

# ***Evaluating to improve: The Law Faculty experience***

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## **Abstract**

Currently, Australian universities participate in a range of quality reviews in which they are required to demonstrate that they have clear processes and procedures in place to ensure quality for their students. One way in which many universities have approached the process of meeting the quality needs of their students is through the implementation of a regular student experience evaluation process. At Monash University the importance of an ongoing student experience evaluation process and the value of the feedback gained from this have been highlighted in a number of forums, including the 2002 Monash University Self-review report *Still Learning: The Report of our Self Review*. This paper outlines how the Faculty of Law at Monash University approached using the Monash student experience questionnaire (the MEQ) as well as the similarities and differences observed at the University level. The results from the MEQ highlighted the similarities in Teaching and Learning issues between the Faculty and University as well as some of the Faculty only issues such as “Explaining things properly”.

**Keywords:** MEQ, Evaluating the student experience, University self review instruments

## **Introduction**

Students are the largest and most important stakeholder group for any university. The student landscape has experienced significant shifts in the last five years creating fundamental changes to the student population. Large international cohorts and massification in the domestic higher education market have also contributed to diversification in the sector. Students now display much more varied levels of academic, cultural and linguistic preparation for tertiary study. They also exhibit a more diverse range of expectations, mediated, at least in part, by the more direct monetary relationship between students and universities. As a result, the higher education sector is now coming to grips with the reality that it is a service industry and it has had to re-evaluate its approach by placing greater emphasis on meeting the expectations and needs of customers, i.e. the students (Cheng & Tam 1997; Griffin, Coates, Lee, Jolly, Kench & Gelonesi, 2000; McInnis, 2003; Wright & O’Neil, 2002). Although the precise nature of a quality educational environment can be debated, much progress has been made in conceptualizing, assessing and researching its characteristics and effects on student learning. Studies have consistently confirmed a strong correlation between classroom environments and learning and satisfaction (Devlin, 2002; Fraser, 1991, 1994, 1998; Fraser & Fisher, 1994; Griffiths, 2001; Suarez, Pias, Membiela, & Dapfa, 1998; Nair & Fisher, 1999; Ramsden, 1991). Research over the last four decades has recognized that students’ and teachers’ perceptions are important parameters of the social and psychological aspects of the learning environments of school classrooms (Fraser, 1991, 1994, 1998).

The research on student learning clearly describes some key factors in dealing with educational productivity. These are: the importance of intellectual challenge, clear goals, creating a classroom environment where students take responsibility for their own learning, encouraging co-operation between students, concern and respect for students as learners and people,

understanding what students have learnt and what they still need to learn, the quality of instruction, the quality and quantity of feedback on learning, viewing teaching as a dialogue rather than a transmission process and the understanding of teaching as a process of enabling learners, rather than a set of recipes (Ramsden, 1991, 1992, 2005; Walberg, 1981, 1984). Lee et al (2000) highlight that such influences or determinants of satisfaction are not only multifactorial, but they are likely to vary from person to person, and from institution to institution, and are most likely to vary over time. Nevertheless, satisfaction with the university experience in terms of overall enjoyment, benefit or value is an important parameter to which universities need to pay attention as this may influence the decision to enter, persist with or leave higher education.

This paper focuses on the role of the Monash Experience Questionnaire (MEQ) in gaining feedback from students about their overall University experience and how these findings are then used to identify areas of best practice, areas which require improvement and to help develop improvement strategies. The MEQ was developed in response to a recommendation of the 2002 institutional review report '*Still Learning: The Report of our Self Review*'. That report recommended "an ongoing Monash Student Experience Questionnaire as a means for determining, monitoring, benchmarking and improving the student experience." The MEQ was subsequently developed in 2002/3 by the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) following consultation with the university staff. In 2005 CHEQ undertook a further consultation and modified the MEQ based on the information received. The MEQ was designed to be used in the context of the Monash Quality Cycle – plan, act, evaluate (monitor and review) and improve.

The Monash Experience Questionnaire (MEQ) was first administered to all current students, post graduate and undergraduate, in 2003 (MEQ03) and it is administered every two years so the most recent survey was in 2005 (MEQ05). The MEQ was developed in 2002/3 by the Centre for Higher Education Quality (CHEQ) following consultation with University staff and in 2005 it was modified following a further round of consultation. The questionnaire design was modified to allow the separation of data from those students who were doing double degrees.

