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**The experience of
international students
at SLU Uppsala**

a consultancy report

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SLU University Library

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Introduction

Introduction

This report details the key findings, methodology and recommendations derived from UX (user experience) research and design consulting at Sveriges lantbruksuniversitet (SLU) in October 2019.

What is UX research and design?

UX research and design is an established process that uncovers detailed and extremely rich knowledge of user behaviours and needs via a range of methods designed to best capture information on how services, spaces or products are actually experienced. In the case of SLU: the needs and behaviours of SLU's international students and the development of the University's campuses in response.

The process involved an initial research phase, followed by mapping and ideation, and the testing of prototypes created and iterated with users with a view to ultimately developing and delivering more user-centric spaces and services.

The UX research and design process is a complimentary synthesis of many different disciplines drawing on the worlds of anthropology, social science, design thinking and agile development, and promises unparalleled access to the world of our users.

Consultancy brief

This UX research and design consultancy had two core priorities:

1. The employment of UX research methods to gather data about the needs and behaviours of SLU's international students, ahead of exploration of new or modified campus spaces and services to be prototyped, tested and iterated with users.
2. Training and development of nine staff from across the University who would perform UX work during the consultancy, and by its end be capable of taking UX research and design forward as a continuous process for SLU's students and campuses.



Research questions

The research and design phases of the programme sought to answer questions such as:

- What is the experience of SLU's international students?
- What detracts from their experience of life at SLU?
- What enriches and improves their experience of life at SLU?
- What spaces and services are missing from the current provision to international students?
- What institutional values are currently communicated by the campuses' spaces and what values should they communicate in the future?
- How can the spaces at Uppsala's Ultuna campus (the site of the consultancy period) in particular be optimised?
- What does SLU mean to its students, and specifically its international students.

UX Team

As User Experience research & design and agile processes are best undertaken across service teams with a view to embedding new ways of collaboratively working, thinking and researching, a project team consisting of nine SLU staff from different departments was formed:

- Anita Boffano (Library, Alnarp)
- Kitte Dahrén (Library, Uppsala)

- Helena Holmquist (External communication and marketing)
- Johan Karlsson (IT Services, Uppsala)
- Sarah Meier (Library, Uppsala)
- Helena Payne (Landscape Gardener, Uppsala)
- Dana Rocklin (Educational department)
- Jennifer Salomonsson (Library, Uppsala)
- Camilla Westerborn (Facilities and projects)

This team received training in UX research approaches, and helped conduct the behavioural and attitudinal research required as set out in the above brief, generated ideas from the data gathered, and tested and iterated a range of prototypes.



L-R: Anita, Johan, Camilla, Kitte (© Jennifer Salomonsson)

Methodology

The consultancy followed a standard UX research and design process (also termed 'Double Diamond') incorporating three of the four phases of that process: 'DISCOVER', 'DEFINE', 'DEVELOP', with the expectation that the remaining phase, 'DELIVER', will follow later, in response to the recommendations detailed in this consultancy report (see Figure 1). The four phases are as follows:

1. DISCOVER: The conducting of a wide range of behavioural and attitudinal UX research techniques in order to identify problems, opportunities and gaps. The methods employed included:
 - Observation (of students on campus)
 - Behavioural mapping (observation of routes through spaces and the identification of desire lines i.e. the most popular routes)
 - Guerrilla/semi-structured interviews (short *ad hoc* and in-depth interviews with students and staff)
 - Cognitive mapping (drawings requested from students to establish their expectations and priorities)
 - Card sorting (positives, negatives and ideas produced and arranged on sticky notes)
 - Touchstone tours (asking students to give a tour of the spaces in order to understand their preferences and routines)
 - LEGO Serious Play (a generative method for exploring experiences and ideas)

2. DEFINE: The mapping and analysis of the data gathered and idea generation of possible solutions.
3. DEVELOP: The creation of a range of low fidelity prototypes (space/service modifications or new initiatives) derived from the data. The gathering of feedback to the prototypes from users and their refinement in response, ahead of more testing.
4. DELIVER: Services are formally launched and invested in; staff continue to develop prototypes and existing services, iterating them on the basis of user feedback and input.

N.B. UX research and design is a continuous, cyclical process. You are never done, because your users and their experiences are always changing.

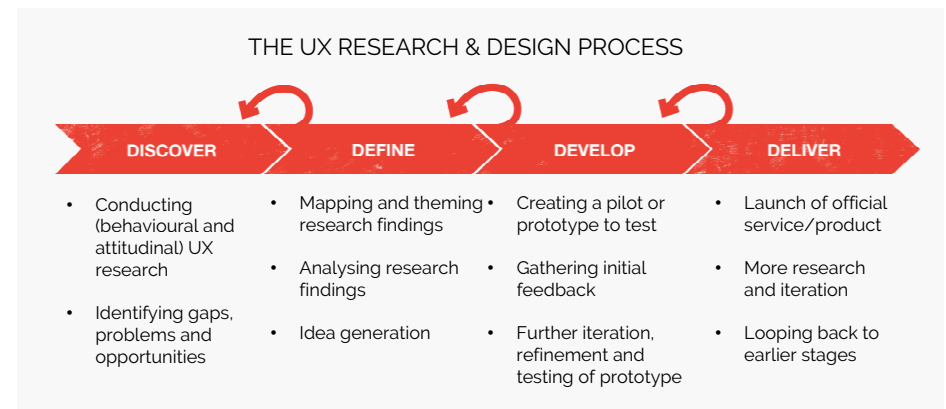
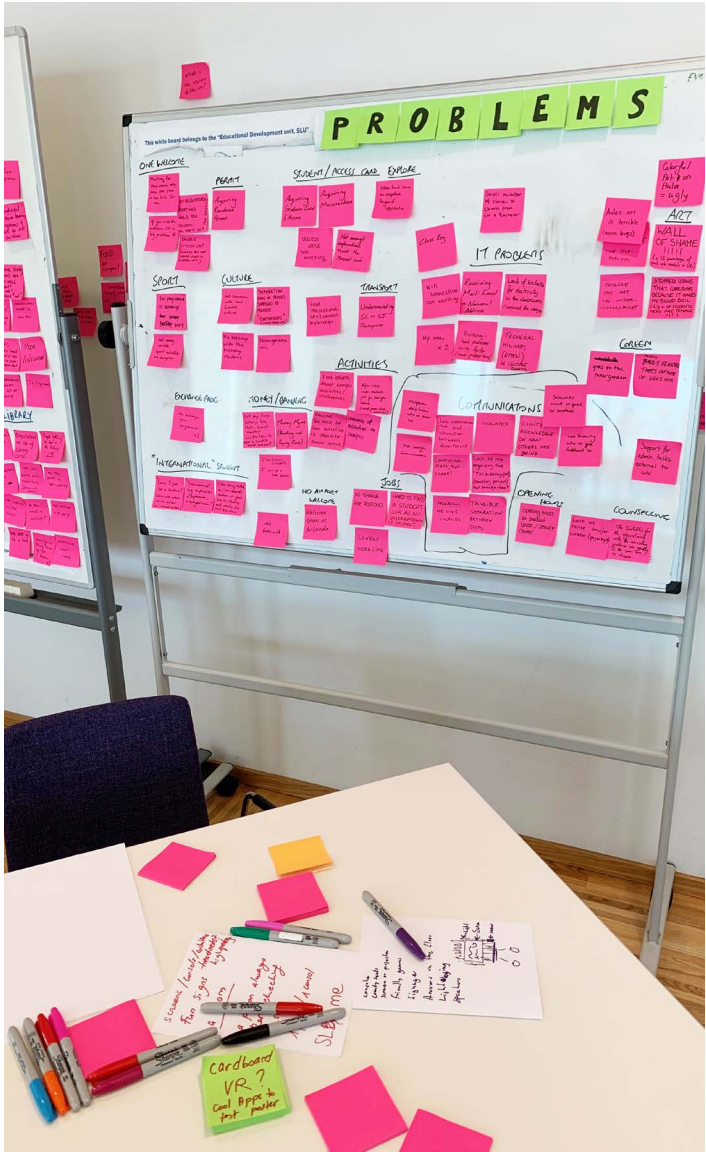


