
International student experience: What it is, what it means and why it matters

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Abstract

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was administered to recent university graduates by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) in order to obtain feedback about their perceptions of their course. Students were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with a series of 49 statements covering issues surrounding the education and support services provided by their university. Although data from international graduate students were collected, there is no commonly used standard, nor is there a systematic way, for reporting and tracking these results; and little is understood regarding the utility of the CEQ items as a scale of international student satisfaction. This article investigates the utility of two of the CEQ scales — Generic Skills and Good Teaching — and compare differences in satisfaction levels between domestic and international graduates. A better understanding of the experience of this student cohort will provide further insights, enable meaningful comparisons and allow university administrators and policy practitioners to make critical decisions in program planning and educational policy. Ultimately, our goal is the same, to enhance the international student's total experience.

Keywords: Course Experience Questionnaire; Student experience; Generic skills; Good teaching; International graduates

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Higher education is becoming increasingly internationalised. Universities in both Australia and overseas are not only competing for students within their own countries, but are increasingly competing for the enrolments of students from across the globe. In 2004, for instance, 2.7 million tertiary students were enrolled outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2006, p. 286) with Australia having the highest concentration of international students within the tertiary sector among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and partner countries (OECD, 2006, p. 303). Data from the Department of Education Science and Training also showed that, in 2005, a total of 25% of higher education students (i.e., 239,495) were international (Department of Education, Science & Training [DEST], 2006). Further data collected through the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs showed that the majority of students (65% in 2005) who come to Australia to study within higher education were from South-East or North-East Asia (Australian Education International, 2005).

Among these students, courses within the 'Management and Commerce' field of education are the most popular, accounting for 48% of the market share (calculated from DEST, 2006). Information Technology courses also attract many international students (12.9%). Additionally, for Australian universities, international students provide an important funding source. In 2003–04 for instance, the average tuition fee for an international student undertaking a university degree was \$10,825 per year (OECD, 2006, p. 240).

Undertaking tertiary studies in another country provides a range of benefits for students including the opportunity to learn a new language, gain valuable life experiences and obtain a deeper understanding of another culture and society. For a university, the enrolment of an international student cohort assists in the development of networks and academic links beyond national borders and provides domestic students with greater opportunities for

understanding other cultures and being exposed to a wider range of academic and social viewpoints.

Australian universities are likely to face special challenges in attracting and retaining this cohort of students in the future. Reduced public funding, the introduction of Voluntary Student Unionism and increased competition for international students may create downward pressures on international student numbers. Part of this challenge is to ensure that international students feel satisfied with their Australian educational experience. It is important that they leave their degree feeling that they were provided with teaching of a high quality and have obtained the skills they were seeking to assist them in their future academic and professional careers. It follows that if students leave satisfied they may be more likely to return to Australia for further study, or to recommend Australia as the preferred destination for higher education to friends and family in their home country.

One of the ways higher education institutions measure their success in providing students with the educational experience they desire is by regularly collecting information on students' satisfaction of their student experience. Although data on international graduate students' satisfaction are collected as part of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), there is no formal mechanism to report, monitor and respond to the needs of international students. In fact, little is understood about what is meant by the international student experience. A better understanding of the experience of this student cohort will provide further insights, enable meaningful comparisons and allow university administrators and policy practitioners to make critical decisions in program planning and educational policy. Ultimately, our goal is to enhance the international student's total experience.

International student experience

If Australia is to continue to successfully compete globally for international students, and in turn reap the benefits that an international student cohort brings, it is important to have a good understanding of how satisfied international students are with different aspects of the university experience — including the quality of the teaching offered to them and the skills and knowledge they obtain as a result of that teaching.

In many ways, the needs, expectations and drivers of satisfaction among international students are likely to differ from domestic students. There are the social challenges that come with leaving behind familiar support networks and moving to a foreign country; but international students often have to overcome language difficulties, as well as adapt to a teaching and learning framework that may be quite different from their educational experiences in their home country. These issues can all impact substantially upon their experience of higher education in Australia.

