

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Students' suggestions for improving their vocational education and training experience

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Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment
and Workplace Relations

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government or state and territory governments.

Publisher's note

Additional information relating to this research is available in *Code book for SOS 2006 (student suggestions) confidentialised unit record file: Support document*. It can be accessed from NCVER's website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/2202.html>>.

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ISBN 978 1 921413 66 7 print edition

ISBN 978 1 921413 54 4 web edition

TD/TNC 97.22

Published by NCVER

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About the research

Students' suggestions for improving their vocational education and training experience

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for Vocational Education Research

The overall satisfaction of students with their training is used as a major indicator of the quality of training delivered in the vocational education and training (VET) system. It is derived from the Student Outcomes Survey, which has been run since the mid-1990s.

At the end of the survey respondents are asked for: *Your suggestions for improvement—do you have any suggestions for improving the training shown on the front of the form?* This information is fed back to the institutions that have provided the training. In this report, the authors provide the first national analysis of these verbatim suggestions.

They find that the bulk of the suggestions relate to eight domains:

- course relevance and design
- staff attributes and behaviours
- teaching and learning practices
- access to courses, facilities and services
- assessment practices
- learning resources, equipment and materials
- initial information provision
- administration and learning support services.

While there is some crossover with the training questions in the Student Outcomes Survey, the suggestions are wider in their coverage. This raises the issue of whether we should think about broadening the Student Outcomes Survey questionnaire, noting that this would have resource implications. The authors raise the possibility of whether an automated tool along the lines of CeQuery, used in the higher education sector, could be built. Whatever the results of these considerations, we should not lose sight of the fact that the verbatim comments provide the colour that can never be achieved through standard closed survey questions.

Tom Karmel

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Background

The overall satisfaction of students with their training is used as a major indicator of the quality of training delivered in the vocational education and training (VET) system. It is derived from the Student Outcomes Survey, which has been run since the mid-1990s and asks questions of those who have completed, at least for the time being, their VET studies. As well as student satisfaction, the survey also collects data on employment outcomes and any further study being undertaken. The survey is the source for key performance measures used to evaluate the effectiveness of the system as a whole.

At the end of the survey, respondents are asked for: *Your suggestions for improvement—do you have any suggestions for improving the training shown on the front of the form?* This information is fed back to the institutions that have provided the training, but it has never been systematically analysed at a national level. The purpose of this report is to do exactly that.

The next section of the report details students' suggestions. The report concludes with some discussion about how the suggestions relate to the current structure of the questionnaire.

Analysing student suggestions

Almost 10 000 students provided one or more verbatim suggestions for improvement in the 2006 Students Outcomes Survey. For our analysis we examined the comments provided by a random sample of these students.

We have not considered all the verbatim comments because some suggestions (in fact over 20% of the students in our sample) relate to comments about the quality of their experiences (the majority making positive comments). Our focus is on those comments that directly indicate that the associated processes or outcomes should be improved. This left a total of 1254 students in the random sample who provided one or more suggestions for improvement.

Classifying the responses

While there is great variety in student suggestions for improvements, all but a few comments can be grouped together under eight meaningful categories or major domains (table 1). The remaining comments we have placed in a separate ‘other’ category. In assigning responses to specific major categories or domains we grouped them according to similar features. For example, if students made suggestions that the course reflected current workplace practice, we categorised this under ‘course relevance and design’. If they raised issues which related to improving the quality of instructors’ knowledge and how they interacted with students, we categorised this under ‘improving staff attributes and behaviours’. Any suggestions which related to delivery of training and learning activities we categorised under the category ‘improving teaching and learning practices’. We used similar processes to group responses dealing with similar issues under the remaining headings.¹

Suggestions for improvement

Tables 2–9 give the areas which students want improved. In the following sections we report the different suggestions students made for improving a major category. When we break down major categories into sub-categories or sub-domains, we find that students may provide a number of sub-category comments. The suggestions are presented by their popularity, so the first suggestion put forward in each table was made by the greatest number of students, and the last suggestion by the least number.

