

DIXO5035

AARE paper code: DIXO5035

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Teaching and Learning Partnerships in Higher Education: Using students' feedback to inform developments in teaching.

Abstract – University administrators are becoming aware of the importance of increasing the quality of teaching and learning across their study programs. Measuring and supporting quality teaching and learning is frequently linked with accountability to internal and external stakeholders. The increasing pressures on Australian universities to be more strategic with a view to enhancing market share in a competitive educational industry has put pressure on all key players in the process to investigate

ways in which the quality of learning can be improved. The partners in learning within this research involve the students, lecturers, and the organisation. This research investigates the 'student feedback' data (UEQ) in a Business Division in an Australian University. Data is collected and analysed by an external department to the Schools and educators within this department are available to work with academics to interpret their results. Student feedback data indicates that the business school academics must engage with teaching and learning issues such as workload, increasing the quality of teaching and assessments, and clarifying expectations. The study identifies a number of key initiatives which serve as a model for facilitating a constructive response to the current political and economic pressures within the context of higher education in Australia.

Introduction

This paper analyses the results of the longitudinal quantitative data collected from students within a Business School in an Australian University. The data is related to student perceptions of the quality of their learning experiences throughout their program of study. The researchers outline a range of initiatives that have been implemented by the Business School in order to address the challenges highlighted in the students' feedback data. A number of these challenges include reviewing curriculum which is perceived by students as being 'extremely overloaded'; addressing issues of assessment in terms of the low cognitive demand, and structure and practices, for example, problems with the monitoring, structure and success of group assignments; and the need to overtly embed professional skills into coursework and assessments. Additionally, students have indicated there is a distinct need to focus on improving academic teaching practices; hence the Business School has implemented systematic contextualised professional development programs for its academic staff, one of which directly articulates into formal teaching qualifications. Completion of the workshop series (10 sessions) and a contained action research project enables participants to apply for "recognised prior learning" for the introductory unit in the Graduate Certificate Tertiary Teaching. In light of current changes to the context of higher education in Australia - such as reduced Government funding, increased international student numbers, increased accountability and pressure from Government to increase the quality of teaching and research practices, the staff of the Business School are in the position where they need to examine the areas where quality of teaching and learning practices are of concern, and determine ways to implement positive change. This is crucial in order to ensure the School's place as a valued educational provider. This paper examines the extensive student feedback related to their perceptions of the learning experiences and outlines the strategic action taken as a result.

Higher Education in Australia

The Australian University which is the focus of this research is situated within an increasingly competitive context. The environment for tertiary education is one in which "prospective students are focusing on course quality and likely employment outcomes in making their selection" (Ronayne, 1999, p.8). Although universities have always had quality teaching and caring for students on their agenda, Government pressure for accountability in these matters is now more overt and with funding incentives for compliance included within these reform agendas. As Ramsden (2003, p.211) stated "[e]valuation for accountability has become an essential part of today's universityThe days when students' experiences and comparability of standards were in the background and unprofessional teaching behaviour was quietly tolerated have gone". Increasingly, universities are being encouraged to focus on

students' learning rather than on teaching alone with many exploring feedback mechanisms which focus more on students' perception of the learning that occurred rather than what the teacher/lecturer did. Outcomes-based education is an example of the change in focus from the teacher input model to that of students' demonstrations of learning or the output orientation.

A dilemma which emerged in the late 1980s was how do we measure and make judgements about the quality of teaching in universities? Some advocated using 'student satisfaction' as a possible indicator of quality teaching, however, many felt that this was a subjective and potentially confusing indicator when student *learning* should be the focus. Performance indicators in higher education in relation to quality teaching began to be developed in the early 1990s. The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) report on *Performance Indicators in Higher Education* (1991) was based on the outcomes of the trial of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which was developed as a means of assessing perceived teaching quality across institutions. The DEET Report, which acknowledged that a national system of assessing teaching quality would be useful in terms of comparing performance across disciplines and institutions, also indicated that it was not a simple task to assess teaching quality. Assessing teaching quality was a matter of judgement which involved a complex pattern of behaviour. The authors acknowledge the limitations of a largely quantitative instrument such as the modified CEQ, hence a major cross-divisional research program has been established to employ other forms of evaluation which include qualitative student focus groups, and interviews of academics.

