

Student surveys and feedback: Strategic solution for all tertiary education institutions

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Abstract

In recent years, the student voice has gained significant prominence as a measure of quality outcome in learning and teaching. Various kinds of evaluations tools are now used in various countries to evaluate the student experience. In some countries like United Kingdom (UK), Sweden and in Australia, governments have introduced questionnaires to evaluate the student experience. In the UK the government uses the results of the National Student Survey (NSS) to publish institutional performance for public access. In Australia, the government is currently in the transition to review and implement a number of student survey instruments to measure student experience at all stages of study including graduate outcomes. Interestingly the new quality and regulatory framework in Australia will use student experience measures to assess and possibly reward institutions in coming years and the results of the survey will be published on the new My University website for public access.

So far universities, vocational providers, and private for-profit providers have been using different kinds of internal and external student survey instruments to assess and in some cases improve student experience. This paper argues the need for the government to develop a strategic approach to student surveys and feedback which would be used with all kinds of tertiary education institutions rather than universities only. The development of a suite of national instruments would enable benchmarking with comparable providers and it will also ensure consistency across all types of institutions. The solution to the current problem with the use of different kinds of externally monitored survey instruments with different providers will ensure a sustainable approach to student feedback from an institution and student perspective.

Key words: student survey, student feedback, evaluations

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Structure of Australian tertiary education and student feedback challenge

The Australian tertiary education sector comprises 36 public universities, three private and one foreign university. The sector includes four self-accrediting institutions and more than 170 private for-profit higher education institutions (Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), 2010). The tertiary education sector also includes many publicly-funded Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, which have traditionally offered vocational courses and are now providing higher education courses. The tertiary sector has more than 4800 private and community-based registered training organisations (RTO) offering vocational qualifications, with some also offering higher education courses (Shah & Nair 2011a).

Introduction

Measuring and improving the student experience is gaining prominence in many countries. Government are now using the student experience indicators not only to assess institutional performance but also to reward institutions along with other academic outcome measures. The marketization of tertiary education with increased consumer choice is playing a key role in governments publishing the results of surveys in public domains along with the creation of ranking and league tables. While the use of student survey results in the public domain and institutional ranking is more common in the UK, such phenomenon is now being implemented in Australia. The Australian government as part of the new quality and regulatory framework for tertiary education is in the process of reviewing and developing new student survey instruments which is aimed to measure student experience in the first and later stages of study and post graduations. The government has announced that in the current rounds there are no attached funding's, however one should not rule out future plans to use the results of the survey in assessing and rewarding universities. The government has announced that the results of the surveys will be made available on public domain via the *My University* website from 2012 (Lane 2012).

While the government is keen to develop new survey instruments and strengthen other measures to assess and reward institutions, limited focus has been made on developing a strategic approach which could suit all kinds of tertiary education providers. So far the discussion papers (Commonwealth of Australia 2009; 2011a and b) to engage stakeholders in consultation about the development of new measures and survey instruments are focussed on universities only rather than all different kinds of tertiary education providers. The opportunity to provide input on the discussion papers and consultation with the booming TAFE's and other non-university providers have been nil. The government has been silent as to whether Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) and the proposed new University Experience Survey (UES) will be used by TAFE's and other non- university providers; or if their results will be made available on the *My University* website.

The focus on developing student survey instruments for universities only defeats the purpose of the Bradley review of higher education in 2008 which strongly argues the need to ensure comparability, standards, benchmarking and more importantly strengthened pathways between vocational and higher education, and enhanced collaboration between different kinds of providers (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). For example the Bradley review in 2008 recommended “*That the*

Australian Government require all accredited higher education providers to administer the Graduate Destination Survey, Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) from 2009 and report annually on the findings” (p xix). The same review also made a series of recommendations to ensure the development and use of a single and consistent quality and regulatory framework for all kinds of higher education providers which includes registration, accreditation and performance monitoring. The establishment of the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and the introduction of a consistent quality and regulatory framework (e.g. new provider standards) is an example of how the government intends to use consistent standards with all kinds of providers. Similarly the government’s plan to bring TEQSA and ASQA together is a signal that all kinds of tertiary education providers will be assessed and reviewed using a consistent framework and standards.

