# A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF QUALITY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Tan, A. H. T., Muskat, B., & Zehrer, A. (2016).

A systematic review of quality of student experience in higher education.

*International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, 8(2): 209-228.

DOI: 10.1108/IJQSS-08-2015-0058.

# A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF QUALITY OF STUDENT EXPERIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION


## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to identify and synthesize major streams of research on quality of student experience in higher education, in order to present an agenda for future research.
**Design/methodology/approach** – A systematic review of high quality journals published during the period 2000 to 2014 in the areas of quality of student experience and higher education was performed.
**Findings** – Findings highlight current research trends on the quality of student experience in higher education. Results show five prevailing research streams: 1) exploration of learning experience; 2) exploration of student experience; 3) gender differences in assessment of higher education experience; 4) improvement in quality of student experience, 5) student satisfaction with higher education experience.
**Research limitations/implications** – The identification of the five research streams presented in the findings of this paper provide the basis for a synthesis of key issues identified within each research stream. These discussions, along with the identification of the purposes and limitations of existential research allow existential issues concerning research on quality of student experience in higher education to be addressed.
**Practical implications** – Literature currently portrays the quality of student experience as a student-centric idea. Together with the purposes and limitations identified in existing research, the paper proposes an agenda for future research that increases the variety of research streams that is essential to provide a deeper understanding of the student experience to enhance the delivery of quality in higher education.
**Originality/value** – The findings contribute to the research scene by providing important insights in terms of the current trends and focus of existing research in the area of quality of student experience in higher education.



Service Experience, Learning Experience, Higher Education, Service Quality, Singapore, Literature Review

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to identify and synthesize major streams of research on quality of student experience in higher education, in order to propose an agenda for future research. More research into the quality of student experience is required since the increasing liberalization of higher education has resulted in changes in the way student learning experiences are supported (Mok, 2007). The call for more research into the quality of student experience is further supported by an increasing focus in managing the quality of student experience as a competitive advantage in the higher education market, and the complementary relationship that quality of experience has with quality of service in influencing student satisfaction (Otto and Ritchie, 1995).

With the establishment of the higher education market as a global phenomenon, higher education institutions (HEIs) frequently have been using service quality as a services marketing strategy in their outreach efforts for students (Brocado, 2009; Conway *et al.*, 1994; Hemsley-Brown and Optatka, 2006; Nadiri *et al.*, 2009). In order to remain competitive, it has become common practice for higher education providers to employ a service quality and quality management framework to evaluate and improve service delivery and service encounters for its students (Abdullah, 2006; Brocado, 2009; Ho and Wearn, 1996; Stodnick and Rogers, 2008; Tsinidou *et al.*, 2010; Yeo and Li, 2012).

However, a quality of service framework is usually purely attribute-based and tends to focus on the functional and utilitarian, and hence, cognitive aspects of service delivery (Otto and Ritchie, 1995). With a concentration on service characteristics, it fails to reflect the inclusive nature of a

higher education experience which covers all life experiences, and hence affective aspects, of the engagement of students with higher education (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012; Baird and Gordon, 2009). For example, proposed service quality measures such as SERVQUAL (Barnes, 2007; Ho and Wearn, 1996) and HEdPERF[1] (Abdullah, 2006) have a focus on measures of service attributes which are utilitarian and cognitive in nature (Otto and Ritchie, 1995), and do not include measures for affective aspects of the total student experience (Harvey and Knight, 1996). Quality of service and quality of service experience are two incommensurable, yet essential and complementary service models which service industries need to employ to "obtain a broader and more complete picture of customer evaluations and customer satisfaction" (Otto and Ritchie, 1995, p.59). It is essential to include affective aspects in the assessment of service quality in higher education since what matters most to students is the delivery of the total student experience, which is also a key factor in the assessment of quality in higher education (Baird and Gordon, 2009; Harvey and Knight, 1996).

The student experience is increasingly being regarded as an important area for HEIs to differentiate themselves from the competition (Baranova *et al.*, 2011). The fundamental role of HEIs is to provide quality learning experiences to its students (Michael, 1997; Simpson and Tan, 2009; Yeo, 2008). The problem for service providers, however, is that existing frameworks evaluating the student experience, focus solely on the cognitive aspects of the service delivery. (Chen and Chen, 2010; Otto and Ritchie, 1995). With the growing internationalization of higher education (Daly and Barker, 2005; Huang, 2007; Mok, 2007), it is even more important to gain a holistic understanding of the quality of a higher education experience so as to ensure satisfying

[1] Higher Education PERFormance

student experiences (Pereda *et al.*, 2007; Arambewela and Maringe, 2012). Consequently it is of increasing relevance to produce a comprehensive conceptual understanding of what the student experience is.

The student experience is central to many initiatives in higher education (Baird and Gordon, 2009; Arambewela and Maringe, 2012). It is also an important consideration in higher education as it is a key determinant in the assessment of quality in the delivery of higher education (Harvey and Knight, 1996). Many definitions of the student experience exist. According to Baranova *et al.* (2011), there has been an evolution in understanding the student experience, which predominantly considered only teaching and learning experiences, and which now increasingly includes the student encounter with administrative and support services that a HEI provides. Hence, the student experience is also referred to as the "experience of higher education teaching, learning and assessment and their experience of other university ancillary service aspects, i.e. within and beyond the classroom experience" (Douglas *et al.*, 2008, p. 19). Another possible definition refers to the student experience as the total life experience which encompasses both academic and non-academic experiences as a student (Baird and Gordon, 2009; Arambewela and Maringe, 2012). Harvey and Knight (1996) uses the term 'total student experience' to refer to the student experience that is not restricted to the student experience in the classroom.

