

Trends in the quality of the student experience: an international perspective based on studies in three universities

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ABSTRACT

The trends in student experience in higher education have significantly changed in the last decade. The changing pattern of student participation with large proportion of students in full time or part time employment while also studying, growing student diversity, the use of ICT and flexible modes of learning and the demand for work integrated learning which allows students to undertake practicum's while studying is playing a key role in the changing trend in student experience. Research in student experience and satisfaction has mostly looked at individual institutions and national results on student satisfaction. There is limited research on what students see as most important in various institutions with different cohort of students which may improve student engagement, retention and improvement in student satisfaction.

This paper reviews the trend in student experience in three universities that have been using student satisfaction surveys for more than a decade with diverse student groups. The study is based on two Australian and one United Kingdom University (UK). The paper reports that student experience and high satisfaction is based on five interrelated factors including: adequate and reliable learning infrastructure and resources, quality of teaching staff, course design which enables student attainment of generic skills, quality management of student assessments and issues around administrative matters such as timetabling, admissions and enrolments. The findings of this study informs the predictors of student satisfaction which if effectively managed and improved by universities could result in improved student engagement, retention and student satisfaction.

Keywords: *Student experience and student satisfaction*

INTRODUCTION

Student experience and satisfaction matter to universities and students. It is the moral purpose of a university to provide high quality and standard of education and research to fulfil the needs of the society. In most developed countries like Australia and the UK, governments are in the process of introducing performance based funding to reward or in some cases penalise universities by using measures to assess teaching quality (BIS, 2009; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). One of such measures is the outcome of student surveys such as the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) used in Australia and the National Student Survey (NSS) used in the UK. On the other hand, students are the key stakeholders of the universities and they expect and deserve a high quality of education to ensure value for money.

Students are in a better position to assess quality of courses and teaching, quality of support services and the quality of resources and infrastructure based on their learning experience. Universities provide a range of services and support to students. In some cases some support services (for example disability services, learning skills and religious centres) are not used by large population of students however universities do need to provide such services to cater for the needs of the diverse student groups. Measuring student experience using both importance and satisfaction rating allows institutions to identify four scenarios. First, universities are able to identify services that students rate as *most important* with *high satisfaction* rating (i.e. services that could be rewarded), second, services that students rate as *most important* with *low satisfaction* rating (i.e. services needing immediate improvement), third, services that students rate as *high satisfaction* with *low importance* rating (i.e. services that could be rewarded) and finally services that students rate as *low importance* and *low satisfaction* (i.e. services that needs ongoing monitoring).

Students are the most important clients of universities and their experience or knowledge and understanding of higher education must be based on their voices. In other words, student experience is shaped by student judgement rather than it being defined by universities. Students play a very key role in university management by providing feedback on what they see as most important and their satisfaction. By fostering and promoting engaged partnerships with students, institutions can improve teaching, course design, assessments, and quality processes which produce the best outcomes for students. According to Ramsden (2009), prospective students do need better information about what they can expect from higher education in terms of independence in learning, contact with tutors, and other forms of support. He argues that it is not because it will improve quality by getting students to choose more wisely rather it is because higher education is different compared to school or further education. Institutions need to articulate student expectation and find ways to find out student experience in early stages of study. Such strategy will enable institutions to act on areas needing improvement in a timely manner.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND SATISFACTION: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

The changing pattern of student participation in higher education has played a key role in the student expectations and experience. The growth of student participation in higher education and the diversity of students require institutions and governments to rethink about student experience and how student learning in higher education contributes to national economy. Higher education in Australia and other parts of the world is no longer dominated by only 18-21 year olds living on campus, studying fulltime, using traditional face-to-face learning, using campus facilities such as gymnasiums, bars and pools, and being taught by elite academic. James *et al*, (2007) study in Australia suggests that more than 74 per cent of students undertaking undergraduate courses are engaged in full time or part time working while also studying full time. Mass communication and use of technology in day to day lives have opened new styles of communication outside higher education which have led to expectations of 24 hour, seven day a week availability of learning support.

