

## **The Influence of Student Engagement Levels on Satisfaction and Behavioural Intentions**

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### **Abstract**

The measurement of student satisfaction within a university presents challenges which result from the nature of the industry, the role of students, confusion over who the customer is, and the various conceptualisations of satisfaction in a university context. In this paper we propose a re-thinking of the concept of student engagement and the link between student engagement and satisfaction as predictors of post-consumption university student behaviours. These engagement factors achieve this by better incorporating the cognitive and emotive aspects of the consumption experience into satisfaction evaluations.

**Keywords:** Student Engagement, Student Satisfaction, Behavioural Intentions

## **The Influence of Student Engagement Levels on Satisfaction and Behavioural Intentions**

### **Introduction**

The measurement of student satisfaction within a university presents challenges which result from the nature of the industry, the role of students, confusion over who the customer is, and the various conceptualisations of satisfaction in a university context. In this paper we seek to expand the concept of student engagement through the adaptation of the mechanisms of employee engagement and customer engagement. The analysis is then used as a basis for supplementing existing employee and customer satisfaction measures as predictors of post-consumption university student behaviours. These engagement factors achieve this by better incorporating the cognitive and emotive aspects of the consumption experience into satisfaction evaluations.

Consideration of whether a parallel construct of student engagement may similarly enhance student satisfaction measures has yet to be made in the academic literature. One significant difficulty with the current measurement of student engagement is the narrowness with which it is defined. That is, student engagement has traditionally been defined as “the quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes” (Hu & Kuh, 2001, 3). This definition is in contrast to claims that student engagement should be considered as a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic, as well as selected non-academic and social aspects, of the student experience (Krause & Coates, 2008). Research into the relationship between student satisfaction and a broadening of the definition of student engagement will help to answer calls for “a wider acknowledgement that the totality of the student’s experience of an institution is the most useful perspective through which to measure student satisfaction” (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998, cited in Mavondo, Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2004). To re-shape our understanding of student engagement and the link with post university behavioural intentions we develop a conceptual model (see Figure 1) and discuss the transition from customer satisfaction measures to student satisfaction and then the transition from engagement measures to student engagement levels.

### **Literature Review and Conceptual Analysis**

#### **Customer satisfaction**

Research has indicated that customer satisfaction is an antecedent of increased market share, profitability, positive word of mouth, and customer retention (e.g., Anderson, Fornell & Lehman 1994). Increased global competition among higher education providers means that the retention of existing students is as equally important as attracting them in the first place (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Elliot & Healy, 2001). Therefore, an understanding of 'satisfaction' in the context of higher education has become a progressively more significant area of study. The traditional conceptualisation of customer satisfaction is as a cognitive construct (Westbrook, 1987), but it is increasingly being argued that such a construct should also incorporate customers’ affective responses (Clemes, Gan & Kao, 2007; Yi, 1990).

Customer satisfaction has variously been described as stepping away from an experience and evaluating it (Hunt, 1977); an evaluation of the surprise inherent in a consumption experience (Oliver, 1980); a response to an evaluative process (Tse & Wilton, 1988), and more recently, a summary of emotional and cognitive responses relating to a particular experience occurring at a particular period (Giese & Cote, 2000). More recent conceptualisations of customer satisfaction describe it as “an overall feeling, or attitude, a person has about a product after it has been purchased” (Solomon, 1994, p.346), and “a summary, affective and variable intensity response centred on specific aspects of acquisition and/or consumption, and which takes place at the precise moment when the individual evaluates the object”, whether after a particular transaction or after accumulative experiences (Giese and Cote, 2000, p.3). A useful précis is that “[c]ustomer satisfaction may be perceived as a summary psychological state or a subjective summary judgement based on the customer’s experiences compared with expectations” (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007).

