



Monitoring and Improving the University Experience of Diverse Commencing Student Cohorts

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Overview of assessing student experience

- Purposes of external and internal student feedback surveys
- Important aspects of surveying student experience
 - effective strategies for engaging students in feedback provision
 - choosing best time and methodology to undertake surveys
 - ensuring validity of survey instruments
 - taking actions based on survey outcomes
 - ‘closing the loop’
- Measuring expectations and experience of diverse commencing students cohorts



Research questions

- What insights and benefits can universities gain from surveying commencing students?
- Is it too early?
- What is the best time?
- What is the best methodology?



Rationale for surveying commencing students

- Students who dropped out within their first year of study indicate that if early feedback is taken from them and acted upon this can encourage some of them to stay on.
- Delivering this survey in weeks four to five gives enough time for students to ‘get a feel’ for how things work so that they can give meaningful feedback whilst still allowing time for staff to respond before their unit is over.
- The commencing student survey importantly:
 - only gets feedback on what students can reasonably be expected to have experienced in their first few weeks of study;
 - focus not only on this feedback but also asks students what help they would most like while studying.
- Universities which survey commencing students seek to take a proactive approach rather than simply relying on lagging data.



Method: Instrument

The Commencing Student Survey (CSS) invites all UG and PG coursework students commencing their studies at the university to give feedback after the first four to five weeks of their studies on:

- their expectations about the outcomes they would value most;
- how they would like their course to work;
- the quality of their initial experiences with transition, enrolment, first classes, administrative and academic staff;
- the various forms of orientation and early support.



Method: Instrument

- The survey items were identified from studies of successful graduates in a wide range of disciplines; and also based on the data collected by one large multi-campus Australian university since 2004 on a range of surveys – with students on their experience and with employers on key capabilities they rated as most important with early career graduates.
- Respondents are invited to rate the importance and performance of the above areas using a five-point Likert-type scale, 1-low to 5-high.
- The survey concludes by asking respondents to comment on the types of assistance or support they would currently find most helpful.



Method: Participants and procedure

- The research sample consisted of 8,228 first year students who participated in the CSS conducted by the university in 2010 and 2011.
- For the 2011 Survey 3,871 students responded representing a response rate of 36%. The corresponding figures for 2010 are 4,357 respondents and a response rate of almost 48%. Both participant groups were representative of the university's commencing student population.
- The CSS is sent out to all commencing first year students. The survey is available online only and the students are sent an email to their student email address with a link to the survey.



Method: Data analysis

Mean scores and their ranks of all survey items were calculated for the overall samples and a number of subgroups studied each year. These subgroups include:

- Indigenous students;
- students from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB);
- international students;
- students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (LSES) by postcode;
- students being first in their family to attend university.

Comparisons based on 'effect size' or Cohen's d measure were made between group results to highlight areas of particular importance for each group.



Overall findings

Outcomes from their course students would most value

- Gaining employment in my chosen career (mean importance rating = 4.63/5 vs 4.66/5 in 2010)
- Using what I learn to make life better for others (4.39 vs 4.39)
- Effective time, learning and project management (4.37 vs 4.37)
- Develop my ability to learn from my errors and accept feedback (4.32 vs 4.34)
- Improving my problem-solving skills (4.30 vs 4.29)
- Develop my ability to persevere when things are not turning out as expected (4.25 vs 4.27)



Overall findings

Preferred approaches to course design and delivery

- Staff who are good teachers (4.71/5 in 2011 vs 4.74/5 in 2010)
- Clear assessment requirements (4.70 vs 4.75)
- Prompt and helpful feedback on my assessment (4.64 vs 4.67)
- Staff who have up-to-date knowledge in their subject area (4.59 vs 4.63)
- Study times and locations that make my attendance as convenient as possible (4.58 vs 4.59)



Overall findings

Transition and the first few weeks of study: Importance

- Quality of information about your course (4.57 in 2011 vs 4.61/5 in 2010)
- Quick and convenient enrolment (4.53 vs 4.53)
- Speed and accuracy with which your queries have been answered (4.52 vs 4.52)
- A helpful briefing on how my units of study work, including assessment (4.51, not used in 2010)
- Helpful advice on the right combination and sequence of study units to select (4.48 vs 4.50)