However, an issue with conceptualization of the construct *student experience* is the focus on a person's identity solely as a student, which is increasingly difficult to disentangle with other life experiences that a person may have (Baird and Gordon, 2009). While some definitions of the student experience refer to the social, cultural or consumption aspects of a student life, a common trend in these definitions has been to place the student at the center of the discussion

(Baird and Gordon, 2009). A need arises to develop a holistic understanding of the student experience in the context of the broader learning environment, and from the perspectives of different types of students and other stakeholders of higher education (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012).

With the above discussions in mind, the focus of this paper is to address the following two research questions:

- What are the current trends in research on the quality of student experience in higher education?
- What are the existential issues concerning research on quality of student experience in higher education?

In view of the research questions, existing studies related to the student experience in higher education was reviewed with the purpose of mapping current research contributions concerning the quality of student experience. The extant literature was systematically reviewed to reveal the extent of research in the field which is followed by discussions on the limitations of existing research and opportunities for identifying the agenda for future research.

## METHODOLOGY

The protocol adopted for the systematic review of literature in this study was adapted from approaches adopted by Cooley *et al.* (2015), David and Han (2004), Newbert (2007), and Thorpe *et al.* (2005). Originating from the medical sciences, systematic reviews are also used in social sciences and management research as a replicable, scientific and transparent mode of managing

the diversity of knowledge in a specific field of interest to enhance the knowledge base for informing policy and practice (Transfield *et al.*, 2003). The aim of conducting a systematic review is to gather as many existing studies of relevance to the research interest irrespective of their publication characteristics such as published location or even disciplinary background, and in so doing produces insights for future research activities as well as prevent duplication of efforts amongst researchers (Thorpe *et al.*, 2005). Our process of systematic review was conducted in two stages.

First, a decision was made to conduct searches through the PROQUEST database using *quality of student experience* in conjunction with *higher education* as keywords. Adopting the keyword search approach by Page (2008) and Yang *et al.* (2011), the database queries included those keywords (quality of student experience; and higher education) in their titles, abstracts or full text. The period of analysis was between 2000 and 2014. Following a similar approach proposed by Khan *et al.* (2003) and Papaioannou *et al.* (2010), only published journal articles written in English with content concerning the service experience of students in higher education were included in the review since quality control is enhanced by restricting reviews to refereed journal article (David and Han, 2004). The search revealed an increasing number of hits in terms of the number of journal articles that contain both sets of key words over the defined period of analysis, which is illustrated in Figure 1.

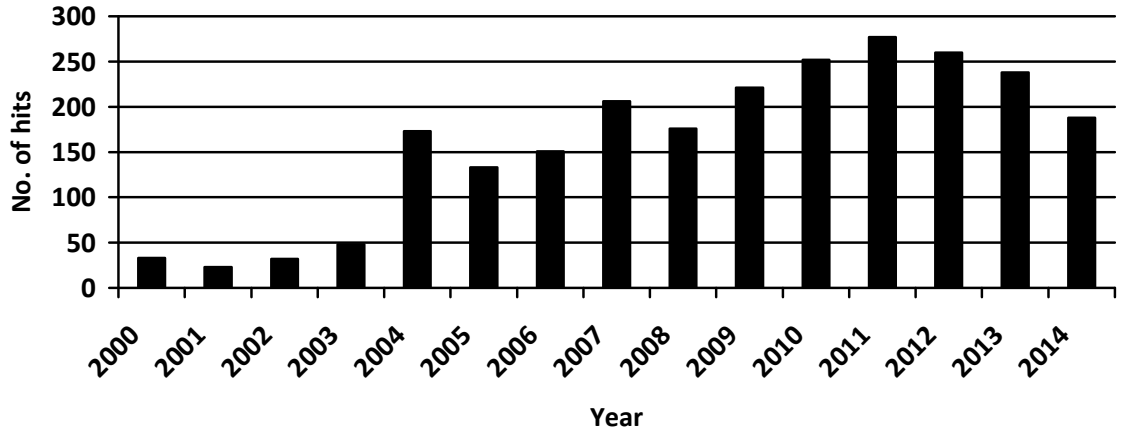


**Figure 1** Number of hits over time of journal articles based on keywords search.

Second, from the filtered list of journals produced in the first stage, journal rankings were used as the source for selection of high quality international journals (Benckendorff and Zehrer, 2013; Hall, 2011; Khan *et al.*, 2003; Zehrer, 2007). In this review, journals ranked by the Australian Research Council (2012), and Australian Business Dean's Council (2013) were included in the review. A total of 39 papers across 24 journal publications were identified to meet the specified criteria for paper selection. The retrieved papers were analyzed by all three authors separately and subsequently controlled for inter-rater reliability. A distribution of the papers according to the journal publications in which they were published is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1** Distribution of papers published according to journals between 2000 and 2014.

