

# Chasing student satisfaction in the delivery of property higher education

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Customer satisfaction has been a goal within the services marketing area for many years. There has been considerable debate over whether higher education students are customers. Funding sources for higher education (HE), regard student satisfaction as one of the measurable components of a university's success in Australia. If it is accepted that HE students are indeed customers, then the marketing models that are applied to services marketing clients could also be applicable within the higher education arena.

**Methodology Approach:** The research methodology chosen for this paper is a combination of Interpretivism and Critical Incident Theory. The authors have used open interviewing and open ended questionnaires to encourage open dialogue between the researcher and those being questioned. A questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics, which was delivered to every property undergraduate student in Australia.

**Findings:** The current Australian HE student is contributing towards the cost of their tertiary education in a considerable way. For this reason and many others, modern HE students have different needs and expectations from students in the past and they are similar to any other service customer. Responses from the interviews and the questionnaire indicate a degree of dissatisfaction with issues around teaching quality and delivery, out-dated and inappropriate materials and the lack of practical application such as formal work experience, site visits and case studies.

**Originality:** This research seeks to evaluate higher education property student satisfaction and identify important factors that universities can concentrate on in their goal of improving the student experience.

**Keywords:** *higher education, service quality, student satisfaction, student satisfaction models*

## **Research Paper**

### **Introduction**

Although a discussion of student satisfaction within higher education (university) is focused on education, it also relates to services marketing issues. Since the 1980s when Australian higher education (HE) students began to pay for a substantial proportion of the charges relating to their studies this relationship to marketing theory has become more relevant. A review of literature shows the emergence of the concept of students as customers, or clients. As the fees higher education students pay have increased, so too has the emphasis by students on receiving value for money paid. Regardless of whether higher education students are regarded as customers or stakeholders; there is no argument of the need to be vigilant in the pursuit of overall educational satisfaction. As the product is unpacked, higher education can be seen to be unique. There are not many other products that take three or more years to mature. The second characteristic of this service is the tiered structure, which sees one section having to be successfully completed before moving on to the next. The final product, the degree, is not awarded until all the tiers are completed. A third characteristic that is different for this product is the intensity of the experience, up to 15-30 hours a week in blocks of 11/15 weeks at a time. Finally, within HE the producer of the service also assess the progress of the client and without this assessment the client cannot progress to the next stage. Taken altogether, these four characteristics make a higher education experience unique from a relationship services marketing perspective. This paper examines this unique industry through the eyes of the major stakeholder in higher education, the student and focuses on one area of study, property, across public universities in Australia. The central aim of this research is to hear the voice of the property higher education student and to identify the service gaps they experience, suggesting ways these gaps can be managed.

### **Literature Review**

Whether you call a higher education student a customer or a client, there is no doubt that the concern about the quality of their educational experience and the resulting level of their satisfaction with this experience, is a very important component of the evaluation of an educational institution. Regardless of who the customer is, it is important that the evaluations used in this process are relevant and appropriate to measure the experience of the HE student. Sometimes it is the interaction between the customers themselves that is important and unlike the customers of most service industry organisations, students spend a lot of time with other customers like themselves. They talk amongst each other and make value judgements about the relativity of their HE experience (Owlia and Aspinwall, 1996). Not only is there a need to create a desire on the part of the student for the service, but the university must also try to insure that students have clear expectations about what the university can actually deliver. Although it is frequently stated that customers assess satisfaction and judge overall service

quality by comparing their expectations with their perceptions, the process through which this occurs continues to be unclear. Indeed, in many cases the difference between what customers desire from the service, or what they expect is uncertain (Coye, 2004).

### **Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction**

Parasuraman *et al.* (1985) were the first to grapple with a customer satisfaction model that also looked at consumer expectations and perceptions. They identified ten determinants of service quality; accessibility, reliability, responsiveness, competence, courtesy, communication, credibility, security, understanding the customer, and tangibles, or physical facilities. These ten factors were condensed into five dimensions, (tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) when they developed the SERVQUAL model to measure customer perceptions of service. The definitions of the dimensions are as follows:

- Tangibles. Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.
- Reliability. Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- Responsiveness. Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- Assurance. Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
- Empathy. Caring, individualised attention an organisation provides to its customers.

Tangibility: The challenge for higher education institutions is to ensure that the service provided, such as course content, delivery and application, meet the expectations of their students consistently. Reliability: The discrepancy between promise and delivery is largely the result of inaccurate communication from advertisements, word of mouth and notices. Some institutions tend to oversell their services, leading to grand promises that misrepresent their actual potential and academic readiness.

Responsiveness: Institutions should be responsive to the changing needs of their students in providing programs that are relevant in subject matter and teaching approaches. The learning process is expected to be academically rigorous, yet flexible in areas pertaining to course selection and assessment. With the advent of technology, course design and delivery are expected to be progressive, wherein innovative and creativity should be the by-products (and process) of learning.

Assurance: Judgment of high or low-service quality largely depends on how the students perceive the actual performance based on their expectation. The level of tolerance in service standards differs across all areas; for instance, the more important the area, the smaller the level of tolerance. Students' willingness to modify expectation of service standards needs to be appropriately managed through the availability of choices. Hence, from a holistic perspective of education, support services and facilities also play a vital role, in contributing to the overall service quality in higher education.

