



How to increase student's satisfaction at higher education institutes (HEIs) today?

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Abstract

The paper examines key factors that affect student's satisfaction at higher education institutes. Possible strategies and solutions to satisfy and enhance student's satisfaction are indicated and discussed. In this paper, no particular context is specified, instead, it collects discussions, overviews and perceptions of scholars over the word. In a broader expectation, the outcome of this paper would be applicable to universities in the world in terms of increasing student's satisfaction. In another perspective, it also can be used as literature review for further studies that intend to investigate on student satisfaction in a specific context.

Keywords: higher education; student satisfaction; strategy

Introduction

The connection between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and students is moving from the traditional relationship towards a nature that bases on consumers' needs (Jones, 2006). In this business model of tertiary education, HEIs need to pay attention on how they respond to student feedback and especially to satisfy students' needs (Jones, 2010) and contribute to an ever increasing demand of student satisfaction. Demands of students towards HEIs have dramatically increased as they are more aware of the high tuition fees that they have to pay during their courses (Jones, 2006). The massification of higher education with a greater range and variety of students has also contributed to complex levels of student expectations (Ramsden, 2013) and explanatory variables that influence and increase student satisfaction levels at universities. These variables are many and varied. This article will examine different points of view regarding student's satisfaction at universities and importantly pinpoint strategies to satisfy student's expectations.

In a minor scope this paper does not aim to cover all aspects regarding student' concerns at universities, and it will cover some key strategies and elements that more likely to significantly affect student's satisfaction.

Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Work integrated learning is a curriculum strategy utilising real-world experiences. It is used to create or utilise authentic environments for students to experience and apply their skills and knowledge in real workplaces. According to Smith & Worsfold (2014) WIL incorporates student probation at real workplaces, "authentic simulated environments (mock moot courts; airline simulations; simulated patients in doctor-patient interaction training" and training workplaces on campus under supervision and guidance of university teaching staff.

Research conducted by Smith and Worsfold (2014) found induction and preparation as key predictors of university-focused satisfaction. Factors impact students' satisfaction at HEIs include:

supportive and 'non-pedagogical' or more administrative WIL elements (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2010; Keogh, Sterling & Venables, 2007; Smith & Worsfold, 2014). WIL programs also positively impact on students' capacity and the development of generic skills (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2010).

WIL placements are more likely to be obstacles for students and perceptions of lack of institutional support impact negatively on satisfaction of the WIL experience and the university (Freestone, Williams, Thompson & Trembath, 2007). Supports such as supervisor access and induction processes can counteract these negative perceptions (Smith & Worsfold, 2014).

Satisfaction in the workplace component of WIL experiences is positively influenced by learning outcomes (Smith & Worsfold, 2014). Further, WIL programs engage industry at the University and these bring students continuing links and participation of industry in WIL based degrees (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2010). When industry is engaged in the learning experience for university students, they can see the link between their future careers and their current study adding genuine engagement into the WIL experience (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick & Cragolini, 2004; Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2010; Kavanagh & Drennan, 2008). Industry participation gives students a sense of direction and excitement about the future, confirms students' career choice and provides tangible links between work and study (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2010; Chowdhury, Endres & Lanis, 2002).

Finally, increases in student satisfaction in WIL programs positively impact on engagement, retention and perceptions of satisfaction with the overall educational experience at the tertiary level (ACER, 2008; Harvey, 2000).

Strategies for Work Integrated Learning

Satisfaction can be increased by improving student learning performances through adequate and comprehensive providing support that meet the needs of students in terms of academic and induction of the curriculum's design in WIL environments (Smith & Worsfold, 2014). In addition, these authors go on to claim that, WIL programs need to be supported by induction programs, preparatory materials and staff access and support. Furthermore, it is necessary to grow and foster new and current industry partnerships for student WIL experiences and internships (Freudenberg, Brimble & Cameron, 2010). Further to this point, WIL programs can increase engagement, retention and satisfaction (ACER, 2008; Harvey, 2000) and could be developed in courses and degrees in which there is not a current tangible connection between study and future work.

Pragmatism – Applicability of Learning Materials/Assessments to Potential Future Working Environments

The 2013 Grattan Report in Higher Education indicates that "currently higher education generally meets labour market demands, although shortages of health and engineering professionals have persisted over the last decade" (Norton, 2013, p. 02). In response to the massification of higher education and the significant increase in student enrolment, the numbers of graduates who have got well paid jobs is quite stable in recent time (Norton, 2013). As documented by Norton (2013) "male graduates from universities in Australia earn 50 per cent more over their careers than men who finished school at Year 12; whilst female graduates have a 60 per cent net earnings premium". In terms of increasing fees for current students in HE in Australia, the rate of return on higher education investment increased over the last few years (Norton, 2013).

For work recruiters, quality of universities is measured by providing employees who can meet the needs of the labour market. These graduates are assessed through a variety of skills including soft and hard skills such as working in group, independent work, communication, intercultural adaption, highly specific knowledge skills, and other skills depending on specific requirement at workplaces (Maringe & Sing 2014).

Strategies for Pragmatism

HEIs should articulate clear course pathways to employment; develop employment pathways with industry partners (Norton, 2013). Moreover, universities need to pay more attention on

developing skills in students that will allow them to successfully interact in and navigate the contemporary workplace (Maringe & Sing, 2014).

Electives and Core Subject Offerings

Course cohesion is fundamental to student experience. The primary purpose of curriculum design is to provide students with learning experiences that impact personally, academically and professionally on the learning and development of the student (Bahr & Lloyd, 2011). Effective course leadership and robust design architecture are influences for cohesion. These elements work together to enable ongoing development, innovation and responsive renovation of courses without cohesion collapse (Bahr & Lloyd, 2011). Consideration of cohesion factors, connection trees and snapshots are potential tools for bringing together leadership and design elements for course cohesion (Bahr & Lloyd, 2011). The pivotal role of leadership in maintaining course cohesion is communication with specific reference to a shared vision; learning/subject sequence, teaching approaches and assessment (Bahr & Lloyd, 2011).

The attributes students use to select electives are difficult levels of subject material, followed by perceived interest level of the subject material and then potential to future job seeking (Ting & Coi Lee, 2012). Universities should be encouraging students to choose electives that not only purposefully to past subject and complete their courses, but equip them with knowledge and skills for upcoming careers. (Ting & Coi Lee, 2012). As recommended by Ting & Coi Lee (2012, p17) "HEIs should seek to be the educational nexus of 'professionalism' rather than 'professionalisation', and to offer relevance to career exposure through active involvement and participation in practical aspects, theory and research".

Strategies for Electives and Core Subject Offerings

Courses need to be designed with cohesion not just regulation in mind and leadership should play a pivotal role in maintaining this cohesion (Bahr & Lloyd, 2011). University leaders should be highly aware of purpose of selecting electives to help students in meeting demand and supply (Ting & Coi Lee, 2012). In an important sense, tracking subject choice in elective subjects will assist students in the planning of what are offered in subjects (e.g. facilities and instructors), and thus increase the effectivity of the university by distributing and providing resources to elective subjects with heavy demand (Ting & Coi Lee, 2012).

Learning Support

Tinto & Pusser (2006) pinpoint that support is a condition promoting student success. Researchers go on to claim that there are three main kinds of support that promote success "academic, social, and financial. Academic support encompasses developmental education courses, tutoring, study groups, and academic support programs" (Tinto and Pusser, 2006, p07). One of the core factors contributing to students' success is quality academic as it reflects an institution's commitment to its students (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Students or academic advisors have a positive effect on the student experience. The readiness, availability and assistance of advisors clearly link to factors demonstrated to predict student success (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Flatley, Weber, Czerny & Pham, 2013). Advisors can act as facilitators to provide students with strategies and hints to enable students to be more confident and motivated in their studies. (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). An great adviser does the same for the student's whole curriculum that the brilliant teacher does for one particular course (Lowenstein, 2005).

Social support needs to be carried out in different forms such as counselling, mentoring, and ethnic student centres (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). For new students, those support can serve as secure, and reliable supports that enable students to adapt quickly with the university climate (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Support is more likely to be productive when it directly relates to the environment where students are required to learn. Other instructions such as, providing academic advice that is directly allocated to a particular class in order to assist students well perform in that class (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). As a support strategy, it is more often used for key first-year "gateway" courses that are fundamental to coursework that continues in upcoming years (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Awareness of usefulness of support services enables students to effectively cope with a variety of issues that may occur in the academic environment (Schweitzer, 1996). A lack of awareness regarding the variety of support services in universities may hinder students to obtain what they need. During the orientation week, new students are usually told availability of student services on campus, and this strategy may not be the most effective (Schweitzer, 1996).

