and by extension SLX) achieve their intended goals or fail to do so. Furthermore, we critically analyze the use of design education in an attempt to improve and innovate SLX services. To find opportunities to improve both SLX services and design cases, we use an educational psychological perspective and metacognitive strategies to monitor and evaluate learning experiences.

Taking the standard route through the book, you'll start as a social scientist, grow into a design thinker, and end up being an educational reformer. However, jump to whichever chapter you want, read it from back to front, or do your very own thing. We hope the book inspires you with a passion to start your very own service uprising.

Chapter 1

The student life experience: Constructing a paradigm for the praxis of student affairs and services in Flanders

Koenraad Keignaert,
David Corradi

Abstract

This chapter does not aim to settle a scientific debate, rather to start it[1]. It offers a paradigmatic construct – namely the student life experience – to facilitate in Flanders, on the one hand, the formulation of high-level institutional and legislative policy setting and, on the other hand, the management of the praxis of student affairs and services.

Background Student affairs and services are a set of support services imposed by decree that must be offered to students by Flemish higher education institutions. These services have grown organically over the past three decades. The challenges of an increasingly complex world with some fundamental uncertainties bring into question the current accepted operational methods and organizational forms in Flanders.

Objective The aim of this chapter is to offer a substantiated framework for student support services so that they can be designed to operate in a more robust manner. Moreover, we suggest that this base can be the starting point for research in Flanders, at least, and potentially in other European countries.

Method Starting from a reflexive process, a number of the features that have greatly influenced the current praxis in student affairs and services within the Flemish higher education institutions were identified. These features are assumed explicitly or implicitly throughout the student support practices and the supervision processes that govern the praxis. Next, to better understand the nature of these features, the organization management theory literature was explored with a view to linking these features to existing theoretical frameworks on organization and innovation. Finally, by exploring the links between these theories – thus interlinking the praxis features – and by applying product-service systems thinking, a framework or paradigm construct is derived. This construct offers a framework wherein the formulation of policies, management of a well-considered mix of services, and designing of services can take place without leading to the 'erasure' of the specific context of a higher education institution.

Keywords Student affairs and services, service logic, paradigmatic construct, Flanders, design and research agenda

1 This chapter was first published as a peer-reviewed paper entitled *De student life experience: Een conceptueel voor de Vlaamse studentenvoorzieningen?* in *Tijdschrift voor Onderwijsrecht en Onderwijsbeleid* (translated as Journal for Education Law and Educational Policy; vol. 2021–2022, nr. 3). It was subsequently adapted to better suit this book, especially through the addition of several notes on designing support services.

1. Problem definition in a Flemish and European context

Higher education (HE) in Europe has quite a history, and so has student life. It was in Bologna – the seat of the inception of the present-day European higher education scene – that the first independent and self-governed student association was created (Brizzi, 2010). In fact, conceptual elements of what we understand today as the 'student community,' 'student identity,' and 'basic student support services' can be traced back to the 11th- to 13th-century origins of those earliest universities in Bologna, Montpellier, Oxford, Paris, or Salamanca. Since then and up to today, student affairs and services (SAS) have to a lesser or greater degree been an integral part of the (local, regional, national, and international) higher education systems, yet often strongly influenced and defined by their specific institutional context. SAS as modern-day praxis – defined here as the totality of professional practices grounded in theories of education, psychology, management, etc. – were first developed in the United States of America. There, the early practitioners of the 19th and early 20th century distinguished themselves by almost single-handedly developing a new professional class, and subsequently a third space (Bamford et al., 2022)[2]. The developments in Europe have been slower due to national histories and are far more diversely focused (for an overview, see Ludemann et al., 2020a).

Hence, the challenge for this book is to add to the development of SAS policy setting, innovation, management, design, and praxis in Flanders

2 The third space is defined as an in-between place for a distinct group of professionals that do not purely operate in either the academic working places or the administrative working places of a higher education institution.

and Europe. As, in its purpose, this book is to a great extent reflexive and practical – namely to rethink and redesign existing SAS into a holistic student life experience, which is quite a challenge – the breadth of the consulted literature serves primarily to frame this challenging development process. So, in order to understand both the relevance of the paradigmatic construct and the importance of designing the praxis of services, the present chapter starts by defining and describing the Flemish context in which the present book has come about, as this provides readers with the necessary perspective for the subsequent chapters. In the ensuing section, a paradigm is constructed, based on a reading of the current literature in both the field of student support services and the field of organizational management.

1.1 Student affairs and services in the Flemish context

In the academic year 2020–2021, a total of 279 000 students were enrolled in Flemish higher education (AHOVOKS, 2021). On January 1, 2021, there were 6.77 million inhabitants in the Flemish Region and approximately 110 000 Dutch speakers in the Brussels-Capital Region. Students at Flemish higher education institutions (HEI) therefore make up 4.05% of the Flemish population. Thus, both through their number and their future role in society, students make up an important social category.

The Flemish legislator has determined that HEIs should promote equitable access to and participation in higher education for all students through SAS (in Dutch: ***Stu****dentenvoorzieningen* or STUVO[3]) by improving the basic conditions for their student career. That policy is a logical offshoot of art. 26 of the UN Convention on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1948), which states, among other things, that all young people, provided that they have sufficient intellectual merit, should have access to higher education.

However, we know from research in Flanders that personal and background factors, certainly prior to but also during the course of their student career – and often regardless of their individual academic possibilities or merit – can

3 The Flemish term for social affairs and services or support services is 'Studentenvoorzieningen'. It is regularly abbreviated as STUVO, although interchangeably SOVO ('**So**ciale **Vo**orzieningen') is also used.

have a strong study-impeding impact on the student journey (Glorieux et al., 2014; Lens & Levrau, 2020). Yet, for some students their needs are so much more acute than for others; even to the point where those needs amount to a real hurdle before they gain access to higher education.

Access to higher education in Flanders is conditional only upon having obtained a diploma from a secondary school offering an educational program me aimed at further (higher) education. Over the period of 2003–2018, the number of drop-outs from secondary schools in Flanders decreased (Cincinnato et al., 2020), which means that as a proportion of their cohort, a higher percentage of pupils gained the right of access to higher education[4]. Factors affecting the chance of dropping out of secondary school are the educational status of the mother (if low level, then a higher chance of dropping out), a non-EU migratory background (if so, then a higher chance) and the employment status of the parents (if one or both parents are in long-term unemployment, then again a higher chance). Even when pupils beat the likelihood of dropping out[5], a mother's low educational status still negatively affects the actual step towards higher education participation (Cincinnato et al., 2020)[6].