Much of the research on the international student cohort examines cultural differences in approaches to teaching and learning and on issues that might interfere with a positive student experience. The key issue raised in the literature is that international students are often less engaged in class participation (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Choi, 1997; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Tompson & Tompson, 1996). It is argued that this is because many international students are passive learners or not intellectually or critically engaged in the course material (Chalmers & Volet, 1997); but other researchers have suggested it may simply be due to feelings of awkwardness (Krause et al., 2005), cultural expectations about the use of class time (Chalmers & Volet, 1997) and language difficulties (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004).

There appear to be only a few studies that have examined satisfaction among international students. A majority of these studies focused on factors that influence satisfaction rather than measuring or comparing levels of satisfaction. For instance, Mavondo, Tsarenko and Gabbott (2004) surveyed 516 students from an Australian university in their second or later years of study and found that the quality of student services, library facilities and learning significantly affected satisfaction levels among international students. They further found that quality of teaching, educational technology and student orientation of the university were not found to influence satisfaction.

Another US study by Perrucci and Hu (1995) examined personal factors influencing university satisfaction of 428 international graduate students. It was found that self-esteem, contact with domestic (US) students, perceptions of discrimination and perceptions of others towards their country of origin were the best predictors of satisfaction with their academic appointment.

A study by Smith, Morley and Teece (2002) directly examined levels of satisfaction among international students in Australia. A total of 1,132 international students who finished a course in 1999 at one of 75 universities, schools, vocational education and training programs and English language instruction courses were asked to rate their satisfaction with their education provider on a four-point scale (from 1 being *very satisfied* to 4 being *very dissatisfied*) across a range of different items. Satisfaction levels were highest in regards to ‘meeting students from other countries’ (mean of 1.83) suggesting that the Australian education system may be performing well in terms of providing international students with the opportunity to broaden their social networks. However, items relating specifically to the provision of education were also highly rated, with items pertaining to the ‘quality of the teachers’ and ‘quality of the course’ having mean scores of 1.93 each. While this report

provides some useful insights into satisfaction levels among international students it failed to provide a comparison with their domestic counterparts.

Those studies that have examined satisfaction among international students have used a variety of survey instruments to obtain information about student satisfaction. For more than ten years, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) has been administered to graduates in Australia to obtain information on elements of teaching and organisation within higher education (Ramsden, 1991a, 1991b). In 2001, the CEQ was extended to address a range of ‘out of class’ factors including, social, technological, interpersonal and resource aspects of the university undergraduate experience (Griffin, Coates, McInnis, & James, 2003; McInnis, Griffin, James, & Coates, 2000).

While there have been a number of studies analysing different aspects of the CEQ, there is a dearth of studies into the experiences of international students as measured by the CEQ. This article attempts to fill the gap in the literature with regards to measuring satisfaction among international students. In light of the Australia’s Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) and its focus on improving the quality of learning and teaching within higher education for domestic students, this article compares the satisfaction levels of domestic and international bachelor graduates using two of the LTPF CEQ scales: Good Teaching Scale (GTS) and Generic Skills Scale (GSS).

Method

The data set being analysed in this study was derived from the 2005 administration of the CEQ which collected information from students who completed their course in 2004. All 12 items from the Good Teaching (GTS) and Generic Skills (GSS) scales were included in the analyses and are shown in Table 1.

Table 1*Items in Good Teaching and Generic Skills Scales*

Item no.	Item text	Scale
1	The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work	GTS
3	The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going	GTS
10	The teaching staff of this course motivated me to do my best work	GTS
15	My lecturers were extremely good at explaining things	GTS
16	The teaching staff worked hard to make their subjects interesting	GTS
27	The staff made a real effort to understand difficulties I might be having with my work	GTS
6	The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member	GSS
14	The course sharpened my analytic skills	GSS
23	The course developed my problem-solving skills	GSS
32	The course improved my skills in written communication	GSS
42	As a result of my course, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	GSS
43	My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work	GSS

The study was divided into two components:

- to examine the utility of the CEQ for international students
- to compare the satisfaction levels of international and domestic bachelor graduates.

