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Beyond Happiness: Managing Engagement to Enhance Satisfaction and Grades

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RESEARCH BRIEFING

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement

Volume I **June 2008**

Highlights

- Overall satisfaction varies across student groups, and is comparatively low for international students, students in their mid 20s, and people studying management and commerce and information technology.
- All aspects of student engagement are positively related to students' overall satisfaction with university study – more engaged learners are more satisfied, and vice versa.
- Challenging and supportive learning environments, and environments that support students' participation in enriching experiences, play an important role in enhancing satisfaction and student outcomes.
- The quality of relationships with teaching staff, administrative personnel and other students is particularly important for enhancing satisfaction, as is helping to cope with non-academic responsibilities.

Beyond Happiness: Managing Engagement to Enhance Satisfaction and Grades

Universities collect a considerable amount of data on students' perceptions of the quality of teaching and institutional services, including on their satisfaction with the overall experience. While much data is collected from students, less is collected on what students are actually doing.

Yet it is equally – or arguably more – important to understand students and their learning as it is to understand learners' satisfaction with provision. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) provides data on both learners' engagement in effective learning practices and on whether institutions have provided the support mechanisms to facilitate such engagement. It also collects data on overall satisfaction.

Monitoring student satisfaction plays an important role in assuring the quality of higher education. It provides information on whether learners see a return on their educational investment.

Yet satisfaction is underpinned by more than happiness. We need to examine the determinants of satisfaction, not just satisfaction itself, to identify what institutions can do to enhance education. That is, we need to look beyond satisfaction at more fundamental educational factors to identify how to enhance student outcomes and their overall experience.

Managing Engagement to Enhance Satisfaction and Grades

This briefing focuses on students' overall satisfaction. It identifies the activities and conditions that influence students' satisfaction – the educational levers that institutions can use to enhance students' university experience.

The merits of satisfaction data have been debated for decades. From one perspective, it has been argued that learners are not able to assess service quality as they are in the process of shaping their knowledge and skill. From another, learners are seen as able to offer a privileged perspective on the educational process. For current purposes, it is assumed that learners' satisfaction with the quality of provision offers an important perspective on quality, but that it is one perspective among many.

The briefing is based on analysis of data from the AUSSE, conducted for the first time in 2007 with 25 Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions. A stratified probabilistic sampling strategy is deployed to produce results for first- and later-year bachelor degree students. Post-stratification weighting is used to ensure that responses represent the target population. In 2007 a total of 9,585 responses were received from students at participating universities.

Patterns in overall satisfaction

The Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ), the AUSSE survey instrument, includes around 100 items that measure specific educational activities and conditions. The following three items ask first- and later-year students to assess their overall satisfaction:

Overall, how would you evaluate the quality of academic advice that you have received at your institution?

How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?

If you could start over again, would you go to the same institution you are now attending?

The SEQ moves beyond the use of 'agreement' response scales. Students can provide responses of 'poor', 'fair', 'good' or 'excellent' to the first two of these items. For the third item, response options include 'definitely no', 'probably no', 'probably yes' and 'definitely yes'. The distribution of first- and later-year responses to these categories is shown in Table 1.

The responses show little change across year levels, and if anything a slight reduction in satisfaction levels. Reading the top two response categories of each item as implying 'satisfaction', the results show that 71 per cent of respondents were satisfied with the quality of academic advising, 76 per cent with the educational experience, and that 85 per cent would choose to attend the same institution is starting again.

Table 1 Response to satisfaction items response categories (per cent)

Item	Response categories	First year	Later year	Total
Academic advising	Poor	4	6	5
	Fair	24	25	24
	Good	52	49	51
	Excellent	19	20	20
Educational experience	Poor	3	5	4
	Fair	19	20	19
	Good	54	50	52
	Excellent	24	25	24
Attend institution again	Definitely no	2	4	3
	Probably no	10	14	12
	Probably yes	46	44	45
	Definitely yes	41	38	40

Together, the three items work together to measure a single dimension of overall satisfaction. This scale has a high alpha reliability of 0.82. Scale scores are reported using a metric that runs from 0 to 100, which is derived by scoring each item's four response categories as 0, 33, 67 and 100.

The mean scale score for the whole sample is 67, ranging from 68 for first-year students to 66 for later-year students. The average variation of scores around these means was 22, meaning that from a statistical perspective a difference of 7 points or more may be considered a meaningful effect size. Broadly, as the individual item responses suggest, around two-thirds of Australasian first- and later-year students are satisfied with the overall quality of their educational experience.