In either case, i.e. whether need-driven or upon advice of highly trained parents due to their prior experience with or knowledge of the extant services in higher education, almost every student in Flanders makes use – sometimes intensively – of one or more support services (e.g., student restaurants, financial support, housing, and sports facilities, etc.). And, since plenty of Flemish students exhibit a more or less similar behavioral pattern, this pattern 'equates' with a public policy problem.

In Flanders, this has been translated – in close consultation with the students' representative bodies and the HEIs – into several legislative

4 In 2003, 37% of the 18–20 years old cohort were in higher education (or 64% of those 18–20 years old with a diploma that gives access to higher education) while in 2018, 53% of the same age group were in higher education (or 82% of the same age group with a diploma).

5 Cincinnato et al. (2020) note that the present Equal Education Chances policy to address those factors is in part ineffective.

6 E.g., in my own professional career of more than twenty years as a senior lecturer, I have observed at the Faculty of Design Sciences that students in the auditoria are predominantly more white and middle / upper class than can be expected based on Flemish and City of Antwerp population demographics.

initiatives, of which the Decree on Student Services in Flanders (2012) is the latest milestone. The importance and impact of Flemish SAS – which have been funded by the government since 1991 at the universities and 1996 at the university colleges with so-called 'earmarked resources' amounting to approximately €62 million today and which are organized into six fields, namely nutrition, housing, social services, medical and psychological services, transport, and student life – therefore cannot be underestimated[7,8]. In a limited comparative study of European higher education, Glorieux et al. (2013) identified SAS (amongst others) as a policy measure that truly could impact both the perceived costs and the expected chances of success in higher education. They argue, e.g., that providing pupils who would otherwise incur significant time and transportation costs, with student housing positively influences their level of participation. Similarly, providing additional financial support was found to lower the threshold of HE participation.

Today, SAS in Flanders pursue their goal by means of both material and immaterial aid and services in the six fields of activity mentioned above[9]. The Flemish legislator leaves it to the HEIs to determine the shapes and flavoors in which the HEIs wish to provide those services – on the understanding that the absence of any services in one or more fields must be motivated; and the HEIs can complement these activities with awareness-raising, prevention, and problem-signaling campaigns.

The organization of support services and the spending of the budget is subject to double supervision, on the one hand through a decree-mandated council for student services, namely the STUVO Council, and on the other hand the HEI's government commissioner.

7 This is the budget for 2024. To understand the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, it is revealing to discover that in 2020 the Flemish government had to come up with a one-time measure of more than €8 million to keep the services of the HEI afloat. As of September 2023, funding for SAS has been structurally increased with €6 million since the needs of students have not fundamentally diminished. The budget for the entire higher education sector in 2023 amounted to €2.35 billion.

8 Although the Flemish legislator identifies and finances six service fields, the International Association of Student Affairs and Services distinguished no fewer than 42 topics in which professionals in the field of student affairs and services can be involved (Ludeman et al., 2020a).

9 (Decr.Vl.) Flemish Decree June 29, 2012, regarding student services in Flanders, from June 29, 2012, Belgian Official Gazette (BS) published August 3, 2012, subsequently incorporated into Codex Higher Education, Art. II.336 – 351.

The jointly composed STUVO Council is charged with drawing up a five-year policy plan, the annual budget, and the annual report[10]. That annual report – with substantive and financial sections, in accordance with the so-called Financing Decree[11] – is still drawn up in accordance with the regulations of a 1997 BVR[12]. In contrast to the formal control by the government commissioner, the supervisory control by the STUVO Council consists of a substantive quality check of the offered services, on the one hand, and assessing, on the other hand, whether these services are still in line with the (perceived) needs of the student population.

Generation Z, born after 2000, shows that students' minds are maturing quickly towards living a more sustainable life (Kamenidou et al., 2019). The HEIs will therefore inevitably need to make their SAS offer – e.g., food, transport, and student housing – more sustainable. In the current Flemish context – i.e., where there are no investment budgets for our services – the understandable choice would be to limit the service offer rather than to expand or innovate on it. Such a quick fix is, of course, anathema to our paradigmatic discourse.

Yet, what does it really mean to provide all students with equitable participation in higher education, and how should that be done? The Flemish legislator may have identified six fields of activity (i.e., nutrition, housing, social services, medical and psychological services, transport, and student life) – and it consistently provides funding for their realization on an annual basis – but the government does not offer a comprehensive framework within which the praxis of service provision can or should be conceptualized. At best, the current organization of SAS in Flanders can be understood as an institution-bound collection of practitioners who support students within the organizational confines of a specific administrative unit. SAS in Flanders is not understood to be 'a transformational and holistic student

10 The STUVO Council has a minimum of eight members, consisting of equal numbers of students elected by the Student Council and members designated by the institution's Board of Governors.

11 Art. 57, §1, Decr.Vl. March 14, 2008, on the financing of the operation of colleges and universities in Flanders of March 14, 2008, BS published June 26, 2008.

12 BVR (Besluit.Vl.Reg.) or Government of Flanders Order February 4, 1997, laying down the regulations for drawing up the annual report of the universities in the Flemish Community of February 4, 1997, BS published May 13, 1997. In 2010, an attempt was made to update the BVR. In vain, because according to some stakeholders in the supervision process a major simplification of the annual report could no longer have ensured the process's continuity.

development approach' nor as 'a field of study' (Roberts et al., 2021). Concurrently, Flanders does not have a specific program me in which future SAS professionals are trained and rarely does it see research into SAS.

1.2 Flemish student affairs and services in a European context

The Flemish SAS must also ask how they will maintain their relevance in a 21st-century Europe that is fully experiencing the impact of an increasingly complex world. Unsurprisingly, scientific findings both in Flanders and in a multitude of European countries have led, through the Bologna process, to the Berlin Declaration on the Social Dimension (2011), the subsequent Yerevan Communiqué (2015) on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Social Dimension Strategy, and ultimately to the Rome Communiqué (2020), which bore Annex II, Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.

