Students’ Expectations of Teaching: the Business, Accounting and Economics Experience

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a study aimed at exploring student perceptions of teaching and learning in the disciplines of business, accounting and economics. Twenty-three students from two Sydney-based faculties were interviewed and their responses analysed qualitatively. Their educational expectations are articulated in five major pedagogical themes including delivering and presenting a lesson, encouraging class participation, providing academic feedback, the dilemma between structured and discussion-based tutorials, and the dynamics of learning through group work. Students’ responses reveal that they have strong and clear expectations about quality teaching, although some dissonances from the educational theory were identified with respect to exam-driven learning and over-emphasis of work-readiness oriented instruction. Implications for enacting quality teaching, curriculum delivery and design are discussed.

Keywords: Accounting, business, economics, higher education, students’ perceptions, quality teaching.
Introduction

The study of learners’ expectations of various aspects of quality teaching has become prominent in the last two decades (Addison, Best, & Warrington, 2006; Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). As education is a dynamic human activity it is obvious that students, being the end users of the academic community, would be able to provide important insights derived from their experiences in the classroom (Cunningham, 2008). Such feedback can be interpreted at various levels of the scholarship of learning and teaching. These include generic expectations that might feed pedagogies across disciplines, as well as those regarding specific fields of study or particular educational settings.

This paper explores these expectations in the business, accounting and economics disciplines. It also seeks to identify those expectations that differ from the current literature on effective instructional practice. This study reflects on literature about students’ expectations and perceptions of what constitutes effective pedagogies in the last two decades in higher education. The findings are aimed towards informing course delivery and enhancing professional development programs, with the ultimate purpose of influencing the retention and success rates in business, accounting and economics faculties.

Background

There are a number of useful reasons for identifying students’ perceptions of which attributes contribute to quality teaching. There are practical, pedagogical, psycho-emotional as well as socio-economic motivations for conducting research. Practical reasons for such research include being able to identify their perceptions and needs for the purpose of developing curricula in a way that best engages students and promotes quality teaching (Addison, Best, & Warrington, 2005; Greimal-Fuhrmann & Geyer, 2003). The pedagogical reasons include teachers’ reflections on aspects of their teaching for the purpose of improvement, and an inspired shift to student-centred environments from the dominant but quickly eroding transmission-oriented approach to teaching (Nisbet & Warren, 2000). Potential psycho-emotional benefits for characterising students’ perceptions of effective teaching include the benefits of providing them with a sense of inclusion and participation in their own learning environment (Entwistle, 2009).

In terms of the socio-economic motivations for the present research in this climate of economic rationalism, where there is increased competition for enrolments and social inclusion dominating higher education in Australia (DEEWR, 2008), it would seem pertinent to ensure that students as consumers of the education system have their opinions taken into account on the basis of good business sense. Use of such feedback would encourage the sector to understand what its audience needs and to assist higher education policy makers in designing and delivering courses that enhance the learning experience and improve retention rates (Lizzio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002). It is noteworthy that students’ perceptions about the quality of teaching in the accounting discipline deteriorate over their university time (Geiger & Ogilby, 2000).
Research also shows that student perceptions of effective teaching can be characterised within specific and general instructional settings and are relevant for designing staff academic development programs (Abrami, D’Apollonia, & Rosenfield, 1997; Lizio, Wilson, & Simons, 2002; Sheehan & DuPrey, 1999). Ultimately, their perceptions of the learning and teaching experience affect their attitude towards education and therefore academic performance (Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). Insights drawn from their responses are also very useful because these are issued by adults who have been sitting in schools and university classrooms for at least twelve years. They have been able to observe a great number of teachers, in a broad variety of subjects, and within a large range of learning environments. Able scrutinisers they have indeed become and their comments therefore hold legitimacy in teaching and learning scholarship (Handal, 2003).

**Researching Students’ Perceptions of Quality Teaching**

Several research approaches have been used to capture the nature, direction and magnitude of learners’ perceptions of their learning and teaching experience. Such diversity has produced complex findings with variables such as research design, instruments and subjects ultimately determining variances.

