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## The student experience at risk? Measurement and enhancement of student experience in private tertiary education

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### Abstract

Student experience results are increasingly used as a measure of educational quality. Institutions are increasingly using such measures as part of internal quality assurance. Governments and quality agencies are using such measures to identify potential risks, benchmarking with comparable institutions, and publishing the results in the public domain. In countries such as the UK, student experience results are also used in rankings and league tables. Since 2009, a number of policy instruments have been developed to strengthen the measurement and reporting of student experience. They include the introduction of the new University Experience Survey (UES), the current review of the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS), and the introduction of the MyUniversity website.

To date none of the recent policies related to student experience are aimed at private tertiary education. This is despite the growth of the private sector, and student experience now being used by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) as risk indicators. This paper outlines the current dilemma in the consistent measurement and reporting of student experience, and it argues the need for the government to revisit its policies with the view of a 'one tertiary education' approach which can be used by all kinds of providers including VET, higher education, and dual sector providers.

## Keywords

Private tertiary education, student experience, government policy

## Introduction

The Australian tertiary education sector includes different kinds of providers who offer and confer qualifications at different Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) levels. In the last five years, there has been increased growth of the private tertiary education sector in terms of the number of providers and student enrolments. Private tertiary education providers are defined in this paper as private for-profit higher and vocational education providers offering vocational and higher education courses. While the private tertiary education sector has experienced ongoing growth, there has been limited research on student feedback practices in such institutions which are aimed to enhance the student experience at unit/subject of study, teacher level and the overall experience of the institution. Most recent analysis undertaken by Shah and Nair (2012)<sup>1</sup> suggest significant inconsistency in measuring student feedback in different kinds of providers. For example the national Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) which includes the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) is mostly used in universities with only five out of 150 providers participating in the survey. Another complexity is the use of different instruments in higher and vocational education sectors. For example the dual providers and registered training organisations (RTO) participate in a number of surveys to meet the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) compliance requirements.

As the Australian government progresses its work to possibly form a single national regulator with the merger of the TEQSA and the ASQA, it is important to ensure that private tertiary education providers have effective systems and processes to measure and enhance the student experience. The use of standard, valid, and reliable survey instruments could motivate private tertiary education providers to participate in using standard surveys and to possibly benchmark with comparable providers. The use of standard instruments with such providers will also enhance internal quality assurance within the providers, strengthen the role of students in providing feedback systematically, and it will assure external regulatory and accrediting bodies that the student voice is measured and comparable experience can be benchmarked.

It is clear that the Australian government considers student feedback an important tool in their quest for quality and reputation of tertiary education. The Bradley Report outlined the case on why such feedback is important and how Australia was lagging behind other developed countries (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008). Some of the recent initiatives by the government to align itself to this quest have been the introduction of the national Student Experience Survey (UES) as well the review of the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). Information from such surveys will appear on the MyUniversity website, but is limited to the University sector only. The government has been silent on whether private tertiary education providers will be part of the UES and AGS though the government has clearly signalled that private tertiary education providers will not be part of the MyUniversity website (The Australian, 2011).

## Private Tertiary Education Providers in Australia

The research on private tertiary education providers is limited in the Australian context. Most research about Australian providers in recent years has been carried out by two researchers. Their research (e.g, Nair, Bennett & Shah, 2012; Shah and Brown, 2009; Shah and Nair, 2011<sup>1</sup>, 2011<sup>2</sup>; 2012<sup>2</sup>, 2012<sup>3</sup>; Shah, 2012), shows a number of recurring themes related to private higher education. They include:

- trend growth of student enrolments in such providers with an average of 20 per cent growth in the last three years;
- predictions that the such providers may contribute 30 per cent of the total higher education enrolment by 2020;
- key policy instruments and other factors influencing the growth of the sector;
- quality and standards in such providers;
- the need to enhance the measurement and enhancement of student experience;
- the lack of a systematic approach to measure student feedback -only five out of 150 private for-profit institutions participated in the national Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) in 2010;
- the growth of flexible mode of delivery by such providers with 11.2 per cent growth in 2010 and 14.2 per cent in 2009;
- significantly low access and participation of disadvantaged students in such providers;
- ease of entry and pathway from vocational to higher education and providing a second chance for many students to access and participate in higher education; and
- increased collaboration between public-private institutions as a result of the government's social inclusion agenda.