### **Existing satisfaction theoretical determinants and their shortcomings**

There are two dominant theories which attempt to explain satisfaction determinants. First, the most simplistic theory of satisfaction determinants conceptualises customer satisfaction as an outcome of a cognitive process, which evaluates and compares pre-consumption expectations with an overall post-consumption attitude formed by observing product or service performance (Bartikowski & Llosa, 2004; Bowden, 2009; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1988; Wirtz, Mattila & Tan, 2000). This expectancy disconfirmation paradigm was pioneered by Oliver (1981). The lack of dimensionality offered by the basic confirmation-disconfirmation of expectations approach has resulted in criticism that the approach fails to “measure the depth of customers’ responses to consumption situations” (Bowden, 2009). This, along with several other criticisms of satisfaction measurement, has contributed to the continued evolution of theories relating to determinants of customer satisfaction. Second, the attribute-based approach measures of customer satisfaction have sought to achieve greater depth of analysis by recognising that different product/service attributes are ascribed different levels of importance and, therefore, result in a non-linear measure of customer satisfaction (Busacca & Padula, 2005; Kano, Seraku, Takahashi & Tsuji 1984; Mittal & Kamakura, 2001; Walden, 1993). However, these models continue to draw criticism for lack their lack of generaliseability and ability to sustain robust theories about customer satisfaction (Anderson, Pearo & Widener, 2008; Oliver, 1997).

### **Translating customer satisfaction into student satisfaction**

The concept of student satisfaction (see Figure 1) has been the subject of much academic discourse (for example see Aldridge & Rowley, 1998; Athiyaman, 1997; Banwet & Datta, 2003; Browne, Kaldenberg, Browne, & Brown 1998; DeShields, Kara and Kaynak, 2005; Elliot and Healy, 2001; Elliott and Shin, 2002; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005; Mavondo, *et al.*, 2004). The concept has received increased attention due to prevailing views along the lines that, since universities are services and services are delivered to people by people, the “moments of truth” dealing with customers can make or break a university’s image (Banwet & Datta, 2003). Further to this view is the understanding that, in order to deliver total student satisfaction, all employees of a university should adhere to the principles of quality customer service, whether they be front-

line contact staff involved in teaching or administration, or non-contact staff in management or administrative roles (Gold, 2001; Low, 2000, cited in Banwet and Datta, 2003). These understandings form part of the reason why student satisfaction has received so much recent attention in academic literature. Student satisfaction is conceptually analogous to customer satisfaction and can be defined in various ways (Browne *et al.*, 1998; DeShields *et al.*, 2005; Elliot and Healy, 2001; Elliott and Shin, 2002; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005; Saunders & Walker, 1993). A useful definition is that student satisfaction is “a student’s subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences with education and campus life” (Elliott and Shin, 2002, p.198). Mavondo, *et al.*, (2004) have commented that, “[a]s the topic of student satisfaction continues to garner more interest, the ability to measure it has also [sic] gained prominence.”

The challenges in measuring satisfaction within a university context mean that due to the nature of a student’s university experience, student satisfaction cannot realistically be measured utilising a transaction-specific confirmation-disconfirmation analysis because “it would be a difficult, if not impossible, task to measure student satisfaction with all relevant classes [or other university consumption experiences]” (Athiyaman, 1997). For this reason Mavondo, *et al.*, (2004) have commented that “there may be an issue of whether satisfaction is a post-consumptive measure or a cumulative measure.” Based on its treatment in the literature, satisfaction can be viewed as either a process or an outcome (Mavondo, *et al.*, 2004). The type of measure employed can be dependant on practicalities (such as whether transaction-specific measures are possible), the sample population (i.e. a cumulative measure may be more relevant for students approaching the end of their degree), and the focus of the study (Mavondo, *et al.*, 2004).

## Engagement

The notion of engagement has been used differently in various contexts, including higher education. Engagement measures have attempted to explain organisational commitment, which in turn can help predict financial performance (Bowden, 2009). Engagement in this context has been defined as “task behaviours that promote connections to work and to others” (Kahn, 1990, 700). These connections are expressed physically, cognitively and emotionally, and can stimulate personal development and increase employee motivation (Kahn, 1990). Another definition of engagement in the context of organisational behaviour is a “pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual or behaviour” and enhances organisational productivity (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá and Bakker, 2002, 74). Such engagement, therefore, incorporates roles that are both cognitive and emotive. This is consistent with research findings that group cohesion can be increased by emotional engagement (Salanova, Agut & Peiró, 2005) and that intellectual engagement with one’s job is important for workers (Hardaker & Fill, 2005). Since the construct of engagement includes both cognitive and emotive components, it may provide a superior predictor of behavioural intention. It is worth considering whether a parallel construct of student engagement may similarly enhance student satisfaction measures and improve predictions of post-consumption behavioural intentions.