Using an accounting sample, Ferreira and Santoso (2008) explored the effect of students’ perceptions of accounting on their academic performance. They used a Likert-style survey to measure perceptions and actual final grades in the subject to measure performance. The research was conducted in two stages, first at the beginning of the semester and then at the end. The researchers found that generally accounting undergraduates come to study accounting with negative perceptions of the subject, particularly in regards to the nature and role of an accountant, although age and gender account for variations in these perceptions. The relationship between student perceptions and learning outcomes was also examined in terms of surface and deep learning approaches. The main difference between deep and surface learning is in their emphasis on students’ internal and external motivation to learn, respectively (Duff & McKinstry, 2007). Ferreira and Santoso concluded that learners’ perceptions impacted on learning outcomes to a greater extent than teaching methods.

Similar findings were revealed by Lizzio, Wilson and Simons (2002, p. 43) in their study of 5,000 university students. They concluded that:

> Perceptions of a good teaching environment influence students towards deep approaches to studying, and conversely, students’ perceptions of a bad teaching environment influence them towards surface approaches to studying. The strongest predictors of students using a deep approach to studying are their perceptions of the quality of the teaching and the appropriateness of the assessment.

Along the same lines, Entwistle, McCune and Hounsell (2002) also concluded that learners’ positive perceptions of the teaching environment are conducive to deep learning approaches, whereas negative perceptions lead to surface approaches to learning.
In 1994, the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) developed the Perceptions of Learning Environments Questionnaire (PLEQ) to understand what students’ perceptions of effective teaching actually are. While this questionnaire advanced research in the study of student perceptions of their learning experience, some authors such as Marcia Devlin (2002) have suggested that its design does not measure student perceptions in sufficient depth, including an in-depth analysis of subject specific contexts. She further suggests that PLEQ promotes the traditional view of learning and teaching as the transmission of a discrete body of information and/or knowledge, whereas the philosophical view of learning and teaching is more experiential. The author suggests some amendments to the PLEQ design, which involve asking students questions to elicit comments on the influence of their personal learning behaviours and activities, as opposed to the behaviours and activities of their teachers. Devlin modified PLEQ to PLEQII, which allows the examination of student perceptions of who is responsible for their learning. PLEQII recognises that teaching and learning is a shared responsibility between student and teacher, and qualitatively analyses students’ perceptions of the behaviours of both groups in considering how to improve student learning.

In Spain, Fernandez (1992) conducted a study that provided an analysis of a shortened version of the Complutense University Teachers Evaluation Questionnaire (CUTEQ-R), a 22-item instrument designed to evaluate student perceptions of the attributes of competent teachers. A total of 36,589 university students enrolled in 1,651 course subjects taught by 3,705 Faculty staff resulted in a total of 194,885 student evaluations. Two major themes identified by respondents as quality teaching skills were the demonstration of teaching competence, and class engagement and motivational skills.

In another study evaluating the qualities of an effective teacher, Jahangiri and Mucciolo (2008) found that generally dental and medical students and residents with professional practitioners wanted “A teacher who develop[s] a clearly defined, well organised topic.” Respondents were also found to want instructors who create a positive environment in which retention of knowledge is encouraged. They concluded by describing teaching effectiveness as the ability to be useful, helpful and valuable in facilitating lasting intellectual learning through identified personal traits and instructional organisation.

Okpala and Ellis (2005) examined students’ perceptions of teacher quality, focusing on teacher qualifications. Two hundred and eighteen business college undergraduates enrolled in one college participated in the study, with a large proportion of them having an African-American background. The researchers found a large variation in their perceptions as to what characterises teacher quality. The major emerging themes on what students perceived as attributes of a quality teacher were teaching skills, commitment to student learning, content knowledge and verbal skills. The researchers’ methodology involved qualitative and quantitative survey questionnaires to map student perceptions of teacher competence.

In Canada, Grayson (2008) conducted a longitudinal study of 513 students in Toronto over four years. Grayson’s study considered the socio-cultural and ethnic backgrounds of participants in mapping out the trend of data. In this study, students of Asian origin regarded their teachers less positively than
their peers from Caucasian and African-American backgrounds. Other researchers have supported this view by suggesting that student characteristics such as aptitude, age, gender and parental occupations are determinants and explanations for their perceptions of what effective teaching should be (Gibbs, Morgan, & Taylor, 1982; Feldam, 1986; Renaud & Murray, 1996; Crumley, Henry, & Kratchman, 2001; Santhanam, 2004).

