

Evaluating the Student Experience: Reflecting on the value to the University

Introduction

This paper reflects on a study completed 10 years ago in light of what was found then and what has changed. It presents a summary of some of the findings from a longitudinal study of a cohort of students who enrolled for first year university study, with a full time work load at Victoria University of Wellington in 1996. Surveys were conducted in April 1996, September 1996, 1997 and 1998. Telephone interviews were conducted mid-year 1997 with students who had taken part in the first stage of the research but subsequently withdrawn from study.

Study objectives

The objectives of the three year study were to evaluate factors affecting student retention and attrition, including the critical transition period, and students' perception of the quality of their university experience. As such it provided students with a constructive opportunity for reflection. The resulting analysis was intended to enable the university to plan how to better facilitate students' transition, development and performance.

Why evaluate the student experience

Internationally, research on the student experience of tertiary education arose because of concern about retention rates. For example, Tinto (1995) indicated that in the USA over a quarter of students do not enrol for their second year of study at the same institution. Further more, around a half do not complete a qualification within five to six years at the institution where they first enrolled. There is a particular emphasis on the first year experience as research (e.g. Tinto 1975, Astin 1993, Yorke et al 1997) indicates that besides those who leave at the end of their first year there are others whose leaving in the second and sometimes third year has its roots in the first year experience (Tinto 1995).

There is increased competition for students among New Zealand tertiary institutions at a time of reduced government funding and the introduction of degree programmes by polytechnics. Students may select institutions on the basis of successful marketing strategies, cost factors, or employment trends that may be short-lived, rather than through informed choice based on genuine interest and motivation. This, combined with the "massification" of tertiary education which involves more first generation students from diverse backgrounds, and mounting student debt through the Student Loan Scheme, is likely to increase the number of students who are at risk of withdrawing. It is also likely to result in a greater number of students requiring specific support, and more students revising their original choice of institution and transferring to another. The cost of withdrawal is considerable for the institution concerned, for the tax-payer, and even more so for the student in terms of personal aspirations and self-esteem, quite apart from financial costs and resultant debt. Ensuring that students have a 'good' university experience becomes a crucial issue for the senior administration in particular. Thus evaluating what is happening becomes an imperative.

Evaluation has become one of the keys tools used at all stages of programme provision; planning, implementation, measuring outputs and outcomes. As Owen (1999) points out

...evaluation is complementary to, and supportive of, the development and provision of effective and responsive social, educational and other like interventions. (p22)

According to Michael Scriven (1996), evaluations are the outcome of the process of determining the worth, merit, or significance of programmes or policies. Institutions, such as universities need evaluation data to demonstrate their effectiveness to government, other funders and other stakeholders such as students and their families, as well as providing some measure of effectiveness for marketing purposes.

Most often an objectives approach is taken to evaluate to what extent policy and programme objectives have been met. The inherent strength of this approach is its emphasis on outcomes and the subsequent information provided for programme and policy staff to assist with future planning and delivery. However, Caulley (1996) cautions that the more general an objective the less likely it is to provide a guide to action which makes carrying out the evaluation more difficult. On the other hand, the more specific objectives are the less possibility there is for misunderstandings and misdirection but a high level of specificity generates its own problems. In terms of evaluating the university experience these cautions are relevant, particularly given that some key factors are outside of the university's control.

Method

All students who were enrolled for their first year of full time study were posted a survey form to complete and return in the reply paid envelope, either through the post or the university's internal mail system. Given the original post out of nearly 2000 anonymous questionnaires it was decided that reminders were not a feasible option. Therefore, a university pen was included with each questionnaire pack with the invitation to use it to fill out the survey form. As an incentive this did catch the imagination of the students and comments were made about the inclusion, or not, of this pen and whether it wrote. The manual task of assembling the packs for each iteration (pens were only included in the 1st survey) was carried out by postgraduate students. There were 972 (54%) students who responded to the first questionnaire administered in April 1996; 777 responded to the second questionnaire in September 1996; 726 (52%) completed survey forms were received in September 1997, and 507 (48%) in the final round in September 1998. Telephone interviews were conducted mid-year 1997 with students who had withdrawn from study find out their reasons for withdrawal. One hundred and thirty students who had completed a questionnaire in 1996 and were not enrolled in June 1997 were followed up and 80 phone interviews were completed with these students. This survey utilised the same questions as one carried out by Dr Jim Elliott from Curtin University (Elliott 1996),