Overall findings

Transition and the first few weeks of study: Performance

- Quality of information about the university (4.02 in 2011 vs 3.95 in 2010)
- Quality of information about your course (3.94 vs 3.93)
- Speed and accuracy with which your queries have been answered (3.9 vs 3.91)
- A helpful briefing on how my units of study work, including assessment (3.87, not used in 2010)
- A helpful orientation program (3.82 vs 3.74)



Overall findings

Most requested types of assistance and support

- Tips on how to study at university (4.05/5 in 2011 vs 4.12/5 in 2010)
- Advice regarding employment opportunities whilst studying (3.91 vs 3.93)
- Training on how to use different technologies (3.90 vs 3.99)
- Having a single member of staff to contact about any queries about my studies at the university (3.88 vs 3.93)



Subgroup analysis: Indigenous students

	Survey sections			
Student subgroups	Course outcomes	Course design and delivery	Student experience (importance and satisfaction)	Most requested type of further assistance
Indigenous	Understanding ethical practices; networking with fellow students	Comparable	Important: quick and convenient enrolment; speed and accuracy with answers to queries; quality of information about the university; helpful advice on the right combination and sequence of study units. Low satisfaction with: information about the course; enrolment, and briefing on how units work	Help with managing finance and with housing



Subgroup analysis: NESB

	Survey sections			
Student subgroups	Course outcomes	Course design and delivery	Student experience (importance and satisfaction)	Most requested type of further assistance
NESB	Comparable	Interaction with fellow students – both formal and informal	Low satisfaction with enrolment and advice on the right combination and sequence of study units	Help with English language and Mathematics skills; information on transportation; help with housing; information on child care



Subgroup analysis: LSES students

	Survey sections			
Student subgroups	Course outcomes	Course design and delivery	Student experience (importance and satisfaction)	Most requested type of further assistance
LSES	Promoting social, economic and environmental sustainability; developing ability to learn from errors and accept feedback	Interaction with fellow students – both formal and informal	Important: helpful orientation program; helpful bridging program	Help with mathematical skills; help with managing my finances; tips on how to study at university



Subgroup analysis: International students

	Survey sections			
Student subgroups	Course outcomes	Course design and delivery	Student experience (importance and satisfaction)	Most requested type of further assistance
International	Comparable	International study opportunities	Low satisfaction with: quality of information about the university; speed and accuracy with answers to queries; and helpful orientation program	English language skills; help with housing; information on transportation



Subgroup analysis: First in their family to attend university

	Survey sections			
Student subgroups	Course outcomes	Course design and delivery	Student experience (importance and satisfaction)	Most requested type of further assistance
First in their family to attend university	Comparable	Comparable	Comparable	Comparable



Qualitative findings

Top five areas of IMPORTANCE (total number of comments BA+NI) include:

- Support – social affinity (796 comments of 4,960)
- Course design – methods (543)
- Staff – accessibility and responsiveness (485)
- Support – infrastructure (407)
- Staff – quality 397

Top five areas of QUALITY (BA/NI ratio) include:

- Support – social affinity (6.4)
- Outcomes – personal (5.0)
- Staff – accessibility and responsiveness (3.4)
- Outcomes – intellectual (3.3)
- Outcomes – interpersonal (2.5)



Qualitative findings

Bottom five areas of QUALITY include:

- Assessment – feedback (BA/NA ratio = 0.05); Rank 19 on importance
- Assessment – expectations (0.06); Rank 12 on importance
- Course design – structure (0.18); Rank 8 on importance
- Assessment – standards (0.20); Rank 18 on importance
- Assessment – relevance (0.21); Rank 25 on importance

Consistent with the national CEQuery study the assessment domain attracts relatively fewer comments and the highest proportion of NI comments compared to other subdomains.



