The Student Outcomes Survey – An Overview

Prepared by the Policy and Planning Group
(http://www2.rmit.edu.au/departments/planning)
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1. Background

The Student Outcomes Survey (SOS) is a national survey of Vocational Education and Training (VET) students conducted after they complete their training. It collects information and perceptions on a student’s educational history, the course (program) they studied, and any employment before, during or after the course. Most information can be satisfactorily analysed at national, state and institutional levels.

The Higher Education equivalent of the SOS is the Graduate Destination Survey/Course Experience Questionnaire (GDS/CEQ).

The SOS is conducted in the year after the student completes their training. It has always included a sample of graduates and, since 1999, a sample of module completers. Generally, graduates and module completers are analysed separately, although comparisons can be made between the two.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) first conducted the survey in 1995 when it was known as the Graduate Destination Survey. The National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) has managed it annually since 1997. Up until 2004, there were relatively few modifications over the years thus the majority of the information from 1997-2003 can be examined as time series.

In 2004, the survey was redesigned in order to improve and shorten the questionnaire. While the majority of questions were not modified, all of the questions measuring student's perceptions of the program were changed to conform to a model developed and tested in Western Australia, the intention being to better measure students' perceptions of their program. Thus scales such as the Good Teaching Scale are no longer comparable with previous years. The questionnaire was also shortened, as there was a prevailing view that it was becoming too long.

2. Who is surveyed?

2.1 Graduates

Graduates are defined as students who attended a TAFE institution in Australia and who completed a Certificate, Advanced Certificate, Associate Diploma, Diploma, Advanced Diploma or a Bachelor’s degree and who had an Australian address as their usual address. The latter exclusion is particularly notable for RMIT given its relatively high number of international students. Up to, and including, the 1999 survey there was an additional requirement that the program must have had a duration of at least 200 hours or one semester. However this restriction was relaxed to simply exclude persons who undertook only recreational or hobby (short courses) from the 2000 survey onwards.

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1 Comparative analyses can be undertaken for RMIT against the state and national averages by industry group, but no information is available that enables comparison between institutions.
2 In 2000, NCVER unintentionally included some overseas fee paying students in the sample.
2.2 Module completers

Module completers are defined as students who are not graduates, and who attended a TAFE institution in Australia successfully completing some of the training in a program, irrespective of the number of hours of the training, and who left the TAFE system. As with graduates, only those with an Australian address are included in the sample. Those who undertake only recreational or hobby short courses are excluded.

2.3 Other sampling and analysis issues

The questionnaire provides an opportunity for module completers to indicate that they actually graduated. Quite a significant number of module completers do this. Prior to 2003, the status of the students when they were initially sampled determined whether they were treated as graduates or module completers in analyses. However, the practice was changed in 2003 so that module completers who indicated they had in fact graduated were transferred to the graduate file for analysis. Thus the weighted number of graduates rose and the weighted number of module completers fell in 2003 compared to previous years.

In 2004, the sampling of module completers by the survey contractor was incorrect. For example, no male RMIT module completers were surveyed, and there were similar (generally less serious) errors in sampling module completers from other institutions. Revised weighting was constructed in an attempt to improve the accuracy of analyses. In the case of most analyses, it is unlikely that the error in sampling would substantially affect any conclusions to be drawn from the data. However, it would generally be inappropriate to produce analyses just for RMIT module completers because no RMIT male module completers were surveyed.

2.4 Number of Responses

Table 1 below indicates the number of responses obtained from each of graduates and module completers between 1997 and 2004 and the level at which analysis is appropriate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Year</th>
<th>Graduates</th>
<th></th>
<th>Module Completers</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis Level</td>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis Level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>Nat’l</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>RMIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>60,746</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>66,607</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>63,198</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>41,660</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>39,426</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>41,807</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>40,356</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>16,078</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Data adjusted to account for over-sampling of females by NCVER contractor. No male RMIT module completers were surveyed, thus it is inappropriate to analyse module completers at the institutional level.
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Since 2003, and going forward, NCVER's plans are to survey sufficient graduates and module completers to permit institutional analyses in odd-numbered years. In even-numbered years sample sizes will permit analyses at state and national levels.

Note:
RMIT have traditionally always paid an additional fee to NCVER in order to boost the samples of RMIT graduates to cover all domestic RMIT graduates from the previous year. This usually means that the number of RMIT graduates responding is around 1,000, and that there are always sufficient graduates to permit analyses at the institutional level (including in even-numbered years).

2.4 Response Rates

In 2003 and 2004 the graduate response rate has been around 45% nationally. The response rate for module completers tends to be a few percent lower.

Response rates for RMIT graduates are usually slightly below the national rates: for example in 2004 the national response rate for graduates was 46% compared to an RMIT response rate of 41%.

