

THE ROLE OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE QUESTIONNAIRES AS A MEASURE OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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*Working Paper 33/05
May 2005*

**DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT
WORKING PAPER SERIES
ISSN 1327-5216**



Abstract

While quality was once perceived to be purely the domain of engineering, manufacturing and production engineering disciplines, quality processes have now expanded to include both the service and public sectors of the economy. As a consequence, the need to identify the stakeholders, within an institution of higher education becomes paramount as each set of stakeholders- academics, students, parents, future employers, the government and funding bodies- bring with them a different set of values. The aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of quality and the role of student experience questionnaires in the effective monitoring of quality in universities.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will provide a conceptual framework from the literature on the role of quality within institutions of higher education. The paper then provides an introduction to an aspect of a quality process within an Australian university. The quality concept is focused upon the perceptions of the student stakeholder group concerning their student experience. The survey identified four main areas, namely: teaching and learning, administration, resources, and their overall study experience.

The paper begins with a background discussion on quality within education. The purpose of the background is to define the concept of quality within higher education which will provide the basis for the discussion of the role of students' experience questionnaires in the effective monitoring of quality in universities. The paper will conclude with identification of key areas for future research.

THE QUALITY CONCEPT

Institutions of higher education now operate in a global environment and, as a result, compete for both students and research funds within an international market that is fast reaching maturity. As a result, there has emerged a significant change in education at both the international and national levels. For example, in Australia, encouragement of universities to seek commercial opportunities and align themselves more closely with industry needs is paramount to their survival. Alongside of this saturated market is the increasing emphasis placed on the concept of quality and its impact on the providers of educational programs.

While quality was once perceived to be purely the domain of engineering, manufacturing and production engineering disciplines, quality processes have now expanded to include both the service and public sectors of the economy. Feigenbaum (1994:84) believes that "quality of education" is the key factor in "invisible" competition between countries since the quality of products and services is determined by the way that "managers, teachers, workers, engineers and economists think, act and make decisions about quality."

Craft (1994:viii) identifies the need for "...credible academic and professional awards" ...which has led "...national governments and tertiary institutions themselves to establish sophisticated mechanisms toimprove the quality of the education offered and the awards granted."

The phrase "quality of education" is a difficult one to discuss in a concrete way, since it is almost always related to some specific goals (and can involve a related argument about whether such goals are legitimate or not). Quality is also a difficult word because it evokes a wide range of attributes, and the usual way of acknowledging the existence of quality is to appeal to observation and experience of a range of possibilities.

During the 1990s, quality in higher education moved to being the foremost concern in higher education alongside funding issues. Harvey (1999:2) explains that national governments expect higher education to: "...be more relevant to social and economic needs; widen access; be more cost effective; ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons; and, be responsive to a range of stakeholders."

Dawson and Palmer (1995) argue that there is some disagreement as to what constitutes quality and how best it can be achieved. For example, Garvin (1988) identifies five approaches to defining quality: transcendent (innate excellence); product-based (some attribute); user-based (needs); manufacturing-based (conformance to requirements); and, value-based (cost and prices).

Garvin's (1988) classification mainly applied to industry, and appears to have little relevance to tertiary education; however, it has been widely applied in this sector in the absence of a more suitable approach. Harvey & Green (1993) discuss the nature of quality in the context of a university and identify five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality in higher education: exceptional (quality as something special); perfection or consistency (processing and setting specifications); fitness for purpose (relates quality to the purpose of product or service and its relationship to that purpose); value for money (you get what you pay for); and, transformation (issues of added value and empowering the participants). These approaches are more applicable for higher education having been designed specifically with this sector in mind.

Barrett (1996) raises a number of issues and arguments against the push for quality mainly on the grounds that students should not be considered as customers, since they are unlikely to be sensible judges of what they need in terms of education in order to be satisfied. Furthermore, certain intrinsic principles and standards which are entrenched in academic life, particularly invention and creativity, as well as internally-derived standards and the motivation of academics, are unlikely to survive attempts to introduce changes such as quality, corporatism and market-based solutions (Barrett, 1996).