Survey items were selected for the first questionnaire based on an extensive literature review and some of the specific research into the first year experience carried out by Tinto (1987, 1995), Astin (1993), McInnis and others, including the widely used Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire. Issues identified included the effect of clear career goals on student academic performance and persistence, financial difficulties (Astin 1975, 1977, 1993), socio-economic background and ethnicity, family experience of university, disparity between expectation and reality.

Students were asked to answer Yes / No / Maybe for a range of these identified concern categories, including finance, subject knowledge, study skills, writing and speaking skills and what they anticipated for the year ahead. In subsequent surveys students were asked to indicate whether these areas had in fact caused major difficulties in the past year. It has been an area of increasing concern for universities throughout NZ that the rising cost of university study has forced students' greater participation in the paid workforce giving less time for study and related activities. Students were asked to estimate the number of hours spent in paid employment per week during the academic year. The second and subsequent questionnaires, building on information obtained from the first, also invited students to complete a statement beginning, 'My greatest difficulty during the year was ...'

Reflecting on the method

Self complete questionnaires were chosen for this research because of coverage issues as well as financial constraints. The evaluation of the student experience also met the criteria for the use of surveys as the phenomena was known to exist and the question to be answered was how much/many students were affected and in what ways. Given the known lower response rate for this method, a census rather than a sample survey was used. September was chosen as a suitable survey month for the follow-up surveys as it was near enough to the end of year for students to have an opinion on how the year had gone but it was also before the end of the trimester and examination and other pressures really took hold.

Using a survey was the best method to use. Ten years ago a paper based approach was the only feasible alternative whereas now delivering the surveys electronically, the approach used by the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), is clearly the preferred option.

There are difficulties with a longitudinal study like the one carried out at VUW. The university allows staff access to student information for such research purposes subject to ethics approval. Although questionnaires were sent to named individuals, no identifiers were attached and returned questionnaires were completely anonymous. For each iteration of the survey, the original sample was run against currently enrolled students and those that did not match were excluded. Therefore, over the three year period, while the same cohort was being surveyed each time, the same people did not necessarily answer all four questionnaires. However, choosing this approach was administratively simple, was cost effective and achieved the objective of evaluating the university experience for the cohort. While longitudinal studies are often seen to be expensive, in this case where there was a 'captive' cohort, this was not the case. It also had the advantage of continuity where processes and progress were able to be tracked. Intentions could be matched to actions and perceived barriers related to actual experience.

What did the students say

Tables 1 and 2 indicate the areas that students anticipated would be problematic and how these were realised over the period of their study. As can be seen finance became a bigger problem as time went on as did the balancing act required to fit in study, family life and paid employment. However, a number of

these areas were not ones where the university was able to have a direct influence. At the end of each year students were invited to complete a statement beginning, 'My greatest difficulty during the year was

and when looking at the results presented in Table 3 this aspect is evident. The use of associated student services went up over the period suggesting that students were seeking help with some of the issues they identified.

Students at VUW were asked to assess how their skills had developed over the course of their study. They considered that they had improved in all areas over the first two years, particularly in terms of verbal presentation skills and computing skills. There was further improvement in verbal presentation skills in the third year as well as in communication and research skills (Table 4). These areas are not necessarily dealt with at secondary school hence the possibility for greater improvement.

