

Guide to Best Practice in

# Monitoring Student Satisfaction

in ELICOS

Updated 2014

## Project Writer

**Katherine Brandon**  
Professional Support & Development Officer  
English Australia



# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS



## Contents

## Page

Introduction .....	3
Why monitor student satisfaction? .....	4
Key features of best practice.....	4
Survey purposes .....	5
Survey methods.....	6
Written surveys .....	9
Spoken surveys.....	10
Responding to survey outcomes .....	12
Points to consider .....	13
Acknowledgements .....	14

## Introduction

### Aim of the document

English Australia regularly prepares **Guides to Best Practice in ELICOS** (Best Practice Guides), collating information provided by member institutions, who represent the full spectrum of provider types, purposes and locations in Australia, and incorporating current TESOL research.

Within its overall strategic plan of providing leadership in raising educational, professional and ethical standards within its member colleges, English Australia provides Best Practice Guides in order to achieve five main goals:

- a) To encourage English Australia member colleges to reflect on how they deliver quality programs and service to international students;
- b) To support English Australia members in the development of their policies, practices and procedures;
- c) To provide a benchmarking tool for member colleges;
- d) To reassure all English Australia members that they are part of a community of best practice; and
- e) To instil confidence in all stakeholders who have dealings with English Australia members.

English Australia takes compliance with the National Code 2007 and ELICOS National Standards as minimum standards.

### Need for guidelines

There is no specific requirement for monitoring student satisfaction with services offered as part of ELICOS programs under the National Code or the ESOS legislation, however Standards P3.4 and P4.4 of the ELICOS National Standards require that delivery and assessment of courses is 'continuously improved by making adjustments based on collection and analysis of feedback from students and other stakeholders as appropriate'.

For ELICOS students, the Australian experience encompasses a broad span of activity starting with how they access information about and book their course, continues through their arrival in Australia and orientation to their chosen institution, incorporates accommodation and social activities and, of course, includes curriculum (syllabus, assessment and teaching) and pastoral care and support while they are studying.

English Australia invited staff from all member colleges to participate in a survey in order to pool the expertise of a wide range of providers. This paper is a summary of the findings of this survey, based on input from 20 ELICOS institutions around Australia. The paper was updated in 2014 to take account of changing contextual and legislative features of ELICOS operation.

Sue Blundell  
Executive Director  
English Australia

## Why monitor student satisfaction?

Finding out what our students think about our programs and services is essential to ensure we are continuing to meet student needs. If our students are not happy with our ELICOS provision we want to find out why so that we can a) remedy the situation; or b) inform students of the reasons why we cannot or prepare future students for a situation we can predict they may not be happy with. Unhappy students are bad for business: local, national and international studies have shown that recommendation and 'word of mouth marketing' are significant factors in a student's choice of provider.

Knowledge of levels of student satisfaction can enable an organisation to use its resources more effectively. The knowledge can be used to inform decisions as to setting up student services; programming; staffing levels and skills; purchase of furniture and educational materials; as well as curriculum and resource development for educational delivery. An organisation can be sure it has the most effective agents and pre-registration processes.

A key outcome of monitoring student satisfaction is effective targeting of professional development. Knowledge of levels of student satisfaction can help organisations plan their professional development programs for staff, targeting quality of support services, quality of the learning experience and quality of teaching<sup>1</sup>. Quality professional development, targeted at areas of need identified by students, managers and the staff members themselves can lead to increased student satisfaction thus more student enrolments.

Students report high levels of satisfaction with an institution that is obviously interested in their views and takes these views seriously. There can also be a washback effect of monitoring student satisfaction if personnel involved in the provision of programs and services that are surveyed are aware of the monitoring and strive to get positive feedback.

Whereas student services staff, teachers, management and agents can make broad statements based on anecdotal information the only effective way to find out students' response to specific programs and services is to ask them directly. Because students are not a homogenous group and student profiles are constantly changing it is important to get feedback on a regular basis. This information can then be fed back to appropriate people to ensure that operations are running as effectively as possible.

