

Engaging students in the AUSSE

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide outlines a cyclic approach to managing the AUSSE and suggests ideas for engaging students in key aspects of the feedback process.



AUSSE – year round, rather than once a year

Achieving your target response rate is crucial. Achieving the target delivers sufficient data to support reliable analysis and interpretation. This means you have a valid input to performance monitoring, to planning change, and to monitoring the impact of changes you introduce.

Securing your target AUSSE response rate relies on a cyclic approach to survey management. Success in reaching or exceeding your target relies on the steps you take between each administration of the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ). It's important to run a campaign in the weeks before the SEQ is distributed through to the deadline for completing it. This campaign is best regarded as the last stage in the cyclic process.

Designing, managing, monitoring and evaluating an annual AUSSE cycle is done most efficiently by an identified task group involving stakeholders and including representatives of those who use the data. It's important to evaluate the effectiveness of your campaigns so you can focus your efforts in future promotional campaigns on the strategies that are most effective.

Involving students and staff year round

The AUSSE itself can provide a valuable means of broadening student engagement. Most elements of your AUSSE cycle offer opportunities to involve students directly. For example, students could be involved in designing and conducting an evaluation of your AUSSE promotion campaign, perhaps as part of a project submitted for assessment.

Ideally, analysis and interpretation of AUSSE data will involve your students. Focus groups and cognitive interviews can provide qualitative data that assist you to refine your interpretation, focus your change effort, and more thoroughly evaluate the impact of changes you introduce. Activities like these convey to your students that their contribution to the AUSSE dataset directly influences the student experience.

Establishing an understanding of student engagement amongst academic and professional staff is essential. The manner in which you interpret and use AUSSE results can take many forms: workshops for academic and professional staff; professional development programs; referring to AUSSE data when renewing an academic or learning support program; establishing improvement benchmarks for particular AUSSE scale or item scores; marketing to prospective students; monitoring the impact of changes you introduce.

Involving students in AUSSE-related projects can stimulate a nuanced and thoughtful grasp of student engagement, and the literature behind it. This can be one element of your broader institutional approach that generates academic and professional staff participation in the analysis and interpretation of AUSSE data, and its application to practice and system change.

Communicating about AUSSE year round

Research tells us that people are more likely to respond to surveys if they believe that:

- the outcomes will benefit them, or will benefit an organisation they care about
- their voice matters and will be heard
- the survey process is conducted in a consistent, valid and transparent way.

This knowledge suggests students will be encouraged to respond to the AUSSE if you let them know how your university, faculty or department is using the data. Tell them about how AUSSE data has informed changes to things like teaching practice, orientation programs, curriculum design, learning support services or online delivery. Communicate both small and big changes.

What to communicate to students can be revealed by answers to questions like:

- What has changed about the way we do things around here, based on our analysis of AUSSE data?
- What has improved?
- What opportunities have we created?
- What problems have we resolved, in whole or in part?
- What are the benefits of these changes to students?

It can be helpful to frame your communication in ways that are of direct interest to particular groups of students. If changes you have made, or are planning to make, to orientation programs for international students are informed by AUSSE data, you can target that information to international students. If you have introduced a number of informal opportunities for engineering students to discuss with teachers career opportunities or research activities in engineering, you can target that information to engineering students.

Communicating with students about the ways in which AUSSE data has made a difference will convey to them that participation in the AUSSE gives their voice a direct influence, and that benefits accrue for them through participation. ACER does this by directing students who complete the AUSSE to an ACER web-page that provides a national overview of key results and a list of improvements institutions are undertaking in response to AUSSE findings, www.acer.edu.au/ausse/findings.html.

This kind of communication does not have to wait until you commence your promotional campaign just prior to the next administration of the AUSSE. You can communicate outcomes through an annual student engagement report, or incrementally to specific groups of students. Perhaps you made changes to your study abroad programs on the basis of AUSSE data. You can indicate this on printed material or on the home page for those programs. And, of course, you can reinforce the impact of AUSSE data during your promotional campaign.

Plan your AUSSE sample

Planning your sample well in advance of collection is fundamental to success. ACER will inform your university about the minimum numbers of students your sample should contain. This advice will specify minimum numbers of first year students and later year students. The advice is based on a sample size that will generate valid data at the nominated level of analysis. The nominated level of analysis is usually the institutional level.

If your institution, or your faculty, wants to analyse student engagement in a specific student group – for example, international students in first year, or first year mature age students studying in distance mode, or later year students in design disciplines – you may need to over-sample. That is, the minimum sample size may be insufficient to provide valid data on specific groups of interest. Consequently, you will need to increase the sample size for your target groups.

Plan an imaginative AUSSE campaign

Once you have planned your sample size you can determine what promotional strategies will encourage sufficient numbers of students in each group to respond to the AUSSE. You need to design a campaign that will capture the interest of each of your target groups. You may need specific strategies for some groups, in addition to institution-wide strategies.

The design of your institutional or faculty sample could involve students studying statistics at either undergraduate or postgraduate levels, possibly as a team project where the team includes students, academics and professional staff.

Likewise, identifying, developing and rolling out promotional strategies to capture student interest could involve students studying psychology, marketing, advertising or public relations.

A campaign designed to encourage students to respond to the AUSSE would usually start about four weeks prior to distribution of the SEQ. Be open to imaginative ideas and experimentation when you design your campaign. There is a welter of possibilities that includes things like:

- posters
- chalking walkways
- articles or advertisements in student newspapers
- emails from senior university managers that indicate how AUSSE data is used to benefit students
- coffee shop postcards
- promotion through student associations linked to target groups (for example, international student associations)
- website pages, video clips or document downloads

- FAQ pages on university, faculty or student union websites
- a three minute computer presentation that is shown at every first year lecture in the week prior to the distribution of the SEQ.

Students studying in multimedia, IT, art, writing or design disciplines could participate in the design and development of some of these strategies. If you are targeting first year students in health sciences, for example, it may be especially helpful to involve students in this cohort – word of mouth advertising is a powerful campaign tool.

It's important to be aware that your campaign continues until the deadline for completion of the SEQ. For example, an article or advertisement in a student newspaper is something you can schedule before the SEQ is distributed, and/or at some time between the SEQ's distribution and the deadline date for completion.

After the SEQ is distributed – either online or by mail – plan to follow up with reminders. Emails and letters are one way of doing this, and are most effective if they are individually addressed.

Offering incentives to complete the SEQ

You can offer incentives for students to complete the SEQ. If your university intends to offer an incentive, let ACER know by the specified date (usually early June) so the incentive can be brought to students' attention via the AUSSE promotional materials for your institution.

Student organisations can advise about what incentives may be attractive. Incentives can take many forms. You can offer a choice of two or three incentives if you think different prompts are needed for different student groups. Vouchers can be a flexible incentive. A credit amount at your campus bookstore could link completing the SEQ with student engagement itself.

In general, it is important to ensure that response incentives are appropriately targeted to individual student cohorts, and that they are likely to boost students' intrinsic motivation to respond rather than to introduce a new extrinsic prompt that is unrelated to engaging students in effective education.

About this guide

This AUSSE Enhancement Guide forms part of the suite of resources developed by ACER to assist institutions to enhance their students' engagement in effective educational practices. Visit www.acer.edu.au/ausse for further information about the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement.