



Engaging Students at the Solomon Group Education and Training Academy: A Case Study

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Abstract

The purpose of this case study was to examine student engagement at a Māori private training establishment. This organisation operates out of two sites in south and east Auckland. We run part-time and full-time courses, both during the day and at night, based on a community need for flexibility in access to learning. We are a second-chance education option for adults who have not succeeded in mainstream education. Our focus is literacy, numeracy and self-development, and we work with people whose skills range from being illiterate to having a level 3 qualification (and thus wanting a bridge into higher level tertiary education).

Our emphasis is on individual learning and teaching through a curriculum based on students' needs as opposed to subject-focused teaching methods. Strategies we value include building relationships, providing support into independence and celebrating cultural diversity. This case study was done as part of a wider study funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) that involved nine tertiary institutions. The overall study looked at student engagement using a questionnaire for students and teachers.

Our particular case study used the results from question 2 of the questionnaire. This question asked students how important they thought the 26 items were and how well the 26 items were performed at our institution. We had 64 participants (82.7 percent response rate) and we used teachers and teacher aides whom the students did not know (we swapped sites for the day) to ensure untainted data. We were also able to use reader/writers for those students who felt they required them. We did not sample those students whose literacy levels were lower than foundation level two as we felt that this could potentially be detrimental to their overall perception of self and their learning.

Results show that our students have very high expectations. Thirteen of the 26 items were judged to be important/very important by at least 95 percent of our participants. Of the 13 items, the following six related directly to teachers and teaching.

- teachers providing feedback that improves my learning
- teachers challenging me in helpful ways
- teachers making themselves available to discuss my learning
- teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn
- teachers providing opportunities to apply my learning
- teachers caring about my learning.

Another six related to the work of the organisation as a whole, including management, teachers and administrative staff:

- learning support services being available at the times I need them
- receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study
- being given information on how systems work
- knowing how to contact people to get help
- having access to the learning resources I need
- staff creating a pleasant learning environment.

Solomon Group exceeded expectations significantly ($p < .05$) on “teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn”. Although we did not exceed students’ expectations on the other five items in a statistically significant way, there was little difference between importance and expectation on these items and the differences could have been due to chance. These results suggest that we are doing well on these 12 items most important items.

While we were pleased with the results, it is always possible to improve performance and our values demand this. Part of our commitment to our students and staff involves continuous improvement. We looked for items with the largest gaps between importance and performance to see what we could do to close the gaps, even though the gaps were not statistically significant. The items we chose to focus on were: “teachers providing feedback that improves my learning”; “teachers making themselves available to discuss my learning”; “learning support services being available at the times I need them”; and “having access to the learning resources I need”.

There were two identified limitations to this case study. As a “non-academic” institution, the data analysis and write-up was a difficult exercise; also, we were unable to sample all of our learners because of their low level of literacy. To have done so would have been a step backwards for our students with regards to their confidence levels and we were not prepared to do this. Overall the results of the case study indicated that students are engaging positively and successfully. The recommendations were that we keep on doing what we are doing as our students are satisfied with this.

Introduction

*Hūtia te rito o te harakeke
Kei hea te kō'mako, e ko'
Ui mai ki ahau
'He aha te mea nui o te ao?'
Māku e kī atu
'He tangata, he tangata, he tangata'*

*Rip out the centre of the flax
Where will the bell bird be, lass?
Ask me
'What is the most important thing in the world?'
And I will reply
'It is people, people, people'*

In 2007, Solomon Group Education and Training Academy (Solomon Group), a Māori private training establishment, was asked to take part in a project that looked at how students engage with learning in tertiary institutions. This project was funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) as a two-year study entitled “Improving Student Engagement in Tertiary Settings”. Solomon Group was one of nine tertiary institutions taking part in the study. There were also two universities, one wānanga, four polytechnics, and a community organisation.