First, in order to examine the utility of the CEQ for international students and whether an individual item performs differently between student cohorts, a differential item functioning (DIF) analysis via Item Response Theory was conducted to investigate the item parameter estimates and mean ability estimates of domestic and international bachelor graduates. For this component of the study, 50,773 complete responses (i.e., respondents who gave an answer to each of the GTS and GSS items) from domestic and international bachelor graduates were used, of which 5,538 were international students.

Second, the responses of international and domestic bachelor graduates were compared to provide a better understanding of satisfaction levels among international graduates with regards to quality of teaching and the acquisition of generic skills. For the second component of the study, the LTPF methodology of scale calculation was used.

Respondents were included in the scale calculation if they answered at least four of the six items within the scale. The response categories ranged from 1 to 5 where the higher the score the more positive the response and agreement to an item was measured by a mean item response of 3.5 or above. Since international student enrolments seemed to be predominant in particular disciplines, comparisons were made at four different discipline groupings used in the 2007 and 2008 rounds of the LTPF. Chi-square tests were conducted to identify areas of significant difference.

Results

Differential Item Functioning

To be able to make meaningful comparisons of differences between domestic and international graduates, it is important that measurement equivalence holds, that is, the pattern of agreement across the items within the scale is the same for one group of respondents as for another. If an item elicits a high proportion of *agree* scores in comparison to the other scale items for one group of respondents, in this case domestic graduates, the same pattern should also occur for the other, in this case international graduates, and vice versa.

If this is not the case, the item is said to violate measurement equivalence and is therefore deemed to exhibit differential item functioning (DIF). Thus, DIF occurs when an item is substantially harder to agree for one group than for another group. Since any two samples will inevitably produce slightly different item parameters, DIF takes into account overall differences in satisfaction of the respondents and any trivial or unreplicable item calibration differences across groups. DIF does not mean simply that an item is harder (or easier) to agree for one group than for another. It is important to note that some groups of students may find the entire questionnaire more difficult (or easy) to agree with than does

another group. This would not suggest that the scale is flawed. If the students in one group tend to be more satisfied with their experience than the other group, they will tend to be more agreeable on all items.

The results found that, overall, international graduates tended to have lower satisfaction than domestic graduates on the GTS and GSS items. The actual parameter estimate for international graduates is approximately eight times larger than its standard error estimate and hence the difference between the two groups is quite significant. Further, results of the interaction between the item and student group facets also found that international students are more likely to disagree with five items (items 14, 23, 32, 42, and 43) than domestic students. Interestingly these items relate to acquisition of generic skills. One item (item 16) showed no statistical difference in difficulty (i.e., the measurement equivalence holds for this item). The chi-square was found to be significant (3343.081, $df = 11$, $p < .05$), demonstrating the existence of DIF.

Although the analysis has shown the existence of DIF in these CEQ items, its magnitude determines whether it is of substantive importance. The differences in estimate for the items range from 0.006 to 0.238 logits. Two items (items 6 and 10) exhibit much more DIF than others — that is, international graduates are significantly more likely to agree with these items than domestic graduates. However, on average, the differences in estimate will shift the international students' satisfaction distribution by just over 10% of a student standard deviation. Based on this analysis, it can be concluded that while there is existence of DIF, its magnitude is not significant enough for it to be deemed important. Although at least two items may not be working as intended and may require revision, the analysis suggests that the two scales could be used as a measure of international student satisfaction and that they can be used to make meaningful comparisons between the two student cohorts.

Table 2*Differential Item Analysis*

Item no.	Domestic		International	
	Estimate	Error	Estimate	Error
1	0.036	0.004	-0.036*	0.004
3	0.034	0.004	-0.034*	0.004
6	0.119	0.004	-0.119*	0.004
10	0.110	0.004	-0.110*	0.004
14	-0.089	0.004	0.089*	0.004
15	0.027	0.004	-0.027*	0.004
16	-0.003	0.004	0.003*	0.004
23	-0.046	0.004	0.046*	0.004
27	0.069	0.004	-0.069*	0.004
32	-0.099	0.004	0.099*	0.004
42	-0.081	0.004	0.081*	0.004
43	-0.077*	0.014	0.077*	0.014

Note: *An asterisk next to a parameter estimate indicates that it is constrained.