## Key features of best practice

A number of key features of best practice in monitoring student satisfaction were evident within the member institutions involved in this project.

1. There is a 'culture of continuous improvement' within the institution where it is evident that the students' views are valued and acted upon and where monitoring student satisfaction is viewed as a process rather than event.

---

<sup>1</sup> Merrifield, G. (2006) *Research into Good Practice in Institutional Professional Development in International Education: Australia, England, Canada and the USA*. Wellington: Education New Zealand

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

2. The institution uses a variety of ways – formal and informal, spoken and written – to find out how the students’ experiences are being received and acts on issues and problems as soon as they arise, where practicable.
3. The process is transparent. Staff and students at the institution and other service providers such as agents and homestay providers are aware of the aims and outcomes of any student satisfaction process: there are no ‘hidden agendas’.
4. The monitoring methods and tools are appropriate to the aims of the activity and the students involved ie survey tools are culturally appropriate and the language used easily understood by the students.
5. Monitoring processes are evaluated and reviewed on a regular basis to ensure monitoring is appropriate and relevant to the current student body.

## Survey purposes

Best practice indicates survey methods are closely linked to the reason for the monitoring. The following are the main reasons identified in this project:

Why	Find out students’ views on aspects of student experience	Find out how students are settling into new environment	Find out students’ views on aspects of curriculum
<b>Outcome</b>	Inform review of agents & recruitment information; professional development planning; institutional policies and procedures; resource allocation	Deal with problems promptly	Inform review of curriculum, programming, professional development planning, performance review, resource allocation
<b>Focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment processes</li> <li>• Student services</li> <li>• Facilities, resources etc</li> <li>• Staff having contact with students</li> <li>• Curriculum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student services (accommodation, airport pickup etc)</li> <li>• Course (appropriate level, type etc)</li> </ul>	Curriculum ie programming, course content, methodology, assessment & teaching, resources
<b>Who</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All students OR</li> <li>• Sample group (demographic or class)</li> </ul>	All students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All students OR</li> <li>• Sample group (demographic or class)</li> </ul>
<b>When</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At any time during the course</li> <li>• On exit from the institution</li> </ul>	During first week of student’s course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Midway through course</li> </ul> AND/OR <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• End of course</li> </ul>

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

Why	Find out students' views on aspects of student experience	Find out how students are settling into new environment	Find out students' views on aspects of curriculum
How	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PA, Marketing, DoS</li> <li>• 2 – 4 pages</li> <li>• Paper-based, online survey</li> <li>• Formal 1-1 interview</li> <li>• Group discussion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DoS</li> <li>• Brief (1/2 page)</li> <li>• Paper-based survey</li> <li>• Interview</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DoS</li> <li>• 2 – 4 pages</li> <li>• Paper-based, online survey</li> <li>• Group or individual interview/discussion</li> </ul>

Some institutions also survey students' response to a potential new course or service, a kind of market research to evaluate possible satisfaction levels. Focus groups are most useful for this type of activity, which can be carried out at any time.

## Examples of good practice

■ College A, a medium sized private institution, carries out a substantial orientation survey process. Students undertake group orientation and induction that includes a placement interview with a senior teacher. Every student is then introduced to the Student Services Officer, who conducts a 5 – 10 minute interview designed to find out if the student is looking for work, if they are happy with their accommodation and if they have any other concerns. The SSO then introduces each student to each of the marketing officers at the institution. A week later the SSO conducts a follow up interview to make sure any issues have been addressed.

The SSO at College A is a trained ESOL teacher and is employed for four days a week. College A reports that because of the personal introduction and attention given during the first week, students feel comfortable approaching the SSO with problems and, if necessary, a marketing officer who may speak their language.

■ College D has developed three versions of its written survey so that students with different levels of English and in different courses can participate in the activity. The survey starts with an opportunity for students to reflect on their learning in different skill areas before gauging opinion on different student services.

## Survey methods

### How can I monitor levels of student satisfaction?

Following are the most popular approaches to monitoring student satisfaction. Details of these approaches are outlined in later sections of this paper.

