

2008 ALTC Citations ceremony – Sydney

5 August 2008

Enhancing the Student Experience

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the elders and traditional custodians of the land on which we are gathered.

Emeritus Professor John Hay, Chair of ALTC, Professor Richard Johnstone, Executive Director of ALTC, Professor Ross Milbourne, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Technology Sydney, senior member of NSW Universities and higher education institutions, and, of course, award winners.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity, as Convener of the New South Wales Vice-Chancellors' Committee to speak, on this afternoon of celebration of learning and teaching excellence, about enhancing the student experience. Firstly let me congratulate, on behalf of the NSWVCC, everyone receiving awards – well done and thank you for your commitment to, and success in, promoting student learning.

Student experience sits right in the middle of a discussion on student learning.

What is the student experience?

The student experience can be different things to different people and different institutions.

Defining what your institution believes the optimal student experience to be for your university is essential to efforts to then enhance it.

In my view, the fundamentals of the student experience are learning and teaching itself, curriculum, and the broader set of curricular and extracurricular activities in which students engage that contribute to the overall experience. While we know we are providing better learning and teaching environments – the awards here demonstrate that – other questions that are yet to be tested properly are whether what we are 'teaching well' is actually the 'best material', and what constitutes the broad student experience.

This is not a new issue. John Lombardi, President of the University of Florida, said 18 years ago that “we must think even more about what we teach than about how we teach”. I regard curriculum as the sleeper issue for learning and teaching in Australia today.

So, in any consideration of enhancing the experience of the students at our institutions, we must be concerned with the curriculum we are offering them – whether it is the correct curriculum. Is it contemporary? Similarly, we must also be concerned about the other aspects of the student experience. It is on this last point that I wish to speak further.

Defining the student experience as it relates to your institution is the foundation to communicate, plan and take action. An institution must be able to define what the

student experience means for itself, not for another institution. It is a difficult task; it must be in real terms – in defining the experience, simplicity is essential.

The student body is now very diverse – equity groups, locations, study modes, backgrounds etc. The student experience is *different for each student*, particularly school leavers, distance education, mature age. We need something that transcends these traditional cohorts, the different phases in the student life cycle and other aspects mentioned above.

In approaching these questions it is useful to consider taking the lead from ACER's 'engagement' approach and frame the student experience in terms of the quality of students' engagement with the University.

The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) provides information to higher education institutions on the nature and level of their students' engagement in university study.

The Survey asks students to address a range of interactions available to them at University. It asks students to rate specifically the *quality* of their relationships with people at their institutions, from other students to academic staff and administrative personnel – a fairly broad view of the student experience.

The scales/broad measures in this survey are:

1. Academic challenge
2. Active learning
3. Student and staff interaction
4. Enriching educational experiences
5. Supportive Learning environment
6. Work Integrated Learning

This last one is for Australian and New Zealand universities, rather than North American universities from where the survey was derived. The survey was applied to first year and later year students and differentiated by on campus and distance education.

The survey looks at the activities in which students are engaged, eg.

- Time on campus
- Participation in activities other than learning, eg. cultural, sporting etc
- Relaxing and socialising on campus
- Caring for or tutoring others

It really is a summary of how students are engaging with:

Learning
Academics
Other students
Resources, and,
The workplace

As such, it is a more refined and useful set of measures than 'Student Satisfaction'.

The survey drills down to behavioural levels and provides information for decisions n institution may make in relation to particular items in terms of improving the student experience and in regard to its own definition of the student experience.

Interactions we then can consider adjusting/supporting/adding to in relation to the student experience include:

- Student to academic
- Student to administration and Learning and Teaching support
- Student to student
- Learning and Teaching support to academic

In summary, once a university has a handle on its definition of student experience and how its students feel, then targeting engagement may be the next step in enhancing the student experience.

In that spirit, thank you all for your current and future commitment to the student experience by engaging students in learning and teaching, and congratulations.