Learning and Teaching Investment Fund 2011

Final Project Report

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Title of project: Co-creating a cohort experience for first year students at RMIT Business

Strategic objective(s) addressed: Student experience

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1. Executive summary

A student cohort experience seeks to produce improved student satisfaction and benefits that relate to student and institutional engagement. This project provides a model to help (re)conceptualise processes, factors, actors and resources involved in the student experience. The model is based on current academic literature and qualitative research exploring student cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions in assessments of their tertiary experience. The outcomes of this project are a literature review, qualitative research output, and a model conceptualising the co-creation of a student experience.

The outcomes of this project lend support to the conceptual logic of value co-creation. The results suggest that participants contribute to and are implicated in the RMIT experience while pursuing meaningful experiences in order to attain personal and educational objectives. The results point to a constellation of student contextual factors and nine interaction points comprising processes, actors, factors and resources implicated in the student experience.

It will be useful to empirically examine the relationship between student contexts and the various interaction points, and their effect on the relative importance of each process, actor, factor or resource. This will enable the development of a sustainable strategy and implementation plan, which identifies and targets the critical and high-impact interaction points to enhance the student experience at RMIT in meaningful ways.
2. List of outcomes

This project has successfully achieved the following outcomes:

1. Literature review
2. Research findings
3. Co-creating the student experience model (Refer to Appendix 1 for full page graphic representation)
4. Presentations and journal publications

3. Project outcomes and impacts

Introduction

A student cohort experience seeks to produce improved student satisfaction and benefits that relate to student and institutional engagement. RMIT’s Red Paper on the Strategic Plan 2011-2015 (Dec 2010) proposes that a successful student experience should:

...build in students a sense of belonging and commitment to the field they have chosen and to the students and staff with whom they have studied. ... It will lay the foundations for graduates’ continuing association with the university, through professional development and engagement as alumni with teaching, research and industry partnerships.¹

This project builds upon the foundations laid by the Red Paper and those provided by the ‘Pilot projects to define the student cohort experience’ project. It is framed specifically within the scope of the University’s vision to “create a student experience which is characterised by achievement, excitement and a sense of belonging”².

This project provides a model and framework to help conceptualise processes, factors and actors involved in the student cohort experience. The model is based on current academic literature and qualitative research exploring student cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions in student assessments of their tertiary experience. This project provides insights into the dimensions and factors operating and influencing the creation of value, student engagement and positive student experiences and outcomes. The longitudinal aim of this work is to assist RMIT University to identify and target sustainable institutional strategies that enhance student engagement and student outcomes for retention, and academic, professional and personal success.

Marketing and service science approaches can offer strategies for sustainable business practice to tertiary institutions embracing the changing educational landscape. Recent discourses on the co-creation of value and service experiences situate consumers as actors co-creating service processes and outcomes by interacting with other actors and by integrating resources. Co-creation has the potential to reframe common conceptualisations of student engagement and the student experience. In applying this framework to tertiary institutions,

students are situated as co-creators of meaningful educational experiences through direct and indirect interactions with other actors (such as peers and academic and teaching staff) and resources (such as facilities and learning material).

**Amendments to deliverables**

Some deliverables identified in the project proposal were amended to reflect unanticipated process and conceptual challenges, and research results. The amendments have not compromised the value and impact of this project and its outcomes.

**Table 1 – Summary of amendments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed deliverables</th>
<th>Variation to actual deliverables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes of a scoping study identifying the relationships between the activities that contribute to a cohort experience for all first year business students.</td>
<td>The project scope was widened to include first, second, third and fourth year students in exploratory research to ensure sufficient student participation and richness of data.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A framework and examples of engagement activities related to the first year student experience in the College of Business.</td>
<td>Not amended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An implementation plan and communication strategy, including measures to promote sustainability of the project's focus and outcomes.</td>
<td>Implementation plan and communication strategies were ambitious for this exploratory project. The researchers determined that the project results should be tested empirically to ensure the development of targeted and sustainable strategies to enhance the student experience. This work forms the 2012 LTIF project ‘Co-creating the Student Experience: An Empirical Understanding of a Student Cohort Experience at RMIT University’. Implementation and communication plans are key outcomes of the 2012 project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The framework will be written up for a conference paper for the First Year in Higher Education Conference, and possibly other academic conferences highlighting its relevance to concepts and theories such as Student Relationship Management, Service-Dominant Logic and Student Cohorts and Relatedness.</td>
<td>Not amended</td>
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Literature review