Strategies for Learning Support

In an expectation, HEIs should provide academic advisors to assist with satisfaction and retention (Campbell & Nutt, 2008; Flatley, Weber, Czerny & Pham, 2013). Similarly, support services need to cater for academic, financial and social needs (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Additionally, institutions should connect and embed academic supports to specific subjects (Tinto & Pusser, 2006). More importantly, universities need to continually find ways to advertise awareness of the range of supports available to students (Schweitzer, 1996).

Value and Effectiveness of Lectures, Workshops, Tutorials

Considerable research indicates that teaching in large sized class handicaps rather than improves both the quality of learning and the distribution of opportunity to access equitable outcomes and attainment across the diverse groups in HE (Maringe & Sing, 2014).

Despite growing rhetoric about the ineffectiveness and passive approaches to learning of lectures in HE; overwhelmingly, students still choose to attend lectures even while electronic recordings are available (Webster, 2015). Lecture formats provide a unique experience for students through the presence of the leading academic, the expectations and paradigms which students bring with to them and the interpretation of meaning modelled by 'expert thinking aloud' that can focus on deeper *thinking* which is more likely to be most valuable for students experiences in higher education (Webster, 2015).

Students are concerned with a large tutorial classes due to a lack of confidence in presenting in front of the crowd, not getting serious attention from the tutor, and sense that the opportunity to create a learning community is decreased (Wannar & Palmer, 2015). Students in large introductory classes report their dissatisfaction in comparison with their peers in smaller classes (Carbone, 1999). This would suggest that reducing class size would serve to elevate their retention rate (Cuseo, 2007).

Online tutorials lack the face-to-face social contact that students feel impacts positively on their learning and the interruption that may happen in discussion sometimes occurring in online discussions is adverse to learning outcomes (Wannar & Palmer, 2015).

Strategies for Lecture and Tutorial Effectiveness

It is crucial to maintain small class sizes in tutorials and workshops (Cuseo, 2007; Wannar & Palmer, 2015) and maintain lecture format for on campus learning opportunities (Webster, 2015). Furthermore, it is also more practical to review and innovate assessment processes and shift assessment tasks to students through self and peer-assessment strategies. This argument has currency in the context of contemporary life-long learning discourses. (Maringe & Sing, 2014). Similarly, HEIs also should conduct research and practice on enhancing classroom pedagogies for large and demographically diverse university classes to provide equal opportunities for achievement and outcomes (Maringe & Sing, 2014).

Online and Blended Learning

For students who self-enrol in distance learning approaches, one of the primary and potential of student satisfaction is quality of instructions (Kumar, 2014; Liegler, 1997). According to Debourgh (2003) students who enrol in distance education courses relate overall satisfaction to both lecturers and instruction, do not concern much about course format, the mediation of communication and interaction by technology, and the time and physical distance that separates participants (lecturer and students). For these students, "the lack of previous experience with either distance learning or the technology is not associated with course satisfaction" (Debourgh, 2003, p12).

Lecturers that purposefully use pedagogic strategies that are more likely to affect student satisfaction will also impact the learning process positively (Debourgh, 2003). A great pedagogic

strategy is not a detriment from distanced teaching/learning or the adoption of technology, otherwise, equipped technology would enable interaction and mutual communication (Debourgh, 2003). Online programs have to provide structures for peer interactions but also communicate the value of such interactions (Kumar, 2014). Timeliness of feedback also added to student satisfaction (Kumar, 2014).

Students' comments reflect the use of technology as a vehicle for instruction, not a determinant of students' satisfaction despite issues with equipment function and reliability (Debourgh, 2003). Although other studies have indicated students find the quality of technical infrastructure and virtual environments in the courses influences their satisfaction (Kumar, 2014).

Faculty reported struggling with the workload of managing an online program along with their regular research, teaching, and service activities (Kumar, 2014).

