

Working with student expectations of tutor support in Distance Education: Testing an expectations-led quality assurance model

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Draft version of Stevenson, Keith, Mac Keogh, Kay, Sander, Paul (2006) Working with student expectations of tutor support in distance education: testing an expectations-led quality assurance model. *Open Learning* Vol 21, No 2, July 2006, pp139-152

Abstract

Previous research studies (Stevenson, Sander and Naylor, 1996; Stevenson and Sander, 1998) have shown that students come to distance education courses with variable expectations of the levels of service and support they will receive from their tutors. It has been further suggested (Stevenson et al, 2000), that a specific expectations-led quality assurance process that enables the sharing of these expectations before a course starts could be of mutual benefit to the student and the tutor, as well as generally improving the overall quality of tutor support provided by the distance learning organisation. This process, it is argued, would be appreciated by the students and have beneficial effects on student satisfaction with tutor support and reduce student drop-out and increase course completion rates. Could such a process that asks tutors to collect student expectations before a course begins be instituted effectively into a distance learning organisation and how would students and tutors respond to it?

This paper reports on a project carried out by Oscail (the Irish National Distance Education Centre) aimed at developing and testing how students and tutors valued being involved in just such an ODL expectations-led quality assurance process. In the study reported here, 96 tutors on an Oscail BA distance learning programme were asked, two weeks before their course began, to circulate a student expectations questionnaire to their students (a total of 950 students). Tutors were asked to collect the questionnaires, reflect on the expectations of the students and consider how their tutorial practice and student support might change as a result of the exercise. Tutor and student views on the effectiveness of the exercise were also gathered through questionnaires and focus group meetings. The findings suggested that the majority of students and tutors involved in the study did see the value of the process and that it did help tutors, (especially newly appointed ones), consider and respond to the type of support students hoped to receive. The practice of issuing student expectation questionnaires has now been embedded in Oscail introductory courses.

Expectations and student satisfaction

Some authors argue that the quality of the services provided by Higher Education institutions has largely been undefined and under-researched and that the usefulness of investigating students' expectations and preferences of service delivery has been neglected (McElwee and Redman, 1993, Stevenson and Sander, 1998). Some studies in UK higher education (Hill, 1995; Narasimhan, 1997; Booth, 1997; Harrop and Douglas, 1996; Sander et al 2000) and in the United States (Shank et al, 1993; 1995) suggest that student expectations and preferences of higher education services are valuable data which can be collected relatively easily and usefully taken into account when considering quality of service provided.

In February 2005 the UK Government published results on teaching quality from the largest student survey ever conducted. Students near the end of their studies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were asked their views on the quality of the education they had received. Some 170,000 students responded, comprising

over 60% of the survey sample. The results were shown on the HEFCE website at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/data/> and made comprehensive student views available to the public for the first time. The results are available for each subject taught by each institution. The survey included full and part-time students studying for a wide range of undergraduate courses. However it does not include students studying Initial Teacher Training or Nursing and some related subjects.

Further information on the National Student Survey can be found at www.thestudentsurvey.com. The survey results are subject to various threshold criteria before they can be published: at least 30 respondents, representing at least 50% of students enrolled in a specific subject. For this reason some data, typically where student numbers are small, are not reported on the site. Users are warned that they should not draw conclusions about the quality of provision where results are not shown. Figures for virtually all Higher Education providers are available in excel spreadsheet format. For example, The Open University UK results show that the overall average scores for teaching, assessment and feedback and satisfaction with the academic course are excellent and range from 4.1- 4.5 on a 0 - 5 scale.

Whilst this kind of large-scale exercise is interesting in providing comparisons of student opinion between institutions perhaps and benchmarks for lecturers to be judged against it is not a quality assurance model that we would support. We have argued elsewhere (Stevenson et al 1997) that trying to improve quality of provision by only using end of course feedback exercises are flawed and fail to address a fundamental issue about quality and quality assurance. The flaw in this type of exercise is that students' views are only accessed at the end of their course and the tutor, who can actually influence the quality of that cohort's student experience, is not actively involved in collecting students' views or given the opportunity to respond to them. We believe that quality in distance learning tutor support can be measured and improvements can be implemented by having tutors actively involved in collecting and responding to students' views. This paper reports on how such a model was designed and tested for feasibility in a distance learning organisation.