Student engagement is an area which has been extensively studied over a number of years. For the purposes of the TLRI project, student engagement was defined as “students’ cognitive investment in, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning” (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2008, p. 1).

Literature review

As part of the overall TLRI project, a literature review was conducted by the participants. Ninety articles were looked at by the group of researchers. To enable articles to be summarised consistently, a template was developed based initially on themes identified by Kuh et al. (2005) such as “student teacher transactions” and “institutional support” (Zepke et al., 2008). The articles were largely from different countries, with seven being New Zealand-based studies. For a Māori private training establishment, three themes not prominent in the templates seemed to “fit” best with our students, our organisation’s values and how we do things. These were: the importance of course structure; the importance of cultural congruence (both at a learner and an organisational level); and the importance of relationships in achieving successful student engagement.

Course structure can be seen to be an important element in the context of adult student engagement. Alexander and McDougall (2003) examined different models of structuring student tutorials as a way of looking at how students engage with their learning. Traditional theory-based

tutorials were redesigned so that problem solving and practical applications of theory were undertaken by the students in small groups. Assessment was also redesigned in keeping with the changing course emphasis. Qualitative analysis indicated that there was a positive response to these strategies from both the students and staff. Law's (2005) research examined programmes that emphasised the importance of student-centred learning when looking at course structure. The study was conducted with 40 preservice teachers enrolled in a six-week environmental education course at the Christchurch College of Education. The study examined student engagement through the lens of experiential learning and indicated that experiential learning contributed to the students' motivation to learn; helped them to connect their own experiences with theory; allowed them to use active decision making; and helped them analyse society from an objective viewpoint. The study identified four effective teaching and learning strategies including the importance of student-centred learning, and the students "owning" their learning.

Student-centred course structure (focusing on student need) leads to better engagement than subject-centred course structure. The emphasis on the individual rather than the subject would seem to play a major part in successful student engagement. Solomon and Solomon (2008) emphasised that successful student engagement occurs when each student is treated as an individual. Their experiences have led them to believe that basic foundation education skills (reading, writing, spelling, numeracy, and speaking and listening) are not being taught well in many educational institutions (especially high schools and tertiary institutions) because of the emphasis on "teaching the subject" (Solomon & Solomon, 2008, p. 30). They assert that basing a curriculum on students' needs can have a huge effect on student engagement, and on a student's educational experiences overall.

The culture of the classroom and the organisation can be instrumental in successful teacher–learner engagement. Morris (2005) studied law students and engagement and found that (in line with other similar overseas research) numbers of students describe the experience at law school as being highly competitive and alienating. The study found that students were expected to fit into the culture of the department, and that the department had set expectations on how the students would engage with both their peers and their lecturers.

Cultural alignment would also seem to contribute to student engagement. Gavala and Flett (2005) examined student engagement through the effects of stress and discomfort on 122 Māori psychology students and found that providing a comfortable academic environment that students saw as being culturally-congruent increased their perceived psychological well-being, academic enjoyment and motivation—all of which contributed to them engaging with their learning.

Cultural appropriateness (at both a student/classroom and organisational level) would also seem to support successful student engagement. Watene (2006) examined engagement through a programme that integrated community learning with Māori principles of learning. The strategy was designed to increase retention and academic achievement of Māori students in a tertiary institution. This was primarily a descriptive study and showed how students learning in a culturally appropriate way can be used as a strategy to support both retention and success.

The positive relationships developed as part of the teaching–learning situation can also be seen to support student learning and success. Hawk, Cowley, Hill, and Sutherland (2002) used three different research projects (in primary, secondary and tertiary settings) to look at engagement of Māori and Pasifika students. The study clearly found that the relationship between the teacher and the learner was extremely important. When a positive relationship existed, students were more motivated to learn, to actively participate in their classes and to be more effective as learners.