For economic reasons, NCVER now follows-up fewer non-responders on the telephone than they have done in the past. This has been significant contributor to declining response rates in the past couple of years compared to prior years.

3. What information is available?

The SOS questionnaire collects basic demographic and program information from each respondent. Broadly, it also collects information at three different reference points:

1. Before starting training, particularly collecting information about training and employment activities over the six months prior to commencing their program.
2. During training, collecting information regarding program characteristics, sources of income, reasons for doing the training, and employment activities.
3. At the end of May in the year after completion of training, obtaining information about employment status and opinions of the training.

Appendix A provides a greater level of detail regarding the information available. Although this specifically relates to the SOS 2004 collection, most of the information is available every year.

It is worth noting that the SOS questionnaire was redesigned in 2004. There were two changes of particular note:

- Previously graduates and module completers were administered slightly different questionnaires. From 2004 onwards, they answer the same questionnaire. This entailed some changes to the questions at the start of the survey.
While the majority of questions were not modified, all of the questions measuring student's perceptions of the program were changed to conform to a model developed and tested in Western Australia. Thus scales such as the Good Teaching Scale are no longer comparable with previous years. As has always been the case, the scales are not comparable to the CEQ scales of the same names.

4. Where can I access more information?

Information can be accessed from a variety of sources:

- Up until 2002, NCVER published an annual report with comprehensive analysis and commentary at the national level. It also included some analysis by state, but no analysis by institution. After that date, NCVER have simply published data tables, frequency accounts and a summary report. NCVER describe what information is available at http://www.ncver.edu.au/statistics/surveys/sos_FAQ/whatinfo.htm. Their publications can be searched at http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/search.html.

- In the years when NCVER sample sufficient graduates and module completers to report at the institutional level (odd-numbered years), they publish an annual report tailored to each institution. The RMIT report includes detailed analyses and comparisons with statewide and national statistics. It is available from the Policy & Planning Group – contact Angel Calderon. Where applicable, this report contains analyses of both graduates and module completers. It does not include analyses at the program level.


- The Policy and Planning Group is currently in the process of building a web tool that will enable analysis of RMIT programs by the twenty-two separate items and five scales included on the SOS (see Section 6). These items and scales were first introduced in the 2004 survey. It is anticipated that the web tool will be available by early 2006.

- For years prior to 2003, the ratings for RMIT programs on eighteen separate items and seven scales such as “Teaching Instruction”, can be analysed online by using the Policy and Planning Group’s “Item by Item Analysis”. This analysis can be done either at the (old) faculty or program level (as described by the National Course Codes). Data relating to graduates for 1999-2002 is available. Output can be viewed online and stored in Acrobat (.pdf) and Excel (.xls) formats. Go to http://www2.rmit.edu.au/departments/planning/ircu/outcomes/outcomes.php. Click on “Item by Item Analysis of Student Outcomes Survey”.

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5. Key Performance Indicators

A full list of RMIT's Key Performance Indicators can be found by going to http://www2.rmit.edu.au/departments/planning/ircu/, clicking the link to "Performance Measurement" and viewing the document at the first link on the page ("RMIT Key Performance Indicators").

At the time of writing, three of RMIT's Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) are derived from the SOS:

- Graduate Employment,
- Generic Skills, and
- Good Teaching

Overall Satisfaction is used by OTTE in their Key Measures of Performance.

5.1 Graduate Employment

Graduate Employment is calculated as the percentage of TAFE graduates who are employed either full-time or part-time at 31st May in the year following graduation.

5.2 Generic Skills

The percentage of positive responses (defined as those who Strongly Agree or Agree) to the Generic Skills items across all TAFE graduates. See Section 6 for more details about the Generic Skills Scale.

5.3 Good Teaching

The percentage of positive responses (defined as those who Strongly Agree or Agree) to the Good Teaching items across all TAFE graduates. See Section 6 for more details about the Good Teaching Scale.

5.4 Overall Satisfaction

The percentage of positive responses (defined as those who Strongly Agree or Agree) to the Overall Satisfaction item across all TAFE graduates. See Section 6 for more details about the Overall Satisfaction Item.
6. The SOS Items and Scales

RMIT has traditionally made good use of the scaled questions that measure graduates’ perceptions of their programs. In particular RMIT has made use of the questions relating to Good Teaching (previously referred to as "Teaching and Instruction"), for example in measuring Teaching Quality as part of its Profiles Process. This section therefore provides some additional information about those questions.

As already discussed, these questions were all changed in 2004, thus they are not comparable to previous years.