The model of quality assurance of ODL student-tutor support needs, using student expectations, that is reported here can be found in a paper describing a comparative study of European distance education provision where the authors conclude:

Student expectations of tutor support are difficult to compare across culturally different institutions that employ very different methods of conducting ODL. Nevertheless individual institutions and individual tutors within those institutions can benefit from researching and reflecting upon their students' expectations. We believe that the system we have outlined here for accessing and responding to student expectations is an important and valuable outcome of this study. We also believe that the appropriate use of the questionnaires operating in a professional supportive environment can assist in improving the quality of learning and tutorial support provided by ODL institutions (and experienced by ODL students) throughout Europe. We hope that further work using the system suggested here will demonstrate the value of this approach.

Stevenson et al. (2000)

The model Stevenson et al. refer to above is based on ideas about expectations and satisfaction with service located in the business and marketing literature. In this field expectations are defined as the 'desires or wants of consumers'

(Parsuraman et al, 1988), or 'beliefs about a product or service that serves as a standard against which the product or service performance can be judged' (Prakash, 1984). These expectations of how a service should be delivered can either be of a specific transaction or relate to longer-term general expectations of continued service quality. Generally speaking satisfaction with a service seems to be strongly linked to the meeting or exceeding of customer expectations. Whether or not customer expectations of service are met (or exceeded) appears to be the dominating construct in explaining immediate 'post hoc' customer satisfaction (Olson and Dover, 1979).

The marketing literature suggests that some successful companies explicitly ensure customer satisfaction with service by managing customer expectations to a level that the company knows it can meet. Thus 'they don't promise what they can't deliver and ensure that they do deliver what they promise' (Boulding et al, 1993). This idea of managing expectations can be translated into the educational context of distance learning students' perceptions of tutor support. For example a tutor who recognises the 'expectations-satisfaction balance' might decide to manage initial unrealistic student expectations of say tutor availability, through negotiation, to a more realistic level. Provided the student and tutor are in agreement about the level of support that can realistically be expected, and the tutor then provides that level of support, the student should be satisfied with the quality of the tutorial service provided. The process of establishing student expectations is likely to have benefits in attendance and completion rates as well as providing a procedural model for quality assurance.

The model outlined below (see Figure 1) is derived from the Expectation Led Planned Organisation quality assurance model (ELPO), proposed in an earlier article published in *Open Learning* (Stevenson et al 1997) and modified by the ideas expressed in the outcomes of the Socrates funded CEESOC study (Stevenson et al., 2000). The first step of the model involves the collection of student expectations of the tutor service before a course begins, followed by a negotiated agreement between tutor and students of what constitutes the adequate provision, (and hence the mutually agreed expectation), of that service. The service is then provided and its success is then judged by the students. The end of course student evaluation of tutor support then provides a measure of the quality of the service.

To investigate these ideas further the authors designed a test of the first 4 stages of this quality assurance process for a sample of 96 distance learning Oscail tutors who deliver the first year of Oscail's BA Distance Learning Humanities programme (Oscail 2005). The test was aimed to find out if students would share their expectations with tutors and how students and tutors would respond to the process.