Other commentators in this subject area support this stance. Wilke (2005) argues that “you will make a difference with (young) people when you show you care about who they are as individuals” (p. 23), while Pomeroy (2002) asserts that “key features of a successful student-teacher relationship are dialogue and students knowing that a teacher believes in them” (p. 23).

Peer relationships would also seem to be important to successful student engagement. Russell (2007) looked at student engagement through studying student’s perceptions of how peer relationships influenced students to maintain motivation and persistence, and whether peer relationships helped to increase feelings of self efficacy, enhance learning and provide emotional support. The study found that peer support was important to feelings of integration and that peer interaction did in fact provide academic benefits.

These seven New Zealand-based studies were influential in informing our case study research.

Who are we?

Solomon Group is a second-chance education organisation. It is a family-owned and operated business with two sites in Auckland (Manurewa and Panmure). We deliver a number of “stepped” courses which target basic foundation education skills (reading, writing, spelling, numeracy and speaking and listening) along with personal development. Our courses are “staircased” from pre-literate level to foundation level 3. We also run a large Counties Manukau-wide youth transition service project as a separate contract. Our clients and students are primarily beneficiaries, many of whom have not had a “good” experience in mainstream education. We are not an “academic” institution as such, nor do we assert this stance. We are a community-based tertiary provider who believes that every individual has the right to an education. Our work is based around a Māori kaupapa and as such we will be using the following concepts as a framework for our discussion in this case study:

- tū rangatira (dignity of the person)
- aroha ki te tangata (social responsibility)
- mana tangata (integrity)
- pūkenga (professionalism)
- kaingākau (commitment).

These concepts are our organisation's founding values—they dictate how we work at an ideological level. "Our organisation starts with and stands on those values" (Solomon & Solomon, 2008, p. 34).

With regards to how we structure our day-to-day business practices, we use the following model to dictate how we operate in any and all transactions:

- rangatiratanga (leadership)
- wairuatanga (spiritual dimension)
- kōtahitanga (unity)
- mana tūpuna/whakapapa (people's place in the world)
- manaakitanga (mutual respect and reciprocity)
- whanaungatanga (value of the collective).

This model embodies what we believe will reflect the New Zealand society of tomorrow. The actions and behaviours of all our staff and students are governed by the following rules which reflect the model we work to:

- show respect (for self, for others and for property)
- be positive
- no "put downs" (it is okay to make a mistake—no-one will put you down)
- show commitment (meeting the "norms" of the organisation).

Supporting positive student engagement is "part and parcel" of our organisation's guiding principles, rules and values.

Pastoral care is strongly emphasised at Solomon Group to the extent that we have a dedicated student liaison position at each campus. These staff support, cajole, care for and help students with any and all issues so that the students can concentrate on their learning. "Many of the students are fragile. Many have a variety of barriers to overcome or 'baggage'. ... Students can't learn if their other issues and concerns aren't being addressed" (Solomon & Solomon, 2008, p. 34).

We also ensure that we celebrate any success. Recognising and rewarding a student's effort is an integral part of ensuring that they continue to enjoy learning.

We cannot emphasise enough how important quality staff are to our organisation as a whole. We employ staff for their passion for learning and concern for individuals. We also make a commitment to ensure that they have access to the training and support which will enable them to excel in their role. We recognise that the most important factor in the success of our organisation is our staff.

Our teaching/engagement style

Our way has always been to teach the individual student rather than teach the subject. Our founding directors (Judy Solomon and Frank Solomon) both come from a mainstream educational background each with more than 40 years of experience. Both became concerned at the numbers of young people who were dropping out of school with no formal education skills and so Solomon Group was born.

At Solomon Group, teaching the student involves embracing concepts such as “accelerated learning” and “learning styles”. Accelerated learning is a technique which targets an increase in the rate of learning (Lozanov, 1978). A number of the techniques are aimed at making learning fun and creative so that engagement occurs and information is retained. Learning styles empower people to understand how they best learn (Dunn & Dunn, 1987) and include using a number of factors which influence people’s learning. These two concepts resonate with our organisation’s values and overall model as they emphasise the importance of looking at each student holistically—everyone has their own “context”. “Through the culture of the indigenous people of New Zealand we can [then] edify and celebrate the importance of each person’s cultural base and establish common values” (Solomon & Solomon, 2008, p. 33).