Figure 1 Adapted from 'The UX design process', <http://www.designingcollaboration.com>.

UX research & design lab

During the research phase the UX team carefully transferred the data gathered to different coloured sticky notes, which were arranged by theme on the walls of the 'Alnarp' training room in Ulls Hus. For the duration of the consultancy this room became in effect a 'UX research & design lab'.

The activity of arranging research data by theme is known as affinity mapping. This technique allows the researcher to visually ascertain data concentrations and connections and to physically interact with it, debate it and move it around. Just as importantly, it allows those not involved in the project to more quickly understand the approach, purpose and outcomes of the research.



Research data

Research data

The user experience data gathered was affinity mapped into different themes and concentrations, and a range of key issues quickly emerged. This attitudinal and behavioural data is detailed below, in the form of short summaries, and is presented alongside the supporting data.

- attitudinal - gathered by talking to an individual via interview, a cognitive map, a card sort, a touchstone tour, or via LEGO Serious Play
- behavioural - gathered by observing individuals and recording their actions and the routes they took through SLU spaces, also those routines and behaviours described by students

The data was chiefly gathered via 3 workshops with international students, but also through *ad hoc* research.



Experience workshop with international students

Where international students could not be found, native students were invited to make up the numbers; however, around two-thirds of our research interactions were with international students.

It is important to note that UX is not about scientifically proving things with numbers, instead it's about accessing insights into experience and then turning them into new services, spaces or products to test on more people. More than enough data was gathered through the workshops and *ad hoc* research we conducted to identify both opportunities for development of SLU campuses and ways of improving the experience of international students.

The research was conducted over 4 days between 1-4 October 2019.

1. Isolation and separation

Summary: It was quickly obvious that although international students were pleased and grateful to be studying at SLU, many of those we talked to felt isolated, lonely and in need of more opportunities to meet and befriend other people. Specifically, some felt that one of the main barriers to making connections was the lack of comfortable spaces in campus buildings where people could hang out and make new friends. There was also some concern about the term 'international student': some people felt the term gave them identity and couldn't see a problem with it, others felt it had the effect of separating

them out and categorising them as different. Another issue was the perceived lack of communication channels both for receiving information and giving feedback. Several also mentioned a need for psychological support and counselling outside of classroom hours.

Data:

- 'I'm feeling like an outsider'; 'isolated'; 'SLU is a closed bubble'; 'people exude a feeling of always being busy and unavailable'; 'where I stay is not so good, it is isolated'; 'as a student who is older (second educ.) does not feel like I belong (lots of young people around)'; 'no exchange with the exchange students'; 'separation even in places supposed to promote togetherness (lunch room etc)'; 'lonely work life'
- 'there aren't enough places to meet other people on campus, places to just hang out, play games, talk'; 'need more hangout places with sofas'; 'places to meet and share knowledge'; 'there aren't enough places to hang out'; 'SLU should be about the connection between people with a passion for nature and the environment but there are not always enough opportunities for this'
- 'Can't I just be a student?'; 'the international tag emphasises a separation, a categorisation'; 'I like being called an international student – it gives me an identity and makes me feel less alone'; 'I have no problem with being termed an international student – what is the problem?'
- 'not enough communication'; 'low communication and interaction'; 'not knowing who to give feedback

- to'; 'limited knowledge on what others are doing'
- 'lack of psychological support'; 'the timetable for the appointments with the counselling service are usually at the same time as classes'
- 'difficult to be different'
- 'geographical distances – emotional distance'
- 'all needs to feel cosier and friendlier'

2. Language and culture

Summary: Language was another cited barrier. The fact that many introductory activities and virtually all signage were only available in Swedish was considered problematic. Several people cited these issues as impacting directly on how they felt about their SLU experience and contributing to their sense of isolation and loneliness. Another issue was that international students felt they did not have sufficient opportunity to experience Swedish culture, being cut off from the real lives of Swedes, their language and customs. Several cited the possibility of learning Swedish and others expressed a desire to explore Sweden beyond the Ultuna campus and Uppsala.