Satisfaction levels among student groups

Responses to the GTS and GSS items among international and domestic bachelor graduates were examined in detail to investigate whether the Australian higher education sector is meeting the needs of international students and whether more could be done to ensure these students have a satisfactory student experience. Figure 1 outlines the GTS results.

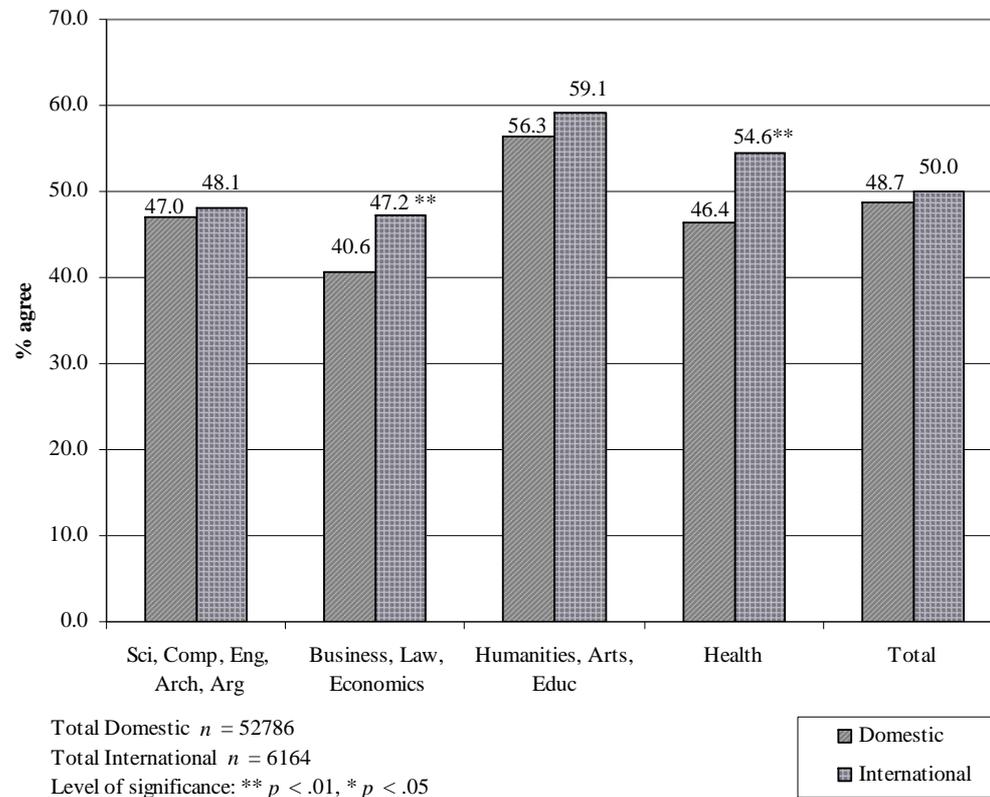


Figure 1

Good Teaching Scale results among domestic and international bachelor graduates by discipline, 2005.

Overall, there was very little difference between domestic and international graduates in their perceptions of the quality of teaching. Half of the international graduates gave, on average, positive responses to the GTS items compared with 48.7% of the domestic graduates.

Interestingly though, within Business, Law and Economics (BLE) and Health, international graduates were significantly more likely to give a positive rating to the quality of teaching than domestic students. Perhaps the teaching styles used within these disciplines are more suited to that expected by international students than domestic students, or perhaps there is a greater emphasis on ensuring the needs of international students are met.