In any kind of **written survey** eg paper-based or online questionnaires, best practice indicates there is a combination of quantitative responses (tick a box, circle the appropriate response) that provide information in the form of 'hard data' about the students' experiences, and qualitative responses (room for students to write comments) where institutions can find out more about what students think about their experiences. Qualitative responses are always more challenging to interpret because of the variation in information given by students. Written surveys can capture information

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

from a large number of respondents and can be used when anonymous responses are required. On-line surveys are easier to collate and interpret than paper surveys and may be more attractive to students who use technology on a daily basis.

Students report a high level of satisfaction with any method that enables them to have face-to-face contact with college staff and to discuss their views. **Formal interviews** between staff (counsellors, teachers, senior teachers etc) and individual students provide opportunities for the interviewer to 'drill down' to find more about why students hold the views they express. They can be carried out in conjunction with written surveys. Disadvantages of this survey type is that interviews can be time consuming and staff implementing them need to be trained in listening to student responses effectively.

Increasingly, **group interviews or discussions** are being used by member colleges. With this method, students are more likely to be able to see an immediate response to their issues: with written surveys many students leave the college before their issues are addressed. Students can also see if their concern is widespread, or if they or the group they represent are the only one holding a particular viewpoint. A good moderator or facilitator is key to the success of a group activity (see below). **Focus groups** can be explorative and diagnostic ie used to 'test the waters' for a new course or service.

On the whole, **suggestions boxes** are not considered to be effective despite college staff making efforts to advertise the opportunity and 'dress up' the boxes to make them attractive.

**Student counsellors** are often a valuable source of information about student satisfaction levels as they listen to individual student problems and issues. These can then be addressed directly with the student concerned.

## Examples of good practice

- College J, a large, metropolitan institution dealing with pathway students, reports the use of student diaries as very effective. Students are encouraged to write their experiences and reflections on a regular basis in a wiki set up by the college. The diary is then read by the teacher and corrected/responded to as appropriate. This has three main purposes: to provide an opportunity for the students to practice their writing skills; to enable the teacher to monitor satisfaction levels with the program and address salient issues; and to enable the teacher to identify and help deal with any personal issues that could be affecting the student's stay. Students disclose more as they get to know the teacher and the college. The nature of the activity means that because students are not anonymous, teachers are able to refer them to appropriate support as necessary. This practice has been taking place for a number of years and is viewed as very positive by both teachers and students.
- College M, a large private institution, holds an informal weekly morning tea for all staff and students. The Director reports that students often take that opportunity to approach staff with problems.
- Many colleges, large and small, implement formal interviews between teachers and students in their class every four to five weeks. Students complete a meaningful task in class while teachers take students out of class one by one to go through a range of prepared questions focussing on curriculum and other issues.

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

## Who is monitored?

Generally, institutions survey most, if not all, students. This can be very resource-intensive if paper based surveys are used and there is no guarantee that all students will be completely candid about their views. There can also be a danger of 'survey fatigue' if students are asked to undertake surveys too often, especially if outcomes are not evident, and that students become careless about completing the surveys, thus rendering the activity pointless.

Some colleges use sample groups, nominating a demographic or class group or proficiency level. One college reported that there was little difference between responses from different demographic groups: differences were far more likely to arise because of the student's personality than because they belonged to a particular cultural group.

Respondents suggest that carrying out a written survey in class time gets a better coverage of students, if maximum participation is a goal. Students who are given a choice whether to participate generally choose not to. Material incentives such as vouchers, movie passes etc may help boost participation.

Unless numbers and percentages are required by management in order to inform decision-making in response to survey outcomes, the only reason a college would need all students to participate would be if they want all students to feel as though they are getting a voice. In that case there may be more efficient and effective ways of doing this, such as the use of groups. It may be effective to invite students to volunteer to give feedback if they want to, but no college that was involved in this survey reported these approaches.