While half agreed that they had been keeping up with their work at the end of 1996, this had dropped to 44% at the end of 1997 - possibly reflecting the greater pressures at this stage. By the end of their third year over half (53.7%) were agreeing with the statement but a quarter of the male students were still having problems. On the other hand, 59.8% of students felt confident about taking part in tutorials at the end of 1996 and this rose to 65.1% by the end of 1997 and 67.8% at the end of 1998. However, a gender difference remained with 75% of the male students feeling confident compared to under two thirds (64%) of the female students.

The intellectual aspects of the university experience were viewed more positively as the students progressed. Compared with their first year, 87.1% found the lectures more intellectually stimulating sometimes or often in their second year and 90.5% considered this was the case when comparing their third year with the second. The course material was more challenging for 93.3% at the end of the second year and for 93.9% at the end of the third year..

In comparison with their first year, 68.5% of the students indicated that they had more interaction with their tutors and lecturers and by the end of their third year this has risen significantly to 81.8% probably reflecting the generally smaller class sizes in the third year and the more intensive nature of the work. While the proportion of those who had informal personal contact with their lecturers or tutors remained about the same in the first two years (30.4% 1996, 29.4% 1997), it rose to 37.2% in the third year.

At the end of 1996 under half the students (45%) were satisfied with the overall quality of teaching in their courses and while this rose to 54% at the end of 1997 and 57.3% at the end of the third year, it still left a sizeable proportion of students who were either neutral about or dissatisfied with the overall quality, clearly an area that the University needed to consider very carefully.

While there was some evaluation of the academic and related experiences there could have been more especially in the subsequent years of the study. These aspects have been addressed by the AUSSE which uses six parameters to measure what is happening to students in a learning environment.

Scale Description

Academic Challenge: Extent to which expectations and assessments challenge students to learn

Active Learning: Students' efforts to actively construct their knowledge

Student and Staff Interactions: Level and nature of students' contact with teaching staff

Enriching Educational Experiences: Participation in broadening educational activities

Supportive Learning Environment: Feelings of legitimation within the university community

Work Integrated Learning: Integration of employment-focused work experiences into study

(ACER 2008)

Motivation

Asked at the beginning of their first year what they considered would be the major factors affecting their success on a scale of 1 (not important) - 5 (very important) 78.6%, indicated their 'own level of motivation' would be very important. At the end of each year levels of motivation were low with nearly half (49.7%, 1996, 48.6%, 1997 and 47.8%, 1998) of the students agreeing that they had not felt motivated to study lately. This is probably a reflection of the pressure resulting from the end of year build up to final assessment

Withdrawals

At the end of the third year a third of the students indicated that they had seriously considered withdrawing at some stage over the three years. For these students the areas of difficulty had reached a stage where the negative aspects of the university experience looked as if they were going to out weigh any benefits (Table 5). Comments made included:

Doubt as to whether time stress cost was going to pay off

Became disheartened as I came straight from school and felt I needed a break.

Never felt really comfortable with Vic

However, these were the students who stayed on so they did manage to find a way of continuing. The sorts of comments they made included:

By ignoring student loan statements! Dealing with studying now and paying back student loans later.

Found motivation after getting a very good mark for my course

Realised in the long run I'd be better off with a degree

Have to finish what you start and still interested in the area.

Of Value to Whom?

The person who initiated the original research was at that stage the AVC Research, was a member of the senior management team and had the director of student services reporting directly to them. They considered that the results of this research would have a direct input into future planning and an impact on the delivery of student services and the general student focus. As Patton (1986) states, an evaluation

should be useful and able to be utilised rather than be just an exercise. Further more who carries out an evaluation has a considerable influence on how the results are used, and how they are viewed. The value-laden nature of evaluation is neatly summed up by Markiewicz (2006 p2) when she asks "Is evaluation really an independent and objective process or can it be bought for a price?" Evaluation is a highly political activity and control of the information that has a direct bearing on people's lives creates issues for those involved (McTaggart 1990. Patton 1997). The evaluation of the student experience was no exception. While the credentials of the sponsor were impeccable other agendas were clearly operating.

