

# RESEARCH BRIEFING

Australasian Survey of Student Engagement

Volume 12 **September 2011**

## Highlights

- 75 per cent of students who rate their relationships with teaching staff as poor are considering quitting their courses, in contrast to just 19 per cent of students who rate their relationship with teaching staff as excellent;
- Sessional teaching staff are more likely to lead activities which allow students to actively engage in learning, and are more likely to be approached by students for advice, than senior academic teaching staff;
- Just 8 per cent of Australian university teaching staff report that the majority of their students discuss class materials with them, in contrast to 29 per cent of teaching staff in the USA;
- 66 per cent of first-year students and 60 per cent of later-year students report that their coursework emphasises memorisation either quite a bit or very much while just 20 per cent of professors and 32 per cent of sessional/casual staff at the same institutions report emphasising this lower order thinking skill; and
- 53 per cent of Australian teaching staff feel that student satisfaction is very important, while just 26 per cent of staff feel that student retention is very important.

## *Uniting teachers and learners: Critical insights into the importance of staff-student interactions in Australian university education*

### The magic ingredient in quality higher education

One of the fundamental purposes of higher education institutions is to provide students with an enriching educational experience which enables them to achieve both personal and intellectual growth and to equip them for their future professional lives. As the Federal Government moves to increase regulation of the higher education sector in Australia, debates about quality standards, performance targets and monitoring regimes are intensifying. Largely missing from this debate, however, is an examination of those aspects which optimise the quality of learning. And the perspectives of students are almost entirely absent.

This briefing focuses on perhaps the most fundamental aspect of student learning—the role of teaching staff. It does so by reporting insights from both teaching staff themselves and the students whom they teach. If the scholarship of teaching requires bridges to be built between teachers and learners (Boyer, 1990), this briefing

# *Uniting teachers and learners*

examines the structural integrity of those bridges in contemporary university education in Australia. In doing so it focuses attention on perhaps the most obvious but most woefully neglected aspect of quality in higher education – the role which teaching staff play in inspiring, challenging and engaging students.

## *The significance of student-staff interactions*

This briefing highlights the critical importance of contact between students and staff in ensuring quality provision of university education. As the data presented below makes clear, students who feel supported by teaching staff, and who find them available, helpful and sympathetic, are more engaged with their higher education studies than those who do not. They are less likely to consider quitting their courses, are more likely than their peers to be satisfied with their studies overall and are more likely to feel that they have successfully developed the competencies they will need for their future careers. At the same time, teaching staff who have regular contact with students are more attuned to the contemporary student experience, are better able to understand the perspectives of students on a whole host of educational measures and are better able to meet their learning needs. Together these conclusions reinforce the vital importance of sustained, significant and meaningful contact between staff and students if the quality of learning and teaching in Australian higher education is to be optimised.

*Getting to know students seems to have a strong impact on engagement in many cases. (Teaching staff member)*

While this conclusion may seem obvious, there is an urgent need to reinforce this basic point given lurking pressures in Australian higher education. Student numbers have expanded rapidly (DEEWR, various years), and decreases in public expenditure have pushed up student/staff ratios (KPMG, 2009; Lyons, 2010; Woodhouse & Stokes, 2010; Heagney, 2009). This has been coupled with increasing casualisation of the teaching workforce (Coates & Goedebuure, 2010). An increasing burden of teaching is shouldered by temporary staff with no job security and limited teacher

training (Edwards, Bexley & Richardson, 2011) who are likely to have sporadic access to office space and frequently be unavailable outside teaching hours. Taken together, the odds are stacked against students enjoying significant engagement with their academic teachers.

As the data outlined below makes clear, opportunities for students and staff at Australian universities to engage with each other are severely limited. Dominant pedagogical methods make even the most basic forms of interaction – the ability of students to ask questions or to discuss class materials with teaching staff – close to impossible, with the prevalence of lectures particularly marked in the fields of business and engineering. The more senior academic position a teaching staff member is in, the less likely they are to be approached by students. At the same time, senior academic teaching staff are much less likely to understand students' needs and experiences than their junior colleagues, and greatly exaggerate the amount of higher order thinking which students engage in.

Students particularly vulnerable to a lack of interaction with teaching staff at university are precisely those whose participation in higher education has been consistently highlighted – those from a background in which attending university is by no means taken for granted. This includes students from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly Indigenous students and students from rural and regional areas. These students are likely to require more support than those from backgrounds where university study is a given. As the diversity among university students grows it is inevitable that the demands on teaching staff will increase rather than lessen. Yet there are signs that as more vulnerable students are accepted into university the institutional capacity to look after individual learning needs is decreasing. The rapid growth in online and distance models of delivery (Bramble & Panda, 2008) exacerbates this trend and underscores the urgent need for a reconceptualisation of the role which teaching staff play in the learning of their students.

## *AUSSE and SSES data*

The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) is the largest cross-institutional survey of university students ever conducted in Australia. In 2009, 25,795 responses were collected from undergraduate students at 30 Australian universities, representing a total

population of 222,547. The AUSSE measures student engagement through administration of the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) to a representative sample of first- and later-year bachelor degree students at each institution. The SEQ has formative links to the USA National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), enabling benchmarking between these collections.

Student engagement is an idea specifically focused on students in higher education and their interactions with their institution. Once considered behaviourally in terms of ‘time on task’ contemporary perspectives now embrace aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners’ lives beyond university, and institutional support. Students lie at the heart of conversations about student engagement, conversations that focus squarely on enhancing individual learning and development.

The Staff Survey of Student Engagement (SSES) parallels the AUSSE. In 2009, 2,736 teaching staff from nine Australian universities, representing a population of 9,872, responded to the SSES. While the AUSSE measures student engagement, the SSES asks teaching staff to report on their perceptions of student engagement. The SSES measures academics’ expectations for student engagement in educational practices which have been linked empirically with high quality learning and development. The SSES builds directly on the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE), a survey run since 2004 by Indiana University’s Center for Postsecondary Research.

Comparing AUSSE and SSES results for those nine institutions which took part in both collections generates powerful insights that universities can use to evaluate practices and investigate whether they are doing all they can to promote student learning and engagement. In 2009, 6,702 student responses were received from students at these nine universities, reflecting 55,292 first- and third-year learners in the AUSSE population. Overall, 2,736 responses were received from teaching staff at the same institutions, reflecting 9,872 people in the SSES population.

Item and composite (scale) results from AUSSE and SSES scales are reported on a metric ranging from 0 to 100. This enables comparisons between the perceptions of staff and students on the same facets of engagement. In general, differences of five score points or more are of particular significance, highlighting a potentially meaningful educational effect.

## Investigating staff/student relations

An extensive literature demonstrates the profound role which interactions with teaching staff play in student engagement in higher education. In a wide-ranging study, Young and Sax (2009) find that the impact of

interactions with teaching staff enhances the learning and development of all students, regardless of their social background or demographic profile. One of the major outcomes for students of their interaction with teaching staff is an increase in their sense of belonging at the institution. As a number of scholars have identified, those students who interact with teaching staff are more likely to feel that their universities are supportive, both academically and socially, than those who do not (Johnson et al., 2007; Hoffman et al., 2003). Students who feel supported are most likely to persist with their studies (Tinto, 1998, 1997, 1993) and to achieve academic success (Meuwisse et al., 2010). At the same time, staff and student interactions increase the likelihood that students are actively participating in learning, which is equally important in achieving good educational outcomes (Michel, 2009; Braxton, 2008; McCarthy and Anderson, 2000).

For staff, regular interactions with students are also very important. Staff who frequently interact with students are likely to be those who are most aware of students’ perceptions and concerns. As Mancuso et al. (2010) suggest, when teaching staff are unaware of the ways in which students experience higher education the potential for misunderstanding is great. And when students feel misunderstood by teaching staff, their engagement is likely to be less than among those who perceive that staff have a good grasp of their needs and interests. Overall, a mismatch between the perceptions of teaching staff and students is likely to lead to widespread disappointment among students. As Mancuso et al. (2010: 4) suggest:

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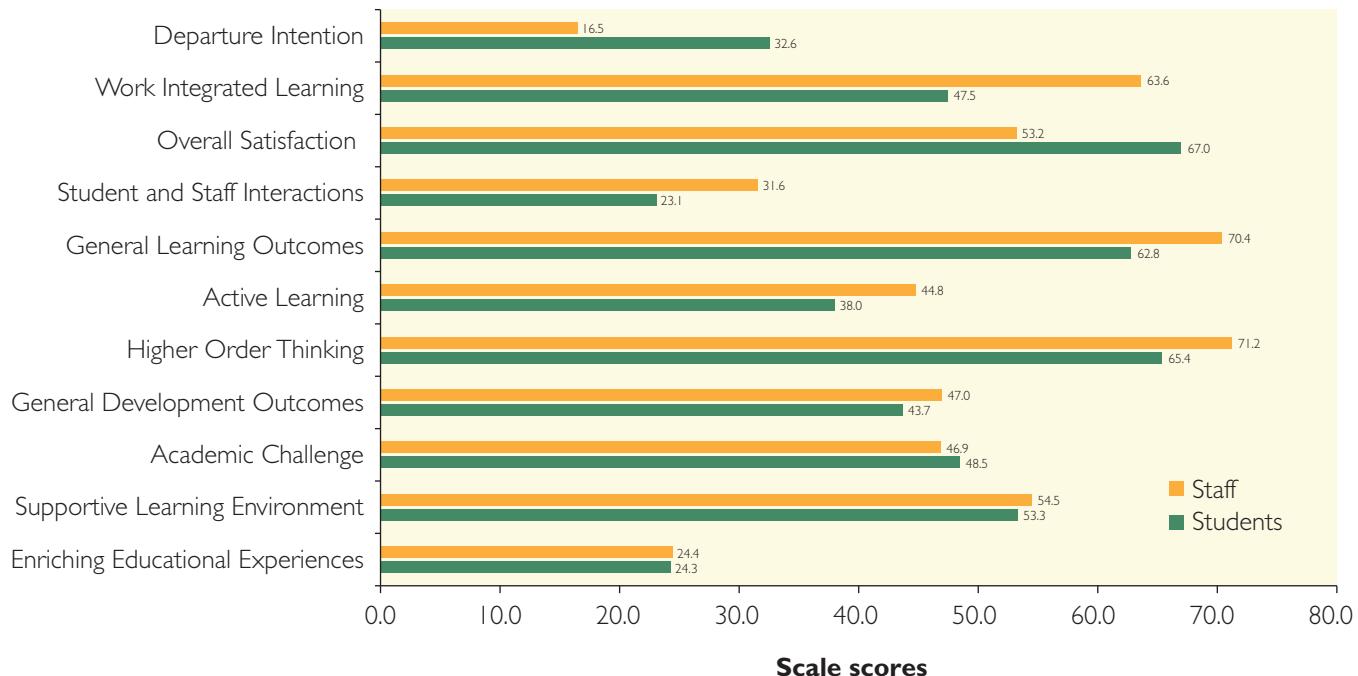
*“such disappointment – whether rational or irrational, avoidable or inherent – can be a powerful deterrent to engagement in the university experience and misunderstandings can signal a disconnect in the pedagogical process that hampers its effectiveness”.*

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Building empirical insights into the ways in which students and staff engage in the joint pursuit of higher education plays a fundamental role in improving learning. To that end, this briefing explores contrasts in the activities and perceptions of staff at different levels of appointment, from casual tutors to professors, and focuses attention on the ways in which students and staff perceive critical aspects of higher education. Overall, it helps to identify where there are notable differences in what students actually do, and what teaching staff perceive them to be doing, in order to suggest ways of improving engagement and outcomes for both students and staff.

# *Uniting teachers and learners*

## Engagement and outcomes



**Figure 1:** Staff and student perceptions of engagement and outcomes (AUSSE and SSES)

## Perceptions of engagement and outcomes

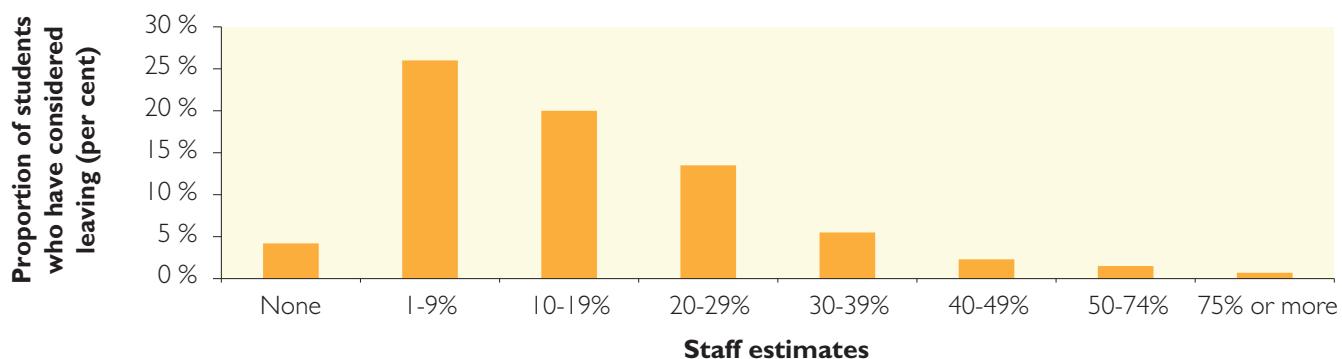
Students see many aspects of their university experience and outcomes in the same way that staff predict, but there are marked differences in several critical areas, as Figure 1 illustrates. Students' scale scores are significantly lower than the scale scores of staff in five key areas:

- Work Integrated Learning (16.1 points lower);
- Students and Staff Interactions (8.5 points lower);
- General Learning Outcomes (7.6 points lower);

- Active Learning (6.8 points); and
- Higher Order Thinking (5.8 points lower).

Conversely, students report greater overall departure intentions than expected by teaching staff (16.1 points higher), and are also more satisfied (13.8 points higher).

Most crucially of all, while very significant proportions of students report that they have considered quitting their courses, staff predictions fall well below this. As Figure 2 makes clear, 26.0 per cent of staff who provide a response believe that in the current year between one and nine per cent of students have considered leaving



**Figure 2:** Staff estimations of the proportion of students who have considered leaving their institution

their institution before graduation, with a further 20.0 per cent of staff predicting that this is the case for between 10 and 19 per cent of students. Among students at the same nine institutions, the actual figures are much more worrying: 28.7 per cent of first-year students and 27.6 per cent of later-year students report having considered leaving their institution in the current year. This suggests a serious lack of understanding among staff of the students they teach, a misunderstanding that doubtless inhibits attempts to improve student retention.

*Casual academics are often the ones at the cutting edge in terms of inclusive and engaged teaching practices. A lack of career pathways means we regularly lose those with vital institutional knowledge and ‘best practice’.*

*(Teaching staff member)*

When staff are asked to indicate the importance they place on retention, the results are startling. Overall, just 26.3 per cent of staff report that retaining students is ‘very important’. This is in contrast to 52.9 per cent – more than double – who feel that satisfying students is ‘very important’. When these figures are broken down by the level of appointment of staff, it is clear that senior lecturers are least likely to value the retention of students, while sessional or casual staff are the most likely to understand the importance of retention. There is much more uniform agreement between staff at different levels in terms of the importance of student satisfaction.

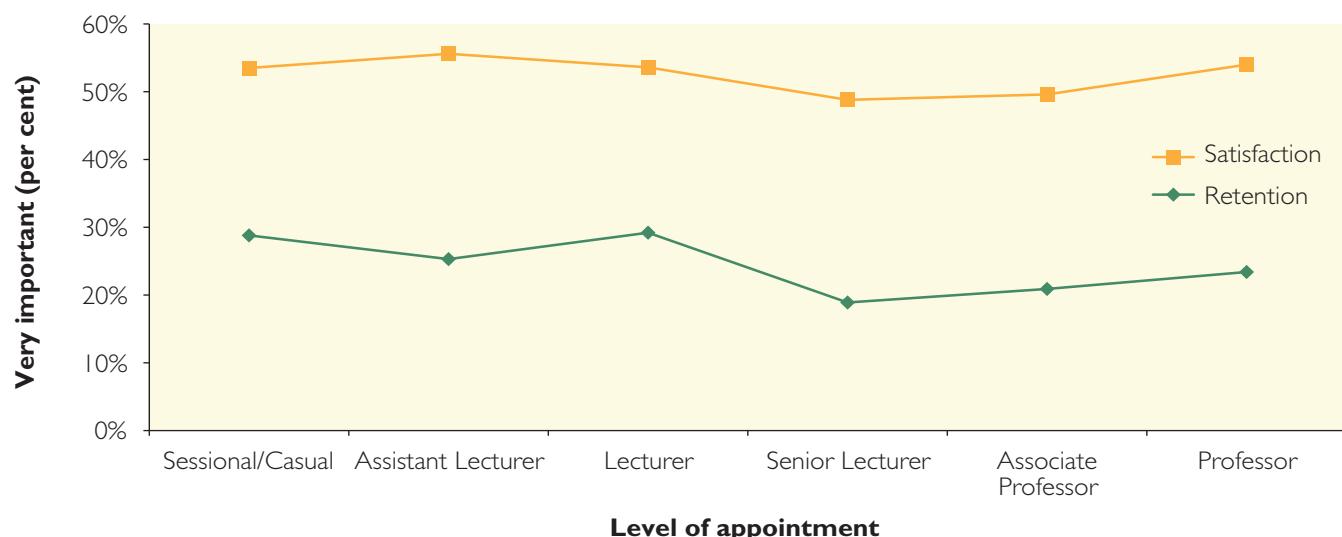
These findings are very significant. It is clear that in a sector in which quality of teaching surveys are considered the most appropriate – and usually only – measure of teaching effectiveness, teaching staff place a great deal of emphasis on their ability to satisfy students, but have perhaps lost sight of the need to

retain them. National figures show that 17.1 per cent of domestic first-year students and 9.9 per cent of international first-year students do not move on to their second year (DEEWR, 2010). The loss of students to universities before completing their studies represents not only a great waste of talent but is also extremely costly. If one in three students is reporting that they are considering this option, the impact on institutions and the community at large is profound.