Several national studies in Australia (Scott, 2006 and Krause *et al*, 2005) suggest that student judgement of quality and high satisfaction is based on both learning and teaching (course design, teaching and assessments) and administrative factors (student support, resourcing and infrastructure). According to the work of Kane *et al*, (2008), students are not particularly interested in the course-related aspects of their learning and that it is the social and union related aspects like bars, clubs other campus facilities of their experience that are most important. In contrast, student satisfaction data from a number of UK universities since the early 1990s suggest that students are more concerned with course-related issues compared to the social side of their experience. An analysis of offshore student satisfaction in a large Australian university suggests that the top ten factors students see as most important are related to library, quality of teachers, course outcomes, IT infrastructure and local support by partner institutions.

According to Alves & Raposo (2007), it is a fundamental necessity to analyse and study students' satisfaction in higher education, as the dissatisfaction of students could have ominous consequences for both the institution and the students, including for example unsuccessful students (Wiese, 1994, Walther, 2000), students quitting or transferring (Chadwick & Ward, 1987; Dolinsky, 1994; Thomas *et al.*, 1996; Astin, 2001) and 'negative word of mouth' harming future applications (Ugolini, 1999). Conversely, Alves & Raposo (2007) suggest that, institutions of higher education with satisfied students could greatly benefit from being able to establish lasting relationships with their graduates.

The analysis of literature suggests that the characteristics of high quality student experience and satisfaction includes factors related to course design, quality of teaching staff, quality management of student assessment, library and IT services and range of well resourced support services. To gather meaningful data on student satisfaction, the survey questionnaire itself needs to be reviewed in light of the changing trends in student satisfaction. Most importantly institutions need to be able to have robust and systematic survey management systems that enables the tracking and improvement of student experience at all levels of the university operations including course, subject and teacher levels.

THE STUDENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

The Student Satisfaction Survey used in the three institutions has been in place for the last ten years. Although the questions in the survey are different and it has changed overtime, all three institutions use importance and satisfaction rating in the survey questionnaires. The use of three different student satisfaction questionnaires in different institutions with consistent findings provide confidence that student experience and factors students see as most important are common in Australia, UK and possibly other countries. All three institutions have diverse student profile and different size including single and multi-campus universities. The survey measures the total student experience in a single tool including items related to teaching quality, course outcomes, admissions and enrolments, learning support, library, student support services, computing, teaching infrastructure and campus facilities managed by student associations. One of the important aspects of student satisfaction in the three institutions is the engagement of student unions or associations in the process.

All three universities engaged student unions in the making of the survey questionnaires and the promotion of the questionnaires to students with the view to engage students and thus improving the response rate.

METHODOLOGY

All universities reported in this study use the student satisfaction survey on a biennial basis. The survey is sent to all undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students using online and paper survey. The response rate in the three institutions is around 40-46 per cent. The response sample in all three universities was representative based on the profile of each institution. Responses were received from domestic students, international onshore and offshore students, students from Non English Speaking Background, undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students and full time and part-time students from various disciplines.

FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY

The findings of the three separate studies in three institutions in two countries with diverse groups of students show consistent results. Such findings enable better knowledge and understanding of student experience in higher education in the 21st century. The results from three separate studies inform us that the top factors that students see as most important while studying in a university if effectively managed, enhanced and sustained could improve student satisfaction, engagement and retention in higher education. The result shows five key themes which are recurring in the three studies (see Table 1).

Table 1: Five recurring themes based on three separate studies.

