

Student Experience in the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

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Introduction

The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report (hereafter Accord Report) highlights that, in relation to the student experience, ‘the current measure of quality, the QILT Student Experience Survey (SES), is conducted using a well-defined methodology which compares well with international best practice’ (p. 77). The purpose of this submission is to present an evidence-based challenge to this point regarding the appropriateness of the SES as a quality measure, and to suggest an alternative approach to measuring students’ satisfaction with their higher education institution.

Limitations of the SES

Any discussion around measuring and monitoring the quality of the student experience in the Australian higher education sector must consider the limitations of the QILT SES, and student satisfaction surveys more broadly.

First, comparing institutions on the basis of ‘satisfaction’ as a general concept can be problematic, given the subjective nature of satisfaction judgments and the fact that students’ expectations of higher education may vary considerably. Students’ demographics vary considerably across higher education providers, as would their expectations of their experience. Students attending a Go8 university (attracting more academically strong students), for example, doubtlessly have different expectations of their student experience than, for example, a mature-age student enrolling part time through a new generation university with a focus on distance education. Such differences are not reflected in the SES results, which calls into question the validity of cross-institutional comparisons.

Second, Covid had a differential impact on institutions based on their geographic location. Institutions in regions more severely impacted by the pandemic (e.g. metropolitan Melbourne) have seen their SES results impacted to a greater degree than institutions in less affected areas. Similar to how cross-institutional comparisons of graduate outcomes are complicated by local labour market conditions, Covid has introduced a geographic bias into recent SES results. Again, no attempt to correct for this exogenous shock has been in published QILT results.

Third, the SES questionnaire itself has a number of methodological and conceptual limitations:

- SES reported measures of overall teaching quality and the overall quality of the entire education experience are each based on students’ responses to **one single item** out of 47 items that students respond to in the survey. It is well established in psychometric theory that relying on any single item as an accurate measure of a trait is inherently problematic in terms of validity, sensitivity, reliability, and response bias.
- **The options that students can select in their response (*Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent*) are subject to wide interpretation, with overlapping categories.** Different people may choose *Fair* or *Good* to indicate a similar level of moderate satisfaction which could, in effect, ‘blur’ the boundaries where respondents select categories to mean quite different things.

- In addition to the SES response categories being somewhat ambiguous, **results are then further collapsed into just two categories of satisfied and unsatisfied**. And, **while students might choose *Fair* to mean moderately satisfied, *Fair* responses are counted as an indicator of dissatisfaction**, further blunting the distinctions between respondents.

The consequence of these limitations is that two key reporting metrics in the SES are not able to offer a sufficient explanation of the differences between institutions and, rather, highlight weaknesses in the measure being used to compare institutions. When random fluctuations are introduced into the data (such as ambiguous response categories), it reduces the validity of the measure and the confidence we can have that any reported differences have not been influenced by the tool. While we could assume a consistent interpretation of what constitutes *Poor* across institutions, this is not what is reported. Rather, *Poor* is merged with *Fair*, and because *Fair* is ambiguous, this introduces additional ambiguity into both the '*Poor/Fair*' (dissatisfied) and '*Good/Excellent*' (satisfied) categories that the reported institutional differences depend on.

This is highlighted in **Figure A1** in the appendix, where SES overall satisfaction results are presented for Victorian universities as an example case study. It can be seen that, although satisfaction percentages vary somewhat across Victorian universities (depicted in **Figure A1** as the combined height of the stacked orange and blue bars), the share of students rating their university experience as *Poor*—the only unambiguously negative response option available—is fairly consistent across institutions (the data labels indicate the percentage of respondents in the *Poor* category). This shows that at least 94 per cent of all Victorian students are reasonably satisfied with their experience.

Extending this analysis, if we then consider ratings of *Excellent*, *Good* and *Fair* to constitute 'broad satisfaction' (i.e. the student has not characterised their university experience as *Poor*), the cross-institutional picture around overall satisfaction changes markedly. **Table A1** shows, for each Victorian university, the percentage of students indicating broad satisfaction with their university experience in 2022, the 95% confidence interval¹ around the satisfaction percentage, and the number of respondents who completed the SES overall satisfaction item. It is clear from **Table A1** that **the majority of Victorian students, regardless of their institution, are broadly satisfied with their university and that, when statistical uncertainty is taken into account (via overlapping confidence intervals), very few statistically significant differences between institutions exist**.