At Solomon Group there is recognition that adults have different learning needs. Structure is very definitely required, as is recognition of prior knowledge and experience. It is also important that students own their own learning goals (we use individual learning plans for this), that there is varied practice, repetition and regular reviewing taking place (Solomon & Solomon, 2008).

Another point of difference between Solomon Group and other tertiary institutions is that each class has both a tutor and a teacher aide. This greatly assists with student engagement as it ensures that sufficient individual support is available. The value of this practice was detailed in the Learning for Living Initiative case study (Christiansen, 2006).

The case study

In this case study we will be exploring the following questions that informed the overall study question of “How do institutional and non-institutional learning environments influence student engagement with learning in diverse tertiary settings?”, namely:

- What did our students tell us was important?
- What do we do well that our students don’t think is important?
- What do we do well that students do say is important?
- What can we improve on?

The method section will look at the TLRI project and processes. The results section will outline what the students told us about their engagement (using question 2 from the TLRI questionnaire), and the discussion section will endeavour to put these findings into a context—our context.

Methodology

The survey was part of a larger data collection process for the TLRI project conducted by all nine participating tertiary institutions. Our method for the data collection is described below. Zepke et al. (2008) have described fully the methodology used in this project. Here, a summary of the methods used to obtain the data suffices.

Introductory session—before the data collection

We visited classrooms one week before the survey, and spoke with the students about the project. The purpose of this was to ensure that each of the students knew what the project was about; who was involved; what the survey covered; and that participation was voluntary. We emphasised that students were able to withdraw from the process (or could choose not take part at all) without any ramifications. We also took this opportunity to notify the students that the data collection process was being conducted by a different tutor or teacher aide from our other campus. We wanted to let them know that their usual teacher and teacher aide would not be there for the session.

Data collection session

We swapped teachers and teacher aides between our Manurewa and Panmure campuses for the data collection sessions. This meant that the staff from the other campus (whom the students had no relationship with) conducted the session with each other's classes. This was done so that the teachers about whose teaching practice the students were responding were not present as the students did the survey—so they could be seen to be able to answer more honestly.

Each of the 67 students was given a copy of the questionnaire to complete. The students completed the survey and then were invited to hand their document in. There were two who were hesitant to hand in the survey and one of the students indicated that he wanted to take the questionnaire home to think about it. In the end, we received 64 completed questionnaires, which is a very high response rate.

Reader/writers

It is important to note that we also offered our respondents the choice of reader/writer assistance to help with completing the questionnaire. We are a literacy/numeracy provider and we knew that some of our students could struggle with some of the vocabulary, concepts and word recognition throughout the questionnaire. It was definitely not our intention to make our students feel embarrassed, and offering this resource seemed the best way to ensure that all of the students enjoyed the process rather than felt threatened by it. This strategy had approval from the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

Students not included in the data collection process

For this study, we consciously made a decision to survey only those students who were at foundation level 2 or above. The point of this strategy was to ensure that we did not further reinforce some students' insecurities about learning—they would have struggled with understanding and contextualising the content. We have numbers of students who speak English as a second language (ESOL), including students who are illiterate in both their own language and English. A side benefit with this strategy was that we could also circumvent a potential issue where our ESOL students (mainly from overseas) based their responses on deferring to their teachers' position rather than responding according to their own experiences (Beasley & Pearson, 1999).

Demographics

The majority of the respondents were female and over 21 years of age and indicated that their mode of study was face-to-face and that they were full-time. The two highest groups responding to the survey with regards to ethnicity were Māori followed by Pasifika. Table 1 summarises the participants.