Current problem

At present, the AGS is used by all universities and it is used by the commonwealth government to assess institutional student experience with selected group of comparative universities as part of the annual institutional performance portfolio (IPP). The AGS data is also used internally by universities to benchmark their performance with selected universities and the sector. AGS is the only national instrument that is used by all universities along with the post graduate research experience questionnaire (PREQ) which is aimed at higher degree research students. In 2011, 11 out of the 160 non-university providers participated in the AGS with the response rates ranging from 10% - 67%. Until 2011, the AGS data was also used by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) during the audit of institutions. The practices in all universities differs in terms of internal survey methodology; survey design, range of internal instruments used; engagement of students to participate in the feedback mechanisms; analysis and reporting; closing the feedback loop; and using survey results to track and monitor institutional performance (Barrie, Ginns and Symons 2008). Shah and Nair’s (2009) study suggest that student surveys used in Australian universities ranges from six to 14 internal and external surveys.

The AGS gained prominence in 2004 when the commonwealth government decided to use the results of the survey in the learning and teaching performance fund. The government policy on performance based funding (Commonwealth of Australia 2004) which was introduced in 2004 has resulted in a number of shifts in the use of student surveys including the following trends:

- the shift in many institutions from using voluntary end of semester teacher and unit evaluations to mandatory surveys;
- merger of teacher and unit evaluations into a single instrument;
- the alignment of the 13 core Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) items from the AGS with the end of semester teacher and unit evaluation surveys in various institutions; and
- using the results of the survey in the annual performance development and review process (Shah and Nair forthcoming).

Further Shah & Nair (2011b) and Shah, Lewis and Fitzgerald (2011) also argue that the use of performance based funding has diverted institutional resources to attract reward rather than internal enhancements with reliance on quantitative measures to

assess educational quality. Harris and James (2010), suggest that the concern with the performance based funding and the value issues associated with the merit of such a scheme are a long way from being resolved with the funding scheme being a contentious policy within the Australian higher education sector.

While university practices on student survey is known, the practices in other kinds of tertiary education institutions such as VET (e.g. Technical and Further Education, private for-profit providers offering higher education courses and private registered training organisations (RTO)) is not well publicised. At present it is not mandatory for non-university higher education providers to participate in the AGS. Such providers use different kinds of internal survey instruments without any national benchmarking. There is also no requirement for such providers to report the data to any state/territory or commonwealth government agencies. To-date the TAFE institutes participate in the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) student survey after graduations. The private RTO and TAFE who offer vocational courses are required under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) by state/territory governments until 2011 and now by ASQA to participate in two separate surveys targeted to students and employers. These surveys are for compliance purpose and to-date it has not provided any national results or reports on the findings although its implementation has been since 2008.

The consistency in terms of registration and accreditation across all tertiary education providers also requires a strategic solution to develop and implement a single student survey and improvement framework which could be used by all tertiary education providers. For example, the use of AGS and the proposed UES within the Tables A and B universities only, defeats the overall rationale of the Bradley review which argues for the need to strengthen links with VET and higher education. The governments proposed strategy has huge financial impact on dual sector universities, non- university providers (offering vocational and higher education), and other universities who have pathway colleges offering vocational courses. In these types of institutions different kinds of internal and external surveys are used for the enhancement of student experience and also compliance requirements. Analysis undertaken by both authors suggest that it cost almost \$18 to get a completed paper based AGS from respondents which includes the cost of: engaging student with surveys; printing; postage, mail outs, follow up; casual staff cost in reminders, scanning, data coding and verification. There is a real need to develop a single solution for all different kinds of institutions for both internal enhancements and external compliance requirements.