As has been shown, defining what is meant by quality in higher education is somewhat different to that in industry and service production where the perception of quality is more homogenous. Since institutions of higher education have not previously seen the need to define quality, there is no specific definition that encompasses objectives within these institutions (Giertz, 2000). It is argued that there exist different perceptions on what defines quality in higher education. Firstly, quality has many aspects and is often based on values. Those values are shared by a group of stakeholders - academics, students, parents, future employers, the government, and funding bodies. Secondly, higher education in general has undergone significant change and there exists many different forms and as a result if quality is seen as "fitness for purpose" then what counts for quality will be different (Giertz, 2000).

Despite there not being a need in the past to clearly define the concept of quality, it is still true to say that Australian higher education institutions have always striven for this undefined measure. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any education institution, or any organisation, which deals with people, not embodying at least some recognition that quality is an important measure.

The establishment of the Australian Universities Quality Agency was endorsed in March 2000 as an independent national agency to monitor, audit and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education. The agency is responsible for conducting quality audits of self-accrediting institutions; providing public reports on the outcomes of these audits; and, reporting on the relative standards and international standing of the Australian higher education system and its quality assurance processes (DEST, 2001).

From the above discussion it is evident that the Commonwealth Government has recognized the increasingly important role of institutions of higher education to the future of the nation. The need to provide a transparent quality process attesting the quality and reputation of Australian universities is paramount to our continued success in a highly competitive market. As a result, the need to identify and recognize the claims of the stakeholders has become an integral part of the management process in institutions of higher education (McFarlane & Lomas, 1999). Without a clear indication of who are the players, the question of quality and its meaning becomes purely a reaction to the external government guidelines imposed on the institution.

The four key stakeholders within the sector each have their own perception of quality and their own objectives and expectations. Employers look for graduates with specific competencies. The institution's administration has the primary responsibility for the most effective use of resources. The faculty has the objective is to instil an appropriate level of intellectual development. Finally, the student body is concerned with getting the best job that they can on the completion of their studies. Hence, it is counterproductive to group all four stakeholders together. Given the importance of

clearly articulating the different values that each group possess, for the purposes of this paper, the discussion will concentrate on what has been often identified as the key stakeholder group, the students.

DISCUSSION

Monash University is Australia's most internationalised university with more than 49,500 students from over 100 countries, with eight campuses - six in Australia, one in Malaysia and one in South Africa and two centres – one in London, UK and one in Prato, Italy. Monash is recognised for excellence in teaching, learning, research and graduate outcomes.

With the introduction of newly-established Australian Universities Quality Agency (AQUA), Monash University identified several key areas that would be required as part of its quality assessment portfolio. These areas – leadership and management; staffing; teaching, learning and assessment; research and research training; and support services and resources – have all been coupled with an underlying foundation of quality values, principles, systems and evidence. (*Monash University-Still Learning: The Report of our Self-Review May 2002*)

Monash's approach to quality is reflected in its identification of seven core values and principles – creating the agenda (fitness for purpose); quality as a professional responsibility; encouraging the development of a learning organisation; valuing diversity, devolution and comparable treatment; an open and informed approach to quality; a planned and systematic approach to quality; and, valuing self-reflection and external reference (*Quality at Monash: Values and Principles, 2004*). It is within this context that our discussion will take place. The identification of the provider - with clearly identified values and principles - and the stakeholder group - the students - whose perceptions of quality, amongst other things, are now considered to be a significant determinant to student retention (Astin, 1993).

The Monash Experience Questionnaire (MEQ) was developed in response to a recommendation of '*Still Learning: The Report of our Self Review, May 2002*. The recommendation from that report articulated the need for "...an ongoing Monash Student Experience Questionnaire as a means for determining, monitoring, benchmarking and improving the student experience." (p17). The MEQ was developed to measure the experience of current undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students at all campuses and comprised of four parts. The first part measured students' perceptions of their overall study experience (for example, good teaching, learning community and student support/resources). The second part sought the students' views of their experience with administration and support services (for example, reliability, assurance, empathy and responsiveness). Part three of the survey concerned the general university experience (for example, general university experience from the perspective of social interaction). The final part of the survey consisted of biographical information providing information about the response patterns of students. All parts provided an open-ended comment concerning the best aspect of the study experience and aspects that could be improved upon.

Of the 43,149 students qualified to participate in the survey, there were 17,260 returns, resulting in an overall response rate of 40.0%. The summary data showed that between 80 -90% of students were "broadly satisfied" over the four identified areas of experience at Monash.