Qualitative findings

Typical Best Aspect comments:

- *Helpful and friendly staff. Providing assistance in peer-support programs and discussion board on e-learning systems.*
- *The campus is close to home, has a welcoming atmosphere, and I'm happy with my timetable.*
- *Motivated and dedicated staff.*
- *Early access to e-learning systems with clear and concise tutorials within offering opportunity to familiarise and navigate. Enrolment was made very easy online.*
- *Lecturers and tutors are excellent in every aspect (enthusiastic, professional, knowledgeable, friendly, etc). My campus is wonderful. Convenient shops on campus, lots of quiet places to study, great library.*
- *Orientation day. Clear guidance and direction made things easier, especially about who to contact and all the available services. It was informative and encouraging.*
- *The staff and current students have been very helpful in making me feel at ease and comfortable.*
- *Friendly peers and staff; well explained tasks and assignments.*
- *The teachers are treating us like young adults and show us respect to gain respect back which happens in every class.*
- *The hands on approach makes learning easier and makes it feel like you are getting something done.*



Qualitative findings

Typical Needs Improvement comments:

- *Although courses are offered part time, very little consideration is given to appropriate class times for part time students. I am expected to fit my busy schedule around full time student work loads.*
- *Information about how to structure courses and what a unit is about before choosing it.*
- *Flexibility of course delivery. Courses in one campus should also be offered in others.*
- *More information about course and study units and enrolment, flexible and convenient class times.*
- *Personalised feedback on course structure, timing and enrolment - particularly for distant education students.*
- *Consideration of single mum who with too much responsibilities to give her more flexibility in time of tutorials and assessment.*
- *Its hard to grasp the assessments at first as they are so different from school.*
- *Longer periods between assignments. Ability to revise and resubmit work after its been given a grade, if we want to improve the original mark.*
- *More on what is exactly needed for assessments.*
- *The teachers need to slow down and explain the assignments better.*
- *Clarification of what we have to do for assignments, before the assignment is due in.*



Qualitative findings

Areas most helpful now:

- help with learning methods (609 comments of 5,296)
- staff accessibility (455)
- assessment expectations (382)
- course structure (379)
- course flexibility (378)
- staff quality (339)
- infrastructure (331)
- learning resources (331)
- social affinity (331)
- staff teaching skills (240)



Dissemination and exploitation of results

Annual CSS report is available on the intranet and also is sent to all relevant staff. It contains:

- Trend quantitative and qualitative data (institutional level)
- Current key groups quantitative data (institutional level)
- Current quantitative data (school and course level)
- Current qualitative data (school, campus and course level)



	School of *****	Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	School of *****	University
	Codes: High importance: means > 4.5 – blue; Good practice: mean ≥ 4.0 – green; Nearing target: mean ≥ 3.5 and < 4.0 – orange; Warrants attention: mean < 3.5 – red					
	Frequency of responses	294	18	15	327	2440
	Item # CSS Items					
Importance	1 Gaining employment in my chosen area of study	4.45	4.63	4.60	4.46	4.62
	2 Learning how to work productively with diverse groups of people and cultures	3.94	4.00	3.60	3.93	4.11
	3 Understanding what ethical practice involves	3.93	3.50	3.80	3.92	4.07
	4 Improving my problem-solving skills	4.23	4.50	4.80	4.25	4.32
	5 How to promote social, economic and environmental sustainability	3.86	3.88	4.60	3.87	3.92
	6 Using what I learn to make life better for others	4.04	4.38	4.20	4.06	4.42
	7 Effective time, learning & project management	4.28	4.50	5.00	4.29	4.35
	8 Develop my ability to learn from my errors and accept feedback	4.31	4.13	4.80	4.31	4.34
	9 Develop my ability to persevere when things are not turning out as expected	4.27	4.25	4.60	4.27	4.29
	10 Being well prepared to undertake higher studies in my area of study (e.g. a Masters or Doctoral Program)	3.90	4.38	4.20	3.92	4.11
	11 Developing strong networks amongst my fellow students	4.03	3.88	4.40	4.03	4.08
	12 Study times and locations that make my attendance as convenient as possible	4.45	4.63	5.00	4.46	4.49
	13 Clear direction, including a clear picture of how the different units of study I take fit together	4.33	4.75	4.60	4.35	4.40
	14 Learning through links to the workplace	4.20	4.00	4.80	4.20	4.15
	15 Active rather than passive learning (e.g. learning through group work, solving real world problems, being involved in work-placements, etc)	4.01	4.13	4.00	4.02	4.15



