

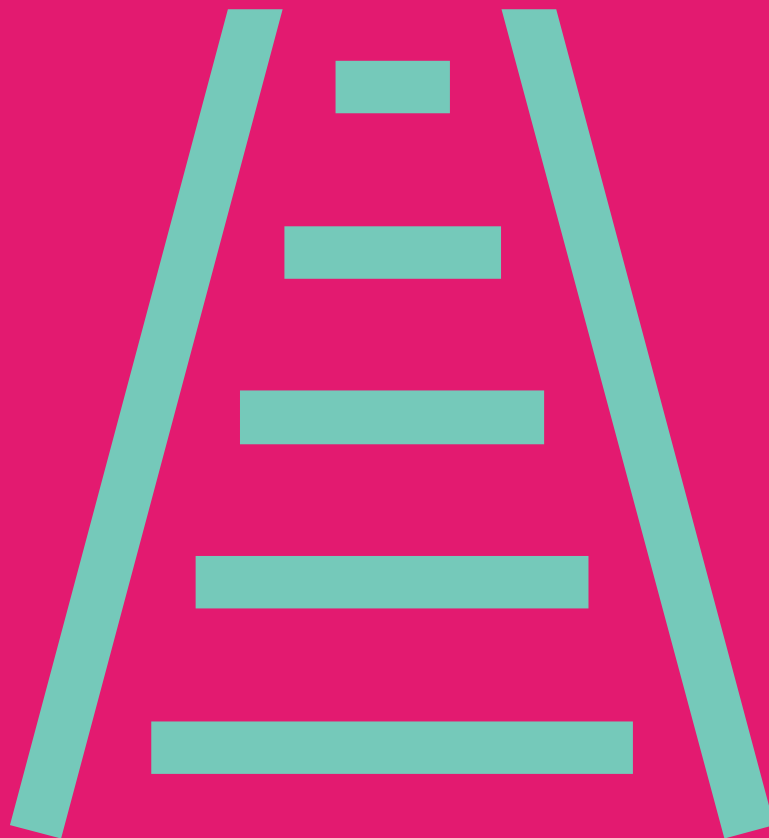
Snakes and League

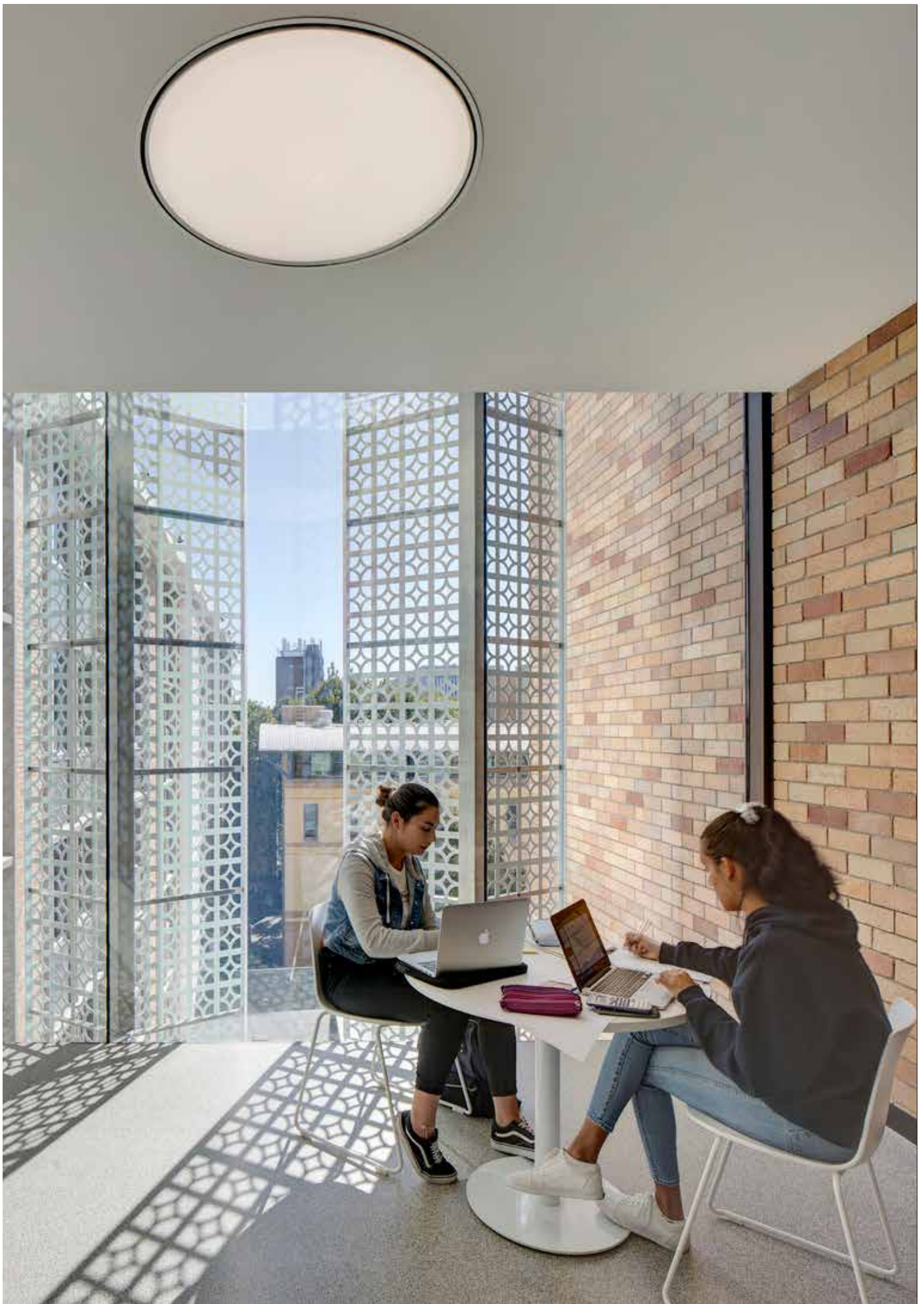
Table Ladders

The Value of Campus Facilities In

The Student Experience

September, 2018





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Hassell believes that good design can positively influence the student experience.

This research explores how the student experience is measured, and the importance that universities and student place, amongst all the indicators, on the campus environment.

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HEADLINE FINDINGS

Universities are striving to demonstrate their unique qualities, strengths and, more pragmatically, their ability to improve in league tables in order to attract the best, and more, students.

Experience counts

As competition for students intensifies, the term Student Experience is seemingly everywhere in university strategic documents the world over.

This competition is a consequence of the commodification of higher education, and has profound implications for how, when, and why education is delivered. It is also affecting how universities design their buildings and campuses.

There are many angles from which to view the student experience, and many indicators to measure it -

attraction and retention of students, satisfaction, engagement, graduate outcomes, league table rankings etc..

For this project, the student experience is defined as the sum of three distinct but related components:

- University brand
- Social, learning and support activities undertaken by students
- Spaces in which these take place

Within this framework we explore the growing trend of measuring student experience, the responses of universities to maintain or improve

their students' educational journeys, and the importance of the campus environment in those responses.

From analysis of different student surveys, and interviews with key university representatives, two critical insights emerge:

- Governments, universities and students view the student experience differently, but all have value for money as a core concern
- High quality facilities play a direct role in student attraction, and an indirect role in student satisfaction

These insights provide food for thought for decision makers who strive to improve their university in the league tables of student experience.



University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

The combined evidence suggest that campus facilities play a direct role in student attraction, and an indirect role in satisfaction.

Surveys: What student experience means on paper

Universities have measured student satisfaction as a matter of course for decades through short surveys at the completion of each unit of study.

More recently, overall satisfaction with the university experience has been measured by governments in questionnaires such as the National Student Survey in the UK, and the Student Engagement Survey in Australia.