Students who report that they plan on changing institutions next year report lower average satisfaction scores

Satisfaction matters for student retention: Students who report that they plan on changing institutions next year report lower average satisfaction scores of 54 compared with 69 for those who intend on staying at the same institution. Students who report course-change intentions also have a lower average score of 59 compared with 69. Early student departure is a highly complex phenomenon to investigate. Nonetheless, read broadly these patterns are telling and underpin the importance of overall satisfaction.

There is a decrease in satisfaction between students who are 18 and 30 years of age

Satisfaction varies across broad student groups. For instance, international students are less satisfied than domestic students, with average scores varying between 62 and 68. Clearly, this is important given the significant value of international students to Australasian higher education. Females are only very slightly more satisfied than males with a mean score of 68 against 66. Students who live on campus are moderately more satisfied than their off-campus counterparts (average scores of 71 against 67).

There is a decrease in satisfaction between students who are 18 and 30 years of age, although Figure 1 shows an increase for those over 30. The final group incorporates a wide range of ages which makes this apparent spike difficult to analyse. The general decline in satisfaction with age is important, however, given the number of people in these brackets in the undergraduate student population.



There is a lot of support - all the lecturers are really helpful and you always know that someone is there to help you out. They make the whole experience a lot better.

– First-year secondary teaching student

High performing students report being more satisfied. Figure 2 shows that satisfaction increases with students' estimate of their average overall grade. Similarly, there are reasonably high correlations between overall satisfaction and self-reported learning and development outcomes – 0.5 and 0.4 respectively. This observation may appear trivial or possibly dangerous inasmuch as it may promote 'grade inflation'. But read in the context of other AUSSE findings, including those reported below, it suggests that students feel more satisfied when they perceive a positive overall return from their investment in learning.