It is also the case that, although the questions themselves were not changed in 2003, that 2003 data is not directly comparable to prior years. This is because the responses to each question, except the one regarding overall satisfaction, were changed from a ten-point scale to a five-point scale.

6.1 The current SOS scales (from 2004 onwards)

Graduates are asked to rate twenty-two aspects of their program on a five point scale ranging from ‘Strongly Disagree’ to ‘Strongly Agree’. The twenty-two items are grouped into five scales:

- Teaching (also referred to as "Good Teaching"),
- Assessment,
- Generic Skills,
- Learning Experience, and
- Overall Opinions

For methodological purposes consistent with the Higher Education Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) data, the items have been grouped into summary scales according to the program aspect they address. However, note that even though some of the CEQ and SOS scales have the same name (e.g. Good Teaching) they are not directly comparable as the items making up each scale vary between the two surveys.

Below is a list of the items making up each SOS summary scale.

*Good Teaching Scale (GTS)*

- My instructors had a thorough knowledge of the subject content.
- My instructors provided opportunities to ask questions.
- My instructors treated me with respect.
- My instructors understood my learning needs.
- My instructors communicated the subject content effectively.
- My instructors made the subject as interesting as possible.
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Assessment Scale (AS)

- I knew how I was going to be assessed.
- The way I was assessed was a fair test of my skills.
- I was assessed at appropriate intervals.
- I received useful feedback on my assessment.
- The assessment was a good test of what I was taught.

Generic Skills Scale (GSS)

- My training developed my problem solving skills.
- My training sharpened my analytic skills.
- My training helped me develop my ability to work as a team member.
- My training improved my skills in written communication.
- My training helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work.
- As a result of my training, I feel more confident about tackling unfamiliar problems.

Learning Experience Scale (LES)

- My training has made me more confident about my ability to learn.
- I have gained the skills I want to learn from my training.
- As a result of my training, I am more positive about achieving my goals.
- My training has helped me think about new opportunities in life.

Overall Satisfaction Item (OSI)

- Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this training.

Analyses undertaken by the Policy and Planning Group in interpreting SOS data have been developed using similar methodology to that employed in interpreting Higher Education CEQ data.

Care should be taken in comparing results across institutions. Differences in disciplines (Fields of Education) and student profiles need to be considered in making such comparisons.

References

NCVER, National Student Outcome Survey Reports, 1997-2002
NCVER, Student Outcome Survey Tabulations and Summary Reports, 2003-2004
Appendix A

Information available from the Student Outcomes Survey 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. About Your Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Are you still enrolled in the training shown on the front of the form?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Are you currently enrolled in any other training with a TAFE?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Level of qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Whether completed all the training to obtain qualification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Reasons for not continuing training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Main reason for not continuing training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>B. About You</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In which country were you born?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Do you speak a language other than English at home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How well do you speak English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Do you consider yourself to have a disability, impairment or long-term condition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Please indicate the areas of disability, impairment or condition (visual, hearing etc.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>C. Before Undertaking Your Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- What was the highest level of schooling you completed before undertaking … ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- When the training shown on the front of the form was started</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Qualifications completed previously</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D. Six months Before Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Whether had a job in the six months before undertaking the training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Basis of employment (wage earner, own business etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Occupation and main tasks of main job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Industry of main job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Hours per week worked in main job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Entitlement to sick leave or paid holiday leave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did you actively look for work during the six months?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>E. More About Your Training</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Mode of delivery (classroom, workplace etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Recognition for prior learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did you enrol … because it was part of an apprenticeship or traineeship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Whether successfully completed all requirements of apprenticeship/traineeship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Sources of income while doing training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- What was your main reason for doing the training?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Did the training help you to achieve your main reason?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued overpage)
# Appendix A

## Information available from the Student Outcomes Survey (cntd.)

**F. Your work situation at 28 May 2004**
- Did you have a … job of any kind … at 28 May 2004?
- On what basis were you employed in your main job at 28 May 2004?
- Whether employer/business the same as the one before training
- Entitlement to sick leave or paid holiday leave
- Occupation and main tasks of main job
- Industry of main job
- Hours per week worked in main job
- How much did you usually earn in your main job?
- Job related benefits received as a result of completing the course
- How long did it take you to find a job after completing the course?
- How relevant is the training … to your main job?
- Were you actively looking for work on 28 May 2004?
- Have you previously held a full-time job?

**G. Additional Study**
- Whether enrolled in further study
- Level of qualification enrolled in
- Where did you enrol to study the course?

**H. Your Opinions On The Training**
- How would you rate, on average, the following aspects of the training?*
- Would you recommend the training you have undertaken to others?
- Would you recommend the institution where you undertook the training to others?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving the training …?

**I. Optional Question**
- Daytime contact phone number

* Further information about these scales can be found in Section 5