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Abstract

In many developed countries, including Australia, it is common practice to regularly survey university students in order to assess their experience inside and beyond the classroom. Governments conduct nationwide surveys to assess the quality of student experience, benchmark outcomes nationally and in some cases reward better performing institutions. Internal surveys aim to identify which aspects of university services students rate higher or lower on their importance and performance. Thus, universities can promote highly performing areas and work on those needing improvement.

Traditionally students are surveyed at the end of each year of study. However, in recent years, some Australian universities have introduced surveys for commencing students focusing on their experience in the first few weeks of study. This article investigates whether surveying students at the early stage can be informative and help universities manage proactively student expectations to optimise first year engagement and retention. The research sample consisted of 8228 first year undergraduate students who participated in the Commencing Student Survey (CSS) conducted by a large

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multi-campus Australian university in 2010 and 2011. The results have significant implications for the university's first year retention strategy and consistently suggest the importance of: helping new students with learning methods; staff accessibility and responsiveness; course flexibility; implementing a wide range of formal and informal peer support activities and systems; giving students better prior training on what will happen at university; and providing new students with guides on how the university works and how to do well, written by experienced and successful students from their group. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)