After presenting the summaries we provide a selection of the verbatim comments.

¹ Readers are referred to the support documents that provide the coding frame and access to the data file generated for this report.

Table 1 Student suggestions for improvement

Category of suggestions	% of respondents (n=1254)
Improving course relevance and design	41
Improving staff attributes and behaviours	27
Improving teaching and learning practices	25
Improving access to courses, facilities and services	16
Improving assessment practices	14
Improving learning resources, equipment and materials	9
Improving initial information provision	6
Improving administration and learning support services	7
Other	1

Note: Percentages will total more than 100% as students were able to make multiple suggestions.

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

Improving course relevance and design

Table 2 Suggestions for improvement to course relevance and design

Include practical work-placement component and address quality of experience
Ensure course currency and relevance to industry
Add extra components to course content
Review time allocated for course completion
Review structural design and qualification level of course
Add depth to course content
Continue availability of courses
Customise course to take account of student needs
Improve student selection processes
Address mandatory requirements for course (including attendance)
Have systems in place to deal with changed requirements during life of course
Other

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

The suggestions which appear most frequently relate to ways to increase practical knowledge and skill. This includes implementing formal work placements (the most frequent of such suggestions) and addressing the quality of work placements where they are already in place, including who gets to do them and the number required. Suggestions are also made for courses to lead to occupational licensing.

Need better places to send students on work placement/experience. For my cert 4 community services work I was sent to a high school & I found this very boring & not relevant to the study I had been doing & for the certificate!

Practical application i.e. work placements to apply learning in the various areas of study.

Better work placement experience, more suited to students' interest rather than where they live.

The next most frequent group of suggestions relate to the need to ensure that courses provide more opportunities for students to learn about relevant and current industry practice.

Some lecturers/trainers seemed to require more current industry involvement. But generally really good.

More industry based equipment and funding.

Increase technical content and use of more relevant technology to be more relevant to the current industry practices.

Students want regular visits to industry and opportunities to listen to industry experts as guest lecturers and up-to-date practices and technology, including courses being available online.

Have visits from professionals in the hospitality and tourism industry. Gain knowledge from experienced people.

Some of the training needs to be stepped up to deal [with] issues with cars of today.

Expanding the components of courses so that they cover a broader range of subject material is also commonly suggested. These are followed by suggestions for extending or shortening the duration of time allocated to courses and addressing time-tabling issues.

My main suggestion for improving the course is to do with the time frame. I considered classes short to fulfil the completion of full set of nails [beauty salon work].

It was a very in-depth course and one day a week over a six week period was not enough. It would have been better to have a few extra days to be able to thoroughly cover each unit.

Ensuring that full-time course is not crammed into 2 very full days of study (8.30 am–9.30 pm, with an hour lunchbreak 1/2 hour in the afternoon), as was the case for part of the second year. This was utterly exhausting.

Students want courses condensed and shortened so that they do not duplicate material that has already been learnt.

It was a 3-week course and I finished it within 1 week and we just bummed around for the other 2 weeks and it was time I could have spent back in the shop.

Students in this category made a variety of other suggestions, including suggestions about:

- ✧ reviewing the structure of the course and offering it at a higher qualification level
- ✧ making courses more comprehensive in their coverage and adding more depth and detail
- ✧ improving student selection processes and customising courses to the needs of students
- ✧ applying mandatory requirements for attendance and specified prerequisites
- ✧ helping students deal with any course restructuring that has taken place during the course of their studies
- ✧ having courses delivered in more interactive formats (including having course contacts available online)
- ✧ having consistency in what is required across campuses and institutions
- ✧ having accuracy in course descriptions
- ✧ ensuring further auditing and evaluation of courses.

Students who are satisfied with their courses made suggestions for maintaining the availability of courses (including in secondary schools). There was also a suggestion for courses to be organised into a core group of units, with opportunities for students to move into specialist areas.