On the positive side, there were some immediate changes in student services and now there is a tertiary teaching qualification offered to university as well as a number of courses to enhance various aspects. External political pressure resulted in some changes in the student loan which has had an effect on the financial pressures faced by students. Some faculties ensured that information overload was managed more successfully for first year students. On the negative side, a year after SMT received the final report of the research, they commissioned a commercial firm to do a very similar study. While marketing briefly employed an analyst to look at the statistics already collected by the university this was only a short term initiative because of the then 'siloeing' of central service units. This is a common situation that arises where new information is sought before existing information is utilised.

The departure of the AVC and the changes in SMT definitely contributed to the minimal action on the recommendations made in annual updates. There was lack of clarity around who should be doing what, and whose responsibility it was.

Ten years on a lot of areas for attention that were identified have been addressed but not because of the evaluation. Rather it is because a series of events in the wider tertiary context have "upped the anti". VUW is now part of the AUSSE study which collects information from both staff and students so there will be ongoing evaluation information to work with. It does seem that some aspects around the use of research and marketing information and evaluations need to be revisited and empirical evidence collected cyclically to cater for changes in the institution. The political nature of evaluations and their timeliness remains an issue that has a fundamental impact on the value and for whom. Absolute buy-in by those in a position to implement recommendations is an imperative and possibly a large funding commitment along with the setting of performance goals that cannot be met without acting on information produced by the evaluation may be one way to go. Plus a philosophical attitude on the part of insider evaluators who recognise that there is rarely a direct link between evaluation findings and change but rather evaluations form part of the background within which decisions are subsequently made, can lead to a pragmatic and more positive view of the value of evaluations in a wider context. This makes it possible to continue doing our best to ensure that evaluations are worthwhile.

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Appendix 1

Table 1 Expected and Actual Areas of Difficulty

Area of Difficulty	Expectation April 1996	Experience Sept 1996	Experience Sept 1997	Experience Sept 1998
	%	%	%	%
Financial	46.8	46.2	56.2	57.4
Study skills	28.2	30.5	23.8	18.8
Knowledge of subject areas	28.0	22.5	18.7	13.5
Daily living (eg Transportation ...)	18.9	21.0	18.4	12.5
Social	11.0	19.3	15.3	11.5
Written/spoken communication skills	16.3	11.8	8.7	9.7

Percentages given are the percentage of students who completed the questionnaire, 972 in April 1996, 777 in September 1996, 726 in September 1997, 507 in September 1998.

Table 2 Other Areas Identified

	1996	1997	1998
Balancing study/work/family commitments	41.2%	60.7	59.4
Time Management	40.9%	50.3	44.8
Health	26.3%	33.2	36.6

Table 3 Greatest Area of Difficulty During the Year

Area of Difficulty	1996		1997		1998	
	No	%	No	%	No	%
Time Management	199	27.8	120	18.5	95	21.3
Financial	99	13.8	107	16.5	100	22.4
Social	77	10.8	15	2.3	21	4.5
Study skills & course related	73	10.2	88	13.5	71	15.9
Daily living (eg Transportation)	73	10.2	43	6.6	12	2.7
Balancing study/work/family commitments	52	7.3	111	17.1	62	13.9
Health	41	5.7	54	8.3	61	13.6
Knowledge of subject areas	25	3.5	16	2.5	6	1.3
Written/spoken communication skills	15	2.1	8	1.2	2	.5
Motivation	50	7.0	51	7.8	48	10.7
Other	33	4.6	36	5.5	3	.7

Table 4 Skills Improvement

Skill Area	% 1996	% 1997	% 1998
Communication	42.2	50.1	63.5
Numerical	20.9	21.7	18.9
Verbal (oral) presentation	26.6	43.3	51.1
Research	52.0	60.7	67.6
Computer	37.7	52.6	47.9
Negotiation	23.4	30.5	28.4

Table 5 Reasons for considering withdrawal

	No*	%
financial	48	28.9
personal/health problems	39	23.5
work load	27	16.3
motivation	24	14.5
perceived value of the degree	23	13.9
academic support lacking	10	6.0