Student surveys are also gaining popularity for privately funded publications such as the Good Universities Guide in Australia, the Princeton Review in the US, and the Times Higher Education league tables in the UK.

These combine national survey data with other measures to produce overall comparisons of institutions for prospective students.

These surveys are important for universities in two ways – they provide an opportunity to understand the opinions of current and finishing students to enable quality improvements, and they act as a comparative tool to help prospective students choose where they will study.

While the extent of questions relating to facilities is limited and very general, many universities conduct further surveys to obtain more detail on facility related information, which can be used to formulate funding applications and strategic plans for campus and student services development.

Teaching quality is particularly under the spotlight as a major point of difference, but it is not the only factor in students' perceptions of whether their time and fees at university have been well spent.

A university must now explicitly demonstrate value for money through its graduate outcomes (one tangible measure of teaching quality) but also its brand, institutional rankings, student retention, and campus environment, amongst other indicators.

Interviews: What student experience means in practice

Three themes relating to an optimal student experience consistently arose in interviews with university representatives. Each of the themes has a direct link to the campus environment, and is explored in case studies of the participating universities.

Universities that do well in student experience rankings give their students:

1. Capacity

For many universities the most pressing issue in facilities management is providing sufficient capacity for students to remain on campus between and beyond lectures - put simply, somewhere to sit. Study space, whether in discipline specific buildings, or more general areas such as the library, is a priority in estate development.

2. Choice

Once universities have sufficient study space capacity (as measured against their peer institutions), providing choice in how, when, what and where their students study is a critical factor in satisfying a diverse student population with high expectations of value for money.

3. Co-operation

Those universities with a highly rated student experience seek to understand, and act upon the needs of different cohorts, as identified by the students themselves.

They provide services and facilities that support transitions (for first year, first-in-family or international students), affordable and high quality residential accommodation, pastoral care, industry placement, and out of hours access to library services.

The three most effective mechanisms to identify needs are student surveys, focus groups, and a strong relationship between the university and the student union.

WHO'S MEASURING WHAT?

"There will be twenty Vice Chancellors in the UK who say their university is in the top ten. And they will all be right, because they will be looking at different league tables."

Keith Lilley, Director Estates and Facilities Management, University of Sheffield

Method

This study compares seven national student experience surveys in the UK, Australia and North America, and how universities in Australia and the UK respond to them

Research questions

- How do universities and peak bodies measure student experience?
- Which aspects of the campus environment are most critical to the student experience?

Participating institutions

- University College London, UK
- University of New South Wales, Australia
- University of Sheffield, UK
- University of Leeds, UK
- University of Surrey, UK
- University of Newcastle, Australia

Data

The research includes analysis of the following data:

- Interviews of 23 Executive, Estates and Library staff from six universities
- National student experience surveys
- Canadian University Survey Consortium, Canada
- National Survey of Student Engagement, US/Canada/Ireland
- National Student Survey, UK
- QILT Student Experience Survey, Australia
- The Princeton Review, US
- Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey, UK
- The Good Universities Guide, Australia

Student barbecue, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia



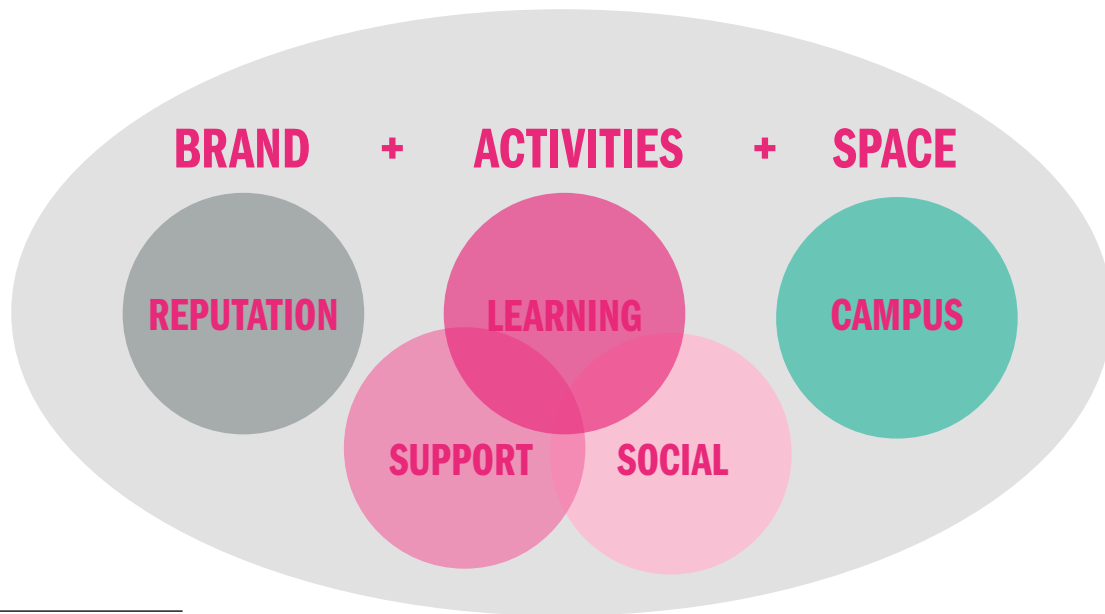


Figure 1.
The Student Experience

What is the student experience?

Are we investigating engagement, satisfaction or something else entirely? The complexity of student needs and the universities' desire to understand them are reflected in the terminology used in various surveys:

- Student attraction
(Do you want to study there?)
- Student retention
(Did you complete the course?)
- Student experience
(What happened while you were there?)
- Student engagement
(Were you actively involved in your learning?)
- Student satisfaction
(Did you enjoy it and get what you needed?)

Student experience is the sum of these separate considerations. Our interest lies in understanding how and at which point in the student journey the questions relate to the campus environment.

This project began with a theoretical framework of three connected components perceived to be central to the student experience - Learning, Support and Social activities. That model proved to be inadequate after interviews with university representatives, and evolved into a wider interpretation of the journey from potential student to graduate that also includes institutional reputation and the campus environment (see Figure 1).

The student experience begins well before enrolment. Ideas about specific institutions, and university life in general, come from friends, family, schools, and media. Each contribute a different perspective about what a student might experience when they take on a university qualification.

The commodification of higher education has created a sophisticated, discerning market of prospective students who use a range of sources, including league tables, student experience surveys and university open days, to determine where to study.

All of this available information means that the experience of being at university can no longer be considered in isolation from the potential of enrolling at university in the future, because the opinions of current students are very openly informing the expectations and decisions of prospective students.

Why is it so important?

The student experience is important to universities for two primary reasons: because a fundamental tenet of the academic mission is to provide robust and engaging education for the student, and because it is financially prudent to enhance the reputation (and therefore enrolments) of the institution.

It is relevant across time, for the attraction, retention and satisfaction of students.

NATIONAL SURVEY ANALYSIS

This research explores the national student surveys in Australia, the UK and North America by categorising the questions put to students into five different themes – Learning, Support, Social, Facilities and Other (which captures brand and demographic information).

The analysed surveys fall into two broad types – those undertaken by or for university or government agencies to provide benchmark data with which quality improvements and funding decisions can be made, and those undertaken by private companies to generate league tables. Some government backed surveys are conducted by private companies.

Government/university backed

- Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC), Canada
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), US/Canada/Ireland
- National Student Survey (NSS), UK
- QILT Student Experience Survey (SES), Australia

Privately backed

- The Princeton Review (PR), US
- Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey (THE), UK
- The Good Universities Guide (GUG) Australia

Learning is the priority

As might be expected, questions about learning dominate the surveys, representing 43 per cent of all questions. (Figure 2, page 11) Learning is the major consideration of all of the surveys except for the Princeton Review, which emphasises support services, and the Times Higher Education survey, which focuses on facilities. (Figure 3)

Support services, social activities and facilities are evenly represented at between nine and thirteen per cent across the surveys. Other questions about demographics, university reputation and miscellaneous factors constitute approximately 25 per cent of all other information.

