

Factors Impacting Online Student Satisfaction: Designing for the Future

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Student satisfaction is a student's reported attitude towards their educational experience and is an important indicator of online learning success. As higher education becomes increasingly competitive and as even traditionally face-to-face learning increasingly shifts online, education providers are focusing more intensively on measuring student satisfaction and translating these observations into actions for enhancing online learning experiences. This article reviews what research tells us about student satisfaction in online learning, particularly how this compares to our analysis of student satisfaction themes at Australian Institute of Business (AIB).

What Influences Satisfaction?

Studies have been tackling this question ever since the release of the first computer-based training program in 1960. Unsurprisingly, the quality of an online student's interactions with other students, [their instructors, and the content](#) significantly influences their overall satisfaction. Other studies suggest that instructor presence and the instructor's perceived facilitation skills and knowledge, as well as the [clarity of a course's structure](#) and the clarity of [assessment guidelines and feedback](#), strongly influence satisfaction. Given such a broad range of student satisfaction predictors, distilling satisfaction themes into key actionable priorities for higher education providers is a valuable exercise.

As an online educational institution, the Australian Institute of Business (AIB) analyses student satisfaction feedback each term and monitors trends in feedback themes. The strongest predictors of satisfaction in our online MBA are:

- frequency and quality of learner-instructor and learner-learner interactions
- assessment clarity, and
- design of the online subject content.

Considering the emergence of the 'subject design' theme, the question of what constitutes 'good' subject design in the context of an online MBA can be explored.

What is 'Good' Online Subject Design at AIB?

In our recent [case study of online learners](#), we explored the most commonly reported themes in student feedback to understand what students consider 'good design' of an online subject.

We identified the following findings from the analysis of qualitative text-based survey feedback (N 870) using both theme-based and text mining approaches of a range of subjects typically offered in the MBA program. Student commentary on the subject design was interconnected with the themes of instructor engagement (i.e. fostering interaction), authentic assessments, subject content, textbook and webinars. Let's examine the findings of interaction/ engagement and assessment to understand what they mean to design online learning and student satisfaction.

Fostering Interaction and Knowledge Construction

Students indicated that their instructors play an effective role in creating opportunities for social learning, fostering engagement and interconnectivity while maintaining a delicate balance between the online learning environment and human agency. Our analysis confirmed that the frequency and quality of learner-instructor and learner-learner interaction are [aligned with the teaching practices](#) of "cooperation and encouragement of contact" and "giving prompt feedback". Some areas, such as learner-instructor interactions, are already changing with the prevalence of social media tools such as [WhatsApp in online education](#), blurring traditional classroom boundaries. The analysis also revealed the flow of subject content and the use of real-world examples assist learners in constructing knowledge by incorporating a logical progression in the content, aligned with the teaching principle of "encouraging active learning".

Authentic Assessments and Quality Feedback

Assessments that are perceived as practical, engaged with real-world contexts, and personally meaningful directly align with the teaching practice of [respecting diverse ways of learning](#). Tasks perceived as authentic by adult learners capture work relevance and currency and centre on students' life experiences. This will, in turn, [motivate students to engage more in their study](#) and brings synergy that helps them succeed in the workplace through better application of knowledge. Assessment without meaningful feedback will not facilitate a student's learning and continuous improvement. Hence, prompt, personalised and unambiguous feedback and an achievable timing of content delivery and assessment due dates are important to time-poor adult learners. Based on [constructivism theory](#), assessment feedback provides the catalyst for a deeper construction of knowledge based on a student's previous understanding.

Future Opportunities for Good Design Practices

Recent studies suggest that [digital education strategies](#), including subject design, can benefit from data-driven decision-making, [learning analytics](#) and artificial intelligence (AI). How can some of these key design elements benefit from technological advances in the collection of learning analytics? Let's take, firstly, the challenge of providing scalable quality feedback in higher education. Learning

analytics can already be used to [automate personalised messages](#) based on the student's engagement with learning tasks. To delve further, automated [adaptive and personalised pathways](#) can be developed based on each learner's needs (e.g. basic mastery level activities for struggling learners or extension material for the more competent). Personalised learning pathways can also mimic the role of learner-instructor interactions throughout subject material without the student having to wait for instructor availability.

Recent, well-publicised advances in generative AI, most notably the general release of ChatGPT, have had a broad impact across many facets of our society, and higher education was no exception. Given the [varied applications of AI technology](#) in the workplace, including drafting marketing materials, brainstorming ideas, translating text, proofreading and providing personalised customer service, there is a solid impetus for incorporating generative AI into curriculum design. [Australian Universities](#), as well as [academic journals](#), are legitimising the use of generative AI for students and academics if adequately acknowledged. Moving forward, the guiding principle of subject design could be around [differentiating human's unique capabilities](#), such as critical or contextualised thinking, to prepare graduates with the capability to "augment" their work with AI rather than being "replaced" by AI. From the [perspective of assessment design](#), there is a clear incentive to move away from assessing only the artefact of learning (i.e., summative assessments), which AI more easily produces, and considering how we can better assess the holistic learning process. However, such a focus shift would lead to turbulence for student experience and satisfaction.

How will interactions with peers and instructors change for learners in the age of personalisation and generative AI? How can assessment continue to be authentic, practical and personally meaningful in an age where a chatbot can [ace all-important exams](#)? Ultimately, each education provider's specific goals and priorities will dictate their next course of action. Nonetheless, suppose we persist in seeking out novel methods and tactics to enhance the online learning experience. In that case, we can strive towards producing more engaging, efficient and satisfying educational opportunities for learners from diverse backgrounds and skill sets.



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Experienced Senior Lecturer in Marketing with a demonstrated history of working in the higher education industry. Skilled in Marketing Management, Analytical Skills, Advertising, and Integrated Marketing. Strong research professional with a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) focused on Business/Marketing Research; Dean's Commendation Award for Doctoral Thesis Excellence from University of Adelaide.



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Liz has over 25 years' experience in educational technology including 15 years leading strategic and operational processes in eLearning, quality assurance, project management and organisational change management. She has worked internationally in Singapore, France and Canada and in multiple higher education institutions across Australia, and holds postgraduate qualifications in Education, Information Technology, and a Master of Business Administration.



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Bora has over ten years of experience working in academia and industry. Bora obtained her PhD from the University of Adelaide, Australia (where she taught for five years) funded by the ARC Training Centre for Innovative Wine Production, graduated with honours from a MSc in Luxury Goods and Services from the International University of Monaco (Monaco), and has a BS in Bioinformatics from Jacobs University (Germany) which equipped her with strong analytical skills.

Dr. Qesja continues her engagement with the industry as a consultant, with the latest project ('Riverland on the Verge') resulting in a permanent Virtual Reality fixture (for promoting the tourism of the Riverland Wine Region) in both the National Wine Centre (Adelaide) and Riverland Wine Centre.



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With a background in Library Science, Michelle worked in training for library skills, educational design, change management, digital literacy and learning object development at various Australian Universities before moving to AIB as Educational Designer.



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