| Journal Name | Number of Papers |
|---|---|
| Adolescence | 1 |
| Australian Journal of Education | 1 |
| British Journal of Educational Psychology | 1 |
| Educational Research | 2 |
| European Journal of Engineering Education | 1 |
| Higher Education Research and Development | 3 |
| Higher Education Review | 1 |
| Higher Education: | 1 |
| International Journal of Educational Management | 1 |
| International Journal of Educational Research | 1 |
| International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning | 1 |
| Journal of Educational Research | 1 |
| Journal of Marketing Education | 1 |
| Journal of Marketing for Higher Education | 1 |
| Journal of Philosophy of Education | 1 |
| Journal of Research in International Education | 1 |
| Journal of Studies in International Education | 2 |
| Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education | 1 |
| Psychology of Women Quarterly | 1 |
| Quality Assurance in Education | 7 |
| Quality in Higher Education | 4 |
| Studies in Educational Evaluation | 2 |
| Teaching in Higher Education | 1 |
| Tertiary Education and Management | 2 |

In order to make sense of the importance of the 39 papers identified for the systematic literature review in this paper, both citation analysis and authorship analysis were also conducted to identify possible important works and authors from among the 39 papers (Benckendorff and Zehrer, 2013). 'Times cited in refereed journal articles' which indicates the importance of the study for each paper is presented in Table 2. Prior to the publication of this paper, 35 of the 39 papers had at least one occurrence of citation in a refereed journal. The remaining four were either not cited, or cited only in conference proceedings. In order to reveal the extent of research collaboration between authors, Table 2 also provides the authorship analysis in terms of the number of authors involved in the study, including information on whether the authors were from the same institution and country. The table reveals that 10 of the 39 papers were for

research conducted by authors from different institutions, among which three were international collaborations. Of the 29 remaining papers, 11 were for research conducted by single authors within the context of a specific institution or country.

**Table 2** Citation and authorship analysis of journal articles.

| Name(s) of Authors | Times Cited in Refereed Journal Articles | Number of Authors | Authors are in the same institution? | Authors are in the same country? |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arambewela and Maring (2012) | 0 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Baird and Gordon, George (2009) | 2 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Baranova *et al.* (2011) | 1 | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| Brown (2011) | 9 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Cahill *et al.* (2010) | 5 | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| Campbell and Li (2008) | 42 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Chahal and Devi (2013) | 2 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Chapman and Pyvis (2006) | 13 | 2 | No | Yes |
| Douglas *et al.* (2008) | 46 | 3 | No | Yes |
| Duarte *et al.* (2012) | 0 | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| Ellis *et al.* (2004) | 17 | 4 | No | Yes |
| Geall (2000) | 3 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Gift and Bell-Hutchinson (2007) | 4 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Ginns *et al.* (2009) | 5 | 5 | No | No |
| Gosling and D'Andrea (2001) | 7 | 2 | No | Yes |
| Grace *et al.* (2012) | 4 | 5 | Yes | Yes |
| Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) | 4 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Kim (2007) | 4 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Nair *et al.* (2011) | 4 | 3 | No | No |
| Ng and Forbes (2009) | 30 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Ning and Downing (2011) | 0 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Peltier *et al.* (2007) | 24 | 3 | No | Yes |
| Peng (2008) | 2 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Peterson and Miller (2004) | 28 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Scaffidi and Berman (2011) | 12 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Shanahan and Gerber (2004) | 3 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Simpson and Tan (2009) | 9 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Staddon and Standish (2012) | 2 | 2 | No | Yes |
| Stake and Malkin (2003) | 8 | 2 | Yes | Yes |
| Tam (2006) | 7 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Tam (2007) | 5 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Voss (2009) | 9 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Ward *et al.* (2010) | 13 | 3 | Yes | Yes |
| Waugh (2001) | 4 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Waugh (2003) | 2 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Webber *et al.* (2013) | 0 | 3 | No | Yes |
| Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) | 5 | 2 | No | No |
| Yeo (2009) | 8 | 1 | Yes | Yes |
| Yorke (2000) | 16 | 1 | Yes | Yes |

## FINDINGS

In order to identify the current trends in research on the quality of student experience in higher education, this section presents the findings of the systematic literature review.

As described earlier, 39 high quality journal articles were analyzed (see table 2) and mapped against five research categories: research contributions, research methods used, type of research, unit of analysis, as well as context of research. As a result of this systematic literature analysis, five dominant research streams have been identified: 1) exploration of learning experience; 2) exploration of student experience; 3) gender differences in assessment of HE experience; 4) improvement in quality of student experience, 5) student satisfaction with HE experience (see Table 3). Descriptions of each research stream are also presented in table 3. A dominant trait of these research streams is student-centeredness, placing the student at the heart of discussions.

**Table 3** Quality of student experience in higher education: synthesis of research streams.

| Research Stream | Description | Author(s) |
|---|---|---|
| Exploration of Learning Experience | The focus of this research stream is on the perceptions and factors influencing learning experiences in higher education. | Campbell and Li (2008); Ellis *et al.* (2004); Kim (2007); Ning and Downing (2011); Peltier *et al.* (2007); Peterson and Miller (2004); Ward *et al.* (2010) |
| Exploration of Student Experience | Research in this area focuses on the perceptions and assessment of the student experience in higher education. | Chalal and Devi (2013); Chapman and Pyvis (2006); Geall (2000); Ng and Forbes (2009); Peng (2008); Scaffidi and Berman (2011); Shanahan and Gerber (2004); Simpson and Tan (2009); Stake and Malkin (2003); Tam (2006), Tam (2007); Waugh (2001); Waugh (2003); Yeo (2009); Yorke (2000) |
| Gender differences in assessment of HE experience | The focus of this research stream is on investigating differences in gender perceptions of the higher education experience. | Grace *et al.* (2012), Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) |
| Improvement in quality of student experience | Research in this area focuses on what higher education institutions do to improve and | Arambewela and Maringe (2012); Baird and Gordon (2009); Baranova *et al.* (2011); Brown (2011); Cahill *et al.* (2010); Geall (2000); Gift and Bell- |

| Research Stream | Description | Author(s) |
|---|---|---|
| | enhance the student experience. | Hutchinson (2007); Ginns *et al.* (2009); Gosling and D'Andrea (2001); Nair *et al.* (2011); Staddon and Standish (2012) |
| Student satisfaction with HE experience | This resarch stream focuses on the assessment and modeling of student satisfaction in higher education. | Douglas *et al.* (2008); Duarte *et al.* (2012); Grace *et al.* (2012); Voss (2009); Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2013) |