At the same time, this loss has significant equity implications. Results from the 2009 AUSSE show that 36.7 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander students at Australian universities have considered quitting their course, significantly more than the 29.7 per cent of non-Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander students. This suggests that those students most likely to leave university before their studies are complete may be from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. If the expansion of participation in Australian higher education is to incorporate more students from traditionally underrepresented groups, it is not enough to simply focus on their recruitment. Significant effort is required to ensure that they do not drop out of their courses. Given the responses of teaching staff reported here it is clear that effort is required to broaden institutional policy focus to incorporate both satisfaction and retention.

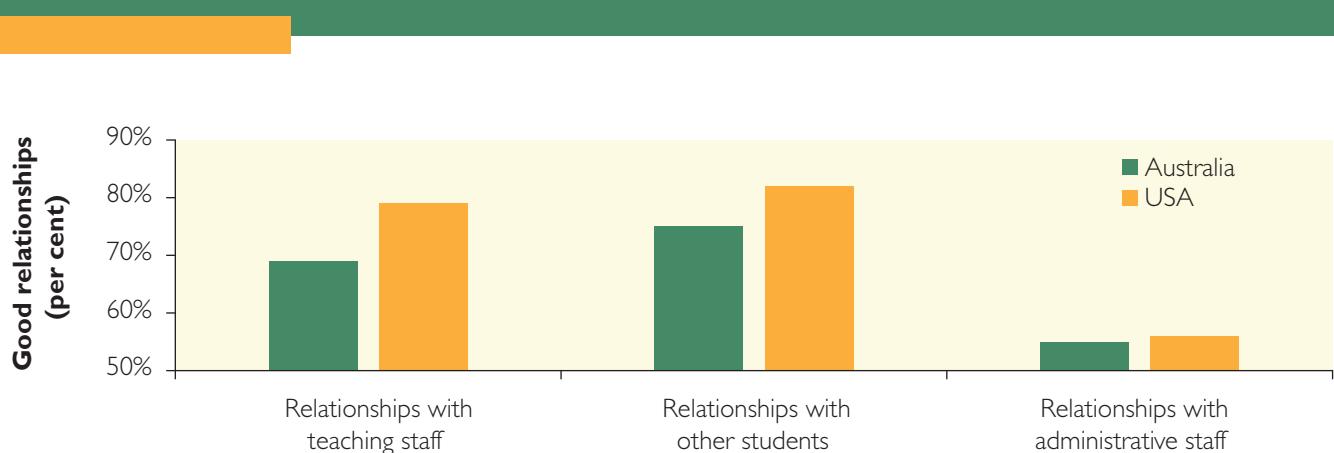
## Quality of relationships

When students perceive their learning environment as supportive they are likely to be more engaged with learning. While this in itself is not a revolutionary idea, data from the AUSSE indicates that students are most likely to feel supported if they have good relationships with teaching staff. And Australian students are much less satisfied with their relationships with teaching staff than their peers in the USA.



**Figure 3:** Retention and satisfaction

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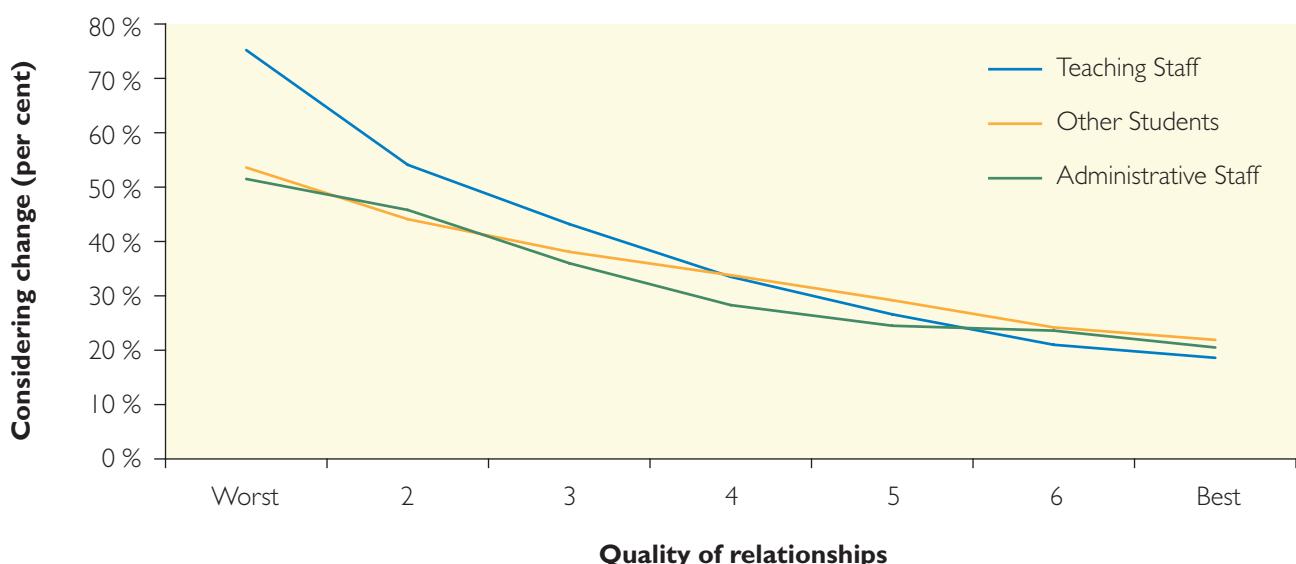


**Figure 4: Quality of relationships**

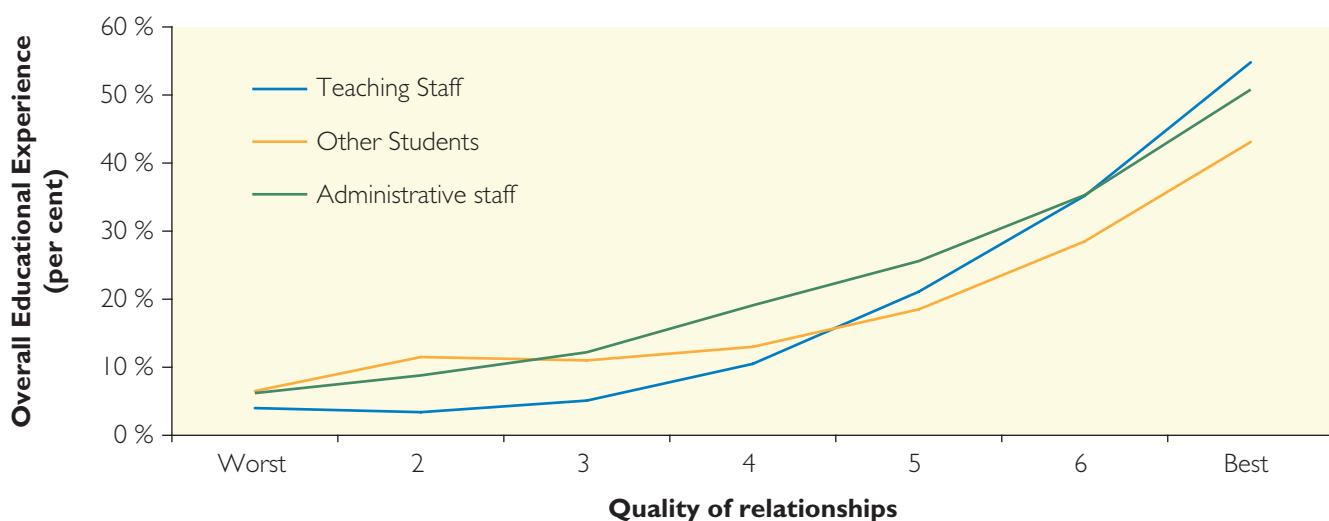
Australian students in the AUSSE and the USA Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) were asked to rate their relationships with teaching staff, other students and administrative staff on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 representing unsupportive relationships and 7 representing highly supportive relationships. Figure 4 shows the proportion of Australian students who rated their relationships a 5 or above and compares them with responses from students in the USA. While 78 per cent of American students report they have good relationships with teaching staff, this is the case for just 69 per cent of Australian students. A similar pattern can be seen for the quality of relationships with other students, with 82 per cent of American students rating these as good in contrast to 75 per cent of Australian students. Interestingly, almost identical proportions of students in America and Australia report having good relationships with administrative staff.

This finding is particularly worrying because the quality of relationships with teaching staff has a very significant impact on the ways in which students approach their education. In particular, those students who feel that their relationships with teaching staff are poor are much more likely to consider quitting their course, and the impact, as Figure 5 indicates, is much stronger than the quality of their relationships with other students or administrative staff. 75.2 per cent of students who rate the quality of their relationships with teaching staff as very poor report considering changing their course, in contrast to just 18.6 per cent of students who rate their relationships with staff as excellent, a difference of 56.6 per cent.

The importance of the relationships of students with teaching staff is not limited to the likelihood that students will leave their course, but also extends to student satisfaction and learning outcomes.



**Figure 5: Relationships and departure intention scores (Students)**



**Figure 6:** Relationships and overall satisfaction (AUSSE)

As Figure 6 indicates, less than 20 per cent of students rate their overall educational experience as excellent if they perceive the quality of their relationships with teaching staff to be lower than 5 on a scale of 1 to 7. In contrast, 54.8 per cent of those who rate their relationships with teaching staff as excellent, also rate their overall educational experience as excellent.

