



## Full length article

# What determines students' expectations and preferences in university teaching and learning? An instrumental variable approach



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## ABSTRACT

This paper embodies three goals. First, it develops a student expectations and preference questionnaire (SEPQ). Second, factor analysis identifies dimensions within student responses. Third, instrumental variable (IV) approach explores the determinants of these dimensions. Using a 59-item SEPQ and 506 student responses at a leading Australian university, the study identified four dimensions (Lecturer, Teaching Approach and Contents; Feedback, Communication and Assessment; Active Participation and Engagement; and Presentation, Delivery and Focus) that underpinned expectations and preferences. These dimensions differed due to variables typifying diversity within the student population. Higher school-leaving score (IV) and those aged 20–25 years significantly positively influenced the score for Lecturer, Teaching Approach and Contents. English speaking background (ESB) and economics students strongly preferred Feedback, Communication and Assessment, while male economics students disliked it. The IV and ESB discouraged Active Participation and Engagement while students aged >25 years were keen on it. Both ESB males and higher IV scores promoted aversion toward Presentation, Delivery and Focus. The findings imply that instructors provide intellectual and analytical rigour; contents incorporating latest developments and relevance to real world issues while School respond to the diverse needs of non-English speaking students. Further research involving universities within and outside Australia is warranted.

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## 1. Introduction

The Western world has experienced phenomenal changes in the context of teaching and learning in higher education over the last quarter century in two key ways. First, student numbers have increased greatly due to the expansion in the international student market and increased domestic participation and second, the nature of the student population has changed significantly with varied learning needs, academic abilities, and aspirations that typify increasing diversity in the university student population (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Denson and Zhang, 2010; Vardi, 2011). Flexibility of enrolment and entry (part-time vs. full-time, school leavers vs matured age student) has also added a new dimension to this diversity (Martin et al., 2013). Managing the profound change from elite to mass education at the university level has posed significant

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challenges to teachers and educational institutions because of the diverse needs, aspirations, expectations, and preferences of students in the teaching and learning process.

The present study has three goals. First, it develops a 59-item Students' Expectations and Preference Questionnaire (SEPQ). Second, it uses factor analysis to examine student responses based on this SEPQ and explore relevant dimensions within the data. Third, an econometric model using university entry score as an instrumental variable (IV) identifies determinants of these dimensions. This research follows a deductive approach and develops research questions from the existing literature. As will be noted later in this paper, the questionnaire incorporated items that reflected both implicit and explicit expectations of students (Koskina, 2013).

Section 2 provides a brief review of the relevant literature. Section 3 focuses on the survey instrument, participants and procedure as well as the analytical frameworks employed. Section 4 presents and discusses the results from factor analysis and the econometric model while Section 5 presents the conclusions and explores the implications.

## 2. A brief review of literature

A large body of literature contends that students in institutions of higher education increasingly perceive themselves as customers (see e.g., Gruber et al., 2010). Two decades ago, Plater (1995, p. 24) summed up the American scenario:

We can then begin to think of education as a product. Whether we feel comfortable with such terminology or not, we need to recognise that virtually every other sector of the American society has gone (or is going) through a transformation that makes funding contingent upon the delivery of valued outcomes .... What we do with our time, then, will be recorded by recognition that we are becoming a constituent-based service industry or profession.

Subsequent studies (e.g., Delucchi and Korgen, 2002) confirmed evidence of consumerism among American university students. However, the spread of consumerism among university students is not just confined to the American context. It has spread to other developed countries including Britain (Kandiko and Mawer, 2013; Koskina, 2013) and Australia (Lodewijks, 2011).

Higher education institutions in the developed world increasingly regard higher education as a business-like commodity (a commercial good) and focus more on meeting students' needs by regarding them as customers, especially in universities that are tuition-based (DeShields et al., 2005). Fee-paying students were likely to expect "value for money" (Gruber et al., 2010; Koskina, 2013). Thomas and Galambos (2004) suggested that students' satisfaction was critically important for recruiting new students as they view themselves as consumers of higher education service. Gruber et al. (2010) employing German data found that students' satisfaction with school placements and atmosphere among the students (personal environment) but dissatisfaction with university buildings and the lecture theatres (physical environment).

Koskina (2013) employed a psychological contract framework to analyse student expectations in one English business school and identified the implicit and explicit nature of students' expectations (pp. 1029–1030). The former referred to such matters as lecturers engaging students professionally and creatively, being experts in their fields, having good classroom presentation and delivery skills, being able to communicate, and accommodating cultural diversity within the student population. The explicit expectations included detailed and constructive feedback, pastoral support, coursework guidance, and advice. The explicit expectations emphasised the economic exchange aspect of the contract. A student's view typifies the nature of this exchange. As Koskina (2013, p. 1013) reported "the university is expecting from us to pay our fees we expect from it to provide all the services being promised to us .... I want to get a good service in return for the fees I am paying!". The implicit and explicit expectations identified by Koskina suggested that students perceive themselves as both learners and customers at the same time.

Another stream of literature challenges the view that students are customers. Mason et al. (1995, p. 403) stated:

Students are not fully informed consumers because they do not necessarily know whether the professor is providing them with the relevant material, and doing so correctly. Consequently, students' judgements may be insufficiently well informed to evaluate this portion of the performance of their professors. Furthermore, students may not be fully cognisant of the quality until later life experiences dictate the long-term value transferred.

Alauddin and Tisdell (2000) (see also Alauddin and Kifle, 2014; Mason et al., 2003) echoing this view, suggested that the asymmetry of information between the two parties (the student and the teacher) could lead to market failure. Furthermore, in contrast to the traditional customer–supply model, the customer in higher education (the student) directly contributes to the quality of the education s/he acquires. This implies that the quality of knowledge imparted depends not only on the service provider (the teacher) but also on the intellectual ability of, and the effort expended by the learner. While analysing students' study philosophy, beliefs and attitude to learning in higher education, Alauddin and Ashman (2014) found that contrary to the conventional wisdom portraying students as customers there was a core group of students that considered teaching and learning to be synonymous with acquisition of knowledge rather than grade maximisation.

Armstrong (2003), Bailey (2000) and White (2007) questioned the idea of students as customers and supported the view that they are clients. White (2007) argued that customers demand a service be to their satisfaction and that engagement was not part of the equation, while in contrast, clients engage with the process. More recently, Cuthbert (2010) identified problems inherent in thinking of students as customers and suggested a multidimensional approach to understand the relative roles of students and markets in managing higher education. In a similar vein, Mark (2013, p. 8) argued that ensuring

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