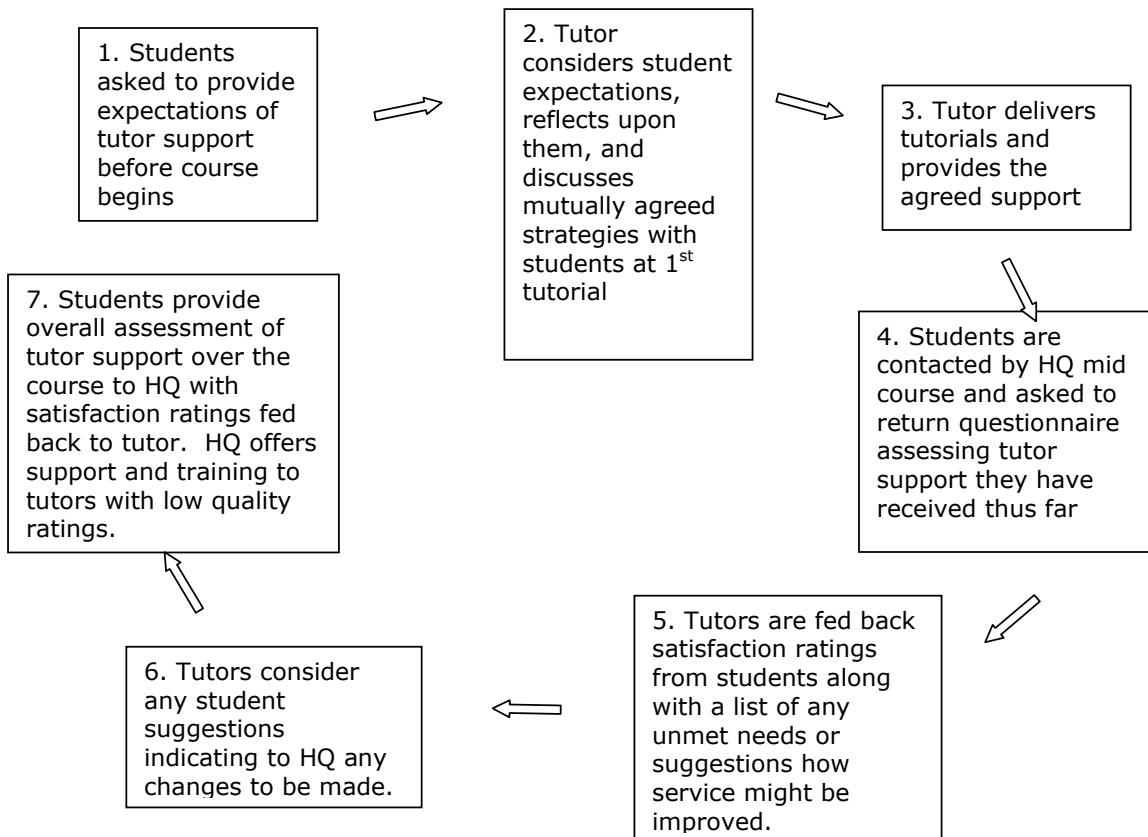
Three research questions were posed:

- | Would students share their expectations and concerns in a questionnaire to be returned to their subject tutors before their course begins?
- | Would these expressed expectations be of assistance to subject tutors?
- | Would students and subject tutors view the process of working with student's expectations as worthwhile?

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In the next section we report on the way the project was conducted by Oscail and the findings that emerged.

Figure 1: The 7 step model of quality assurance using student expectations of tutor support needs



Oscail quality assurance process

The possibility of assessing the effectiveness of an expectations led quality assurance system arose when Oscail cooperated with the CEESOC project group, funded under the Socrates ODL programme (see Stevenson et al 2000). Oscail agreed to assist the project by providing access to its ODL students, and in developing and evaluating the proposed student expectations-led quality process.

Oscail, the Irish National Distance Education Centre was established in 1982 with a brief to extend access to higher education to adults throughout Ireland. Oscail has a unique status in that it is a faculty of Dublin City University, but has a national role in developing and delivering distance education programmes in cooperation with the universities and other higher education institutions. By the year 2005, over 3,000 students were enrolled in a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, mainly in information technology, the humanities, business, and nursing. Oscail has a small core staff of open learning specialists and administrators and draws on staff in the universities to act as subject leaders, members of course teams, course writers, editors and tutors. In this distributed system, quality assurance is a key concern.

The existing system of quality assurance included evaluation of student satisfaction with courses using mid-course questionnaire surveys, end-of-course questionnaires, focus group meetings, as well as monitoring student performance and dropout rates. The mid-term questionnaires were a useful means of

identifying any problems while there was still a chance to address solutions. However, in common with many evaluation questionnaires, it was acknowledged that by mid-course a proportion of students might have already dropped out of the system for a range of reasons. Consequently these students' opinions and unmet needs are lost to the organisation.

