

Innovative perspectives and approaches for enhancing the student experience

*2014 Strategic Priority Project:
21st Century Student Experience*

Office for Learning and Teaching

*Project Brief
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1. Project abstract

This project builds capacity of higher education institutions by developing new perspectives and approaches for enhancing the student experience. To effectively manage the student experience, institutions must understand who students are and what they expect from higher education. Students have changed in the 21st century and institutions need to understand and do different things to enhance their experience. Much current work has conceptual and technical limitations and is failing to deliver. This project steps ahead in both substantive and methodological ways. Through literature/context reviews and fieldwork it builds new conceptualisations of Australia's undergraduate students which go beyond stereotypes, generalities and dated assumptions. Through a scan of institutional practices it identifies new and under-utilised empirical options for understanding and enhancing the 21st century student experience. It brings these developments together into a model and enhancement framework. Further engagement activities are deployed to seed sustainable institutional adoption.

2. Project overview

2.1 *Aims*

This study aims to bring about sustainable strategic change through improving institutional capacity to enhance the 21st century student experience by:

- building new concepts for understanding Australia's higher education students;
- identifying new data sources and approaches for measuring the student experience; and
- engaging institutions in enhancement work and new conversations about students.

2.2 *Objectives*

To effectively manage the student experience, institutions must understand who students are and what they expect from higher education. Much current work has conceptual and technical limitations and is failing to yield useful information on how students experience higher education. Drawing together consultations with hundreds of experts in recent years, we will create a major new line of work into the undergraduate experience. This project will yield improved perspectives and approaches for institutions to understand students and enhance their experience.

2.3 *Value proposition*

This project builds capacity of higher education institutions by developing new perspectives and approaches for enhancing the student experience. The project will create and capture new value for Australian higher education by:

- generating insights on students, including in areas that have not been considered;
- contributing more nuanced and evidence-based insights into student expectations;
- producing data-driven approaches for enhancing the student experience;
- contributing a model that details constructs and approaches, a framework with implementation guidelines, and institution case studies for enhancing student experience; and
- building institutional engagement with new concepts and approaches.

Work of this scale necessarily builds capacity among the existing workforce and seeds development of new roles and capabilities. Though its conceptual and empirical contributions the project will

deliver infrastructure and architecture for sustainably enhancing and expanding Australia's work in this field.

2.4 Partnership

The 2014 OLT Strategic Priority project is a collaboration between the University of Melbourne, Indiana University, Janet Clarke Hall, Macquarie University, Navitas, University of Queensland, and University of Western Australia.

2.5 Outputs

A suite of reports will be delivered throughout the project, including: Detailed Project Plan, Background Research Report, New Perspectives and Prospects Report, National Engagement Workshops, Enhancement Framework, 21st Century Students Report, Project Website, three Progress Reports, and a Financial Acquittal.

3. Project rationale

This project advances institutional capacity by building new perspectives and approaches for enhancing the student experience. Effectively managing the student experience is essential to retention, support and education. Fundamentally, the prevailing means for conceptualising and assessing the student experience are out of date. Only around 20 per cent of students respond to surveys and only around 15 per cent of variability in the resulting data can be explained. By blending earlier work on students with more contemporary perspectives the project validates new psychographic constructs and profiles for understanding 21st century students. As summarised below, we will validate a suite of new constructs relating to student identity, expectations, wellbeing, engagement, values, opinions, attitudes, interests, commitments and lifestyles. By looking beyond current constructs and information the project exposes new options for institutions.

Fundamentally, we seek to develop different means for enhancing the student experience because higher education is getting a lot more complicated. The system is undergoing radical change with disruptive innovation at its core (Christensen, 2011). New regulatory and funding arrangements are spurring new institutional forms, new qualifications and a larger and more diverse system than ever. Institutions are positioning in increasingly competitive markets, sub-degree programs are expanding, and private payments are increasing. Seeking excellence in all its diverse forms requires innovative ways of doing business.

As higher education changes, so too do the means by which institutions seek to monitor and improve students' experience. Effectively understanding and managing students' experience is vital. It is imperative that institutional recruitment and management systems target relevant facets of the student experience, are deployed in appropriate ways, and return robust data able to impel progress. In doing this they must make appropriate assumptions about the discourse between students and institutions.