Empathy: It is sometimes a challenge for institutions to meet student expectations and demands. For instance, a shortage of teaching staff and the need for optimal enrolments have

seen an increase in class sizes, stretching the teacher-student ratio. This has implication on the level of individual attention and empathy given to each student inside and outside classroom. Further, when teachers are expected to assume multiple roles including curriculum writing, stand-up teaching, mentoring, project supervising, and administrative responsibilities, the level of service quality may become less standardised and desirable over time (Parasuraman *et al*, 1985). The advantage of this model is that it would ask students to consider their expectations as well as experiences and provides an opportunity for reflection, based on personal desires and contextual considerations. This way, rating and feedback provided by students is more objective and less erratic (Yeo, 2008).

Yeo and Marquardt (2011) in their paper on expectation-perception in higher education focused on the use of services marketing models such as SERVQUAL (**Appendix A**) and SERVPERF (Firdaus A, 2005) (a services quality model adapted from SERVQUAL specifically for higher education)(**Appendix B**), within the Civil Engineering and Mathematics schools at a Singapore university. Their methodology consisted of interviews of university staff (24) within the two schools and covered three broad topic areas: customer focus, quality course design and support services. Although their findings are clinically interesting, it is difficult to draw conclusions from this paper as even the best intentioned academics may be unaware of their lack of connectedness to the student body, especially with regard to empathy. Many of the qualities that students value in university staff are difficult to learn. Factors such as openness, being student focused, friendliness and reliability are behavioural characteristics and are difficult to adopt if they are not already part of your character. Knowing you need to behave this way and behaving this way are two different things (Akerlind, 2004).

This is supported in Sarrico and Rosa (2014) where they discuss the two different aspects of the teaching delivered at HE institutions. One is operational teaching and covers the delivery of the service and the other is the input from the student and their perspective of the service delivery. Because students are not a homogeneous group, the way they will relate to any given experience will be different. Their research used a questionnaire delivered to 50% of Portuguese HE institutions, with 11,600 students completing the survey. Their findings showed that significant differences existed between the average scores of expectation and perception levels for all of the variables under analysis. In other words, the prior expectation of the students was significantly higher than their perceptions of the quality of their educational experience. In addition, this satisfaction level became lower the further the students progressed with their studies. The differences between students and the fact that they are all have different educational experiences, makes measuring their actual satisfaction very difficult. What is true for one student will not be the case for another, just like any other service encounter. What becomes clear is that there is a gap between prior expectations and the perceived service experience (Sarrico and Rosa, 2014). But knowing there are gaps in a customer service experience is only part of the solution. If satisfaction is to be improved there needs to be

knowledge about what is wrong with the service experience. Using a Critical Incident Technique (CIT) is another way to obtain this information. By asking respondents to provide specific negative and positive experiences, either by interview or in questionnaires is an accurate manner to discover what works and what does not work for your clients (Douglas et al, 2008).

### **Managing Quality in the HE Process**

Customer satisfaction is often used synonymously with quality, and quality is frequently defined as meeting and exceeding customer expectations. Meirovich and Romar (2006) argue that the difficulty of applying marketing concepts to the HE experience is due to the dual role of students and teachers. They have complementary and conflicting roles within the HE process. Normally, when a customer purchases a product or service in the market place, they evaluate both the product quality as well as the supplier. In the educational process the situation is reversed because the teacher does the evaluation in the form of assessment. Without these evaluations students cannot progress to the next stage of their education. It is difficult to come up with a similar situation in industry where the supplier constantly evaluates the customer. Indeed, the presence of these evaluations creates a truly unique situation in education because the fact that a teacher evaluates the student, means simply that a teacher is not only a supplier and the student is not just a customer. Their relationship goes beyond these roles, and is more intricate and multifaceted (Meirovich and Romar, 2006). The logical implication of this is that a student's satisfaction with a certain course and teacher is influenced by both knowledge-seeking (customer role) and grade-seeking motivation, where the relative weights of each are difficult to measure. The motivation to attain high grades, together with the corresponding behaviours discussed above, constitutes the grade-seeking role of a student (Meirovich and Romar, 2006). Complementary to the customer role of a student is the supplier role of a teacher. The purpose of this role is to provide the best quality service and to this end a teacher is engaged in behaviours such as; developing, challenging, sustaining, explaining, encouraging and discussing issues with students. It is important that HE institutions actively engage in improving their service quality. If they do not they will lose out to other institutions that operate using a student-centred focus, improved customer data and process management, increased student loyalty, retention and satisfaction within their programs and services (Seeman and O'Hara, 2006).

### **The situation in property higher education in Australia**

Studies within the property discipline within higher education (Newell, 2013; Boyd, 2010; Bedggood & Donovan, 2012) found that at the specific property education level there were key factors influencing the student satisfaction ratings. These included the quality of instruction, the perceived relevance of the instruction and the difficulty of the task. The most important of these is the quality of instruction, which includes the lecturer personality, perceived knowledge and skill and friendliness and approachability. This factor can account for 50–80 per cent of the variance in student satisfaction ratings (Bedggood & Donovan, 2012). It has become

increasingly more important for Australian universities to seek higher satisfaction scores from their students for their educational programs. Good teaching scores and overall student satisfaction is now linked to government funding for universities (Newell, 2013).