Data on students' expectations and concerns can, however, be collected before students start courses and before they drop out. By collecting all students' views before the course begins the students who might drop out have a chance to have their expectations included. As Sander et al. point out 'collecting and considering student expectations and preferences of teaching style can be an effective means of giving students a voice in course delivery and help focus team discussion on teaching, learning and assessment' (Sander et al, 2000: 321).

Student Expectations Questionnaire

Previous questionnaires on student expectations have utilised a list of pre-coded tick box options which students either rank in order of preference or select the most liked/disliked option (Sander et al, 2000). This is clearly an efficient way of collecting quantitative data on large populations of students. However, the purpose here was not to obtain information on students' expectations on an aggregated basis. Previous studies have shown that the majority of students dislike lectures, but expect to be presented with lectures (Sander et al, 2000), but that their likes and dislikes of particular approaches change over time (Stevenson 1998, Fung and Carr, 2000).

While this information is helpful in the abstract, it is not so useful to a tutor who is faced with a disparate group of ODL students often with conflicting expectations conditioned by a range of factors such as age, gender, educational experience, occupational status and so on. Instead, it is suggested that open-ended questions allow for more detailed expression of student views (Sander and Stevenson, 1999, Fung and Carr, 2000) and qualitative information on the students in the individual group is far more helpful than aggregated statistical data gathered from other groups.

A pilot questionnaire using open questions was drawn up and issued to sixty randomly selected students starting Oscail's Introductory Module to the Bachelor of Arts programme. The questionnaires were issued by post and some thirty responses were received (50%). The key open-ended questions related to:

- What form students expected contact with their tutor to take
- How often they expected to be in contact with the tutor
- How they expected the tutor to help them learn on the course
- What they expected tutors to do at tutorials
- How they would like their tutor to teach at tutorials
- How they would not like their tutor to teach at tutorials

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Students were also asked to provide any personal details about themselves which they would like their tutor to know about them. Because of Irish data protection laws, tutors do not have access to personal data on their students. Yet it was considered for the purposes of this project that such information, specifically given with the consent of students, could be passed on to tutors and would assist tutors in understanding and responding to their students' needs and concerns.

The pilot questionnaires were analysed for engagement with the questions and completion. The high completion rates of the questions and the rich detail provided by respondents gave support for the effectiveness of this

method of collecting data on student expectations. Following some minor changes to the wording of questions to ensure clarity, the questionnaire was then issued to all 950 students on the Bachelor of Arts programme starting in 2001. Students on this programme take an average of two modules per year (each module represents 15 ECTS credits and is equivalent to one quarter of a full-time study year). There were 136 tutorial groups and 96 tutors (some tutors may take more than one tutorial group, with an average enrolment of 20 students). The tutors were briefed on the process at the pre-course training sessions prior to the first tutorial. All 96 tutors were issued with a batch of questionnaires and asked by letter to issue them to their students to complete at the beginning of the first tutorial. Tutors were advised to allow up to fifteen minutes for completion of the questionnaires, and then to invite students to discuss their expectations. The completed questionnaires were then sent on to Oscail for processing.

As the focus of this project was on the effectiveness of the expectations-led quality assurance process, it is not proposed to discuss the expectations which students reported in any detail. However, preliminary analysis of responses indicated a wide range of expectations and conflicting likes and dislikes of particular modes of tutorial teaching. Generally, students expected a mix of guidance, instruction, and encouragement from their tutors.

In traditional university undergraduate education in the UK and Ireland, first year students will often be of similar age and academic background selected as they are by similar levels of subject success at GCE A level or Leaving Certificate. In distance education, of course, the students can often not be more dissimilar. Typically in a tutorial group there will be a wide range of student ages and occupations and therefore life experience. For example in this study one group of twenty-four students ranged in age from 26 to 75, and included a nurse, artists, sales people, clerical workers, a driver, homemakers, and retired people. The challenge of meeting the needs of students with such diverse previous educational backgrounds is illustrated in another group which included a 23 year old male factory worker with no school leaving qualifications, a 45 year old homemaker with a Bachelor of Arts and Higher Diploma in Education, and a college lecturer with a PhD in science. Clearly, these students will be markedly different in confidence in their ability and are likely to have very different expectations of tutorial support. In the next sections we report on the evaluation by tutors and students of the effectiveness of the process of eliciting these expectations.

