

Student Expectations – How do we measure up?

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Abstract

Students of Higher Education increasingly perceive themselves to be customers of a service. This is partly as a result of the funding arrangements in the UK where students (or their parents) contribute directly to the cost of their education, and partly because of the growth of consumerism in public services. The student experience has become an important dimension in the measurement of quality of education.

The major focus of the paper will illustrate the ways in which student expectations have changed over the last three decades and what the drivers for this change have been. The nature of student expectations and the form of appropriate university responses are clearly complex issues, touching on almost all aspects of higher education. There is considerable value in sharing experience, knowledge and reflections about these matters.

The paper will conclude by demonstrating how a web based interactive version of a 'Service Template', QUEST (Quality Evaluation by Student Template) can highlight aspects of the student experience to generate a better fit between what students expect in a course of study and what they receive.

Changing Student Expectations

It is clear to all who work in Higher Education (HE) that student expectations have changed over the last three decades. These expectations are now of greater complexity and a different order to those which might have applied in the past. Universities now find themselves being pushed on the one hand to respond to mounting student expectations, while on the other there are fears that the fundamental purpose of HE could be distorted or even lost if institutions go too far in the direction of placing HE on a commercial footing.

It is interesting to reflect how student expectations have changed over the past thirty years. In the 1970s a student at university may have expected:

- A place of scholarly reflection and learning
- To obtain a degree
- Enhanced employment prospects
- Support by government funding
- Teacher student relationship to be one sided
- Very few expectations of teaching quality
- No concept of expectations of other stakeholders

The 1980s and 90s were very much a period of change. There was the translation of polytechnics to universities in 1992. This changed the face of HE, we now had a sector responding more to societies needs, providing vocational courses and catering for a more diverse set of students. A new generation of students were entering HE and had a new set of expectations. The introduction of tuition fees has led to students acting more like customers. How many times have we heard students say “I expect value for money”. Today students are seen increasingly as customers of a service. The supplier-driven, take-it-or-leave-it model which most HE institutions have followed in the past has been replaced by a focus on the student as a customer of a service.

Students (and parents) expectations are now high and as Davies (2002) points out, these now include:

- Flexibility and choice in the delivery of education
- Access to cutting edge technology
- A two way communication process between themselves and with the university
- To be consulted about the learning experience
- Accurate information about their courses, assessment procedures, complaints process, etc
- Honesty with respect to whether their needs can be met or not

To these we may wish to add:

- Quality and professionalism in the provision of services
- Access to suitably qualified teachers and appropriate learning support
- Value of study to career prospects

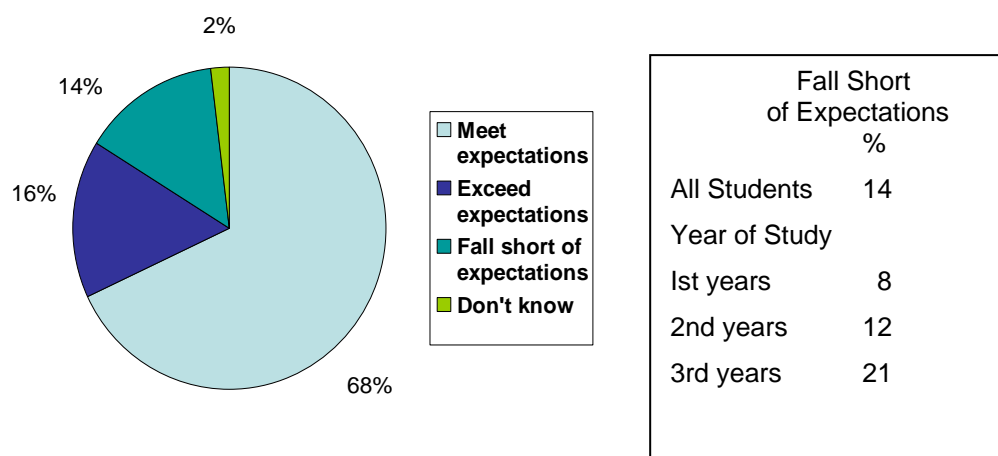
It is possible to sketch some of the broad parameters that have caused student expectations to change. They include, for example the rise of the student as a customer, which has been fuelled by the view by government that they should shoulder an increasing share of their cost of HE. Many students now work part time while in HE and as a result want a flexible learning environment. (eg 24/7 access to services) Not last in a drive of change has been the influence of external agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency, with it's emphasis on the quality of the student experience. With its rolling programme of subject reviews there has been a heavy emphasis on identifying and enhancing the student experience and whether institutions are meeting student expectations.