Historical changes and the academic development of higher education property programs in Australia have created a situation where the practical element of property education has diminished (Ball, 2014). While it is accepted that “work readiness” for valuation graduates is lacking, it is not the sole responsibility of universities to fill this gap. In the past, the work experience programs fulfilled this role, but in a new era of property education there needs to be a different model. One possible solution could be greater interaction between industry and educators to address this emerging problem. With the fading out of work experience as an active component of Australian property higher education programs, there is a need for increased practical industry experience to form part of the curriculum. Alternatively employers may have to accept a greater training role for new staff (Ball, 2014).

## **Methodology**

The best way to understand any phenomenon is to allow the questions to emerge and change as the researcher gains a greater understanding of the material being investigated (Krauss, 2005). The research methodology chosen for this paper is a combination of Interpretivism and Critical Incident Theory, especially in regard to the methodology where although the authors not only brings their own subjective experience to the research, but also adopt the role of a facilitator by encouraging the participation of the subjects in the research. This research has used open interviewing and open ended questionnaires to encourage open dialogue between the researchers and those being questioned. Interpretivism is a view of the world as defined by the people in it and their actions and reactions to events that happen to them (Voce, 2004).

Within this research the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) does not constrain students to student feedback questionnaires, but allows them to describe their experiences in open – ended responses (Douglas et al, 2008). The CIT asks the participants to reflect and provide the researcher with both positive and negative experiences of their service encounter. This allows the stakeholders to express their experiences, perceptions and feelings in their own words. This research has collected information about the educational experiences of property students in Australia from the public universities offering higher education programs. For the student questionnaire, no sampling method was adopted as the questionnaire was delivered to the entire population of students within this study. This process was followed by a series of in-depth individual interviews to further enhance the description of the critical incidents with students from property higher education programs.

There are ten Australian public universities offering undergraduate property (real estate) related degrees and they have all been included in this research (Australian Property Institute, 2015).

A questionnaire was developed using Qualtrics, which was delivered to every property undergraduate student in Australia across the period from September 2014 till April 2015. This eight month period was necessary as a number of the universities required a lengthy period of analysis before allowing questionnaires to be delivered to their undergraduate students. This questionnaire was created using data from group interviews and was trialled on groups of the author's students who fell within the data population, to ensure that the questionnaire was operating successfully. Once this was observed to work it was delivered nationwide via the program coordinators at the ten universities (**Appendix C**). An analysis of the data revealed that although most of the respondents discussed their negative and positive experiences at university it was felt that a number of in-depth interviews specifically asking for further elaboration with regard to Critical Incidents would offer a greater understanding of the student experience. 30 of these interviews were carried out to gain more detail about the specific critical incidents.

## **Discussion**

Of the 350 students who completed the questionnaire, 16% are from first year, 40% from second year, 35% from third year and 9% from fourth year. This indicated a reasonable spread of respondents from across all year groups, as only three universities had four year programs at the time. Similarly the spread of male to female was reasonably representative, as overall it is a traditionally male dominated program, with 60% male respondents and 40% female. The age groups of the respondents ranged from 23% under 20 years, 53% from 20 to 24 years, 8% from 25-29 years, 6% aged between 30-34 years and a very high 10% of responses from students aged over 35 years. This appears to indicate that mature aged students, although not making up the bulk of the property student cohort, are concerned to have their say about the program they are undertaking. It is estimated that the population of property students across these ten universities is approximately 2,200 students and with 350 respondents, this is approximately 16% of the total Australian cohort.

## **Results from the student questionnaire**

28% of the respondents were part-time students and 82% were full-time. 81% of the students are working during their study, 20% of them were working full-time and the rest part-time. Approximately 40% of the respondents, who work, are working in the property industry and the remaining 60% work in a non-property industry. In response to the question of how satisfied they were, 51% responded as over 80% satisfied with their program and a further 40% were between 60-79% satisfied. Of the remaining respondents 8% were satisfied between 40-69% and only 1% were less than 39% satisfied with their property program (See **Figure One**).



**Figure One – Property HE student satisfaction**

The students were then asked to give reasons for their dissatisfaction if it was less than 80% and 34% of respondents gave feedback on what they needed to make their satisfaction levels higher. The majority of these comments were concerning the poor quality of teaching, with phrases from boring, ill prepared, badly organised, no practical experience and confusing assignments. Some examples of the comments are:

*“ This course does not need to be four years you could easily remove unnecessary subjects and condense it into three years with a further fourth honours year being optional.”*

*“Lecturers being willing to accommodate more for online students with tutorials etc. outside business hours make me happy!!”*

*“Subjects that are focused in actual practice are very important and provides insight into real world situations. Studying property law was very important. Lecturers who try and trick students into learning all of the course content and not being specific about actual topics covered in examinations creates massive amounts of unnecessary stress for students.”*

*“Compulsory exposure to the working property industry would be excellent.”*

*“Lack of structure in many property courses is frustrating”*

*“academic staff that give us good feedback and guidance”*

*“Inconsistencies with teaching. For example, lecture stated a fact and in tutorial the guest lecturer contradicted this. This has happened many times.”*