Table 1 **Characteristics of Solomon Group respondents**

		Solomon Group %
Gender	Female	76.6
	Male	23.4
Age	Under 20	18.8
	Over 21	81.2
Mode of study	Face-to-face	97.6
	Distance	2.4
Method of study	Part-time	0.0
	Full-time	100.0
Ethnicity	N.Z. Pakeha	16.4
	Māori	27.4
	Pasifika	23.2
	Asian	15.1
	Other: Iraqi, Iranian, Northern European ...	17.8
Total returns	n	64
Response rate		95.5%

Results

We had a 95.5 percent return rate for the student questionnaire, with a total number of 64 participants. In our case study we bring together two different data sets. The first shows how important each of the 26 items in question 2 was to students. We have divided “importance” into three frequency bands. The first band, identified as “H” in Table 2, shows items that more than 80 percent of respondents thought to be important or very important. The second, designated as “M” (medium importance), identifies items that between 50 and 79 percent of respondents thought were important or very important. The third band, dubbed “L”, singles out items supported by fewer than 50 percent of respondents as important or very important.

The second data set answers the question “How well are the 26 items performed in our institution?” We examined the differences between the scores for importance and performance. On every item our students showed a difference between their ratings for important/very important and how well they were performed. We think that where percentages for the “how well things were done” response were similar to or bigger than the percentage response for “importance”, student expectations could be said to have been met. But where respondents scored items more highly on importance than on how well things were done at a significant ($p < .05$) level, student expectations were not met. The symbol “#” indicates where the differences were significant at the 5 percent level. Table 2 provides details.

Table 2 Importance of and how well 26 items were performed

Question 2 statements	Importance/ How well done	Percentage	Importance
1: Teachers providing prompt feedback	Importance*	95.3	H
	How well**	92.2	
2: Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning	Importance	100.0	H
	How well	91.6	
3: Teachers challenging me in helpful ways	Importance	96.8	H
	How well	93.8	
4: Teachers making themselves available to discuss my learning	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	87.5	
5: Teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn	Importance	96.9	H
	How well	93.8	#
6: Teachers making the subject really interesting	Importance	93.7	H
	How well	90.1	
7: Teachers valuing my prior knowledge	Importance	92.2	H
	How well	85.9	
8: Teachers being enthusiastic about their subject	Importance	90.6	H
	How well	87.5	
9: Teachers encouraging me to work independently	Importance	92.2	H
	How well	89.0	
10: Teachers encouraging me to work with other students	Importance	92.2	H
	How well	93.8	#
11: Teachers recognising that I am employed	Importance	39.1	L
	How well	37.5	
12: Teachers recognising that I have family and community responsibilities	Importance	90.6	H
	How well	87.4	
13: Learning support services being available at the times I need them	Importance	96.8	H
	How well	85.9	
14: Receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study	Importance	98.4	H
	How well	90.6	
15: Knowing how to find my way around	Importance	92.2	H
	How well	97.4	#
16: Teachers providing opportunities to apply my learning	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	82.8	
17: Being given information on how systems work	Importance	96.9	H
	How well	89.1	
18: Knowing how to contact people to get help	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	89.1	
19: Being challenged by the subject I am learning	Importance	93.8	H
	How well	85.9	
20: Having access to the learning resources I need	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	87.5	
21: Having my cultural background respected	Importance	87.5	H
	How well	93.8	#
22: Teachers caring about my learning	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	93.8	
23: Learning to effect change in the community/society	Importance	87.7	H
	How well	82.8	
24: Being encouraged to question teachers' practice	Importance	86.0	H
	How well	87.5	
25: Staff creating a pleasant learning environment	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	94.7	
26: Learning to use subject knowledge in practice	Importance	95.3	H
	How well	90.6	#

* Combines very important and important

** Combines very well and well

On 21 of the 26 items, the differences between “importance” and performance were not significant. We interpret this as saying that Solomon Group met expectations as the differences on these items could have been due to chance. But on three items expectations were significantly exceeded ($p < .05$): on item 5 “teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn”; item 10 “teachers encouraging me to work with other students”; item 15 “knowing how to find my way around”; and item 21 “having my cultural background respected”. On item 26, “learning to use subject knowledge in practice”, students’ expectations were not met at a statistically significant level. But as Solomon Group does not directly prepare its students for a specific workplace, this result is not surprising.

We tested our assumption that our results were positive by constructing a scattergram using the data from question 2. Figure 1 offers another view of the importance of items to students’ engagement and how well we performed on the 26 items. The small circles above the 45 degree reference line show where items were judged to be more important than how well they were being done, and those below are where performance on an item exceeded its importance.

Figure 1 **Scattergram showing “importance” of and performance on items**

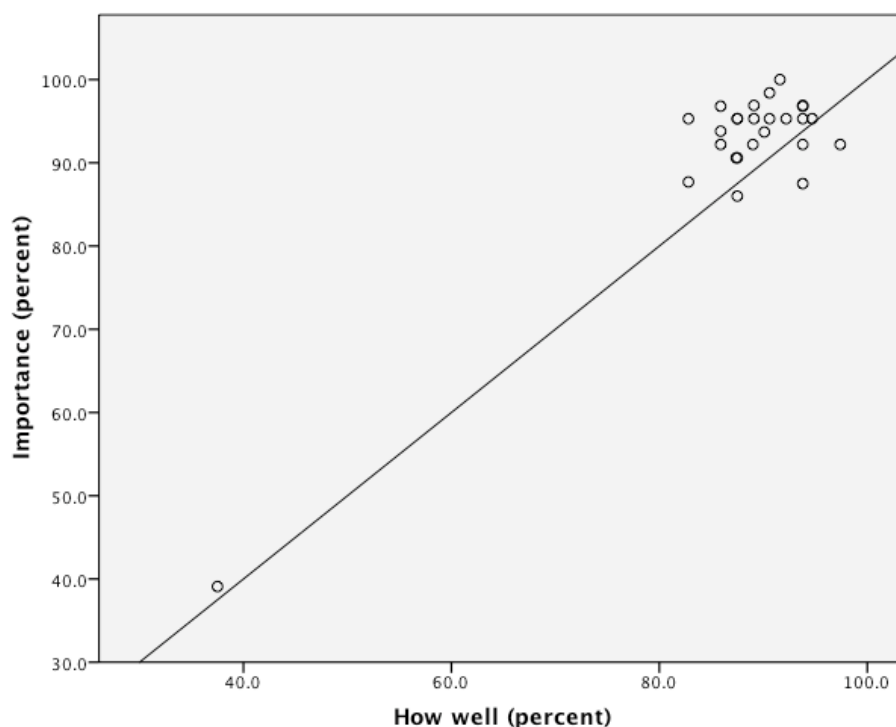


Figure 1 confirms that students were generally satisfied with Solomon Group’s performance. All but one item cluster at the top right corner, with items scoring above 80 percent on both importance and performance. Below the line are the four items on which performance was significantly better than expectations. All but one of the items appearing above the line are clustered closely together. This shows that for all but that one item there was little difference between importance and performance. The lowest plot point refers to the item “recognising that I am employed”. As our students are generally not employed, this result is not surprising.

Discussion

Our discussion is shaped to answer the research questions.

What did our students tell us was important?

Judging by the important/very important data in Table 2, our students have very high expectations. Thirteen of the 26 items were judged to be important/very important by at least 95 percent of our participants. Of the 13 items, the following six related directly to teachers and teaching:

- teachers providing feedback that improves my learning
- teachers challenging me in helpful ways
- teachers making themselves available to discuss my learning
- teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn
- teachers providing opportunities to apply my learning
- teachers caring about my learning.