Similarly, less than 20 per cent of students ‘very much’ agree that they are acquiring a broad general education if they perceive the quality of relationships with teaching staff to be below 5 on a rating of 1 to 7. In contrast, 45.0 per cent of students who rate their relationships with teaching staff as excellent, ‘very much’ agree that they are acquiring a broad general education.

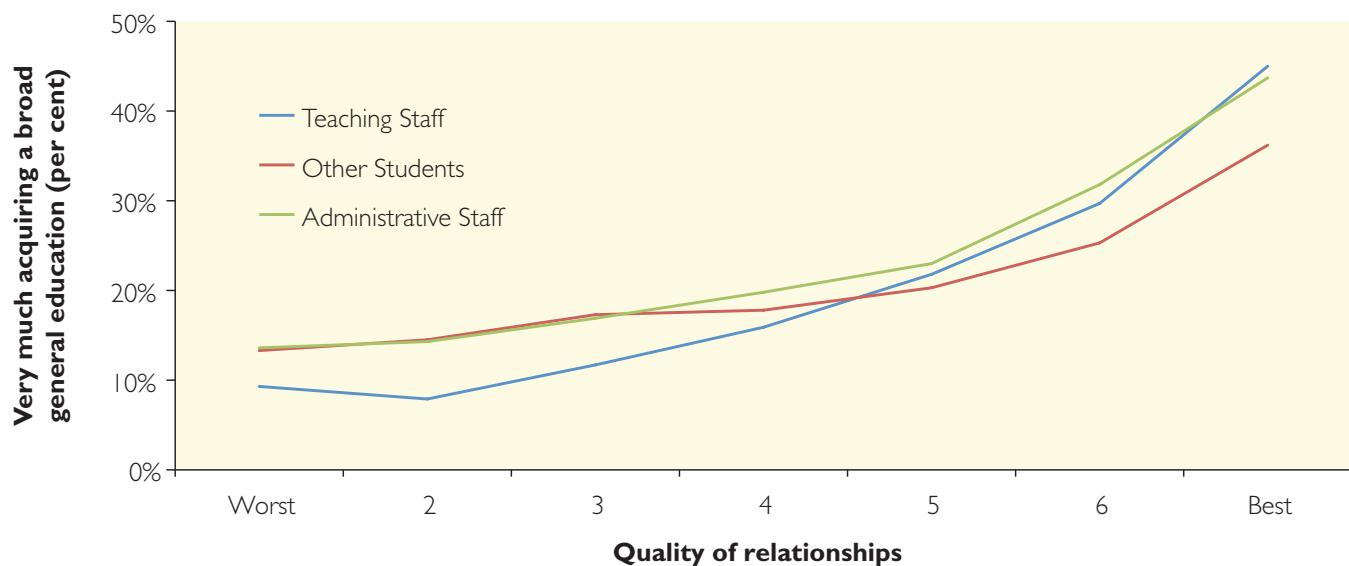
It is also interesting to note that in all of these measures, the quality of relationships which students have with administrative staff has an equal or even greater impact than the quality of students’ relationships with peers on their perceptions of their educational experience. This suggests that it is not only relationships with teaching

staff, but relationships with all staff at a university which have a profound impact on students’ engagement with their education.

### Students’ contact with teachers

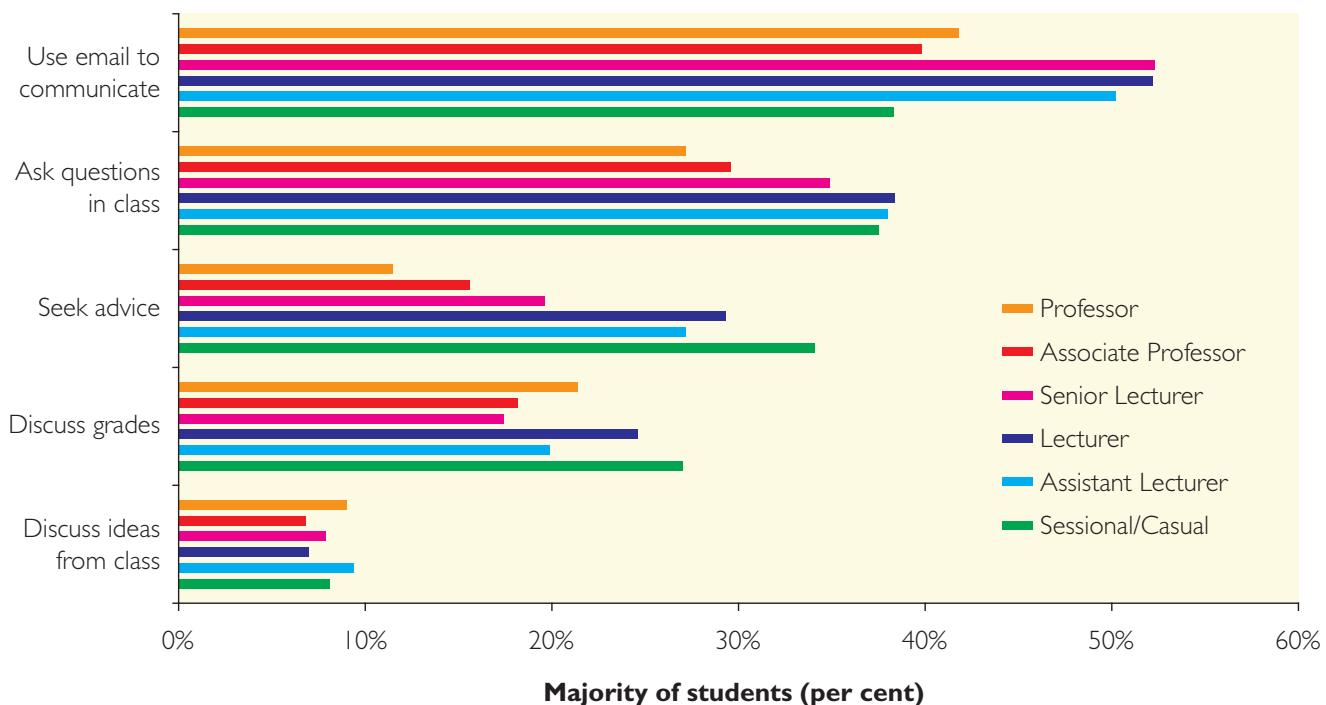
It is very difficult to build a good relationship with another person without sustained and substantial contact. The quality of relationships between teaching staff and students at Australian universities is therefore closely connected to the amount of contact which each group has with the other. Worryingly, staff at Australian universities report that their students have very limited contact with them.

Figure 8 indicates the proportion of staff at each level of appointment who report that more than 60 per cent of their students have engaged in a particular form of contact in the current academic year. Very small proportions of all staff report that the majority of their students discuss ideas from class with them (7.8 per



**Figure 7:** Relationships and general learning outcomes (students)

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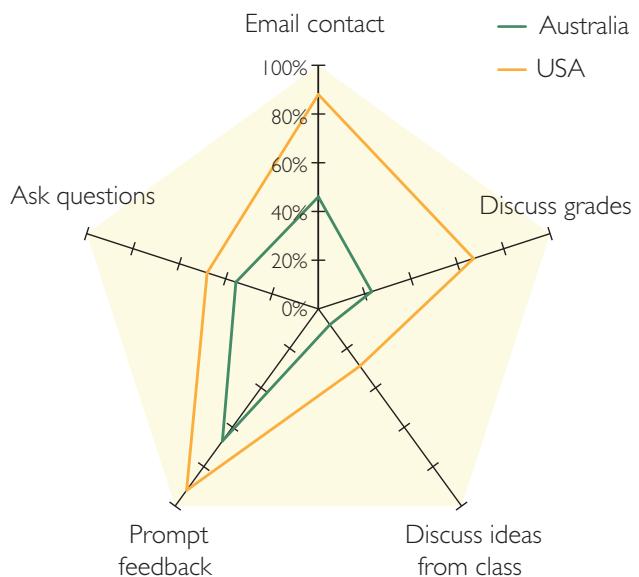


**Figure 8:** Staff perceptions of interactions with students

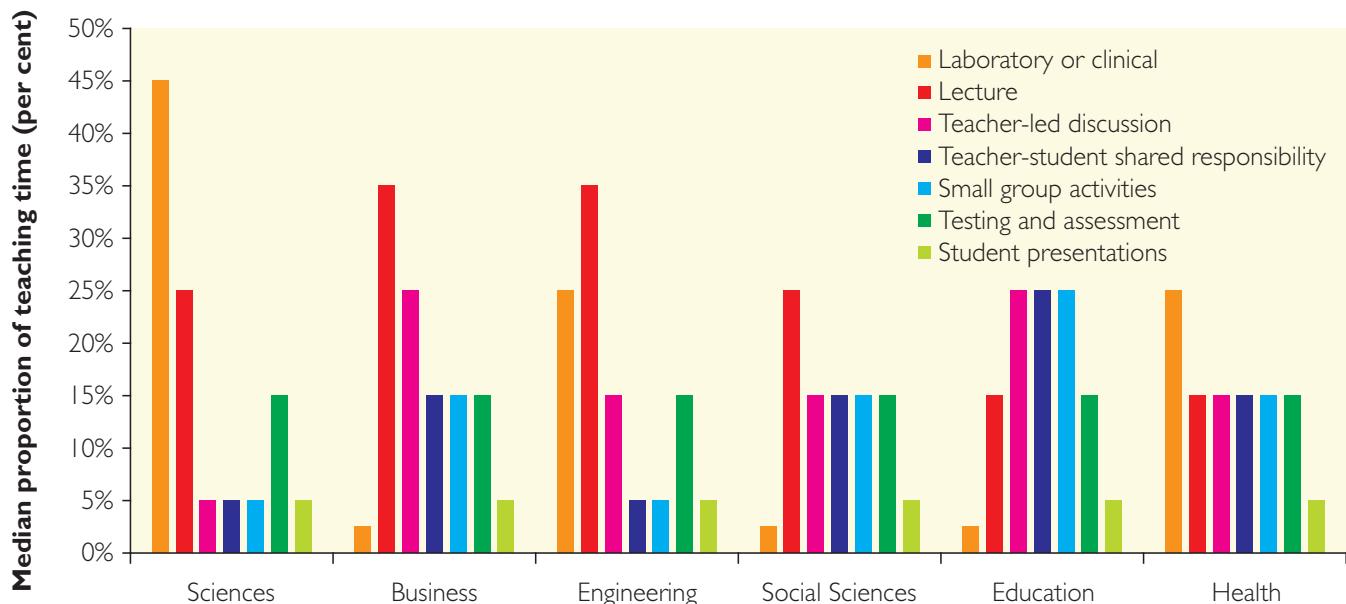
cent), discuss grades with them (23.3 per cent) or seek advice from them (27.4 per cent) and only 36.2 per cent of staff members report that the majority of their students ask questions in class. The most common form of interaction with students reported by staff members is email, with 45.6 per cent of staff reporting that the majority of their students are in email contact with them. These results indicate that the level of student-staff interaction in the nine universities from which this data is collected is very limited, and this is likely to be reflective of the situation in many other institutions.

These patterns have significant implications for the ability of staff to understand their students and, as Figure 8 also indicates, the more senior a teaching staff member, the less likely students are to interact with them. Just 11.5 per cent of staff at professorial level report that the majority of their students have asked them for advice in the academic year, in contrast to 34.1 per cent of sessional and casual staff. Similarly just 27.2 per cent of staff at professorial level report that the majority of their students have asked questions in class, in comparison with 37.5 per cent of sessional or casual staff. Given that senior academics are those most likely to be in charge of decision-making on issues of critical importance to students, this is a very worrying finding.

Significant contrasts are clear when reports of teaching staff in Australia are compared with those from teaching staff in the USA. As Figure 9 indicates, much larger proportions of teaching staff in America than in Australia report that their students interact with them in all of the ways mentioned above. 29.0 per cent of teaching staff in the USA, for example, report that the majority of their students discuss ideas from classes



**Figure 9:** Student and staff interactions – Australia and the USA



**Figure 10:** Pedagogical activities by field of education

with them, while this is the case for just 7.8 per cent of teaching staff in Australia. Similarly, 48.0 per cent of staff in America report that the majority of their students ask questions in class in contrast to 36.1 per cent of Australian staff.

It is thus unsurprising that Australian students rate their relationships with teaching staff at much lower levels than their counterparts in the USA. Given the link between staff contact and critical factors such as retention, satisfaction and the achievement of general learning outcomes, these findings indicate that students in Australia are being short-changed by their universities.

*Engaging with the students in the more formal classroom environment is difficult. This then impacts on the student's learning when they feel a greater distance from the lecturer. Smaller classes provide a way of the teaching staff being able to engage with the students to facilitate their learning. (Teaching staff member)*

## Teaching activities

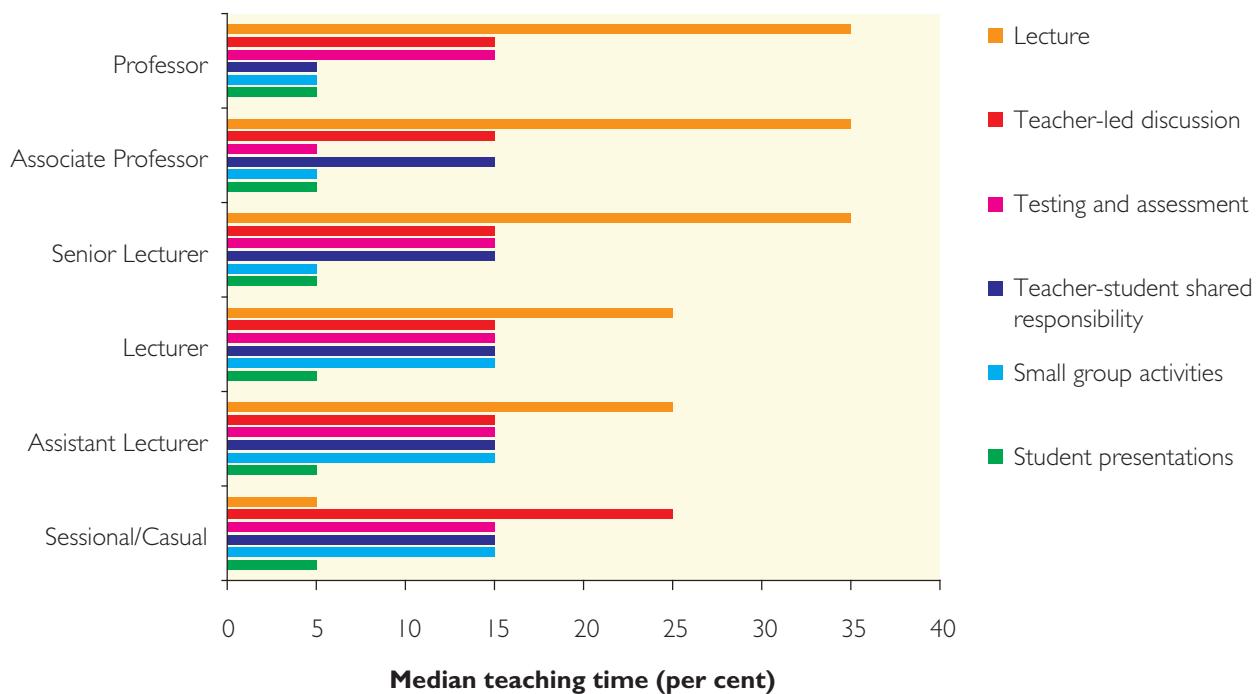
The amount of contact which students and teaching staff are able to have is clearly influenced by the dominant teaching method used in universities. In the SSES, teaching staff were asked to indicate the amount of their teaching time they spent on different pedagogical activities. As Figure 10 spotlights, lecturing is the dominant method of teaching in Australian universities, comprising a median of 25 per cent of all teaching activities, and this is particularly the case in fields of education such as Engineering and Business where lectures are far more common than all other teaching activities and comprise 35 per cent overall.

In contrast, activities where students have the opportunity to interact with teaching staff and to actively engage in learning, such as small group activities and teacher-led discussions are much less common in most fields of education, with the exception of education and health. Small group activities, for example, comprise just five per cent of teaching activities in engineering in contrast to 25 per cent of teaching activities in education.

While the dominant pedagogical method varies according to the field of education in which a staff member teaches, it also varies by their level of appointment. As Figure 11 indicates, the more senior a teaching staff member, the more likely their teaching activities are to be dominated by lecturing and the less likely they are to use more interactive pedagogical methods. Staff with more senior appointments spend more than one-third of their teaching time giving lectures and very little using small group activities or student presentations. In contrast, much greater proportions of the teaching time of staff in junior roles is spent on small group activities and student presentations. Overall, sessional and casual staff are more likely than any other staff to use activities such as teacher led discussions which enable students to communicate both with each other as well as with staff, and to actively engage in learning. It is interesting to note that student presentations are the least used method of teaching.