Five Themes	Related Sub-Themes
Learning Infrastructure	<i>Library:</i> electronic access to library resources, library's online information resources, convenient opening hours of the library, number of up-to-date books and range/availability of materials to support the course of study <i>Information Technology:</i> quality of computing equipment and computing facilities (computers and printers) are reliable <i>Online learning:</i> quality and user friendly online learning portal <i>Classrooms:</i> well equipped lecture theatres, classrooms and other learning areas and adequate spaces on campus to work with other students on group assignments
Quality of Teacher	<i>Teachers:</i> teaching is conducted by staff who are good teachers, reliability/ punctuality of teaching staff and staff treat students as mature individuals
Course Design	<i>Course Outcomes:</i> course equips students with up to-date-knowledge and skills needed by employers, course develops subject knowledge, relevance of course content to future employment and development of skills and abilities required for your future employment
Student Assessments	<i>Assessments:</i> clear assessment requirements and timely and usefulness of feedback from teaching staff
Administrative Matters	<i>Administration:</i> enrolment and reenrolment is quick and convenient, exam timetable clashes are easily resolved, early availability of class timetable to organise other aspects life (e.g. work, childcare), course enables me to construct a timetable for attendance at classes which suit my needs and security on the campus

The study shows that student experience and high satisfaction is based on five interrelated factors including: adequate and reliable learning infrastructure and resources, quality of teaching staff, course design which enables student attainment of generic skills, quality management of student assessments and issues around administrative matters such as timetabling, admissions and enrolments. These studies inform that the characteristics of quality student experience are based on the total student experience including the quality of both academic and administrative areas. The UK university included in this study had items related to work experience in the student satisfaction questionnaire. Interestingly both work experience items were rated in the top two on importance.

This finding suggests student demand of courses which integrate work-based learning which allows students to undertake practicum's while studying. Research undertaken by Grebennikov and Shah (2008) with graduate employers suggests that employers prefer courses which enable students to engage in practicums while studying thus allowing students to attain the necessary generic/employability skills.

The comparative analysis between the three studies (two Australian and one UK universities) and the national studies conducted in Australia shows two key variations. First, the three studies repeatedly shows that students have voiced the need to ensure that university courses are focused on the attainment of generic/employability skills which employers recognise as important. Secondly, these studies show the need to improve quality management of student assessments including assessment clarity and timely and constructive feedback on assessments.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study informs that student experience and factors that students see as most important while studying are consistent in Australia, UK and undoubtedly elsewhere. The use of three different student satisfaction questionnaires with diverse student groups from various disciplines and with consistent results provides assurance that student experience is evolving based on the changing pattern of student participation in higher education. Students now expect universities to fit within their day-to-day lives rather than students adjusting their lives to fit within university teaching norms such as timetabling, lectures and tutorial times and flexible learning. While universities are proactive in obtaining student feedback, the challenge is to act on the results of the survey to improve student experience and satisfaction. The need to review student satisfaction questionnaires is also important based on the contemporary trends in student satisfaction in order to target improvements. The current reforms in higher education across many developed countries with performance based funding place onus on universities to take student experience as a joint venture between students and universities for long term sustainability. There is a need for universities to listen to student voices in the first year of study in teaching and administrative areas to be able to respond to student feedback by implementing rapid improvements which may improve student experience and satisfaction in 2nd and 3rd year of study. Universities also need to be prepared to change their curricula, teaching, assessments, and infrastructure and student support services to align with the changing trends in student experience.

The findings in this paper are based on the overall student experience but the similarities are interestingly similar to the engineering student experience. For instance the importance of course design in engineering courses attributing to student capabilities have been reported in a number of studies (for example, Martin et al 2005; Nair, Patil, & Mertova, 2009) and the quality of administrative matters, infrastructure as well as teaching is well articulated in the paper by Nair and Patil (2009).

This paper reinforces that the student experience is not necessarily discipline specific but takes into account the general teaching and learning environments in institutions of higher education.

The results of the study in the three institutions clearly suggests that the predictors of student satisfaction and positive experience are based on both teaching, course design and effective support systems such as IT, library and campus facilities. Institutions need to be able to monitor the changing trends in student experience in order to improve the quality of student experience.

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