Another six related to the work of the organisation as a whole, including management, teachers and administrative staff:

- learning support services being available at the times I need them
- receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study;
- being given information on how systems work
- knowing how to contact people to get help
- having access to the learning resources I need
- staff creating a pleasant learning environment.

While it is invaluable to know what students consider as important/very important, it is even more valuable to understand whether students think we meet their expectations. We looked first at the six items in the teaching group. Of the items that more than 95 percent of students thought to be important/very important, Solomon Group exceeded expectations significantly ($p < .05$) on “teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn”. Although we did not exceed students’ expectations on the other five items in a statistically significant way, the clustering of items pictured in Figure 1 suggests that there was little difference between importance and expectation on them and the differences could have been due to chance. The items related to efforts by the whole organisation similarly clustered very closely on the scattergram. Even though the performance did not significantly exceed importance on any of these six items, the scattergram shows importance/performance closely clustered, suggesting no great gap between them. These results suggest that we are doing well on these 12 items most important items.

We found that on one item, thought to be important/very important by more than 95 percent of our students, we do not meet expectations. The item is “learning to use subject knowledge in practice”. This is difficult to respond to as our organisation does not offer vocational programmes.

We accept and respect that our students think that learning subject knowledge is important for them, but beyond explaining to them that we do not offer vocational programmes, we cannot address their desires. And it is in this area of subject knowledge and vocational aspects of training that students thought we performed least well.

It is of great importance to us to find out whether these results match the philosophy of Solomon Group. Our organisation's philosophy is that we are concerned for the educational development of the individual. Tū rangatira (dignity of the person) is a core value supporting this and our motto affirms that we are "committed to the educational development of the *individual*". Our results support these values, as on five of the six most important teaching items our performance meets expectations. On one, indeed, performance exceeds expectations significantly. The results suggest that our tutors and teacher aides address what is important to our students by caring about each of our student's learning and providing daily opportunities for students to work one-on-one in order to bridge gaps in their learning. This care and support of each student is rewarded in these results.

What do we do well that our students do not think is important?

When we looked more closely at what our students thought to be important/very important, we found that 25 of 26 items were judged to be important/very important by more than 80 percent of our students. Only one item, "teachers recognising that I am employed" was considered to be of low importance. Given the make-up of our students this is not surprising. Given this result, we decided to examine items that between 80 percent and 90 percent of students thought important/very important, redefining these as low importance items to these students. Only three items fell into this category: item 21 "having my cultural background respected"; item 23 "learning to effect change in the community/society"; and item 24 "being encouraged to question teachers' practice". On two of these items ("having my cultural background respected" and "being encouraged to question teachers' practice") students thought we exceeded their expectations, that we were doing very well. The difference between importance and performance on the third item could have been due to chance.

We are a Māori organisation that emphasises Māori values in learning. It was not surprising, therefore, that we should exceed students' expectations on the cultural respect item. That we exceeded expectations on "being encouraged to question teachers' practice" was more surprising. However, our rigorous evaluation and feedback loops may contribute to this result. That students thought that "learning to effect change in the community/society" was important/very important and that they thought we met their expectations could be explained by the daily practice of our values: aroha ki te tangata (social responsibility); kaingākau (commitment); tū rangatira (dignity of the person); and pūkenga (professionalism). These results support our organisation's value of pūkenga as we strive to maintain professional standards in all of our interactions—both with and for staff and students.

We were amazed that so many items were judged to be important/very important. While an explanation for this must be tentative, we think it may be due to the fact that students were so

engaged in their learning that everything is important to them. Our approach to feedback to improve learning makes students aware of a wide range of important issues to them. Our belief in continuous improvement continuously alerts students to a wide range of educational issues. For example, all students complete a course/tutor evaluation which is carried out twice yearly. All tutors complete a course evaluation annually. Information from these two sources of feedback informs the discussion and revision (where appropriate) of each course. We also seek feedback on management performance from all staff once a year. Feedback alone is not enough. We work very hard to ensure that any relevant feedback is acted on and this could well have had an effect on these results.