A literature review, presented in Appendix 2, traces recent discourses on service and student engagement to help define and conceptualise a student cohort experience at RMIT University. It draws together the parallel subject areas of student engagement and student satisfaction, and the production of value and service quality in tertiary institutions. It explores the relationships between the co-creation of value and the student experience, and helps to identify a consolidated constellation of processes, actors and factors.

Qualitative research outputs

Research method

The researchers employed exploratory qualitative research methods involving focus groups and in-depth interviews. In total, twenty-eight students participated across four focus groups. Of these, fifteen students were invited to also participate in in-depth interviews to further explore concepts and issues raised during focus group discussions. Participants represented first, second and final year undergraduate College of Business students, including one student from the Bachelor of Design (Industrial Design). There was sufficient representation of males and females, and domestic and international students. All participants were current RMIT students in Semester 2, 2011.

The focus groups were semi-structured and followed the themes and questions identified in Appendix 3. The key aims of the focus groups were to:

- Explore co-creation of value at RMIT University
- Examine the range of interactions constituting the student experience, and
- Examine student goals and the relationships between these and various interactions.

Laddering techniques\(^3\) were employed by the researchers during focus groups discussions. These techniques sought to understand and provide insights into student behaviours and perceptions. Critical incident techniques\(^4\) were also employed to examine the student experience by focussing on particular incidents perceived as successful or positive and unsuccessful or negative. The aim of this technique was to develop an understanding of the particular phenomena from the perspective of the participant through cognitive, affective and behavioural elements.

The in-depth interviews were unstructured and sought to provide deeper insights into aspects of the student experience. Both laddering and critical incident techniques were employed.

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Transcripts of focus groups and in-depth interviews were coded and analysed using NVIVO software to identify recurrent themes and categories relating to the factors, actors and variables involved in conceptualising the student experience.

Ethics approval was granted by the Business College Human Ethics Advisory Network (BCHEAN) Committee on September 22, 2011. The approval confirmation is BCHEAN 1000335.

The outcomes of the coding and categorisation process, and the consolidated works identified in the literature review, were employed in the development of the co-creating the student experience model.

**Findings**

**Underpinning themes in value co-creation**

The research findings lend support to the conceptual logic of value co-creation and Service Dominant Logic (SDL). The findings suggest that students contribute to and are implicated in the RMIT experience through cognitive, emotional, and behavioural efforts to attain educational and life goals. A recurrent theme provided by participants indicated that “RMIT is very much... what you make of it” (Student Interview No. 5). While participants appear to derive or co-create value from their interactions with various processes, actors, factors and resources, this appears dependant on their own specific and multidimensional contexts.

Three underpinning themes emerged that characterise co-creation of the student experience: interdependency, reciprocity, and humanisation.

**Interdependency** suggests that students do not actualise or shape their experiences at RMIT independent of their own (and others’) contexts. This is illustrated in Student Interview 11:

> I think these experiences are heavily dependent on other people as well because, you know, they’re dependent on you on actually going out, seeking out those different avenues, those initiatives. But it's also dependent on other people as well, like my friends at university, I just didn’t make them, you know, you don’t make friends at uni just by sitting in the back in the corner. That’s not how friends are made. Friends are made through having common experiences, through seeing each other a fair bit, just seeing a person in class and then you start a conversation, and then realise you've got a lot more similar sort of stories and stuff like that.

**Reciprocity** acknowledges mutuality and collaboration in the student experience, as indicated in Student Interview 11:

> A lot of it is conversation based, just the connections that you make, the things that people talk about, but then with design a lot of it is putting up your work, being really open about what you’re doing so that other people can see that and learn from that. Just that sharing experience of what you’re doing, sharing where you’re at, that’s helped so much and also it makes you quite competitive because you know where everyone else is, you know what the standard is.. A lot of it is initially just building your relationships with other people and learning from what
they know, you sharing with them what you know, some of the cool stuff that we've done is because we've collaborated, but then on the other hand some of the worst stuff we've done is because the collaboration just hasn't worked. It's so hard to get it right but when it happens it's really good.