Australian higher education has shown substantial leadership in understanding and enhancing the student experience over the last three decades. Myriad studies have been conducted (see: Coates, Tilbrook, Guthrie & Bryant, 2006; Radloff, Coates, Taylor, James & Krause, 2013), building on specific Anglo-American assumptions about 'the student' (e.g. Marton & Saljo, 1976; Pace, 1986). However, as we outline below, particularly given contemporary changes further investment in prevailing approaches now a generation old is yielding increasingly diminishing returns to practice and policy. There is a need to study different concepts and methods to understand contemporary higher education, and build productive and quality futures.

We therefore propose a major new line of work into the experience of our undergraduate students. Who are the individuals entering Australian higher education, and how can institutions better manage their experiences as they progress through study? How can we move beyond the suite of popular but limiting constructs on teaching, retention, experience and engagement to look instead at student profiles, types and segments? How can we get information on each and every student, not just the fifth who respond to surveys, and how can we explain more than a fraction of the variation in students' experience? These are deep and broad yet basic questions which require us to better understand how an increasing number and range of individuals approach higher education, students' identities and expectations, and how institutions can manage and enhance students. This fresh work will help sustain Australia's leadership in this area, with benefits for the sector, institutions and individuals.

We initiate this new line of enhancement work because system and institution changes make understanding students' higher education experience more important than ever before. In light of contemporary policy developments understanding how individuals choose among institutions and courses of study is increasingly complex. At the same time it seems that 'going to uni' is no longer what it once was— a seminal life event or stage, a coming of age almost. Students today source identity-building experiences from a broad range of study, lifestyle and employment opportunities. Such change drives a need to revisit basic assumptions about who students are, what they seek from higher education, the expectations that shape their experience, and how institutions can best help students reach their potential. Yet surprisingly there has been no major cross-institutional study in Australia in recent years into how individuals approach higher education. The concepts that drive many student experience and 'lifecycle' models are similarly dated. The Australian Government has recently tendered for the development of a suite of national 'Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching' without any overarching conceptualisation of the 21st century student.

The way in which we have studied students' experience also needs to change. We contend that rather than rest further weight on approaches designed for a previous era, a more productive way to study the experience of students in the 21st century is to shift from general statements about the broad experience of groups to a more individual focus. The now well-institutionalised focus on groups is largely an historical artefact of the methodological, analytical and processing limitations of the traditional student survey. With mobile technologies, people analytics and other techniques made possible by rapid advances in technology, we now have the tools and data required to overcome these limitations. Hence we propose a sustainable shift in focus using the powerful fields of business, behavioural and academic analytics, referenced as 'student analytics' in this project.

Consequently, the study steps ahead in both substantive and methodological ways:

- Substantively, we will investigate who students are and what they expect from higher education—inquiry that goes beyond stereotypes, generalities and dated assumptions about demography and contexts.
- Methodologically, we will develop sustainable new approaches for Australia to measure and report on these new constructs and profiles. We will develop the field of student analytics and help institutions leverage under-utilised existing data for quality enhancement.

This work advances rather than replaces current work. Student surveys and the concepts they purport to measure have grown to play an important role in Australia. Yet increasingly they have been shaped to furnish information required for monitoring and quality assurance rather than the far more textured information required to more fully understand and continuously improve students' experience. The current work assumes that surveys will continue to play an important role but that there is an enormous need to look into new concepts and data sources.

There are myriad compelling reasons for changing tack and looking more broadly:

- While escalated via paper then online over the last three decades, the ‘student survey’ is an increasingly outdated means of capturing useful information on today’s students. Response rates are in decline (typically around 20% (Radloff et al., 2013)); with evidence suggesting they are increasingly being ignored. More effective electronic footprints are available that students create through their interactions with courseware, social networking and other systems.
- Institutions and other stakeholders seem increasingly unresponsive to results from student experience surveys. There are various reasons for this, including that over the decades strategies have been developed for influencing and rationalising survey responses, that the phenomena measured have themselves become more standardised, that people get habituated to the results, and that almost invariably it is hard to explain statistically more than 15 per cent of variation in data (Coates & Ainley, 2007). Explanatory power is low as well generalizability.
- There is substantial evidence that the student experience is highly individual in nature, yet prevailing analytical approaches emphasise crude group-level statistical generalisations. As the ubiquitous use of mobile technologies implies there is a need to deploy much more nuanced approaches, including through the use of business, academic and people analytics.
- Australia has substantial data on certain facets of student learning and development, yet is seriously lacking data on other important areas. There is a plethora of data on satisfaction and perceptions of teaching, for instance, yet little if any data on who students are, how people approach higher education, the ways in which they learn, and how people change as they progress. Such limitation is stifling innovation, and is in need of major and urgent improvement.
- Most work on this front is framed within the context of institutions and fields, but higher education is increasingly trans-disciplinary and trans-institutional in nature. The future learner is more likely to engage in episodic interactions with multiple institutions in the course of their completion of an undergraduate degree (‘student swirl’ (Sturtz, 2008)). Hence, to make any progress it is imperative to take the individual as the primary unit of analysis.