### Examples of good practice

- The Director at College M, a large, university institution, noticed that students were 'surveyed out' after completing evaluations at the end of every course. Now all students take part a brief orientation interview and College M implements a 2-page written survey of students representing the biggest nationality groups on set dates twice a year. Other groups, such as all students at a particular level, are targeted at random from time to time in order to find out their specific issues of concern.
- If students at College J want to move to a higher level course, they are required to complete a 'Level Up' survey in conjunction with a proficiency test. This two-page survey, focusing on the student's perceived language development and also covering aspects of student services, is then used as the basis for discussion with the student as to their readiness to move.

## Using the student's first language

Members report that students can be much more forthcoming when they are able to use their first language to express their views. Although most colleges do not provide their written surveys in students' first languages, citing cost as the reason they don't do this, many would like to and those who do report successful outcomes.

### Example of good practice

- At College J higher level students or bilingual staff members are used to interpret for lower level students, students going through an emergency or experiencing a high level of stress: this is done only for non-sensitive issues and no one has reported dissatisfaction with this arrangement at any level.

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

## Internal or external?

Outsourced monitoring can be expensive but may be more valid if it is designed, administered and interpreted by trained professionals. English Australia offers ELICOS colleges the opportunity to participate in [the ELT Barometer](#), a biennial survey of ELICOS students in Australia that is benchmarked against survey results from other English language providers around the world. The survey enables colleges to benchmark themselves against national outcomes as well as against outcomes for colleges from other countries. Please contact [easec@englishaustralia.com.au](mailto:easec@englishaustralia.com.au) if you are interested in participating in the next ELT Barometer.

## Example of good practice

■ College B, a medium sized university provider, took part in an externally designed and implemented written survey as part of the university's approach to monitoring student satisfaction. The college staff had input to the survey and the draft survey was trialled before being administered to all students. The DoS was gratified to find that the outcomes of the externally-administered survey were similar to those of past surveys administered by the college although the students provided more comments to the former survey.

## Written surveys

### Principles

Whether the survey is administered online or on paper, certain principles apply.

- Involving staff in the development of a survey instrument will encourage a feeling of engagement with the process.
- Always keep in mind the goal of the survey. One approach is to make a list of what you want to know then design a question for each one: this ensures all questions are relevant.
- Keep it simple! Use plain, clear English and avoid long complex sentences. Students at lower levels may not have learnt how to read the language and layout of formatted texts 'form English' yet so you may need to write complete sentences rather than the usual truncated phrases of this type of text. Remember to make the instructions, as well as the survey questions themselves, clear and use examples where appropriate.
- Written surveys can be an opportunity to teach students how to understand 'form English'.
- To maintain a user's attention, a survey should take no longer than 15 – 20 minutes to complete.
- If you are designing a paper-based survey, make sure the layout is clear with lots of white space around the writing, and a font that is easy to read (no less than 11 points). Avoid the 'fun' fonts – stick to Calibri or Arial. If you want students to write a response, make sure there is enough space. Use formatting such as numbering, bold and heading size to clearly indicate different sections of a survey.
- Think about how the question will be answered. If you're going to give a choice of answers, can you cover all possibilities or is it better to allow space for an open-ended response?
- Consider a brief introduction to the survey outlining the purpose of the survey and how the outcomes will be used.

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

- Check the spelling and grammar of the questionnaire.
- Thank the student for doing the survey.
- It is crucial to trial a draft survey before you implement it. Get different staff members to try the survey to iron out any bugs. Staff from non-English speaking backgrounds may be useful to try the survey to make sure they understand it.

## Online survey tools

Using programs such as [www.surveymethods.com](http://www.surveymethods.com) and [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) it is easy to create secure surveys (using the same principles of survey design as outlined above) and set them up for students to complete anonymously. It is even easier to collate the information: the program does it for you in a number of different ways and the information can be imported to Excel. To quote one manager: "It takes the pain out of collating results and leaves time and energy to follow up on student feedback." Both programs are subscription services that can be accessed through the website.

There are some cheaper or even free programs available, however ease of access and use are often compromised so 'buyer beware'!