Improving staff attributes and behaviours

Table 3 Student suggestions for improvement in staff attributes and behaviours

Improve provision of learning support
Improve quality of performance, self-organisation and subject interest
Improve communication with students, teaching staff and employers
Improve knowledge and practical industry experience
Improve fairness and consistency

Improve behaviour management strategies for dealing with disruption

Source: NCVER Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

With respect to improvements to the provision of learning support, students want instructors who are available, willing and able to help them with their learning through the provision of face-to-face or online support (as required) and prompt feedback on assignments and progress. Those in fully-on-the-job programs want more visits from instructors. Students particularly want continuity of instructors for the duration of a particular subject.

Students commonly suggested that teachers improve their knowledge and practical industry experience.

If the person taking it might have a bit better knowledge, might have a background in the subject he is teaching.

Tutor should know what's going on in the sector where we're employed.

Better trainers—that know about the industry and understand what's needed to advance.

Employ more GIS [Geographic Information Systems] teachers rather than having teachers from a surveying background teaching GIS. Although teachers were extremely knowledgeable, their knowledge could be more update in terms of industry practices and materials.

Suggestions were also made for having more than one teacher (including tutors) allocated to a class group to enable students to get prompt assistance with questions and therefore reduce the necessity for waiting around while instructors or tutors deal with other students who are experiencing difficulties.

Students want instructors who have the required teaching skills, are well organised for their classes, and enthusiastic about their subject areas.

Basically organise it professionally and actually have work to do/instead of saying there is weeds there we'll do that/wasn't really planned out that well [horticultural context].

It would be good to see the teachers/instructors to be more inspiring, to make the course seem worth accomplishing.

Ensuring that those teachers employed part time (for night classes), as their second (job), do not have too many things on their plate, so they can be organised, prepared & give students their full attention in class, as well as being organised at assessment time.

Just better skilled staff because they can only take you so far/wasn't very intense.

There were also suggestions for providers to improve processes for staff selection, and evaluation and accountability.

Instructors with good communication skills are also valued. Students want instructors who are able to communicate with students, employers and other staff members, and who deliver training with clear enunciation.²

Teachers that can be clearly understood. Some teachers' accents were so strong I could not understand them.

Justice and fairness is also desired. Students want instructors to be fair in their marking of assignments and not to show favouritism and to be respectful in their treatment of students. They also want instructors to be consistent with other instructors allocated to the same class in relation to what they expect from students for course completion or for grading, and to be stricter with those students they believe disrupt their learning environment (often younger students and secondary school students attending TAFE).

Students who constantly arrive late to class should be dealt with firmly as their absence of punctuality disrupts classes already in session. Also field trips delayed until their arrival.

Improving teaching and learning practices

Table 4 Student suggestions for improvement to teaching and learning activities

Increase practical learning tasks
Increase face-to-face contact and one-on-one teaching
Modify time allocated for learning activities (mostly extensions) and improve training schedules
Provide a good balance of direct teaching and self-paced learning activities which engage students
Provide variety of learning activities, including group work, role plays and online interaction
Make clear course and other requirements (to students and employers) and rigorously monitor quality of performance
Reduce class sizes
Customise teaching to take account of student levels of knowledge and experience
Improve teaching flow
Provide students with basic skills training including writing skills
Address issues of duration or abolition of class-time breaks

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

The greatest number of suggestions in this area relate to learning activities that incorporate practical or hands-on learning in classrooms or classroom workshops.

More interactive workshops for people doing courses online or off campus.

It will be helpful to have some workshop practical activities.

In class there should be more practical and hands on in the teaching of the subject as it is a lot easier to understand the reading print outs.

Students also like sufficient time to complete their class or course activities and would like to see the time allocated to such activities extended. They would also like personal contact with teachers in terms of increasing the amount of face-to-face teaching in class and one-on-one support for individuals (including for distance learning students).

