Abstract

Student expectations are recognised as a key factor in forming their perceptions of satisfaction with their learning experience that in turn influences retention and completion in their studies. This paper describes a novel research method that was used to quickly identify student expectations. The educator used the findings to implement changes in course content and presentation during the delivery of intensive courses, in order to address student expectations to improve satisfaction. In this set of case studies across several deliveries of the same undergraduate entrepreneurial foundations course, the grounded research method identified expectations that differed in importance from one course delivery to another, so that the educator was able to respond to particular course requirements. The expectations identified were related to findings in the literature. Qualitative evaluation of courses indicated high levels of student satisfaction.

Introduction

Expectations play an important part in forming customer perceptions of quality, and hence directly influence customer satisfaction, particularly for services such as education. This paper focuses on expectations that students have when starting an undergraduate entrepreneurship foundation course, as distinct from student entrepreneurial intentions that have been the subject of numerous studies (Carsrud and Brännback, 2011; Nabi *et al.*, 2010; Piperopoulos, 2012; Solesvik, 2013).

It is important for educators to access a method to identify and understand the expectations of their particular group of students, so that course delivery can be managed to best address these expectations while the course progresses, and hence improve student engagement and satisfaction. Current methods for identifying student expectations are quantitative (Sander *et al.*, 2000), require large numbers of students and are time-consuming to implement.

This research describes a novel approach for analysing student expectations almost in "real time". Qualitative data is collected in the first class session using minute papers where students describe their expectations (Stead, 2005). Their comments are analysed using a grounded approach implementing concept mapping (Borgatti *et al.*, 2013) to identify the expectations in that particular class. The educator then uses the research findings to adjust course content and delivery as appropriate to address student expectations while the course is in progress, with the aim of increasing student satisfaction with their class experience. This research also contributes insights into the nature of expectations of undergraduate students taking foundation entrepreneurship courses.

Expectations in education

Student attraction and retention of students is becoming more and more important as universities face increasingly competitive environments. Students are seen as customers, and the principles of service management and service quality are applied to universities (Finney and Finney, 2010; Jain *et al.*, 2011) that aim, like other service providers, to "employ particular tactics to influence customer expectations during the encounter to achieve a high quality service experience" (Hsieh *et al.*, 2011, p. 12129).

There is increased attention to measuring student satisfaction for several reasons that are common to service organisations (Fisk *et al.*, 2013), such as for planning improvements to services and courses and measuring the perceived impact of such improvements, as well as for identifying gaps between expectations and perceptions of outcomes so that resources can be allocated appropriately. Well-known institutional-level measures include the NSS, the International Student Barometer and the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (in the UK), the NSSE (in the US), the Course Experience Questionnaire (in Australia), as well as tools that are used by individual universities.

It is recognised that the results of national or university-level surveys are difficult to translate to the course level (Balan and Metcalfe, 2012). Further, quantitative surveys generally exclude small-number courses (for example, courses with fewer than 25 students are excluded from NSS surveys), and this has implications for fairness (Lawson *et al.*, 2012).

This research responded to the proposition that entrepreneurship educators "need to better understand students' journey so that they can better develop learning environments within which the students' personal development can be advanced" (Jones, 2010, p. 500). The research questions in this exploratory case study were: (1) what are the learning expectations of undergraduate entrepreneurship students at the class level, (2) are the learning expectations the same for different deliveries of the same or similar course, (3) how can the results be used to address student expectations, and (4) does this process influence student satisfaction?

The Research Method

Participants were students from a range of degrees or study programs in a University in Australia, taking an undergraduate elective entrepreneurship foundation course. Classes with between 34 and 69 students were delivered in intensive mode (over three weeks) in summer and winter schools.

Within a few minutes of the start of the first class in a course delivery, data was collected using a "minute paper" method (Angelo and Cross, 1993; Stead, 2005). Each student was given a blank sheet of paper and asked: "Please describe one or two things that you expect from this course". Statements provided by the students for each class were analysed separately with an inductive grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), using the concept mapping method (Borgatti *et al.*, 2013). The output of this research method consists of maps showing links between the statements, and clusters or

themes of similar statements. The themes represent the different student expectations in the particular class.

Findings

The findings for each class generally included expectations such as “learn about entrepreneurship”, “learn how to start and run a business”, “learn useful things for my career”, “learn about teamwork and networking”, “pass the course”, and “help to get a good job”. Importantly, there were differences between each class.

The educator adopted an “assimilation-contrast” approach (Anderson, 1973) in using the findings. In particular, research results were used during course delivery to adjust student expectations to be either realistic or a little lower than the educator considered could be achieved in the class. To facilitate this, the educator established continuing two-way communication with students by regularly moving around the classroom and asking students about their work in order to assess their experiences, and adjust their expectations if necessary.

Importantly, findings for each class were reported to students in the final session of each course, using the maps produced in the data analysis. The class received feedback on the data that they had provided, and an explanation of the ways in which their expectations had been met. This was an important closing step in expectations management.

Discussion

This research demonstrates that student expectations in a particular class can be identified quickly, and the educator can use the findings in “real time” to make changes to course content and delivery to better meet those expectations. The research findings show that expectations vary from one class to the next, and this demonstrates the value of this method that makes it possible to address expectations on a class-by-class basis. The educator used the findings in a deliberate manner (Brown *et al.*, 2014) to adjust student expectations in

a manner that would best improve student satisfaction. Qualitative evaluations at the end of each course show that students found these courses to largely meet their expectations.

This research contributes to the literature by revealing differences, as well as similarities, with expectations identified in other studies. This research has significant practical implications. It contributes to education practice by demonstrating a practical approach that can be used to quickly identify the characteristics of student expectations in their particular class, and that the educator can then use to manage expectations with a view to improving student satisfaction. The research findings can be used for continuous improvement and development of courses, as well as for policy decision-making to improve entrepreneurship education programs.

This exploratory study is limited by the small number of classes of foundation entrepreneurship courses, and its current restriction to undergraduate classes. Further research, however, is currently being carried out, and this approach is being replicated in other fields of instruction including logistics, health management, and anthropology.

Conclusion

This innovative exploratory research demonstrates that it is possible to identify student expectations in a particular class and actively manage aspects of course delivery in order to improve student satisfaction. It contributes to the literature by providing insights into expectations that vary from one class to the next, and provides significant practical implications for improved course management. This research also establishes a basis for further research for an improved understanding of student expectations in entrepreneurship, as well as in other fields of learning. This research can also provide the basis for the development of a scale for measuring student expectations at the classroom level in situations where student numbers are large enough for quantitative analysis to be conducted.