Because of such complexity in research results due to sample composition and research instruments, authors such as Crumley, Henry and Kratchman (2001) have supported the view that the use of student evaluations and/or perceptions is biased and unreliable as a method. While their view might sound reasonable, it is also justifiable that the concept of effective teaching should be one of inclusive teaching – one which allows students from all backgrounds to have the same quality experience of teaching that allows them to succeed (DEEWR, 2008). Robinson and Tang (2005) support this view. In their study of students’ perceptions of quality teaching and learning they used the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which is commonly used in Australian higher education. This instrument is useful in the analysis of perceptions as its outlook is global and looks at the overall effectiveness of a degree program (Ginns, Prosser, & Barrie, 2005).

Moreover, researchers like Shulman (1987) and Ingersol (1996) have argued that teaching as a discipline has long been conducted without an audience of peers, unlike other disciplines such as law that are guided by case studies and precedents. While researchers across the world have been attempting to define what makes for a good teacher, few researchers have adequately consulted with the people most impacted, that is, the students (Layne, DeCritoforo, & McGinty, 1999) and when consulted, they are sceptical about how their opinion of teaching quality is considered (Spencer & Schmelkin, 2002).

The above review of the research literature in relation to students’ perceptions of teaching quality highlights the diversity of methodologies and student samples. It also highlights that students’ feedback as a means of defining and mapping what makes for quality teaching is possible to a certain extent. It is, furthermore, an inventive and perhaps under-utilised form of preserving and improving pedagogical practice.

**Constructivist Pedagogies**

The present research aligns to a constructivist view of learning and teaching. Constructivist pedagogies acknowledge instructional strategies where students learn by personally and socially constructing their own knowledge. Within constructivist perspectives, reality is internal or implicit to each individual and consequently it is constructed rather than transmitted. Learners do determine their own knowledge as they look at a situation from their own peculiar angle (Biggs & Moore, 1993). Similarly, effective learning occurs in periods of exploration and cognitive challenge such as confusion and conflict among diverse pieces of information (Wood, Cobb, & Yackel, 1991). However, behaviourist approaches in teaching and learning tend to emphasise transmission of knowledge and factual information acquisition in the form of rote learning and one-way teacher-oriented methods, as well as isolated and independent learning (Elliot, Kratochwill, & Travers, 1996).
Leder (1994, p. 35) has indicated that in the behaviourist movement “the mind was regarded as a muscle that needed to be exercised for it to grow stronger.” Its reliance on process/product-oriented teaching alongside teacher-centred tendencies have been prevalent in course delivery in the past century (Marland, 1994). The present research also aligns with current literature on higher education pedagogies advocating student-centred approaches, with an emphasis on qualitative transformation of knowledge rather than transmission of facts and procedures. Furthermore, the constructivist approach seeks ways to engage the learner within a context embedding personal and social experience (Biggs, 2003; Good & Brophy, 2009). At the higher education level, the constructivist discourse seems to focus on five major themes, namely, students’ expectations of course delivery and presentation, encouraging class participation, the instructional dilemma between structured and discussion-based tutorials, providing academic feedback to learners, and getting them engaged in productive group project work (Ramsden, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Good & Brophy, 2009; Entwistle, 2009).

**Research Questions**

In general terms, the present study addresses the following questions:

1. What expectations do students hold about teaching and learning in the disciplines of business, accounting and economics in regard to:
   1.1 Expectations of course delivery and presentation
   1.2 Encouraging class participation
   1.3 Structured versus discussion-based tutorials
   1.4 Providing academic feedback
   1.5 Working in group projects?

2. Which of those expectations appear to be in conflict with instructional practices recommended in the quality-teaching literature?

3. What are the implications of both types of expectations for curriculum design and delivery in the context of the above disciplines?

**Method**

Print advertisements inviting participation from students enrolled in Business and Economics subjects were posted on University notice boards. Interested students were asked to contact the researchers, through a single research contact officer. From the expressions of interest received by the researchers, 23 students in various stages of their study in business, accounting and economics departments in the Sydney metropolitan area participated in the interview study. Table 1 details the diversity in opinions and interests in the interview sample in terms of gender, background and discipline, ensuring that a diversity of interests and opinions was obtained for research purposes. The interviewees were enrolled in faculties of business and economics at Macquarie University, Sydney University and the University of Technology, Sydney.
Table 1: Characteristics of Students Participating in the Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>International/Domestic</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>International</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Business and Accounting</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Applied Finance and Commerce</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Accounting</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>Domestic</td>
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<td>International</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Business and Law</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Applied Finance and Actuarial Studies</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<td>International</td>
<td>Actuarial Studies and Commerce</td>
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<td>International</td>
<td>Applied Finance</td>
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<td>Domestic</td>
<td>Actuarial Studies and Applied Finance</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>International</td>
<td>Accounting and Applied Finance</td>
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Semi-structured interviews were conducted because such a methodology allows the researchers to interact with each respondent on the basis of a set of pre-determined questions (see Appendix). This approach also opens the way for more questioning and negotiation of meaning between interviewer and interviewee within the context of the research (Minichiello & Kotler, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were preferred to administering questionnaires for data collection purposes because questionnaires present respondents with a set of fixed statements that are arranged a priori and with which they are only allowed to agree and disagree with.

After consultation with five academics and five students in the Faculty of Business and Economics of Macquarie University, a guide (see Appendix) was prepared to lead the semi-structured interviews with twelve questions representing a broad range of instructional issues. Prompt questions were designed to stimulate discussion and elicit students’ opinions. Those questions were jointly prepared by three academic staff and validated with five students beforehand.

Each interview was audio-taped, with approximately 40 minutes per interview. Participants were advised of issues ensuring anonymity and confidentiality and the project obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of Macquarie University and the approval was subsequently ratified by the Sydney University and University of Technology, Sydney ethics committees.

In order to facilitate the analysis of students’ responses, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Responses were subsequently coded using NVivo8 qualitative software according to the five constructivist themes as identified in the research literature (Ramsden, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Entwistle, 2009) and outlined in the first research question.
Responses were further broken into smaller sub-themes. A sub-theme represented a single meaningful and complete idea expressed by a respondent. Similar sub-themes within each theme were reduced on the basis of common attributes to discover any underlying uniformity across the data until further comparison could not be made because of saturation.

**Discussion of Findings**
Using the five constructivist themes as a framework, the qualitative analysis explored students’ expectations of quality teaching in the disciplines of business, accounting and economics. It also uncovered those expectations that do not align to the current literature on a constructivist perspective to learning and teaching.

**Theme 1: Students’ Expectations of Content Presentation**
Teachers constantly engaging the class through good use of voice projection, movement, gestures, eye contact and speaking pace were identified as more effective compared to those who ‘droned on’ without any regard for the audience. The importance of being articulate was a recurrent theme.

A good presentation was perceived as one portraying a summary of what knowledge should be assumed, an overview of learning objectives to be mastered at the end of class, as well as their relevance in the context of the course of their study. For some it did not matter much whether the introduction was provided at the beginning of class or as reading materials available before class. Likewise, there was a request for ending each tutorial or lecture session with a summary of key points and a preview of what was to come in the next class. Respondents also revealed that they found it useful when their teachers posted unit information online before class, as this allowed them to read ahead and prepare.

Clarifying content through explanations, demonstrations, analogies, illustrations and examples were also much appreciated. Slide presentations were seen as instrumental in reviewing key points with a reference to exam concerns:

Great lecture slides are priceless. They don’t have to have a lot of detail on them but as long as they have the main points for exams or for generally what we need to know, then it helps so much …

A related issue was the delivery of the first lecture or tutorial. Students want to know what the subject is about. Is this subject relevant within the context of their degree program or future career choices, and will they enjoy the subject? Providing a basic introduction and/or a unit overview gives them an opportunity to make a decision as to whether this is a unit they could successfully study, particularly in the first class when some students are “shopping”. They also want an idea of resource availability, such as: what is the required text, is it available in the library, and will extra material be made available online. They require teachers to make clear in the first session their expectations for the whole semester. For example: how classes will be structured; how they will be assessed; how much input is needed to get a good result; the study and examination processes that will assist them in successfully completing the subject.
For many students, preparing for getting a job was cited as a major reason for learning. As one respondent said: “Uni is about getting someone ready for the workforce, trying to get them a job once you graduate.” Interestingly, however, students perceived that there might be a tension between how teachers build academic theory as against their own experiences and expectations of professional practice. The perception was that the classroom setting tends to emphasise the cognitive or academic over the professional or future application. They wanted teachers to always address the question: “Why are we learning this?” This was evident from comments such as: “The material and all is great, but if we can’t work with it … later on in life, then it doesn’t really help much”. In fact some respondents commented on how they spent “a whole semester on a particular topic without knowing why they were learning it [what they were learning]”; they wanted to know how it was relevant to them, or arguably, whether the content was “going to be used in exams”.

Theme 2: Encouraging Class Participation

A relaxed teaching environment was perceived as conducive to increase participation. “Breaking the ice” and getting students “out of their shell [sic] through the use of humour” were some of the suggestions to create an open and friendly environment and therefore enhance participation in class. In particular, the issue of students’ ‘losing face’ among their peers came up strongly as they sometimes felt “intimidated by the fact that they may get answers wrong, or appear stupid … in front of their classmates or people they didn’t know.” Teachers’ getting to know their students’ names was often portrayed as a strong connector: “… calling us by name, it’s a small thing, but I think an important thing as well”.

Many interviewees were of the opinion that dismissive and pushy teacher attitudes and other such negative behavioural patterns made the class “shut down” because “they feel they’re being picked on.” There were suggestions for alternative learning activities such as role playing and brainstorming to encourage participation.

Consideration of catering to various learning styles was highlighted: “I think the lecturers must understand that everyone has different learning styles, and to be able to convey their message and teach different ways so people are able to grasp that”; as well as the need for varied teaching styles: "I think the important part of teaching is being able to explain the same thing in a few different ways ...”.

There were references to students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) who may often be reluctant to participate because they are quiet, have shy dispositions or do not understand the teachers’ or their peers’ accents. Some domestic participant students speculated that some students failed to communicate effectively not only because of language barriers per se but rather due to socio-cultural differences and expectations. For example, one student mentioned that the perceived lack of participation by international students in class was “a cultural thing, [some cultures] don’t discuss with people, [they] just sit down and absorb what other people are saying”. Some NESB respondents clearly indicated that diligence in their work was not the
issue but language confidence “because their English they think (sic) is not as good as some other students”.

Respondents were able to identify various types of questioning methods. While they recognised the value of closed questions for building up their confidence to speak more, open-ended questions were identified as the most effective type of questioning technique because it gives them an opportunity to consider their answers. As one student stated, “...it makes a big difference, to kind of have a bit of time to answer...”. Maintaining a flexible approach to questioning and answering was recognised as valuable, through keeping a mix of structured questions and “interactive” spontaneous questions. Allowing for question time was seen as indispensable in any lecture or tutorial. On the other hand, it appears that anxiety about being embarrassed or exposed as incompetent in class is exacerbated when the teacher conducts open questioning. Students expect affirmations and encouraging verbal responses, such as, “that’s a good point,” or through non-verbal signals such as eye contact, a nod, or a smile.

Finally, there was acknowledgment that online forums are useful social networking tools where everyone can ‘meet’ and discuss issues at “any time at home or in the university” without undue face-to-face participation pressure or the worry of being ridiculed in public. An online forum also acts as a collection of questions and answers that students can access at any point of time during the course.

**Theme 3: Vertically-oriented versus Interactive Tutorials**

The dilemma of whether tutorials should be more vertically oriented or more interactive was addressed from various perspectives. There was also the view that the decision needs to be linked to the nature of the subject, although a mix of both approaches was usually preferred. Most respondents agreed that they prefer a synergy between an interactive and a rigidly structured tutorial to promote a better learning atmosphere. It was their view that it does not matter whether a class is a tutorial or a lecture – students felt that while some structure is necessary to guide the content and direction of course material, interaction between the teacher and the class and vice versa is necessary to create an active learning environment. They perceived that the more interactive a class, the more the teacher values student input.

If you're interacting with the class as well as the tutor, then you're more motivated to go to the tutorial as well because when it’s too structured it gets boring ... and that's when the students start getting slack because they reckon they're not important, they don't feel important. It's all about making the student feel important as well and that's what I expect from a tutor in a respective tutorial.

More specifically, they mentioned that they do not enjoy being “talked at” and that “when classes are too structured they get too monotonous.” One respondent said, “I think interactive, discussion based ... is the best way to learn instead of just being lectured to and told things”. Their comments illustrate that learners do in fact value interactive opportunities and prefer to take an active part in the learning process. Opportunities to apply the
knowledge they have are much appreciated because interactivity is “more engaging” and “more effective than just listening.” Furthermore, interactive classes provide students with informal support opportunities from their peers as well as academic staff, as one aptly put it, “Discussions help you get more information. Then students can help each other, like smart students can help the weak students…”

Identified interactive opportunities included group work, questions and answers, class discussions and debates. Although this list is not exhaustive of the techniques that teachers may use to engage the class, the list goes some way to highlighting that students want “flexibility” in their learning, they want to “have room to be able to ask a little bit more detailed questions … or … to go on different branches”. They do recognise that structure is necessary as a measure of “objectives to be fulfilled”, while craving the engagement that interactive lectures or tutorials promise to provide.

**Theme 4: Providing Academic Feedback**

Feedback was recognised unanimously as important because of its formative nature. Some comments highlight the dependency that learners have on effective feedback, particularly in getting to know strengths and weaknesses: “If I am doing something wrong the only way I can know is if someone else tells me, because I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t feel it was right.” Similarly, it “was important to have [feedback] throughout the semester”.

When asked what type of feedback they believed enhanced their learning, most respondents thought that most importantly for feedback to be effective it has to be consequential. A commonly reported concern, for example, was that feedback was often provided to students too late to influence or support their learning. Several students commented that when feedback came after a final exam and/ or a final mark had been allocated, they felt the feedback ceased being useful to them as at that point there was no longer an opportunity for them to act on the information.

While individual feedback was generally preferred, that is, feedback that was specific to their assignments, there was ample recognition of the logistical need for generic feedback. In fact, it was surprising how many of them acknowledged the necessity of generic feedback due to the large class sizes. Online tools such as Blackboard were perceived as a space for them to receive feedback from their peers and teachers, which greatly assisted and enhanced their learning. One respondent illustrated how online discussion forums allowed him an opportunity to consider ideas he had not previously thought about: "I’ve seen that a lot of times I might not have a question … that I might have in the future or something, but when somebody else raises the issue then I’ve got the answer there [and] everyone can see other people’s questions [and answers which is] really helpful”.

It is noteworthy that in the interviews feedback was commonly thought of only as marks and comments received after assessment tasks – also known as summative feedback. Respondents did not seem to consider informal communications in class as formal feedback. For example, questions and answers in tutorial discussions, explanations and examples worked out in
class, and feedback that was not connected to assessment pieces were not perceived as formal teachers’ feedback.

**Theme 5: Working in Group Projects**

Interviewees were asked for their opinions in regard to the dynamics and benefits of group work in the context of group assignments. Generally, respondents felt that “group activity [was] actually quite important for any subject”, but also “it depends on what you’re being assessed on”. In particular, it was felt that group activities give NESB students or those with a shy temperament an opportunity to verbally contribute to discussions, whereas they may find the traditional classroom setting to be intimidating. As one student said:

> I think [group work] is a bit easier. Instead of having to say something or discuss something in front of the entire class, you can just raise a point in front of two or three people. It gives you a bit of confidence. So you are taking some material and you’re being able to convey it to your own peers, on your own terms, in your own way. That builds confidence and helps you to understand the material a little bit more I think.

It was also encouraging to find the view that group work allows negotiation and knowledge sharing and that getting “another point of view rather than from a textbook or a tutor” is beneficial. A large proportion of them also discussed how group work provided them with invaluable tools for “practical life” and “the future”, “like team work”. One participant suggested:

> So yeah work group is essential for – it doesn't matter what field it is because as I told you, it’s a valuable tool for practical life and if they can start learning from the time when they’re in the university it’s going to help them substantially.

Not surprisingly, some aspects of group work were found to be challenging. The major difficulty identified was group members who were not “pulling their weight.” It was suggested that in assessing group work teachers could mitigate this problem by monitoring all group members’ work input. This could be done by getting each group member to evaluate their colleagues’ input in the form of anonymous peer evaluations. Other students felt that unequal work input and distribution was an issue they could ‘sort out’ themselves. One of them provided an interesting comment about the personal challenges involved in working together in group projects:

> It's [about] making sure that everyone is putting in equal input and someone is not being slack or someone is not bossing around so that there is a perfect balance and perfect equilibrium in the work group.

**Summary, Implications and Conclusion**

The interviews provided a unique opportunity to elicit students’ opinions on what they value in course delivery either in a tutorial or lecture. Their insights reveal that they enter and proceed in university with well-articulated expectations of quality teaching, although some dissonances were also identified.
In this study students called for a clear and enlightening picture of the subject at the first lecture or tutorial, including communication of course objectives and requirements. Similarly, variety in instructional approaches was seen as the primary condition for effective lesson delivery and presentation. Perceptions about keeping the right balance between theory and practice appear to be biased by students’ predilection for work-related instruction. Likewise, encouraging universal participation in class through enacting a friendly and positive learning environment was an instructional approach highly appreciated by the respondents. On the dilemma about vertically-oriented versus interactive tutorials, respondents identified the need for the co-existence of both approaches in class. Also, formative and summative feedback which is constant and timely, and focuses on strengths and weaknesses, was seen by students as conducive to improving academic performance.

Group work received support as a worthy learning strategy, with a warning note on the discouraging effect of non-contributing team members. As for eLearning tools, these were acknowledged by most students as indispensable in tertiary education due to their flexibility as an extended classroom, media versatility and social networking capabilities. Finally, the discussion on language difficulties was largely focused on meeting the pedagogical needs of NESB students, while culture was perceived as a significant learning mediator. It is interesting to note that across all these issues students did not strongly identify knowledge of the subject matter as a requisite for good delivery of a class. While this is pertinent to effective teaching, perhaps this omission highlights the importance of good planning and effective presentation techniques for excellence in teaching from the learner perspective.

Some dissonances between student expectations and what is prescribed in educational theory supporting constructivist pedagogies were found across the five themes (Ramsden, 1992; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Biggs, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Good & Brophy, 2009; Entwistle, 2009). These disparities include a tendency to study mostly for the exam rather than for the sake of learning itself (Duff & McKinstry, 2007). Exam-driven learning is very often the result of overcrowded curricula, reliance on textbooks and teachers’ preference for transmission-oriented instruction. These two factors, exam-driven learning and an over-utilitarian view of academic knowledge, are said to generate a surface approach to learning and a disregard for higher order thinking (Biggs, 2003, Entwistle, 2009). Furthermore, an over-practical perspective about the nature of academic knowledge might lead students to believe that the University mission is about preparing people solely for the workforce. Clearly, this assumption contradicts current university trends where curricula are designed to support the development of broader graduate capabilities such as being an “engaged and ethical local and global citizen”, “socially and environmentally active and responsible” and acquiring “problem solving and research capability” (Winchester-Seeto & Bosanquet, 2009, p. 3).

Despite the obvious value that students’ perceptions might bring as feedback about a particular institution, the issue of totally adhering to their views remains problematic. Giving the end users of the higher education system a real and meaningful opportunity to communicate what they want and expect is
certainly a positive endeavour for curriculum development and staff professional development (Prosser & Barrie, 2003). However, the presence of dissonances in students’ expectations might reinforce Crumbley, Henry and Kratchman’s (2001) caution in using such feedback as the sole instrument for teacher evaluation of practice. It can also be argued that identifying flawed expectations on a regular basis – that is, those expectations that are a mismatch with a constructivist view of education – would be a healthy curriculum exercise in order to modify those teaching practices likely to generate surface approaches to learning.

Such an exercise would ultimately ensure that curriculum delivery and design is perceived by staff as a dynamic activity rather than a static entity. It will also guarantee that a higher education qualification is simultaneously a meaningful academic endeavour, an enriching life experience as well as a functional preparation for the workforce in the fields of business, accounting and economics.
References:


