

Going Green: Improving Student Satisfaction

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Introduction

CQUniversity Australia has been on a 'quality journey' for several years which has taken many routes through building community engagement, reducing internationalisation risk, developing research capacity, bolstering staff qualifications and improving both teaching and learning practice and the student experience. These efforts across the board have resulted in growing capacity and reputation: in 2016, for the first time CQUniversity was named in the top 500 in the THES World University Rankings.

'Going Green' is the story of improving student satisfaction through listening to the student voice; the traffic lights have changed from a red stop light hindering progress to a green light reflecting teaching quality and student satisfaction and enabling the University to continue its quality trajectory. This quality improvement has occurred at the same time as significant growth in student enrolments and campuses.

Student Satisfaction Surveys

Student satisfaction surveys have been extensively used and researched in higher education for at least twenty-five years. The Course Experience Questionnaire is probably the best-known survey in national use across Australia (Ramsden, 1991), while in the UK it is the National Student Survey (Williams and Mindano, 2015). In many Universities, the institution-wide survey is supplemented by a range of other instruments, generally teacher assessment questionnaires and course, unit or module feedback (Harvey, 1995).

The national surveys have often been heavily criticised for being 'blunt instruments', for failing to address the quality of teaching, or for being misused or manipulable (Williams and Mindano, 2015). However, it has been shown that benchmarking student satisfaction over a period has considerable benefits (Kane, Williams and Cappucini-Ansfield, 2008). This paper examines the use of unit surveys over a five-year period, which have been used directly as a means of enhancing the quality of units and indirectly the quality of teaching. Furthermore, the use of student feedback has become an expectation and a key mechanism in internal quality assurance through monitoring, review and improvement.

Higher Education Standards Framework

The quality improvement discussed here is set within the context of the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF), and particularly relates to Domain 5, Institutional Quality Assurance. The relevant standards from the HESF are:

5.3 Monitoring, Review and Improvement

All students have opportunities to provide feedback on their educational experiences and student feedback informs institutional monitoring, review and improvement activities.

All teachers and supervisors have opportunities to review feedback on their teaching and research supervision and are supported in enhancing these activities.

The enhanced use of the unit evaluations essentially provides opportunities for students to give - and for teaching staff to receive - feedback on the fundamental elements of their learning, the course units. Importantly, not only was feedback given and received but was demonstrably acted on through enhancement activities for teaching staff through the Office of Learning and Teaching and the Deputy Deans (Learning and Teaching). The loop was closed with students through a renewed emphasis on having useful and informative Annual Course Evaluation Reports which identify feedback and responses to it on each Moodle site.

Student Satisfaction and the Student Voice

CQUniversity Australia has undertaken student evaluations of units for many years. These are student surveys undertaken every time a unit is offered and constitute seven questions, the answers to which are ranked on a 5-point Likert scale. Every unit has a Moodle site and the release of the survey is prompted by the release of the 'big red button' on each site. There is a question on overall satisfaction which is the focus of this paper, and other questions on navigation of the Moodle site, the adequacy of the learning resources, and a significant concentration on assessment – the tasks, the clarity of requirements, the timeliness of return and the quality and utility of feedback.

A significant precursor to making effective use of the student unit evaluations occurred 2010-12, when Professor Rob Reed, in the inaugural role of PVC (Learning and Teaching) worked tirelessly to boost the response rate from 3.8% in Term 1, 2010 to a very respectable 48% in Term 2, 2012 (Reed, Miller and Thomson, 2012). Without this work, the surveys essentially consisted of a few student voices, ranging from the highly conscientious to the highly critical; there was no valid basis on which to make changes or improvements, and it was easy for teaching staff to dismiss the comments and for inaction to prevail.

In 2013, the Office of Learning and Teaching began a very simple colour-coding of the results, using a traffic light system of green for good (>4/5 satisfaction), red for needing improvement (<3/5) and orange in the mid-range. This provided a very clear and in some cases, stark, picture of the student opinion of the course units, which could obviously be grouped by School, course and individual unit co-ordinators and their staff. It was decided to focus the initial efforts of enhancement on those units which had been given more than three 'red lights' or 'red flags'.

The improvement journey: restructure as catalyst

The renewed focus on student satisfaction and teaching quality occurred at a time of upheaval at the University, following a downturn in international revenue, and a major restructure and redundancy round in 2012 (which in fact primarily affected professional rather than academic staff). The PVC (Learning and Teaching) role was brought into the Higher Education Division and new roles of Deputy Deans (Learning and Teaching) were introduced into the Schools reporting to Deans but with matrix responsibility to the PVC (Learning and Teaching).