The current climate within higher education in Australia is one of increasing accountability with the view to ensuring quality of the learning experience for students who are now frequently considered "clients" within an educational industry. According to the Federal Minister of Education, Science and Training, Dr. Brendan Nelson (2004), Australian higher education needs to improve quality, enhance competitiveness in the field while facilitating critical thinking and research. Dr Nelson indicated that the challenge for higher education is how to better connect academic learning with the workforce. One of Dr Nelson's proposals is for universities to establish systematic student evaluation of teaching and learning which will be made publicly available via the World Wide Web.

There have been several wide-reaching changes to universities in Australia: a greater emphasis has been placed on the state universities to perceive themselves as members of a more federally oriented system. The abolition of the binary divide between the university and college sectors reflects the broader roles of each and a more heterogeneous student population. The focus on the quality of teaching in tertiary institutions is part of more explicit and stringent accountability procedures and attempts to highlight excellence in teaching rather than adequacy. According to Lally and Myhill (1994), problems exist in both developing appropriate operational definitions of effective teaching/learning and in developing valid and reliable instruments for assessing teaching/learning. The process of assessing teaching raises a number of difficult issues; however, the appropriateness of the teaching evaluation itself depends upon a number of factors including the purpose of the evaluation, academic staff members' personal philosophies of teaching, concepts of good teaching, and the contexts in which the teaching takes place. Ramsden's (2003) work in this area has yielded a number of core aspects which he indicated were useful indicators of students' learning. These included the clarity of the goals and standards as laid down by the academic; a scale of items related to "good teaching"; students' perception of the appropriateness of the assessments and workload; a measure of the generic skills that were developed in the course, and finally a "student satisfaction with the quality" item. Used

holistically, he posited that this set of indicators would be a reliable indicator of teaching quality.

These calls for increased accountability resulting in the requirement of systematic evaluation of teaching/learning quality have not been unreservedly embraced by all academics. Critics of 'students' evaluation of teaching' approaches argue that students are incapable of recognising effective teaching until after graduation in situations where they are called upon to demonstrate their learning. Some academics also feel strongly that the majority of students are not yet adult learners, able to appropriately identify what supports their learning (Marsh, 1987; Centra, 1979, 1989). Cross-sectional studies however, indicate high levels of agreement between responses of current students and alumni (Marsh, 1987; Centra, 1979, 1989). Overall and Marsh (1980) conducted a longitudinal study where the same students were asked to retrospectively evaluate classes several years after graduation and found that ratings were very similar to current students.

Frequently universities collect 'students' evaluation of teaching' data but fail to utilise these data in order to make decisions regarding the quality of teaching and learning. Additionally, universities who systematically collect 'students' evaluation of teaching' data frequently fail to keep a longitudinal archive of the results - little use is made of these data. The research in this paper reports on the findings emerging from the 'students' evaluation of teaching' - the Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ); with the view to using it as a "performance indicator of teaching quality from the students' perspective ... [and to provide] information" that the university and faculties can use "to make improvements" (Ramsden, 2003, p.219).

The Business Division's Approach to Student Feedback

The increasing climate of accountability in Australian higher education and the emphasis on increasing the quality of learning and teaching approaches and practices influenced, the Business School in late 1999 to establish a systematic student feedback mechanism related to students' learning experiences called the Unit Effectiveness Project (UEP). This project aimed at instituting a systematic evaluation process that would provide data from which academics could make teaching decisions and implement positive changes to their units and practice. This follow-up on student feedback constituted a fundamental reflective practitioner cycle, namely, the Plan-Teach-Reflect/Evaluate cycle. This cycle comprises the fundamental stages of sound teaching, namely, the *planning* and development of curriculum and teaching activities with student learning outcomes in view, implementation of activities designed to increase learning of particular skills and knowledge (*teach*), and *reflection and evaluation* of the success of the learning and teaching and further development of teaching and learning as a result of reflecting on the evaluation (Stringer, 2004). This cycle is valuable in describing university teaching processes, with data for the evaluation phase of the cycle resulting from student surveys and other forms of information gathering.