**Humanisation** emphasises the human side of interaction and resource integration, which is illustrated in Student Interview 7 and 1, respectively:

*It makes you be part of the university, instead of just being a number*

*I suppose, much like the human experience, you want to have a connection with other people and learn from them and offer your advice so that you can both benefit from your experiences and I suppose put more towards that end goal*

Given these insights, co-creation in university environments can be conceptualised as an interdependent, reciprocal, and humanised process of interaction and resource integration (i.e., employing resources to achieve outcomes) that aims to facilitate and enhance students’ learning and campus life experiences.

Student interview 1 provides the following insights into co-creation and the student experience:

*You make your own opportunities and that's pretty much what university is like. So you can go to uni, have no actual interaction, do classes, go home ...you can do perfectly well through that, [but] you don't just go to uni just for the degree. You go to uni for those other university experiences as well.*

**A constellation of drivers and interactions**

The results point to a constellation of interaction points comprising processes, actors, factors and resources implicated in the student experience. These are also referred to more generally as interaction points. The literature review supports this constellation and is further supported by the exploratory research results. The constellation represents the drivers influencing participant perceptions of the student experience and how value might be conceptualised at RMIT University.

A model representing the co-creation of the student experience is presented below. This model is made up of student contextual factors, such as values and culture, learning and life goals, motivation, and social network. These factors appear to influence if, how and the degree to which interaction with the processes, actors, factors and resources occurs. For example, pre-existing student perceptions of the RMIT brand and RMIT’s reputation appear to impact participant assessments of value and quality, and their assessments of the student experience. While the contextual factors delineated by the black circumference of the sphere are not controllable, the nine interaction points can be influenced internally by RMIT.
Learning and Life Goals - The proactive use of resources appears to be influenced by students’ goals related to learning and life. Overall, participants reported that the intention of finding a well-paid job or a job that enables international travel are key drivers of the efforts that students are prepared to put into their experiences. This is illustrated below.

Student Focus Group 2
I’m a bit of a perfectionist, even if something is right and it’s working, if I don’t like something I’ll continuously try to fix it to work on it. I can finish an assignment within hours or days of it being given to me, but I’ll keep going back to it just to tweak it just to make it better and to know that it was good enough.

Student Interview 1
I think a lot of people come here to gain perspective on what they want to do in their lives as well, you know. I don’t think it would be very common for people to really absolutely know that they wanted to do after university, before coming to university. Like a lot of people say oh, I want to be an accountant, so they go and study accounting. Or they study law.
Social Network - Participants indicated that their social network, such as their university friends and family, influence their resource usage and interactions. For instance, goal-oriented friends or parents with very high expectations might influence student motivation to engage and interact, as well as co-create meaningful experiences. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 1:

Obviously my parents, keeping them happy and you talk to them about it and what their views are. The person that I was seeing, she was really motivated and really driven so that obviously helped. Just your general surroundings, but at the end of the day it’s me, it’s my own experiences, which motivated me a lot.

It’s a really nice feeling when you know that your parents are happy with what you’re doing, that they’re proud of it as well.

Motivation and Emotions - Participants pointed towards motivation as emotional states shaping their efforts. Motivation might, for example, be related to needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 2

What I want to get out of uni is more dependent on my attitude… I talk in class, I’ll put up my hand and talk. Now that’s not dependant on other people talking, that’s ‘cause I can generate conversations. That’s just dependant on me.

Values and Culture - The final element relates to student values and cultural frames, which influence the student experience. This is illustrated below.

