

The Use of Surveys as Quality Evaluation Tools

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Abstract

As part of the institutional research being undertaken within the University of Wollongong's Management Information and Planning Section, a number of cyclic surveys have been implemented to evaluate and provide feedback to members of the institution regarding the performance and measurement of quality against stated objectives. These surveys provide invaluable insights which are incorporated into the strategic planning processes of an institution as well as having potential for marketing purposes. This paper will outline the extent of surveys undertaken and planned at the University of Wollongong, determining periodicity, target groups, aims and objectives with regard to assessing needs and quality, questions asked, feedback received, and how this information is used and fed back into the planning and marketing processes.

Introduction

The University of Wollongong is involved in a number of 'Quality' initiatives at present, not the least of these being a DEET funded project looking at *Planning and Management Information Systems for Quality Enhancement and Assurance & Effective Resource Utilisation in the Higher Education System*. The institution is continually working to improve the quality of education generally, as well as within the context of the higher education sector as a service and - to some extent - product provider. In terms of the quality standards (in particular A53904.2 / ISO 9004-2*) 'the requirements of a service need to be clearly defined in terms of characteristics that are observable and subject to customer evaluation. The more definable the (service delivery) process, ... the greater the opportunity to apply structured and disciplined quality system principles' (page 7, Standards Australia*).

The University of Wollongong's Mission Statement and planning document *Towards 2000* begins the process of identifying and defining goals and strategies for all units within the University (and for the services/products it offers), encompassing the view that planning is a constant, dynamic process. *Towards 2000* also takes into account recent and prospective changes in external circumstances. This planning document is especially noteworthy for the specificity of the quantitative and qualitative targets adopted by the institution as a whole and by each Faculty and Unit. Those objectives identified are intended as benchmarks against which quality and progress may be assessed.

Standards Australia* note that for quality objectives to be established following the identification of goals and strategies, (as set out in *Towards 2000*) an organisation needs to look at three issues:

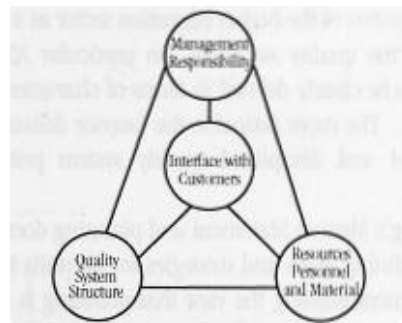
- 'customer satisfaction' (is it consistent with professional standards and ethics);
- 'continuous improvement of the service, give consideration to the requirements of society and the environment';
- look at the 'efficiency in providing the service' (page 7).

This is where surveys as evaluative tools come into play, remembering that any evaluative assessment needs to take place within the context of the University's Mission Statement and established goals for the future. That is, deciding what particular character the University wishes to adopt and in what direction it wants to move, then proceeding to obtain information on *current perceptions* of its current status, and identifying possible means for moving from this perception to the desired reality. In this way, feedback from surveys (both internal and external) become invaluable guides.

Although internal assessment using performance measures derived from internal sources is important, it has been suggested that organisations cannot account for the quality of its services or products without the involvement of customers (including potential and current students, graduates, employers and the general community) in the evaluative process. Standards Australia* (1992) reports that ‘management should provide for ... reviews of the quality system in order to determine its continuing suitability and effectiveness in implementing a quality policy and achieving quality objectives’ (page 8). Central to the quality of the service, or product provided, is the customer’s and supplier’s assessment and the extent of the feedback loop which provides input into the organisation’s marketing, design and delivery processes. The figure below (*Key aspects of a quality system*) ‘illustrates that the customer is the focal point of the three key aspects of a quality system. It also illustrates that customer satisfaction can only be assured when there is harmony of interaction between management responsibility, the personnel and material resources and the quality system structure (page 7, Standards Australia*).

- identifying a ‘clear definition of customer needs with appropriate quality measures:
- ‘continuous review of service requirements and achievements to identify opportunities for service quality improvement’ (page 8, Standards Australia*).

Key Aspects of a Quality System



(Adapted from: Standards Australia (1992) - ‘Quality Management and Quality System Elements part 2: Guidelines for Service AS 3904.2, page 7)

The use of surveys as quality evaluative tools, responds to the need for ‘customer’ feedback in relation to the wide range of services and products that the university provides. These would include such areas as the curriculum and delivery of courses offered, administrative services, student support services, accommodation, recreational facilities, other ancillary services, and the quality and desirability of its graduates. It also includes market research.

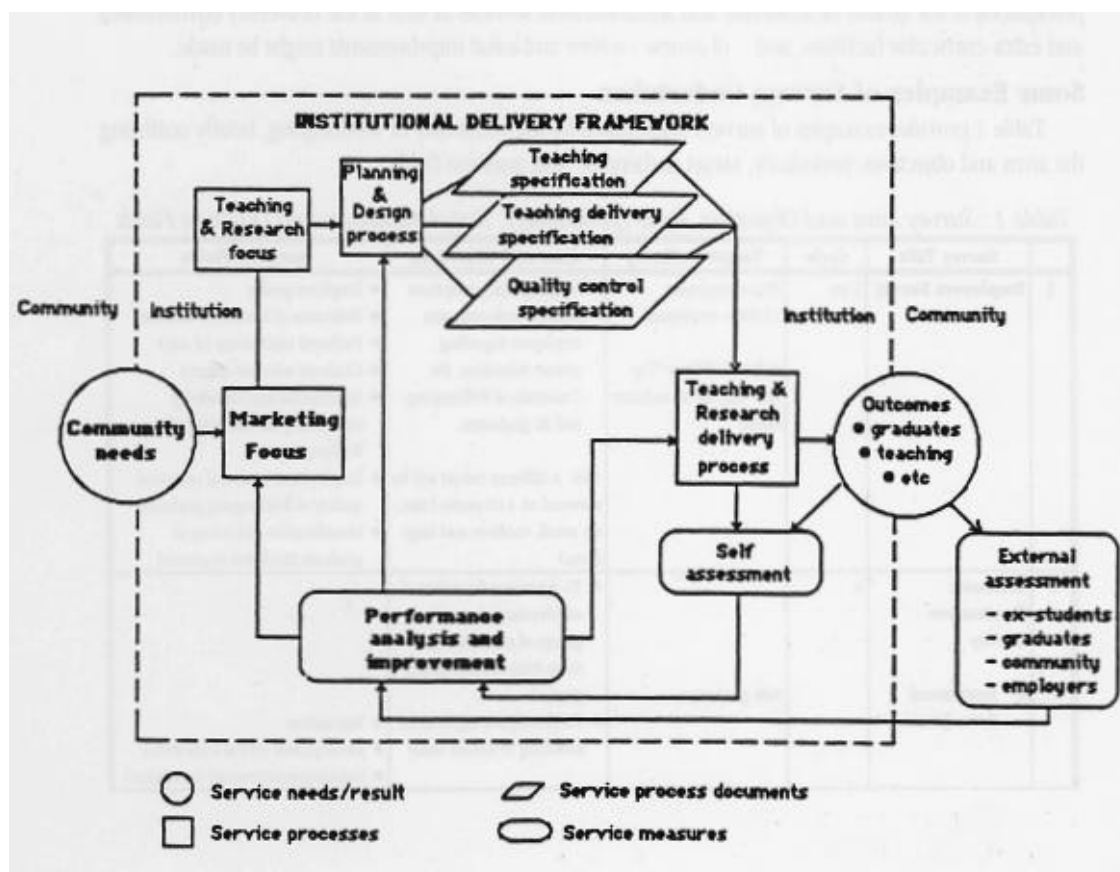
The three main provisioning service processes (marketing, design and service delivery) are shown in the diagram below to be operating in a service quality loop) (Standards Australia*).

The customer’s assessment of the quality of the services is the product of the inter-relationship of the processes shown in the figure above. Quality feedback measures reflect upon the services. The mechanisms for quality feedback measures are as follows:

- ‘supplier’s assessment of the service provided;
- customers assessment of the service provided;
- quality audits of the implementation and effectiveness of all elements of the quality system.’ (page 10. Standards Australia*).

As with any evaluative tool, it is important for the focus to remain on how surveys can constructively assist the organisation in monitoring and improving its level of quality in a strategic planning context, rather than focus on the specific outcomes in themselves. Information collected through surveys should therefore include a combination of qualitative and quantitative data so as to provide a more rounded picture and not simply a frequency count. (Many have suggested that to simply count something because it is countable, will not provide a greater understanding or assessment of an issue.)