Tutor evaluation of collecting student expectations

While the literature on gathering and considering the nature of student expectations is growing, there has been little research on tutor perspectives on the value of the process to tutoring (Fung and Carr, 2000). The second phase of the research reported here involved issuing a questionnaire to tutors seeking feedback on the exercise, to establish how effective the tutors thought the questionnaire had been as an instrument for eliciting students' expectations and suggestions for ways in which it could be improved. The questionnaire, using open-ended questions, asked tutors

- to explain how they had distributed the questionnaire
- how much time it had taken
- whether they felt it was the time well spent
- how they felt the students responded to filling in the questionnaire
- if any of the expectations expressed by students surprised them
- whether they felt the students' expectations of tutor support were realistic or overly optimistic.

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With regard to their own responses to the expectations expressed, tutors were asked

- if they had changed their approach to teaching
- if finding out their students' expectations had changed their attitudes to the students
- to evaluate the effectiveness of eliciting expectations and to make suggestions for improvements in the process.

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Following analysis of the responses, two focus group meetings were held in two study centres, attended by a total of twenty tutors, members of the Ceesoc team and Oscail staff, at which the outcomes of the questionnaire survey were discussed and other issues probed. It was emphasised to tutors at these meetings that the student expectations were to be treated as indicative of how the student saw the role of the student or the tutor in the forthcoming educational journey, rather than a series of demands which must be met. The action taken by a tutor then was to 'manage' the student's expectations of teaching and tutor support to levels anticipated and supported by Oscail.

Results and Analysis of tutor questionnaire

The tutor questionnaire was issued by post two to three weeks after the first tutorials. Of the forty-four questionnaires returned, one was discarded as unusable, leaving a total response rate of 44.8%. The response from female tutors was higher than that for males (67.4% of respondents were female, compared with 58.7% of females in the tutor population). The open-ended questions were coded by type of response and data were analysed by SPSS. Bearing in mind the possible implications of the response rate, the survey provided some useful feedback on the process.

From Table 1 it can be seen that over one third of respondents (38.1%) expressed surprise at the expectations expressed by their students, whereas 61.9% were not surprised. There are indications that more experienced tutors showed less surprise (70.6% of those teaching with Oscail for over 3 years expressed no surprise at their students' expectations). However this response should not mask the fact that over a third of tutors were surprised at the expectations of their students. Among the expectations which some tutors found surprising were conflicting expectations among the student group, with some students favouring discussion and interaction, whereas others wanted lectures and focus on course content. One tutor suggested that she '*found the low level of expectations of tutor support expressed quite surprising*'.

Table 1. Percentage Tutor Responses to questions about expectations process

(N= 44 Respondents).	Yes %	No %
Surprised at student expectations	38.1	61.9
<input type="checkbox"/> < 3 years tutor experience	52.0	48.0
<input type="checkbox"/> > 3 years tutor experience	29.4	70.6
Expectations seen as realistic	70.7	29.3
Changed tutorial plan	37.2	62.8
Student responses made tutor reflect on tutorial provision	55.8	44.2
Collecting expectations worthwhile?	76.7	23.2

Almost three-quarters of tutor respondents (70.7%) considered that their students' expectations were realistic particularly with regard to frequency of contact with tutors.

Just over one third of respondents (37.2%) reported they had changed their approach in response to the expectations expressed by their students. Such changes included '*making available relevant photocopies, keeping exam questions in mind during tutorials and giving detailed responses in assignments*'. Another tutor noted that '*a student asked that the tutor not allow the more vocal students to dominate the group, I directed my approach accordingly*'. Most of the changes related to increased emphasis on preparation for assignments and examinations, dealing with discussion, and preparing more structured tutorials.

Of those who reported no change, some noted that because of their experience, they were already aware of their students' needs for example, '*I have always designed my tutorials as a remedial aid to the units and the required readings*';

or

'In my approach to teaching all the students' expectations are realised';

Another stated:

'my approach is generally interactive, I try to give them what they want (no, what they appear to need)'.

Some reported that they had not changed approaches where they felt the expectations were inappropriate, as for example where a student did not want to participate in discussion, whereas the tutor felt it was important for them to do so, or where a tutor noted:

'I did not make myself available at all times!'

Whilst over one third of tutors suggested they were surprised by the student expectations, the questionnaire responses nevertheless seemed to have influenced more than just those. Over half of the tutor respondents (55.8%) replied that the student responses had made them think how they might respond more effectively to their students. Some tutors noted that personal information provided by students helped illustrate the diversity of backgrounds and the broad range of needs that their students had. These tutors reported that the questionnaire made them more aware of the need for encouragement, support and feedback.

The extent to which some students indicated how much they expected to rely on their tutor to provide leadership and enlightenment appeared to motivate these tutors who received this information to be aware of the need to repeat key issues and continually check student understanding. Other tutors felt that the expectations questionnaire had reminded them to ensure that students felt supported, and the need, as tutors, to allay the fear of failure among students returning to study often after considerable time.

In response to the question ‘Was finding out students’ expectations of tutorials before the course starts a worthwhile exercise?’ just two respondents replied in the negative. One stated that it was not worthwhile because *‘it only confirmed what I already knew’*, the other doubted the sincerity of the responses *‘If I felt they were being honest and not writing what was expected it might have been’*.

However, over three-quarters of tutor respondents (76.7%) felt it was a worthwhile exercise, while 16.7% reported a mixed response. The reasons advanced for considering the exercise worthwhile included an increase in awareness all round; it allowed tutors to adjust their approaches in line with their students’ needs; it helped focus attention on students’ concerns, and could reassure tutors that they were on the right track in terms of providing tutorial support that the students valued.

The questionnaire contributed to an increase in tutor awareness of students’ fears and anxieties. One tutor’s response indicated *‘It is worthwhile being reminded once again that students really fear being singled out.’*

Another tutor acknowledged *‘The open-ended questions allowed students to articulate concerns about not being able to survive, as well as their need for reassurance and positive feedback. Students can respond more openly in the questionnaire than in open discussion’*.

And another tutor commented
‘it establishes ground rules for people in an anonymous way, particularly useful for quieter students...who are able to express their wishes without having to verbalise’.

Tutors reported that the process helped them in preparation and direction of tutorials. The process was regarded as especially worthwhile for new tutors who are unfamiliar with the type of students on ODL programmes: *‘It was a worthwhile exercise since I and the group are beginners...it helped us all to decide upon objectives and responsibilities.’* Another stated that: *‘I now give more time to thinking through the topics I will address in an attempt to cover the material but in a way that broadens their perspective’*.

Another benefit cited by tutors was that the expectations gathering process emphasises students’ needs rather than the needs of the institution. As one tutor commented *‘it gave a sense that Oscail was interested and communicative’*.

Other tutors noted that *‘it alters the focus from giving the tutorial to helping students cope with course demands’, ‘it helped me deliver a service that is useful, focused on the needs of the student’*.

For more experienced tutors the process seemed to function as a reassurance mechanism that their approach was in tune with their students’ needs *‘After years of lecturing/tutorials I think you can become complacent, it’s good to get a shake up at the beginning of the year’*.

At the same time, some tutors seemed immune to students’ needs and warned against raising students’ expectations. One for example commented *‘I think I’d do my tutorials in my own way pretty regardless of what the students wrote because a) it works and b) it’s the way that the tutorial training manual suggests (MacKeogh, 1998) – discussion, group work, brainstorming, debate. Perhaps the questionnaire might make them think they have an input into how tutorials*

should be run – e.g. that if they wanted a 2-hour lecture they'd get it. They'd be sorely disappointed.'

This raises the question of whether the tutor can simply ignore student views whether they be expectations or desires to be taught in a particular way. Whilst this tutor may have views of how best the material might be presented to the students it is not clear if he/she feels this decision should be discussed with the students allowing the rationale for teaching in a particular way to be explained to students.