## Translating engagement into student engagement

Examination of “engagement” in the context of higher education has “revealed that considerable inconsistency exists in its connotation and application, such that the variances in nuance are somewhat of a nuisance” (Thompson, 2008, 5). The linguistic confusion surrounding engagement in the university context has resulted in statements that “a fundamental and urgent priority must be to develop an institutional language for engagement that promotes a consensus among staff, students and community” (Holland *et al.*, 2005, 3). University student engagement has been defined rather restrictively as “the quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes” (Hu & Kuh, 2001, 3). This academic learning-based definition is in contrast to claims that student engagement is a broad phenomenon that encompasses academic as well as selected non-academic and social aspects of the student experience (Krause & Coates, 2008). The disparity between the stated definition and the concepts engagement is said to encompass highlight to issues resulting from the aforementioned linguistic confusion. Recent wide-scale studies have taken a holistic view of student engagement and its contribution to desired learning outcomes (NSSE, 2005; AUSSE, 2008; Krause & Coates, 2008), analysing areas such as the supportiveness of the campus environment and beyond-class collaboration as part of student engagement. Despite the existence of these recent studies, the majority of the research relating to student engagement is in the context of the classroom. Furthermore, since the objective of current student engagement measures relates to educationally purposeful activities, student engagement measures are skewed toward engagement in learning and teaching practices. Although the NSSE and AUSSE both measure beyond-class student engagement, the focuses of these surveys are on in-class student engagement. This again contradicts suggestions that student engagement develops from the dynamic interplay between student and institutional activities and conditions (Krause & Coates, 2008).

These types of holistic notions of engagement are mirrored in relation to student satisfaction, where it has been suggested that “there must be a wider acknowledgement that the totality of the student’s experience of an institution is the most useful perspective through which to measure student satisfaction” (Aldridge & Rowley, 1998, cited in Mavondo, Tsarenko & Gabbott, 2004). It is reasonable to suggest that the usefulness of the concept of engagement in the university context would be greatly increased by incorporating aspects of the employee and customer engagement constructs. This is an appropriate action because of the unique role in which students are cast. That is, the position amalgamates traditional roles and students find that they are a part of an institution, in a manner similar to relationship employees’ have with organisations, while also being conceived of as the primary customers of universities (Hill, 1995). This is despite this conception being seemingly “inconsistent with most academic goals” (Mavondo *et al.*, 2004).

Therefore, in addition to engagement being defined around the academic learning activities of the student; i.e. 'student-learning engagement', we propose the addition of a holistic student-campus engagement dimension called 'student-campus engagement'. In this context, student-campus engagement refers to the task behaviours that promote connections to the university and which are expressed physically, cognitively, and emotionally, and which stimulate personal development and stimulate student motivation (modified from Kahn, 1990, 700). These dual dimensions of overall student engagement are not unrealistic and may prove analogous to the relationship between job and organisation engagement, which have been shown to be distinct but

related concepts. In that context, engagement has been conceptualised as role related (Kahn, 1990; Rothbard, 2001). The existing dimension of student-learning engagement is evidence that engagement in higher education is role related. It is apparent that the two most dominant roles for most university students are their student (learner) role and their role as a member of the university community. Thus, to avoid confusion we propose that student engagement is multi-dimensional and is comprised of both the traditionally defined 'student-learning engagement' (SLE) plus the newly defined 'student-campus engagement' (SCE). Whilst there is much research suggesting a positive correlation between student-learning engagement (SLE) levels and academic achievement (Pace, 1979; Astin, 1993; Kuh 1995), there is no research examining whether a positive relationship exists between student-learning engagement (SLE) levels and student satisfaction (SS) levels. Arising from the discussion the following hypotheses are advanced: **H1: Student engagement (SE) positively influences student satisfaction (SS); H2: Student-campus engagement (SCE) positively influences student-learning engagement (SLE).**

### Customer satisfaction and behavioural intentions

There is generally a strong link between customer satisfaction and repurchase intentions (Patterson, Johnson & Spreng, 1997). Repurchase intentions are based on the evaluation of multiple underlying service dimensions (Bolton, Kannan & Bramlett, 2000). Likewise, student satisfaction(SS) has been positively correlated with students' favourable future behavioural intentions (Athiyaman, 1997; Boulding, Kalra, Staelin, and Zeithaml, 1993; Browne *et al.*, 1998; Clemes, Gan & Kao, 2007). Service quality dimensions can affect behaviours such as praising the university, pledging money to the university, and planning to recommend the university to employers as a good place from which to recruit (Boulding *et al.*, 1993).