Fourth, although the SES is meant to reflect learning achievement of students, there is evidence to suggest that institutional SES results have little to no association with institutional measures of student academic performance. **Figure A2** attempts to correlate SES overall satisfaction results with institutional retention rates. It can be seen that there is no clear association between student experience ratings and the likelihood of students remaining enrolled at an institution. With an R-squared statistic close to zero, it can be concluded that overall student satisfaction explains almost none of the variation in retention rates across universities—the same result is obtained when experience ratings are correlated with institutional success rates (i.e. the percentage of units successfully passed). This result underscores that, while students' perceptions of receiving a high-quality student experience is undoubtedly important, subjective responses to satisfaction surveys are not necessarily a robust indicator of institutional quality and the provision of an academic

¹ Simply put, the confidence interval indicates the lowest and highest values that the broad satisfaction value would likely take if the SES was run again with a different sample of students.

experience that enables students to succeed and graduate. It also echoes the point made in the Accord Report that, in relation to the SES, there is ‘no clear correlation between high student ratings and employment outcomes’ (p. 77).

An alternative ‘satisfaction’ measure

International peers use student retention as a measure to rank universities. The US News & World Report University Rankings, for example, draw on first year student retention as their measure of student satisfaction. This, they argue, is a more robust reflection of student satisfaction **as it captures what students do (actual student preference) rather than what they say (their expressed satisfaction)**. When first year retention and success rates are considered in place of expressed satisfaction (see **Table A2**), a different picture of student satisfaction emerges.

Although Deakin students are the most satisfied among Victorian universities according to the standard SES reporting methodology (compare **Figure A1**), around one in five Deakin students do not continue into their second year of study, with a similar result observed for Swinburne. By contrast, although students from Monash and the University of Melbourne are less likely to explicitly express satisfaction when completing the SES (that is, provide a rating of *Excellent* or *Good*), they are far more likely to remain enrolled. This result strongly implies that students’ experience with their higher education provider could be more positive than suggested by SES results alone.

Implications

The *considerations for change* highlighted in the Accord Report—specifically encouraging and rewarding effective learning and teaching practices (and implicitly measuring the effectiveness of these practices), and sharing these across the sector—would clearly benefit educational quality if implemented effectively. From this analysis, however, two key questions arise:

1. Are sector-level satisfaction surveys, which are necessarily broad in order to measure the student experience across a diverse range of university and non-university providers, an appropriate way to measure ‘effective teaching and learning practices’?
2. Given the limitations of the SES presented herein, does the sector and our stakeholders benefit from its use as a measure of higher education quality, including the public presentation of uncontextualised satisfaction results (e.g. via [ComparED](#))?

I would argue that the answer to both of these questions is ‘no’. The SES could potentially be retained as a nationally-benchmarkable (if flawed) dataset for quality assurance within institutions; however, to address the *considerations for change* highlighted in the Accord Report, a more nuanced approach, tailored to (and driven by) individual institutions is required. As a broad sector-level ‘satisfaction’ **indicator**, first-year student retention is a superior option to that used currently, as it captures students’ actual preferences (‘voting with their feet’), rather than subjective satisfaction judgements influenced both by students’ prior expectations and survey items that are open to (mis-)interpretation. In terms of actually **evaluating the effectiveness** of institutional learning and teaching practices, a viable approach could see institutions responsible for their own evaluations (informed by best-practice guidelines), with evidence and practice shared with the Commonwealth and other institutions via detailed case studies².

² An approach along similar lines has already been adopted for the Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework (SEHEEF).