² Some ESL (English as a second language) students spoke of the difficulties of understanding instructors with broad accents.

Get the teachers not to be so serious so it is easier [for students] to go to them.

Take more time on each specific point they want to get across to students.

More time one on one with instructor.

Teach the students.

A clear understanding of what it is expected is also desired. Students want instructors to provide clear explanations of subject material and assignments. Those in work-based training programs (including traineeships or apprenticeships) want such explanations also to be made to workplace supervisors and employers. Suggestions are also made for reducing the size of class groups.

Smaller class size and more personal contact time with the teacher.

More engaging learning activities are also sought, including the provision of opportunities for students to complete tasks in groups made up of students of mixed ability and diverse backgrounds so that learning can be shared. Others wanted classes that were streamed according to knowledge and ability levels.

Our class was a big mix. We had people who hardly spoke any English and we have very advanced students. It would be better for all of them to be in separate groups. The beginners are too shy to speak with advanced students. Advanced students get bored.

Students are keen to have enthusiastic and responsible teachers and interesting and challenging learning activities. In this regard students make suggestions for:

❖ monitoring student progress

Some form of accessible reassurance or guidance for students doing workplace traineeships as they feel isolated in comparison to those learning in group situations. The only feedback is from assessment results and comments. You don't always have time to phone/email to check if you're on the right track & don't want to annoy the supervisor with trivial questions.

❖ increasing task variety, including role plays and extension activities³ for those who complete things early

The class would have been more interesting if we had more activities such as watching video tapes or group working, playing games etc. However I always enjoyed the class because of its content.

Make the classes more exciting and fun.

❖ achieving a healthy balance between direct teaching and student-centred learning

❖ structuring presentations to achieve a better flow in the way that material is presented.

A more structured classroom approach should be taken by teachers.

Training needs to be presented in an orderly way. I found we would jump from one area back to a previous area then on to something else. There needed to be more of a consistent flow.

Individuals made suggestions for doing work at home as well. Students who are mainly working online want instructors to establish online communication tools like discussion groups and forums.

³ Especially for students who are quick to complete their work and require extra challenge.

Students are equally interested in instructors customising activities to take note and advantage of students' prior knowledge and experience, as well as to improve basic skills (such as writing skills), where these are lacking.

Improving access to courses, facilities and services

Table 5 Suggestions for improving access to courses, facilities and services

Change course timetables
Provide easy access to materials and equipment
Deliver courses in closer campuses
Provide easy access to better facilities and equipment (including out of hours and weekends)
Improve systems for recording, certificating, and recognising achievement
Provide access to other learning options (including further training)

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

In the main, students want to be able to access courses, facilities and equipment (including texts and computers), at times that meet their particular needs.

Course days and times to be more flexible to allow those currently in employment to attend.

The time should be more flexible to allow those that are working to still be able to keep their work.

Making courses by correspondence so it's not so hard for country people to get to the course.

Have more reference books available, like important texts and readings suitable to the relevant course.

More facilities e.g. cafe/restaurant/gym or equivalent outdoor area.

More computers should be purchased and placed in the library.

Make the course available to study at more campuses. I had to travel over 2 hours daily, 4 days per week.

A better and comfortable learning environment. The classroom we undertook the course in was like a grave. Dark, no windows, no fresh air.

Venue was extremely cold and inhospitable—more suitable venue in size and warmth would have been more conducive to learning.

Others wanted access to better systems for recording, certifying and recognising their achievement. For example, some required more prompt delivery of certificates, and the inclusion of graduation ceremonies to recognise course completion. Others required more up-to-date records of their achievements.

Suggestions were also made for:

- ✧ making licences (required for certain occupations or tasks) an outcome of relevant course completion
- ✧ providing access to prior exam questions and correct answers to assignments
- ✧ omitting names on assignments and tests (to maintain anonymity and thus fairness)
- ✧ ensuring that courses lead on to further training.