The 20th-century social welfare state development of Flanders – with as a consequence all the HEIs being publicly funded – has served as the backdrop for the development of the current SAS. Specifically, SAS were embedded within the Flemish HEIs, close to their target group. As each HEI is marked by its own highly specific context and history, SAS at each Flemish HEI have developed their own highly specific contexts and practices. Thus, Flanders stands in stark contrast to, for example, France and Germany, where respectively the *CNOUS* and the *Studentenwerke* are organized regionally or metropolitan-based, i.e., at an above-institutional level. A geographically structured offer of student support services undoubtedly benefits from economies of scale in negotiating, e.g., food purchase prices or in providing a wide range of mental wellbeing activities. The advantage of the Flemish SAS, on the other hand, undeniably lies in their subsidiarity, their proximity to their respective student communities. The activities in the different fields of work can be tailored more easily to the diversity in target groups and contexts of each HEI. Especially in terms of their experiential value, the services that sit 'close to the skin' of the student are judged to be an asset.

If the ownership of SAS is an asset, it is of course also quite a responsibility for each HEI. It is fair to say that the debate between the (geographical) economies of scale and the (institutional) customization in Flanders has not yet been settled. On the contrary, this debate has never led to an actual research question, and thus, it remains highly hypothetical. However, the Flemish legislator implicitly suggests that there is a trade-off between services based on customization and their scalability. In fact, the decree provides a legal ground for the possibility of concluding cooperation agreements between HEIs so that above-institutional economies of scale can be pursued (i.e., wherever a set of HEIs sees this as desirable). A good example of such a cooperation agreement between the SAS of the Antwerp-based HEIs (united in STUVANT – ***Stu****denten****v****oorzieningen* ***Ant****werpen*) is the Psy-net platform which facilitates the organization of 2nd-line care for mental wellbeing and access to the regional sector of mental health care. The participating HEIs herewith pointedly acknowledge that economies of scale are required to tackle the issue of mental wellbeing in their student communities.

Additionally, the increasing importance of student mobility within the European higher education area (and in fact also worldwide) challenges the organization of Flemish SAS. For a small linguistic region such as Flanders, the diversity in languages and cultures impacts both the demand for services and the way these services are provided. Similarly, the digitalization of service provision throughout society and in (higher) education in particular also challenges the current understanding of SAS praxis. Indeed, these two trends became completely intertwined during the COVID-19 pandemic and will most probably lead to a restructuring of SAS (Roberts et al., 2021; Bardill Moscaritolo et al., 2022). Because of the diversity in Flemish institutional contexts and the multitude of historically established praxes in the six fields of activities, it is worthwhile to reflect on the potential of a paradigmatic construct to understand those Flemish contexts and practices, and the international and digital challenges to them.

2. The student life experience: Constructing a paradigm

2.1 Born out of limitations

In Flanders, research into the impact of the student services and the students' experiences is all in all very limited. The Flemish legislator does not suggest, let alone wield, a paradigmatic framework within which the praxis of SAS should be understood. Hence, there has been little comprehensive research into the SAS of the Flemish Universities and the Universities of Applied Sciences and Arts.

Moreover, and as per the requirement of the Flemish legislator, policy formulation and implementation is today exclusively anchored in a so-called 'recognizable office for SAS' at the institutional level. Hence, each HEI's office has grown within its own institutional context over the past twenty-five to thirty years in an almost exclusively organic manner. At the University of Antwerp, the Department of Student Affairs & Services (DSAS) is the specifically recognizable unit for SAS.

Yet, throughout these three decades a number of features have always been important for the praxis in *all* SAS that were organized in Flanders. Specifically, these were the service attitude towards the individual student and the whole student community, the transparency towards the co-creating and co-managing students, and the (financial) effectiveness of the service provision towards the financing authority, i.e. the Flemish government. These features can be distilled from a reflexive reading of a succession of five-year policy plans at UAntwerp and other Flemish HEIs, and the literature on the trends in servitization in higher education (Wasyluk et al., 2021).

In contrast to Flanders, international research into and theory formulation on student services has boomed; with multiple journals dedicated to this topic[13] and a multitude of seminal works summarizing both international research dynamics and the many different types of

13 E.g., Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice; Journal of Student Affairs in Africa; Journal of Student Affairs; Journal of Student Affairs Inquiry

practices in SAS (e.g., Ludemann et al., 2020a,b; Manning et al., 2013; Schuh et al., 2011; Yakaboski & Perozzi, 2018). Theory on SAS has often attempted to synthesize the pedagogical structures with more organizational structures, resulting in valuable research highlighting topics such as sense-of-belonging-theory (Strayhorn, 2019), co-creation theory (Maramba et al., 2021; Shuh, 1999) or critical race theory perspectives (Patton et al., 2007; Hiraldo, 2019) to mention but a few. With these frameworks in mind, quite a number of research reports on the praxis within the field of SAS have attempted to translate these concepts into innovative practices and improvements (see, e.g., Reason & Kimball, 2012). The current critique on the above-mentioned theories is how they differ from the more implicit frameworks that practitioners of SAS refer to or 'use' on a daily basis and how the theories seemingly have a limited applicability to the daily practices (see, e.g., Patton et al., 2007 or Reason & Kimbal, 2012 for similar critiques). The proposed theories are often either philosophical, managerial, or purely educational. Observing from a managerial rather than a scientific background, one feels that these theories lack a holistic approach to the day-to-day operations of SAS and are limited in maintaining a truly actionable side that can be used for policy setting and innovation, and management implementation.

To counter these critiques, and in light of our own appreciation of those theories, and taking into account the limitations of the particular Flemish context, this chapter offers a paradigmatic construct, namely the student life experience (SLX). Tan et al. (2016) defined the 'total student experience' as the experience of higher education including those affective aspects with which the student self-identifies. Affective aspects are attitudes (e.g., motivation, empathy, emotion, compassion), beliefs, and values. Students' affective aspects shape and are shaped by their expectations and aspirations, their conceivable underrepresentation and vulnerabilities, and the (dis-)advantaged environment from which they come. In line with this total student experience, SLX is defined as the totality of service experiences within higher education that offers added value to student life (Vanderlooven et al., 2021). In a similar vein, Ludemann et al. (2020a) wrote:

> The student life experience was initially viewed as extra-curriculum: programmes and services apart from the academic

programme of the institution, also called the out-of-class or beyond the classroom experience. Numerous aspects of student life are now seen as co-curriculum: learning and development experiences designed to support the university mission in partnership with the academic programme. This co-curricular view is reinforced through the current intentionality of being a student-centred institution committed to delivering designated learning and developmental outcomes.