Data:

- 'introductory activities only in Swedish'; 'We're also freshers! (include us by promoting welcome activities in English)'; 'lack of information in English on events happening around the campus'; 'I only realised that the building over there was the Library last week! (because the sign was in Swedish)'; 'not

enough information in English on the website'; 'lack of useful information about the union departments! Especially in English'; 'magazines in the library are all in Swedish'; 'key code machines are only in Swedish'; students also complained about getting lost due to the lack of English signage when showing us around the campus (touchstone tour method)

- 'no Swedish courses at SLU'; 'no possibilities of Swedish courses'; 'no connection with real Swedish culture'; 'not had time to explore Sweden beyond Uppsala'



Sarah listening to a student explaining the cognitive map they had drawn to illustrate their experience of life at SLU (© Jennifer Salomonsson)

3. Activities on campus

Summary: All the students we talked to agreed that Ultuna was very much a '9-to-5 campus', with most students only visiting for classes then immediately going home again. They felt that part of the reason for this was the lack of activities and facilities available on campus that might prompt students to stay and relax, play sport, or attend an event. Some argued that there was plenty of space for such improvements and that if more facilities were provided pre- and post-class activity could be encouraged, creating a different routine and atmosphere. International students in particular felt that there was very little for students to do on campus after class and could understand why their Swedish colleagues elected to go home.

Data:

- 'hard to find information about campus activities'; 'unaware of activities on campus'; 'relying too much on our own initiative to organise social activities'
- 'feels dead here after 5pm'; 'after class most students just go straight home – need post-class activities'
- 'not many visible sport activities on campus'; 'the pingisboard is always busy'

4. Signage and navigation

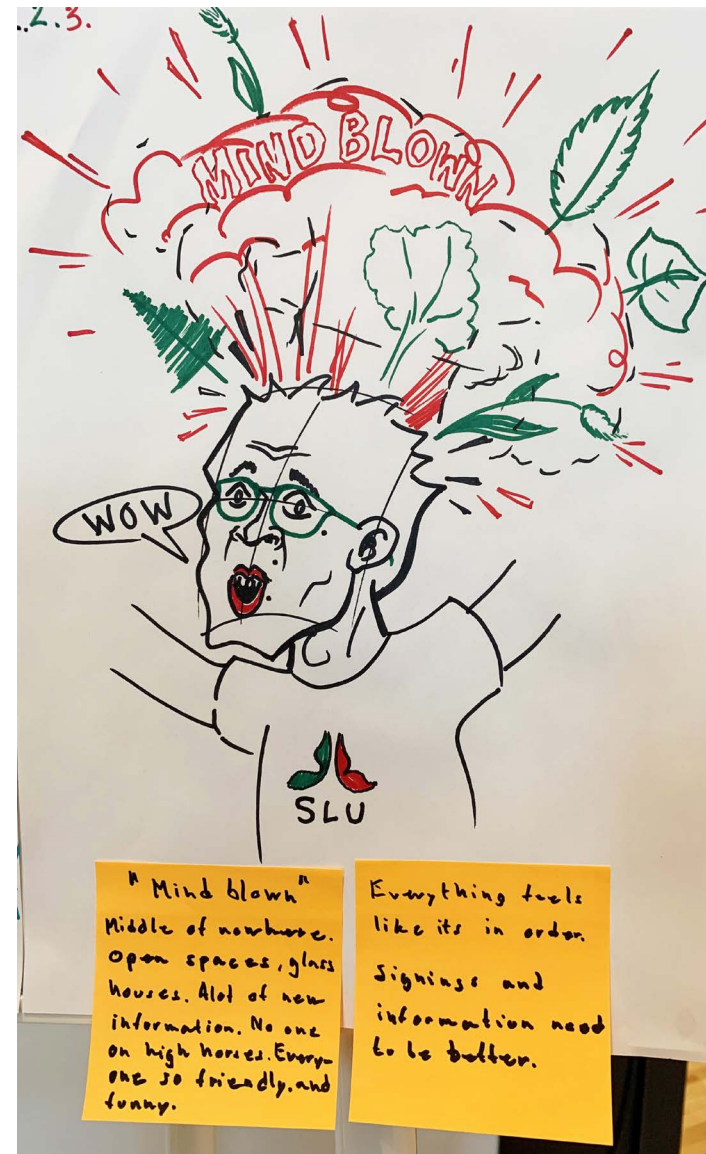
Summary: Many students agreed that they regularly struggled to find their way around the campus, particularly to different classrooms. During our observational research we also noticed people getting lost and struggling to interpret signage. Although Ulls Hus has signs in English as well as Swedish, elsewhere this is not the case, causing problems for international students in particular.

Data:

- 'no signs'; 'I regularly get lost'; 'confusing maps – not clear'; 'we all get lost, all the time'; 'signage at campus is confusing – maps of the campus are unclear'; 'signage and information need to be better'
- 'hard to find classrooms'; 'I don't know how to find classrooms'
- Students pointed out the lack of signs and were reminded of occasions when they were lost while giving us tours (touchstone tour method)

5. Food and drink

Summary: Food and drink provision is always a contentious issue on University campuses, but in the case of SLU in Uppsala, there was broad agreement that there is a definite lack of inexpensive food outlets and cafés at which students can hang out. International students in particular bemoaned the lack of cafés at the weekends and outside of classroom hours as it contributed to their paucity of social connection.



Data:

- Range/quality/price of food: 'food on campus is not good'; 'there is nowhere to eat at weekends'; 'food is bad in the restaurant'; 'buying food – cafeteria is the cheapest, but... maybe not the greatest'; 'few possible shops for buying food near campus'; 'cheap food on campus doesn't exist'; 'more cafés where students can hang out'; 'need an inexpensive central café which is open at weekends'; 'not enough kanelbullar in the cafeteria'
- 'massive queue for microwaves at lunchtime'; 'not enough microwaves'
- 'I couldn't find any restaurant/café on campus on my first day. There are no signs to find them.'
- 'need more choice, options that do not belong to the current monopoly'
- 'more coffee machines'



A student's LEGO model depicting the need for more cafés and food variety at the Ultuna campus

6. Study spaces and room bookings

Summary: Many students complained that there was inadequate study space provision on campus. They also felt that this was not due to a lack of space and that there are in fact far too many large spaces where nothing is happening due to poor layout, and a lack of suitable furniture, comfort, and privacy. Students also asked for an improved room booking system, which many of them claimed to be currently bypassing, and for better information on where study spaces were available.