Improving assessment processes

Table 6 Suggestions for improving assessment processes

Improve clarity and explanation of assessment requirements
Increase rigour of assessments
Improve timeliness and relevance of feedback on assessments
Include appropriate number of assessments
Improve fairness, consistency and relevance of assessments
Apply grading of assessments
Apply RPL [recognition of prior learning] assessments
Address timing and flexibility of assessments (including online submission)

Source: NCVER Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

Most frequently students want clarity, rigour, consistency and relevance in assessments.

Assessment method should improve. Without [students] returning a perfect assessment, a certificate should not be issued.

People who got all 'holds' and did not pass assignments should not be able to just pass by talking to a lecturer ... why should people like me bother to put in effort.

Students also want prompt, relevant and useful feedback and an appropriate number of assessments.⁴

I found that I did not learn anything from my mistakes as I was never told what they were.

Assessment of handed in assignments was sometimes delayed. This made it difficult to start the next assignment due to wanting to ensure one had an understanding of the topic.

The tutor who visited me was excellent, but maybe a follow-up on my overall progress at intervals would have given me greater encouragement to complete the diploma at a quicker pace.

Students want assessments to be more focused on practical performance and to comprise questions that are relevant to what has been taught. They want fairness and consistency in the marking of assessments, and are especially keen to ensure that students they perceive to have taken short cuts (that is, have not attended regularly or not handed things up in time) are not given an easy ride, and that group work is also assessed.

Students express concern at the inability of competency assessments (which deliver only pass or fail judgements) to give a good indication of achievement and request assessments be modified to recognise and record superior achievement. Students make suggestions for assessments to be evenly spaced out during the course and to be administered in a classroom environment rather than off-campus.

We would have all our work due at the same time, that is, at the end of the semester. Work should be spread out more evenly.

Assessment should be graded on a scale rather than as simply pass or fail.

⁴ In some cases this means increasing the number of assessments; in others reducing the number of assessments.

Improving quality of learning equipment and resources

Table 7 Suggestions for improving the quality of learning equipment and resources

Category of suggestions
Upgrade facilities, technology and texts
Ensure availability of appropriate resources (including practical texts)
Increase variety of different media aids
Improve clarity, layout and proofreading of written materials

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

These students made suggestions for upgrading and updating facilities, technology and texts to meet current requirements, improving availability of adequate and appropriate resources, including relevant and practical texts, and using different types of media, including videos, CD-ROMS, and web-based materials.⁵

Provide better textbooks. There was one class that I did that required me to borrow books from other universities. Or maybe improve the library books.

Less abbreviated words in the text questions.

Simplify the explanatory templates for cert IV.

Get some new computers. The computers were slow, it took about 10 minutes for autocad to load.

It would be worthwhile if the institute could provide more teaching media which would encourage students understand easier [sic] and want to learn more, rather than just giving [printed materials] and following the teachers.

Perhaps recorded information on dvd or tapes ... better examples of graphs. Simpler to understand! More demonstrations on video or dvd on manual handling etc.

Improving initial information about programs

Table 8 Suggestions for improving initial information about programs

Increase promotion of the course
Provide information on course schedules
Improve accuracy of course descriptions
Improve information on further learning options
Provide overview of courses prior to commencement
Include orientation sessions for students
Provide information on assessments (including RPL processes)
Other (provide information on facilities and make course resources available online)

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

Students who are satisfied with the course generally suggested that providers should promote the course more widely. To help intending students have a better idea of whether or not to take a course, promotional information is required to provide an accurate description of what is covered. Courses should include introductory or orientation sessions and such sessions should provide information on what the course covers, when it is to be held, required assessments and

⁵ Students are especially critical of the layout of texts and make requests for texts are clearly laid out and do not contain typographical errors.

recognition of prior learning, facilities, resources, and possible articulation pathways to university courses, and employment outcomes.

Please be clear on what the course covers as my understanding that this course was to how to manage a business not how to start a business. Big disappointment and waste of money and time.