The divisional systematic feedback mechanism utilises the Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ). This instrument was modelled on the Australian Government Department of Education Science and Training's benchmarked (DEST) Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) which contains five main scales "good teaching", "clear goals and standards", "appropriate workload", "appropriate assessment" and "generic skills". Each scale contains a number of items in a category which has been found from research to be significant in students' learning. Ramsden (2003) developed the CEQ for use as a nationally comparative measure of students' perception of key aspects which influence their learning over their course. The UEQ utilises the previously mentioned CEQ scales and an additional three open-ended response sections and is focused at the unit rather than course/program level.

Modifications to the CEQ consisted of minor wording changes which included ... “course” to “unit”, lecturer, tutor and other teaching staff descriptors were altered to “the staff member”. The open-ended sections had three questions/statements - “What were the best aspects of the unit?”, “What aspects of the unit are most in need of improvement?”, and “Suggest how the staff member could improve the learning experience”. This UEQ instrument was initially adopted for compulsory use with “large” units (100 or more students enrolled in a semester) at the Australian campus, and in all units in offshore locations. Over the past five years, increasing numbers of academics who supervise and teach units with fewer numbers of students have requested the survey be conducted for use in unit review and for promotion purposes. Academics are recommended to engage in team meetings with their sessional lecturers. These meetings are designed to encourage reflection on the student feedback with a view to implementing refinements and developments to the unit and/or teaching as appropriate. Full time dedicated divisional educational advice and support is available to these academic teams to assist in the reflective practitioner process. The administration (Heads of School) of the various faculties across the division, Heads of Schools, are expected to meet with the Unit Controllers (those academics who are responsible for a particular unit or course) to discuss their unit results and action plans. This process focuses on development of the curriculum, learning experiences, assessments and teaching rather than being a punitive approach. Hence, academics generally are not anxious over these meetings as they are frequently perceived as an opportunity to showcase the work they have been doing.

The Questionnaire Administration Process

Surveys are administered by paid postgraduate students who are external to the Business Division. Questionnaires are administered only in undergraduate tutorial sessions to ensure the maximum number of students will be involved. Students are required to provide feedback on the tutor for their particular tutorial session, however, students frequently provide information on both the lecturer and the tutor. These student administrators explain the purpose of the survey, the process and what happens to the data. Student data collected from units are processed, analysed and reports developed for academics by a divisional department external to the schools. Data from the Likert scale are processed via an opti-scanner and processed using MS Excel. Open-ended data are thematically coded for each unit and themes prioritised from most to least frequent comments. The open-ended and statistical data are then compiled into a report. Reports are provided to individual Unit Controllers (on their own unit’s performance), copies are also generated for the individual tutors (if requested by the Unit Controller), Heads of Schools (on their School’s performance) and the Executive Dean (on the Division’s performance on and offshore). These various reports are used for discussion and forward planning at many levels. In larger units with multiple tutorial groups, the Unit Controllers are expected to work with their team to make sense of the data and make plans for continued review and development. This initiative is designed to promote a supportive “learning communities” approach to professional and unit development, and ultimately to increase the quality of learning experiences for students.

Results and Discussion

The UEQ is administered in all large units (required) and some units (self-selected) conducted in the Australian campus (in both semesters).