Data:

- 'too many big rooms/spaces'; 'so many empty spots inside the buildings'; 'some rooms are not used'
- 'complicated room booking systems and different for different buildings'; 'hard to book group rooms'; 'avoided booking a room as not easy'
- 'unaware that many rooms are open for students'; 'I don't know if I'm allowed in to some areas like computer rooms and yards'
- 'study places need more privacy'
- 'too much noise in Ulls Hus to study'
- 'Undervisningshuset is out of date'
- 'VHC is only for the vets'
- 'too few grouprooms'
- 'study spaces need more power outlets'

7. Library

Summary: Many students felt that the Library was in the wrong place on campus, openly stating that they didn't go there because of its location. The way they talked about the distance gave the impression that it was much further away than it actually is, but the psychological impact of its separation from Ulls Hus and most classrooms was obvious. Students either made a special visit to the Library or elected to just ignore it altogether despite recognising the value it could offer their University life. Some effectively summarised their lack of connection with the Library due to it being 'out of sight and therefore out of mind.' Other Library issues included complaints about noise levels and the lack of natural light in its current configuration.

Data:

- 'the Library is in the wrong place'; 'it's all the way over there so I never go and I feel guilty about it'; 'location is bad'; 'I forget it's there'; 'nope never go there – because it's too far'
- 'the Library is too noisy'; 'the info desk in the Library is too loud'; 'the Library is too busy'; 'people talking too loud'. It was also observed that the computer area in the Library is too loud and central.
- 'the Library is too dark'; 'don't like the artificial light'; 'poor window lighting in back rooms in the Library'. It was also observed that people sit and stand at the skylights in the Library.

- 'too few seats in the Library'; 'more workstations in the Library'
- 'the Library is cold'
- 'do they have a website?'
- 'they are quite intimidating'

8. Furniture

Summary: A lot of the furniture in the public places on campus was considered to be either unusual, uncomfortable or inadequate, sometimes all three. Observations also revealed that some furniture – benches and 'spiral seats' – was not used.

Data:

- 'spiral seats are so weird' (so don't sit in them); we noted that none of these seats were being used
- 'uncomfortable couches in Ulls Hus'
- 'too few seats'
- 'benches not comfortable'
- 'the sofas in the entrance of Ulls Hus are often busy'
- 'some weird furniture in Ulls Hus'
- 'seats at the front of Ulls Hus are nice but I never go there'

9. Plants and planting

Summary: A number of students reflected that it was surprising and disappointing that, despite its courses and research interests, there was very little greenery inside the Ultuna campus buildings.

Data:

- 'SLU is all about the interaction between people and nature, but the campuses' buildings don't project or emphasise that'; 'lack of indoor plants'; 'little reflection of SLU's teaching and research interests inside the buildings'; 'no green inside'; 'why are there so few plants and nature inside the buildings?'

10. Art

Summary: Although art is often deliberately intended to provoke a reaction, it was clear that several students were deeply unhappy and offended by some of the art on display in Ulls Hus and beyond, most notably the wall featuring the framed paintings of SLU's founders due to its suggestion that SLU is all about old white males and its past, rather than its predominantly female present. There were also several mentions by staff (but not specifically by the students we talked to) of some problematic pieces elsewhere on campus which it was feared might particularly offend international students.

Data:

- "'Wall of Shame" (paintings of male role models in Ulls Hus) – I've stopped using that corridor because it makes my blood boil. Two-thirds of students here are female!!!'; 'the percentage of women here should be celebrated; the paintings of the old dudes have to go'
- 'Aula is terrible (neon bugs)'; 'colourful art on Aula is ugly'
- 'dislike the art in the Undervisningshuset'



11. Administrative problems

Summary: International students explained that they experienced a variety of administrative difficulties around finance, the Mecenat card, and housing. In general, it was felt that there was limited resource available to support these types of needs.

Data:

- 'I'm an Erasmus student so I can't get a bank account'; 'time it took to open a Swedish bank account'. It was also recounted that money management is difficult: banking and paying rent
- 'acquiring student card'; 'access card not working'; 'not enough explanation about the Mecenat card'; 'acquiring Mecenat card'
- 'no help with housing because not an Erasmus student'; 'difficult moving into student accommodation'
- 'support for admin tasks external to the University'
- 'acquiring residence permit'
- 'I often don't know who to turn to and spend a lot of time trying to get answers from different people'
- 'reception in Ulls Hus don't know who to turn to'
- 'hard to find a student job as an international student'

12. Welcome induction

Summary: A very specific problem for international students was the 'one-off' nature of the annual welcome event which several people we talked to could not attend thereby missing important information.

Data:

- 'if you miss the welcome it's a big problem'; 'meetings for newcomers only once per year and it was too late for me'; 'introductory meetings are held too seldom'

13. Cycling

Summary: There was a call for more facilities to support the large number of students who cycled to campus, including lockers, dryers, showers, and indoor parking.

Data:

- 'cyclists need lockers and dryers (for helmets, wet gloves); 'people don't know about the lockers that do exist and they are tiny'
- 'biking here is great – but showers?'
- 'more indoor parking for bikes would be nice'



14. Temperature/air quality

Summary: Many students complained that classrooms and other spaces were too cold. Naturally, international students from warmer climates feel the cold more than their Swedish counterparts. There were also a few complaints about air quality in some spaces.

Data:

- 'classrooms are very cold'; 'VHC lecture halls too cold'; 'VHC has cold buildings'
- 'lack of oxygen in many rooms'; 'no air in group rooms'
- 'Ulls Hus is always freezing'
- 'heating is a problem'

15. IT

Summary: Several students felt that WiFi connectivity and reliability could be improved and that more power sockets needed to be provided, particularly in classrooms.

Data:

- 'Wifi sucks'; 'Wifi connection not working'; 'Wifi needs to improve'
- 'lack of sockets for electricity in the classrooms/ around the campus'; 'not enough power sockets'; 'not enough power outlets in lecture rooms'
- 'technical mishaps in lecture rooms'
- 'printing – had problems with PayEx'



Cognitive maps produced by students detailing their SLU experience

16. University priorities

Summary: When asked to explore what SLU meant to them, and the values that it currently stood for, there was some agreement among students that money was too much of a focus and that it could be a braver, more creative institution.