Appendix–Detailed statistical results

Figure A1: SES overall satisfaction results for Victorian universities, 2022

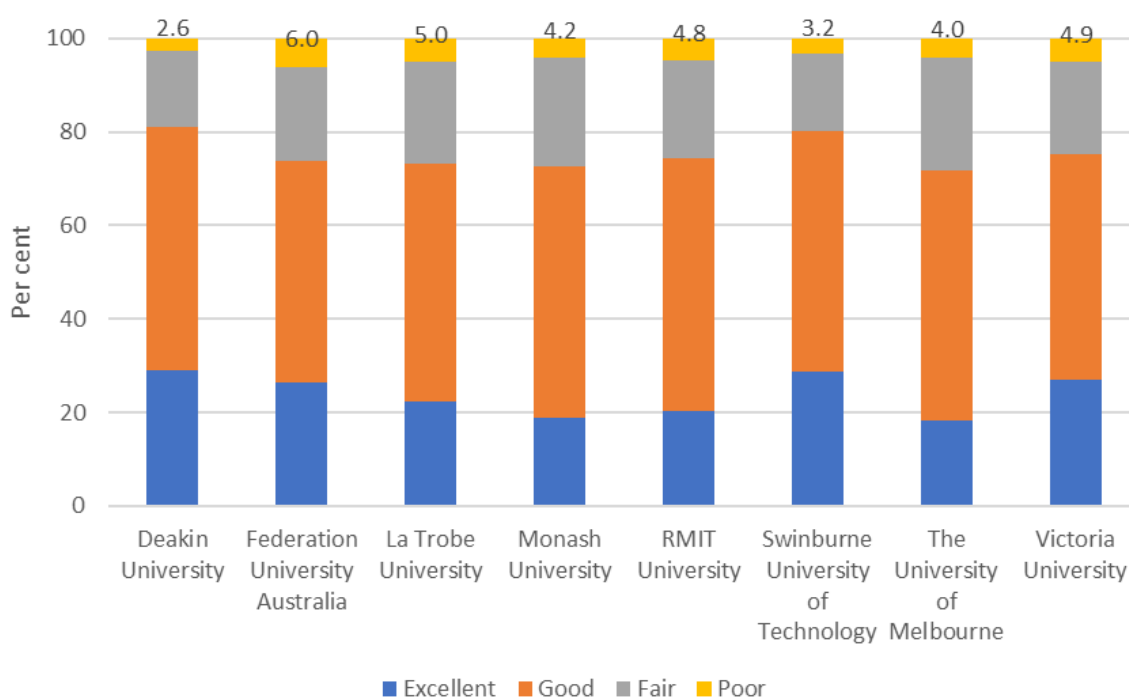


Table A1. 'Broad' satisfaction percentages for Victorian universities, 2022

University	Broad satisfaction (per cent)	Confidence interval (LCL-UCL)	Undergraduate Respondents
Deakin University*	97.4	97.0-97.8	5,848
Swinburne*	96.8	96.3-97.2	5,759
The University of Melbourne	96.0	95.4-96.7	3,592
Monash University	95.8	95.4-96.2	9,789
RMIT University	95.2	94.7-95.8	5,747
Victoria University	95.1	94.2-95.9	2,657
La Trobe University	95.0	94.5-95.6	5,954
Federation University Australia	94.0	92.9-95.1	1,848

*Deakin and Swinburne have >25% online students while other universities have between 1-9%

Figure A2: Association between overall student satisfaction and retention, 2019

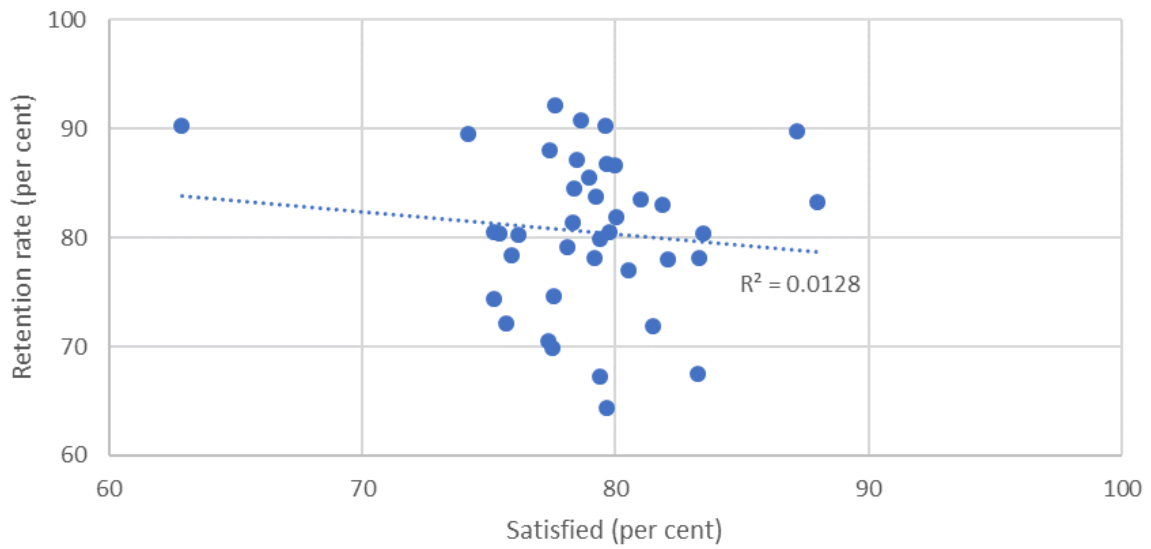


Table A2. Commencing bachelor retention and success rates, 2021

University	Retention rate	Success rate
The University of Melbourne	94.3	91.1
Monash University	92.4	89.5
RMIT University	89.7	88.8
Victoria University	82.9	89.7
Deakin University	81.2	83.6
La Trobe University	80.8	86.5
Swinburne	79.5	82.0
Federation University Australia	71.7	83.6