Be more specific [on] the course intent when advertising for enrolments. Some class members were on a different level to others and it made it a lot of wasted time.

I completed cert 2 in education (teacher aides) and although it was very thorough and of very high standard academically there are absolutely no jobs in the field of teacher aides. My suggestion would be to inform students who are completing such a course of the little chance of them actually finding employment.

There needs to be more information provided to students [about] the credentials of further education [required] to secure a good career in the visual arts. For example: if students wish to go into a teaching position for the visual arts, there should be documents providing the necessary training one will need, where, when, how it is offered and how much etc.

The availability of the next level of study for floristry was poorly communicated. Many of us entered the course expecting to be able to continue onto cert III as per usual. Only near the end of cert II training were changes communicated and the part time option for cert III was cancelled. A disappointment not to be able to continue on. However, these things happen, but it really should have been sorted and communicated earlier. Not in the closing weeks of the course!

Improving administrative and learning support services

Table 9 Suggestions for improving administrative and learning support services

Provide students with support for payment of fees and costs
Provide job search, and job and work experience placement services
Improve services from provider administration officers
Provide learning support for students
Provide equipment and learning materials for students
Other

Source: NCVET Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

Suggestions for improving support services are made in about 7% of cases.

Commonly students ask for assistance with the payment of tuition fees and costs, including the opportunity to pay by instalments or reduce their costs in other ways (including by increased employer subsidy), and the cost of materials and transport costs (including fuel).

Less expensive. Diploma – Child services – average \$100 per module – difficult on child care wages and living expenses.

Make fees cheaper.

Probably more library/and cheaper text books. They were expensive.

Maybe the books should be cheaper.

The training was excellent. My main problem was the hours required for driving each way. I could no longer afford the petrol. If the government wants rural people to have access to further training they should help out with the cost of travel.

Help is also requested for job search, job placement and work experience, including writing job applications and resumes, and obtaining jobs and work experience placements through institute job placement service agencies.

Students voiced concerns with the quality of administrative processes and made suggestions for improving the knowledge, efficiency and effectiveness of administrative staff, streamlining of processes (including credit transfer), providing more support for overworked teaching staff, and recognising the achievement of students through graduation ceremonies.

Increased communication about requirements from administration. Teaching staff terrific but administration struggled, it was very difficult to rectify problems. An incorrect enrolment meant being asked to leave some classes, creating a negative study atmosphere.

It was a big thing for me to have graduated from the course and sad to be not recognised on that day for the effort I put in. If it was not such a big deal for the college it would have been nice to have been told.

Have a graduation ceremony to present the certificates rather than getting them through the post, especially as we were the first group to do this course at our college.

Cancellation of our graduation ceremony was not communicated at all. Poorly handled. My husband had even arranged the night off work for the occasion. We would have shown-up [sic] if I have not checked with a friend (student) if she were going. Another student was preparing to travel from out of town if I hadn't passed the message to her myself!

Support for learning is another area for improvement. Students want training in computer, study and financial skills.

I had to give up my job because it became too for hard for me to do heavy physical work. Therefore I had to retrain, had never touched a computer before. I found that I really could have used a booklet that explained in the layman's terms computer language. Maybe even a beginners' course to teach the basics of how to use a computer to start off would be better. Just simple things like make a new folder to save things into. Simple I know, but had to learn a lot of basics at home with my kids.

For the those students pursuing further studies at university, the TAFE should look at providing training or courses appropriate for the course the student will undertake [at university]. For example, essay writing skills or online research skills.

Individuals made suggestions for setting up buddy-system programs, and for assistance to be provided for female apprentices in male-dominated areas. There was also a request for further assistance in workplaces for students who have completed their programs and gained employment.

Assistance with access to equipment and materials was also requested by students. Students want providers to make it easier for students to buy equipment and materials (mainly computers and software) either at a reduced price or through loan arrangements with providers, or to access such equipment and materials free of charge.