At the same time, committee memberships in Learning and Teaching were reconstituted so that the staff members whose roles had responsibility for learning and teaching enhancement now sat on the relevant committees, rather than the previous selection of staff who were interested in learning and teaching but without the responsibility or mandate to effect improvement. The restructure in effect provided both the catalyst and the structure to enable changes to occur in hearing and responding to the student voice.

The restructure of Higher Education and the need to redevelop international markets also provided urgent reminders to staff that quality, student opinion and viability were seamlessly intertwined. The evaluations began to be taken seriously and the newly empowered committees started the process of effective monitoring of unit enhancement reports, while the Office of Learning and Teaching provided fundamental support to staff in redesigning Moodle sites, assessments and learning resources. Key collaborations in this process were between the Division of Higher Education, Deans of Schools, the PVC (Learning and Teaching) and the Office of Learning and Teaching, the Deputy Deans (Learning and Teaching), and Academic Board and its sub-committees.

The unions also took a keen interest in the process because of the use of the evaluation results as a tool to indicate and manage performance, and because of their concerns that they could be used punitively rather than constructively. Nonetheless the unions, particularly the NTEU, came on board with the process, because they too had a genuine concern for good teaching and could see from the term-on-term results, that there was genuine and widespread improvement.

The results

The results from 2012-2015 (and some initial results from 2016) show dramatic improvement in overall student satisfaction and in the other indicators measured by the student evaluations of units. During that period of rapid growth for the University, the number of units taught increased by 25% and the number of students by 33% (Figure 1 below). The response rate from students has remained steady at around 51-52%.

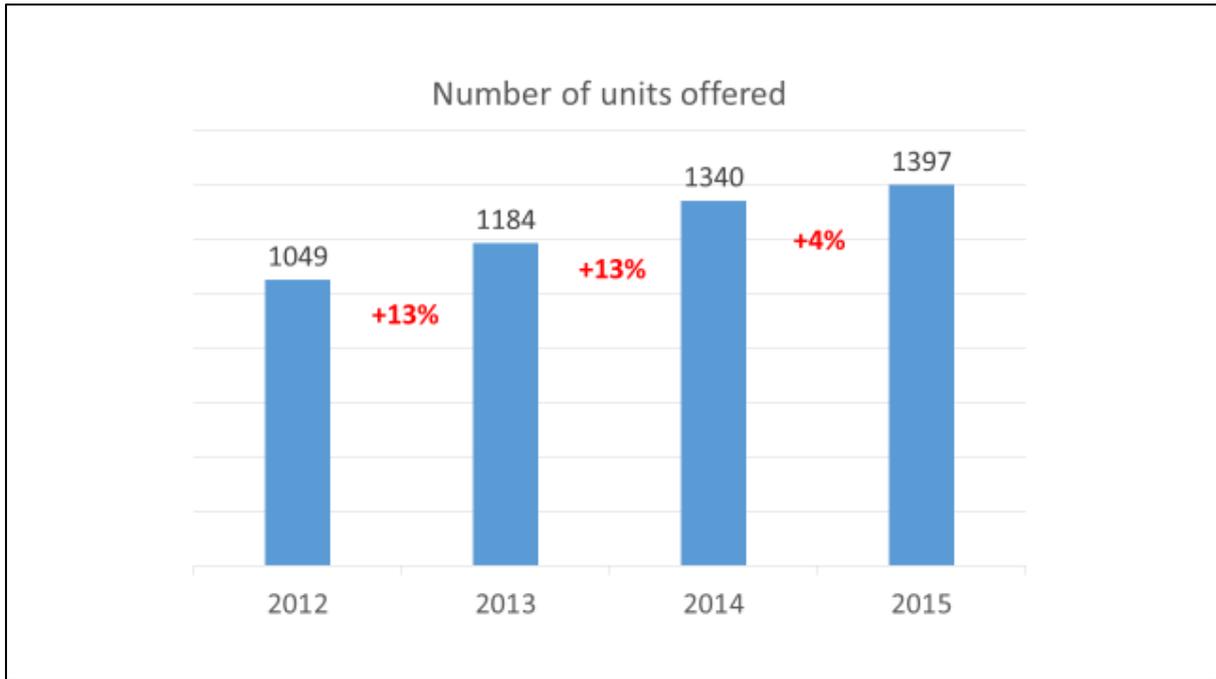


Figure 1 Increase in number of units offered from 2012 to 2015

From 2012 to 2015 the total number of red flags has declined by 23% and the number of triple red flag units has declined by 66%. Overall satisfaction, at its lowest point in 2013 at the height of the restructure, improved from 3.86/5 then to 4.10/5 in term 1, 2016. This pattern of broadly consistent improvement has also been seen in the other indicators. Moodle navigation showed the earliest improvement by 2014, possibly because it is easiest and most mechanical to rectify, but the significant improvement in assessment indicators is indicative of a more fundamental quality shift.

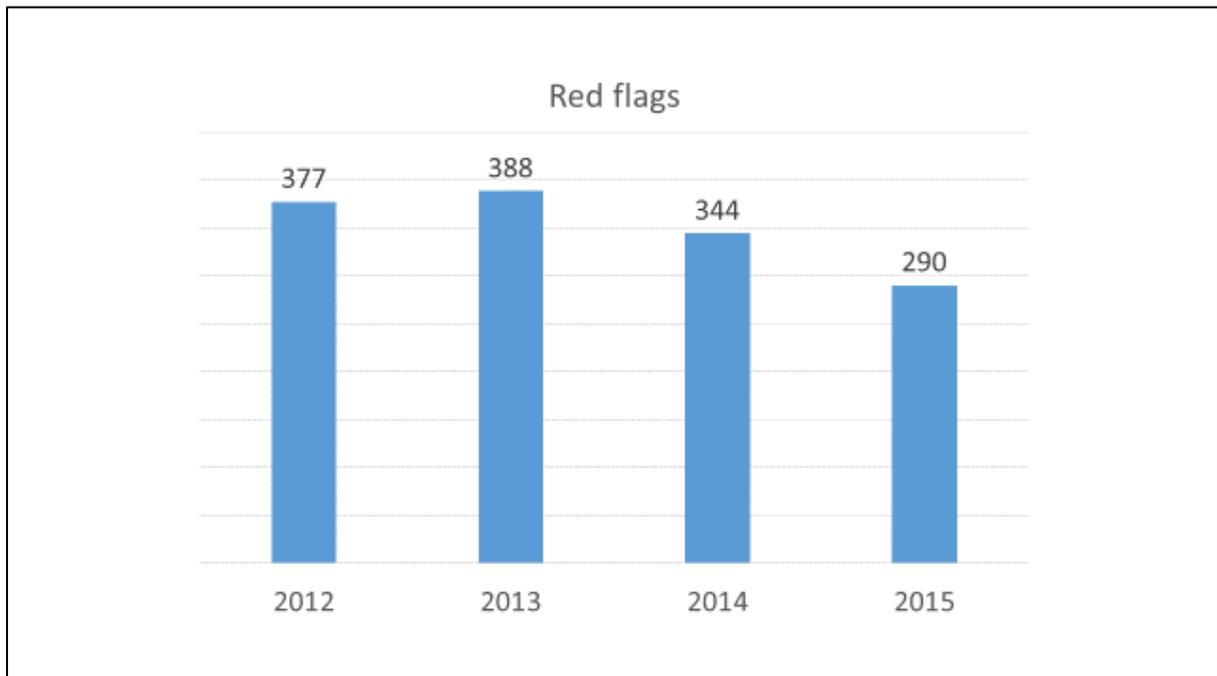


Figure 2 Total number of red flags between 2012 and 2015

Next steps

Going Green has been a significant step in the University's quality journey. The University has used student satisfaction surveys to improve the student experience, the quality of units and indirectly the quality of teaching. It has been a collaborative process which has resulted in a cultural shift in teaching and student expectations. Next steps include a genuine evaluation of teaching rather than units (currently underway through the Office of Learning and Teaching) as well as continued support to academic staff to enhance their teaching practice.

Importantly the University has been able not only to demonstrate its adherence to the standards on student and staff feedback, but also through its transparent reporting to Academic Board and its sub-committees, to demonstrate that:

The results of regular interim monitoring ... are used to mitigate future risks to the quality of the education provided and to guide and evaluate improvements, including approaches to course design, teaching, supervision, learning and academic support.

(Higher Education Standards Framework, 2015: 5.3 Monitoring, review and improvement).

The 'Going Green' project has occurred at a time of major growth in courses, students and campuses. It has been a significant step in growing the University's quality and reputation and gives the green light to further quality enhancement.

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