While perhaps unsurprising, the implications of these findings are significant. It is clear that students' encounters with senior teaching staff are mainly limited to lectures, situations in which their opportunity to have any, far less meaningful, interaction is extremely limited. Lectures render students into passive observers rather than active learners. They are teaching activities in which the opportunity for students to ask questions,

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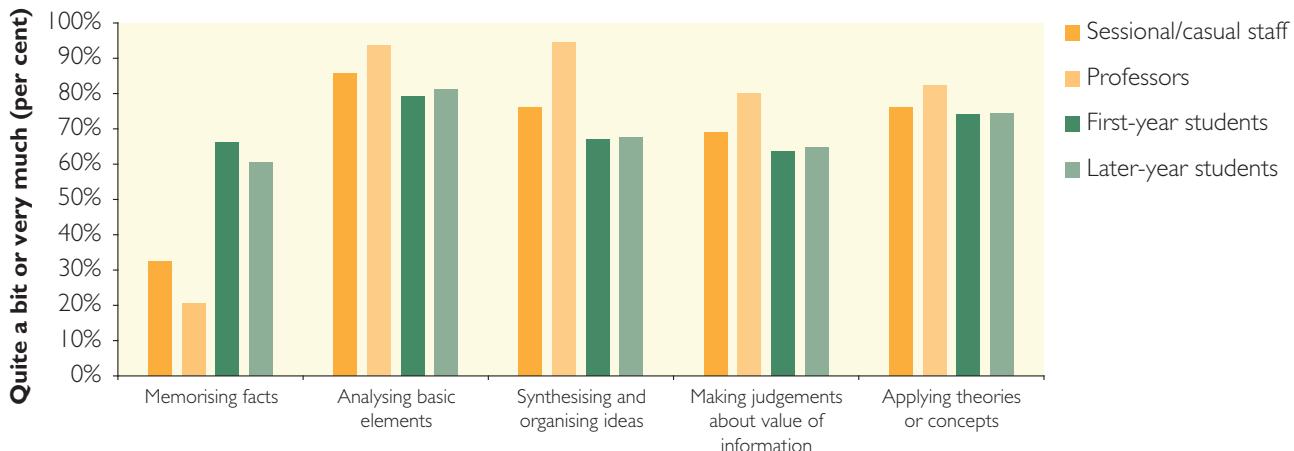


**Figure 11:** Teaching activities by level of appointment

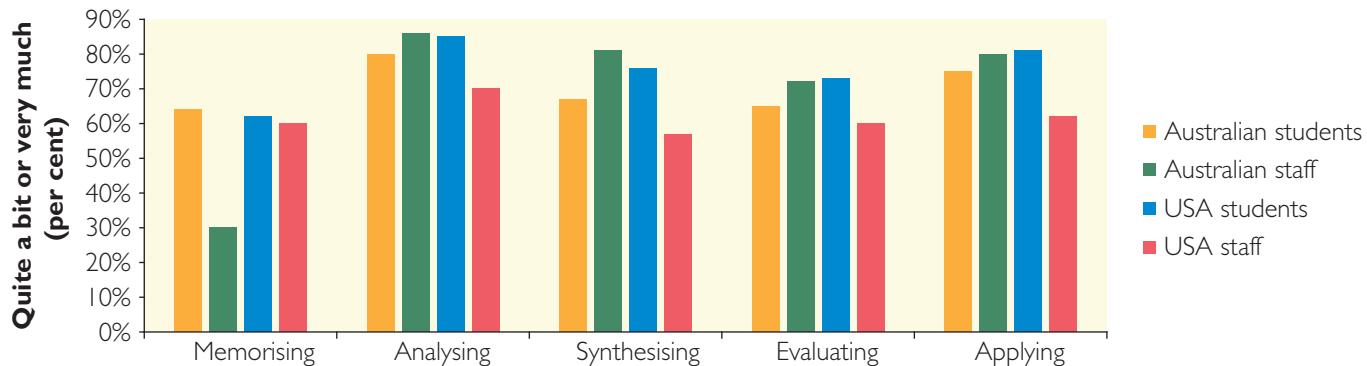
engage in discussion, think critically or engage in higher order thinking are minimal unless the lecturer is particularly skilled. They may be an efficient way of disseminating information to large groups of students but as a means of stimulating interest and engaging students in learning they are woefully inadequate.

In contrast, small group activities and group discussions provide ample opportunities for students to participate in an active form of learning. As the data indicates, however, these methods of teaching are practised primarily by the most junior academic

staff, many of who have casual appointments and are likely to be research trainees. As recent research has found (Edwards, Bexley and Richardson, 2011) very few research trainees have any teacher training and, subsequently, their ability to optimise the learning potential of such classes is stymied. Moreover, if casual staff are those with whom students are most likely to build relationships, this reflects very poorly on universities, many of whom neither provide casual staff with adequate office facilities, nor pay them to consult with students outside of their teaching hours.



**Figure 12:** Staff and student perceptions of higher order thinking (AUSSE and SSSE)



**Figure 13:** Staff and student perceptions of higher order learning, Australia and USA

Ultimately, current university practice in Australia is ensuring that students can only build sustained and significant relationships with the most junior and casualised teaching staff. Given the findings discussed above, the impact on student retention, satisfaction, learning and engagement is highly negative.

## Higher order thinking

Teaching staff in the SSES were asked to estimate how much their teaching had emphasised the following intellectual activities in the current academic year. Students were asked to estimate how much their coursework had emphasised the same intellectual activities. The same scales were used for both surveys, enabling direct comparison for the nine institutions for which both kinds of data exist.

As Figure 12 indicates, teaching staff report that they put much less emphasis on memorisation, and much more emphasis on all the other forms of thinking than students perceive is required of them. Just 20.6 per cent of professors and 32.3 per cent of sessional/casual staff report that their teaching emphasises memorisation either quite a bit or very much, while 66.2 per cent of first-year students and 60.4 per cent of later-year students report that their coursework frequently emphasises memorisation. Clearly there is a very serious disjunct in perceptions between staff and students about the amount of memorisation which students are required to do.

It is also clear that the amount of emphasis which sessional and casual staff report giving to the five forms of thinking is more closely aligned to the reports of students than the estimates of professors, indicating that sessional staff have a better idea of what students are being asked to do than their more senior colleagues. For example, two-thirds of all students report that their coursework requires them to synthesise and organise ideas on a regular basis. In contrast, 94.5 per cent of professors report that their teaching emphasises this skills regularly, while this is the case for just 76.0 per cent of sessional and casual staff.

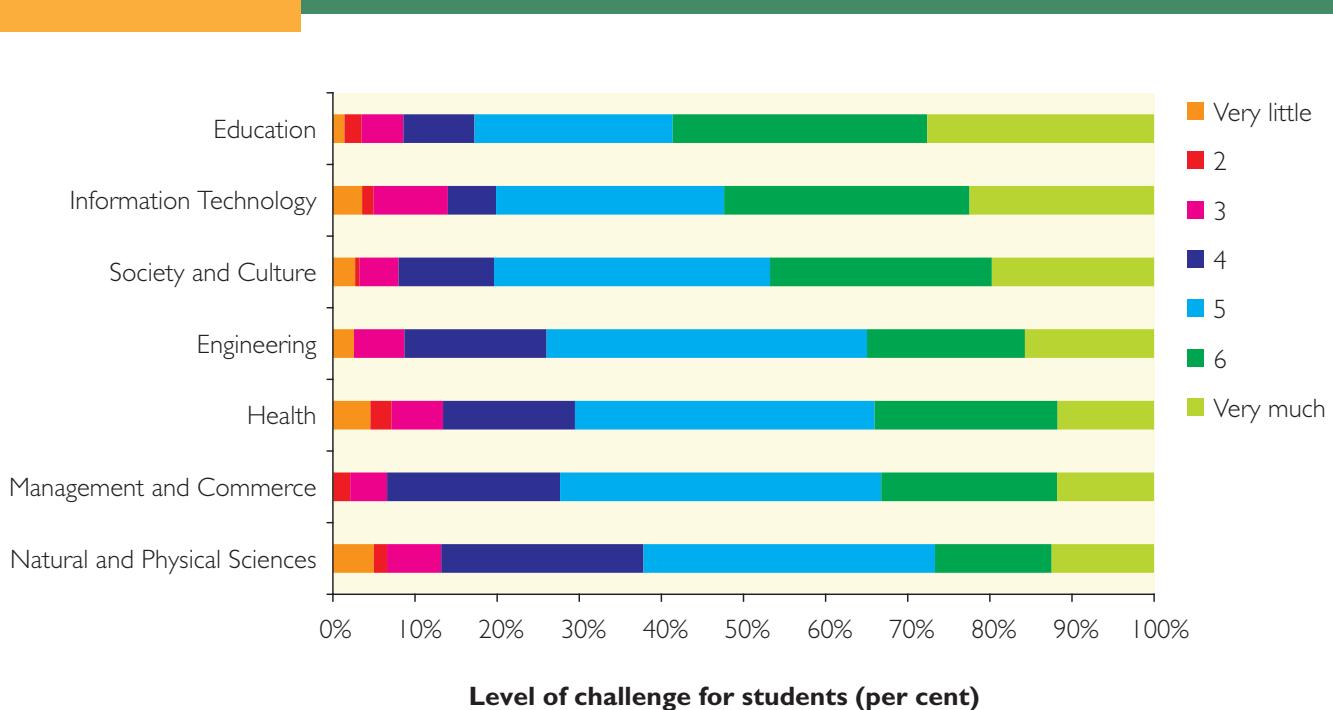
As Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956) highlights, activities such as memorisation are lower order forms of thinking while activities such as the application of theories and concepts are higher order forms of thinking. By comparing the AUSSE and SSES data for nine institutions, we can see that students – both in the first year and later years of their studies – are spending far more time on lower-order thinking than teaching staff perceive. While there are small variations in the reports of first-year and later-year students, the latter still report that their coursework emphasises lower order skill more and higher order skills less than teaching staff feel their teaching encourages.