These averages mask some important differences between regions, and also between government-backed and privately commissioned surveys.

Different surveys for different audiences

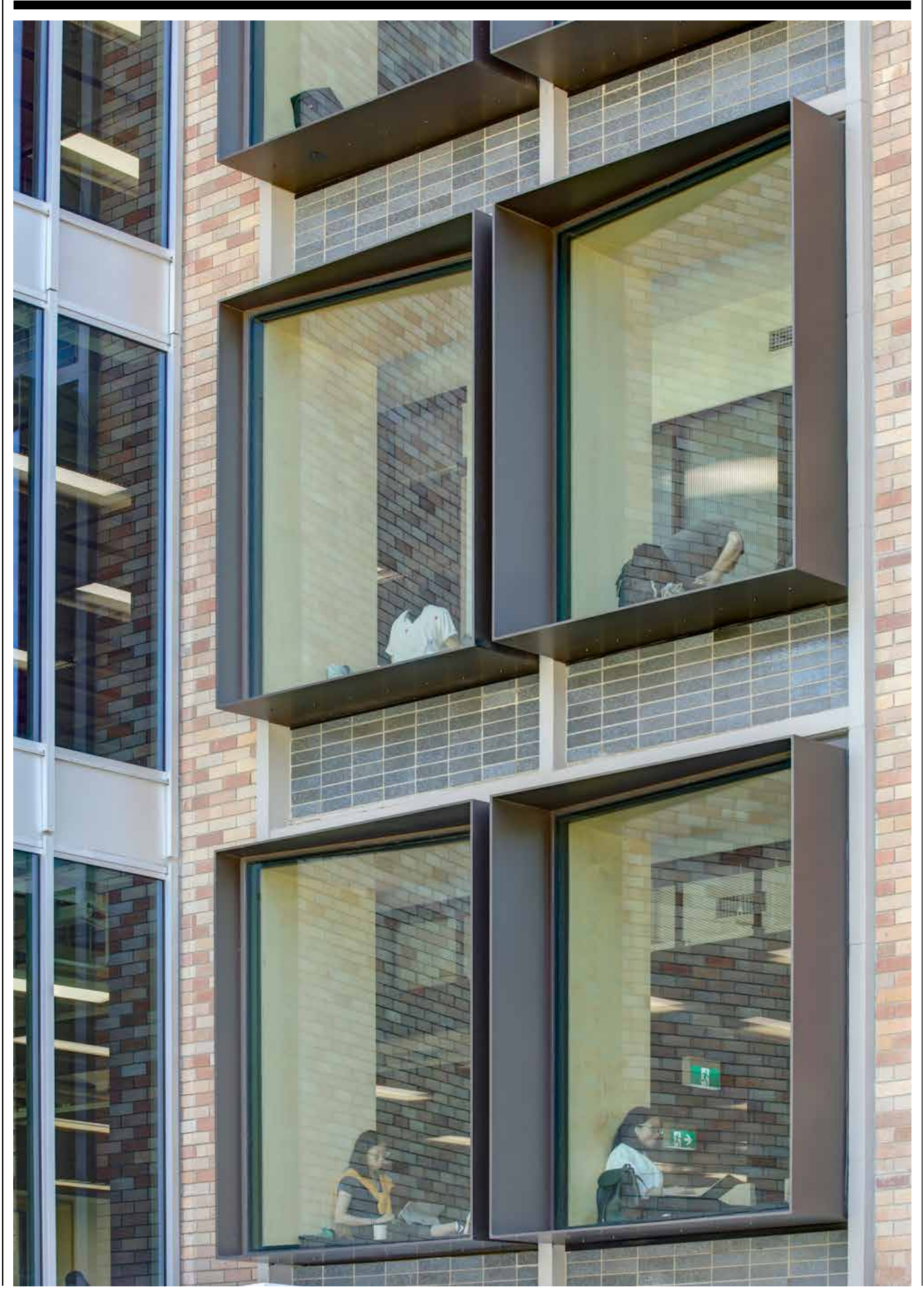
North American surveys are much longer and more detailed (149, 79 and 109 questions) than the Australian (67 and 21) and UK surveys (27 and 22).

This extra detail is largely focused on socio-demographic information about gender, race, income, employment, housing, career intentions etc., which may reflect a more diverse student population and greater wealth disparity in North America.

Alternatively, as noted by some research participants, students in Australia and the UK are frequently surveyed, so minimising the number of questions may encourage higher survey participation rates.

The surveys supported by government bodies were more focused on the teaching and learning experiences than support services, social activities or facilities, which feature more prominently in the private surveys often used by media outlets.

Electrical Engineering Building,
University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.
Photography by Brett Boardman



Questions about facilities

The Times Higher Education survey has as many questions relating to facilities as learning, which is significant because of the reach the publication has, and the likely audience.

These publications are specifically designed to inform prospective students. One research participant noted:

“If you are looking for publicity about a university you end up on Times Higher Ed or The Guardian... That’s just the information that you find first.”

Facilities questions across the board are often general and include IT infrastructure and library resources. This muddies the water somewhat, a problem raised in the interviews with university facilities representatives looking for specific data to solve specific problems.

For example, the Australian Student Experience Survey asks “How would you rate the library resources and facilities?” The response may relate to a building, a service, equipment or a book, and without a follow up question, this distinction is lost.

This ambiguity leads to institutions undertaking their own more detailed surveys, particularly in library services.

Strategically timed in-house surveys provide faster feedback, allowing prompt action to address student concerns. The University of Surrey has devised an internal survey that is an early predictor of the National Student Survey results.

This initiative gives the university time to rectify problems before the students graduate, and before the issues can be acknowledged in publicly available data.

Learning

Have tutors and lecturers set assessment tasks that challenge you to learn? (SES)

Has your course provided you with opportunities to explore concepts in depth? (NSS)

Support

How much does your institution emphasise providing support for your overall wellbeing? (NSSE)

Do you feel part of a community of staff and students? (NSS)

Social

How often have you attended campus cultural events? (NSSE)

Based on your experience, how strongly do you agree that your university offers a good social life? (THE)

Facilities

Library resources (books, online services, learning space) have supported my learning well. (SES)

How would you rate the science lab facilities at your school? (Princeton)

Other

I would recommend my university to a friend. (THE)

Have you acquired repayable debt to finance your education? (CUSC)