Unit Experience Questionnaire Scales/Items	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Avg
Good Teaching	51	53	53	52	55	52.8

Clear Goals and Standards	52	53	54	53	55	53.4
Appropriate Workload	29	31	32	31	33	31.2
Appropriate Assessment	41	41	43	42	41	41.6
Generic Skills	47	48	47	47	48	47.4
Overall Satisfaction with the Quality (1 Item)	60	62	63	61	65	62.2
Total number of student responses	6397	3952	7773	8020	8758	

Table 1: Unit Experience Questionnaire Scales/Items over five years

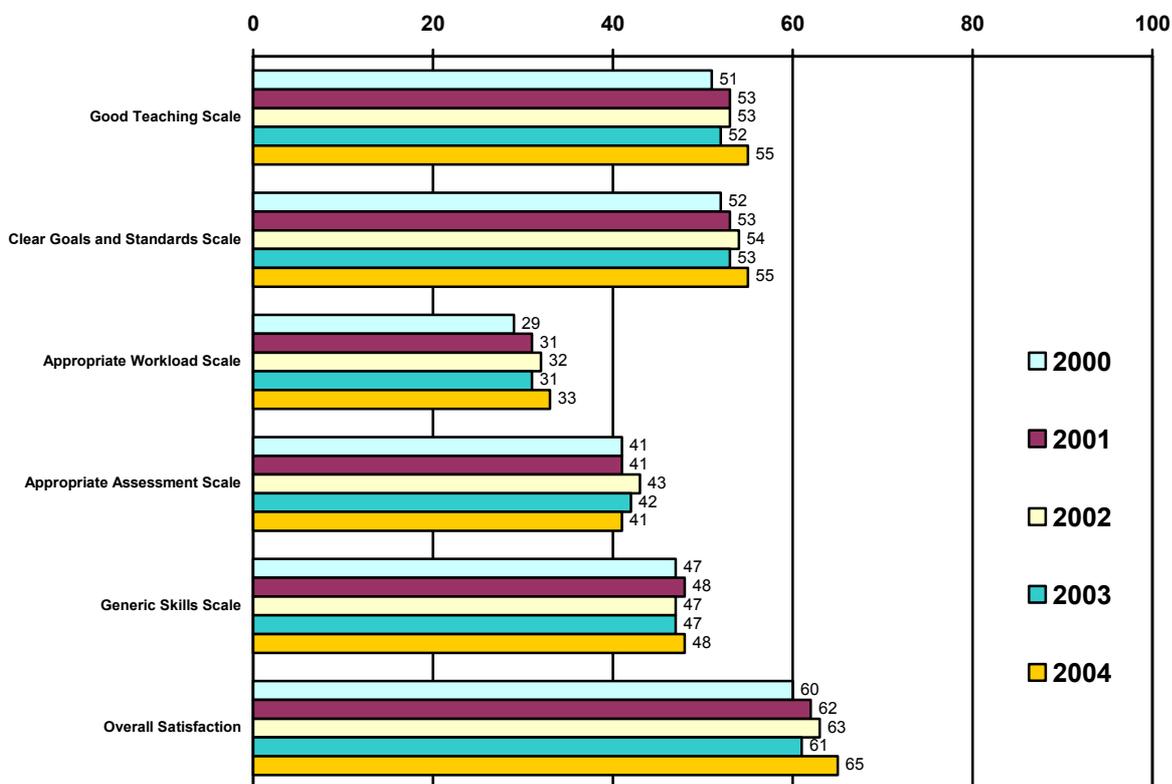


Figure 1: Longitudinal results from the Unit Experience Questionnaire Scales/Items

Table 1 and Figure 1 display business students' level of agreement (as a percentage) with the various aspects that impact on their learning. The data is presented by years from 2000-2004. The five point Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree with 'neither disagree nor agree' as the mid point. There were 34,900 individual student UEQ responses across the five years. Students were studying a range of undergraduate units from the fields of Accounting, Business Law, Economics and Finance, Information Systems, Management and Marketing. The student groups included Australian locals and international students. There were considerably more males than female students (20,528 to 12,456 respectively – specified on responses). The qualitative data from the open-ended questions were extensive and will be explored in a subsequent paper.