Some of the recurring themes outlined were also highlighted in the analysis undertaken by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) of private tertiary education providers (Winchester, 2010 and 2011). One such finding in recent years suggests the need for improvement of student feedback and the measurement of student experience. The analysis of 34 AUQA audit reports of Non-Self Accrediting Institutions (NSAI) as of late 2011 suggest that almost every report included recommendations or affirmations related to student feedback, student surveys and student experience. Very few private tertiary education providers received commendations in the area. The current gap in monitoring student experience in NSAs was recognised by AUQA which resulted in a national workshop in 2010 to build capacity in private tertiary education providers in measuring and enhancing the student experience. This gap was identified based on the recurring recommendations from the audit reports.

The exclusion of private tertiary education providers in standard national surveys will challenge the national regulator to assess comparable and equivalent student experience across all kinds of providers. It will also limit the possibility of benchmarking student experience between different kinds of providers in an environment of increased pathways and collaboration between vocational and higher education (Shah and Nair, 2012)<sup>1</sup>

## **Measuring of Student Experience in Private Higher Education Matters**

As the government plans to introduce a number of policy instruments to measure and possibly reward universities using student experience measures the policy does not clearly articulate if private tertiary education providers will be required to participate in the AGS and the new UES. The ongoing increased growth of private providers (in terms of number of providers and student enrolments) requires the use of well researched and valid student survey instruments that could be used by private tertiary education providers.

The extension of government's FEE-HELP loan scheme to private tertiary education providers and the use of public funding require the government to monitor the student experience in such providers using standard instruments which could in turn also enable benchmarking with different kinds of private tertiary education providers who are now increasingly offering flexible modes of delivery, new partnerships, and articulation arrangements.

The consistent increase of student enrolment in private tertiary education providers despite high tuition fees requires the need to monitor student expectations and experience and to improve the reputation of such providers in Australia and internationally (Nair & Bennett, 2011). This will ensure that stakeholder expectations are met and institutions are accountable to provide value for money education for all students.

At present the student survey instruments used across all private tertiary education providers is inconsistent and in some cases non-existent. The current practice does not enable benchmarking and neither has it enabled the assessment of comparable standards of student experience. The development and implementation of standard instruments will significantly assist such providers to measure and enhance the experience of students. It will also assure the government that private tertiary education providers are using valid and reliable instruments to measure and benchmark outcomes.

In addition, the systematic measurement of student experience is important in the non-university sector with growing pathways of students from VET to higher education. The changing expectations and experience of pathway students can only be assessed and improved, if the measurement of student experience is consistent in university and non-university providers. Another major weakness is the measurement and reporting of student experience with underrepresented groups such as non-English speaking backgrounds, low socio-economic background, and vocational pathway students with different levels of preparedness and expectations (Asian Development Bank, 2012; Oketch, 2009; Levy, 2009). Non-university providers have provided access and opportunity in specialised areas of study to many of these groups and such feedback via student experience results will provide critical information for national policies to improve the overall student experience in both sectors.

Studies by Bennett, Nair & Shah (2012) and Nair, Bennett, & Shah (2012) illustrate a number of key messages emanating from students studying in the private higher education sector. The primary message from their work is that students' perception of their teaching and learning experiences in such providers is not only positive but in many cases not only comparable to the university student experience but often superior. Given this initial finding, there is anecdotal evidence which suggests that if measurements are systematic

across the higher education sector, and private higher education providers are perceived to have a more positive student experience. Supporting this is the work of Shah, Nair & Bennett (2012) which outlines the many factors that influence student choice to study in private higher education. These include the ability to transfer to university studies, ease of entry, quality teachers from industry, easy accessibility to the teachers, one to one interaction with the teacher, practice based learning, and the small classes.