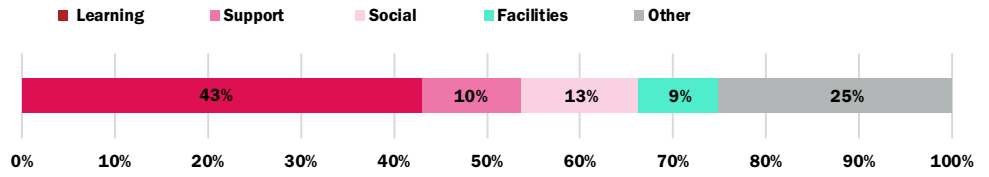


Figure 2.
Questions By Themes:
All Surveys

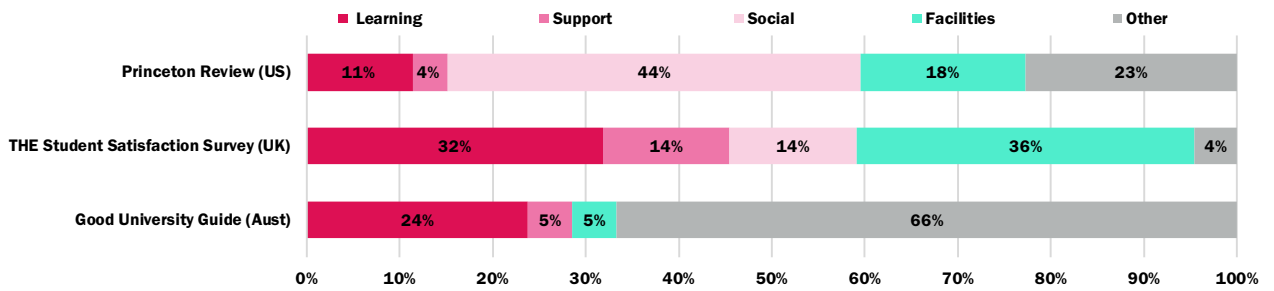


Figure 3.
Questions By Themes:
Private Company Surveys

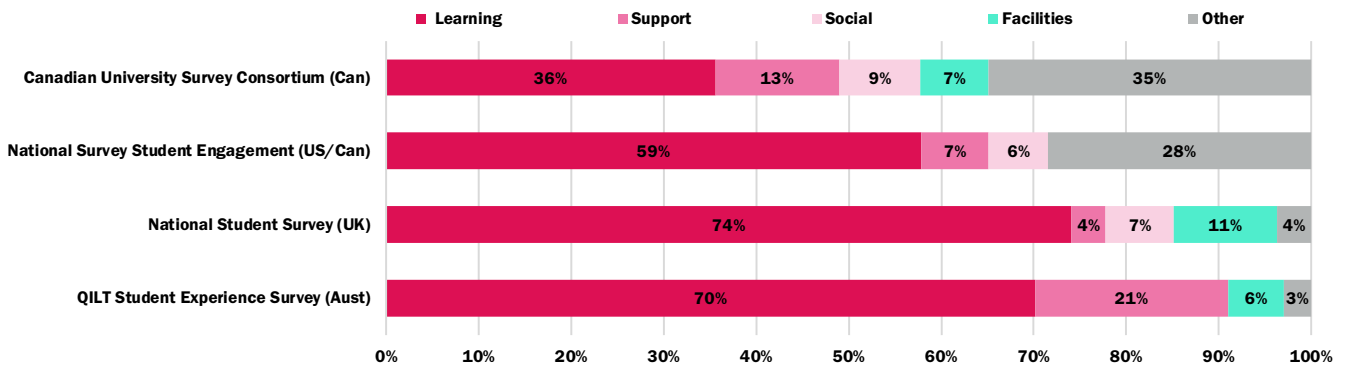


Figure 4.
Questions By Themes:
Government Funded Surveys

Student experience gets political

Student satisfaction measurement has also become a political weapon for governments in the escalating battle for higher education funding. As full fee paying enrolments soar, the value of university (living, learning, researching, personal growth) has been conflated with the cost (\$).

Recent developments in higher education policy in the UK and Australia demonstrate the increasing politicisation and reliance on student satisfaction surveys.

In both countries, funding of universities has hit a critical point, with shrinking public money available to cater for burgeoning demand for university places.

Coupled with enviably strong national higher education reputations, the temptation to increase fee paying (particularly international) student numbers brings pressure on the university to provide, and to prove, value for money.

Two recent publications from the UK sector are telling in this regard: Universities UK released “Education, Consumer Rights, and Maintaining Trust”¹ in 2017, which was followed in 2018 by a report from the newly formed UK Office for Students entitled “Value for Money: The Student Perspective”.²

At the same time as the student focus is intensifying, the UK and Australian governments have linked student satisfaction data to funding decisions through the national teaching quality frameworks.^{3,4}

This is contributing to an increasingly febrile higher education environment.

The UK Students’ Union last year implemented a widespread boycott of the national student satisfaction survey in protest at the links to funding, the ramifications of which are now reflected in the Times Higher Education league tables.

The University of Sheffield and UCL are not represented in the 2017 National Student Survey data after the boycott lowered participation rates below the inclusion threshold of 50 per cent.³

However the politics play out, student satisfaction surveys provide a snapshot of what universities, governments and students value, and for that reason they are worth understanding.



Advertising for the National Student Survey, Surrey University, UK

Higher fees, higher expectations

The growth of, and increasing dependence on, full fee paying courses has major implications for the delivery of a positive student experience because fees and expectations are inextricably linked.

In recent years the annual cost of a university degree has increased significantly to £9,000 pounds in the UK (with further rises expected), and up to \$AU25,000 for full fee paying students in Australia.^{5,6}

While raising fees eases pressure on governments, it increases pressure on universities because, predictably, student expectations of the quality of teaching, facilities, class sizes and available study spaces rise in line with fees.

In the UK, average NSS scores are higher in Scottish universities, where home students are not charged a tuition fee. This supports the view that students' expectation of teaching quality are higher where they are aware of paying fees.⁵

As a further complication, students in the UK tend to believe their fees should in part be spent on the maintenance of facilities, but not on new buildings, which they believe should be funded through other university mechanisms.²

At the University of Newcastle in Australia, the student union takes a harder line, objecting to the use of the Student Amenity Fee to pay for even small building improvements because it believes these should be covered by capital expenditure budgets.

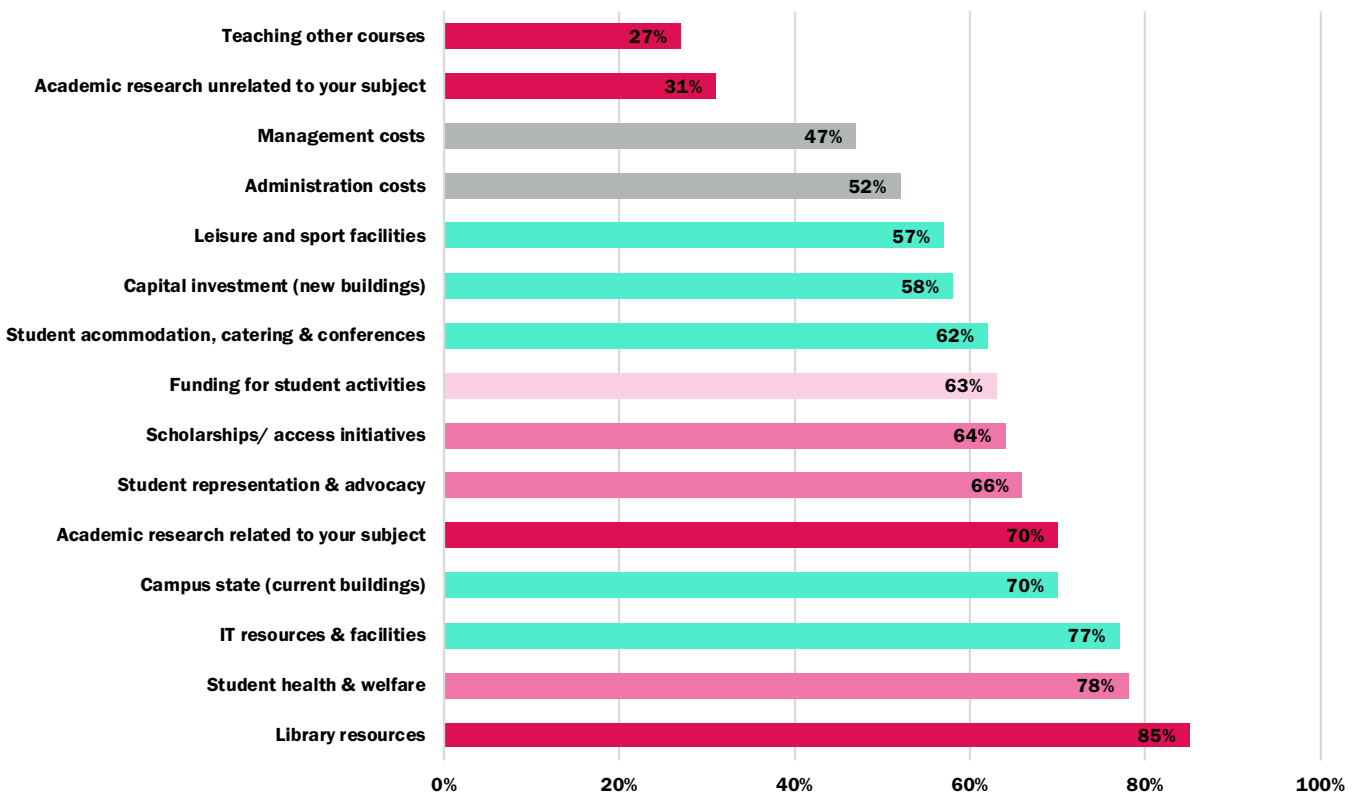
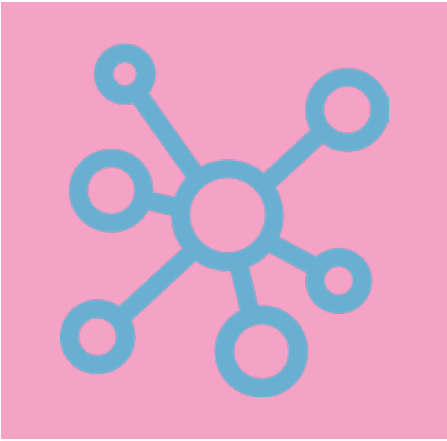