On average, over the five years 53% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the teaching was good. Similarly, approximately 53% of students agreed or strongly agreed with the items related to their unit being structured with 'clear goals and standards'. Just under half of the students (47%) agreed that their units had developed certain generic skills such as problem solving, analytical thinking, communication skills, time management and others (refer to scale items above). Examining the data across the years there appears to be a trend of gradual improvement; however, this is marginal and considering the mediocre levels of the students' ratings of agreement probably not as pronounced as would be desired. The two

aspects that presented challenges for this division were student workload (31% agreement that the workload was appropriate) and assessment at only 41% agreement. This indicated that students perceived assessments as pitched to too low a cognitive level, relying on memorisation rather than deeper understanding of the unit content to be successful in the unit. Surprisingly, students indicated that they were generally satisfied with the quality of the units with 62% agreeing with this item. Obviously, this item is not as statistically strong as the other scales with multiple items. Additionally, the variation in response to this item tends to endorse Ramsden's (2003) position that 'student satisfaction' is a contentious and potentially confusing indicator. This is because the criteria used to judge 'satisfaction' are frequently not readily identifiable and conclusions drawn from the data can be flawed or indeed incorrect. Many individual academics have engaged with this process and have implemented numerous curriculum design and teaching changes over the past five years that this program has been running. Recently the Business School has initiated a whole of Division (encompassing all seven schools) review of the major bachelor degree program with a view to ensuring a more coordinated and significant impact.

It is heartening to observe a positive trend across the five years of increased numbers of students agreeing with the items related to their learning experiences. It is interesting to note that the year 2003 data displayed a reduced level of student agreement. This downturn possibly reflected the uncertainty, distress and disruption to teaching and learning that occurred as a result of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in the Asian region. Even though there was no outbreak in Australia and this data was obtained from students studying at the Australian campus, approximately 46% of the sample was comprised of international students. It appears highly likely that these students were experiencing worry about their family members in their home country. Additionally, many lecturers who were restricted from travelling to their offshore classes were extremely concerned about their offshore students' progress, well-being, and how the disruptions to normal instructional delivery modes were likely to affect their studies. This context of uncertainty and worry did spill over into the Australian campus and it is possible that this may have factored into students' feedback.

Responses to the student feedback

Anecdotal reports indicated that many academics initially viewed the process of collecting students' feedback with considerable suspicion, with some interpreting it as an organisational drive to harness their compliance and increase accountability. Frequently, these academics did not understand or value reflection based upon sound evidence as a worthwhile or constructive process whereby they could productively and specifically target problem aspects in their units or regular practice. Each year, more academics have made use of the educational support available and have begun to use their own data as performance indicators in the promotion process. Even though there has been some engagement by lecturers with this reflective cycle, it appears, based upon the number of staff seeking assistance with their units, that this has been patchy across the six schools with many staff ignoring the process and/or not having time to engage with their feedback to make desired changes.

In the past, attempts by the Business Division to implement a process of reflective discussion regarding the quality of teaching and learning has been rather erratic. Those staff who have engaged, and modified teaching and assessment practices have frequently forgotten to inform their students of the action taken as a result of the students' feedback. Although the academics would be identifying the changes made as a result of a previous cohorts' feedback, if this information is consistently provided students will gain confidence