2.2 Service logic and product-service system

Central to designing and managing SAS within this paradigmatic construct of SLX are two important elements. First, the essence of good service is *value creation* (Downe, 2019). Successful support services in a *Flemish* academic environment *create value for the student journey* in two distinct ways: on the one hand by mitigating those factors that hinder study success, and on the other hand by supporting and enhancing the experiential value of student life. The first impact is mainly of public interest because it targets more vulnerable societal groups (with certain socio-economic or cultural backgrounds, or through groups whose learning is endangered by all kinds of disabilities, etc.), while the second impact is more of a personal nature through the joy of individual student life.

Obviously, in the background of that created value stands the impact on the university's reputation and attractiveness through such metrics as student retention and success. After all, good service provision – especially when it contributes to improved chances of success – leads to higher satisfaction vis-à-vis the education / service provider and a higher willingness for positive 'word-of-mouth' communication – i.e., to a stronger intention to recommend (Ledden et al., 2011). The self-interest of the HEI is therefore embedded in the service-providing logic.

As such, student affairs and services within the framework of 'the student life experience' contribute to and support the organizational and pedagogical aims of the higher educational institute, but also strengthen more implicit aspects such as a campus culture, a student identity, a sense of belonging, and feelings of pride at being a student at a certain university. For an HEI,

implementing SLX through a contextualized mix of SAS is a potential means for being recommended as a reputable institution by its students and alumni to all kinds of stakeholders – not least future students and the current and future employers of those alumni.

A second important aspect, apart from value creation, is that when the educational programme and SLX are strategically intertwined as a whole, this presents an integrated product-service system (PSS) (Dewit et al., 2021). A product-service system is an organizational design-thinking model in which a basic objective – in the case of HE, providing educational programmes – is supplemented with all kinds of additional services – in our case with SAS. The aim is to maximize the chances of student retention and success. Success for the SAS means addressing a set of interdependent needs – e.g., housing, mental wellbeing, and financial issues – so that the student is unburdened before and concurrent with the challenges of the educational programme. Note that both in the Flemish and European higher education contexts, this satisfaction of needs is just as much a thing of public interest – through Flemish policy setting and the Bologna process – as it is of personal interest.

Hypothetically, an SLX could be designed independently of the educational programme, but that is neither realistic nor desirable from a systemics point of view (Checkland, 1999; Tura, 2018). For example, the educational programme through which the student journey runs creates a conditioning context in which feelings of mental discomfort can be triggered or even aggravated. Yet, it simultaneously creates a peer group within which these individual feelings can potentially be detected. Hence, SAS intertwined with educational programmes can then be mobilized to tackle those individual feelings and problems through the psycho-medical services on offer[14]. Ideally, a product-service system offers every student – regardless of their background – an equitable opportunity for a high-quality and

14 With the increase of software as a service (SAAS) applications in (higher) education (Lampinen et al., 2020), intertwining SAS such as support for mental wellbeing with SAAS may turn out to be a challenge. But for whom? It is doubtful that (inter-)national SAAS providers will feel obliged to offer SAS or that (inter-)national legislators will quickly impose that task on SAAS providers. In contrast, HEIs that were used to auditorium-based education programmes and have been forced through COVID-19 to shift to hybrid courses may find their knowledge base for an interconnected SAAS/SAS offering is lacking. Could this turn out to be an entry barrier for HEIs in the market of SAAS?

successful participation in higher education, including all the support services that may be required.

With value creation and PSS in mind, an important caveat needs to be addressed. It has been pointed out in the literature (Maloshonok et al., 2021; Taylor Bunce, 2021) that HEIs that treat their students strictly as consumers are quite quickly confronted by those students with a 'consumerist' attitude. This attitude assumes that obtaining a diploma is a 'right', and HEIs are held to offer these students 'satisfaction' through a highly marketable diploma. SLX is not some sort of one-sided consumer-driven approach to the student journey. SLX wishes to inscribe itself explicitly into the tradition of a student-centred approach to the student–HEI relationship. This approach aims for genuine academic, intellectual, and personal growth (Tangney, 2014; Klemencic, 2017).

However, Maloshonok et al. (2021) point out that this latter approach is highly dependent on the student's motivation, their outlook on studying, and their ability to do so independently. For students who are characterized by unfavourable personal or background factors, the student-centred approach can present an additional barrier because it can implicitly target stronger students with well-developed metacognitive skills and strong self-discipline (cf. Chapter 5, for a more detailed analysis of this argument). For these reasons, there are more and more models of the student–HEI relationship that regard the students as partners in the educational process, giving them the opportunity to contribute to the design of study programmes through co-creation processes. A critical consideration of Maloshonok et al. (2021) is that the students in these co-processes must be proficient in critical reflection on and decision-making in those educational processes. Certainly, not every student is well versed in these proficiencies, yet it is doubtful that those proficiencies are truly absolute requirements. Nonetheless, with the role of students in mind, the co-design of (educational programmes and) SAS – with all the demands that this puts on the shoulders of students – should be considered carefully and, above all, should be well framed.

2.3 To bricolage a paradigmatic construct

2.3.1 Introduction

The presented paradigmatic construct is not the outcome of current research into SAS that we or other authors have done or are presently doing. Rather, it is the result of theoretical bricolage. The need to bricolage follows from the above-mentioned critiques of present and past theories, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the pressing need to relate one's day-to-day practices to grounds for justifiable action.

Bricolage was defined by Lévi-Strauss (1966) as a technique to understand the complexities of social reality, and in particular of the cultural world. As with any scientific method, the goal is to generate knowledge of the situation at hand. However, insights gained from social research soon start to interact through researchers and knowledge workers with that same reality. Hence, reality and the knowledge thereof are interdependent; they are involved continuously in a process of mutual changes. Moreover, knowledge of social reality has a 'limited shelf-life', and thus our understanding of all the intricacies and details of social reality is most of the time tentative at best. Understanding should therefore focus on the systemics of social reality.

As knowledge workers and third-space professionals, our understanding of the praxis of SAS in Flanders revolves around the three systemic features – service attitude, transparency, and effectiveness – identified earlier, and with which these SAS are in compliance with the requirements of the Flemish legislator. To that mix should be added the requirement of sustainability, a systemic feature which increasingly infuses the discourses on societal and institutional organization. Figure 1.1 maps the student life experience (SLX) – resulting from a service logic and shaped as a product-service system – vis-à-vis the four systemic features which it should fulfill.