Through an analysis of the literature, it was possible to classify the research streams by research attributes in terms of research methods used, type of research, and unit of analysis used. The classification of research streams by the mentioned research attributes is tabulated and summarised in Appendix 1. The classification table show the distribution of papers within each research area according to the various attributes mentioned.

An analysis of the classification table in Appendix 1 shows a strong interest in research on the exploration of student experiences in higher education in which the tendency is to explore factors which influence student experiences. Research on the quality of student experience was commonly accomplished through the use of surveys or questionnaires, followed by focus groups or interviews. These predominant methods were also specifically applied to the exploration of learning experiences and exploration of student experiences. Studies relating to gender differences in assessment of higher education experience and student satisfaction with the higher education experience essentially adopted the survey or questionnaire approach. Case studies followed by surveys or questionnaires are predominantly used for research relating to improvement in quality of student experience. These observations are reflective of the high occurrence of empirical research type. In addition, students in general are predominantly the focus of research followed by the organization, i.e. higher education institution.

A further study to uncover the distribution of the research streams in relations to the context in which research on the quality of student experience was conducted, yielded findings tabulated in table 4. The table shows a high incidence of research activity conducted in the context of Australia and the UK, with relatively lower proportions in Asia, except Hong Kong. Interestingly, the top three regions in terms of total research activity, i.e. Australia, UK and Hong Kong, adopt the Anglo-Saxon higher education model. Similar to findings from Appendix 1, popular research activity from these top regions are in exploration and improvement of the student experience.

**Table 4** Quality of student experience in higher education: research streams and context of research.

| Research Streams | Australia | Germany | Hong Kong | India | Malaysia | New Zealand | Portugal | Singapore | Trinidad and Tobago | UAE | UK | USA |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Exploration of Learning Experience | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Exploration of Student Experience | 5 | 0 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 |
| Gender differences in assessment of HE experience | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Improvement of quality of student experience | 3 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 7 | 0 |
| Student satisfaction with HE experience | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 12 | 1 | 6 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 11 | 5 |

Overall, the current research trends have been presented in Appendix 1 and table 4. While there are clear differentiations in the nature of research, a common trend is greater research focus on the student experience in terms of its exploration and improvement.

## DISCUSSIONS

The identification of the five research streams presented in the findings of this paper provide the basis for a synthesis of key issues identified within each research stream. These discussions, along with the identification of the purposes and limitations of existential research allow us to address the existential issues concerning research on quality of student experience in higher education.

### Key Issues Identified Within the Research Streams

*Exploration of student experience*

Papers in this category of research focused on the conceptualization of what makes a quality student experience. Elements of the higher education service delivery system which form impressions of the quality of student experience are identifiable through research by Chahal and Devy (2013), Chapman and Pyvis (2006), Geall (2000), Kim (2007), Ng and Forbes (2009), Peng (2008); Scaffidi *et al.* (2011), Shanahan and Gerber (2004), Stake and Malkin (2003), Waugh (2001), Waugh (2003), Yeo (2009), and Yorke (2000). Also evident in the literature is the emphasis for the need of higher education institutions to include the student body in the co-creation of the student experience (Ng and Forbes, 2009; Yorke, 2000) since "the criteria that contribute to a positive experience evaluation, when viewed through the eyes of students, may

not entirely coincide with the "business language" criteria that education providers believe to be critical" (Simpson and Tan, 2009, p.5).

*Exploration of learning experience*

The difference between this category of research and the former category is in its focus on the academic experience of students which is the core service in a higher education experience (Ng and Forbes, 2009). Papers in this category of research address from the student perspective, the influence that student experience of academic processes has on academic outcomes. Discussions on student experiences with academic processes concern teaching approaches, learning support and the establishment of academic relationships (Campbell and Li, 2008; Ellis *et al.*, 2004; Kim, 2007; Peltier *et al.*, 2007; Staddon and Standish, 2012; Ward *et al.*, 2010). Academic outcomes that are identified include academic performance, study behavior and understanding of the academic culture (Kim, 2007; Ning and Downing, 2011).

*Gender differences in assessment of higher education experience*

For the time period of 2000 to 2014 (inclusive), papers published in this category of research focused on the identification of differences in responses between males and females (Grace *et al.*, 2012; Grebennikov and Skaines, 2009). Grace *et al.* (2012) examine a structural model of the course experience across male and female responses with the intention of determining replications with an overall model, while Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) found gender differences in different aspects of the higher education experience. While research in this category is scant, studies on differences in higher education experiences between gender will

help higher education institutions to "take appropriate action to ensure the quality of the learning environment for all students" (Grebennikov and Skaines, 2009, p.73).

*Improvement of quality in student experience*

There are good reasons for improving the quality of student experience (Staddon and Standish, 2012). Studies in this category of research provide discussions on how higher education institutions can improve the quality of student experience. Three broad approaches of improvement are identifiable from the literature. One fundamental approach would be through adopting a student-centric approach in which higher education institutions are constantly engaged with students to understand their expectations and aspirations, and matching them against those of the institution (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012; Brown, 2001). Involving students in the design stage of higher education services might also be a good consideration (Baranova *et al.*, 2011). A second approach would be through managing the learning environment by improvements to pedagogical approaches, which is fundamental to the service delivery of higher education services (Gift and Bell-Hutchinson, 2007; Ginns *et al.*, 2009). A more holistic approach would be to ensure synergy between physical infrastructure, and educational and operational strategies of the institution (Baird and Gordon, 2009; Cahill *et al.*, 2010; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001; Nair *et al.*, 2011).

*Student satisfaction with higher education experience*

Research in this category has focused on identifying and measuring determinants of the higher education experience which impact student satisfaction (Douglas *et al.*, 2008; Duarte *et al.*, 2012; Grace *et al.*, 2012; Voss, 2009; Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013; Yeo, 2009). Based on

articles in this category, there are variations in factors that have been identified by researchers. However, taken holistically, these factors refer to student experiences both within and outside the classroom (Douglas *et al.*, 2008; Voss, 2009; Yeo, 2009). While the identification of determinants assist in the measurement of the higher education experience, it is also important to understand how students evaluate their experiences (Grace *et al.*, 2012).

**Purposes of Existential Research**

Five broad research purposes are identifiable from the 39 papers reviewed. 64% of the papers reviewed are concerned with the objectives of gaining a better understanding of the student experience (Campbell and Li, 2008; Chahal and Devi, 2013; Chapman and Pyvis, 2006; Ellis *et al.*, 2004; Geall, 2000; Grebennikov and Skaines, 2009; Kim, 2007; Ng and Forbes, 2009; Peterson and Miller, 2004; Shanahan and Gerber, 2004, Tam, 2007, Voss, 2009; Wilkins and Balakrishnan, 2013; Yeo, 2009) and studying the impact of higher education service attributes on the student experience (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012; Baird and Gordon, 2009; Baranova *et al.*, 2011; Douglas *et al.*, 2008; Duarte *et al.*, 2012; Gift and Bell-Hutchinson, 2007; Gosling and D'Andrea, 2001; Peltier *et al.*, 2007; Scaffidi and Berman, 2011; Simpson and Tan, 2009; Stake and Malkin, 2003; Ward *et al.*, 2010). The former objective predominantly mentions the exploration of learning and student experiences, and satisfaction with service encounters in higher education; while the emphasis of the latter objective is to identify factors which influence student experiences as well as to develop frameworks which illustrate the relationship between these factors and student experiences. The remaining papers were focused on establishing measures of the student experience (Ginns *et al.*, 2009; Grace *et al.*, 2012; Sid *et al.*, 2011; Waugh, 2001; Waugh, 2003; Webber *et al.*, 2013), introducing ways of improving the student

experience (Brown, 2011; Cahill *et al.*, 2010; Gift and Bell-Hutchinson, 2007; Staddon and Standish, 2012), and studying the impact of the student experience on student outcomes (Ning and Downing, 2011; Tam, 2006). A commonality among these papers is the aim to determine and validate accurate measures of the quality of student experience through conceptual and questionnaire design, so as to be able to identify directions for improvement of student experience, as well as to understand the impact of student experiences on student outcomes. However, what appears to be deficient in these objectives is the need to develop a comprehensive conceptualization of the student experience.

**Limitations of Existing Research**

Before summarizing the main results of the systematic literature review, the authors have to emphasize the limitations of existential research. The first limitation concerns the use of a specific group or generalized group of students from a specific higher education institution as the unit of analysis (Campbell and Lee, 2008; Chahal and Devi, 2013; Douglas *et al.*, 2008; Grace *et al.*, 2012; Kim, 2007; Ning and Downing, 2011; Peng, 2008; Tam, 2006; Voss, 2009; Waugh, 2001). Also, Ginns *et al.* (2009) noted a lack of investigations according to student status, which may affect inter-rater reliability and correlations between scale scores. The second concerns the use of small sample sizes, particularly in qualitative studies (Campbell and Lee, 2008; Chahal and Devi, 2013). Both limitations affect the generalizability of findings, and impede the ability to perform a cross-reference across different stakeholders, institutions and geographical locations (Ning and Downing, 2011; Tam, 2006; Yeo, 2009).

Another limitation is the lack of discussion on quality of student experience in journals related to education management. A search among these journals in the Australian Business Dean's

Council (2013) list using search words “education” and “management” yields seven journal publications, namely (i) Academy of Management Learning and Education, (ii) Educational Management Administration and Leadership, (iii) International Journal of Educational Management, (iv) Journal of Management Education, (v) Operations Management Education Review, (vi) Sport Management Education Journal, and (vii) The International Journal of Management Education. However, a search through these journal publications on EBSCO Host using the terms “quality of student experience” and “higher education” yielded no matches with the topic.