that action is being taken. If not, this has the potential to reduce student trust that their feedback is valued and does result in action. Another potentially confounding factor is that many staff have indicated that students are not a valid source of information about the quality of a unit or the teaching, and others perceive students as continually dissatisfied and/or vengeful who will only rate a lecturer positively if they make the unit and assessment tasks easy. Longitudinal data does not validate these inferences about students' perceptions, ratings and feedback, as student frequently provide very positive feedback and constructive suggestions on how to make units more effective; however, all these issues have been further explored in subsequent research using the open-ended data from the questionnaire and interviews with academics. Although there has been a positive trend in the data, the results of the feedback indicated that the leaders and lecturing staff in the Business School need to prioritise their focus of addressing problems in their learning, teaching and assessment practices. Another aspect which requires further exploration is to gauge what students perceive workload issues to be. In response to the systematic collection of student feedback the department of Academic Development in the Business School has implemented a number of initiatives as part of an overall model aimed at increasing the quality of students' learning. One component of the model was the establishment of systematic academic professional development opportunities such as workshops and individual, team and whole school support. In-context educational support of academics was designed to facilitate lecturer engagement in collegial team discussions focused on teaching and learning matters. The aim of this support was to increase lecturers' understandings of sound educational practices by exposing them to alternative teaching methods; increase their access to valuable teaching resources; and to create useful collegial networks thereby promoting positive school cultures. A second component was to establish a workshop series which was mapped to an introductory unit in a formal teaching certificate. This meant that staff who participated in all the workshops and successfully completed a small action research project, where they implemented an aspect of their learning, were able to obtain advanced standing for the introductory unit in a tertiary teaching qualification; the final component was to support a comprehensive review of their major programs, in terms of content, delivery and integration and assessment of professional skill development.

Conclusion

The impact of this research is that it has provided information on how international and local Australian students perceive their learning experiences. It has also enabled forward planning and the targeting of specific aspects for development with the view to increasing the quality of learning outcomes for students. It has provided clear strategic direction for the "partners in learning" – the organisations, the academics and the students. A student-focused model has been proposed to speed-up the positive developments that have been demonstrated over the past five years. The model has 'increasing student learning' as the central focus with the long term aim to increase the quality of programs and further increase the reputation of the institution.

This university, similar to many others across Australia, has increasing numbers of full-fee paying students. This may contribute to students being more discerning and demanding which may lead to harsher UEQ responses. This has been done for a range of reasons but included in the various rationales was the need to attract external funding in order to support the university's operations. A shift in perception has resulted which is related to the student-lecturer and student-university relationships. Universities are increasingly considering students as 'clients' or 'consumers' of an educational product, but naturally with this shift comes dilemmas related to the educational component in this new relationship. Academics are still struggling to conceptualise and make sense of the implications of this change in the

student-staff relationship to becoming 'partners in learning' and they frequently resent the changes to their working lives, priorities of teaching and research, teaching practices and foci to which they have had to become adjusted. Many resent the calls to increase quality teaching/learning as a means to ensure the institution's reputation and resultant market share of students.

Therefore, when considering the results of the Unit Effectiveness Program in this study it has become evident that the organisation, academics and the students must engage more effectively as 'partners in learning'. Increased engagement would ensure satisfactory outcomes for all parties within the politicised context of Australian universities. As Ramsden (2003) discussed leadership is "an important part of the context of teaching". Ramsden identified that "a focus on collaborative supportive and purposeful leadership for teaching is associated with a culture of strong teamwork and student-focused approaches". When the context is not established in this manner, mere teacher-focussed transmission of information becomes the norm. Therefore academics and their leaders within the Business School must prioritise the reflective cycle. Leaders must provide time within workload models for staff to learn from students' perspectives as key data sources and to utilise the range of educational support available. Clear vision, assertive leadership, time allowance in pressured academic workloads, and follow through action are required in order to continue, enhance, the positive trends demonstrated in the data. With many Australian universities facing similar dilemmas of increasing staff workloads, calls for quality and accountability, and more demanding "client focused" students, the research being undertaken on developing a sustainable model of faculty development and curriculum review will inform the wider academic community who are facing similar challenges. A more systematic mechanism for informing students of the results and action taken from their feedback also needs to be explored to ensure that students are *overtly* included in the 'learning partnership'. The organisation must prioritise and value academics' studies for teaching qualifications as one of the keys to informed practice. School leaders and their Learning and Teaching Committees must be more systematic about following up on action staff have taken as a result of feedback and communicating to students about the appropriate responses made. Schools need to engage in regular review processes focusing on increasing and maintaining high quality relevant content and assessments, and exemplary instructional delivery. These various proposals are critical if the reputation of the institution and attractiveness of its programs to Australian and fee paying international students are to be increased.

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