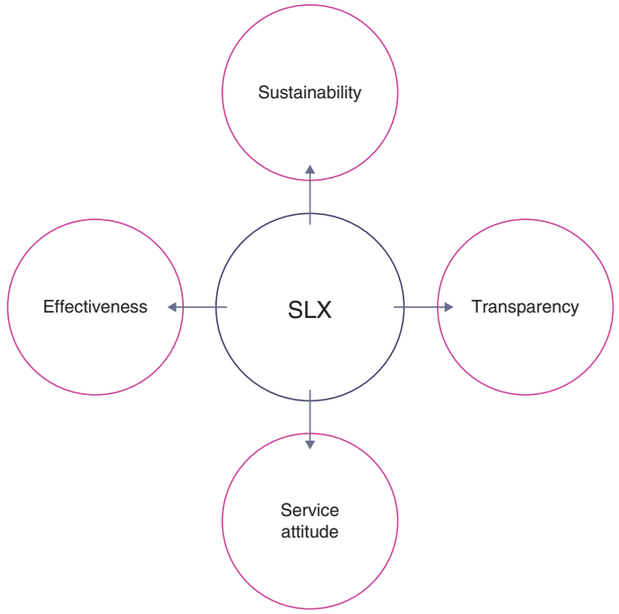

Figure 1.1. SLX and its systemic features

Combining these four systemic features within a service logic is complex. It basically requires the formulation of a novel ontology, i.e., an act of academic creativity. Kincheloe (2005, p. 346), in his conceptualization of bricolage, argues that the researcher / bricoleur should have the ability:

- to imagine things that never were;
- to see the world as it could be;
- to develop alternatives to oppressive existing conditions;
- to discern what is lacking in a way that promotes the will to act; and
- to understand that there is far more to the world than what we can see.

Surely, that is exactly what the design of SAS – in housing, mental care, financial support, healthy catering, and so on – requires? For this volume, any design of a comprehensive service system and of its actual services is

embedded in an imaginative, yet never definitive, understanding of the Flemish HE reality. Of course, as a consequence of that focus on the Flemish context, incongruences between, on the one hand, the paradigmatic construct and the practices / services that flow from it and, on the other hand, the theories, paradigms, and practices used in other (inter-)national SAS contexts are to be expected.

2.3.2 Grounding the paradigmatic construct

Although there is a call for imagination, even in theoretical bricolage a degree of rigour is required. To theoretically frame the concept of SLX, the features identified above will be linked to four process-based theories, selected from scientific literature on organizational management and innovation. But first, we turn to sociology for a meta-approach to theorizing social reality. The theoretical debate in sociology on how something can be organized is very rich and nuanced, but for our purpose we choose to start from, on the one hand, micro-macro and, on the other hand, agency-structure approaches (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018).

The macro approach focuses on the large social structures that make up society as a whole and impose constraints in intricate ways on a member of society, the socius. The micro approach, on the other hand, focuses on the actual social act that occurs in specific contexts. As a socius, one understands these actions as being meaningful, for example when someone moves from one to another student residence. When these individual actions coagulate into patterns, structures arise such as, for example, in the formation of a student neighborhood with student bars[15]. The micro-macro approach is mainly analytical, and at times seemingly assumes the appearance of a 'summation' of social effects caused through a 'sum' of individuals. However, that interpretation is somewhat simplistic.

The agency approach underlines that the agent – the acting party – is not necessarily an individual. The agent could be any social unit that understands how to make a difference, e.g., a student union. Agency is made up of a stream

15 The micro-macro approach is mainly analytical, and at times seemingly assumes the appearance of a 'sum' of social effects caused through a 'sum' of individuals. However, that interpretation is far too simplistic and should be avoided.

of social acts performed by the member(s) of a social unit. The structure approach in contrast looks at how, where, when, and which means, goals, and rules of the 'social play' become a set of patterns of a social system, for example when a permanent consultation platform is created between higher education management and their services' professionals on the one hand, and student unions on the other hand (e.g., the STUVO Council). For the purpose of clarity, observe that in Flanders it is decreed that the designated agent in the formulation of a mix of support services is the HEI. The HEI is, however, held to pursue both the public interest and the students' personal interests.

The dichotomies micro-macro and agency-structure are only opposite pairs in appearance. Social reality can never be grasped by a single pole, nor by a single set of poles. Social reality is 'caught up' in between all four poles, shifting continuously on the continuums between the abstract / extreme poles.

The first dichotomy, micro-macro, as a partial answer to the quest for a paradigmatic framework, stems from the American tradition of structural functionalism infused with behaviorism (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2018). This approach sees society as layered, wherein those layers equate to levels of analysis. There is therefore a certain degree of 'dominance and subordination' to the nature of this approach, and it is also to a certain extent ahistorical. This micro-macro reality is applicable to both the Flemish HEI landscape and the backgrounds of its student population, and hence to the student affairs and services.

The second dichotomy, agency-structure, finds its roots in the European tradition of structuralism with strong traces of the German historical school and social constructivism. This approach mainly offers room for the roles of free – especially creative – will and systemic emergence (i.e., the occurrence of unpredicted, predictable effects that can be explained only in retrospect).

Through this theoretical bricolage, an ontology appears. At each end or pole of the dichotomies, a framework from the organizational and innovation theory literature is pinned. The selection of these theories is based on the four systemic features that the paradigmatic construct should pursue. Each of these theories studies processes that are relevant to the challenges of policy setting and innovation, and of facilitating a managerial approach to SAS and their design. For the micro-macro dichotomy, adaptive co-management on the one hand and institutional management on the other hand have been selected, and for the agency-structure dichotomy, human-centred design

(HCD) on the one hand and systemics / evidence-informed organization on the other hand. Figure 1.2 shows SLX as an actionable reality caught between the poles discussed above and as grounded in four theories for purposes of testable justification.