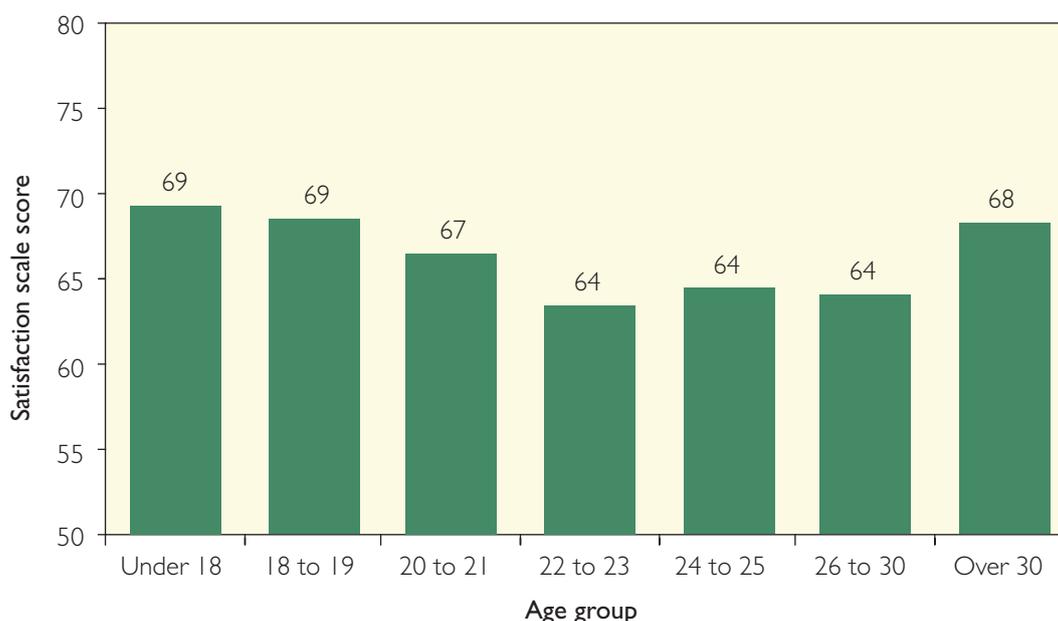


Figure 1 Satisfaction by age

Managing Engagement to Enhance Satisfaction and Grades

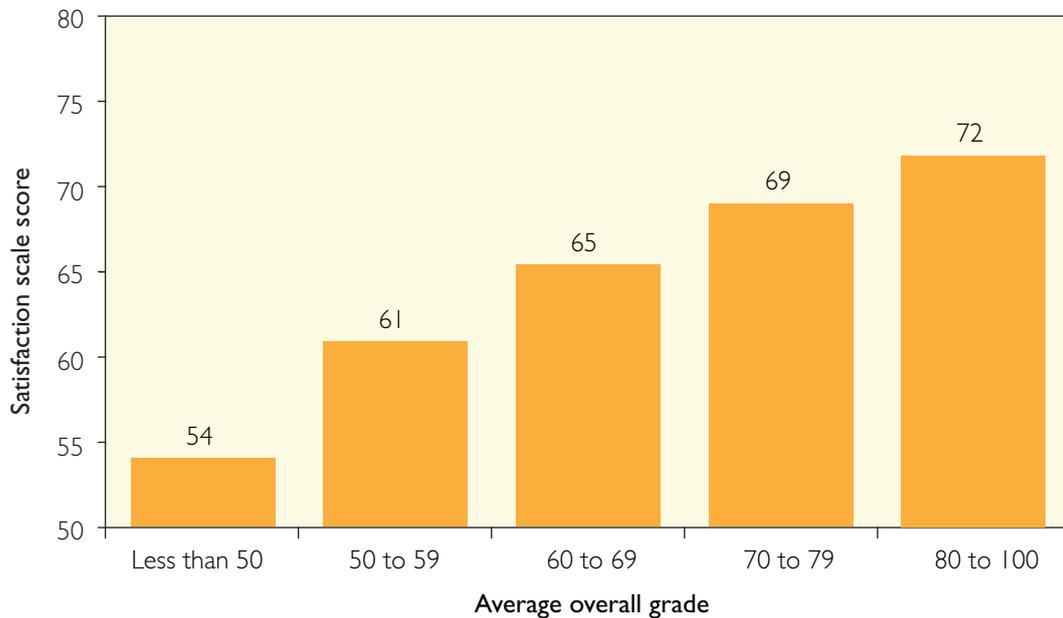


Figure 2 Satisfaction by average overall grade

Field of education differences are important for many aspects of university education, and learner perceptions of satisfaction are no exception. Figure 3 shows that students in the sciences tend to be most satisfied, particularly compared with people studying management and commerce, and information technology.

In contrast to the above differences, the means by which a student finances their study does not influence satisfaction levels, nor does whether a student is first in their family to attend university, whether they study full time or part time, whether they study internally or by distance, or whether they work for pay on or off campus.

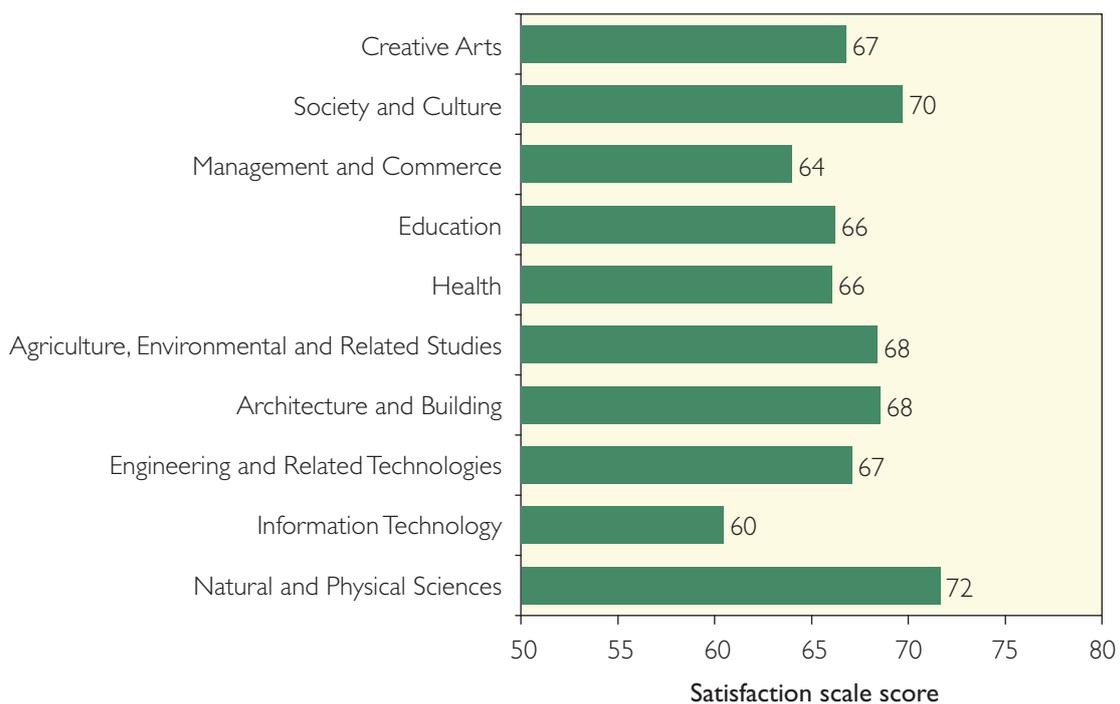


Figure 3 Satisfaction by field of education

The determinants of satisfaction

These findings highlight variations in satisfaction for different groups in Australasian higher education. The observations are important in themselves, and can be used to shape institutions' improvement plans.