The MEQ is significant for three reasons. Firstly, it provides an important method by which Monash can systematically identify major areas of the student experience which require attention. This information assists the University in a number of ways such as planning for campus redevelopment and preparation for the AUQA audit. Early identification of any problem areas is important as it allows for early intervention. Secondly, the time series data obtained from the MEQ03 and the MEQ05 shows an increase in satisfaction of students in all areas of the University, thus demonstrating the University's real commitment to improving the quality of the student experience at Monash. Thirdly, it is a lead indicator of student perceptions for the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) as it contains some scales and items in common. The results from the CEQ are now a critical indicator for additional funding to the University as in 2005 the University received nearly \$5 million through the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF). However, the CEQ is administered to students who have completed their degrees and left the University whilst the MEQ is administered to the 52,000 current students across all campuses so it is a source of time sensitive data.

### *Significance*

For both Monash and the Law Faculty the MEQ is critical as a source of data about the current student experience. The Law Faculty undertook an analysis of the MEQ03 and MEQ05 which resulted in the development of a range of strategies for improvement. This paper focuses on

- Some of the similarities and differences between Monash and the Law Faculty in the MEQ results, and
- reports on the route taken by the Faculty to address any shortfalls and,
- some of the strategies implemented to improve the student experience within the Faculty.

## **Methodology**

### *Administration & Reporting*

The MEQ is administered by Faculties so the paper-based MEQ questionnaires were distributed to students during class and then sent to CHEQ for processing. Once the questionnaires had been scanned and put into a database, the results for both the University and the Faculty were posted to the CHEQ website in a standardized report format. Access to this information is currently restricted to Monash staff and students for the University and Faculty reports and to Faculty staff only for the raw data.

### *Questionnaire*

The academic and general university experience survey comprises 50 items in 7 scales, plus a global satisfaction item. MEQ's design also includes 3 key scales from the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) which are 'good teaching', 'generic skills' and 'learning community'. No changes to the CEQ items were made except for the tenses as the MEQ is a current student experience questionnaire.

The CEQ is a national survey measuring students' perceptions on completing an undergraduate qualification in Australia. By using the CEQ scales Monash has an advantage in that the data obtained from the MEQ can be used to broadly compare the current student experience with those students who have completed their studies. The scales in the MEQ are Good Teaching, Generic Skills, Learning Community, Graduate Attributes, Student Support/Resources, Monash Approach to Teaching and Learning, Other Important Areas of Teaching and Learning and the General University Experience. In addition, two questions seek comments from students about the "best aspects" and "areas that need improvement" within their overall study experience. Descriptive information of each scale is shown in Table 1. The MEQ has been found to have satisfactory alpha reliability and factor loadings (Nair & Chan, 2006).

The 'closed' response items were constructed as Likert scales measuring from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) with the middle item (3) being neutral. In this study the means of the responses are reported and these can be interpreted in terms of above 3 being positive and below 3 being negative. Results for these scales are also presented in the way that has been universally adopted for CEQ reporting: that is the percentage of students broadly in agreement with the items of the scales (i.e. students scoring 3, 4 and 5). Broad agreement is taken to indicate general satisfaction. The student comments were also considered but due to word limitations this paper focuses on the quantitative results.

**Table 1: Description of the scales used to measure overall study and general university experience**

Scale	No of		Description
	Items ME	MEQ Q03 05	
<i>Overall Study Experience</i>			
Good Teaching (CEQ scale)	6	6	Measures student perception of teaching. It focuses on feedback, motivation, attention, understanding of problems and skill in explaining concepts
Generic Skills (CEQ scale)	6	6	Measures student perception of generic skills (graduate attributes) development achieved in their courses
Learning Community (CEQ Scale)	5	5	Primarily focuses on student perceptions of the social experience of learning.
Monash Graduate Attributes	9	9	Measures student perception of graduate attributes specifically identified at Monash
Student Support/Resources	8	8	Measures student perception of study support and resources available at Monash
Monash Approach to Teaching & Learning	7	10	Measures student perception of the particular approach to teaching and learning encouraged at Monash
Other important areas of Teaching & Learning	6	6	Measures student perception of key areas of teaching and learning not identified elsewhere. (e.g. student workload)

### *Sample*

In 2005 1141 students from the Faculty of Law out of a possible 2788 students completed the MEQ questionnaire resulting in an overall response rate of 40.9%. In comparison, the MEQ05 had a better participation rate than the MEQ03 which had a response rate of 20.5%. The majority of these responses were from full-time, undergraduate, students on campus at Clayton and the questionnaire was administered as a paper

-based survey. The demographic characteristics of the respondents in 2005 were substantially similar to the respondents in 2003.

In 2005 16,116 students from the University out of a possible 47,263 students participated in the MEQ05 resulting in an overall response rate of 34.1%. This is a lower response rate than for MEQ03 when the response rate was 40%. Again, the majority of these responses were from full-time, on-campus undergraduate students and the demographic characteristics of the respondents in 2005 were substantially similar to the respondents in 2003.