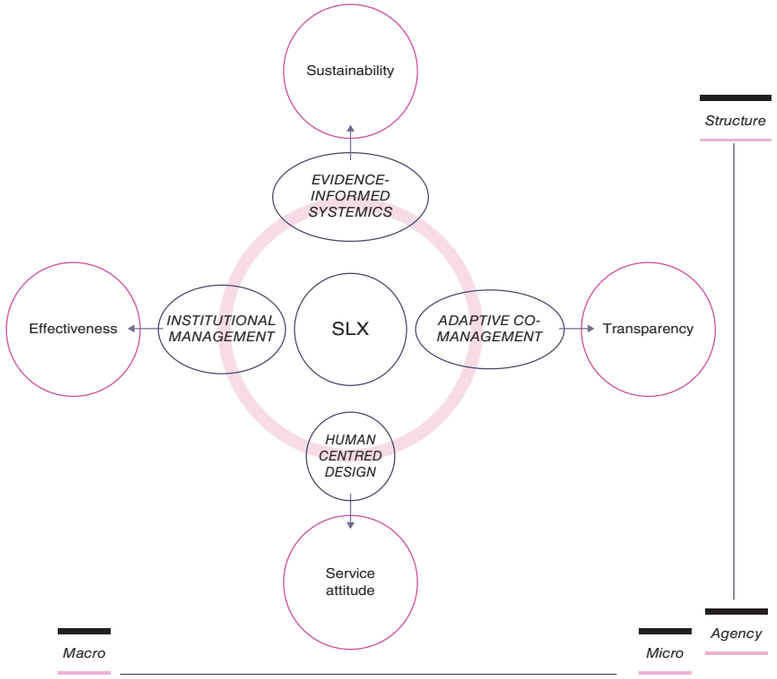

Figure 1.2. SLX – *caught* and *grounded*

2.3.3 Elaborating on the paradigmatic construct

Each of these process theories is the subject of rich debates, the breadth and depth of which can only be cursorily explored here. Institutionalism lends itself to understanding how each HEI stands in its landscape or ecosystem; how institutional (im-)mutability is facilitated; how stakeholders within an organization relate to each other in the light of parallel, opposing, or competing interests; how effectiveness structures the organization; and how participative decision-making works. For example, Cai & Mehari (2015) advocate the use of an institutional conceptual framework to understand institution-related phenomena of teaching and learning. They point out, among other things,

the value of 'institutional logic' – a concept borrowed from Friedland & Alford (1991); namely a whole of applied practices and symbolic constructs that, by means of an internal order, shape an 'organization principle' (irrespective of what that principle may be), whereby that whole is then available as a starting position and a basis for action on which to expand further. For example, UAntwerp uses 'activating and student-centred education' as a prominent organizational principle[16]. Such an institutional approach implicitly underlines the need to help students familiarize quickly with the cultural and symbolic dimensions of their HEI (i.e., internalizing, among other things, how to talk the talk of the institution). Students who are unfamiliar with this culture are more likely to experience barriers to entry and participation rather than a lower threshold; and they may find it a reason to make certain (negative) study (career) choices or even drop out (more quickly). Of course, this detracts from an HEI's effectiveness. That is why, for example, Glorieux et al. (2015) argue for a more culturally inclusive HEI policy.

The decree on student services enforces transparency and co-management via the STUVO Council. *Co-management* theory offers a great advantage in that it points to the complexity and changing nature of an institutional landscape, and above all to the need for transparency towards all participants in that landscape. The support services should help students to a certain extent to buffer against, for example, (feelings of) social insecurity in a (global) environment, which today is characterized by systemic insecurity. However, transparency under (fundamental and systemic) uncertainty is not at all self-evident. Designing services that – more than just offering answers to individual challenges, problems, and risks – also provide an answer to systemic uncertainties requires adaptive co-creation (Ricciardi et al., 2019). Co-management thus specifically means that the services must be fed bottom-up[17], and this through a collaborative learning process – which takes place between the 'recognizable office' imposed by decree and the targeted students – so that the mix and the nature of the services can be adequately shaped.

16 https://www.uantwerpen.be/nl/overuantwerpen/organisatie/waar-staan-we-voor/missie-en-visie/kerntaken/onderwijs/visie-op-onderwijs/activerend-en-studentgecentreerd/

17 For example, the STUVO Council organizes at least two informal sessions each year on the needs and policies regarding the student support services. The agenda is almost entirely determined by the questions that the students submit on the concrete functioning of SAS. In addition, there are also two Student Consultation Committees every year where the chair people of the umbrella organizations of student associations and the Student Council can submit further and broader questions to the rectorate and the central university services. These four moments draw much needed attention to what is ongoing within the student population, and they inspire policy proposals.

The co-management framework generally encourages and facilitates potential innovations, and specifically in HEI (Mancarella et al., 2019). This statement is in line with the three key capacities identified by Ricciardi et al. (2019), namely transparency at the system level, an awareness of sustainable dynamics[18], and adaptive co-creation. Evidently, when innovation contributes to institutional effectiveness, there is hardly a reason not to innovate. In recent years, for example, we have seen that student services increasingly aim for a more layered approach to certain problems. For instance, financial aid is offered per person yet financial literacy is organized for groups, while with regard to mental wellbeing prevention, detection, self, 1st, and 2nd lines of care are also increasingly organized as a total package.

The challenge with a micro-macro approach is that institutionalism and adaptive co-management mainly yield organizational insights. The resulting conceptualizations – for example, student support through more sweeping digital services – hardly equate with effective actions. In contrast, human-centred design (HCD)[19] is a process that accelerates innovative ideas through a transition from concept to what is called an 'actionable reality', i.e., to a situation where the product – a good or a service – can be used in a testable manner. Janzer et al. (2019) strongly argue that HCD should be enriched with scientific insights, a well-situated context, and especially with end-user empowerment (i.e., from the world view of and in consultation with the end user)[20]. Which is precisely what we try to guarantee through the micro-macro theoretical frameworks. Well-designed services – for example through Participatory Action Research[21] – aim to mitigate the study-limiting factors inherent in the student's social environment, and moreover, they can contribute to experiencing 'a good student life'. It is essential here that the services are offered transversally – i.e., organized across the six working fields (catering, housing, etc.) and in relation to one another. The student services can

18 Sustainable dynamics concerns the long-term viability and net-positive impact of an organization's activities and outputs. The impact should outbalance any negative consequences by taking into consideration all social, economic, and environmental aspects.

19 Human-centred design is a method for designing products and services that will be consumed or used by people. The ensuing products mediate human behaviour.

20 Although the argument is made in a context of neocolonialism and decolonization, it actually applies to any social reality.