In view of the purposes and limitations of existential research discusses, there is clearly a need for comprehensive quality measures and conceptualizations to incorporate a broader perspective about student experience. The student experience is an important subject of delivery in the business of higher education. Addressing this gap in the form of future research directions, that this paper provides in the next section, will make a positive influence on contributions to the work on improving the quality of student experience in higher education.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our systematic review of literature has revealed the current trends in research on quality of student experience in higher education in terms of the identification of major research streams. Five major research streams: *exploration of student experience*, *exploration of learning experience*, *gender differences in assessment of higher education experience*, *improvement of quality in student experience*, *and student satisfaction with higher education experience*, have been identified. It was also possible to map these streams of research in terms of their contributions by research methods used, type of research, unit of analysis, and context of research. Key issues were also identifiable from among the five research streams. Based on our meta-analysis of the research streams and contributions, it is possible to conclude that literature currently portrays the quality of student experience as a student-centric idea with the underpinning aim of improving the quality of higher education for students. Together with the purposes and limitations identified in existing research, the authors are able to propose an agenda for future research that increases the variety of research streams that is essential in providing HEIs with a deeper understanding of the student experience to enhance the delivery of a quality higher education.

### Future Research Opportunities and Directions

From the review of the 39 papers identified for this systematic literature review, we find that further research opportunities in the field of quality of student experience in higher education exist across a diversity of education systems. Building on the discussions in this paper, we suggest the following directions for further research.

Firstly, more research is needed to clarify the conceptualizations of both student and learning experiences. Several conceptualizations exist, but none are conclusive (Baird and Gordon, 2009). The identification of the purposes of existential research also reveals that a fragmented view of the student experience exists, and there is need for development of a new holistic model of this phenomenon. There are also differences in perceptions, as well as, cultural and social norms between Asian students and students of western origin (Kim, 2007). Exploring the differences in perception of student and learning experiences among stakeholders from various education systems is also worthwhile due to cultural diversity that may exist.

Secondly, as many student-centered initiatives within higher education institutions are increasingly aimed at improving the student experience (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012; Baird and Gordon, 2009), there is a need to develop an appropriate instrument for the measurement of the quality of student experience (Otto and Ritchie, 1995). Currently, most instruments which exist have been developed for the measurement of quality of service in higher education institutions, which however, do not appropriately measure the affective components of a service experience (Otto and Ritchie, 1995; Otto and Ritchie, 1996). The applicability of quality of service measurements in certain contexts has also been questioned (Ladhari, 2009). While some researchers have proposed survey instruments for the assessment of quality of student experience, some limitations exist (Tam, 2006; Tam, 2007, Webber *et al.*, 2013). To facilitate the development of such a measurement instrument, further studies are also needed to holistically identify the determinants which make a good quality student experience in the context of a broad learning environment (Arambewela and Maringe, 2012). Perhaps exploring the development of the proposed measurement instrument in the context of a service innovation framework might

also be useful since doing so also focuses attention on the delivery process of a student experience (Parasumaran, 2010).

Thirdly, we recommend the analysis of gender differences in perceptions and assessment of the quality of student experience as an area of research. Based on the papers selected for review, studies related to this area are limited and were conducted within the context of Australian HEIs (Grace *et al.*, 2012; Grebennikov and Skaines, 2009). More research in this area is necessary to study the impact of gender differences on the quality of student experience so that initiatives focused on the student experience will be equitable for all students (Gebennokov and Skaines, 2009).

With regards to research methodology, we noted that existing research tends to focus on students within a specific higher education institution as the unit of analysis. If the objective is for research results to be generalized, we suggest that the unit of analysis be widened in future research to include students from various higher education institutions in a specific country, noting that there will be variations in culture across different countries which will hinder the generalization of results among countries (Tam, 2006). There is also a need to diversify the unit of analysis to gather the perspectives of other stakeholders of higher education to provide more a balanced analysis of the state of quality of student experience (Ning and Downing, 2011; Yeo, 2009).

## REFERENCES


Abdullah, F. (2006), "Measuring service quality in higher education: HEdPERF versus SERVPERF", *Marketing Intelligence and Planning*, Vol. 24 No. 1, pp. 31-47.

Arambewela, R. and Maringe, F. (2012), "Mind the gap: Staff and postgraduate perceptions of student experience in higher education", *Higher Education Review*, Vol. 44 No. 2, pp. 63-83.

Australian Business Deans Council. (2013), "ABDC Journal Quality List 2013", available at: http://www.abdc.edu.au/pages/abdc-journal-quality-list-2013.html (assessed 23 July 2015).

Australian Research Council. (2012), "ERA 2012 Journal List", available at: https://research.unsw.edu.au/excellence-research-australia-era-outlet-ranking (assessed 23 July 2015).

Baird. J. and Gordon, G. (2009), "Beyond the rhetoric: A framework for evaluating improvements to the student experience", *Tertiary Education and Management*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 193-207.

Baranova, P, Morrison, S. and Mutton, J. (2011), "Enhancing the student experience through service design: The University of Derby approach", *Perspective*, Vo. 15 No. 4, pp. 122-128.

Barnes, B.R. (2007), "Analyzing service quality: The case of post-graduate Chinese students", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 313-331.

Benckendorff, P. and Zehrer, A. (2013), "A network analysis of tourism research", *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 43, pp. 121-149.

Brochado, A. (2009), "Comparing alternative instruments to measure service quality in higher education", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 174-190.

Brown, S. (2011), "Bringing about positive change in the higher education student experience: a case study", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 19 No. 3, pp. 195–207.

Cahill, J., Turner, J. and Barefoot, H. (2010), "Enhancing the student learning experience: the perspective of academic staff", *Educational Research*, Vol. 52 No. 3, pp. 283-295.