We have deliberately positioned this project to build squarely on Australia’s excellent research, policy and practice in this field, to launch invigorating and expansive conversations about students’ experience, and to help institutions monitor and improve the quality of education.

4. Project activities

The project is divided into three phases, with discrete activities in each phase and some overlapping activities. Each phase will involve consultation and dissemination of deliverables. Leaders for each phase of the project will be identified. Appendix A summarises the different phases of the project.

4.1 Phase 1: Development

4.1.1 Detailed project plan

Detailed project planning will be conducted to specify/affirm: aim, focus and design; leadership and management responsibilities; institutions, participants, advisors and stakeholders; outcomes and deliverables; risks and methods and workflows; schedules and key dates; communication and engagement strategies. Agreements will be confirmed, systems will be established, teams set up, the

Project Website launched, the Project Reference Group (PRG) formed, launch meetings convened, and ethics applications made.

4.1.2 Background research

Background research will be conducted to construct definitions and concepts, review relevant contexts, and consult with experts and stakeholders.

We will synthesise existing insights on the student experience as a basis for creating new concepts. We will explore a suite of new constructs relating to student identity, expectations, wellbeing, engagement, values, opinions, attitudes, interests, commitments and lifestyles. We will form conceptualisations that go beyond looking at groups to instead focus on individual attributes, profiles and segments relevant to the higher education experience. We will blend earlier research on the student experience (Little, 1975; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; McInnis, Griffin, James & Coates, 2001; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; Scott, 2005; Coates, 2006) with more contemporary perspectives (Junco, Heiberger & Loken, 2010; Nguyen, 2013; Badge, Saunders & Cann, 2012; Hanson, 2014; Weidman, DeAngelo & Bethea, 2014; Borden, 2012; Koch, Borden, Berger, Brautigam, Culbertson, Rynearson, Siemens & Wang, 2013; Marginson, 2014; Stets & Serpe, 2014; Coates, 2013). We will work from existing contributions made in relation to the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (McInnis, et al. 2001), Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) (Coates, 2009), University Experience Survey (UES) (Radloff et al., 2013) and Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO) (Coates & Richardson, 2012). The study will include, but go beyond, a traditional literature review as it will include a series of informal consultations that help position the project. It will also incorporate interrogation of relevant institutional and national datasets, largely designed by project leaders, which will provide a basis for subsequent triangulation. Extending earlier work we will explore the content-rich open-ended comments in particular (Scott, 2005; Radloff, et al., 2013).

As part of this background research we will take stock of existing technical work and contexts. We will draw together all insights gathered thus far in the project and build on previous OLT-funded projects (e.g. Fisher, Valenzuela, & Whale, 2014; Kennedy, Williams, Mulder, Khamis, Copeland, Corrin, Lockyer & Dawson, 2014; Dawson, Alexander, Gardiner, Lockyer, Rodgers, Gasevic, Corrin, Nelson, Fisher, Kennedy & Colvin, 2013). We will also review work underway in the field of business (e.g. LaValle, Lesser, Shockley, Hopkins, & Kruschwitz, 2013), behavioural (e.g. Phillips et al., 2011) and academic analytics (e.g. Baepler & Murdoch, 2010) to furnish cogent and new real-time student analytics about the education process. While some work to date has examined these issues and attempted integration of diverse collections of student-related data (e.g. Leece, 2012; Lodge, 2011), the main aim of these projects and models has been to support student transition and retention. The proposed project seeks to move beyond retention and transition issues towards a more holistic understanding of the student experience through data integration (Lodge & Lewis, 2012).

During this early phase priority will be given to connecting with and influencing: substantive and technical experts; OLT-project leaders; the Project Reference Group; and relevant institutional stakeholders. Two interstate consultations are budgeted.