It is not surprising, with the greater role of the student in assessing the quality of their educational experience, that HE institutions are devoting much more time improving the student experience. In many cases this has been carried out by 'Bridging the Gap' between what students expect and experience. By controlling the student learning environment HE institutions have been successful in bringing more in line student experiences and expectations. This has been achieved in my institution by such things as:

- Changing curriculum design to enhance employability
- More flexible provision
- Improvement in teaching quality
- Improved student support
- Greater transparency

The recent annual Unite (2003) student living report provides a valuable insight into the way students view their university with respect to expectations. During the current debate about student funding, it is interesting to note that the survey found that 58% of students think that they receive good value for money from their course, while 10% feel their course to be poor value.

Does Your Course Meet Expectations?



Source: Unite Student Living Report 2003

Figure 1

As Figure 1 from the Unite report indicates, 84% of students say their course meets or exceeds their expectations but 14% feel they have fallen short of expectations. An area of concern is that dissatisfaction with a course increases further into the course as a student progresses. For first year students this is 8% and rises to 21% in year three. It is important to remember that in order to improve the student experience, their expectations have to be taken into account. Clearly the results from the Unite survey indicate that universities are falling short of this as students progress through their course.

Management of Student Expectations

Universities need to take a more strategic approach to the management of student expectations. This management might take the form of spelling out more clearly to students what they will experience and in addition be prepared to change student expectations. This is especially important in light of evidence (James, 2002) that suggests that student expectations can be shaped significantly by a two way dialogue between 'provider and customer'.

As pointed out by Sander et al. (2000) “HE has typically adopted an ‘inside out’ approach – with us on the inside assuming we know what students expect and want from HE. However, successful service industries have been shown to think ‘outside in’. They research what customers expect of the service and then work to provide the service that meets those of customer expectations.”

It would seem sensible that an obvious step in the management of student expectations is to seek ways to understand these expectations ie adopt the ‘outside in’ approach suggested by Sander. Namely, in order to increase student satisfaction, we need to identify where gaps exist between the experience and expectations of students. Identifying where such gaps exist not only gauges the overall level of satisfaction, but reveals specific areas where improvements can be made to raise the level of student satisfaction and therefore the success of the service offered. The next section outlines how the approach used by the service industry can be used to highlight where significant gaps exist between what students are expecting and what they are experiencing on a course.

The Template

Tricker et al. (1999) and Long et al. (2001) have adapted a tool used in the service industry, the Template, to measure the fit between customer expectation and experience (Staughton, R.V.W. and Williams, C.S., 1994), so that it would apply to the situation that students (as customers) find themselves in with their course provider (as service industry). In the context of education courses, this translates as a gap that might exist between what students *expect* on their course and what they in fact *experience*.

In brief, the Template adopts a radically different philosophy from the more conventional satisfaction survey. A number of aspects of interest are first identified. This is done by asking students what are the most important aspects of course provision to them. For each of these chosen aspects the Template offers a spectrum of possibilities, represented by distinct end-points on a scale, on which respondents locate a position corresponding to first what they *expect* in their course and second what they *experience*. The scale for a typical aspect is shown in Figure 2.

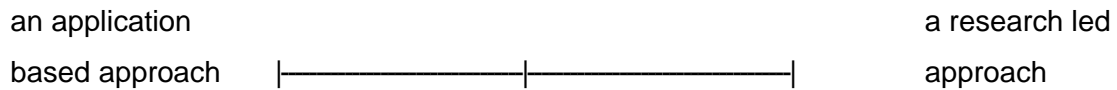


Figure 2: Typical Template Scale

The aspects are identified by asking students to identify the most important aspects of course provision to them. A variety of methods are used to establish what the students themselves felt were the important aspects of course delivery. These included focus groups and a paper based questionnaire (Rangecroft et al, 1999) Care is taken to ensure that the end-points are as far as possible value-free.

After the students have marked the two positions (one indicating what they *expect*, the other what they *experience*), the distance between the two – in other words the gap - is calculated for each of the aspects. The gaps identified by individual students are then combined with responses from other students at the same stage of the same course and analysed to produce comparative statistics. The most meaningful of these statistics is the so-called *satisfaction gap* associated with an aspect of course provision. This is the average across the student cohort of the absolute values of the difference between the two measurements. The absolute value is used to reflect that any difference between what is *expected* and what is *experienced* indicates dissatisfaction. The aspects included in the Template are then ranked in order of this satisfaction gap to establish the order of importance for taking action to close the gap.

The Template (Rangecroft et al. 2002) has been found to allow pinpoint accuracy in the identification and subsequent management of student expectations and experience.

Recently a Web - based version of the Template, QUEST (QUality Evaluation Student Template), has been developed.

Conclusion

In this paper it has been shown how student expectations have constantly changed since the 1970s. It is important that educational providers devote more attention to

ascertaining just what the expectations and experiences of students are. The Template has been shown to be successful in highlighting where there are significant gaps between what students are expecting and experiencing on a course. In doing so it has been found to be a valuable tool in bringing the expectations and experiences of students more closely in line.

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