Student interview 1:

My own experience motivated me a lot but...It’s a really nice feeling when you know that your parents are happy with what you’re doing, that they’re proud of it as well. It’s both, definitely both.
Interaction points: Processes, actors, factors and resources

Peers - Participants often highlighted their peers (fellow students) as a critical resource or interaction point for meaningful learning and university life experiences. The interaction with and importance of other students is not limited to the classroom but is manifested in many facets of student experience, such as through social activities and spaces for formal and informal networking. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 5:

*Other students definitely play a big role, and I think that you need a group of like-minded students around you to kind of encourage you more to get more out of the program. Like my friend Jake, who I’ve referred to quite a lot, me and him have formed quite a close bond and one of the business ventures we’re doing together, and we entered the business plan competition together, and we’re very like-minded in a way where we both want to get as much out of this course as we possibly can. And without him, my experience probably would have been a bit different… it’d just be a different experience because there are other students who are definitely experiencing the same thing that we’re experiencing because of their peer group. And you definitely need other people to kind of enjoy that experience with and to kind of reflect on the experience with each other as well. And I think that’s where it comes down to, you know, in terms of creating more of a community environment, maybe we get more of an opportunity to share our experiences with other students or maybe inform them about things that they aren’t aware of and vice versa. We can become informed about things that we might not necessarily be aware of and just kind of knowledge share.*

Student Interview 7:

*SLAMS gives you a chance to meet other people that you wouldn’t normally have talked to in the lecture hall...It’s the best thing, closest to an RMIT club, but it’s not really a club. So I guess it gave me a few peers this semester that I could talk to about my course work, because second year took a little bit more effort and I struggled a bit. But we could relate and interact.*

Academic and Teaching Staff - The next category that emerged out of the data relates to interactions with teaching staff, including lecturers, tutors, and coordinators. Essential and frequent interactions with these resources appear to shape both learning and more general university experience. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 2:

*You can’t expect a lecturer to be some showman that has everything set up like this TV show, that’s just not how it is. It’s a two way street, the students can do the exact same thing, they can talk to the lecturer, they should talk back, there should be a discussion like a conversation. It’s not just an experience where you’re just getting blasted with information.*

*It’s important you rely on other people wanting to engage in uni and wanting to have a great uni life outside of class. You need to find people that are as passionate about things as you are.*
Curriculum and Learning & Assessment - Participants pointed to the learning resources provided, such as lecture slides, articles and assessment tasks, as significant ingredients employed to advance thinking and achieve valuable experiences. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 3:

Initially when I started off with the (assessment) blog, I didn’t really understand how to comment and do things, so I struggled a little bit. But as time passed I learnt how to comment on certain things. So I think it’s pretty useful. Since I’m a new student and new to these things, I learn as I see other people comment.

Campus Life - Campus life and related resources refer to events such as barbecues, orientation week activities, clubs and societies and events. These types of resources are used as opportunities to socialise with other students and enrich participants’ university experience. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 2:

It’s difficult to meet people. But like a sausage sizzle, if you’re there you’ve got common ground, you’re standing around and then you can talk to people. You are there for a bit of food, a bit of something to drink and by having these events you can actually get a lot more people talking with each other. And that’s how you build up the atmosphere and then so I think it’s really important to keep on having your open spaces plus keeping up the events.

Student Interview 4:

Well, you feel a lot more comfortable coming to university, so you might come in just for the barbecue, even you might not have university that day, you come in just for that. Because you know there’s something to eat, there’s something to drink, there’s a bit of music there and you know you’re going to have a good time.

Facilities and Infrastructure - Facilities and infrastructure refers to buildings, function rooms (such as prayer facilities), and ICT networks and resources that enable students to interact, communicate and engage in learning and extra-curricular activities. At the same time these resources can also enhance productivity and work flows. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 3:

I love the prayer facility. And also it’s kind of a social hangout as well. I’ve met a couple of friends from there as well recently. Sometimes when I need to pray or I just want to take a break, I usually just go there ‘cause it’s just nice and quiet. But I’ve found it very beneficial.

Student Interview 3:

... they help you when you need anything. And they’re really nice, like you never find them grumpy or rude, I really, really like the RMIT library. The business library is fantastic. I think that’s the element that stands out to me. When I leave RMIT that’s what I’m going to acknowledge.
**Brand Associations** - Another element that participants presented as important was the university's brand associations, such as its reputation and image. During the focus groups and interviews, participants related the reputation of the university, for example, to potential feelings of pride or disassociation, which in turn shape their interactions and their overall experience. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 4

*The experience, just being a part of RMIT, recognising that you're an integral part of the university, of the student body of the entire thing, as opposed to just again a student who attends classes and gets a degree.*

Student Interview 6:

*So I think that by associating myself with something that has this big name makes me feel better. The prestige of the university has a lot to do with it.*

Student Interview 1:

*RMIT is well known because a lot of its students get hands-on experience compared to other universities. And I think that’s good as well when I try and look for a job and they’ve seen that I’ve done a degree at RMIT, they’ll know that I’ve got some hands-on experience.*

Student Interview 4:

*RMIT’s design is very famous because they’re all hands on, there is no exam at all. So every single student, every design student would dream to go to RMIT*

Student Interview 7:

*I’m fine with telling people I’m from RMIT anywhere I am. ... because I don’t think it’s that bad, it still has got some reputation, it’s just that the reputation has dropped, yeah. I think that it’s better for RMIT to try to pull their reputation ... because previously RMIT was one of the top unis around the world, and because of some scandals then their reputation dropped.*

**Administration** - Administrative resources such as the student helpdesk and student central were also presented as specific drivers of their experience. This is illustrated below.

Student Interview 3:

*I called and she picked up, and I said, I just need to find out about the marketing electives ‘cause they’re not coming up on my computer. I don’t know if the system’s down and stuff like that. And she was really helpful and she asked if you need anything, just let me know, call back. And it didn’t make me feel like I was stupid because I didn’t know what was going on. She really helped me.*

Student Interview 12

*She’s just so helpful. You come to her with really pathetic problems and she doesn’t look at them like that at all. She goes out of her way basically to make sure it all happens, that it works, that she can help you in some way. Today I was having trouble with Centrelink and I was in the city and I just popped in and*
asked her about what she thought and it has nothing to do with her job description at all really, but she still was really, really helpful, those little things really matter. I think the other thing is actually gaining access to your lecturers outside of their office hours, sometimes that can be quite challenging. Obviously they’re really busy, it’s finding that happy medium I guess.

**Industry and Community** - Participants highlighted the use of industry and community related interactions to achieve their desired outcomes. For example, many mentioned approaching invited industry speakers after the presentation to build connections and networks. This is illustrated below.

Focus Group 2:
*If you just have some sort of work experience or something like that then you realise what you’re getting yourself into, then you realise ok do I need to pick up my standards? Are my standards actually good enough to actually get into this industry?*

Student Interview 12:
*I got a scholarship over in India and when we were over there, a lot of our assignments had to do with working with people in industry but that was because we had a really good lecturer, definitely. I’ve had lecturers that came in from outside of RMIT, external lecturers, but those guys they weren’t necessarily - some of them were really good, some of them you can tell that just come in from work and they’re really tired. You benefit a lot from it as well because they have these insights that the academics don’t, seems like it’s more real world.*

**Support Services** - The final category refers to support services such as study and learning support services, counselling and mentoring programs. Participants identified the use such services to support socio-emotional comfort at university or to improve their student performance. This is illustrated below.

Student Focus Group 1:
*...I came to Melbourne and I didn’t really know many people, I didn’t know anybody in the business school. And so my first semester of uni was just all about adjusting to, you know, finding somewhere to eat, finding how to get to uni, finding my way around uni, and I had a terrible first semester. And then I heard about SLAMS and thought, oh well this would look great on my resume. So I went for a semester, and then just fell in love with the program.*

Student Focus Group 4:
*And where do I get help from? That was from SLAMS, which I went to, and teaching assistants and friends. Those are my sources. They guided me to the Student Learning Centre.*

Student Interview 10:
*I don’t have much time to improve my English that is why I am trying to improve it gradually, but I do go to student centre on level three for help. I went with my essay and they corrected it.*
Project impact and opportunities for further work

This project provides insights into the student experience through a comprehensive literature review and an exploratory research study. These insights helped to build a student experience model that provides new ways to characterise and define a student cohort experience at RMIT University.

The focus group and interview findings revealed that participant interaction with the various processes, actors, factors and resources identified in the model is dynamic, multidimensional and contextual. The importance placed on the various aspects of this model provides many opportunities for further work. Although no empirical relationship was established between the student lifecycle and the importance placed on particular aspects of the model, this study reveals anecdotal evidence suggesting a potential relationship.

An empirical examination of the relationship between student contexts and the various interaction points, and their effect on the relative importance of each process, actor, factor or resource is funded by LTIF for 2012. This examination will enable the development of a sustainable strategy and implementation plan, which identifies and targets the critical and high-impact interaction points in order to enhance the student experience at RMIT in meaningful ways.

4. Dissemination strategies and outputs

Dissemination of project outputs

- Co-creating the student experience model and initial project research findings were presented to the common core Course Coordinators in 2011.
- The literature review (Appendix 1) will be made available on the College of Business Academic Development Group website www.rmit.edu.au/bus/adg
- Co-creating the student experience model (Appendix 2) will be made available on the College of Business Academic Development Group website www.rmit.edu.au/bus/adg
- A journal abstract titled ‘Co-Created Student Experiences Viewed Through a Service-Dominant Logic Lens: Empirical Insights and Conceptual Framework’ was submitted to the SERVSIG 2012 Conference.

Dissemination of project outcomes

- Presentation of initial project findings at Defining the Student Cohort Experience workshop, August 31, 2011.
- Contribution to the RMIT University Reference Group - Pilot Projects to Define the Student Cohort Experience.
- A further academic journal paper to be submitted in 2012.
- Further development of the 2011 pilot project in 2012, which will include dissemination of project outputs and outcomes via the Reference Group and via journal papers.
5. Evaluation of project outcomes

In the project’s six months duration a significant amount of work was undertaken to
determine the nature and the scope of the understanding of the terms ‘cohort’, ‘co-creation’
and ‘engagement’ in academic literature associated with academic administration, learning
and teaching, and marketing. The resulting literature review distils views from a range of
disciplines.

The initial project plan assumed the ability to quickly build upon and extend the conceptual
and scoping work of the RMIT pilot project to identify ways to address identified issues. During
the progress of 15 interviews and 4 focus groups with students at all stages of their university
experience it became clear that the identification of the most significant interactions
presented a significant challenge, due to the somewhat fragmented nature of the literature.
Nine sets of interactions have been established. Testing will be conducted in 2012 to
determine the extent and relative importance of the interactions throughout a student’s life
cycle. When the interactions that are found to be the most critical at various stages in the
student career are identified, recommendations will be made to prioritise them in order of
their relative impact on the student experience.

The table below evaluates the project outcomes by comparing the intended project outcomes
in the project proposal and the actual outcomes.

Table 2 Evaluation of project outcomes

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<tr>
<th>Intended outcomes</th>
<th>Actual outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>This project is geared towards facilitating and enhancing a cohort experience that enables more effective co-production of learning. The project will develop an integrated view of student interaction points that critically shape the student experience to facilitate more deliberate and consolidated planning.</td>
<td>Measurable interaction points established through literature review and findings from the interview and focus groups</td>
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<td>The outcome of the first phase will be a framework developed from a conceptual understanding of the first year experience at the College of Business, developed for implementation and empirical investigation in 2012.</td>
<td>Framework developed which identifies explicit interactions as well as the contextual and environmental factors unique to each student.</td>
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<td>The project defines the cohort experience as a collaborative endeavour between various ‘actors’. This project will determine how RMIT can enhance, facilitate, implement and measure the effectiveness of a student cohort experience. This will be demonstrated by the design of student “co-creative” experiences in first year Business courses underpinned by the framework.</td>
<td>Review conducted of interventions undertaken in first year business common core courses. When the interactions in the model are measured in 2012 proposals will be put forward for the design of “co-creative” experiences to address the changing student needs in each year of study.</td>
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In order to facilitate and enhance a sustainable cohort experience, RMIT’s efforts and interaction platforms will be integrated so that students will experience a seamless series of interactions.

In 2012 each interaction point will be measured. When the interactions that are found to be the most critical at various stages in the student career are identified recommendations will be made to prioritise them in order of their relative impact on the student experience.

6. Budget report

Refer to Appendix 4 – Financial Statement

7. Appendices

1. Conceptual model
2. Literature review
3. Guiding questions and themes
4. Financial statement