4.1.3 Phase 1 deliverables

After consultation with the PRG, Phase 1 will conclude with delivery via the Project Website of a Detailed Project Plan, a Background Research Report and a Progress Report.

4.2 Phase 2: Validation

The validation phase will involve empirical work with students and institutions, and model development. The list of activities may be revised based on evidence from Phase 1 of the project.

4.2.1 Student interviews

We will interview students to develop insights into their experience. These interviews will help identify who students are and what they expect from higher education, how students present information on themselves, and what can be done to form conceptually and empirically integrated perspectives. Such work is important—it is the kind of intensive phenomenological inquiry not conducted since the 1970s and 1980s that gave rise to existing survey metrics. Students' authentic insights have intrinsic value and are essential to legitimating project outcomes.

The undergraduate student population will be formally defined. We will seek to interview a sufficient number of students from a broad range of Australia's institutions (nominally three students from at least 10 institutions across most states/territories). Interview questions will be derived from the background research. We will document the interviews in ways that will engage stakeholders in the evidence and outcomes. The documented interviews will assist in subsequent model and framework development, and institutional engagement.

4.2.2 Institutional scan

Along with the student interviews we will begin the process of identifying data available in higher education institutions of relevance to the student experience. Given the abundance of rich and under-used data in institutions we do not seek to build new instruments. Rather, building on work done in Phase 1 we will identify existing data sources that institutions might use to give persuasive new life to the student experience in ways most relevant to their own unique operating context.

We will consult widely with colleagues at higher education institutions to take stock of existing data systems and capabilities. This fresh consultation is important given variations in focus between this and other OLT projects on 'learning analytics', and particularly given our interest in the broader student experience (and 'student analytics'). Using approaches proven in prior studies (e.g. Coates, Edwards & Friedman, 2010; Radloff, et al., 2013), relevant executives at all public/private (around 170 total) Australian higher education providers will be asked to participate in a survey that assesses relevant policies, resources and practices. Working from earlier consultations we will develop a brief inventory for distribution to relevant personnel at each institution that helps build a broad picture of data availability. The results of this institutional scan will be reviewed and form the basis of targeted interviews designed to shed further light on institutional practice. The scan will link potential indicators and metrics with specific facets of the student experience. The empirical work will provide a means of identifying plans and readiness for deployment and adoption.

4.2.3 Model development

This work draws together the background research, student interviews and institutional scan to develop a new model for advancing our understanding of Australia's higher education students. We will confirm concepts, indicators and metrics. Through Carrick/ALTC/OLT and other projects, team members have considerable experience contributing to the theory and practice of data driven approaches to understanding and enhancing the student experience (e.g. Coates, 2006, 2009; Scott, Coates & Anderson, 2008; Edwards, Wilkinson, Coates & Canny, 2012; Coates & Richardson, 2012; Radloff, et al., 2013; Corrin, Kennedy, & Mulder, 2013; Lodge, 2011; Lodge & Lewis, 2012; Siemens & Long, 2011; Borden, Calderon, Fourie, Lepori & Bonaccorsi, 2013).

Building actionable concepts for understanding and managing students is core to this project. While much applied data-focused student management and institutional research work is a-theoretical, we

contend that taking a conceptual approach is critical for it helps people make educational and institutional sense of the phenomena under study. As evidenced through our leadership of innovations like CEQ, AUSSE, UES, AMAC, OLLS and AHELO (referenced above) we will define constructs which advance how individuals conceptualise higher education. We will examine and validate the perspectives with experts and practitioners involved in the development.

The indicators will provide important new analytical and actionable frames for discussion of the student experience in Australia. They will provide new means for correlating a range of demographic, contextual, or psychographic factors with various facets of the student experience. Specific metrics will be identified to underpin the indicators. The metrics will offer quantitative potential for giving life to the indicators. These will be defined from large and under-utilised storehouses of data held in institution's corporate systems (i.e. as per academic analytics (Siemens & Long, 2011)). Systems from which these data will be drawn will include but not be limited to student information systems and learning management systems. Both data-driven and theory-driven approaches will therefore be used to develop the model drawing on specific statistical and modelling expertise within the partner institutions and project team.