Figure 5.
Where Students Agree Their Fees Should Be Spent:

Adapted from "Value For Money: The Student Perspective.", TrendenceUK, 2018²



We are hamstrung by our 1960s brutalist master plan, including one lecture block with 25 lecture theatres. It's amazing, but has little informal learning space in it. The rest of the campus has to be rich with opportunities.

**Stewart Ross, Director,
Commercial Services, University of Leeds**

WHAT ROLE DO FACILITIES PLAY?

Facilities are important at particular times. Interviewees clearly articulated that facilities are important in the early phase of student attraction, but are unlikely to affect student retention, because once students have commenced their studies, learning goals and support services become more important.

Facilities indirectly affect **student satisfaction** during and at the completion of a student's studies because inappropriate or insufficient campus facilities limit the ability of university staff to deliver content in a suitable format or setting, which in turn inhibits the quality of learning.

New and refurbished facilities must now accommodate pedagogical changes that favour smaller group learning and collaborative assessment tasks over didactic teaching methods.

From short list to enrolment

Facilities can play a critical role in 'sealing the deal', when a student is deciding at which university, of a short list, they will choose to enrol.

This list is initially drawn on the suitability of the course, institutional reputation and location (which country, state, region or city), factors that have been shown to be primary considerations in university selection.

7,8

Whether it is the quality of the residential accommodation, the specialist teaching facilities, or the availability of informal study space, students consider the state and suitability of the facilities once the primary factors have narrowed their choices.

Herzberg's two-factor theory

The perception of students that their fees should fund maintenance of facilities but not new buildings (Figure 5) calls to mind Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory,⁹ which was developed in workplace research, but is perhaps as applicable in the education setting.

The widely accepted theory proposes that one set of job characteristics leads to worker satisfaction while another separate set leads to dissatisfaction.

Individuals are motivated by, and gain satisfaction from, higher order needs such as personal growth, responsibility and achievement (for example institutional reputation, teacher quality, course content, and employment prospects), but are dissatisfied by lower order needs such as fringe benefits and work conditions.

In the education setting these hygiene factors equate to campus social activities, catering quality, accommodation, and facilities.

These lower order needs must be maintained to ensure students are not disgruntled, but ultimately are unlikely to affect their overall satisfaction.

'The things that you are able to decide upon as a prospective student are not the things that then influence the student satisfaction result.'

Keith Lilley, Director, Estates and Facilities Management, University of Sheffield

University of Leeds, UK



£9K
 Cost to full fee paying student in the United Kingdom ⁵

\$25K
 Cost to full fee paying student in Australia ⁶

"Students don't choose a university based on the range of accommodation, but it is a powerful tool in converting a decision."

Joanna Hynes, Deputy Director,
 Campus Support Services,
 University of Leeds



"Buildings help people get to know each other."

Liz Burd, Pro Vice Chancellor,
 University of Newcastle, Australia



27%

Increase in applications for the Engineering Faculty in the year The Diamond Building opened at Sheffield University



85%

Students agree that their fees should be spent on library resources ²



"When we put in a new pool and fitness facility we moved up the rankings. Investing £10 million enabled us to jump into the top three. Facilities evidently make a difference to the rankings."

Stewart Ross, Director, Commercial Services, University of Leeds

1. Electrical Engineering Building, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Photography by Brett Boardman

2. Cruciform Library, University College London, UK
3. Western Bank Library, University of Sheffield, UK

4. Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Australia
5. Student Union, University of Leeds, UK
6. The Diamond Building, University of Sheffield, UK

CASE STUDIES



University of Leeds, UK (Source © University of Leeds)

The following six case studies explore how the student experience is perceived and acted on in the current climate of competition and funding pressures. The research reveals three things a university striving for exceptional student experience should give their students: Capacity, Choice and Co-operation.

Capacity

- University College London
- University of New South Wales

Sometimes it's the simple things that can provide a well needed boost. For many universities the most pressing facilities issue is providing sufficient capacity for students to remain on campus between and beyond lectures - put simply, somewhere to sit and study. Informal study space, whether in discipline specific buildings, or more general areas such as the library, is currently a high priority in facilities development.

The participating UK universities all expressed a desire to equal or exceed the Russell Group average ratio of students to study spaces (approximately 6:1), as measured by the Association of University Directors of Estates (AUDE).

They each could identify specific numbers of seats (beyond teaching spaces) that are suitable to study at in particular locations and where increases were planned.

For Australian universities, informal study space was also highly desired, but less urgent, and in the absence of a simple measure, were striving for more general targets (i.e. more study spaces).

The Australian tertiary education space guidelines (TEFMA)¹⁰ specify an area of up to 0.8 square metres per full time student, but lack a clear definition of study space.

At UCL and UNSW, two institutions hoping to significantly improve their standings in student experience league tables, providing students with a place to study is a major priority, and each has a significant program of informal learning space development underway.

Choice

- University of Sheffield
- University of Leeds

Once universities have sufficient study space capacity (as measured against their peer institutions), providing choices in when, where and how to study is a critical factor in satisfying a diverse student population with high expectations of value for money.

As student populations grow larger, often as a result of higher post graduate and international enrolments, student needs and preferences become more diverse.

This diversity adds richness to the educational experience, but complexity in delivering facilities that accommodate everyone's specific needs - 24 hour access, quiet and collaborative study, didactic and active learning, social and sporting activity, campus and private accommodation, industry presence... The list is endless, but the funds are not.

Choice in when, where and how to study is crucial in perceptions of value. This is particularly evident in the desire at all of the participating universities for specific spaces for post graduate students, and for support services for vulnerable and international students.

The University of Sheffield prides itself on choice in places to study within a library ecosystem. At the University of Leeds, students are able to choose any subject from any course across the spectrum of faculties, and are provided with a variety of spaces within which to pursue them.

Co-operation

- University of Surrey
- University of Newcastle

The great value of student survey data is that universities have never before been so well informed of their students' needs and preferences. Those universities with great student experiences emphasise and act on the importance of understanding the needs of different cohorts.

The University of Surrey has identified through both survey data and a strong relationship with their student union that affordable accommodation is the most significant challenge for their students, on top of the universal issue of study space.

At Newcastle, it is the services and facilities that support transitions (for first year, first in family or international students), residential accommodation, and out of hours access to library services that are critical in student retention, and ultimately student satisfaction.

And at Leeds, understanding their international students' previous experiences (for example in highly pedestrianised campuses, compared to the city integrated model of Leeds) is an unexpected element of risk mitigation on campus.