Strategies for Online and Blended Learning

Universities should create favourable conditions for student to contact in different ways such as email, group discussions, online or face to face meetings. A number of solutions and strategies are more likely to be applicable such as design course (learning activities and instructional methods) to enable students to enact both learner and instructional roles to strengthen ability of team work, inquiry skills, metacognition and enhance cooperation among participants. Another option is to make course learning packet available at start of course, or being discussed in advance of each meeting; and the content should include course and session objectives, test blueprint, sample examination, topic outline/notes/slides, case studies, group projects with completion guidelines, assignment and grading rubrics. Moreover, it perhaps productive to redesign and apply a more vivid and novel way in presentations such as visual, text, or aural that would more engage students and learner-centered. By this way, students have opportunities to demonstrate and develop their soft and crucial skills such as interactive skill, critical thinking, group work and discussion participating during and after presentations.

Emotional Engagement – Feelings of Belonging/Value of Course/Sense of Being Part of a Community

Student satisfaction and student happiness are fundamentally different in terms of the loci of control. "Happier" students are more content with how they engage with edifying experiences, while those "more satisfied" students exhibit external loci of control, that is, satisfaction is dependent on how things are done to and for them, rather than in their engagement with the student experience (Dean & Gibbs, 2015). When students rate their own happiness as high (and have an internal locus of control), they experience greater satisfaction in their overall student experience (Dean & Gibbs, 2015). Happy students are more likely to engage in longer private study periods and will put in more time outside of formal classes (Dean and Gibbs, 2015). In this context, student engagement is a significant contributing factor to profound happiness (Dean & Gibbs, 2015) and engagement in the learning can be attributed to greater levels of student satisfaction.

Student anxieties about their learning influence not only their overall satisfaction but also the their learning achievement (Maringe, 2010). Addressing these issues in real time increases both the student learning performance and the levels of their satisfaction with their course (Maringe, 2010).

Creating a sense of belonging and community is central to student satisfaction. Welcome packs (delivered with tangible items) for distance students can reinforce levels of enthusiasm and motivation to commence study; build the message that the university supports student success and show they value each student as an individual (Leece, 2014). For students (first year in particular) on campus, multiple processes and systems within the new environment lead to frustration and anxiety (Bowden, 2013). The development of strong, personal connections with the institution and its Faculty members can alleviate these issues (Bowden, 2013). Strong connections and relationships also positively impact on a student's dedication to study, and provide for a more enjoyable learning experience (Bowden, 2013). A sense of belonging is also the fundamental factor for retaining students beyond the first year of enrolment (Bowden, 2013).

Strategies for Emotional Engagement

Apparently, investment in student 'happiness' will lead to greater engagement and satisfaction (Dean & Gibbs, 2015). Moreover, monitoring anxiety levels in students will influence the quality of student outcomes and satisfaction (Maringe, 2010). In another perspective, it is important to consider innovative ways to build community with distance/online students (Leece, 2014). Additionally, universities should provide opportunities for first year students to connect emotionally with academic staff and the university (Bowden, 2013). Alternatively, considering use of rituals as a means of emphasising our academic community e.g. welcoming address, staff attendance at graduation can be an effective strategy.

Assessment and Feedback

One of the crucial factors in good feedback is a link between assessment tasks and guidelines, assessment frameworks and criteria and the feedback offered (Ferguson, 2011; Fletcher, Meyer, Anderson, Johnston & Rees, 2012). The vast majority of students consider assessment comment as a critical part of their learning process (clear, detailed and directed to future learning) (Ferguson, 2011). Traditional assessment tasks tend to guide students working on their strengths and avoiding difficult areas, whereas, other forms of assessments like arguably, most personal breakthroughs in learning require an ability of overcoming difficulties (McDowell, 1995). Satisfaction with assessment is more than academic results and endpoints, it is for most students a process that should positively influence their future learning.

In subjects with large cohorts, students understand peaked time and amount of work handled by teaching staff when marking assignments, and they would be aware that it is not always to receive very detailed feedback on time if lecturers were handled with a number of assignments (Ferguson, 2011). However, the most satisfying types of assessment is that their assignments are provided with detailed feedbacks rather than just merely indicating and explanation of criteria or marking schemes (Ferguson, 2011). Although it is more time consuming, students would be happy to wait longer for results if it brings them with adequate and sufficient comments (Ferguson, 2011) and informs future work.