Campbell, J. and Li, M. (2008), "Asian Students' Voices: An Empirical Study of Asian Students' Learning Experiences at a New Zealand University", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 375–396.

Chahal, H. and Devi, P. (2013), "Identifying satisfied / dissatisfied service encounters in higher education", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 21 No. 2, pp.211–222.

Chapman, A. and Pyvis, D. (2006), "Quality, identity and practice in offshore university programmes: issues in the internationalization of Australian higher education", *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp.233–245.

Chen, C.F. and Chen, F.S. (2010), "Experience quality, perceived value, satisfaction and behavioural intentions for heritage tourists", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 29-35.

Conway, T., Mackay, S. and Yoke, D. (1994), "Strategic Planning in Higher Education: Who are the customers?", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 8 No. 6, pp. 29-36.

Cooley, S.J., Burns, V.E. and Cumming, J. (2015), "The role of outdoor adventure education in facilitating groupwork in higher education", *Higher Education*, Vol. 69 No. 4, pp. 567-582.

Daly, A.J and Barker, M.C. (2005), "Australian and New Zealand University students' participation in international exchange programs", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 9 No. 1, pp. 26-41.

David, R.J. and Han, S.K. (2004), "A systematic assessment of the empirical support for transaction cost economics", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 1, pp. 39-58.

Douglas, J., McClelland, R. and Davies, J. (2008), "The development of a conceptual model of student satisfaction with their experience in higher education", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 19-35.

Duarte, P. O., Raposo, M. B. and Alves, H. B. (2012), "Using a Satisfaction Index to Compare Students' Satisfaction During and After Higher Education Service Consumption", *Tertiary Education and Management*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 17–40.

Ellis, R.A., Calvo, R., Levy, D. and Tan, K. (2004), "Learning through discussions", *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 73–93.

Geall, V. (2000), "The Expectations and Experience of First-Year Students at City University of Hong Kong", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 77–89.

Gift, S. I. and Bell-Hutchinson, C. (2007), "Quality assurance and the imperatives for improved student experiences in higher education: The case of the University of the West Indies", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 13 No. 2, pp. 145–157.

Ginns, P., Marsh, H. W., Behnia, M., Cheng, J. H. S. and Scalas, L. F. (2009), "Using postgraduate students' evaluations of research experience to benchmark departments and faculties: Issues and challenges", *The British Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol. 79 No. 3, pp. 577–98.

Gosling, D. and D'Andrea, V-M. (2001), "Quality Development: A new concept for higher education", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 7–17.

Grace, D., Weaven, S., Bodey, K., Ross, M. and Weaven, K. (2012), "Putting student evaluations into perspective: The Course Experience Quality and Satisfaction Model (CEQS)", *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 35–43.

Grebennikov, L. and Skaines, I. (2009), "Gender and higher education experience : a case study", *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 71–84.

Hall, C.M. (2011), "Publish or perish? Bibliometric analysis, journal ranking and the assessment of research quality in tourism", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 32 No. 1, pp. 16-27.

Harvey, L. and Knight, P.T. (1996), *Transforming Higher Education*, Society for Research into Higher Education, London.

Hemsley-Brown, J. and Oplatka, I. (2006), "Universities in a competitive global marketplace: A systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 316-338.

Ho, S.K. and Wearn, K. (1996), "A higher education TQM model excellence model: HETQMEX", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 4 No. 2, pp. 35-42.

Huang, F. (2007), "Internationalization of higher education in the developing and emerging countries: A focus on transnational higher education in Asia", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 421-432.

Hui, M.K. and Bateson, J.E.G. (1991), "Perceived control and the effects of crowding and consumer choice on the service experience", *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 18 No. 2, pp. 174-184.

Khan, K.S., Kunz, R., Kleijnen, J. and Antes, G. (2003), "Five steps to conducting a systematic review", *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol. 96 No. 3, pp. 118-121.

Kim, Y. (2007), "Difficulties in quality doctoral academic advising: Experiences of Korean students", *Journal of Research in International Education*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 171–193.

Ladhari, R. (2009), "A review of twenty years of SERVQUAL research", *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 172-198.

Michael, S. (1997), "American education system consumerism versus professorialism", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 11 No. 3, pp. 117-130

Mok, K.H. (2007), "Questing for internationalization of universities in Asia: Critical reflections", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 11 No. 3/4, pp. 433-454.

Nadiri, H., Kandampully, J. and Hussain, K. (2009), "Students' perception of service quality in higher education", *Total Quality Management*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 525-535.

Nair, C.S. and Mertova, P. (2011), "Enhancing the quality of engineering education by utilising student feedback", *European Journal of Engineering Education*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 3–12.

Newbert, S.L. (2007), "Empirical research on the resource-based view of the firm: An assessment and suggestions for future research", *Strategic Management Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 2, pp. 121-146.

Ng, I. C. L. and Forbes, J. (2009), "Education as service: The understanding of University experience through the service logic", *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 38–64.

Ning, H. K. and Downing, K. (2011), "The interrelationship between student learning experience and study behavior", *Higher Education Research and Development*, Vol. 30 No. 6, pp. 765–778.

Otto, J.E. and Ritchie, J.R.B. (1995), "Exploring the quality of the service experience: A theoretical and empirical analysis", in Swartz, T., Bowen, D. and Brown, S. (Eds.), *Advances in Services Marketing and Management: Research and Practice*, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, Vol. 4, pp. 37-62.