"Those universities who have adjusted their student population too quickly, in scale or cohort mix, have not been able to get the infrastructure to move as quickly, and have seen their ranking in some league tables affected."

Stewart Ross, Director, Campus and Commercial Services, University of Leeds

CAPACITY

University of New South Wales

Location:
Sydney, Australia

Campus:
140 hectares

Students:
53,000

Student Experience Ranking:

- Student Experience Survey 39th/40
- Good University Guide 36th/40

As a highly regarded university with strong student attraction and retention figures and excellent graduate outcomes, UNSW scores surprisingly poorly on the national Student Experience Survey.

‘I am not expecting dramatic change, but I hope that over 3-5 years we see UNSW improving because we are making a lot more effort now.’

Geoff Crisp, Pro Vice Chancellor (Education)

The university is striving for significant improvement in its SES results. Its efforts are underpinned by the creation of a heat map to identify correlations between overall satisfaction and the five domains of the survey, which are Teaching Quality, Learner Engagement, Learning Resources, Student Support, and Skills Development.

The heat map shows that Teaching Quality has the largest single influence, although student services and the campus environment also affect scores.

Campus wide improvement

As part of a major program of campus renewal, the university is increasing the number and quality of informal learning spaces, both inside and out, and undertaking improvements to increase activity and engagement around the campus grounds.

‘We do upgrade tired old buildings even though they might be demolished in five years, because that’s a whole group of students who have got their degree in that time. Do we leave it as a dumpy old space and say to the student sorry, bad luck for you?’

Geoff Crisp, Pro Vice Chancellor (Education)

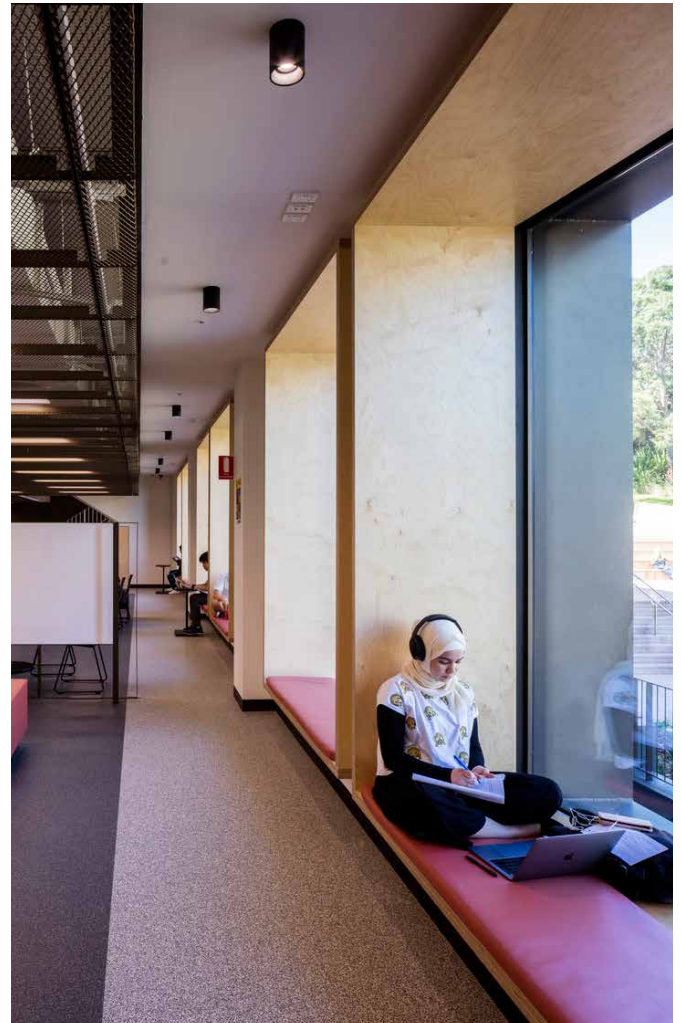
External factors can also affect the student experience. The University is currently experiencing disruption on the perimeter of the campus due to the construction of a light rail service from the city.

On completion, this is anticipated to positively affect the student experience results because it will relieve long term public transport inconvenience and short term disruption for current students.



'The thing that wasn't on the agenda was informal space. Now it's built into everything we do. Students told us they want tables, wifi, a comfortable chair and a kitchen.'

Geoff Crisp, Pro Vice Chancellor (Education),
University of New South Wales



Electrical Engineering Building, University of New South Wales,
Sydney, Australia. Photography by Brett Boardman

University College London

Location:
London, UK

Campus:
20 hectares

Students:
40,000

Student Experience Ranking:

- National Student Survey 101st/48
- Times Higher Education 96th/122

The reputation of many universities is anchored by the age of the institution; a mix of academic tradition, a legacy of research excellence, and historic architecture. Gothic halls, sandstone quadrangles and classical edifices are valuable marketing tools.

The anchor of tradition will keep you steady in a strong current, but can also hold you back when the current changes. For UCL, exceptional research power coupled with brand recognition through longevity attracts students, staff and funding, but does not necessarily translate to strong student experience survey results.

One of the differences between UK and Australian institutions is the greater difficulty UK universities have developing heritage buildings and expanding densely populated campuses.

Working With The Old

In a similar vein to UNSW, UCL regularly performs strongly in reputational league tables, yet struggles in student experience rankings. And, as with UNSW, UCL is focusing on a fundamental requirement - somewhere to study.

"We've done a lot of work over the last few years on ratios of students to workspaces because we were well behind the Russell Group average.

Ben Meunier, Director of Operations, Library Services

UCL library and facilities staff believe that building constraints at the Bloomsbury campus in inner London are negatively affecting the experience rankings.

Heritage building limitations preclude reconfiguration to suit new ways of learning, and a lack of space for large scale lecture theatres and study areas is an ongoing challenge.

Getting Creative

A broad program incorporating pop-up spaces, new buildings and flexible use is underway to address the issues raised by students in surveys.

The new Student Centre will take the study space ratio above the Russell Group average, and the recently completed Wilkins Refectory is a 24 hour food and study haven. Pop-up libraries allow students to use teaching rooms during exam periods, boosting capacity by around 300. The new space availability system provides real-time information on where to find a seat, increasing space utilisation across campus.

UCL is also developing UCL East, in Stratford, approximately ten kilometres from Bloomsbury. The new campus, which will open in 2021, is intended to accommodate sixty new courses, but is not expected to ease space pressures at the Bloomsbury campus.

The new facilities at Stratford will undoubtedly deliver world class education for a new cohort, with an entirely different flavour, but the intention is to 'take the spirit of Bloomsbury' with them as UCL expands to Stratford. This presents logistical and resource challenges, and raises an interesting question: How much of UCL's reputation is anchored in its incomparable location and sense of place in one of the world's great global cities?

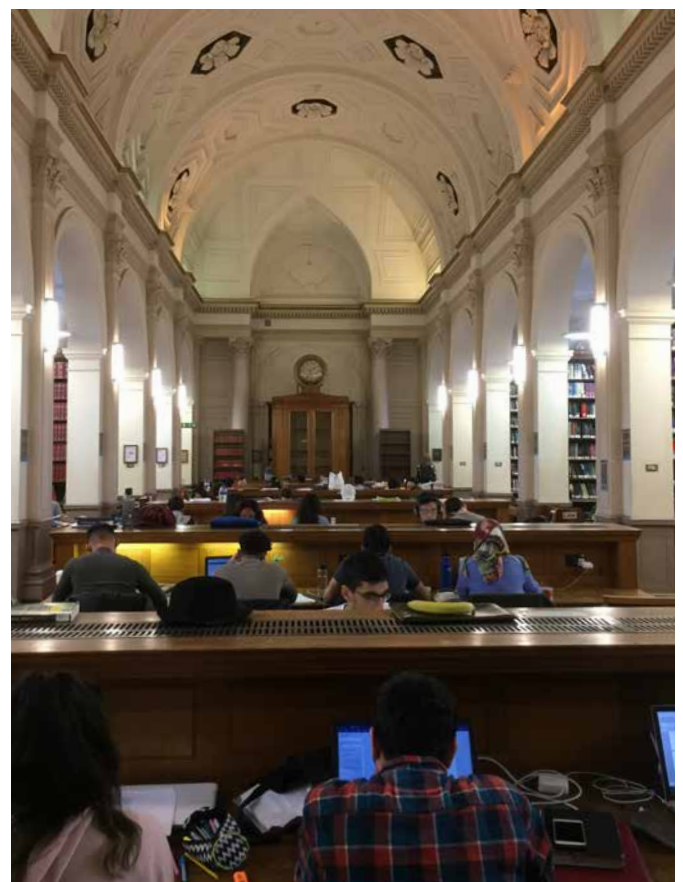
"It's difficult to divorce the choice to study at UCL from the location."