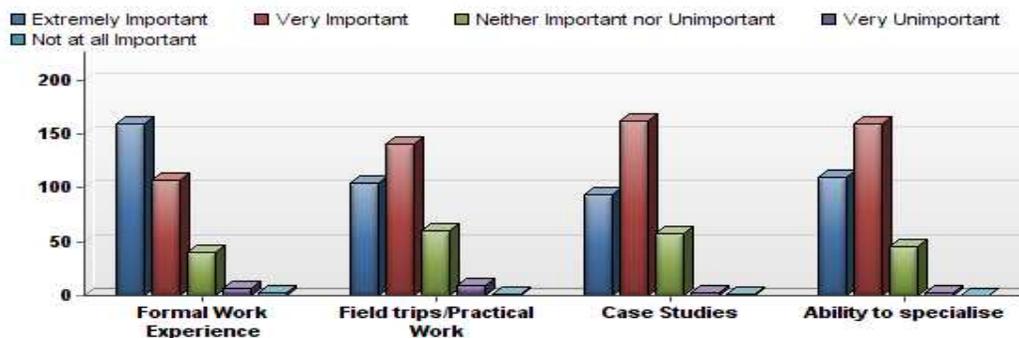
*“I find the online only subjects are a bit slack, as things like the discussion board are not checked by staff regularly and this leaves you waiting often days for answers – secondly, I feel that the course could be improved if it incorporated some practical work experience into it.”*

*“Although it is a business degree I feel there is too much emphasis on core business subjects instead of subjects that relate directly to property.”*

*“Needs to be more property focused”*

With regard to practical experience, there were ten comments specifically complaining about the lack of this activity and a further five noted that the curriculum was poor, with little choice and no chance to specialise. A group of four made mention of how hard it was for external students who received very little support from their respective universities and a further four students admitted that the dissatisfaction was due to their lack of interest, or effort.

Question seven of the questionnaire asked student to rank the importance of four specific things in their property programs. With regard to the importance of formal work experience in their degree, 48% of respondents stated it was extremely important and a further 30% found it to be very important. The use of field trips and practical work was considered extremely important by 31% of the respondents and a further 45% found them to be very important. The importance of case studies found 28% students who thought they were extremely important and a further 55% who thought that they were very important. The ability to specialise was also rated highly with 32% finding this option to be extremely important and a further 52% finding it to be very important. This is set out in **Figure Two**.



**Figure Two – Student favouring formal work experience, field trips/practical work, case studies**

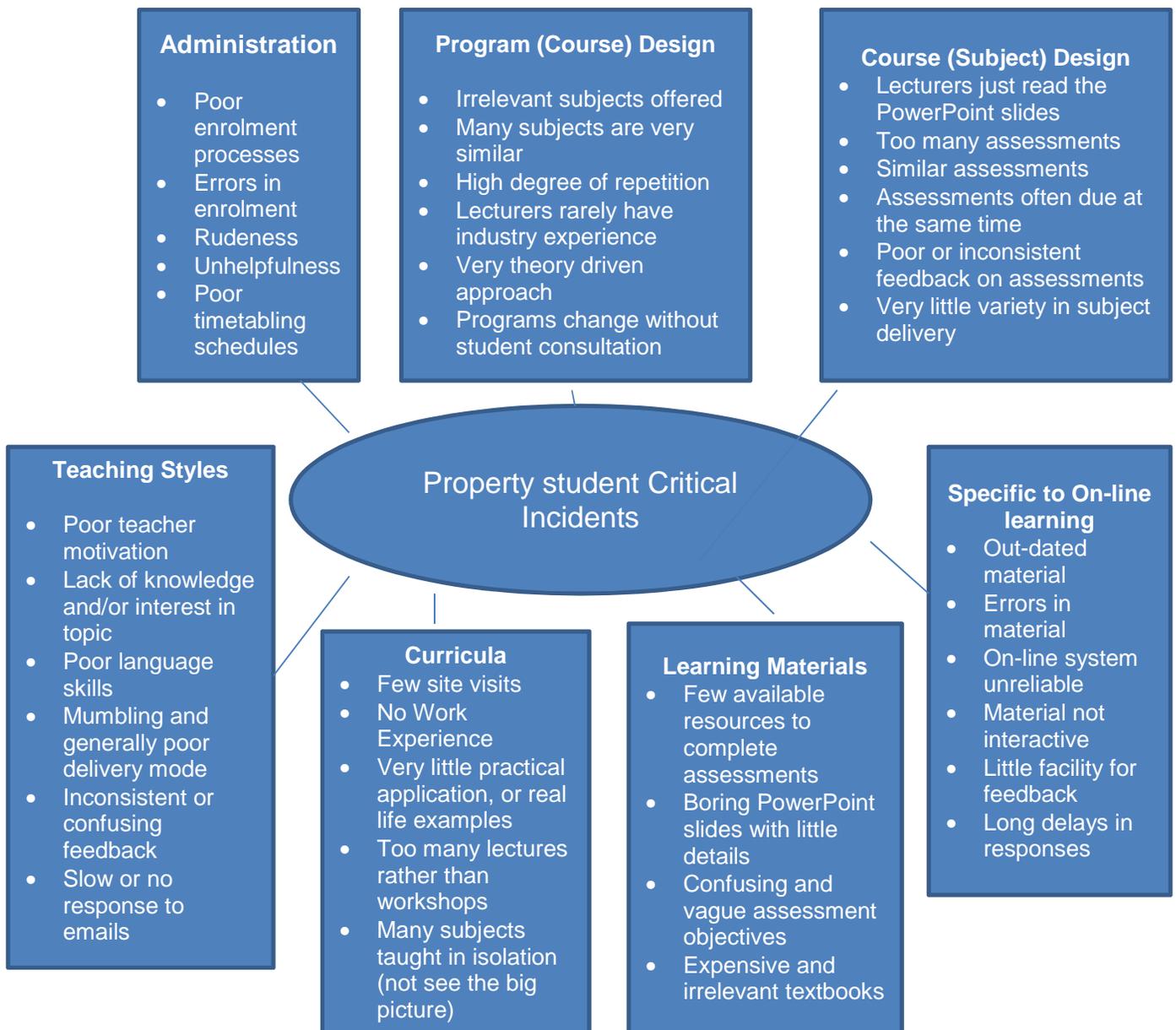
This paper concentrates on the negative critical incidents experienced by property higher education students. They also provided positive feedback, but these issues do not need to be addressed to improve student satisfaction. On examination of the feedback very few of the comments referred to facilities and similarly few for administration difficulties. The majority of the complaints dealt with the actual learning and teaching experiences of the property HE students. Also, many of the negative critical incidents recounted occurred to multiple respondents, all in slightly different situations, but overall, the descriptions given fell into the following seven areas:

- Administration;
- Curricula;
- teaching (individual styles, motivation and experience);
- program/course design;
- subject/course design;

- learning materials used; and
- problems specific to distance/online study.

The following diagram in **Figure Three** provides a summary of the negative Critical Incidents experienced by property higher education students in Australia.

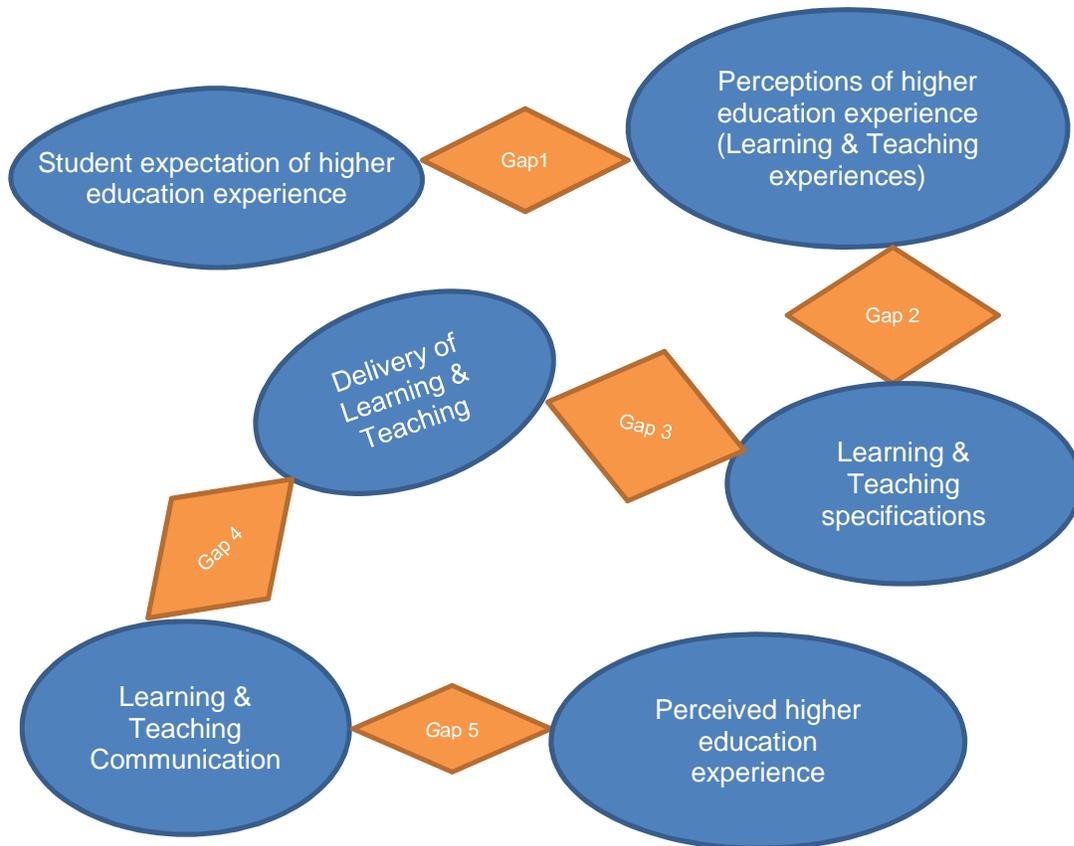
### Negative Critical Incidents for Property HE students



**Figure Three – Summary of Negative Critical Incidents developed by authors**

## Developing a model of Gap Analysis

This model relates specifically to higher education and identifies five possible gaps in student experiences compared to individual expectations. **Figure Four** indicates where the gaps fall in a higher education experience.