Service Quality Loop



(Adapted from Standards Australia (1992) - "Quality Management and Quality System Elements Part 2: Guidelines for Service" AS 3904.2, page 7)

Surveys Undertaken Thus Far

Some of the surveys undertaken by the MIPS Section thus far are listed below. Table 1 below provides additional information concerning the survey target group/s and a brief description of the research aims and objectives. Surveys undertaken include:

- Employers Survey
 - - Major organisations (1992)
 - - Small to medium organisations (1993)
- Graduate Destination Survey
 - - GCCA specific questions
 - - Institutional extra questions, including: graduate perceptions of the University and its faculties, graduate attributes, and further study/ career paths
- Tele-marketing: Community perceptions
- Survey of non-enrolling students
- Survey of Year 12 students

The responses gained (collected) provided the University with invaluable insight, including community and employer perceptions of the University and its graduates; prospective, current and past student perceptions of the quality of academic and administrative services as well as the university environment and extracurricular facilities, and - of course - it *where* and *what* improvements might be made.

Some Examples of Surveys Undertaken

Table 1 provides examples of surveys undertaken by the University of Wollongong, briefly outlining the aims and objectives, periodicity, target audiences, and question fields.

Table 1: Survey Aims and Objectives, Cycle (periodicity), Target Audiences and Question Fields

	Survey title	Cycle	Target audience	Aims and objectives	Question fields
1	Employer's survey	3 yrs	Major employers (5000+ employees) (Identified from "Top 500" list, for all industry fields.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To gauge the perceptions held by large company employers regarding tertiary education, the University of Wollongong, and its graduates <p>(NB: A different cohort will be surveyed on a tri-yearly basis, eg. small, medium and large firms.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Employer profile ■ Relevance of institution attended ■ Preferred institutions (if any) ■ Graduate selection criteria ■ Impressions and knowledge concerning the University of Wollongong ■ Employment rates and perceived quality of Wollongong graduates ■ Identification and rating of graduate attributes in general
2	Graduate Destination Survey	1 year	New graduates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To determine the extent of employment of specific groups of students (eg. those from defined equity groups). ■ To identify the lag time for enrolling in further study ■ To identify the various positive and negative perceptions held by students (recent graduates) towards academic, administrative and recreational/other facilities at the University of Wollongong ■ To identify areas in which "ability" could be improved ■ To identify areas of perceived "excellence" at the University ■ To gain feedback on the appropriateness of graduate attributes for various courses, and to ascertain the extent to which graduates have attained these attributes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reputation ■ Development (of the University) ■ Learning environment (academic) ■ People and atmosphere ■ Social aspects ■ Library services ■ Other services and facilities ■ Aesthetics ■ Administration ■ Comments relevant to specific Faculties <p>■ List of attributes towards our graduates (relevance and attainment indicator requested)</p>
3	Phone survey Community perceptions	3 yrs	Randomly selected households through all LGRs in NSW and the ACT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To gauge community perceptions regarding the city of Wollongong, study at university in general, and perceptions and knowledge about the University of Wollongong. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Profile of respondents ■ Perceptions of the city of Wollongong ■ Awareness and perceptions of the University of Wollongong ■ Source of knowledge about the University ■ Criteria used when selecting a university at which to study ■ University of Wollongong's best and worst features
4	Survey of non re-enrolling students	1 year	Students failing to re-enrol in a course of study prior to completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To determine reasons for sstudents failing to re-enrol at the University of Wollongong (eg. to attend another institution, difficulties in study arrangements, etc.) and whether the University can identify and assist these and future students in similar situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Profile of respondents ■ Education background; entrance to University/course and mode of study chosen ■ Reasons for leaving the University (eg. intention on enrolling, change to another university, cease study altogether, change to TAFE, undertake employment) ■ Relevance of attributes to course

5	Survey of Year 12 students	3 yrs*	Students in Year 12 from both public and private schools across NSW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ To understand the perceptions of students towards further study; in choosing a university for which to apply (criteria on which this decision is based); towards various universities in general and the University of Wollongong in particular ■ To identify the major source areas of information about this University 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Student profile ■ Future intentions towards study ■ Perceptions of important criteria in selecting a university; eg. facilities, reputation, financial, accommodation, entry requirements, courses, etc.) ■ Sources of information ■ Extent of knowledge about the University
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** undertaken on a three year basis in turn with a survey of parents of Year 11 students and Higher Education Journalists*

Feedback for Continuous Improvement

Selected survey results are presented below, showing how they have been used towards improving the quality of services and enhancing marketing initiatives at the University of Wollongong.