Interestingly, these findings are very different to patterns found if the perceptions of students and teaching staff in the United States are compared. As Figure 13 demonstrates, American students report that their coursework emphasises all forms of higher order thinking more than do their Australian peers. In total 80.0 per cent of American students report that their coursework regularly requires them to apply theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations, in comparison to 75.2 per cent of Australian students. Figure 13 also indicates that the American staff tend to estimate that their teaching emphasises all skills to a lesser extent than students report. In contrast, Australian staff estimate that their teaching emphasises these skills to a greater extent than their students report.

## Perceptions of assessment

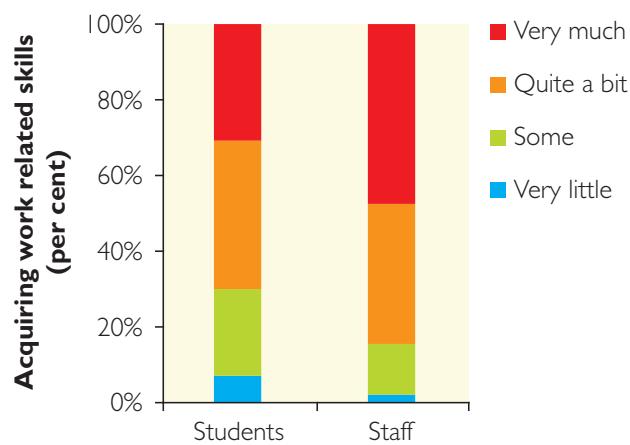
In order to measure what students are learning, rigorous assessment is an essential part of any university education. At the same time, assessments are a critical aspect of learning, enabling students to reflect on their achievements and to identify areas in need of improvement. The most effective forms of assessment are those which challenge and stretch students so that they are required to reach their potential. Data from the SSES indicates that many staff do not believe that the assessments they set students do challenge them to perform at a high level, with very significant variations by the broad field of education of a staff member.

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**Figure 14:** Degree of challenge of assessments (SSES)

Figure 14 shows the extent to which staff from seven broad fields of education believe that the examinations and assessments which they themselves set students challenge them to do their best work. 58.6 per cent of teaching staff in the field of Education report that their assessments challenge students to a great extent, while this is the case for just 33.2 per cent of staff in Management and Commerce and 26.7 per cent of staff in Natural and Physical Sciences. This seems surprising – it is unclear why staff would set assessments which they know students will not find challenging, and this indicates that an educational opportunity is being missed.



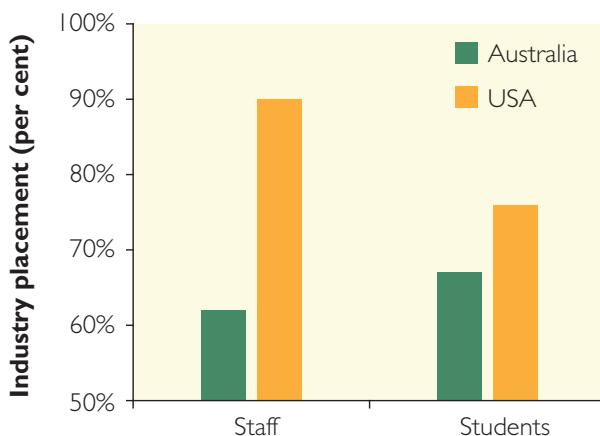
**Figure 15:** Student and staff perceptions of the acquisition of work-related skills

## Work integrated learning

Another important element of university education is ensuring that those students who wish to are given the opportunity to gain an insight into professional practice.

In Figure 1 it is clear that staff and student scale scores for work-integrated learning are very different. Staff were asked to report the extent to which their teaching aimed to help students acquire job-related or work-related knowledge and skills, and students at the same nine universities were asked to report the extent to which their educational experience had actually contributed to this outcome. As Figure 15 indicates, staff report a significant emphasis on facilitating students to acquire skills which will assist them in their careers, while students do not perceive that they are gaining these to the same degree. Just 30.8 per cent of students report that their educational experience has very much helped them to acquire work-related skills while 47.5 per cent of staff report that their teaching very much aims to help students to acquire these skills. These findings indicate a mismatch between the intent of staff and the perceptions of students, ones with important implications for the career preparedness of graduates in Australia.

One of the best ways of guaranteeing that students are fully prepared for future careers is to ensure that they undertake a work placement or internship during their



**Figure 16:** Industry placements and work experience, Australia and the USA

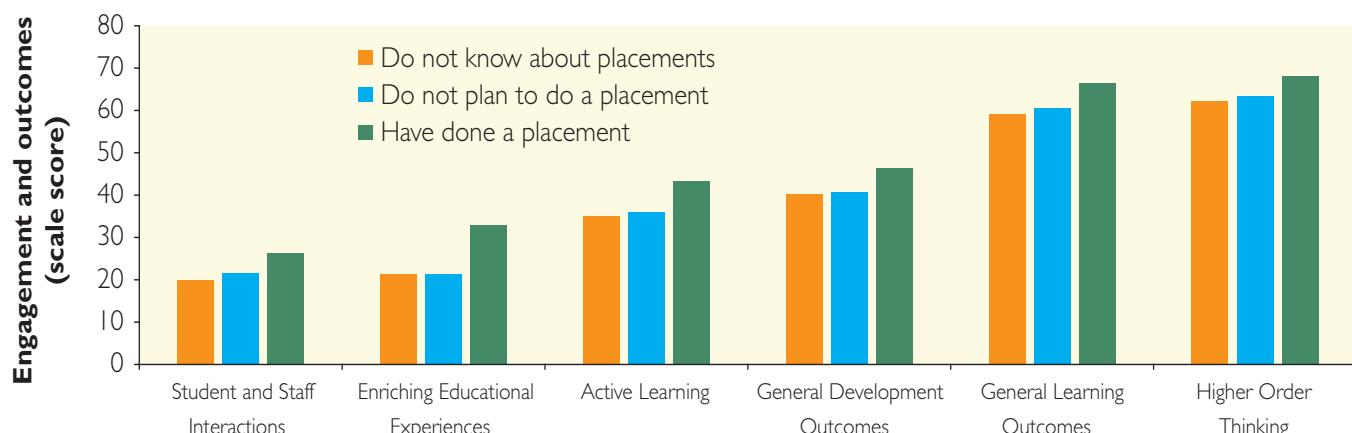
studies. Figure 16 indicates the proportion of teaching staff in Australia and the USA who feel that students in their field should undertake an internship or work placement, and also the proportion of students who report either having done so or are planning to do so. 90 per cent of staff in the USA feel that an activity such as this is an essential part of the education of their students, in comparison to just 62 per cent of staff in Australia. While a greater proportion of students in the USA than in Australia have done or are planning to do a work placement, the difference between students is far less great than the one between staff.

Not only does an industry placement or work experience enhance the preparedness of graduates for employment, it also has a host of other, less obvious, benefits. As Figure 17 indicates, those students who have completed a placement report higher scores on a range of factors than students who have not done so. Students who have done a placement report scale scores of 68.1 for higher order thinking, 43.2 for active learning and 32.9 for enriching educational experiences in contrast to scale scores of 63.5, 36.1 and 21.5, respectively, for students who do not plan to do a placement. Moreover, those who do a placement report a higher scale score (26.3) for student and staff interactions, than those who do not plan to do one (21.7).

Clearly when a student participates in an industry placement or work experience they gain more than simply preparation for their future careers. These findings echo those of Barraket et al. (2009) who survey alumni from three Australian universities and find that the activity which alumni learnt the most from during their university experience, and that they value the most, is a placement or internship. Crucially, the value of such activities lies not just in the opportunity for students to gain exposure to professional contexts and to apply what they have learnt to real-world challenges, but also in the relationships they build with industry staff who supervise them. As Barraket et al. conclude, these relationships are “an absolutely essential part of the experience for students” (2009, 31). Given the findings above which suggest that students in Australia have less established relationships with teaching staff than their counterparts in the USA, it is not surprising that activities in which they can be closely mentored by professionals have such a profound impact on their educational engagement and outcomes.

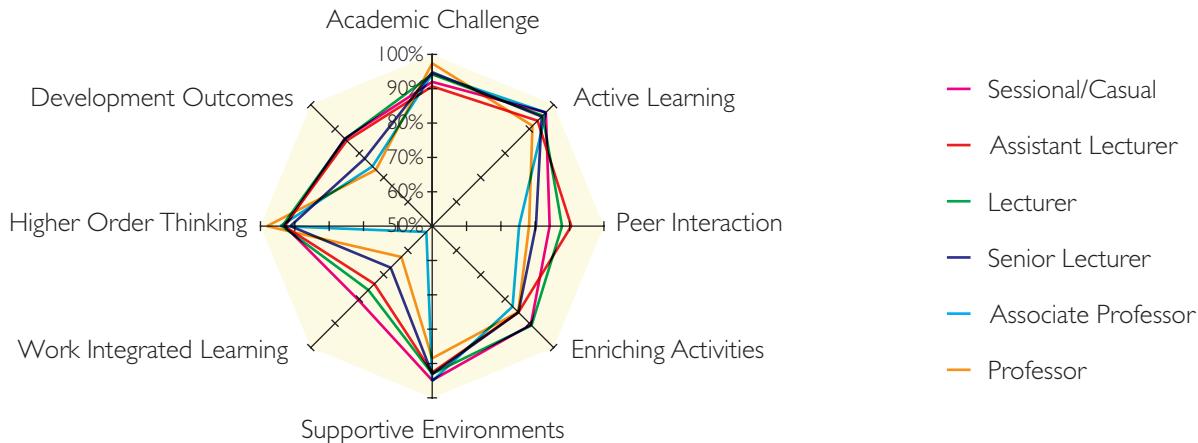
As Figure 16 indicates, teaching staff at Australian universities deem the participation of their students in industry placements and work experience to be less important than their American counterparts. There are also large variations if the level of appointment of a staff member is considered. As Figure 18 indicates, just 52.4 per cent of staff at level D report that work integrated learning is an aspect of university education which is either important or very important for their students, in contrast to 80.4 per cent of sessional and casual staff.