Data:

- 'there is a focus on money rather than other things here'; 'money is in the wrong places'; 'money is the highest priority here – the spin is wrong'
- 'SLU needs to be more innovative, to stop being old-fashioned and be braver. Think outside of the box more'; 'not innovative or creative enough'; 'could be more creative'
- 'controversy of further rebuilding of animal hospital'; 'need to get the students involved with the rebuild'
- 'there aren't enough thoughtful decisions that take into account both the environment and animals'
- 'scientists should work with students more – need collaboration'
- 'what is the vision of the University?'
- 'Vegans vs farmers'
- 'animal testing – big no-no'



Ideation

Once all of the UX research data was gathered and affinity mapped by theme, ideas from a card sorting exercise at the two student workshops were mapped, together with inspirational content arising from a LEGO Serious Play session with students in which they were asked to build individual models of the following:

- A new addition to the Ultuna campus
- One thing I would like to change about SLU
- What SLU means to me

A final idea generation session was then held with the UX team in response to all the data and ideas gathered so far. The session incorporated individual idea generation rather than group brainstorming because it is always twice as productive (people don't worry about whether their ideas are good enough for others to hear and because individuals can get into creative flow more easily than groups).

All of the ideas were then shared as a group and key emerging areas for further exploration identified. Each of these areas were subsequently explored as possible prototypes: to stand as 'minimum viable products' used to quickly and inexpensively test proof of concept of these ideas.



Right: Helena Payne with the affinity-mapped ideas

Prototypes

Why prototyping?

UX design is all about quickly testing the insights gathered during your UX research phase in the form of basic prototypes. Their incomplete and low-fidelity nature means that expensive and mistaken investment is avoided. Instead sufficient evidence is gathered that the service idea or change will actually be of value to users first.

Five ideas for prototypes were devised by the UX team. Over the following pages the purpose, user reaction to, and iteration of these prototypes is explored. Specific recommendations for how they might be taken forward and relevant related opportunities are also supplied.

1. Pop-up garden

Purpose:

A visible response to the feedback that there is not enough greenery inside SLU's campus buildings. The prototype incorporated a gardening activity intended to promote connections between students, bring different people together, and to help de-stress them. It was also hoped that the activity could help to emphasise the place of the natural world in our lives, which students had identified as something which should be core to SLU and which could help to improve internal environments, making them more attractive, interactive, and less empty.

Description:

An area set aside in the Ulls Hus reception decorated with lots of greenery – plants and relevant décor – with music playing. Students were invited to spend time with each other planting seeds, which they could then take away with them to grow into plants wherever they spend their time on campus.

User comments and behaviour:

Once they were encouraged to enter the Pop-up garden area, students were overwhelmingly positive about the prototype, describing it as 'relaxing', 'fun', 'good for the environment', 'nice', and 'a great initiative'. Several students also commented that it was a good complement to their studies: 'good to be testing the practical side of what we study'; 'after so much theory this is a nice break'; 'good



Johan and Jennifer at the Pop-up garden prototype

to promote the biological diversity of Swedish flora'. It was also felt that this was a great example of a fun and engaging activity which the research had clearly indicated was lacking on campus. The only negatives encountered were concerns that the plants might not survive, but the main purpose of the prototype was really to test if this sort of initiative would be engaged with rather than the growth and longevity of the plants that might come out of it. Feedback was gathered in a fun visual way in the form of a sticky note 'tree' dressed with birds.

Iteration:

This prototype was not iterated in the time available, but possible next steps discussed included: inviting SLU gardeners to offer practical demonstrations as part of similar future events; tracking growth of the plants to make the activity competitive; instituting a seed exchange; focusing on growing kitchen garden vegetables and fruit; and a regular farmers market on campus.

Recommendations:

- There was a clear appetite and enthusiasm for this prototype that principally seemed to relate to its focus on nature and the environment in line with the interests of those studying at SLU. Green/gardening activities are an obvious fit for the institution so it would make sense to explore further a variety of activities and events that could bring people together using this theme and simultaneously communicating SLU values.

- Ideally such 'green' initiatives need to actively involve the students and see them take responsibility for them, to ensure both their engagement and sustainability. What is lacking is a strong enough sense of community and that can only be built if all stakeholders contribute.
- I'd advise exploring the opportunities with Helena Payne and her gardens staff who would, I think, be willing to contribute time, energy and ideas to such green initiatives, as well as materials and resources.
- I would also suggest a trip to Uppsala University's Segersteds huset to see how it has incorporated biophilic design in many breathtaking ways. Biophilic design is all about ensuring that buildings increase occupant connectivity to the natural world through the employment of direct and indirect natural elements in indoor environments. While it is great that UU is doing this, it makes even more sense for SLU to be embracing these principles when modifying and creating new spaces on its campuses.



2. You are here

Purpose:

To provide improved signage in English for international students seeking to find their way around and to help all students understand where they are in relation to other buildings, and where other classrooms are located on the Ultuna campus.

Description:

The addition of simple signs in English for a variety of key buildings, spaces and facilities such as the Library, fire exits, the bike pumps and access card swipes. Also, the addition of 'You are here' signs at key locations to aid navigation.

User comments and behaviour:

Several users noticed and commented upon the new signs in English and considered them to be an improvement regardless of their temporary nature.

Iteration:

It was quickly discovered that the plans to additionally produce 'You are Here' maps in Ulls Hus and beyond were effectively rendered redundant as to our surprise they already existed! None of the UX team (who were mostly staff members based at Ultuna) confessed that they had ever noticed these before, hence their idea for such a prototype. Subsequent examination of the existing 'You are here' signs revealed that they were highly stylised,

difficult to decipher and did not stand out due to a muted colour palette. My suspicion is that, like most signage, it had not been user tested before it was installed. The possibility of adding additional signage alongside these signs was rejected on the basis that putting up additional signs could prove even more confusing for students, and because most signs are ignored anyway. Instead a different prototype was devised: a hand-drawn set of laminated maps showing the locations of classrooms around the campus. It was suggested that, if it proved popular, it could be provided in digital form. Although some maps already exist on the SLU website they do not specifically guide students to classroom locations, and that had been identified as the biggest navigation issue.