		School of *****	Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	School of *****	University
		Codes: High importance: means > 4.5 – blue; Good practice: mean ≥ 4.0 – green; Nearing target: mean ≥ 3.5 and < 4.0 – orange; Warrants attention: mean < 3.5 – red					
		Frequency of responses	294	18	15	327	2440
Performance	Item #	CSS Items					
	28	Quality of information about the university	4.11	4.00	4.20	4.11	4.08
	29	Helpful advice on the right combination and sequence of study units to select	3.91	3.43	3.40	3.89	3.89
	30	Quality of information about your course	4.04	3.43	4.60	4.04	4.02
	31	Quick and convenient enrolment	3.85	3.71	4.20	3.85	3.74
	32	Speed and accuracy with which your queries have been answered	3.95	4.00	4.00	3.95	3.99
	33	A helpful orientation program	3.89	3.57	4.00	3.88	3.88
	34	A helpful bridging program	3.86	3.00	4.67	3.86	3.84
	35	A helpful briefing on how my units of study work, including assessment	3.97	3.50	4.80	3.97	3.94



School of *****

Best Aspects Comments × Course × Campus

Course Name	Campus	Best Aspects Comment
B Bus & Com (2739)	PAR	The atmosphere.
B Bus & Com (2739)	PAR	Quick enrolment.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Parking!
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Friendly staff.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Friends.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Good people.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Social life.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Good campus.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Online study.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Making new friends.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Meeting new people.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Meeting new people.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Being with friends.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Convenient location.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Meeting other students.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Friendly learning environment.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Learning environment and different atmosphere.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Meeting friends and learning different things.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Lesser workload, recognition of previous studies.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	The uni was perfect to study and learning skills.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Being in a classroom environment again after so long.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	Quality of teachers and their helpful attitudes students.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	The environment of study, a friendly communication areas.
B Bus & Com (2753)	BAN	The course workload is challenging while still being manageable.



Example: Flexible course design

The university recognises that many of its students work in paid employment, often 30 hours or more a week.

The university seeks to consistently expand the capacity for its facilities and services to operate outside of normal working hours.

The academic literacy support programs and general facilities are increasingly being offered in evenings, weekends and/or electronically for 24/7 access.

The schools ensure flexibility in timetabling, adopt more flexible, mixed modes of course design and delivery to suit part-time students who work long hours (e.g. moving to a 'blended learning' format and considering a trimester system to offer students greater choice and flexibility over time and pace of study).

Regular consultations, electronically or face to face, outside class hours are made available.

Schools find ways to reach out to part-time and working students with information on the availability of and application for financial aid.



Discussion

Surveying commencing students can provide a powerful lens into the steps institutions can take to optimise first year engagement and retention. Such surveys have to be methodologically sound in design and well timed in delivery. This means that:

- The survey items have to be identified and validated through previous research and only seek feedback on what students can reasonably be expected to have experienced in their first few weeks of study;
- Conducting commencing student surveys in weeks four to five appears reasonable because it gives students enough time to 'get a feel' for how things work. This is supported by thousands of telling comments from students received via CSS 2010-2012. Thus, students can give meaningful feedback whilst still allowing time for staff to respond before their unit is over;
- The rich qualitative data which explain what students have in mind while rating survey items should be analysed;
- Commencing student surveys importantly give focus not only to this feedback but also ask students what help they would most like next.



Discussion

The CSS quantitative findings and qualitative comments provide a rich resource for improvement solutions. This has significant implications for university's first year strategy and confirms the importance of:

- helping new students with learning methods;
- giving students better prior training on what will happen at university;
- expanding the scope of formal and informal peer support programs;
- offering convenient enrolment services;
- extending course flexibility
- having assessment systems with clear expectations on what is required from the outset, prompt and constructive feedback on performance, fair marking and high standards;
- providing new students with guides on how university works and how to do well, written by experienced and successful students from their group.
- taking a proactive study assistance approach which is particularly beneficial for students who are from low LSES or NESB backgrounds or work in paid employment as they are more at risk of dropping out or struggling academically.



Questions and comments