- Graduates obtaining employment in fields related to their course of study were asked to comment on the relevance of course-content to their work. They were also asked to comment on any skills/knowledge not included within their course, which they might have found beneficial. In one particular Faculty/Department, responses provoked discussion as to the incorporation of additional skills/knowledge within several courses, thus improving the quality and relevance of those courses.
- Where graduates had indicated a preference to continue studying but an inability to do so, responses demonstrated the predominant reasons why. It was discovered that financial factors, family commitments and stress associated with further study all contributed to the likelihood that a person would not continue, highlighting the needs of this group for University support services and equity initiatives.
- 'Open' feedback is sought from graduates regarding administrative, academic and other facilities within the University, leading to the identification of services/practices of perceived excellence as well as those areas that could be improved. 1992 comments were aggregated and presented at the University's annual Planning Conference (attended by Executives, Deans and Department/Unit Heads) for discussion towards the continual improvement of a quality service. In 1993, graduates were asked additional questions through the GCCA survey specifically relating to perceived teaching quality, developed by the Russell Linke Performance Indicators Group to represent student perception across several teaching dimensions. Results for this institution reflect the University's strategic aim of maintaining curricula which adheres to quality in teaching and to producing high quality graduates.
- Employers were asked to identify key selection criteria used when selecting graduates. They were also asked to rank University-identified attributes of a Wollongong Graduate and identify additional attributes not previously mentioned. This information has been fed back into strategies formulated for improving the employment prospects of our graduates and meeting the needs of employers. Additional work is currently being undertaken to determine to what extent our graduates currently meet these criteria and in ensuring that methods of obtaining attributes are included within all courses.
- A list of 'Graduate Attributes' (having been redefined following employers' responses) were put to recent graduates as to the perceived relevance towards their field of study, as well as the level of attainment of these skills prior to and upon completion of their studies. These responses will be taken into account (along with employer comments) in developing and fostering desirable attributes in our graduates. This process involves university discussion of the best ways to foster attributes within the teaching curricula and to monitor progress towards meeting them. Some attributes (eg competency based) are capable of direct reflection in the teaching undertaken. Others that are considered to be attitudinal are less tangible and may best be gleaned from the student's whole university experience.

- From the phone survey of selected NSW residents, it was found that there was a relatively high level of awareness of the University's existence, however, the majority of respondents knew only a limited amount about the institution and were not able to form definite opinions. It was also found that the more people found out about the University, the more impressed they became (supported by a similar survey undertaken several years ago). It was therefore recommended that the University's marketing strategies continue to heighten awareness of the University and encourage people to visit the campus. Strategies aimed at increasing knowledge regarding the institution were also able to be identified.
- The phone survey of selected NSW residents further found that the main reasons for visiting the campus were study, work, sightseeing and visiting friends and relatives. It was therefore recommended that the University investigate ways to increase the sightseeing potential of the campus, as a marketing strategy.
- The non re-enrolling students survey results suggested that many students leaving the institution did so for reasons beyond the control of the University (eg, offers of employment, did not wish to continue studying for no particular reason, etc.). Of the remainder, assistance in the form of financial aid, counselling, disability services, and learning assistance may have proved beneficial, suggesting that increased awareness of these type of services offered by the University may be necessary in order to assist future students.

Follow-up and Future Surveys

As well as conducting a number of follow-up surveys, the Management Information and Planning Section intends to continue with and expand the range of surveys it is currently undertaking in order to further facilitate the quality evaluation process within the context of meeting Management Information needs and strategic planning. Some examples of surveys planned for the immediate future include the following:

- Longitudinal survey of graduates (surveying the same group of graduates on a 3 year cycle)
- Survey of perceptions and needs of current students re: administrative and academic services
- Honours and Postgraduate students' survey (market research, needs analysis and satisfaction)
- Employer needs (medium to large employers)
- Survey of Students Transferring to the University from other institutions
- Survey of Parents of Year 11 HSC Students
- Higher Education journalists/Commentators

Conclusion

Thus it can be said that surveys provide invaluable insight which can be incorporated into the quality improvement initiatives of an institution as well as being useful in marketing strategies.

Reference

Standards Australia (1992) *Quality Management and Quality System Elements: Part 2: Guidelines for Service*. (AS3904.2 - 1992 / ISO 9004.2: 1991).