21 Participatory Action Research conducts research that is (partly) supported by the target group for which it is conducted, rather than scientists conducting research for or about an otherwise passive target group. The aim is of course that the shared insights are converted into resources that can be used by the target group and into actions that can be carried out by the same people. The research results thus become actionable.

seldom be offered separately from each other (or from the study programme for that matter), because in this way the outreach to the student's reality or environment can easily fail. Only when the support services are integrated with each other and are completely focused on the students' needs can they be labelled as really helpful. HCD offers an action framework to design services that minimize the chance of a counterproductive or suboptimal result.

Finally, there is the need for sustainability. In the brief treatment of the first three theoretical frameworks, sustainability has already emerged as an issue to be answered. Human actions produce social constructs – such as HEIs and their student services. These social constructs in turn mediate individual and organizational actions. The dialectical relationship between these forms of action is constantly evolving, and sometimes results in (r-) evolutions because of the innovations it produces. With a view on those constructs, patterns of action, and innovations, a systemic and evidence-informed approach helps to evaluate and adjust the sustainability of a (new) designed service (for a parallel reasoning in ecosystems thinking, see Dawson et al., 2010, while a good case study is Lahtinen et al., 2013). Finally, a systemic and evidence-informed approach feeds the institutional and adaptive co-management frameworks, so that effectiveness and transparency can be monitored (see, e.g., Harel & Sitko, 2003; Dollinger et al., 2018).

2.3.4 A paradigmatic construct called student life experience

The student life experience (SLX), as the totality of HE service experiences that should be able to offer significant added value to student life,

- is now anchored between the four systemic features (sustainability, transparency, service attitude, and effectiveness),
- while its systemic features are grounded in a theoretical underpinning,
- whereby it can draw upon the insights from organization and innovation theories to structure its overall systemic coherence (represented by the shaded ring and the inward-pointing shaded arrows of Figure 1.3) and its constituent parts, i.e. the actual student support services in SLX,

- and is framed in a space marked by the dichotomous poles (micro-macro and agency-structure) and continuums, where all the complexities, intricacies, and details of social reality play themselves out.

In order to understand the figure below, the four process theories must primarily be seen as juxtaposed, rather than opposed to one another. To emphasize this insight of juxtaposition, and therefore admittedly atypically, the micro-macro axis has been placed horizontally and the agency-structure axis vertically[22].

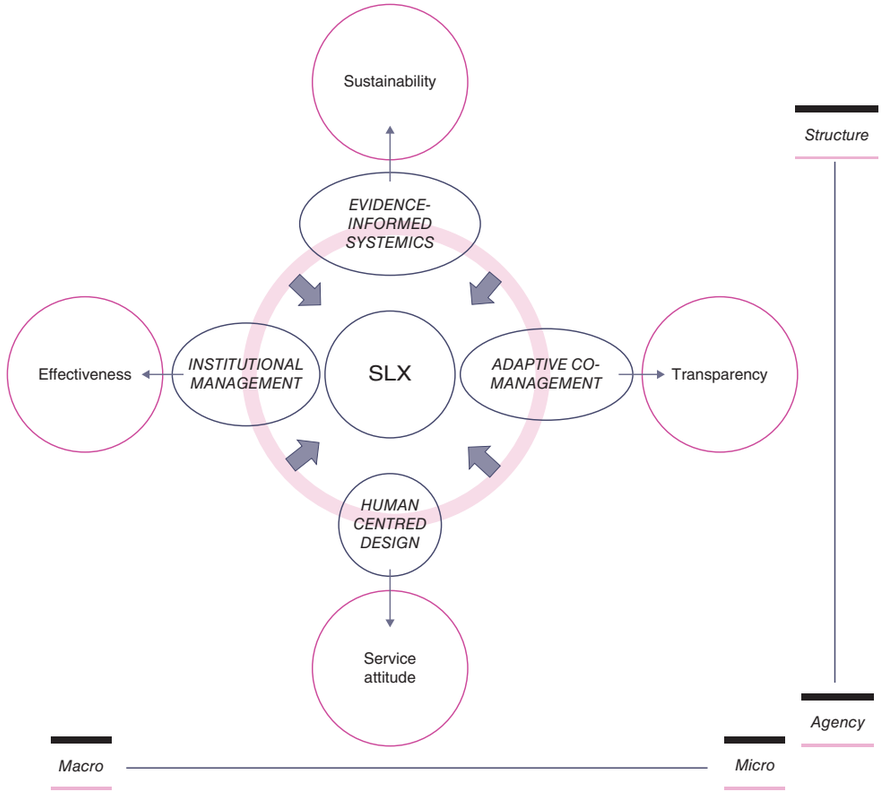

Figure 1.3. SLX as an integrated offer of contextualised SAS

22 The aim is to temper the understandable visual reflex with regard to dominance and subordination.

This paradigmatic construct can now help to frame the extant best practices, and it should enable the management and design of a comprehensive service system and its component parts, the actual services. It allows for an integrated, i.e., differentiated and transversal offer in function of situations and contexts, but above all it gives substance to the aim of offering students access to and participation in higher education (presented by the thick inward-oriented arrows in Figure 1.3). With a contextualized mix of support services – i.e., an HEI's concrete SLX proposition – every Flemish student – regardless of their choice of study, location, and institution – should enjoy the rights to study and student life on an equitable basis. Moreover, with regard to SAS, the different perspectives of the stakeholders – i.e., the government, HEIs, and students – can now be understood and mediated through the framework of the paradigmatic construct. SLX, conceived through theoretical bricolage, with a focus on the desirable characteristics, has the potential to be labelled as a form of HEI good governance[23].

Finally, SLX in Flanders will be distinctive from SLX in, e.g., France or Germany as its institutional configuration is differentiated through legal requirements. This differentiation inevitably impacts how the service attitude and the sustainability of SLX are shaped. The curved dashed arrows in Figure 1.1 illustrate this as internally interdependent, and the probable dynamic and ever shifting nature of SLX. The arrows imply that changes in one of the constituent poles (or, e.g., in the configuration of one dichotomous pair) will lead to impacts and potentially changes in the juxtaposed poles. These curved arrows also serve a second purpose, which is the focus of the research agenda in the next section.

23 The Council of Europe identifies twelve relevant features of good governance, including responding appropriately to a legitimate question within a reasonable period of time, efficiency and effectiveness, openness and transparency, sound financial policy and accountability, sustainability, the rule of law, ethical conduct, competence and willingness to change, and respect for human rights, diverse cultures, and social cohesion (https://www.coe.int/en/web/good-governance/12-principles).