The most important assessment identified by students is formative feedback shown in the form of comments on structure and general content or on the key ideas and issues (Ferguson, 2011). The feedback expected to be positive, clear and constructive with acknowledging positive outcome and pinpointing areas which need to improve in the future (Ferguson, 2011). Students indicate a need for feedback to contain a certain amount of positive comment and simply giving them encouragement and motivation for next assignments (Ferguson, 2011).

Student satisfaction with alternative assessment processes such as self or peer assessment are mixed; some are interested in involving in assessment while others not showing their interest in the whole experience (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002). Self-assessment is crucial in authentic learning experiences and allows students to develop skills of independence and self-evaluation (Brown, 2005; Harris, 1997). It shows students what they do and don't know and by definition allows students to accurately set goals for their learning (Docherty, Topp & Trinder, 2005). Student satisfaction in self-assessment assessment strategies is high when there are opportunities to reach competency levels (Yoo, Son, Kim & Park, 2009). Self-assessment can also be motivating if the focus is on self-improvement and allowing students to identify strengths and weaknesses (Docherty, Topp & Trinder, 2005). However, students need opportunities and supports to learn the processes of accurate self-assessment of their own work as it involves a complex set of skills (Black & William, 2010; Brown, 2005; Dearnley & Meddings, 2007; McDonald, 2007). Finally implementation of self-assessment as a practical part of the learning process will require it to become integral in every assessment task and subject.

As argued by Khonbi & Sadeghi (2013) peer-assessment can considerably enhance student learning in comparison with self-assessment. In peer assessment, students have more opportunities to learn from and to share with each other by exchanging and discussing, and as revealed by many students, it contributes significantly to their own learning (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002). Satisfaction with peer assessment processes is low when traditional views of assessment persist (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002; Davies 2000). This is particularly significant when students

assume that their peers are not qualified and fair assessors of assessment (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002). Despite these misgivings student can see benefits to their learning as it makes them consider their own work more closely, highlights what they need to know, helps them make a practical assessment by their own, and guides them with skills of what are potential in the future (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002). This supports the claim that peer assessment provides students with an ideal opportunity to learn from their peers' efforts (Docherty, Topp & Trinder, 2005; Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002). Davies (2000, p 17) assumes that "students will take more care comparing, contrasting and evaluating peers' work when they themselves were being evaluated on their marking ability". This is a critical factor of self-directed learning, and the form of peer assessment that needs to be maximised.

Strategies for Assessment and Feedback

It is widely documented that student do not like their work and feedback returned electronically (Ferguson, 2011); where possible return hardcopy submissions in class. They also do not like their assignments are returned after class hours. (Ferguson, 2011). As documented by Ferguson (2011) expected feedback for a standard assignment might be summarised and clearly highlighted both positive and negative outcomes. Where detailed negatives are highlighted, it is crucial to provide the implications for future work and improvement, not simply a comment of where the work was insufficient

Moreover, additional time for academics and tutors is needed when utilising self and peer assessment strategies (Ballantyne, Hughes & Mylonas, 2002). In order to do this, formal development of self-assessment skills needs to be included in the curriculum at all levels with the attention on guiding students of carrying out 'self-assessment (Black & Wiliam, 2010; McDonald, 2007). Another strategy is to less emphasis on exams and essays and more use of innovative and non-traditional assessments are more satisfying to students and have better learning outcomes (McDowell, 1995).

Conclusion

The paper has reviewed and identified key factors that affect student's satisfaction at higher education institutes. Possible strategies and solutions to satisfy and enhance student's satisfaction are also examined. In this paper, no particular context is specified, instead, it collects discussions, overviews and perceptions of scholars over the word. This might be seen as a limitation of the paper. In an important sense, however, although depending on different socio-cultural backgrounds, student's expectations at universities today are very much similar in some points. Therefore, this paper has only seriously focused on those key points, and in an expectation, they are more likely to be applicable to current universities in the world. If not, the outcome of this paper can be used as literature reviews for further studies that intend to investigate in a specific context.

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