A higher student satisfaction level reinforces the decisions to consider future attendance at the same university, as well as increases the intention to recommend the university to others (Clemes, Gan & Kao, 2007). Browne *et al.* (1998) utilised three items to serve as dependent measures of satisfaction, one of which was the willingness to recommend the college to a friend or relative and primarily represented the behavioural intention satisfaction measure. Willingness to recommend the college was shown to be moderately correlated with service quality perceptions, and is related to whether a student feels he or she has been treated in a fair and sympathetic manner and can trust the institution (Browne *et al.*, 1998). This is consistent with the understanding of consumer behaviour which suggests that loyalty is associated with trust (Lam *et al.*, 2004). There is a substantial body of research suggesting that student satisfaction has been shown to have a positive impact on student loyalty (Athiyaman, 1997; Helgesen & Nasset, 2007; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005; Schertzer & Schertzer, 2004). However it remains to be seen whether satisfaction measures alone provide the best predictor of these behavioural intentions. As such, the following hypothesis is advanced: **H3: Student satisfaction positively influences student behavioural intentions.**

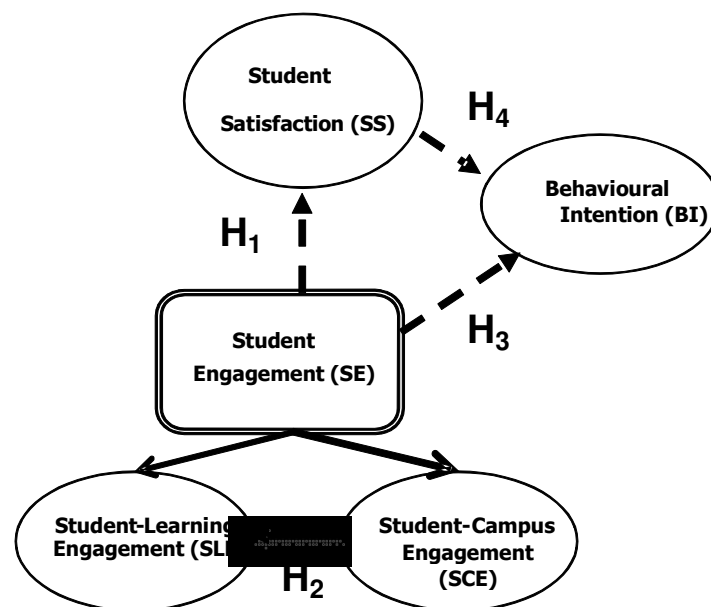
It was previously suggested that it was worth considering whether the construct of student engagement, parallel to the customer engagement construct, may similarly enhance student satisfaction measures and improve predictions of post-consumption behavioural intentions. In particular, this suggestion aimed to identify whether student engagement may propose a more

complete, conceptual process with which to measure loyalty toward a university as a function of students' behavioural intentions. To conduct this examination requires the comparative analysis of the impact of student engagement and student satisfaction on student behavioural intentions. As such, the following hypothesis is advanced: **H<sub>4</sub>: Student engagement positively influences student behavioural intentions.**

### Conclusion

The contribution of this paper is to provide an updated conceptual model which re-defines the concept of student engagement and its links with student satisfaction and behavioural intentions. The proposed conceptual model in Figure 1 re-defines student engagement as multi-dimensional and consisting of both student-learning engagement and student-campus engagement. The model has been developed to address the perceived inadequacies of existing satisfaction measures and to fill the gap in the literature relating to student satisfaction and the manner in which engagement (i.e. particularly non-academic) can augment existing measures of satisfaction, particularly as they relate to predicting behavioural intentions.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Conceptual Model**



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