If you choose to use an online survey make sure it is easy to create and edit the survey and that you can filter the responses to get information you need. Make sure you're signing up for a program that is appropriate for the number of users you think will be involved and the number of surveys you plan to implement.

## Anonymous or not?

Conventional wisdom has it that students are more likely to express themselves if their responses to written surveys are anonymous. However many colleges report no difference between outcomes of anonymous and identified responses and if a student has given their name, they can be approached to receive response/solution to their particular problem. If there is a strong culture of continuous improvement and students are confident they will not be punished for responding honestly, they will be more willing to identify themselves in a survey.

### Examples of Best Practice

- College G uses a merge function to print the students' names on their paper-based surveys. The students have reported they like this personalised touch and are happy to be identified on their responses.
- At College H, students do not have to identify themselves but are advised that doing so may help them resolve an issue. On completion of their survey the students file their papers in an envelope, which is taken by one of the students to the Director of Studies.

## Spoken surveys

### Principles

Spoken surveys can be formal and informal discussions that occur between individual students and college staff as well as discussions carried out with groups of students and a facilitator or moderator.

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

There are some overarching principles that apply, whatever the mode of interaction.

- An effective interviewer or facilitator needs some kind of training in interacting with students so that they do not influence outcomes of the interaction or insert bias. It is important that the staff member listens to the student(s), takes notes and responds in a considered manner that is not defensive or aggressive.
- It is useful to have a list of questions to ask students in a formal interview/discussion situation, yet be flexible enough to pick up on points students make and 'drill down' a little further.
- An information situation where the power distance between the facilitator and the students has been successful in many cases. Providing refreshments can help students feel relaxed.
- Interviewers will get more from students if they ask open-ended questions that require more than a yes/no response.
- For validity of outcomes it is important the interviewer/facilitator avoids asking 'leading' questions where it's clear to the student what the expected response is.
- Pauses are a valuable part of this type of interaction. They give the student time to think about how they're going to say and what they want to express.
- Facilitators of group discussions need to manage the meeting to achieve outcomes, encouraging all to participate and not allowing one student to dominate discussion.
- Records of all discussion are required and interviewers/facilitators need to make notes of important points and any decisions that were made.

## Using groups

Groups can be a very effective way of finding out how students feel about aspects of their ELICOS experience. Participants can be selected/invited at random or for a particular characteristic eg level, course, pathway or class; age, gender or nationality/language group. It may be necessary to appoint representatives as requests for volunteers often go unfilled, although the appointees need to be willing participants. Around 12 participants appear to be ideal for this type of activity. The facilitator may have specific items for students to discuss, eg a range of questions about different aspects of the program or services, or students can bring issues put forward and discussed in a class/group meeting. Participants can have opportunities to express their own individual views or they can be representatives of other groups, providing an opportunity for students lacking confidence or a high level of English to have their views expressed anonymously through a third party. Students seem to give the most favourable responses in a timeframe of 45 – 60 minutes.

Note: the expression 'focus group' is often used when people really mean a group interview or discussion. Strictly speaking a focus group is a carefully selected group of people who meet to give their opinions on a particular issue or item. A focus group isn't a group interview where everyone is expected to participate but an exchange of opinions and views that can be explored. The focus of this type of activity is on what happens during discussion and should be led by someone trained in qualitative research methods. [Click here](#) for a very useful article on group discussion in *EA Journal* Vol 20 No 1 entitled 'Focus Groups and ELICOS Evaluation' by Margaret Zeegers.

### Example of good practice

- The Director of College W, a large university centre, was concerned that surveys were not a real reflection of student experiences. She implemented a system whereby two representatives of each

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

class meet with other representatives and the facilitator (usually the DoS but always someone who does not teach) and a 'secretary' to present their opinions. In this way students are able to express possibly negative views by being able to say "Someone in my class believes that...". Because the facilitator holds a position of responsibility they are able to respond to student concerns instantly. These meetings take place in the penultimate week of every course. The Director found that the quality of feedback increased markedly and she has continued this system for several years.