The current gaps in measuring and enhancing student experience in private higher education include the following:

- lack of government policy on using standard surveys in such providers;
- lack of rationalisation of surveys used in VET and higher education with dual sector institutions over-surveying students;
- lack of overall strategy in institutions on effective ways to design, collect, report, and engage students in enhancement;
- lack of performance measures and targets around student experience;
- lack of capacity in many small and medium providers to systematically measure and enhance student experience;
- lack of accountability on academic leaders to track and monitor student experience;
- increased focus on participating in surveys to meet compliance requirement rather than enhancement;
- lack of culture of using student voice in course development, reviews, assessments, and improving support services;
- lack of infrastructure and resourcing in the area;
- ethical issues surrounding the collection and reporting of surveys e.g. end of semester evaluation;
- increased focus on maximising profit, with limited progress on listening and engaging students in feedback;

### **Where to From Now?**

A recent study by Shah and Nair (2012)<sup>4</sup> highlighted that the assessment of quality using student survey results and performance based funding resulted in a number of changes in the end of semester evaluation surveys. The authors outlined a number of trends in the measurement and reporting of student survey results. They include:

- the development of a single survey tool aimed to measure teacher and unit evaluations;
- the development of an institution wide policy on the use of teaching and unit evaluation results and accountability at various levels;
- a move from voluntary to mandatory evaluations which is conducted at the end of each teaching period;
- linking the findings of the survey to annual academic staff performance review, academic promotions and improvements;
- rewarding academic staff in terms of teaching awards;
- increased accountability on associate deans and academic staff to improve teaching quality outcomes;

- implementation of university wide survey and improvement framework with focus on data collections, analysis, reporting and closing the loop; and
- the consistent use of the survey at all teaching locations including university pathway colleges.

The above trends form a basis for what needs to happen within the sector in relation to the introduction of universal measurements which will help in the engagement and development of teaching and learning. Nair (2013) argues that for student feedback to be in the forefront, there is a need to have an open, consistent and transparent approach to collecting and using student experience data which in turn will inform quality improvements in the higher education sector. This requires leadership within institutions but the pivotal role of the national government is without doubt the driving force for change. Nair (2013) further argues the current approach many institutions have is a number of their own surveys to measure the student experience, personalised to their teaching, learning and service environment. Though there is some merit to this approach, there are merits to having standardised surveys which provide a number of advantages including the ability to benchmark data with like institutions, use data to show performance across the sector, the ability to share and learn from other institutions so as to improve service and the teaching and learning environment, and the possibility to extend the benchmarking internationally.

Private higher education however, still lacks one element critical to effective quality assurance. Shah & Nair (2012)<sup>3</sup> articulate this effectively as “The quality culture in many private for-profit providers is the compliance driven ‘tick box and quick fix’ inherited by vocational educating auditing arrangements rather than an improvement led approach to quality assurance.” This is an area that needs development and would be enhanced if such institutions are included in a system wide approach to collection of data, for example the student experience.

Clearly in a demand driven higher education market, there is a need for consistency in the sector as one of the primary aims for the set-up of TESQA was to safeguard the reputation of higher education in Australia. One of the factors critical to this reputational maintenance is student choice where quality student experience in teaching and learning plays a pivotal role.

The question is how we move forward knowing that there would be definite advantages in having the private higher education sector involved in the quest for quality. There seems to be some move in this direction to include private higher education providers in the use of standardized survey tools. The initial national report for the inaugural administration of the UES included 15 recommendations for the further development of the survey. Among these recommendations is the need for non-university higher education providers to be included in future administrations (Radloff, Coates, Taylor, James, & Krause, 2012). This recommendation is important in that there is recognition that the sector should be considered as a whole and not segregated as private providers and universities. Many of the private providers are in partnership with universities and provide alternative pathways to university education. This recommendation would enhance the understanding of the student experience to a different level and provide information to enhance the experience across both sectors of education. Though this is a move in the right direction, the outcome of this recommendation is yet to be seen.

A sustainable approach in the measurement, reporting and enhancement of student experience across all tertiary education institutions is overdue. The current compliance driven quality assurance monitored by ASQA and TEQSA is shifting the focus on student voice from meeting the requirements of the regulator rather than genuinely using the student voice to enhance their learning experience. The danger of compliance driven quality is disengaging students and staff in dialogue and systematic improvements in all facets of the learning experience.

## **Bio**

**Mahsood Shah** is an Associate Professor with English Language and Foundations Studies Centre at the University of Newcastle, Australia. In this role Mahsood is responsible to strengthen the research capacity of the centre on a wide range of areas including access, participation, and academic outcomes of disadvantaged students. Prior to joining the University of Newcastle, Mahsood was the Principal Advisor at RMIT University. Mahsood has also worked in a number of other universities and private for-profit providers in Australia in strategy and quality assurance roles.

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