However, this does not suggest that higher education providers should necessarily look to teaching practices within these disciplines and apply them to other discipline areas. In

the case of BLE, for instance, although international graduates gave significantly more positive responses to the GTS items than the domestic graduates, BLE graduates — both domestic and international — appeared to be the least satisfied of the four discipline areas. As noted earlier in this article, management and commerce courses (which are part of the BLE discipline) are the most popular among international students. It is disconcerting that less than half agree that their teachers fulfilled their duties as measured by the GTS.

Rather, the teaching practices of courses within the fields of the Humanities, Arts and Education (HAE) should be examined as they may be better meeting the needs of both domestic and international students. For both groups, this was the discipline with the largest proportion of mean GTS scores above 3.5.

Table 3 shows the results for each individual item within the GTS scale. If the impact of discipline is ignored, international students were just as likely as domestic students to agree or strongly agree with four of the six GTS items. Interestingly though, the two items which arguably measure interpersonal aspects of teaching — the ability to motivate students and show an understanding of difficulties — attracted significantly more positive responses from international graduates than domestic graduates. In particular, the item ‘the teaching staff of this course motivated me to do my best work’ (item 10) was quite different from the other items in that international students from all discipline groups were significantly more likely to agree. This is in line with the DIF analysis for that item. In the case of BLE and Health, the differences were quite substantial (more than 10 percentage points).

Table 3

GTS Items: Proportion who Agree (i.e., Agree or Strongly Agree) Among Domestic and International Bachelor Graduates by Discipline, 2005

Item no	Item text	Discipline	Domestic	Int'l	% point difference
1	The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	43.3	43.4	0.0
		Business, Law, Economics	38.5	41.0*	2.4
		Humanities, Arts, Education	54.3	55.1	0.8
		Health	41.0	48.2*	7.1
		Total	45.8	44.6	-1.1
3	The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	51.4	49.9	-1.5
		Business, Law, Economics	45.1	48.7*	3.6
		Humanities, Arts, Education	57.8	60.6	2.7
		Health	49.4	52.9	3.5
		Total	51.9	51.4	-0.5
10	The teaching staff of this course motivated me to do my best work	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	45.1	48.1*	3.0
		Business, Law, Economics	39.0	49.1*	10.1
		Humanities, Arts, Education	51.8	57.7	5.9
		Health	45.3	56.3*	11.0
		Total	46.1	50.6*	4.6
15	My lecturers were extremely good at explaining things	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	46.0	45.5	-0.5
		Business, Law, Economics	44.2	45.2	1.0
		Humanities, Arts, Education	53.2	53.4	0.2
		Health	46.1	51.4*	5.3
		Total	48.2	47.1	-1.1
16	The teaching staff worked hard to make their subjects interesting	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	48.7*	46.2	-2.5
		Business, Law, Economics	44.5	45.9	1.4
		Humanities, Arts, Education	57.1	55.2	-1.9
		Health	48.5	55.8*	7.4
		Total	50.7	48.2	-2.5
27	The staff made a real effort to understand difficulties I might be having with my work	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	38.9	40.5	1.6
		Business, Law, Economics	32.2	38.5*	6.3
		Humanities, Arts, Education	45.7	47.6	1.9
		Health	38.8	45.0*	6.2
		Total	39.7	41.1*	1.4

* Denotes proportions that are significantly greater ($p < .05$). The results of the GSS, and the patterns between international and domestic bachelor graduates, were quite different from the GTS (see Figure 2).

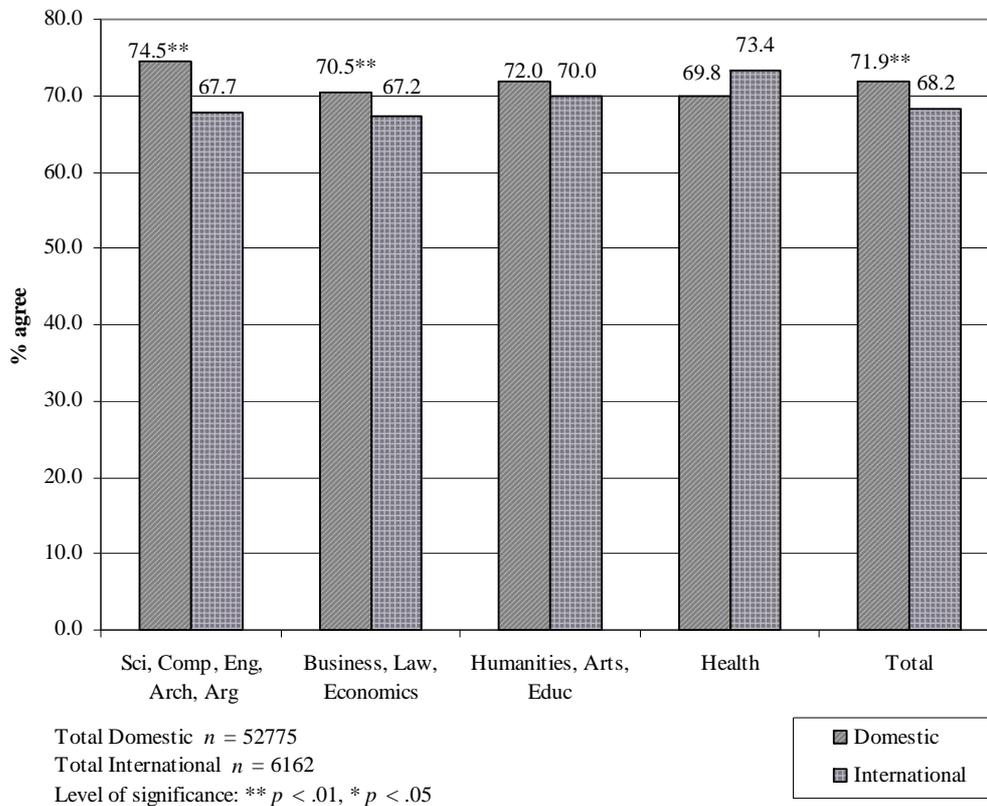


Figure 2

Generic Skills Scale results among domestic and international bachelor graduates by discipline, 2005.

Overall, a larger proportion of graduates, both domestic and international, gave positive responses to the GSS items than for the GTS items. Additionally, while the GTS results for international bachelor graduates tended to be the same or significantly higher than domestic bachelor graduates, the opposite was true for the GSS. This is also in line with the results of the DIF analysis; that is, international graduates tended to be less satisfied with GSS items.

Domestic bachelor graduates were slightly, but significantly more likely to have a mean GSS score at or above 3.5 (71.9% compared with 68.2%). When discipline area is taken into account, significant differences, in favour of domestic graduates, were seen within the ‘Science, Computing, Engineering, Architecture, Agriculture’ (SCEAA) and BLE disciplines.

Table 4 shows the results for each GSS item. It is interesting that, despite previous research arguing that international students struggle to participate in class activities, the only item where international graduates were significantly more likely to agree than domestic graduates was ‘the course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member’ (59.9% compared with 55.8%). Again, this result is in line with the DIF analysis for this item. Although the analysis by discipline showed that the difference was only significant within BLE, this is also the only item where domestic graduates were not significantly more likely to agree in at least two or more of the disciplines. This aspect of the international student experience may be worthy of further research. Perhaps, while many international students may struggle with the interactive classroom format common within Australian higher education, by the time they have graduated they may have become more comfortable and adept at involving themselves in class discussion and, as such, be highly aware of the change in their skill set.

Table 4

GSS Items: Proportion who Agree (i.e., Agree or Strongly Agree) Among Domestic and International Bachelor Graduates by Discipline, 2005