The importance of providing quality education to international onshore and offshore students also requires a strategic solution. At present the government does not have any national instrument that measures student experience of offshore international students. While AGS was used with offshore graduates in past, the low response rates have been a key factor is withdrawing the survey with offshore cohort. Some Australian universities use internal surveys with offshore students with very low response rates. As expected, TEQSA's draft regulatory and risk framework places institutions with offshore program delivery at high risk (TEQSA 2012a). It is worth to note that both TEQSA and ASQA have recently signed a memorandum with the aim to harmonise, streamline and reduce duplication in the registration and accreditation of providers who are offering both vocational and higher education (TEQSA 2012b). This initiative is promising and it is also timely to re-look at the survey instruments that could be used consistently to reduce the duplication and resources used in student surveys administration. Table 1 below outlines the different kinds of providers and student survey instruments used.

Table 1: Types of Tertiary Education Institutions and Student Surveys Used

Types of Institutions	External Student Survey used	Internal Survey used	Other surveys
Universities (including dual sector universities)	AGS PREQ AUSSE <i>Other surveys in dual sector universities</i> Learner engagement Survey Student Outcomes Survey	Internal student experience surveys Unit and teacher evaluations HDR student experience surveys Insync library survey Offshore student experience survey Others	International barometer survey IT client satisfaction survey Insync student support survey Others
Non-University higher education providers offering vocational and higher education	AGS undertaken by 12 out of 160 providers Learner engagement Survey used in providers offering VET courses	Internal student satisfaction surveys Teacher and unit evaluations Others	International barometer survey i-graduate survey Others
TAFE's	Learner Engagement Survey Student Outcomes Survey	Internal student surveys Others	Others
Registered Training Organisations	Learner engagement survey	Others	Others

Strategic solution

The regulation and quality assurance in the Australian tertiary education sector is moving towards using a consistent approach in both vocational and higher education. The new and proposed policy changes are aimed to ensure consistency in registration, accreditation and performance assessment of all kinds of providers. For example, the criteria used in the new provider standards for higher education institutions are similar to those used in the registration of vocational providers. Some examples of comparable standards include: financial viability; fit for proper persons; governance structures; compliance with legislation; student information on rights and obligation prior to enrolment; and student support services.

The authors do not argue the need to develop standard internal instruments which are currently used in various types of institutions. The type, size and diversity of institutions require the use of different instruments based on the need. The authors argue the need to develop standard external instruments which could be used by all kinds of providers for the internal enhancement of student experience and to meet external compliance requirements. The use of standard instruments is important for the following reasons:

- reducing the current regulatory burden which is experienced by institutions which are registered as VET and higher education. These kinds of institutions (public and private) use AQTF surveys and also national AGS in some cases

- shifting focus from compliance to an improvement led student experience framework with the view to improve student experience rather than the current compliance reporting requirements particularly in VET context
- streamline institutional survey practices with the use of few standard external instruments
- cost effectiveness of running various kinds of surveys to meet external and internal requirements
- enable institutional benchmarking with comparable institutions
- monitoring the standard of student experience with different kinds of providers (universities; VET, and private providers).

The government is in a very good position to implement a national solution to student surveys and improvement. The merger of TEQSA and ASQA requires the use of a consistent quality and regulatory framework. For this reason a single student survey and improvement framework for use within the institution is important. Having a single framework with the use of standard external instruments available for all types of tertiary education providers will undoubtedly place Australian higher education in the forefront with student survey practices. This will ensure consistency with all aspects of quality assurance with all providers including: registration, accreditation, risk-based audits, performance assessment, and monitoring student experience.

The revised AGS and the new UES needs to be extended to all tertiary education institutions. Both these surveys should provide tertiary institutions to add optional questions for internal use other than the core items. The use of the AGS and the UES will reduce the current cost and duplication of resources currently being used in different kinds of providers. The data collection, reporting and assessment of results on the two instruments by TEQSA will improve the use of such measures in the enhancement of the student experience in non- university and vocational providers. The government also needs to include the non-university providers in the My University website which enables public access on the performance of all kinds of providers rather than universities only.

Conclusion

The renewal of quality assurance in Australian tertiary education will ensure consistency in the registration, accreditation and performance assessment. While these initiatives are promising, the government also needs to develop a sustainable solution in relation to student surveys and development. The development of instrument for universities only limits institutions benchmarking and the enhancement of student experience across all tertiary education providers.

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