Overall then, apart from the very occasional resistant comment, it seems that most tutors were genuinely interested in students' expectations of the tutor role.

Improvements to the process

The questionnaire asked tutors to make suggestions for improvements in the questionnaire and the method of distribution. This was also asked in the course of the focus group meetings. The timing of issue of the questionnaire was the most frequently mentioned area of improvement. While most tutors agreed that issuing the questionnaire at the start of the course was a useful exercise, they also suggested that it would be more appropriate to send the questionnaire to students prior to arriving at the tutorial so that valuable tutorial time would not be wasted (as they regarded it) in filling in the questionnaire. Another problem identified was where students were taking two or more modules, they were required to fill in multiple copies of the questionnaire. Some tutors, whose students had already filled in the questionnaire at earlier tutorials, met resistance to the idea of filling out a second set of expectations. Since 2005, Oscail issues expectations questionnaires to new students via the virtual learning environment (Moodle) and students email their responses directly to their tutor, thus avoiding some of the problems of timing and duplication identified in the earlier study.

Student evaluation

In order to evaluate the expectations-led aspects of this quality assurance process fully, it was considered essential to elicit student views on the process. Oscail issues a mid-course questionnaire to all students, seeking feedback on tutors, tutorials, course content, assignments, and student support and administration. The standard questionnaire was issued by post with additional questions asking students if they had filled in the expectations questionnaire, and how they rated the effectiveness of this method of informing tutors of their expectations. They were also asked to list their expectations of their tutor and tutorials at the beginning of the module, and to state to what extent their expectations of tutor and tutorials had been met.

Students were provided with reply paid envelopes to return questionnaires and 217 students (23%) responded. This response rate is not untypical for these kinds of surveys (Fung and Carr, 2000). The results of the student response are illustrated in Table 2. The table restricts itself to the 140 responses of those students that remembered submitting their expectations of tutor support.

Over two thirds (67.2%) of the 140 students who returned their expectations questionnaire regarded the expectations questionnaire process as an effective means of informing tutors of their expectations, 20% were unsure, and 12.8% regarded the process as ineffective. Some 64.7% of respondents reported that all of their expectations of tutors and tutorials had been met; 32.3% had most of their expectations met, whereas just 3.0% reported that none had been met. Further analysis of the data indicated a significant relationship (Chi Square $p < .001$) between the extent to which expectations had been met and satisfaction ratings of tutors and tutorials. This tends to support the contention that

satisfaction ratings are significantly influenced by the extent to which expectations of the service are met.

Table 2. Students' Responses to effectiveness of gathering and responding to expectations process

(N = 140 Respondents)	Yes	Not sure	No
Was this an effective method of gathering your expectations of tutor's support?	67.2	20.0	12.8
Were your expectations of tutor's support met?	Yes 64.7	Mostly 32.3	No 3.0

Summary and conclusions

The study reported here asked three questions.

- | Will distance-learning students share their expectations and concerns in a questionnaire to be returned to their subject tutors before their course begins?
- | Will these expressed expectations be of assistance to subject tutors?
- | Do students and subject tutors view the process of working with students' expectations as worthwhile?

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The findings suggest that distance-learning students will share their expectations and concerns with their tutor before their course begins. Tutors reported that the expectations and concerns they received surprised a number of them, especially the less experienced tutors. A majority of both tutors and students who responded to the evaluation questionnaire agreed that the expectations-led process was worthwhile and effective.

The purpose of the study was to establish if students and tutors would engage with an expectations led quality improvement programme and whether they felt it was worthwhile. An evaluation of the first four stages of this seven step expectations-led process indicated a positive response, with a majority of tutors and students regarding the process as worthwhile and effective. Generally, as this paper has shown, the initial stages of an expectations-led approach to quality assurance is feasible and can be effective in helping students focus tutor support onto specific student need. As evidence of its effectiveness, Oscail has embedded the practice of issuing expectations questionnaires to its new students to initiate a student-tutor dialogue on expectations of support. Further research is required to establish the efficacy of the full seven-step model in other institutions and settings, especially as traditional face to face tutorial support is replaced or supplemented by online support

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