



Current and future trajectories for Service Design education: Views from educators in academia

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Abstract

In the past few years, higher education programs in service design have been steadily growing. Mostly positioned as master's degrees within varied faculties and departments, these programs propose quite diverse educational offerings. To explore such variety, this short paper presents the preliminary findings of some in-depth interviews with the coordinators of six master's programs. The interviews discuss key elements of these master's programs and, more broadly, highlight current and future trajectories for the service design education.

Keywords: service design, design education, service design education

Introduction

Although services have always characterized “human adaptation and the organization of societies” (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014, p. 123), the more specific term service design was coined in the 80s in marketing studies (Shostack, 1982, 1984). Already a few years later, a group of design

researchers started using the term to more granularly represent those design processes oriented towards ideating, defining and developing services (Hollins & Hollins, 1991; Manzini, 1993; Morello, 1991; Erhoff, Mager, & Manzini, 1997). This interest prompted the establishment of service design courses at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences, followed by the Politecnico di Milano, Carnegie Mellon University and Linköping University (Mager, 2008, 2009). In 2009, the first master's degree fully dedicated to Service Design was started at the Laurea University of Applied Sciences (Ojasalo, 2012), followed by the Savannah College of Art and Design. Since then, the number of master's programs in service design has been steadily increasing, especially in Europe (White & Holmlid, 2012; de Götzen et al., 2018). As master's degrees highly vary as regards their educational offering (educational approach, curricula and courses) (Becermen & Simeone, 2019), the result is a quite heterogeneous landscape, with different types of degrees (MDes, MA, MFA, MBA and MSc) located in different faculties and departments (design, IT, management - just to name a few). To date, such diversity has not been systematically analysed in design research and very few studies have been devoted to examining the current education in service design (Ferruzca et al., 2016). This paper intends to offer a contribution along these lines by reporting on a set of interviews carried out in 2019 with the coordinators of six master's programs in Europe and the US. These interviews explore key aspects of each master's program with a focus on their current and future educational trajectories. This material allows us to examine some of the views of educators in academia and, hopefully, to offer insights to schools providing service design courses and programs.

Previous research about service design education

The majority of literature on service design education mainly examined specific master's degrees rather than proposing comparative studies. Previous research explored topics as diverse as establishing new service design programs (Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2009; Ojasalo, 2012; Al-Yassini, Kim, & Selzer, 2011; Blomkvist, Holmlid, & Segelström, 2011; Pacenti, 2011; Penin, 2011; Heiskari & Helenius, 2010; Morelli & de Götzen, 2014; de Götzen, Morelli, & Grani, 2014), in-class teaching (Guersenzvaig, 2011; Howard, 2011; Tossavainen & Kaartti, 2015; Ali, Grimaldi, & Biagioli, 2017; Ball & Dominguez, 2017; Tokayer & Lee, 2017; de Götzen et al., 2018), service design competences (Luojus & Tossavainen, 2019) or work

experience of graduates (Sun & Runcie, 2016; Kaartti & Guiland, 2019). Other studies discussed more general aspects of service design education, e.g. knowledge and skills for service designers (White & Holmlid, 2012; Mirzaie & Parlato, 2017; Jones, 2017) or opportunities and challenges for service design education (Polaine, 2011). A couple of comparative studies more broadly examined the landscape of higher education (Ferruzca et al., 2016; Becermen & Simeone, 2019). This short paper aims to complement these studies by further investigating diverse educational approaches in service design through the words of a number of educators in academia.

Research methods

The research is based on a set of in-depth interviews (Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003) with the coordinators of six master's programs in service design, carried out in 2019. The interview questions were mostly open (Seidman, 2006) and built upon previous desk research (Becermeren & Simeone, 2019). The interviewees were chosen to represent different typologies of education (MDes, MA, MFA, MBA and MSc). Some of the oldest programs were selected so that they could share insights on how their students fared on the job market after getting their degree. The final selection (Table 1) includes one- and two-year programs across five countries; for each of the programs, the study coordinators were interviewed.

| Program | Type | Duration | Country | Starting date of the program |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
| Politecnico di Milano - POLI.design Master in Service Design | MDes | 1 year | Italy | 2012 |
| The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) MFA in Service Design | MFA | 2 years | The United States | 2009 |
| Aalborg University Copenhagen MSc in Service Systems Design | MSc | 2 years | Denmark | 2012 |
| Laurea University of Applied Sciences MBA in Service Innovation and Design | MBA | 1.5-2.5 years | Finland | 2009 |
| Politecnico di Milano MSc in Product-Service System Design | MSc | 2 years | Italy | 2005 |
| Royal College of Art (RCA) MA in Service Design | MA | 2 years | United Kingdom | 2012 |

Table 1: Programs coordinated by the interviewees

There are at least three important limitations of this research. The first is the narrow selection of the master's programs and the quite marked euro-centric sampling. The second is that our research is currently aimed at master's programs in academia, but a growing number of courses and degrees are offered also at a bachelor's level and outside academia - at times, through online and offline short courses and workshops¹. The third is that we adopt a characterization of service design (Shostack, 1982, 1984; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010), which does not fully take into account broader and more inclusive views of what services are (Blomberg & Darrah, 2014).

1 E.g. <https://www.ideo.com/products/human-centered-service-design>
<https://www.service-design-network.org/service-design-network-academy>
<https://www.thisisservicedesigndoing.com/school>
<http://ciid.dk/education/professional-programmes/>

We hope that in future iterations of our research, we will be able to represent more properly such diversity. For the time being and acknowledging the current limitations, we mark our research as exploratory and preliminary.

Findings

Table 2 shows a preliminary characterisation of the six master's degrees.

| Master's program | Preliminary characterisation emerged from the interviews |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| MDes in Service Design - Politecnico di Milano - POLI.design | A one-year program for professionals coming from different backgrounds and countries. It is structured around intense three-semester project work in collaboration with companies, supported by other modules; it does not require a final academic thesis. |
| MFA in Service Design - The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) | As the program is part of an art and design college, students are expected to perform good presentations as a core deliverable of their studio projects. The students get briefs from large corporations and work through multidisciplinary groups - meaning that service design, acting, and architecture students can be part of the same group. It recently started offering an elective track on UX design, social innovation and business innovation. It requires a final academic thesis. |
| MSc in Service-Systems Design - Aalborg University Copenhagen | An academic program that focuses on the social, technological and systemic aspects of service design. Most of the students have an internship in their third semester to gain more hands-on experience. It requires a final case-based academic thesis. |
| MBA in Service Innovation and Design - Laurea University of Applied Sciences | A program with strong business and management aspects and that requires previous work experience. The education is organised to accommodate the needs of a heterogeneous group of students who also work full-time and that can indeed use their work as a case for their academic assignments. A final academic thesis is required. |
| MSc in Product-Service System Design - Politecnico di Milano - School of Design | An academic program not exclusively dedicated to service design, as services are considered components of product-service systems. Therefore, students work on different projects integrating services, products and spaces into complex solutions, as to develop hybrid skill sets. It targets relatively young students. It requires a final academic thesis. |
| MA in Service Design - Royal College of Art (RCA) | The program is studio-based and currently does not offer compulsory credit courses. The goal is to help students build a strong portfolio through five studio projects and an optional summer internship project in collaboration with different companies. It requires a final academic thesis. |

Table 2: Preliminary characterisation of the programs

Student profile

Except for the MSc in Product-Service System Design, programs are open to students from different disciplinary backgrounds, even though a large number of students tend to have a design background. The MDes program at Politecnico di Milano and the MBA program at the Laurea University of Applied Science require a minimum of 2-3 years of previous work experience. All these programs are taught in English and are open to international students, but the ratio of international students differs. Programs in the UK, USA and Italy have more Asian and non-European students, compared to the programs in the Nordic countries, which are filled by mostly European students. In all these programs, the number of female students is remarkably higher compared to male students.

Collaborations and curricula

All these programs maintain collaboration with organisations in different sectors, which provide design briefs that the students need to tackle as part of their courses or semester-long projects. Only at the MBA program at Laurea, the collaboration mostly takes place through the organisations for which their students already work (but also with other organisations or R&D projects at Laurea). Except for the MA program at RCA, all the other master's degrees have curricula of credit courses, which vary greatly. A program is management-led (MBA); all the others are design-led. The coordinator of the RCA program argued that the "management side of the service design in most of the service design courses is missing" and this motivated the RCA's collaboration with Imperial College Business School, which, however, has room for improvement. Conversely, the MBA program at Laurea manages to equip their students with management, leadership and business competencies and sees their students as a change agent for their organisations. The coordinator of the program mentioned that common challenges in service design are implementation and impact assessment. To succeed in the market, business competencies such as capital investment analysis, accounting and budgeting are crucial to estimate the means needed for the services to operate and to be financially viable. However, within the limited time and the fixed number of credits of a master's degree, it is always difficult to decide

... how much focus there should be on business and how much on service design competences. Partly this is something that students can decide: depending on their background and learning outcome

goals, they can choose the elective courses that they need - increasing either their business competences or service design competences (Coordinator of Laurea).

Graduates and job market

In general, graduates work in various roles such as designers, design researchers, product/service/design managers or entrepreneurs. Although there is a growing interest from the public sector, the private sector tends to recruit more service designers than the public and third sectors. Graduates emerging from different service design programs develop different skill sets and a somewhat distinct positioning in the job market. For example, graduates from the MSc in Product-Service System Design are hybrid designers (i.e. they could potentially work as product designers, UX designers, graphic designers, service designers) and, as such, they are valued by small and versatile design consultancies, whereas graduates from the MBA program tend to work in larger corporations. Programs also adapt to the requests of the job markets. For example, since in the USA the demand for UX designers is remarkably higher than for service design, SCAD started offering an elective track on UX design. The MFA program at SCAD is the only master's degree dedicated to service design in the US, and the program coordinators have noticed that the current education cannot keep up with the increasing requests for service designers in the job market. The coordinator of the program mentions that "last May, we graduated 25 students, and that was a big thing... But this is all we can do at the moment." Her colleague supports this view:

Although [service design] is a small pond, we don't have enough people to fill this pond. At first, that seems to be great, but it's not, because these positions will be filled by someone else [without a specific service design preparation].

Geographical distribution

The interviewees have several opinions about why a large part of the current master's programs in service design are located in Europe. According to the coordinator of the MDes program at POLI.design, this is a result of the fact that in Europe, 80% of the GDP is based on services. The coordinator at Laurea pointed out that this shift toward a service-dominant economy is a bigger trend:

I know that there are people in South Africa, Colombia and Mexico that are actively studying service design and bringing it to their universities. But probably the critical mass is not there yet, and for those markets, it will take some time.

In the context of the US, the program coordinator at SCAD pointed out that it is also challenging to find experienced staff:

It's very difficult to get faculty able to teach service design. This is one of the things that prevent these majors from growing in other parts of the country. Since there are not many professionals specifically educated in service design, how can you possibly educate other people? Of course, in Europe, it's easier because service design has been taught for a longer period of time, and there are so many people getting out of those education programs.

The coordinator of the RCA program believes that since industrial design programs in Asia have started offering service design courses, in less than five years we will see major growth of service design programs in Asian countries such as China and Korea. She added that her experience is that in some Asian countries, the procedure to establish new educational programs is more cumbersome than in Europe, and this can at least partially explain why service design education is nowadays still mostly anchored to European countries.

Future trajectories for service design education

Table 3 reports on the views of the interviewees about possible future trajectories for service design education.

| View of coordinators from | Question: “What do you think educators should further bring to service design education?” |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Politecnico di Milano - POLI.design - Master in Service Design | Sustainability, environmental issues and circular economy but also closer linkages with emerging technologies: We need to go beyond the user-centred approach. So, I think we need to understand, for example, how to integrate the use of technology, the use of artificial intelligence, the use of data in education to create services that don't exist yet. |
| MFA in Service Design - The Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) | Develop a better understanding of services as systems |
| MSc in Service-Systems Design - Aalborg University Copenhagen | Develop a better understanding of how public administration and policy making work so that we can design better public services |
| MBA in Service Innovation and Design - Laurea University of Applied Sciences | How to bring service design into organisations |
| MSc in Product-Service System Design - Politecnico di Milano - School of Design | Sectoral knowledge and specialisation for areas such as healthcare, tourism, etc. and develop knowledge of digital technologies |
| MA in Service Design - Royal College of Art | Develop a fundamental shared framework for service design education |

Table 3: Views of educators on the future of the service design education

Final remarks

Service design has been characterised as a holistic and multidisciplinary approach that requires different skill sets (Moritz, 2009; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010). However, there is no common educational framework to determine the right balance of design, user research, technology, business and management competencies. Nowadays, programs develop their curricula somewhat independently and in relation to the specific faculty or school in which they are embedded. Some programs attempted to go

beyond the boundaries of single institutions by setting joint degrees, but multi-institution collaborations can open administrative and organisational challenges.

Another key point which emerged from our research is to what extent service design education should aim at creating broadly skilled designers whose capabilities can be applied in different sectors or, as an alternative, should focus on developing expertise in particular sectors, such as in the case of programs oriented to wellness², hospitality³, library⁴ and information services. How can educational programs strike a balance between the broad skill sets needed to support a holistic and explorative nature of service design (including wider perspectives tied to sustainability, circularity and systemic thinking) and the knowledge needed to design, develop and assess domain-specific services?

A more specific but connected point is whether service design education should focus more on the business and managerial aspects of services. Large organisations in particular tend to become more and more complex, with production and distribution pipelines that are scattered across varied geographical areas and markets and that rely on big data and real-time information flows. Understanding such complexity is another important challenge for service designers, who are, at times, not well equipped to understand the organisational, financial and managerial aspects of such processes. A better understanding of the organisational components of service design would also benefit those designers who intend to work on public services, which might require interplay of multiple public and private organisations.

While, arguably, these issues might be inherent to any kind of design, a more specific challenge for service design programs is that graduates are often isolated in their journey of trying to embed service design in their workplace and service design programs could do more to support them. Often, graduates find it challenging to explain what they do (Sun & Runcie, 2016) also because even within the service design community, there is no

² <http://wellnesseducation.pc.ut.ee/>

³ <https://www.novia.fi/studies/master-degree-programmes/leadership-and-service-design/master-of-hospitality-management-leadership-and-service-design>

⁴ <https://kisk.phil.muni.cz/profilace/design-informacnich-sluzeb>

agreement on the definition of what service design is (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2010). There is a great variety of views on the role and the responsibilities of service design professionals and the full potential of service design is still underexplored in the service economy (Sun & Runcie, 2016). This picture is further complicated by the fact that there are many academic programs that do not use “service design” in their official title but still offer courses that are very similar to the master’s degrees in service design (Ferruzca et al., 2016). As a consequence of this magmatic landscape and plurality of views, there is no consensus on which competencies service designer students should acquire with their education. As noted by the coordinator of the RCA program: “A key danger for service design education is that there is no fundamental framework.” This has prompted some to state that service design has “no clear home in academia” (Polaine, 2011, p. 50). Is this varied educational landscape an opportunity to enrich the field? Or rather, this proliferation of different educational approaches - nowadays also in the form of online and/or short courses - makes it difficult for the service design community to build more collaboratively on a joint educational vision? And, again, and more tightly connected to the modest and limited scope of this paper: can the euro-centric perspective here adopted be complemented by the voices of other educators from other geographic and cultural contexts as to provide a more granular mapping that fosters difference and diversity? We hope that these questions can ignite dialogue with other researchers at ServDes 2020 and beyond and help further the understanding of service design education.

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