



The University of Sydney

International Student Experience of Learning and Teaching: Postgraduate coursework students

Focus of written observations received from respondents to the Student
Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) 2007

Includes a comparison with the domestic student experience of learning and teaching

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Executive Summary

Data about the degree experience of international students currently enrolled in University degree programs is collected biennially through the Student Course Experience Questionnaire. Analysis of this data provides a comprehensive picture of the international student experience, and the performance of the University in relation to Generic Skills; Good Teaching; Overall Satisfaction; Learning Community; Curriculum; Assessment; Workload; and Clear Goals and Standards during the 2007 academic year. By analysing the qualitative data from the 2007 SCEQ, this report seeks to highlight key areas of best practice and suggested improvements, for international postgraduate coursework students, who were studying at the University during 2007, and provide a comparison with the equivalent domestic student experience in the same year.

Focus of written observations

Areas of best practice

- Curriculum/ Programme of Study received the highest number of positive comments (36%)
- Good Teaching was the second highest (31%); followed by Generic Skills (28%); and Learning Community (22%)
- In order of percentage of comments received respondents also appreciated their experiences in Overall Satisfaction (11%); Assessment (6%); and Workload (1%)
- Generic Skills and Overall Satisfaction were the only areas to record more comments expressing satisfaction than suggesting improvements.

Suggested improvements

- Curriculum received the highest number of comments suggesting improvements (36%)
- Good Teaching was second highest (31%); followed by Learning Community (22%)
- In order of percentage of comments received respondents suggested improvements in their experiences of: Generic Skills (10%); Overall Satisfaction (9%); Assessment (8%); Workload (8%); and Clear Goals and Standards (5%)
- Although Good Teaching; Learning Community; Curriculum; and Assessment received more comments suggesting improvements than expressing satisfaction, the difference was minimal

Comparison with the domestic student experience of learning and teaching

Areas of best practice

- International students provided more positive comments than their domestic counterparts in:
 - Generic Skills (international students: 28%; domestic students : 16%)
- Domestic students provided more positive comments than their international counterparts in:
 - Good teaching (international students: 30%; domestic students: 40%)
 - Learning Community (international students: 22%; domestic students: 25%)
 - Curriculum (international students: 35%; domestic students: 46%)
 - Overall Satisfaction (international students: 11%; domestic students: 16%)

Suggested improvements

- International students provided more comments suggesting improvements than their domestic counterparts in:
 - Curriculum (international students: 36%; domestic students: 34%)
 - Generic Skills (international students: 10%; domestic students: 5%)
 - Workload (international students: 8%; domestic students: 5%)
- Domestic students provided more comments suggesting improvements than their international counterparts in:
 - Overall Satisfaction (international students: 9%; domestic students: 12%)
 - Learning Community (international students: 23%; domestic students : 24%)
 - Good Teaching (international students: 31%; domestic students: 40%)
 - Clear Goals and Standards (international students: 5%; domestic students: 7%)
- Domestic and international students had identical experiences in Assessment (8% of comments received for each cohort)

Introduction

Context of report

The Student Course Experience Questionnaire (SCEQ) is administered every two years to current students (i.e. those currently undertaking undergraduate and postgraduate coursework study) at the University of Sydney. The survey consists of a number of items to which students were asked to respond by marking their degree of satisfaction with the statement on a Likert Scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Analysis of the responses to these items is undertaken by the Institute for Teaching and Learning, with results published on the ITL website. Summary tables showing the results by SCEQ Factor for all faculties, and the University, are also available on the ITL website.

In addition to the 'closed' questions, students are asked to provide written observations on their experiences through answering two 'open' questions on their degree experiences

- *What are the best aspects of your degree experience? Please explain why these are good.*
- *What aspects of your degree course could be improved? Please explain why.*

Analysis of the written observations or qualitative data is undertaken in the Office of the DVC (Education), with individual reports provided to faculties and senior management highlighting key issues in the student experience from both current students (SCEQ) and graduates (CEQ).¹

By examining the foci of international students' comments in the 2007 SCEQ, this report seeks to highlight areas that were of best practice in the international postgraduate coursework student experience during 2007, and those that have been suggested as areas of improvement.