Item no	Item text	Discipline	Domestic	Int'l	% point difference
6	The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	62.1	61.9	-0.2
		Business, Law, Economics	53.6	60.7*	7.1
		Humanities, Arts, Education	50.1	51.9	1.8
		Health	62.2	64.6	2.4
		Total	55.8	59.9*	4.1
14	The course sharpened my analytic skills	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	75.7	65.9	-9.8
		Business, Law, Economics	70.3*	64.7	-5.6
		Humanities, Arts, Education	70.8	71.3	0.5
		Health	65.8	74.5*	8.7
		Total	71.2*	66.8	-4.3
23	The course developed my problem-solving skills	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	73.9*	66.0	-7.9
		Business, Law, Economics	66.0*	62.0	-4.1
		Humanities, Arts, Education	61.2	63.2	2.0
		Health	67.2	67.5	0.3
		Total	66.4*	63.9	-2.5
32	The course improved my skills in written communication	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	64.5*	61.1	-3.4
		Business, Law, Economics	72.5*	65.4	-7.1
		Humanities, Arts, Education	77.0*	71.7	-5.3
		Health	66.2	65.0	-1.2
		Total	71.2*	64.9	-6.3
42	As a result of my course, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	63.4*	55.1	-8.3
		Business, Law, Economics	58.6*	53.0	-5.7
		Humanities, Arts, Education	60.8*	57.1	-3.7
		Health	60.4	61.7	1.3
		Total	60.9*	54.9	-5.9
43	My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work	Sci, Comp, Eng, Arch, Agr	68.5*	61.7	-6.8
		Business, Law, Economics	66.3*	61.7	-4.6
		Humanities, Arts, Education	70.6*	65.5	-5.1
		Health	66.6	66.8	0.1
		Total	68.4*	62.6	-5.8

* Denotes proportions that are significantly greater ($p < .05$).

Discussion

This article has provided an examination of satisfaction levels among international students within Australian universities in relation to the quality of teaching and acquisition of generic skills. If Australia is to continue to successfully compete within the global higher

education market, it is important that the satisfaction levels of international students are closely monitored.

The CEQ is the largest, most comprehensive survey of Australian university graduates available and provides a good starting point for understanding the experience of both international and domestic students. While it is currently used to provide an indicator of satisfaction with teaching quality and the acquisition of generic skills for domestic bachelor graduates as part of the LTPF, little work has been done to examine satisfaction levels among international students.

A number of conclusions emerged from the study. First, the magnitude of the differences in the DIF analysis were not significant enough to be deemed important, although two items (items 6 and 10) may warrant some revision. This indicated that a common meaning of student satisfaction can be established between domestic and international graduates from the GTS and GSS scales. The need for developing a common measure is derived from the importance and extensive use of satisfaction data by institutions and the realisation that Australian universities are not only competing for students domestically, but also from across the globe.

Second, while the analysis by discipline area showed that international students within BLE and Health were significantly more positive about the teaching, overall the GTS results showed no significant differences in the satisfaction levels of international and domestic bachelor graduates. This provides evidence that the perception of quality of teaching is quite universal and that institutions should develop a holistic approach to enhance the quality of teaching across disciplines. University-wide strategies could include, but are not limited to, staff development workshops on teaching and learning strategies, high quality induction

programs for all sessional teachers, and professional development programs in cross-cultural communication for interacting with the diverse student body.

Third, the results of the GSS suggest that universities may have to develop more coordinated policies and actions to ensure that international bachelor graduates are as positive about the skills they have learnt as their domestic counterparts, particularly within Science, Computing, Engineering, Architecture, Agriculture (SCEAA) and BLE courses. The only ‘skill area’ where international graduates were more likely to provide a positive assessment was ‘teamwork’ which may be reflective of the reported struggle of many international students to interact with classmates. This may be an area where international students see the greatest change in their skill set. Institutions should coordinate, facilitate and encourage strategies aimed at the development of skills for international students. These could include the development of a coherent suite of co-curricular personal development and engagement opportunities for international students to develop learning skills for the university environment.

In a period of rapid change in higher education and increased level of competition for international students, there is a need to adapt to changing conditions and a different set of student expectations. Continued development and review of instruments, such as the CEQ, and analysis of different aspects of satisfaction are recommended. The impact of factors such as English language ability, home country and concentration of international students within the discipline/course/institution, to name a few, could be examined. Further analysis within institutions could also pinpoint areas of excellence and concern which may inform policy and practice.

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