Merely studying satisfaction, however, provides only a partial basis for planning change. It does not make clear the educational settings that underpin higher and lower levels of student satisfaction. To do this, the following analysis highlights the educational factors that underpin students' overall satisfaction and hence the levers that institutions can use to drive improvement.

The analysis reports findings from an investigation of the relationship between overall student satisfaction and defined aspects of student engagement. It focuses on the six defined AUSSE scales: Academic Challenge, Active Learning, Student and Staff Interactions, Enriching Educational Experiences, Supportive Learning Environment, and Work Integrated Learning. Relationships between satisfaction and items that measure specific learning activities and conditions are also reported.

Table 2 presents correlations between scores for satisfaction and the six engagement scales. The correlations have been multiplied by 100 to remove the decimal points. The scales are sorted by correlation size. All correlations are positive and most are modest. These results provide evidence that engaged students are more satisfied with their study. By far the largest correlation is with perceptions of support. This implies that supporting student engagement enhances student satisfaction.

Table 2 Correlation of satisfaction with engagement scales

Scale	Satisfaction
Supportive Learning Environment	59
Academic Challenge	27
Student and Staff Interactions	25
Work Integrated Learning	23
Active Learning	18
Enriching Educational Experiences	17

Figure 4 reports the top 25 specific factors that have strong positive relationships with overall satisfaction. These factors are not ranked. The same factors are identified regardless of whether the analysis is based on simple correlation analysis or on more extensive regression or discriminant function analyses. These are the specific factors that can be managed to enhance students' overall satisfaction with their university experience.

These factors emphasise support, challenge and an enriching environment. It is clear, for instance, that the quality of relationships students have with other students and with staff influences satisfaction, particularly but not only in terms of academic support.

The list in Figure 4 also suggests that students want to be challenged as well as supported. Engaging in higher order forms of thinking such as analysis, synthesis and application is correlated with satisfaction, as are examinations that challenge students to do their best work and learn things that change their understanding.

Factors linked with satisfaction emphasise support, challenge and an enriching environment

Integrated support for learners

- Academic staff are available, helpful and sympathetic
- Administrative personnel are helpful, considerate and flexible
- Other students are friendly and supportive
- Students seek advice from academic staff
- Institution emphasises providing support needed to succeed academically
- Institution helps students cope with non-academic responsibilities
- Institution provides support for students to socialise
- Student receives feedback on academic performance

Challenging students to learn

- Coursework emphasises applying theories or concepts
- Coursework emphasises analysing the basic elements of an idea
- Examinations challenge students to do their best work
- Students learn things that change their understanding
- Students develop communication skills relevant to their discipline
- Students improve knowledge and skills that will contribute to employability
- Coursework emphasises synthesising and organising ideas
- Students keep up to date with study
- Students work hard to master difficult content
- Students spend a significant time on academic work
- Coursework emphasises making judgements about the value of information

Enriching experiences

- Students talk about career plans
- Institutions encourage contact with people of different backgrounds
- Students attend campus events and activities
- Students use computers in academic work
- Students use library resources on campus or online
- Students spend time on campus including in classes

Figure 4 Specific factors that count for satisfaction

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Individually, support and challenge are important for satisfaction and performance, but it is both in combination that promotes the best outcomes

Interestingly, it is not just integrated individual support and academic challenge that counts towards higher satisfaction, but also participation in enriching activities such as talking about career plans, attending campus events and activities, and contact with people of different backgrounds.

The idea that academic challenge and individual support promotes engagement, learning outcomes and satisfaction is not new. In his 1975 book *Faces on Campus*, for instance, Graham Little defined a typology of university learning climates. He argued that the ‘cultivating climate’ was most productive for undergraduate student learning and development, this being characterised by high academic standards, support and recognition.

The perspective is affirmed in Figure 5, which shows average overall grades and overall satisfaction for different learning climates. Individually, support and challenge are important for satisfaction and performance, but it is both in combination that

promotes the best outcomes. Satisfaction is particularly low when students report that support is lacking. The whole-sample shift in grades between 70 and 74 is quite marked considering the typical clustering of mark distributions around such values.

The perspective is not new, but the evidence presented in the current findings underpins grounds for its re-emphasis. To recap, the current analysis shows that challenging students to learn and providing them with integrated forms of individual support and enrichment enhances overall satisfaction. Satisfaction is correlated with individual learning and development outcomes.