4.2.4 Phase 2 deliverables

After consultation with the PRG, Phase 2 will conclude with the delivery via the Project Website of a New Perspectives and Prospects Report and a Progress Report.

4.3 Phase 3: Engagement

As with Phase 2 of the project, the list of activities may be revised based on evidence gathered from previous phases.

4.3.1 Enhancement Framework

Providing fresh perspectives on the student experience, exciting as they may be, is not sufficient to activate major strategic change. Hence we will build an Enhancement Framework which clarifies and exemplifies opportunities for sustainable adoption. This Framework will provide an architecture for linking the innovative perspectives formed through the project with what is undoubtedly a diverse suite of existing practices. The Framework will incorporate evidence-based case studies and good-practice guidelines showing how institutions can use new data and technologies to understand and enhance students' experience. It will include advice to help institutions communicate more effectively with prospective and current students.

Getting this high-level Framework right is vital to the project. As we have achieved in prior projects it must inspire the sector and add value to existing institutional and professional practice.

Accordingly, we will consult widely with relevant stakeholders and develop case studies of how the Framework can be translated into specific strategies, policies and practices. The team brings expertise to this assignment, but it is critical that the model is pitched and positioned well in order to build capacity and generate new conversations Australia needs about the student experience.

4.3.2 21st Century Students Report

A succinct Project Report (provisionally titled '21st Century Students Report') will be drafted that brings together all key insights and outcomes produced in the project. This Project Report will be written for a broad readership, and for the learning and teaching community to use as a reference. The Project Report will include the model with new concepts and data sources, the Enhancement Framework with implementation guidelines, and institutional case studies. In large part this final Project Report will draw together much of the existing writing, but it will also for the first time elaborate the new ideas and techniques validated throughout the project to inform student experience practices and policies. It will include a high-level summary and recommendations for

future work. A range of publicity materials will be developed, and technical materials will be placed in appendices. Resources will be delivered via the Project Website.

4.3.3 National Engagement Workshops

To further validate the project's developments we will seek further feedback from all Australian higher education institutions. In particular, with the draft Project Report in hand a series of National Engagement Workshops will be convened across five states/territories. The purpose of these meetings is to bring together all insights from the project, to discuss the findings, and to agree on priorities for further action and work. The Project Report will be revised given feedback and delivered. As the reference and prior project lists demonstrate we have delivered such workshops for many prior assignments for Carrick/ALTC/OLT, the Australian Government and institutions.

The project team members have substantial experience disseminating outcomes in ways that build awareness, appreciation and change. We will use diverse and sustained dissemination media and channels to ensure that practice changes in the sector. Sustained effort will be put into informal dissemination through the team's professional networks. In addition to the formal products specified in this proposal, dissemination will include conference contributions and articles for professional and sector publications. A priority will be to ensure the widest geographic and institutional dissemination.

4.3.4 Phase 3 deliverables

After consultation with the PRG, Phase 3 will deliver National Engagement Workshops, the Enhancement Framework, the 21st Century Students Report, the final Project Website, a Progress Report, and the Acquittal.

Appendix A: Phases of Project

Phase	Activity	Success criteria	Resources	Milestones (include start and finish)	Accountability
Phase 1: Development	Detailed project planning	- Agreement of project partners to various aspects of the project	- OLT proposal - OLT application information and instructions	Feb 2015 – Apr 2015	HC
	Background research	- Identification of knowledge/data gaps - Analysis of existing data	- Academic literature - Policy papers - Existing data sets	Mar 2015 – Jul 2015	HC
Phase 2: Validation	Student interviews	- Agreement of key stakeholders to appoint students for surveys - Collection of qualitative data on students' undergraduate experience.	- Researchers to conduct interviews	June 2015 – Sept 2015	TBC
	Institutional scan	- Identify existing data systems and capabilities	- survey instrument	June 2015 – Sept 2015	TBC
	Model development	- define constructs - develop indicators and metrics	- results from background research, student interviews and institutional scan	Aug 2015 – Nov 2015	TBC
Phase 3: Engagement	Enhancement framework	- Case studies conducted - Best practice guidelines developed	- results from Phases 1 and 2	May 2015 – July 2016	TBC
	21st Century Students Report	- Report developed	- results from Phases 1 and 2	May 2015 – July 2016	TBC
	National Engagement Workshops	- National Engagement Workshops successfully implemented	- Project manager and support to organise workshops	May 2015 – July 2016	TBC