The approach of using questionnaires for a large student body about their experiences is well documented (Eley, 2001; Ouimet, Bunnage, Carini, Kuh & Kennedy, 2004; Ellett, Loup, Culross, McMullen & Rugutt, 1997; Wright & O'Neill, 2002). However, there is much debate about the use of students' experiences and/or perceptions of quality given the argument that students should not be considered as customers, since they are unlikely to be sensible judges of what they need in terms of education in order to be satisfied (Barrett, 1996).

Deming (1993) suggested that the student could not be considered as the sole customer of course content as any knowledge or skills gained had a value-added effect some time later in life. It has also been argued that, given the increase in student numbers, a wider cross section of the population brings with them different expectations and attitudes who approach their studies 'strategically' (Maunder & Harrop, 2003).

While students are recognized as a central focus in assessments of educational quality, they also are a major stakeholder group (Donald & Denison, 2001). The importance of canvassing students' experiences in all areas of university life, therefore, has a dual role. The first is when the student, in the role of external stakeholder, makes the initial choice of an academic institution. As Schmidt (2002:37) identified, "selecting a college is the first step the student undertakes in the education process of a higher education. The educational value perception to be earned has an important impact on the student's choice of a particular college." Second is their role as the 'customer' in the effective monitoring of quality within the institution (Hill, Lomas & MacGregor, 2003).

Slade, Harker and Harker (2000:1197) suggest that as institutions of higher education now play a major role in the services sector of most economies, then strategies to "enhance their images....by consistently meeting or exceeding customers' service expectations" is needed for service differentiation. This is supported by Ham and Hayduk (2003) who suggest that the use of some form of service quality assessment is essential in order to maintain a level of competitive advantage.

Wright and O'Neill (2002) point to the need for an appropriate measure of actual service performance. To this end, the identification of a 'gap' between expectations and actual service provided has been a significant part of research into the level of service quality within institutions of higher education. Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) claimed that service quality is measurable, but only in the eyes of the consumer and that customers' expectations are confirmed by subsequent service delivery. For example, Parasuraman, et al. (1985) developed an instrument, SERVQUAL, which identified customers' expectations of service and their perceptions of the service received. As a result of this analysis, the researchers conceptualized service quality to be a five dimensional construct – tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy – on which customers evaluate service quality.

Ham and Hayduk's (2003: 238) study tested the proposed linkage between service quality, customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions in two American institutions of higher education. The results confirmed the appropriateness of the SERVQUAL instrument in studying the identified characteristics within a higher educational setting. However, a study conducted by LeBlanc and Nguyen (1997) found that it was important to ensure that dependable measures of service quality were identified as these were different across specific service industries.

From the above discussion, it has been identified that relying solely on an experience questionnaire in order to determine a level of service quality appears to mean different things to different stakeholders. The question we are left with is whether or not experience questionnaires, such as the MEQ discussed above, meets the external auditing requirements and internal benchmarking process within the university.

FUTURE RESEARCH

From the above discussion there appears to be several areas for future research. As a follow on from the application of the Monash Experience Survey, further research will be conducted with the postgraduate business students. This will involve a survey which looks at their expectations on point of enrolment. There will be a second survey during Week 10 of the first semester of their studies. This second survey will evaluate experience of their studies to ascertain if there is a gap in the quality of delivery of their program. This accords with the recommendations of Ham and Hayduk (2003 citing Kerlin, 2000) that institutions in order to be accountable for the effectiveness

of their services, should include appropriate service quality assessment. In addition, dependable quality measures of service delivery need to be designed specifically for institutions of higher education as recommended by LeBlanc and Nguyen (1997).

CONCLUSION

With the recognition of institutions of higher education as a major player within the services sector of the economy, the need to identify the stakeholders becomes paramount as each set of stakeholders bring with them different sets of values and objectives. Along with this is the need for the institution to identify strategies that will meet or exceed customers' expectations and give them, the institution, a competitive advantage in what has become a saturated marketplace.

To this end, the need to implement appropriate evaluation processes of the level of service quality delivered has now become a key issue. The need to design questionnaires that are 'fit for purpose' and approaches that optimise response rates are seen to be significant factors relating to the relentless pursuit of excellence.

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