**Figure Four – Model of Gap Analysis in a Higher Education student experience**

(Model developed by authors based on marketing theory)

**Gap one** is a misalignment of their expectation of what the HE experience would be like and then their perception of the actual learning and teaching experience. Examples of this could be that expectations are unreasonable or flawed and the university are unaware of what the student expected. It includes what they expect after marketing, word of mouth promotion, career advice etc. **(Expectation/Perception Gap)**

**Gap two** deals with the perception of the experience as seen through the learning and teaching specifications and cover things such as: program length, Course Guides, assessment criteria, timetabling, contact hours, class size, classrooms etc. **(Specification Gap)**

**Gap three** covers service performance inconsistencies with regard to the delivery of the learning and teaching materials. This relates to items such as lecturer problems, IT mishaps, material presented poorly etc. **(Delivery Gap)**

**Gap four** this is the gap where the problems are compounded. The communication gap covers how the institution handles all communication with the student, including any resolution of previous problems. Are the communications clear, confusing, contradictory etc. **(Communication Gap)**

**Gap five** is the gap between communication experiences and the student's overall perceived education experience. This is where they reflect and remember the good and bad experiences and make their final judgement on their satisfaction level. **(Experience Gap)**

To illustrate how this works, let us use the property student critical incidents as recounted to the researcher. A Gap 1 experience, where expectations do not meet a student's perception of their experience, could be the student who says "I expected that I would have things personally explained to me"; and "When asked for help, one administrator shrugged and told me that this was not their responsibility". This may be the only negative experiences this student has, or they could go on to have a Gap 2 experience. A typical Gap 2 experience taken from the interviews would be a specification gap and these problems are very common. For example, "When I went online to complete my timetabling my password would not work and by the time this was rectified by the helpdesk there were no places left in the classes that suited my work commitments". Another example of this type of gap is:

*I thought I was completing all my subjects this year, but when I applied to graduate I was told that the program had changed and I still needed to complete one more core subject. I had the correct number of points, but not the right subjects. I had completed one subject that I did not need. This was very upsetting as nobody had warned me about this. I paid for a subject I did not need and had to wait a whole year longer to graduate, as the subject I needed was only offered in second semester. I also had to wait a whole year for a pay increase as a result of this error (a comment from the student interview process).*

This complaint could also fit within Gap 4, the communication gap. This type of gap is the most common negative incident recounted during the interviews and also in the worst experiences of a higher education experience in the student questionnaire responses.

An example of Gap 3, an example of the delivery gap is, "A lot of the online material is out-dated and full of errors"; or "One lecturer has just completed their PhD and they presented the material very poorly"; or "One lecturer simply read the lecture slides very slowly with no other explanation and completed the two-hour lecture in 40 minutes".

With regard to Gap 4, the communication gap, this type of negative incident can often occur along with one of the other gap experiences. If one of the other incidents is reported and no compensation, restitution or apology happens, then the student will also suffer a communication gap incident. An example of this could be "One lecturer gives me the same mark for all my

assessments no matter how much effort I have made. They also give no feedback and when I asked how I could improve my work they could offer no suggestions and I was told no one ever gets full marks, no matter how good their work is”.

The final gap in this model is Gap 5, the experience gap and exists after the communication occurs and the student is left remembering the experience. If the communication experience was frustrating, unhelpful and not motivating as the experience just recounted, then that student will feel very dissatisfied. If the communication experience had suggested a solution to a student’s problem, rather than compound the problem with negativity, then that student could leave the experience feeling reasonably satisfied with a solution and a direction to follow.

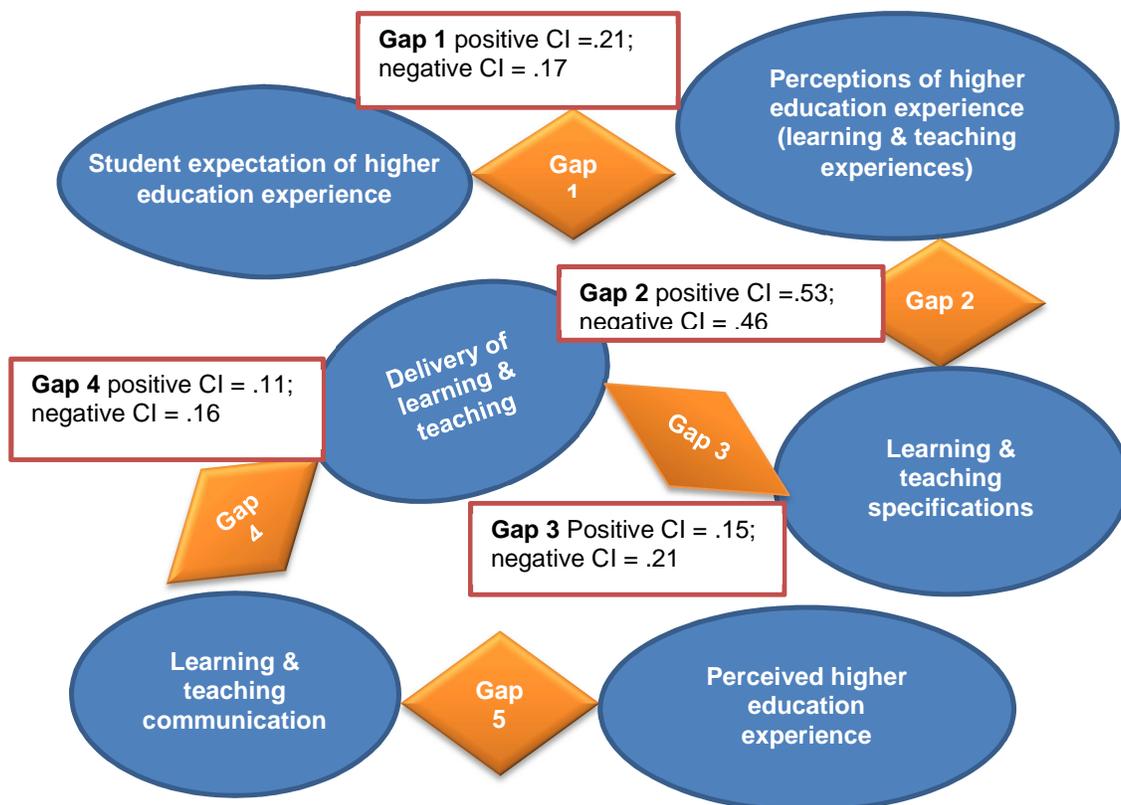
During the data collection period 170 positive critical incidents were provided to the researcher and this was offset by 244 negative critical incidents. All of these critical incidents were coded into the respective experience gaps that related to the specifications of the incident. The specific total of the incidents for each gap was then calculated as a proportion of the overall total to show the relative importance of each gap in the overall experience of a property higher education student. This was completed for both the positive and negative critical incidents. Of the 170 positive critical incidents 21 per cent related to Gap 1, which was the expectation gap and referred to items that reinforced the students’ original expectation about their university experience. Gap 2 which referred to the specification gap and covered the course and program outlines, learning materials and assessment, administration, timetabling, class size and classrooms and so on received 53 per cent of the positive comments. Gap 3 was the delivery gap and referred to lecturers and the presentations of the learning materials and this section received 15 per cent of the positive comments with gap 4, the communication gap receiving 11 per cent. Gap 5 is the culmination of both positive and negative experiences for a student during their university experience and this was discussed in a separate question in the survey which asked about their level of satisfaction overall and was covered earlier in the discussion. These results cannot be inserted into the model as 350 students answered the satisfaction question and a lesser proportion of students answered the section recording the positive and negative critical incidents.