2.4 For the added-value seeker: The paradigmatic construct as a research agenda

The 'recognizable office' of support services of each Flemish HEI reports annually on its activities. However, each new report attracts only a few readers, as it is often to a large degree repetitive vis-à-vis the prior annual reports. The obvious added advantage of a paradigmatic construct for the support services is that it facilitates scientific research into the nature and impact of student services. An annual report should be limited then to reporting in a descriptive manner on the (non-)realizations with regard to both the applicable five-year policy plan and the commenting document accompanying each relevant budget year. The annual reports thus will in general become less expansive and easier to read. As a complement to the annual report, a more expansive indicators report (e.g., on catering, housing, mental wellbeing, etc.) could be part of a new (European) data-driven, evidence-informed research agenda. Here, there are two emergent research options.

Research into the daily practices of SAS and into the experiences of students with these services – i.e., of both the personal experience of the service provision process and the concrete impact of the student services on their socially recognized needs – is the first option. An indicator report for each field of work – provided an agreement is reached on the format and on a division of labor between the HEIs – could be submitted to Flemish or even European HEI research groups. These research groups would need to have a great deal of expertise in that field of work. Hence, a data-driven longitudinal study into the functioning and impact of SAS could be rolled out.

The indicator reporting could be linked to scientific insights that are gained from other relevant Flemish and / or European policy initiatives and research. Research into, e.g., changes in the attitudes and socio-economic needs of Flemish and / or European young adults with regard to housing could be linked to the functioning of the student housing services in their respective HEI contexts. These findings could then be used by governing

authorities to (re-)formulate objectives for SAS, whereby SLX becomes the vehicle for HEI support services to convert those objectives into institutionalized actions (and which are, of course, through their nature and impact, human-centred and systemic). The policy with regard to student services thus becomes structurally evidence-informed.

With regard to the personal experience of the provided student services, research could be conducted via a gap analysis. For example, Bonnarens et al. (2020) reported that students at UAntwerp mainly experienced an information gap. The students who managed to bridge this gap judged the services as very effective. However, they indicated that there was a cost of time and effort before they could access those services that were, after all, always intended for them. In addition to the communication about and the accessibility of the student services, they also looked closely at aspects such as the reliability of the service, the empathy of employees, and the pricing (for example, in the student restaurants). Thus, the desire for 'aftercare' after the actual service provision came to light. In order to accommodate these comments, every element of the service offering is now systematically put under the magnifying glass. Fundamentally, this kind of research allows us to verify whether students perceive their participation at UAntwerp as truly equitable vis-à-vis their fellow students.

A second research approach is to start from the scientific discourse on one of the theoretical perspectives. Institutional management, human-centred design, evidence-informed systemics, and adaptive co-management have recently each lent themselves as a primary research paradigm to deepen the understanding of the organization and impact of student services and higher education in general (see, e.g., Ashton Hay & Doncaster, 2021; Dollinger et al., 2020; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Gibbs & Kharouf, 2022; Kasnakoğlu & Mercan, 2022; Mann 2020; Martinez-Buján et al., 2020). However, the relational configuration of those paradigms within the paradigmatic construct offers the added possibilities of either formulating one or more secondary hypotheses or interpreting unanticipated findings on the basis of the two adjacent perspectives of the employed primary research paradigm. This follows, evidently, from the juxtaposition of the micro-macro and agency-structure dichotomies.

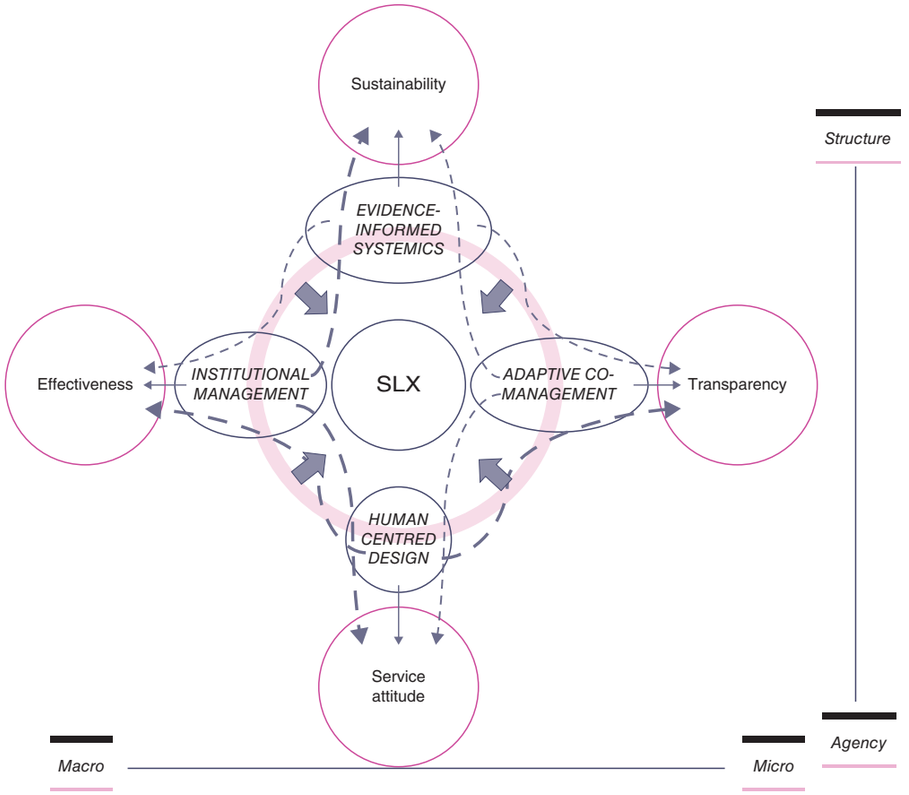

Figure 1.4. SLX for the added-value seeker

The dashed arrows in Figure 1.4 illustrate how research can start out from one angle on SLX and can fan out to adjacent angles. Research starting out from, e.g., the government's policy on the effectiveness of support services could conceivably formulate secondary hypotheses about the systemic and human-centred nature of those services, i.e., that a macro issue can be enriched with aspects that are specific to the agency-structure debate. Similarly, a study of the service attitude or human-centred approach to student services can now look at how those services are embedded in the institutional and co-management structures. These two examples are shown through the thicker dashed arrows in the above figure.