### **Findings**

The results from both the MEQ03 and the MEQ05 are shown in Tables 2 and 3 for the University and the Law Faculty respectively. These show that there has been an improvement in the student experience not only across the University but also within the Faculty of Law. Tables 2 and 3 show the differences in mean agreement between the 7 scales and 2 global items relating to the study experience. The student responses, on the overall study experience, indicate that students are generally satisfied with their academic experience not only at Monash but within the Faculty as well.

In all scales for Law in MEQ05 as shown in Table 3, the mean ratings were above 3, ranging from 3.22-3.85 with standard deviation ranging from 0.91-1.11 and percentage broad agreement ranging from 74% - 91.5%. In comparison University means in 2005 ranged from 3.42-3.81 with standard deviation in the range of 0.88-1.02. The percentage broad agreement for the

University was generally higher, with a range of 82.3%-92.6%. An item analysis within each scale highlighted a more accurate picture of the student experience at Monash.

The results from the MEQ05 for the University show that the scales in need of improvement were

- Good Teaching
- Learning Community
- Monash Approach to Teaching and Learning and
- Other Important Areas of Teaching and Learning.

The MEQ05 for the Law Faculty showed a similar pattern in the same scales. However, an item analysis showed once again some similarities in areas that needed improvement as well as the differences. The main area of concern for both the University and the Faculty was feedback (giving timely and regular performance based feedback). In contrast the Faculty had an issue with the teachers' ability to explain things clearly. The other areas highlighted by students in the Faculty dealt with tutorials, classroom sizes, and facilities. At the University level these were not identified as critical issues.

Within the scales further specific areas were then targeted by the Faculty Quality Committee as needing improvement

- Good Teaching – e.g. teaching staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work, teaching staff giving helpful feedback on how I am going
- Learning Community – e.g. sense of belonging to University community
- Other Important Areas of Teaching and Learning – e.g. the feedback I received on my submitted work is useful; feedback I receive is submitted in time to help me improve.

**Table 2: Means, standard deviations and percentage broad agreement for major scales and global items for the University**

No	Scales	MEQ03			MEQ05			MEQ05 – MEQ03		
		Mean	Standard Deviation	% Broad Agreement	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Broad Agreement	Mean	% Broad Agreement	
1	Good Teaching	3.29	0.86	82.8	3.42	0.94	84.7	0.13	1.9	
2	Generic Skills	3.63	0.85	90.3	3.74	0.88	91.7	0.11	1.4	
3	Learning Community	3.42	0.87	86.2	3.53	0.94	87.5	0.11	1.3	
4	Monash Graduate Attributes	3.63	0.89	89.1	3.75	0.91	91.1	0.12	2.0	
5	Student Support/Resources	3.55	0.91	85.6	3.72	0.95	89.7	0.17	4.1	
6	Monash Approach to Teaching and Learning*	3.41	0.92	83.4	3.57	0.95	87.2	0.16	3.8	
7	Other Important Areas of Teaching & Learning	3.30	0.96	79.8	3.42	1.00	82.3	0.12	2.5	
8	Global Items – 1. Overall satisfaction	3.67	0.89	90.7	3.81	0.86	92.6	0.14	1.9	
	2. Matching expectations	-	-	-	3.55	1.02	84.3	-	-	

**Table 3: Means, standard deviations and percentage broad agreement for major scales and global items for the Faculty of Law**

No	Scales	MEQ03			MEQ05			MEQ05 – MEQ03		
		Mean	Standard Deviation	% Broad Agreement	Mean	Standard Deviation	% Broad Agreement	Mean	% Broad Agreement	
1	Good Teaching	3.16	0.97	76.4	3.32	1.03	79.9	0.16	3.5	
2	Generic Skills	3.62	0.90	88.2	3.85	0.91	91.5	0.23	3.3	
3	Learning Community	3.27	0.90	82.2	3.47	1.02	83.9	0.20	1.7	
4	Monash Graduate Attributes	3.56	0.99	84.9	3.70	1.00	87.8	0.14	2.9	
5	Student Support/Resources	3.58	0.99	84.4	3.76	1.00	88.6	0.18	4.2	
6	Monash Approach to Teaching and Learning*	3.37	0.97	81.9	3.58	0.98	86.6	0.21	4.7	
7	Other Important Areas of Teaching and Learning	3.19	1.06	73.8	3.22	1.11	74.0	0.03	0.2	
8	Global Items – 1. Overall satisfaction	3.65	0.86	89.4	3.78	0.91	90.9	0.13	1.5	
	2. Matching expectations	-	-	-	3.62	1.03	86.7	-	-	

\* Includes 2 new questions in MEQ05

## Discussion

The MEQ has proved to be a useful instrument in providing insights into the current student experience as students identify the strong and weaker areas in their learning environment. The MEQ05 report suggested that law students were generally satisfied with their learning experience as a whole at Monash. However, it highlighted several key areas in which they perceived a need for improvement in their study experience. The most critical of these was the issue of feedback. The importance of feedback being prompt and useful is consistent with findings that show that it is an essential component of good teaching and learning (Billings, 1998; Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995; Ramsden, 2005). Further, the issue with feedback was also clearly reflected in feedback received during the university's institutional self review (Monash University 2002) and in subsequent cycles of unit evaluations.