The report is divided into two sections:

- 1 An overview of the total international student experience of learning and teaching in 2007; together with a comparative view of the equivalent domestic student experience
- 2 A more detailed analysis of the areas of best practice and suggested improvements for each of the University KPIs for learning and teaching; together with the corresponding domestic student analysis.

Qualitative data from the SCEQ

The views of international students on their overall experience at the University, as received through the open response comments, are a valuable insight into what is important to them; what they consider to be areas of best practice; and what they consider needs improvement. They often highlight issues that are not addressed in the survey items e.g. concerning the content and structure of their curriculum; as well as explaining the answers they have made to the items themselves e.g. "I have marked neutral to number x because..." or "I found it difficult to answer question xx because I have had a number of teachers, some of whom were good and some were not".

It is important to remember, when looking at the results of the analysis of this data, that the absence of favourable comments on a particular aspect of learning and teaching does not reflect that this is not an area of best practice. Rather, it could be interpreted that the students are happy with their experiences, and prefer to focus on commenting on areas in need of improvement. For example, very few comments on assessment are received in answer to the question on areas of best practice; whilst very few comments on the development of generic skills feature in those suggesting improvements.

¹ http://www.usyd.edu.au/learning/evaluating/open_ended_responses.shtml#faculty

Analysis and counting of comments

The components of categories and sub-categories used in the analysis of qualitative data are based on:

- Characteristics that define the area of the student experience
- SCEQ survey items (Generic Skills; Good Teaching; Overall Satisfaction; Learning Community; Assessment; Workload; and Clear Goals and Standards)
- recurring themes in students' comments and have been developed over many years of analysing qualitative data from students' surveys.

Together, they represent the range of features of each aspect which are considered to be essential to student satisfaction with the relevant part of the degree experience and/or overall satisfaction with the course.

Each comment is analysed according to the *Taxonomy for analysing qualitative data from the SCEQ/ CEQ²*, which is based on the University KPIs for Learning and Teaching. Based on the premise that a comment is what is written by an individual respondent in response to one of the open response questions, and a tally in the statistics being a specific phrase or sentence referring to one aspect of the student experience, the total number of times an aspect is mentioned in any one set of comments is calculated as a percentage of comments received in the year of the survey. As a general rule, only those aspects which are mentioned in over 5% of comments received from international students are considered significant enough to be highlighted in the report.

For example, the following comment is counted as ONE COMMENT RECEIVED; but as it is mentioned in Curriculum (Content and Structure); Generic Skills (Personal and Intellectual Autonomy); and Good Teaching (Techniques and Methods), the highlighted phrases within the comment are counted ONCE in each of the relevant categories i.e. 3 aspects in one comment.

I enjoyed the University life. The large library helped me to research. I was about to improve my English communication skills. Assignments enhanced my problem solving skills and ability to meet deadlines.

Learning Community:

- Learning environment:
Belonging to community
- Physical resources: Library

Generic Skills:

- Communication
- Research and Inquiry
- Personal and Intellectual Autonomy

Number of comments received:

In 2007 525 international students provided answers to the open question on areas of best practice; 524 suggested improvements.

In 2007 1504 domestic students provided answers to the open question on areas of best practice; 1466 suggested improvements

² Available from Quality Assurance Officer (Learning and Teaching)

Part One Overview.

1 The international student experience of learning and teaching

The following chart provides an overview of the international student experience of learning and teaching, as indicated in their responses to the open questions in the 2007 SCEQ. The chart demonstrates the relationship between areas of best practice, and suggested improvements for each of the SCEQ Factors: Generic Skills; Good Teaching; Overall Satisfaction; Learning Community; Assessment; Workload and Clear Goals and Standards. Since the majority of written observations received from respondent to the SCEQ relate to the Curriculum, or programme of study, this area of the student experience is also included. Results are expressed as a percentage of the total number of comments received from international respondents and which mention the component aspects of each factor.

To summarise, international students who were studying at the university in 2007, and who provided written observations to the SCEQ:

- Were satisfied with the development of Generic Skills
- Were ambivalent about their experiences of Good Teaching; Learning Community; Curriculum; Assessment and Overall Satisfaction. In all these areas the percentage of comments received which either expressed satisfaction of suggested improvements were evenly divided.
- Historical evidence suggests that Workload and Clear Goals and Standards are not usually topics mentioned as areas of best practice, hence the low number of comments received which indicated satisfaction with these areas.

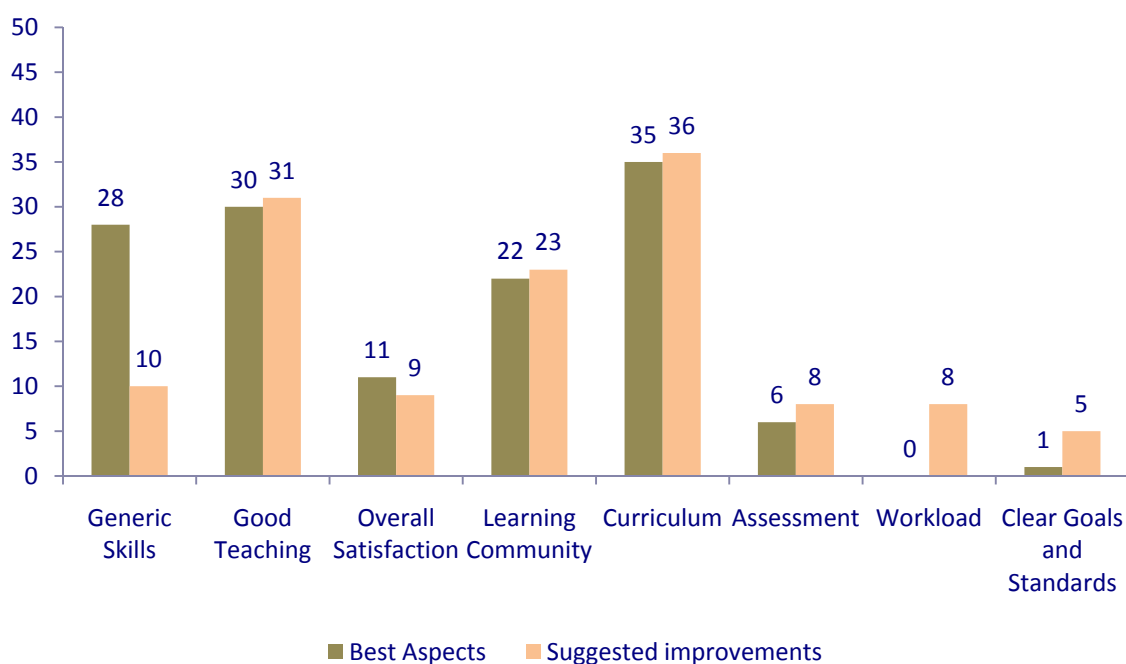


Figure 1: Postgraduate coursework international students: percentage of comments received: SCEQ 2007

2 Comparing the international and domestic student experience

The following two charts indicate the relationship between the international student experience of learning and teaching and the domestic student experience, as provided through their responses to the open questions in the 2007 SCEQ. The numbers refer to the percentage of comments received from the respondents to the CEQ which mentioned the component aspects of each SCEQ Factor.

Figure Two compares the responses to the open question on areas of best practice, as received from international and domestic respondents to the 2007 SCEQ.

Figure Three compares the responses to the open question which asked respondents to suggest improvements in their degree experiences, as received from international and domestic students in the 2007 SCEQ.

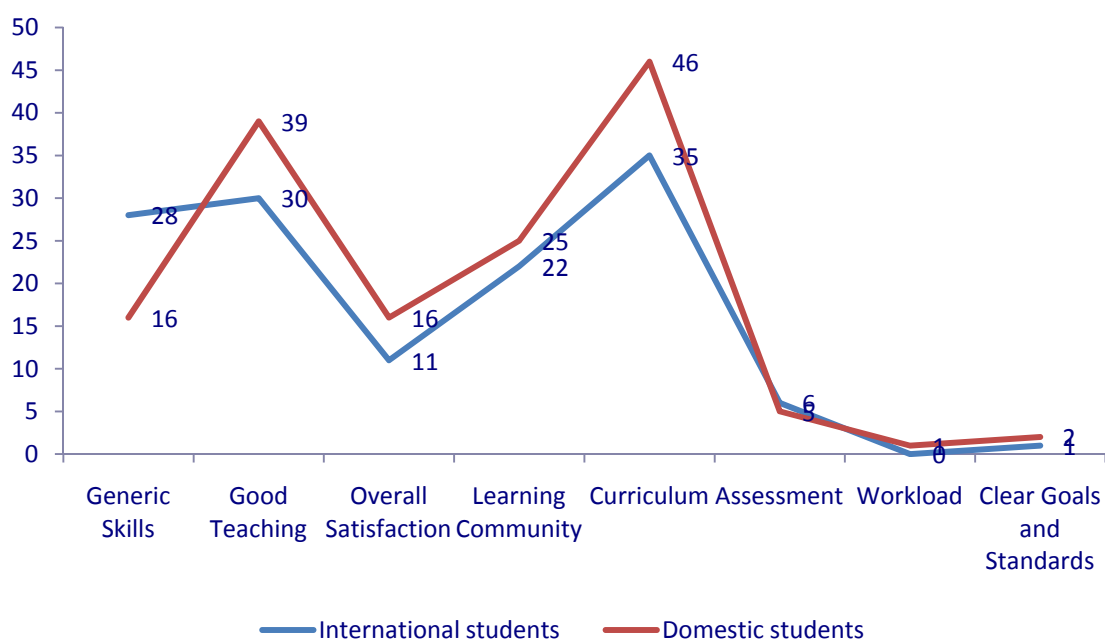


Figure 2: Comparison of international and domestic student experience: areas of best practice: SCEQ 2007

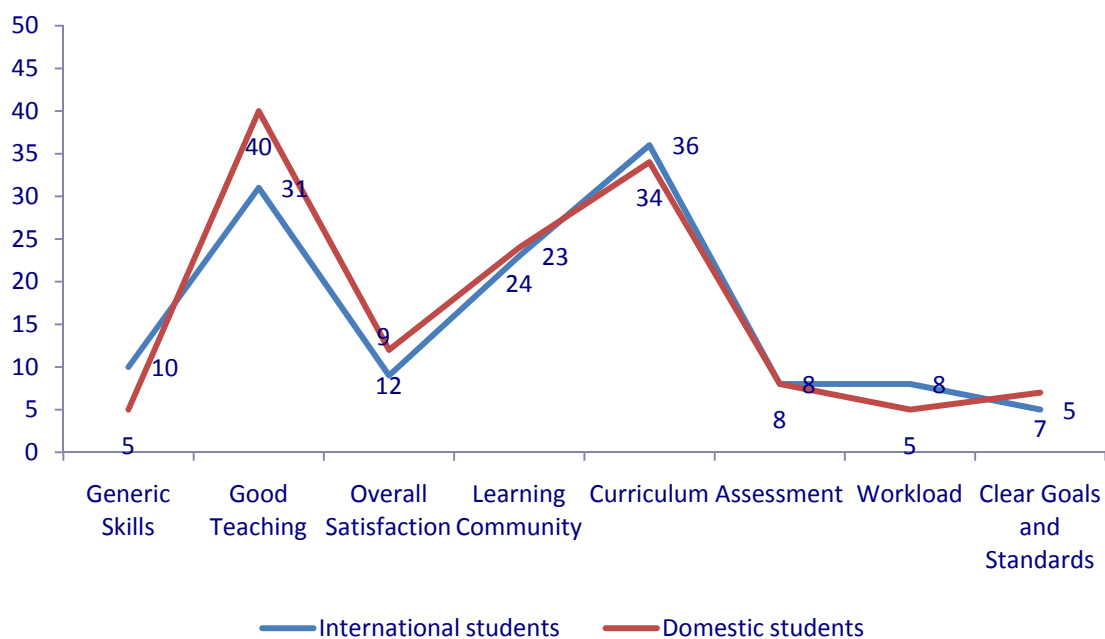


Figure 3: Comparison of international and domestic student experience: suggested improvements: SCEQ 2007

Part 2 Detailed analysis of the international student experience

The following section provides a more detailed analysis of the international student experience, and comparisons with the domestic student experience. Taking each KPI in turn, statistical information is provided on the percentage of comments received from respondents in answer to the questions on areas of best practice and suggested improvements. Within each KPI, the distribution of comments across the constituent components is provided, together with a brief analysis of the comparative domestic student experience.

1 Generic Skills

Areas of best practice

- 28% of respondents to the SCEQ indicated in the answers to the open response question on best aspects, that they were developing skills and abilities in all of the University Graduate Attributes
- The majority of comments (10%) referred to skills and abilities in the Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding cluster, and included the development of professional or disciplinary skills and relevant work experience.
- The remaining comments were distributed between: Research and Inquiry (7%); Information Literacy (4%); Personal and Intellectual Autonomy (3%); and Communication (5%).

Suggested improvements

- 10% of respondents indicated that improvements were required in their acquisition of Generic Skills
- Half of the comments received related to skills and abilities in the Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding cluster, including group and team work skills; and professional/ disciplinary skills and relevant work experience.

Domestic students

- With considerably more positive than negative comments relating to this KPI, domestic students recorded similar outcomes to their international counterparts
- 16% of domestic respondents to the SCEQ indicated that they were satisfied with their development of skills and abilities in all of the University Graduate Attributes, with the majority falling into the Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding group (7%)
- 5% of domestic respondents expressed dissatisfaction with this area of their experience, particularly in relation to the development of skills and abilities in the Communication and Ethical, Social and Professional Understanding clusters.

2 Good Teaching

Areas of best practice

- 30% of respondents indicated that they were satisfied with teaching practices across the University
- 14% valued the variety of teaching methods used; the ability of lecturers to make their subjects interesting and to motivate students; and the learning resources provided
- Support provided, together with an understanding of student problems, by academic staff was appreciated by 7% of respondents.

Suggested improvements

- 31% of respondents considered that improvements were necessary in this area of their experience
- 13% referred to the outdated teaching methods used
- The lack of timely and constructive feedback on work was the focus of 7% of comments received from this group of respondents; whilst a further 6% considered that they did not receive support and understanding of their problems from academic staff

Domestic students

- According to the percentage of comments received on this KPI, international students had similar experiences of Good Teaching to their domestic counterparts.

- 39% of domestic students who provided written observations in their responses to the SCEQ valued the teaching methods used (15%); support from academic staff (7%); and the ability of staff to motivate them in their work (6%).
- 40% of domestic students suggested improvements in this area of their experience, particularly in relation to: teaching methods (19%); timely and constructive feedback on work (11%); and concern and care for student learning from academic staff (7%).

3 Overall satisfaction

Areas of best practice

- 11% of international students provided information in their written responses that could be accredited to this KPI
- The majority of these (8%) expressed satisfaction with the relevant qualifications, experience and knowledge of academic staff.

Suggested improvements

- 9% of respondents provided comments that could be related to dissatisfaction with this area of their experience
- Comments were evenly spread across all components of this area of their experience: Quality of degree; Quality of staff; and Quality of students / financial aspects.

Domestic students

- Domestic and international respondents had similar experiences in this area of their experience
- Of the 16% of comments received from domestic students, that expressed appreciation, 12% valued the relevant qualifications, experience and knowledge of academic staff, and the use of guest lecturers and clinicians in teaching subjects.
- 12% of comments received from domestic students suggested improvements in the areas of: Quality of degree; Quality of students / financial aspects; and Quality of staff

4 Learning Community

Areas of best practice

- 22% of international students appreciated the various aspects of the Learning Community that they experienced during 2007
- 16% referred to the learning environment, including: the exploration of academic interests through tutorials and other discussion fora; and the cultural diversity of the student body; whilst 6% appreciated the physical facilities and library services

Suggested improvements

- 23% of respondents considered that this area of their experience required improvement
- Dissatisfaction with the learning environment, including isolation from the student community; and exploration of academic interests, was mentioned in 12% of comments received.
- 9% of comments referred to the dissatisfaction with the physical resources provided by the University e.g. buildings, equipment, computers, library services

Domestic students

- In their written observations on the Learning Community, domestic students reported a similar experience to their international counterparts
- 25% of domestic respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction with the Learning Community; the majority of comments referring specifically to the Learning environment (20%).
- 24% of domestic respondents considered that improvements were needed in this part of their experience, in particular in the learning environment (tutorials and other discussion fora) (12%); and physical facilities and library services (9%)

5 Curriculum

Areas of best practice

- 35% of international students appreciated the programme of study offered by their respective faculties.
- 29% appreciated the content, structure and relevance of the course

Suggested improvements

- 36% of respondents were dissatisfied with the programme of study

- A high proportion (28%) mentioned that the subject content was not always relevant, that some subjects were unnecessary, and that the degree was not well structured in terms of relationships between subjects in the same stream

Domestic students

- Domestic and international students both highly appreciated the curriculum; however the domestic students offered considerably fewer suggestions for improvement than their international counterparts
- 46% of domestic students appreciated the programme of study offered by their respective faculties
- 33% suggested improvements to this area of their experience

In the following areas of the student experience of learning and teaching, historical trends suggest that Assessment, Workload and Clear Goals and Standards are rarely referred to in written observations as being an area of best practice. The majority of comments on these topics occur in answer to the open question which asks respondents to suggest improvements to their degree experience. In all areas, the experiences of international and domestic students are similar.

6 Assessment

Areas of best practice

- 6% of international respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction with assessment.

Suggested improvements

- 8% considered that a wider range of assessment methods should be utilised; that they tested memory not understanding, and did not relate to the coursework; and that changes were required in marking practices.

Domestic students

- 5% of domestic respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction assessment practices within their relevant faculties.
- 8% considered that a wider range of assessment methods should be utilised; that they tested memory not understanding, and did not relate to the coursework; and that changes were required in marking practices.

7 Workload

Areas of best practice

- No comments received from international respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction with their workload.

Suggested improvements

- 8% of respondents deemed the workload to be too high; that too much reading was required; or that consultation was required between faculty members to ensure that deadlines for assessments did not coincide.

Domestic students

- 1% or 17/1466 comments received from domestic respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction with their workload.
- 5% of respondents deemed the workload to be too high; that too much reading was required; or that consultation was required between faculty members to ensure that deadlines for assessments did not coincide

8 Clear Goals and Standards

Areas of best practice

- 1% (4/525) international respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction with this area of their experience.

Suggested improvements

- 5% of respondents would appreciate a clearer explanation of the standard of work required for assessments; more information about the aims and objectives of the course; and clarification about the marking criteria used.

Domestic students

- 2% or 25/1466 comments received from domestic respondents to the 2007 SCEQ expressed satisfaction with this area of their experience.
- 7% of respondents would appreciate a clearer explanation of the standard of work required for assessments; more information about the aims and objectives of the course; and clarification about the marking criteria used.