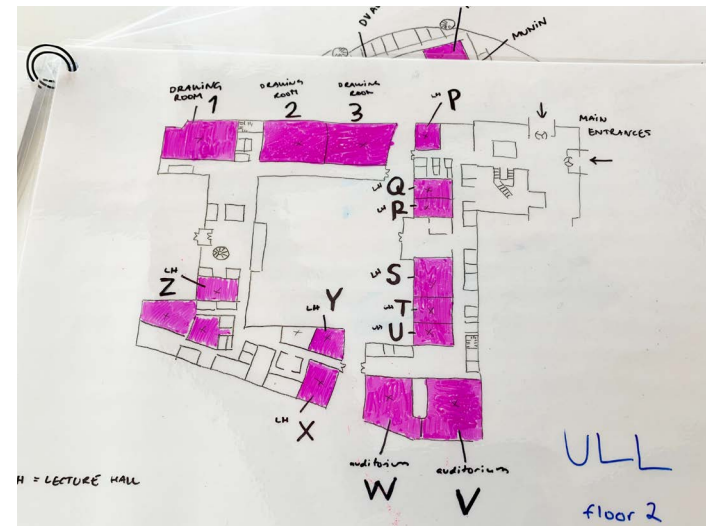
User comments and behaviour:

Users reacted positively to the prototype, finding it easy to orientate themselves using them and understanding where they were in relation to different classrooms. They felt that providing these maps in digital form would be valuable, stipulating however that registration/passwords should not be required in order to access them. Canvas was suggested as the best place for them.

Recommendations:

- Ideally all buildings should offer English translations as part of the signage system. If there is not sufficient budget to remedy this now, then inexpensive temporary (but professional) looking signs should be affixed alongside the signs in Swedish.

- The classroom location prototype should be iterated further as a basic digital version tested with students before time and investment is spent on designing this perfectly. This testing needs to explore how students actually use existing platforms and how the classroom maps might best be integrated into their digital routines. Usability testing would be the key technique to use in this instance.
- All future wayfinding systems should incorporate a period of prototype testing to ascertain if the signs are actually used and helpful to their intended users/audiences. It would definitely be worth exploring universally understood colour-coded signage alongside the Swedish and English translations to further aid with navigation.



Laminated hand-drawn maps of Ultuna classroom locations

3. Social gaming

Purpose:

An opportunity to explore the value of providing another form of activity on campus, namely the playing of competitive video games in an area designated for that purpose. As well as being fun, this prototype offered students time to take a break and 'disconnect their brains'. It also provided the chance to meet and play with other people and to take part in an activity that could combat the perception of SLU as old-fashioned and boring, while also using a space that had been observed to be barely used.

Description:

The social gaming prototype consisted of a large mobile projector screen, a video games console and several controllers (belonging to one of the UX team), a set of whiteboards to screen off the area which could also be used to record user feedback, and rows of chairs where visitors to the area could sit and play.

User comments and behaviour:

As with the pop-up garden prototype, all of the visitors to the social gaming zone were very positive about the testing of this idea. Comments included: 'needed'; 'perfect for relaxing'; 'Yay - future! Hope this will be the new thing'; and 'Yessss, even if I lost!'. Several requests were received to make the areas permanent, with people asking 'how long is it staying?' and that they would 'vote for it' if required. Users of the area were very diverse,

ranging from students (50% of whom were international students), staff members, and even a teacher (between two lectures).

Iteration:

The area was deemed too light for the activity, making it difficult for visitors to see the games they were playing. It was also felt that it was located in the wrong place given the lack of 'through traffic'. It was agreed that a space nearer the eating area where students hang out at lunch-times would be a more popular location, although some thought would have to go into the lighting issue. Users of the space also suggested instituting a ranking system recording game winners and leaders.



Students enjoying the social gaming prototype (© Jennifer Salomonsson)

Recommendations:

- I would encourage further exploration of this prototype in a new location, but am sceptical about the advantages of housing it in a separate room with window blinds. This might solve the light problem but it might bring with it entirely new issues as the area would not so easily attract passing trade and might well instead become a territorial haunt of a handful of committed gamers.
- While testing the prototype we heard from one student how such areas were commonplace on American University campuses, so it would be worth exploring with US institutions what they learned when rolling out this sort of activity on a more permanent basis.
- Video gaming is just one indoor play activity that was explored during the week. Other possible options that were discussed included: provision of a LEGO building area (judging by how quickly we filled the 10-person LEGO workshop on a virtually empty campus, this could prove very popular!); a board game zone (particularly those award-winning games currently giving new life to this pastime such as Carcassonne and Ticket to Ride); giant chess, draughts and Jenga towers; and (as the SLU Library is already doing) areas with jigsaws, craft and mindfulness options where people can choose to colour-in or make something.
- It is important to remember that play is not just about people having fun, it is an activity that helps people

to unwind, to learn and, most importantly in the case of SLU needs, to prompt collaboration, interactivity and the development of relationships between players. Crucially play could give students a reason to potentially stay on campus for longer, as well as giving them something relaxing to do between lectures and at lunchtimes.

- Provision of outside sports should also be explored for the same reasons outlined above; however, the difference is that the indoor options detailed above are much less expensive and could use spaces that are currently empty or under-used.

4. Comfy corner

Purpose:

This prototype responded to research data that students wanted more places to hangout on campus, more comfortable furniture, and a cosier feel within such spaces.

Description:

As with all the prototypes tested we spent no money and instead borrowed and repurposed existing furniture (and objects from home), siting items in new spaces. Initially the front corner of Ulls Hus was selected as a new hangout space and because of its shape the name quickly followed. There was some debate among the team as to how to dress the space: either cushions on the floor making it a very relaxed, even bohemian, feeling space, or something a bit more formal. In the event, formality



Initial Comfy Corner prototype on the ground floor of Ulls Hus

won more support and the cushions were placed along the top of the radiator boxing around the edges of the corner. The addition of pot plants, colourful cushions and blankets gave the area a very comfortable homely feel. A mindfulness colouring-in activity was also supplied in the space.

User comments and behaviour:

Although students invited to critique the space considered it to look 'cosy' and 'inviting', very few people actually voluntarily sat in it during the testing period. One international student who came to test the space felt that the cushioned seats on the radiators were too high and that he wouldn't be taken seriously if he chose to sit there. Another commented that the space would be better suited as a kind of 'speakers corner' with a small stage

that could be used for different SLU events.