The high priority areas from the MEQ for the Faculty of Law are shown in Table 4 plus some of the strategies designed to improve these areas. These have been developed and implemented in consultation with specialist academic staff such as the Director Teaching and the Director of the Educational development and Flexible Learning Unit (EDFLU). Many of these strategies are ongoing so evaluation data on the effectiveness of these is yet to be made available.

**Table 4: Strategies for improvement in the Faculty of Law**

Area identified	Student concerns	Strategies for Improvement
Feedback	Non timely return of work, staff perceived as not giving feedback	Ran a Teaching Discussion forum on how to give more effective feedback, supporting teachers who are experimenting with earlier assessment , teachers are asked to explain to students in their first lecture/tutorial what constitutes feedback in their unit and how it is given
Student to staff ratios	Class sizes	Issue is currently being reviewed at the Faculty management level
Tutorials	Need to increase frequency and availability of tutorials	Issue is currently being reviewed at the Faculty management level, Pilot of tutorial evaluation has been conducted but data has not yet been processed
Classroom facilities	Not satisfied with physical environment	Issue is currently being reviewed at the Faculty management level - the possibilities include a change of buildings or to relocate to another Monash campus
Explaining properly	Teachers not explaining things properly	Issue is currently being reviewed and will be addressed through the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching Course and Teaching Discussion forums

The focus is on those issues highlighted by students in the MEQ reports as critical areas in need of improvement, the actions taken and any improvements noted as a result of the action taken are being documented. The Faculty is currently working on a more systematic approach to implementing improvements as actions taken in the past were somewhat ad hoc. Strategies for improvement now go through the Faculty Quality Management Committee and then the Faculty Executive Committee for endorsement. A range of staff are involved including the Dean, the Deputy Dean, the Faculty Manager, the Director of EDFLU, the Director Teaching and the Associate Deans of Undergraduate and Post Graduate Studies.

The approaches reported in this paper are specifically the Faculty's response on key areas of the MEQ which affect the Faculty study experience. The approaches taken may have some applicability to other Faculties at the University but no data on this is currently available. The University has also embarked on addressing the key areas of concerns raised in the MEQ. This has been addressed by formulating a strategic document which outlines the strategies that the University will employ for improvement and the Centre for the Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT) will take a leadership role to implement the required changes. This strategic approach to improvement was endorsed in the recent AUQA audit of Monash University.

### **Conclusion**

Monash University, like many Australian universities, participates in a range of reviews including self reviews to ensure that the quality of learning and teaching is continually improved. Monash has chosen to enhance the process of meeting the quality needs of their students through the implementation of a regular student experience evaluation questionnaire – the MEQ.

This paper has presented a case study on how the Faculty of Law has approached the student experience evaluation process and highlighted some of the strategies which the Faculty has implemented to help improve teaching and learning and thus hopefully the overall student experience. This may have applicability to other higher education organizations particularly those thinking of introducing their own student experience questionnaire.

Although the application of the MEQ05 results is still in its early stages it shows some promise in helping to improve the overall student learning experience at Monash. The University has taken the view that, consistent with research in this area, feedback from students is not only important and integral to the quality cycle but that it provides valuable information to which the University must respond to continue to meet the needs of their customers. Further, the University has realized that the information contained within this survey is also important in measuring how it is performing as a whole. Without the additional stimulus of the MEQ results the University's efforts to improve the student learning environment may not have made such rapid nor far-reaching gains.

### **Biographies**

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Ms Becker works in EDFLU (the Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit) in the Faculty of Law at Monash University. Her experience includes learning needs analysis, project scoping and implementation, educational development and design, teaching, evaluation and academic professional development.

#### **Dr Sid Nair**

Dr Nair is a Quality Adviser with CHEQ (the Centre of Higher Education Quality) at Monash University. Currently, he heads up the evaluation section for the Centre. His research has been in the area of quality in the Australian Higher Education system and classroom and school environments.

#### **Associate Professor Len Webster**

Dr Webster is Director of ITFLMM (Information Technology, Flexible Learning and Multimedia) and EDFLU (the Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit) in the

Faculty of Law at Monash University. As an educational theorist, Dr Webster has sought to link educational theory with instructional models to provide educationally sound online learning environments.

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