## Responding to survey outcomes

Once information has been received from monitoring activities the next part of the process is to interpret and respond to that information. Best practice indicates that information is handled and interpreted by people who are able to do so sensitively and with understanding of a larger context eg marketing staff do not use negative responses as a criticism of teachers. Things are not always what they seem, especially as regards teaching and learning: for example students who have learnt largely de-contextualised written English may have an issue with classroom activities that involve communicating with other students. They may lack understanding of what is necessary for them to make progress with their spoken English and may require individual counselling with the teacher or Director of Studies to help them accept this different approach.

Record aspects of student feedback, including information from a range of sources, for monitoring over a period of time. Summaries of levels of student satisfaction with all aspects of the student experience can be regularly sent to those involved in program and service delivery, including external contractors such as agents and accommodation specialists, as well as to the financial and curriculum decision-makers within an institution. This provides opportunities for praise and recognition as well as for focus on improvement.

As part of a transparent approach to the process, outcomes of surveys to find out how services are viewed can be published so that students can see how others have responded (and can see that perhaps not everyone shares their view!). This is easier for written surveys, especially those conducted on line as they have built-in data collection facilities. It is not appropriate to publish outcomes that contain criticism of identifiable people.

### Examples of good practice

- College K, a medium sized private metropolitan organisation, carries out curriculum monitoring as the students leave the college. The DoS or a senior teacher interviews each student and among the questions they are asked to comment on and grade the teachers they had during their study. This information is used to provide feedback to the teachers, and may be the basis of continued employment at the college. The teachers are all aware of this and rather than see it as a negative point, they are motivated to do their best. The staff is very stable and team-focused.
- At College B the Director of Studies frequently visits classrooms as requested by teacher to address any issues of concern that are common to most students.
- The Director of College J, a large university centre, makes note in a spreadsheet of all major areas of concern expressed in survey and 'signs them off' as they are addressed. That way she is building up a snapshot of how concerns change over time.

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS

## Points to consider

1. Regardless of the approach you take to monitoring student satisfaction, make sure there are clear procedures and training for staff who are going to be involved. These can be part of staff induction processes and included in the Staff Handbook as a permanent reference.
2. Provide professional development in areas such as listening and responding to students. Make sure staff dealing with student problems have clear guidelines as to what they can and cannot do in different situations. Again this can be covered during staff induction and included in the Staff Handbook.
3. Include names and location of people who can help eg DoS, student counsellor, homestay coordinator in the Student Handbook and introduce these key people to students during orientation.
4. Display grievance procedures clearly in classrooms.
5. Your student body, services and programs are bound to change from time to time. Evaluate your surveys regularly to make sure they are relevant and useful.

### Example of good practice

■ College J had a problem with students approaching marketing staff who spoke the same language: the marketing staff would then approach teaching staff about the problem on behalf of the student. This caused resentment on both sides. Following implementation of clear procedures (students complete a form and marketing staff may help students complete the form but may not intervene otherwise) the issue has now stopped.

# Guide to Best Practice in Monitoring Student Satisfaction in ELICOS



## Acknowledgements

There proves to be a wide range of good practice implemented by English Australia member colleges. Around 25% of all member colleges in 2007 responded to the survey (see below) and we thank them for being willing to share their successful processes and practices.

English Australia would like to particularly thank staff from the colleges marked with an asterisk\* who offered their time and expertise in discussion with the Project Writer.

\*Ability Education

ACL Sydney (now Navitas English – Sydney)

\*Australian Pacific College

\*Billy Blue (now Think Colleges CLASS)

Chisholm Institute (no longer a member of English Australia)

Deakin University English Language Centre

GEOS QCE Brisbane (no longer in operation)

\*PIBT International English Centre (no longer a member of English Australia)

\*Meridian International School – Sydney (no longer in operation)

\*Milton College (no longer in operation)

Phoenix Academy (no longer a member of English Australia)

\*RMIT English Worldwide

Step One College (no longer a member of English Australia)

\*Swinburne University English Language Centre

University of New England English Language Centre

\*University of Tasmania English Language Centre