Iteration:

It was felt that an iteration of the comfy corner in a new location elsewhere might prove the concept better, as the original corner was possibly too exposed (opposite reception and near the entrance) and the 'radiator seating' was simply not comfortable enough. A space on the first floor was selected beside the elevator which already had a few bench-style sofas. As before, the selected area was dressed with cushions, blankets, plants and a table, and the mindfulness colouring-in option.

User behaviour:

Although the area was definitely more comfortable than the first version of the prototype, this second space attracted only a handful of visitors during the test period.



Iteration of the prototype, now situated on the first floor

Recommendations:

- Given the regular lack of students on campus before and after classes, testing of comfortable new hang-out spaces needs to take place over a longer period. There is also something of a 'chicken and egg' situation to the problem, as people won't come to use the places until they exist, but it also might be hard to justify their existence until people use such spaces.
- We observed many items of furniture in Ulls Hus and beyond to be under-used, so an audit of furniture use over a longer period of a few days would also offer valuable data. Having students test new furniture for its functionality and comfort before it is invested in permanently also makes a great deal of sense.
- There is undoubtedly a balance to strike between offering comfortable and cosy environments as per this prototype and more formal study spaces. There was a call for more of the latter as much as there was for hang-out spaces, so future explorations of these ideas need to ensure that the ratio is appropriate.
- New spaces should ideally be developed with some in-built flexibility allowing spaces to be set and re-set for the purposes of study, events and socialising. This means more furniture which is foldable, stackable, and on castors, allowing for space efficiency. Flexible furniture also offers users the opportunity to create spaces which better match user needs at any given time.

5. Women on the wall

Purpose:

In response to user complaints about the wall of paintings of SLU's male founders within the seating area at one end of Ulls Hus, we were keen to explore how we might lessen the negative impact of this wall in some way. The simple, but powerful, idea of this particular prototype was to respond to the existing wall with a nearby wall which conversely celebrated the achievements of women and which also looked forwards rather than backwards to SLU's past. The present and future of SLU is arguably more about women than it is about men due to the far higher percentage of women students. It was decided to focus on those women who had received honorary doctorates from SLU for their inspiring and important work in the fields of agricultural science, forestry, and veterinary science, who could in turn inspire current SLU students with their achievements in those fields.

Description:

A total of 11 large colour pictures of women with honorary doctorates from SLU were affixed to a wall adjacent to the 'wall of men', with a large title 'Honorary Doctors at SLU'. A descriptive explanation sheet was affixed below the title reading 'On this wall are portraits of honorary doctors at SLU. They are all women. Times change.' This explanation deliberately aped the text affixed to the wall of men which read 'They are all men. Times change.'

User comments and behaviour:

All the comments received, from both men and women, were positive: 'it looks good'; 'exciting!'; 'a good idea', and 'Yay!' The wall went up just before lunchtime and it was interesting to note how few people initially noticed the new wall as they filed past on their way to lunch. Ultimately team members had to approach users directly to obtain feedback on the wall.

Iteration:

Although this prototype was not iterated during the programme, there were plans to include women of colour should there be any (the fact that women of colour with SLU honorary doctorates were not found when searches were initially made is of course an issue in itself), to enlarge some of the pictures, and to add faux gold picture frames to further imitate (and equate with) the paintings of the men.

Recommendations:

- Given SLU's large female student population it would be insensitive to continue to ignore the effect the wall of men has on women students – whether that be consciously or subconsciously. Representation and inclusivity are important issues and SLU should make a definite effort to redress the balance of artwork it currently chooses to present. Perhaps the wall of men could be moved to an area less frequented by its students, or a decision taken to present a less overwhelming number of these

paintings together in one place. Certainly their current presentation behind an informal seating area, occupied largely by female students, sends a forceful and unfortunate message.

- Student involvement in the selection and creation of art would also be a sound move. Many Higher Education institutions now have 'artists in residence' chosen from within the student body who are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that a University's members, mission, research interests and values are presented and explored through a variety of different art pieces. SLU's buildings are seemingly devoid of student representation and voice, and this issue should be addressed.



'SLU SL-ME'

Although not a prototype in itself, all the ideas we tested were badged with a logo suggested by one of the students who attended a workshop: 'SLU? > SL-ME!', suggesting collaboration, connection and the opportunity that every individual has to make SLU and the wider world a better place. However, this idea was somewhat lost in translation when the logo was produced as 'SLU SLUME' which arguably failed to recognise the 'you' and 'me' play on words and prompted people to ask what is 'Slume?!'. This example of a slogan aside, several users suggested that SLU could better leverage its initials to send a clear message about its values and purpose through marketing campaigns or even a total rebrand so that, as one staff member suggested, SLU could more powerfully stand for something like 'Sustainable Life University.'



General recommendations

General recommendations

In addition to the specific recommendations relating to the prototypes tested during this research and design work, I outline here some more general recommendations relating to provision for international students, campus development, and the opportunity that embedding a UX research and design approach might offer SLU different user groups and campuses.

1. Go bilingual

Given its large number of international students and the 'fördubbling' student numbers strategy, now is the obvious time for SLU to draw a line in the sand and from here on in move forward as a more inclusive and welcoming bilingual University. This should mean that all information provision, be it physical or digital, should be supplied in both languages ensuring therefore that no SLU international student, academic or visitor ever feels confused or excluded.

2. Create a community

There is a clear message from the research data that more needs to be done to create a community on campus. This requires students to spend more time on campus outside of their lectures with a view to building wider and stronger relationships. This can only be achieved if more engaging activities (e.g. indoor play/sports) and attractive spaces are offered, giving students more reasons to stay rather than immediately cycle or bus home. As with the process



Workshop exploring experience with LEGO Serious Play

we have followed, these activities and spaces should be prototyped and iterated to ensure that they are a valuable user-centred fit for your students rather than be instituted as a result of quickly made decisions to purchase discrete items of furniture or kit. Your students need to be involved in the process every step of the way. They have great ideas and a passion for the institution and their subject matter that could and should be harnessed and leveraged for the benefit of all SLU members.