Students also suggested that providers support the concept of competency-based pay and incentives for the achievement of higher levels of performance. There was also a request for providers to recognise that student carers require support.

Lessons learned

It is important to note that these suggestions are specific to a variety of different courses, and in many cases made by small numbers of students. As such they have much more relevance for local providers and course instructors. Nevertheless we can draw some general principles for course design and provision.

Students considered it important that they receive industry-relevant training that takes notice of the current practices and technology used in the workplace. To this end course developers may wish to explore how their courses can incorporate work-placement opportunities for students, as well as other ways to ensure that students have realistic experiences and current knowledge when they move into the labour market.

Students also do not want broad-brush approaches to subject content and would prefer more depth and detail in the material presented. However, they also want shorter courses (meaning that they do not want sessions dragged out to fill the time allocated), and do not want to be rushed through such that some students have no time to understand or complete tasks to their satisfaction or standard.

They want courses that are designed to meet student needs (in terms of appropriate complexity, relevance, and breadth) and are often opposed to having to repeat things that they have already learned. A review of what is covered by a course is required to ensure that it explores content in sufficient depth, is appropriately pitched, and does not make students repeat in more advanced courses content already learned.

Comparing student suggestions with the SOS scales

The first observation is that the student suggestions provide a much broader perspective on the students' experience than does the questionnaire. The questionnaire covers three 'domains': teaching, assessment, generic skills and learning experiences (see appendix). By contrast, the suggestions cover course relevance and design; staff attributes and behaviours; teaching and learning practices; access to facilities, courses and services; assessment; learning resources, equipment and materials; information provision; and administration and support services. There is some crossover, but clearly the suggestions are broader than the questionnaire.

Table 10 maps the suggested improvements to the SOS statements that form the teaching domain. We did this to see whether the verbatim comments only duplicated what could already be derived from this information. Not surprisingly, we found that, although students refer to improving the same teaching and assessment practices in their verbatim suggestions for improvement, they also identify a much wider range of issues.

Students who had not experienced good teaching practices were the most likely to make a comment about improving the attributes or behaviours of instructors and the nature of teaching and learning activities than other students. Although students do make comments which deal with practices also captured in the rating scales, they provide much more specific information about these practices and raise other issues associated with the totality of their experience. They advise on practical strategies that can be understood generally and in particular at the local course level by providers and instructors.

In table 11 we align student suggestions for improvement with the items referring to assessment in the 'aspects of training' scale in the SOS.

When we analyse the verbatim comments referring to assessment practice we find that, although students generally covered similar ground, they tended to provide more specific and practical details of other strategies for appropriate assessments. In addition, students highlighted the need for altering the main paradigm of competency-based assessments to include increased differentiation between performance (that is, introducing graded assessments) and made suggestions for improving the relevance of assessments.

Table 10 Aligning SOS statements used for Likert rating scales with student verbatim suggestions for improving teaching and learning

SOS items on 'Aspects of Training' scale	Students' suggestions for improving the attributes and behaviours of staff	Students' suggestions for improving teaching and learning practices
Instructors should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ have thorough knowledge of the subject content ♦ provide students with opportunities to ask questions ♦ treat students with respect ♦ understand student learning needs ♦ communicate subject content effectively, and ♦ make the subject as interesting as possible. 	Instructors should improve: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ subject knowledge and practical industry experience ♦ communication with students, other teaching staff and employers ♦ provision of learning support ♦ fairness and consistency in dealing with students ♦ quality of performance, self-organisation and subject interest ♦ behaviour management strategies for dealing with disruption 	Instructors should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ increase practical learning tasks ♦ modify time allocated for learning activities (mostly extensions) and improve training schedules ♦ provide variety of learning activities including group work, role-plays and online interaction ♦ increase face-to-face contact and one-on-one teaching ♦ make clear course and other requirements (to students and employers) and rigorously monitor quality of performance ♦ provide a good balance of direct teaching and self-paced learning activities which engage students ♦ reduce class sizes ♦ customise teaching to take account of student levels of knowledge and experience ♦ improve teaching flow ♦ provide students with basic skills training including writing skills ♦ address issues of duration or abolition of class-time breaks