While there is greater similarity in the importance which staff at all levels of employment place on other aspects of student engagement, such as academic challenge, active learning, higher order thinking and an environment which supports learning, another area in which there is great divergence is the development of general learning outcomes. Just 73.2 per cent of professorial staff feel that this is an important aspect of a university education, in contrast to more than 85 per cent of junior staff.



**Figure 17:** The connection between placement and engagement (AUSSE)

# Uniting teachers and learners



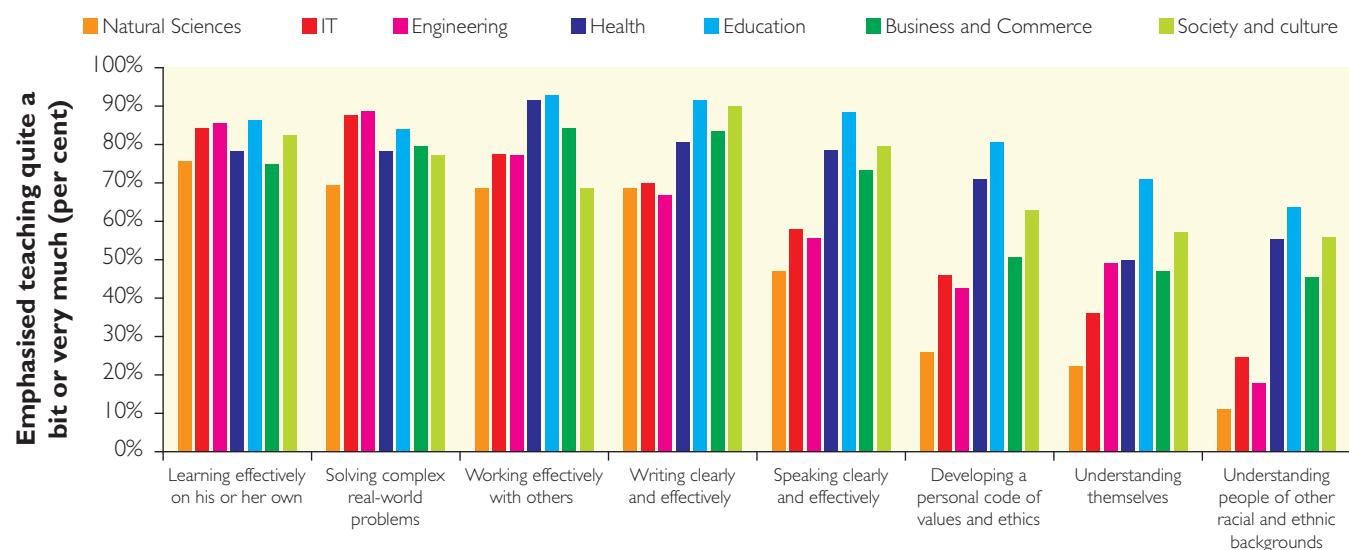
**Figure 18:** Perceived importance of university experiences (per cent 'important' or 'very important')

All university students need to have developed certain generic skills by the time they graduate – for instance, the ability to communicate clearly, to work with others, to be self-reflexive, to understand those different to themselves, to learn independently, to solve real-world problems and to behave in an ethical manner. The extent to which teaching staff in different academic disciplines areas report that their teaching intends to contribute to the knowledge, skills and development of students in a range of areas is shown in Figure 19. The greatest variation relates to the development of a personal code of values and ethics, with just 25.9 per cent of staff in natural sciences reporting that their teaching intends to contribute to this outcome either quite a bit or very much, in contrast to 70.9 per cent in health and 80.6 in education. Another very large difference can be seen in relation to understanding

people of other racial and ethnic groups – just 11.1 per cent of staff in natural sciences report that their teaching intends to contribute to their students gaining this attribute in comparison with 55.9 per cent in society and culture and 63.8 in education. Clearly, the support which graduates in different disciplines receive in the development of generic skills is highly variable, with serious consequences for their professional practice in the future.

## Conclusion

As this briefing makes clear, significant changes are required if Australian universities are to fully meet the needs of students and enhance their ability to provide



**Figure 19:** Importance of General Development Activities (AUSSE and SSES)

them with an enriching educational experience. In particular, it is essential that students are given the opportunity to have sustained and meaningful contact with teaching staff. Not only does such contact optimise student engagement, it enables teaching staff to better understand the experience of students and their educational needs, and to respond to them.

Data from the AUSSE and SSES suggests that many teaching staff have only limited contact with the students they teach, and that this is particularly the case at the most senior levels of appointment. The continued dominance of large lectures as the preferred pedagogical method for much university teaching is a reflection of the need to ensure cost efficiencies in the teaching of undergraduate students. It is not, however, an approach which encourages students to actively engage in learning and it severely constrains their ability to ask questions and discuss class materials with teaching staff. If universities are serious about assuring quality in educational provision, a reduction in class sizes is imperative.

As student numbers increase, it is essential that universities employ sufficient academic teaching staff – the blowout in staff-student ratios which has characterised Australian universities in recent years demonstrates that this is not taking place. A solution used by many universities is to employ large ranks of sessional staff. Many of these staff are research students and, as research by Edwards, Bexley and Richardson (2011) has shown, the majority have received no training in how to teach. This high risk strategy is not one which assures quality provision of education and it is imperative that universities instead increase the numbers of academic teaching staff in ongoing roles. This will allow universities to ensure that their staff are appropriately trained for, and supported in, their teaching activities and that they are available for student consultation. In the drive for quality in higher education, the interaction between students and teaching staff is a critical element, one that is too-often overlooked. Urgent attention is required to ensure that the status quo is not maintained.

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## Appendix I: Overview of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)

The AUSSE (AUSSE, 2011) was conducted with 25 Australasian universities in 2007, 29 in 2008, 35 in 2009, and 55 higher education providers in 2010. It offers institutions in Australia and New Zealand information on students' involvement with the activities and conditions that empirical research has linked with high-quality learning and development. The concept provides a practical lens for assessing and responding to the significant dynamics, constraints and opportunities facing higher education institutions. The AUSSE provides key insights into what students are actually doing, a structure for framing conversations about quality, and a stimulus for guiding new thinking about good practice.

Student engagement is an idea specifically focused on learners and their interactions with higher education institutions. Once considered behaviourally in terms of 'time on task', contemporary perspectives now touch on aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners' lives beyond university, and institutional support. It is based on the premise that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. While students are seen to be responsible for constructing their knowledge, learning is also seen to depend on institutions and staff generating conditions that stimulate and encourage involvement. Learners are central to the idea of student engagement, which focuses squarely on enhancing individual learning and development.

This perspective draws together decades of research into higher education student learning and development (Pace, 1979; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Ewell and Jones, 1996; Astin, 1985; Coates, 2006, 2010; Kuh, 2008). In addition to confirming the importance of ensuring appropriate levels of active learning and academic challenge, this research has emphasised the importance of examining students' integration into institutional life and involvement in educationally relevant, 'beyond classroom' experiences.

The AUSSE measures student engagement through administration of the Student Engagement Questionnaire (SEQ) to a representative sample of first- and later-year bachelor degree students at each institution. The SEQ measures six facets of student engagement: Academic Challenge (AC), Active Learning (AL), Student and Staff Interactions (SSI), Enriching Educational Experiences (EEE), Supportive Learning Environment (SLE), and Work Integrated Learning (WIL). The SEQ is the most thoroughly validated survey instrument in use in Australian higher education, and has been revised for use in Australasian higher education.

The AUSSE has close methodological links with the USA's NSSE. To facilitate cross-national benchmarking, work has been done to align the instrument, population, sampling, analysis and reporting characteristics of AUSSE and NSSE. There are close ties between the SEQ items and those used in the College Student Report, NSSE's main instrument. This enables comparison to be made across these collections, with the exception of the WIL scale which is unique to AUSSE.

This briefing uses data from the 2009 AUSSE and SSES. Specifically, the results are based on responses from a representative sample of 25,795 students (12,356 first years and 13,439 later years) at 30 Australian universities and responses from a representative sample of 2,736 academic staff at nine Australian universities. Results in this briefing are based on weighted data. Given that the sample of institutions and responding students reflects the overall population, it is reasonable to assume that the responses reflect the national populations. The AUSSE website (<http://ausse.acer.edu.au>) provides further details on the weighting of the AUSSE and other information about the instrument. Each year, broad results are published in the Australasian Student Engagement Reports (Coates, 2008, 2009; Radloff & Coates, 2010).

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