



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

GRADUATE VIEWS ON THE QUALITY AND RELEVANCE OF THEIR COURSE AND UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE

Summary report of the survey of
graduates from completion years 1996-
1998

This survey was conducted for the University of Melbourne by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/>).

The purpose of the graduate survey questionnaire is to obtain information about the totality of the student experience provided by the University of Melbourne. In particular, it seeks to determine the views of graduates about the quality of their course, their broader experience of the University, and the relevance of these experiences to their present employment. Included in the questionnaire are items relating to the overall coherence of courses; the social nature of the learning experience; the level of independence and commitment required of students, the international outlook; and the use of new technologies in learning.

Four years of graduate surveys have produced a comprehensive database on the student experience of the University of Melbourne. This database includes responses from graduates with completion years of 1992, 1993, 1995, 1996, 1997, and 1998. Some graduates were surveyed two-years-out and others were surveyed five-years-out. Analysis can be made of patterns over time as well as providing benchmarks for future trend analysis.

The most recent survey, conducted in October 2001, was of graduates who completed undergraduate and postgraduate courses in 1998. In total, 1451 responses were received, representing response rates of 18.1 per cent and 20.9 per cent respectively. The latest report incorporates data from completion years 1996, 1997, and 1998 for comparative purposes.

Summary of findings

Responses from graduates consistently highlighted the University of Melbourne's capacity to offer intellectually stimulating courses that require high levels of commitment to study. Graduates frequently mentioned the satisfaction of completing a rigorous and challenging degree as the single best aspect of their experience. They also commented upon the extent to which their intellectual horizons were broadened through the academic and social interaction with other students of the University.

Graduate ratings of the overall University experience are consistently high at close to 4.0 (on 5-point scale, 5 = excellent). Undergraduate ratings are slightly higher than postgraduate ratings, and show signs of upwards trends. The apparent upward trends include slight rises in satisfaction with the:

- overall quality of undergraduate teaching;
- provision of student support services;
- access to IT;
- access to library resources; and
- quality of administrative services

Overall satisfaction with aspects of teaching and learning in postgraduate coursework was high. For the 1998 completion year, 83 per cent of respondents reported they found their course intellectually satisfying and 75 per cent reported that academic staff made their subjects interesting.

The overall findings with regard to graduate employment are also positive. Typically, only a small percentage (2-4% of University of Melbourne graduates) were not in paid employment and seeking it. A large majority of graduates are employed as managers or professionals.

Graduates consistently rated oral communication skills, written communication skills, and analytical skills as the most important to their life and work. Though oral communication skills are viewed as important, the extent to which the University helped develop these skills receives a relatively low overall mean. The highest rating areas in terms of the extent to which graduates perceive the University assisted them were, subject-specific knowledge and understanding (mean of 4.03, 1998 graduates), an awareness that knowledge is always being revised and extended (3.97, 1998 graduates), and the ability to work independently (3.86, 1998 graduates).

With regard to personal involvement and satisfaction, graduates consistently report high levels of intellectual stimulation from their courses (85% agreement from 1998 undergraduates). Of possible concern, however, were the apparently low levels of collaborative study and involvement in campus life beyond the classroom. Typically, a little over one-third of respondents from undergraduate courses report that they regularly study with other students. Even fewer report involvement in extra-curricular activities. In open-ended comments, a number of graduates note they wish they had been more involved in campus life.

The percentage of respondents who indicated they valued studying in a University where academics were committed to research rose to 62 per cent for 1998 respondents. Ratings for this item show a significant upward trend. Similarly, graduate perceptions of the extent to which IT in courses helped effective learning is steadily rising, though from a relatively low base.

Graduates from combined degree programs are consistently very positive about the overall benefits of completing such a program and report that the extra time and study was worthwhile. However, their satisfaction with administrative arrangements can be improved (52% agreement, 1998 graduates).

But while the survey showed some very positive results for the University, it also brought out some issues of possible concern, which the authors highlighted for further consideration. Some of these issues were:

- that a small number of graduates, roughly 10 percent, leave the University with dissatisfaction of some kind. While some level of dissatisfaction seems inevitable, aiming to reduce the proportion of graduates expressing concerns would be a desirable quality assurance objective. Identifying the action that might be taken is a considerable challenge, however, for the origins of individual disquiet are often in particular circumstances and events rather than University-wide systemic issues.

- Graduates generally viewed the University to be more effective in helping develop subject-specific knowledge than in helping to develop some essential work skills such as oral communication, written communication and teamwork skills. The variations in ratings across the faculties and the relatively moderate ratings given by graduates for a small number of generic skills may need to be examined further.
- The proportion of graduates who appear to have been involved to the full in campus activities appears small. About one-third of undergraduates and fewer than 10 per cent of postgraduate coursework students report that they were consistently and actively involved in extra-curricular activities. A related issue is that only a little over one-third of undergraduate students indicated they regularly engaged in collaborative study with other students. These findings in part reflect the considerable complexity of the lives of many students and the limited time available for participating in enriching on-campus activities.

The survey has been useful in highlighting the success of the University's learning and teaching programs – with graduates describing their course of study as rigorous, and intellectually stimulating – and also in identifying areas which the University may need to address further as part of its quality assurance activities. The overall picture that emerges, however, is that the experience of the University of Melbourne is viewed as highly positive and beneficial by graduates.

What is the Evaluation Cycle?

The Evaluation Cycle is part of a formal structure (“the Accountability Structure”) adopted by the University of separate cycles of planning and budgeting, reporting on outcomes and performance, and evaluation. The Evaluation Cycle was established to permit the ‘users’ of University services to provide feedback on the quality, relevance and availability of programs and services. Although there have been a number of staff and student surveys in the past, with the establishment of the Evaluation Cycle they are now integrated and co-ordinated into a formal, systematic process.

There are several major components to the Cycle –

- Student feedback on the quality of teaching and learning
- Postgraduate research student feedback on quality of supervision and academic support
- Student feedback on the quality of administrative and support services
- Graduate feedback on the quality and relevance of their University course
- Employer feedback on the quality of University graduates
- Staff feedback on the quality of University management and administration

The national Graduate Destinations Survey, Course Experience Questionnaire, and Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire are also considered part of the University of Melbourne's Evaluation Cycle.

The Evaluation Cycle is co-ordinated by the University Planning Office.

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