June Hedges, Head of Liaison and Support Services



‘The student feedback divides evenly between the physical experience on campus, which is not always positive, and their experience with programmes, which is very positive. Our facilities are a significant barrier to improving the student experience.’

Geoff Crisp, Pro Vice Chancellor (Education),
University of New South Wales



1. Flaxman Gallery, University College London, UK
2. Wilkins Building, University College London, UK

CHOICE

University of Sheffield

Location:
Sheffield, UK

Campus:
40 hectares

Students:
25,000

Student Experience Ranking:

- National Student Survey 35th/148
- Times Higher Education 4th/122

Heavy Hitter

The University of Sheffield is highly regarded by students, at fourth in the Times Higher Education student experience rankings. As a medium sized Russell Group institution, it has the quality and breadth of offerings to allow choice in courses, spaces, social activities and support services.

Moving up the ladder

The University has recently addressed shortfalls in space quality and quantity. As one of the beneficiaries of £600 million of investment over the last seven years, the Faculty of Engineering has moved from fourth in the UK for engineering research income to second, behind the world leading UCL. Estate development in the form of The Diamond, the Pam Liversidge Building and the soon to be completed Heart of the Campus have contributed significantly to this improvement.

Architecturally spectacular, popular with students, and highly publicised globally, The Diamond has been instrumental in raising the quality of undergraduate learning, the rankings in student experience, and increasing enrolments within the Faculty of Engineering.

‘We had a 27 per cent increase in applications for the year The Diamond was opening. Why did we get that increase? I think it was because people knew they were going to be in a fantastic building.’

Keith Lilley, Director of Estates and Facilities Management

Choosing where to study on campus

The high regard in which the student union and the libraries are held demonstrates their centrality to the student experience. The union has been voted best in the UK for ten years running, and the library regularly rates well in national surveys. The library is, in many respects, at the heart of the Sheffield student experience. Each of the three main libraries has a different personality, attracting different types of students.

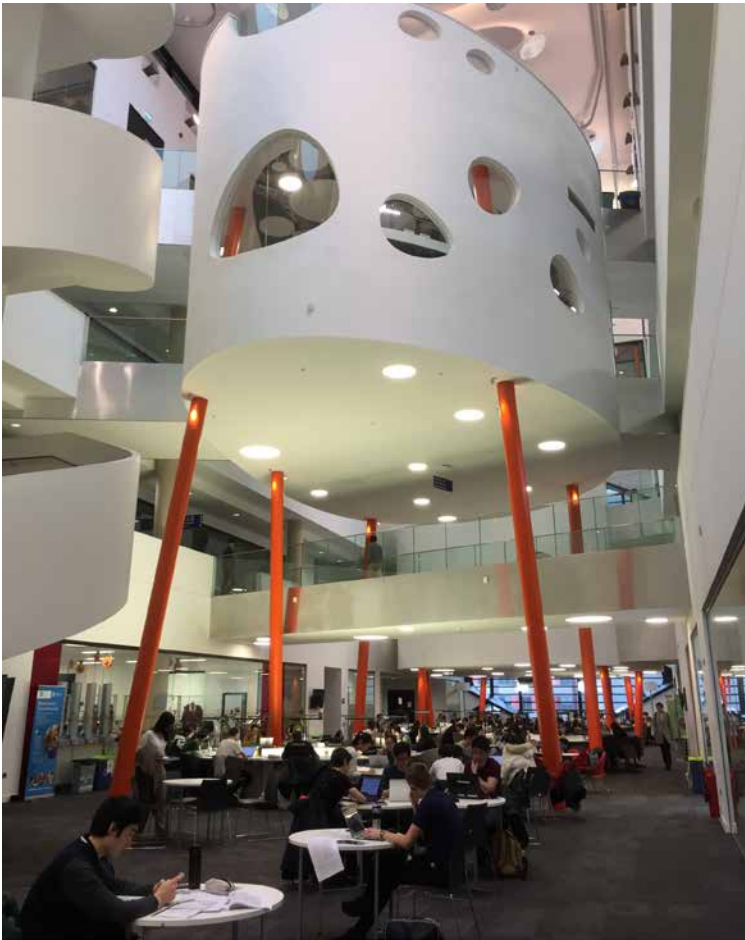
The 1950s Western Bank Library is a modernist jewel for quiet study, favoured by post-graduates. The Information Commons, the first space of its kind built in the UK, has recently been refurbished after being the collaborative learning workhorse for ten years. The Diamond, favoured by undergraduates and international students for its busier atmosphere, has now taken on that mantle.

‘When the National Student Survey started we were quite poorly ranked. The Information Commons made a massive difference to the students and the library.’

Alison Little, Associate Director Learning Strategy and Student Engagement

Operating on a one-in, one-out policy during peak times, these buildings are delivering valuable choices for students with an insatiable appetite for study space.

1. The Diamond, University of Sheffield, UK
2. Western Bank Library, University of Sheffield, UK



'Students choose where they want to study. The library has five sites. It's about choice, and at different times of the year you'll see different choices.'

Anne Horn, Director of library Services
and University Librarian, University of Sheffield



University Of Leeds

Location:
Leeds, UK

Campus:
37 hectares

Students:
34,000

Student Experience Ranking:

- National Student Survey 19th/48
- Times Higher Education 6th/122

Big and broad

The University of Leeds is a large and comprehensive all rounder. It scores well across the board in student experience categories.

Working with the legacy of an imposing brutalist master plan, Leeds has invested around £2 million annually for several years in upgrading their 250 flat floored and tiered teaching spaces. In the past five years it has delivered around twenty capital investment projects to increase space and space quality, and this has had a measurable effect on student attraction and enrolments.

‘A few years ago Earth and Environment got a new building and applications went through the roof. Facilities obviously plays a big part in attracting students.’

Michele Troughton, Head of Estate Planning

Attention has now turned to informal learning space within the libraries and other smaller spaces. School-based areas are important in providing faculties with a ‘home’ for their students, and choice in where to study. But decentralisation of informal learning spaces creates security concerns. And with the diverse range of subject options for students to choose from, timetabling and maintaining proximity to lecture spaces becomes more complex.

Choices, choices!

The approach to libraries at Leeds is similar to that of Sheffield - the variety of architecture and resources within them encourages very different behaviours, and allows the students to choose the right study environment at the right time. At the 1930s Beaux Arts Brotherton Library, post-graduates sit undisturbed in deep concentration.

The recently refurbished Edward Boyle Library is quieter and more focused on the upper levels, and the new Laidlaw Library, built to keep up with the Russell Group study space ratio target, is preferred by first years for it’s busy atmosphere and cafe.

‘Libraries are a bit like road building - build them and you just get more traffic. Over the last three or four years traffic to the libraries has gone up by about 33 per cent.’