Key findings

- 1 Monitoring satisfaction plays an important role in managing educational quality. But we need to look beyond satisfaction at more fundamental aspects of students’ engagement with learning in order to identify the levers that can be used to enhance student outcomes.
- 2 Overall satisfaction varies across student groups, and is comparatively low for international students, students in their mid 20s, and people studying management and commerce, and information technology. The lower level satisfaction among international students is concerning given the importance of these students for Australasian higher education.

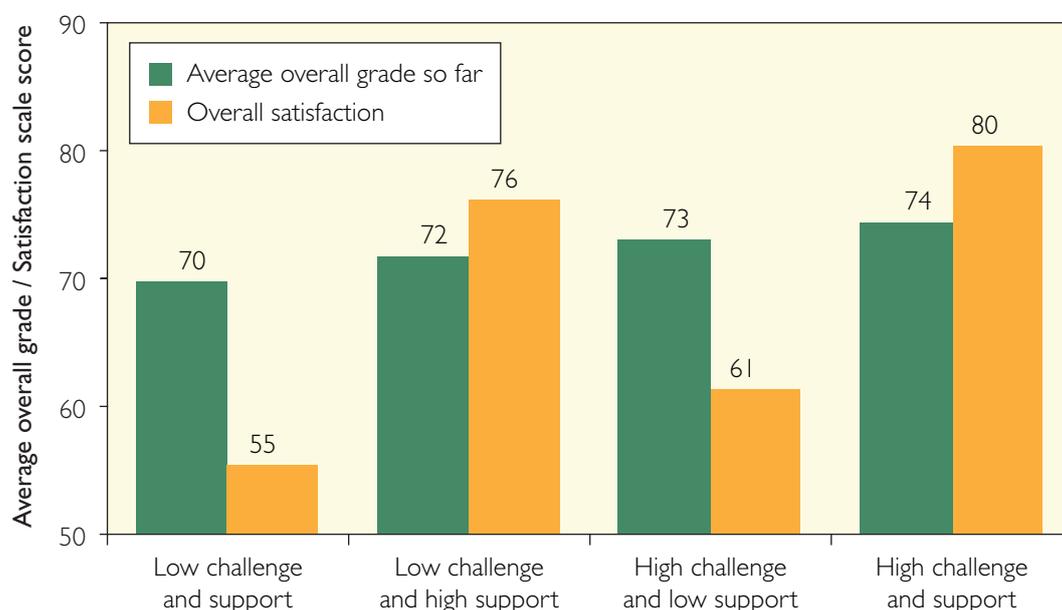


Figure 5 Satisfaction and grade by learning climate

- 3 All aspects of student engagement are positively related to students' overall satisfaction with university study. More engaged learners are more satisfied, and vice versa. By enhancing students' engagement, institutions can enhance satisfaction with provision.
- 4 Creating challenging and supportive learning environments, and supporting students' participation in enriching experiences, plays a particularly important role in enhancing satisfaction and student outcomes. Institutions should consider how to create a 'cultivating learning climate' that sets high academic standards and provides integrated support for each individual's learning and development.
- 5 A number of specific factors play a particularly important role in enhancing student satisfaction. Emphasising these as part of change activities is likely to provide the most significant returns on institutional investment.

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A better student support group and encouraging and providing for more social interaction.

– First-year science student



Refer those with poor marks to support services contacts directly.

– Later-year geography student

Managing Engagement to Enhance Satisfaction and Grades

Analytical foundations

'Student engagement', defined as students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning, is increasingly understood to be important for higher education quality. The concept provides a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions. It provides key insights into what students are actually doing to learn, a structure for framing conversations about quality, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about best practice.

Student engagement is an idea specifically focused on learners and their interactions with university. The idea touches on aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners' lives beyond university, and institutional support. It is based on the premise that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement. Learners are central to the idea of student engagement, which focuses squarely on enhancing individual learning and development.

Despite its importance, information on student engagement has not been readily available to Australasian higher education institutions. The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), conducted with 25 institutions for the first time in 2007, provides data that Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions can use to attract, engage and retain students. The AUSSE builds on foundations laid by the North American National Survey of Student Engagement. By providing information that is generalisable and sensitive to institutional diversity, and with multiple points of reference, the AUSSE plays an important role in helping institutions monitor and enhance the quality of education.

Having really supportive and friendly lecturers, who are there to help.

– First-year early childhood student



Relatively small tutorial groups. Posing thought-provoking questions in lectures and tutorials. A relaxed and friendly environment.

– First-year nursing student



Providing each student with work that is targeted to their individual needs.

– First-year music student

This briefing was prepared by Dr Hamish Coates, with assistance from Dr Daniel Edwards and Mr Stefan Nesteroff.