3. Audit your spaces, furniture and signage

The research data also suggests that many spaces on campus are under-used, and that within these spaces lots of furniture is not being used, and signage is not being noticed. All three should be audited through observation and behavioural mapping by the UX team so that dead



spaces, unused furniture, and signage that is not working, are all identified. Naturally, this research would also reveal popular spaces and furniture, and signage that is already effective. This process would also help identify desire lines (routes students like to take through spaces) on campus, information which can be used to feed into plans for changes to building and space layouts.

4. Explore cultural initiatives

There is a very real opportunity for the celebration and exploration of the cultures and traditions of SLU's many international students which should go beyond events that are devised only for the international community (e.g. potluck nights). It is important that such events serve to integrate rather than separate international students from Swedish students. There also needs to be a concerted effort to help international students to have a fuller

experience of Swedish life and culture through events, language classes, home-stay family programmes and the like. Swedish students should be encouraged to take a role in ensuring such provision and building bridges. Conversations with student union representatives would be a good starting point.

5. Provide a better range of food and drink outlets

A core component of the life of any University is its range of food and drink outlets. At SLU there is a definite need for at least one additional sit-down café in Ulls Hus, vending machines offering healthy snacks, and for a wider range of international cuisines offered across the campus. Improved food and drink options could prove to be just as vital a motivator for students as post-class activities and improved hang-out and study spaces; however, perhaps the latter have to be in place first in order to guarantee enough students staying on campus before additional outlets are considered to be a viable investment?

6. Embedding UX research and design

I would hope that this process has highlighted the value of adopting UX research and design methods when seeking to explore and respond to the user experience of students. A large amount of attitudinal and behavioural data was gathered very quickly which offered actionable insights into how international (and some Swedish) students currently feel about how the Ultuna campus's buildings are falling short of their needs, how they are actually using them, and how these issues might be addressed.

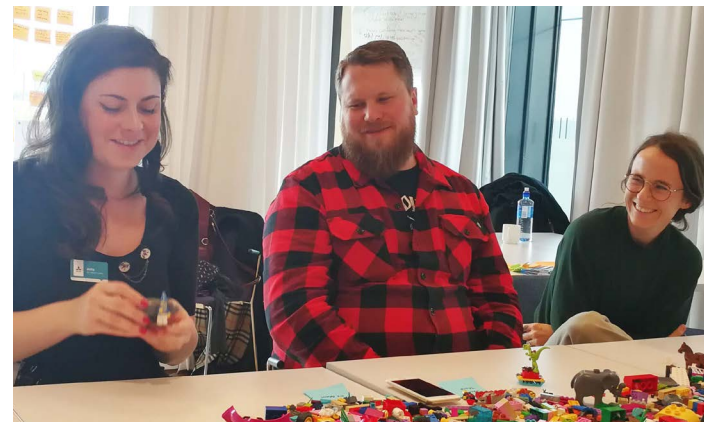
Crucially, rather than jumping straight to solutions, ideas were generated from user research data which were subsequently tested on users to find out what might or might not work. You cannot find out the true and full story until you physically prototype and iterate in response to how users actually behave and react. As is always the case with UX, some of our prototypes worked wonderfully first-time, some did not work at all, and others happened by accident – the key was agile and inexpensive experimentation until we found the best solutions.

UX can be easily embedded at any institution if the following ingredients are in place:

1. A genuine will to explore and uncover the experience of users
2. A team of UX practitioner staff from different departments committed to impartially and collaboratively exploring experience and opportunities (who are given sufficient time and permissions to carry out this work)
3. Always balancing attitudinal user research (what people say) with behavioural user research (what people do)
4. Gathering insights quickly rather than gathering large amounts of data slowly (you don't need large amounts of data as you will be testing the insights)
5. Bravery and agility to inexpensively and quickly try out new approaches
6. An appetite for experimentation and testing rather

than guesswork and blind decision-making

7. Ensuring your users are part of the process when you are researching and prototyping new spaces or services. The more they are part of the process the more user-centred the experiences you create will become.
8. Senior management understanding and declaration that UX has its place through open support of activity and active response to data findings
9. Putting the user at the centre of everything you do. Always stopping and asking yourself is this for you the staff, or for the user? And recalibrating your agendas and priorities accordingly.
10. For UX work to be successful it is essential that you don't form committees, write reports or plan too much. As Nike puts it "Just Do It!"



Anita, Johan and Sarah evaluating their experience of this consultancy through LEGO Serious Play (© Jennifer Salomonsson)

7. Task the team to conduct more UX

I would encourage SLU management to convene a meeting soon to explore the recommendations detailed in this report ahead of reassembling the UX team.

The team should then be tasked with continuing the efforts they began: conducting more behavioural research in particular (in line with the auditing recommendation); creating, testing and iterating new prototypes; and generally deepening their understanding of the experience of the student experience of the Ultuna campus.

They should also share their ideas for how to advocate for UX within their own departments. Ideally, similar cross-functional teams should be formed at the Alnarp and Umeå campuses, tasked with understanding, exploring and responding to the user experience of those sites too. Perhaps Uppsala staff could visit to share their new-found UX expertise and perspectives?



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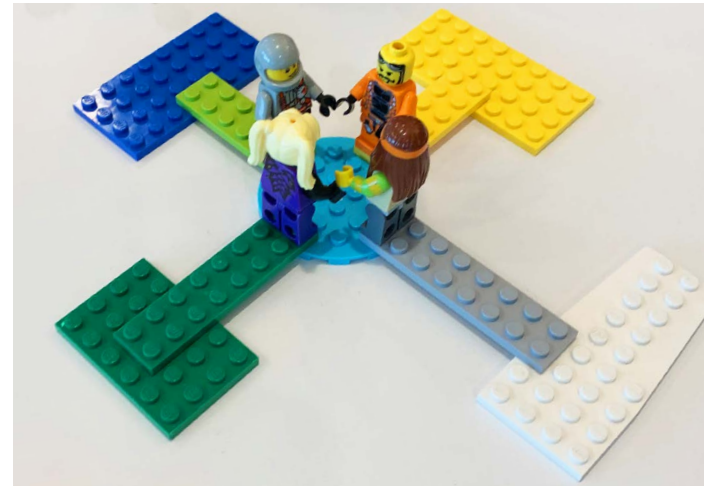
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A model built during the final evaluative LEGO Serious Play workshop depicting the importance of different SLU departments coming together to explore the experience of students