Otto, J.E. and Ritchie, J.R.B. (1996), "The service experience in tourism", *Tourism Management*, Vol. 17 No. 3, pp. 165-174.

Parasumaran, A. (2010), "Service productivity, quality and innovation", *International Journal of Qualitu and Service Sciences*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 277-286.

Page, D. (2008), "Systematic literature searching and the bibliographic database haystack", *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 171-180.

Papaioannou, D., Sutton, a., Carroll, C., Booth, A. and Wong, R. (2010), "Literature searching for social science systematic reviews: consideration of a range of search techniques", *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, Vol. 27, pp. 114-122.

Peltier, J. W., Schibrowsky, J. a. and Drago, W. (2007), "The interdependence of the factors influencing the perceived quality of the online learning experience: A causal model", *Journal of Marketing Education*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 140–153.

Peng, C.H. (2008), "Chinese adolescent student service quality and experience in an international tertiary education system", *Adolescence*, Vol. 43 No. 171, pp. 661-680.

Pereda, M., Airey, D. and Bennett, M. (2007), "Service quality in higher education: The experience of overseas students", *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 55-67.

Peterson, S.E. and Miller J.A. (2004), "Comparing the quality of students' experiences during cooperative learning and large-group instruction", *The Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 97 No. 3), pp. 123-133.

Scaffidi, A. K. and Berman, J. E. (2011), "A positive postdoctoral experience is related to quality supervision and career mentoring, collaborations, networking and a nurturing research environment", *Higher Education*, Vol. 62 No. 6, pp. 685–698.

Shanahan, P. and Gerber, R. (2004), "Quality in university student administration: stakeholder conceptions", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 12 No. 4, pp. 166–174.

Simpson, K. and Tan, S. (2009), "A home away from home? Chinese student evaluations of an overseas study experience", *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 5-21.

Staddon, E. and Standish, P. (2012), "Improving the student experience", *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 46 No. 4, pp. 631–648.

Stake, J. E. and Malkin, C. (2003), "Students' quality of experience and perceptions of intolerance and bias in the women's and gender studies classroom", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 174–185.

Stodnick, M. and Rogers, P. (2008), "Using SERVQUAL to measure quality of the classroom experience", *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 115-133.

Tam, M. (2006), "Assessing quality experience and learning outcomes: Part I: instrument and analysis", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 14 No. 1, pp. 75–87.

Tam, M. (2007), "Assessing quality experience and learning outcomes: Part II: findings and discussion", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 61–76.

Thorpe, R., Holt, R., Macpherson, A. and Pittaway, L. (2005), "Using knowledge within small and medium-sized firms: A systematic review of the evidence", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 7 No. 4, pp. 257-281.

Transfield, D., Denyer, D. and Smart P. (2003), "Towards a methodology for developing evidence-based-informed management knowledge by means of systematic review", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 14 No. 3, pp. 207-222.

Tsinidou, M., Gerogiannis, V. and Fitsilis, P. (2010), "Evaluation of the factors that determine quality in higher education: An empirical study", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 227-244.

Voss, R. (2009), "Studying critical classroom encounters: The experiences of students in German college education", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 156–173.

Ward, M. E., Peters, G. and Shelley, K. (2010), "Student and faculty perceptions of the quality of online learning experiences", *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, Vol. 11 No.3, pp. 57-77.

Waugh, R. F. (1990), "Quality of student experiences at university: A Rasch measurement model analysis", *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 45 No. 2, pp. 183–206.

Waugh, R. F. (2003), "Evaluation of quality of student experiences at a university using a Rasch measurement model", *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 145–168.

Webber, M., Lynch, S. and Oluku, J. (2013), "Enhancing student engagement in student experience surveys: a mixed methods study", *Educational Research*, Vol. 55 No. 1, pp. 71–86.

Wilkins, S. and Balakrishnan, M. S. (2013), "Assessing student satisfaction in transnational higher education", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 143–156.

Yang, J.Y., Tipton, F.B. and Li, J. (2011), "A review of foreign business management in China", *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, Vol. 28 No. 3, pp. 629-659.

Yeo, R.K. (2008), "Brewing service quality in higher education: Characteristics of ingredients that make up the recipe", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 266-286.

Yeo, R. K. (2009). Service quality ideals in a competitive tertiary environment. *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 48 No. 1, pp. 62–76.

Yeo, R.K. and Li, J. (2012). Beyond SERVQUAL: The competitive forces of higher education in Singapore. *Total Quality Management and Business Excellence*, 25(1-2), 95-123.

Yorke, M. (2000), "The quality of the student experience: What can institutions learn from data relating to non-completion?", *Quality in Higher Education*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 61–75.

Zehrer, A. (2007), "The justification of journal rankings – A pilot study", *Scandinavian Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, Vol. 7 No. 2, pp. 139-156.

## Appendix 1

| Research Streams | Research Methods Used | | | | Type of Research | | Unit of Analysis | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Case Study | Content Analysis | Focus Groups or Interviews | Survey or Questionnaire | Conceptual | Empirical | Domestic Students | External stakeholders | International Students | Organization | Students in General |
| Exploration of Learning Experience | 1 | 0 | 3 | 5 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 5 |
| Exploration of Student Experience | 2 | 0 | 6 | 11 | 4 | 13 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 10 |
| Gender differences in assessment of HE experience | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Improvement in quality of student experience | 4 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 4 |
| Student satisfaction with HE experience | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Total | 7 | 1 | 11 | 26 | 10 | 32 | 1 | 1 | 5 | 12 | 26 |