The situation for the negative critical incidents shows a similar pattern to the one given for the positive critical incidents, but in this case there are 244 negative critical incidents. 17 per cent of the complaints refer to Gap 1 experiences; 46 per cent to Gap 2; 21 per cent to Gap 3 and 16 per cent to Gap 4. These proportions have been placed in a table (See **Figure Four**) below:

Gap	Characteristics	Positive CI	Negative CI
1	Misalignment between student expectation and the actual higher education experience	0.21	0.17
2	Student perceptions of L+T specifics	0.53	0.46
3	Student perceptions of delivery of L+T materials	0.15	0.21
4	The communication gap. Student perceptions of how all communication is handled by the university.	0.11	0.16
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

**Figure Five: showing proportions for the critical incidents (CI)**

This table identifies the areas where the most complaints are being generated and the areas that the universities need to address if they wish to improve property higher education student satisfaction. The proportions of the positive and negative comments have also been placed on the model, (see **Figure Six**) below:



**Figure Six: Higher Education Services Gap Model with Critical Incident proportions**

It can be seen that by far the most important gap, for both positive and negative critical incidents is Gap 2, with .53 and .46 proportions respectively. It is the area of the perception gap where most of

the complaints are to be found and this is the area that the universities need to improve if they wish to see an increase in student satisfaction. Almost half the student complaints concern this area of their higher education experience. The program and course content, program and course design, the timetable, administration and the class frequency and size. This is what the property higher education students complain about. It may be different for other groups of higher education students, but for the current cohort of property students these are the things they complain about. On the other hand many of the students are very supportive of these factors as well. Although there were less positive comments expressed by students than negative comments many students mentioned specific excellent teachers and programs at their respective universities.

It is possible that any given student may only experience one or two gaps in their academic career, but it is also feasible that they will experience all five gaps and possibly more than once. The authors maintain that the level of a HE student's satisfaction with their university experience will be related to the gaps they have experienced over their university career and in particular those they have experienced in their final period of study.

## **Conclusion**

When customer (student) satisfaction are examined and gaps are found in their experiences the individual problems may be addressed and even rectified or the client is compensated, but rarely does the intrinsic process change and the errors in service delivery, the negative critical incidents, continue. The same problems continue to be raised as each successive group of students are questioned. Over a four year time period and at ten different universities it is the same problems that reoccur. Much research has been undertaken in an attempt to determine the level of satisfaction for higher education students with their educational experience. Longitudinally very little has changed over the last 20 years. Various strategies have been adopted and student satisfaction has improved over this period, but never by very much and it probably never will. 100% student satisfaction may be possible for individual classes and individual academics, however this is a rarity. Satisfaction is not the focus of students; their focus is on gaining a degree. This is their reason for attending university. Students persist not so the experience improves, but so they achieve the qualification that they signed up for. They have become cynical about the surveys and questionnaires. They fill them out; give their opinions and very little changes.

Higher education is more than services marketing, it is relationship marketing. Although there are classrooms, on-line materials, textbooks etc, the predominant experience is between the students, their administrators and lecturers and like all interaction between humans, some is positive and some is negative. Students may relate well to one lecturer and not another. Lecturers may have an excellent group of students to work with one semester and not the next. Higher education is like a sushi train, a constantly moving set of experiences, some good, some bad, which make up

the three or four years of undergraduate education. In the scheme of a life it may not be all that important. It is possible that we have reached the limits of how student satisfaction can be managed and improved. It may be time to evaluate the process and accept that despite the best efforts of well-intentioned university personnel, this is as good as it is going to get. The strategies that many universities put in place such as peer review for promotion, student satisfaction surveys and teaching awards need to be continued, but perhaps this is realistically a maintenance program, rather than an ever increasing phenomenon.

A new slant on the student satisfaction issue would be to accept that student dissatisfaction is always present and instead of asking what students need, spend time offering strategic suggestions to improve the student experience:

- Accept that some lecturers are boring and try to offset this
- Accept that some assessment is inappropriate, vague and full of errors and try and manage this and
- Accept human error and enable strategies to combat this.

The future of property higher education can only be improved if the stakeholders work together and talk through all viable options. A start would be for the ten universities to individually examine their Gap 2 learning and teaching specifications and also Gap 4, communication, in an endeavour to improve the student experience. Most of the universities have steps in place to improve the Gap 3 components of learning and teaching delivery. However teachers come and go and some of the delivery experiences for students are rewarding, others are not; this will probably always be the case. By making improvements to the other processes, discussed in Gaps 2 and 4, permanent improvements in stakeholder satisfaction can be achieved.

### **Limitation of this research**

Although possible, it would be extremely difficult to input values for these gap experiences and thereby compute a relative value of each student's satisfaction score based on their level of service failure. This research discusses the concepts in a general manner and identifies a relationship between service failure and student satisfaction, but does not compute a value or determine a causal relationship; this would be possible with future research. Changing student expectations and experiences overall is a daunting task. This paper reports specifically on property (real estate) higher education programs in Australia. However there are no doubt commonalities within this research to other higher education programs and across other countries.

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## **Appendix A (SERVQUAL Questionnaire)**

### **Questionnaire items as applied to the airline industry**

1. Modern appeal of the aircraft
2. Visual attractiveness of aircraft
3. Appearance of the employees

4. Visual attractiveness of the materials related to the airline's services (tickets, in-flight magazines, security instructions)
5. Fulfilment of promises
6. Employees' interest in solving passenger problems
7. Flight's punctuality
8. Assurance that the luggage will reach the destination
9. Handling of the luggage
10. Speed of the service offered
11. Willingness of employees to attend passengers
12. Willingness of the employees to respond to the passengers' questions
13. Level of communication to the passengers regarding unusual circumstances and unexpected occurrences on flight
14. Degree of trust transmitted to the passengers by employees
15. Kindness of employees
16. Level of knowledge of employees in responding to questions of the clients
17. Communication of security procedures
18. Clear identification of the emergency equipment
19. Individualized attention provided to passengers
20. Convenience of flight schedules
21. Cordiality and kindness of employees
22. Searching for the best for the passenger
23. Understanding of the specific needs of the passengers
24. Utilization of an understandable terminology whenever attending the passenger
26. Comfort of airplanes (seats, corridors, hand luggage set)
27. Overall level of satisfaction
28. Assessment of the service received in relation to expectations
29. Comparison with ideal company

(Source: Robledo, 2001)

#### **Appendix B (SERVQUAL Education Questionnaire)**

- B1 The institution has up-to-date equipment
- B2 The institution's physical facilities are visually appealing
- B3 The institution's employees are well dressed and appear neat
- B4 The appearance of the physical facilities of the institution is in line with the type of service provided
- B5 When the institution promises to do something by certain time, it does so
- B6 The institution is sympathetic and reassuring
- B7 When you have problems, the institution is dependable
- B8 The institution provides its services at the time it promises to do so
- B9 The institution keeps its records accurately
- B10 The institution does not tell its students exactly when services will be performed
- B11 You do not receive prompt service from the institution's employees
- B12 Employees of the institution are not always willing to help students
- B13 Employees of the institution are too busy to respond to student requests promptly
- B14 You can trust employees of the institution
- B15 You can feel safe in your transaction with the institution's employees
- B16 Employees of the institution are polite
- B17 Employees get adequate support from the institution to do their jobs well
- B18 The institution does not give you individual attention
- B19 Employees of the institution do not give you personal attention
- B20 Employees of the institution do not know what your needs are
- B21 The institution does not have your best interests at heart
- B22 The institution does not have operating hours convenient to all

(Source: Firdaus, 2005)

## APPENDIX C

### Default Question Block

This research aims to better understand what makes students satisfied with their study programs. It is expected that the results will assist in improving program quality in the future. In this exercise I am asking you to evaluate your property/valuation university program that you are currently enrolled in. This survey forms part of a PhD study being undertaken into an examination of Property education in Australia.

What year level are you currently enrolled in?

Which University are you attending?

How satisfied are you with your property/Valuation program?

If you answered any level less than over 80% satisfied for the above question, is there anything you can tell me that will make you more satisfied with your program? Feel free to make as many suggestions as you like.

What are the five best things about your Property program?

What are the five worst things about your Property program?

How important is it for you that your Property program contains the following components? (This is regardless of whether these things are currently in your Property program.)

Formal Work Experience  
Field trips/Practical Work  
Case Studies  
Ability to specialise

Please tell me a little about yourself.

Under 20

20 - 24

25 - 29

30 - 34

Over 35

Part-time

Full-time

Property Industry

Non-property industry

Part-time

Full-time

What age group do you belong to?

Are you a Part-time or Full-time student?

Are you working during your study?

If Yes, please indicate the area and amount of time in the section below.

Is it your intention to join a Property professional body such as API, RICS or other? If not, please explain why not?

Is there anything that you could share that you think might provide me with a better understanding of what makes students really happy – or conversely, really unhappy – with their property and valuation studies?