Source: NCVER Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

Table 11 Aligning SOS statements used for Likert rating scales with student verbatim suggestions for improving assessment processes

SOS statements for assessments	Student verbatim suggestions for improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ knowing how they were going to be assessed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ improve clarity and explanation of assessment requirements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ undertaking assessments at appropriate intervals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ include appropriate number of assessments ♦ address timing and flexibility of assessments (including online submission)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ undergoing fair tests of their skills and good tests of what was taught 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ increase rigour of assessments ♦ improve fairness, consistency and relevance of assessments ♦ apply grading of assessments ♦ apply RPL assessments
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ receiving useful feedback on performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♦ improve timeliness and relevance of feedback on assessments

Source: NCVER Student Outcomes Survey, 2006.

Lessons learned

There is obviously some crossover between the Likert scales in the questionnaire and the suggestions in relation to teaching and assessment. Students generally provided qualitative data which accords with the direction of their responses on the 'Aspects of Training' Likert rating scale in the context of good teaching and assessment practice. However, if we relied solely on the results of Likert scale ratings we would miss out on some of the colour that suggestions provide.

In addition, students made suggestions that do not always deal directly with practices used by instructors for teaching and assessment, but which also have a major impact on learning outcomes. For example, they want improvements to the content, relevance, coverage and duration of courses. They want to access facilities, services and classes at times which suit their own schedules and in venues that are closer to home. Students want well-developed written resources and up-to-date equipment. They require administrative services to be efficient and not overly bureaucratic and student services systems to help them with fee-payment processes, computer provision and finding jobs and work placements. Students also require orientation sessions that provide them with clear directions and overviews of what will be expected of them in their courses.

One issue this raises is whether the SOS questionnaire should be revised to cover the broader student experience. There is a cost to this—in terms of processing cost and the time students take to fill in the questionnaire—but it is worth considering. One strategy we can rule out is replicating this study on an ongoing basis. While manual coding by researchers allows for an understanding of context and the application of expert judgement, it is very expensive.

One option to circumventing the time required for manual operations is to investigate tools for automating processes. One such tool (the CeQuery⁶ software package) is currently being used in the higher education sector to analyse verbatim comments (including suggestions for improvement) in graduate destinations surveys similar to the SOS, and this would be worth investigating.

⁶ Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) 2004, *CeQuery: Overview*, GCA, viewed June 2007, <<http://www.cequery.com>>.

Appendix

Aspects of training questions

How would you rate, on average, the following aspects of the training? Please cross one box for each aspect using the scale below

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
TEACHING					
My instructors had a thorough knowledge of the subject content	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My instructors provided opportunities to ask questions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My instructors treated me with respect	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My instructors understood my learning needs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My instructors communicated the subject content effectively	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My instructors made the subject as interesting as possible.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
ASSESSMENT					
I knew how I was going to be assessed	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The way I was assessed was a fair test of my skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I was assessed at appropriate intervals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I received useful feedback on my assessment	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The assessment was a good test of what I was taught	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

GENERIC SKILLS AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES					
My training developed my problem solving skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My training helped me develop my ability to work as a team member	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My training improved my skills in written communication	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My training helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
As a result of my training, I feel more confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My training has made me more confident about my ability to learn	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
As a result of my training, I am more positive about achieving my goals	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My training has helped me think about new opportunities in life	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Support document details

Additional information relating to this research is available in the following support documents.

- ✧ *Code book for SOS 2006 (student suggestions) confidentialised unit record file (CURF)*, which can be accessed from NCVER's website.
- ✧ *SOS 2006 (student suggestions) confidentialised unit record file (CURF)*. To access CURF, please contact NCVER at <ncver@ncver.edu.au> and we will send out the necessary documentation for you to complete.

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