Michael Fake, Head of Learning and Customer Services

But it is not only these micro choices that give the University of Leeds strong student experience results. It is located in a large city, close to international airports, and another major student destination in Manchester, with high quality and affordable accommodation on and close to campus. The site is integrated into the city fabric, but maintains a consolidated campus atmosphere, surrounded by student focused activity and another university, Leeds Beckett.

‘We are in the city, but we are also a campus for those students that that’s important to. We’ve got an experience on campus, there’s a reason to stay, there’s a lot to do culturally, and there’s a sense of place.’

Stewart Ross, Director, Campus and Commercial Services

It has invested heavily in the student experience, and is reaping the benefits across the spectrum of learning, social and support services.



Part of Leeds' unique selling point is that we are a big research intensive university that manages to be also very student focussed. We have the full range of disciplines. That's good for student experience."

Stewart Ross,
Director Commercial and Campus Services,
University of Leeds



Edward Boyle Library, University of Leeds, UK

CO-OPERATION

University of Surrey

Location:

Guildford, UK

Campus:

140 hectares

Students:

15,000

Student Experience Ranking:

- National Student Survey 37th/148
- Times Higher Education 6th/122

Know your students well

As the smallest institution in this study, the University of Surrey perhaps has a natural advantage in addressing student needs most attentively. In addition to the usual array of surveys, the university has developed an internal tool based on the i-graduate survey's four domains of Arrival, Living, Learning Environments and Support.

The Surrey version adds questions related to wellbeing, careers and employability, and is strategically timed to address student concerns well before students participate in the National Students Survey.

It is this extra knowledge about the welfare and aspirations of students that informs the development of pastoral care programmes and other services that directly support the students in their learning as well as their personal circumstances.

'There are lots of non-academic reasons for students leaving - mental health, isolation, being away from home. That's why we invest in support services.'

Craig Lowe, Head Student Support Services,
University of Surrey

Address your weakness

The biggest challenge for students at Surrey is finding reasonably priced accommodation in well-heeled Guildford. Students have high expectations of campus accommodation, which has gradually shifted over time from basic youth hostel to hotel style.

On-site campus housing only serves a third of the students. The rest must negotiate the difficult private rental market. To assist, the university has an in-house student letting agency, which received the 2018 Guardian Award for Student Experience.

A recent audit of the Surrey estate indicated that while available space was sufficient for growth, a major programme of teaching space refurbishment is required to lift the standard of quality, and to accommodate smaller group learning and collaborative assessment tasks.

But the conservative student population is resistant to change. Exam-based assessment is still the norm, and drives an appetite for more individual quiet study space. Even as a star performer in experience league tables (and not a Russell Group member), Surrey is not immune to the pressure to aspire to the Russell Group study space ratio.

‘Study space is a real concern on this campus. Ninety five per cent of our students are undergraduate, which means huge numbers of students on campus in full time courses.’

Michele Facer, Head of Strategic Space Management, University of Surrey

Play to your strengths

One of Guildford's strengths is its proximity to London, and the picturesque campus situated on a hill overlooking the town. It is also considered the safest campus in the country.

With an excellent employability record built on professional training and employment links, and a strong relationship with the student union, the university plays to its strengths and is working hard on its few weaknesses to stay in the top echelons of the student experience league tables.



"Other student union presidents wouldn't necessarily have the access to the Vice Chancellor that they do here at Surrey. Two big issues we are working with the Student Union to address are accommodation and study space pressures."

Craig Lowe, Head of Student Support Services, University of Surrey

Surrey University, Guildford, UK

University of Newcastle

Location:
Newcastle, Australia

Campus:
140 hectares

Students:
37,000

Student Experience Ranking:

- Student Experience Survey 30th/40
- Good University Guide 11th/40

Valuing the student

The University of Newcastle significantly improved its standing in the league tables of student experience after a concerted effort to listen to, act on and communicate its focus on students' needs and particular circumstances.

'From 2012 to 2015 UON's ranking of graduate satisfaction lifted from the lowest to the highest quartile, partly because of a 'you said, we did' campaign. We built a relationship with the students. One of the things that became clear was that the university valued it's students.'

Mark Kirby, Manager, Planning and Quality

The university prides itself on working hard to accommodate its many vulnerable cohorts. First in family, indigenous, mature age and international students make up a significant proportion of the student population. These groups benefit from specific programmes to ensure a positive experience.

For indigenous students, this translates into a standalone building to support those who need their own space. For others it is the provision of prayer rooms on campus. From a service perspective, some students benefit from face-to-face meetings or regular phone contact to ensure they are not disengaging from their studies.

'Last year we employed a consultant to meet with staff and students to map the entire student journey, from initial promotion right through to being alumni.'

Greg Anderson, University Librarian

Study space, again

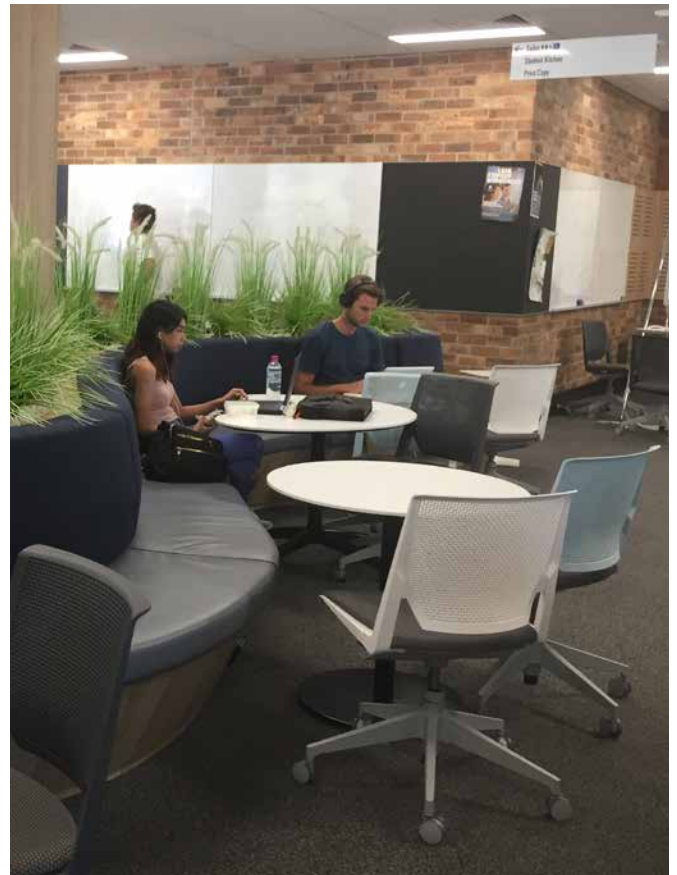
As with all other universities in the study, Newcastle students value the opportunity to stay on campus to study and socialise beyond lectures. Informal spaces are a critical factor for vulnerable groups of students because they allow them to congregate to socialise, build peer networks, and feel a part of a community.

Over recent years the university has invested in many informal learning spaces across the libraries, as well as external social spaces for eating, drinking, sports and recreation in an effort to build a cohesive and supported community of learners.



"Social and support services are more important than learning components because many students feel ill-prepared for university study and so are vulnerable to leaving if they are not supported."

Professor Liz Burd,
Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching)
University of Newcastle



1. University of Newcastle, Australia
2. Auchmuty Library, University of Newcastle, Australia

CONCLUSION

Student Experience Surveys are an increasingly important tool for universities to understand their current students' needs, and prospective students' priorities. While learning quality is the primary consideration in the student experience, facilities are an important contributing factor, directly affecting student attraction, and indirectly enabling quality learning outcomes for students.

In order to compete for, and meet the expectations of fee paying students, universities should, and will, continue to invest in facilities that provide an optimal learning and living environment on campus.

Those universities that invest most effectively will place themselves in a strong position to maintain and improve their performance in the league table ladders of student experience.

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