What do we do well that students say is important, and why?

We have already listed and discussed the items judged to be most important by our students. Here we explore possible reasons for students judging three items to be of greatest importance.

Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning

At the end of each term (four times during the year), students are provided with feedback which compares their individual learning against predetermined goals that were set in conference with their tutor. Certificates and other ongoing forms of reward confirm and edify “excellence”.

Teachers caring about my learning

Solomon Group management has learnt from experience that staff need to have a “heart” for our students. As we believe that this is an essential requirement for people working with our client group, this aspect heavily informs our recruitment processes.

Teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn

Our staff use techniques which we know make a difference to the learning for these students. An awareness of different learning styles informs all teaching practice and we also focus on the use of proven teaching strategies to consolidate learning. We do not use strategies that have already seen them “fail” in mainstream education.

Reasons students judge our performance to meet or exceed expectations

We next explore reasons for students judging our performance to meet or exceed their expectations on three items that were very important to them.

Teachers caring about my learning

Our students have a “wrap around” (holistic) programme so that they develop a warm relationship with the liaison person (who enrolls, exits and supports), as well as their tutor and their teacher aide. These staff members work together to facilitate the clients’ chances of success. Management personnel spend time in classrooms as well.

Teachers encouraging me to work with other students

We know from the research that an important part of student retention and engagement is peer support (Russell, 2007). We strongly encourage the tuakana/tēina concept wherein those who are more advanced help those who are not and they, in turn, are supported in their areas of weakness. Staff modelling reflects this concept at another level—staff collegiality and support is encouraged and expected at Solomon Group.

Teachers challenging me in helpful ways

At the beginning of each term the tutor will have a conference with each student and revisit the goals agreed upon in their individual learning plan. Then together they will establish a new individual learning plan for the next term. The evaluation of progress is ongoing and at the end of the term forms the basis of the student report, together with observations from the tutor and teacher aide which focus on such important attitudinal changes as persistence, attendance, motivation, positive attitude, commitment, support and concern for other students. Staff are encouraged to use “tough love” with their students so that after the sympathising comes the focus on rangatiratanga (self-determination).

Kaingāko (Commitment)

These results support our organisation’s value of kaingāko (commitment). We commit to delivering the best service we can to each of our students but we also expect students to commit to their own learning. Each student that comes in to a campus has a “one-on-one” meeting with a student liaison officer. They are taken through the student handbook and each party’s responsibility is clearly laid out to them. We find that not only is this a great way of empowering students, it also provides structure for learners around expectations and commitment to own their learning. We find that the rule around respect is the most potent force in resolving any class management issues and in creating self esteem in our many clients, who often present with very little.

This feedback from our students supports the directors’ “ways of doing things” as outlined in Solomon and Solomon (2008). It would also seem to support the assertions made by Pomeroy (2002) and Wilke (2005) about student engagement. Although these assertions were based on students in secondary schools, our results would indicate that students of all ages have the same need to be treated as individuals, and that student–teacher relationships and dialogue are pivotal to the success of the student.

What can we improve on?

This is a difficult question to answer as the results obtained from the questionnaire suggest that our students engage very well with their learning. However, it is always possible to improve performance and our values demand this. Aroha ki te tangata (social responsibility) and mana tangata (integrity) permeate every aspect of our work at Solomon Group. Part of our commitment to our students and staff to support these concepts involves continuous improvement. We looked for items with the largest gaps between importance and performance to see what we could do to close the gaps. We found four items where the gap was larger than 8 percent. These were: item 2 “teachers providing feedback that improves my learning”; item 4 “teachers making themselves available to discuss my learning”; item 13 “learning support services being available at the times I need them”; and “having access to the learning resources I need”. While the gap between importance and performance on these items was not significant, it was large enough to become the launching pad for further improvement.

As a first step we will talk to our staff and students to identify what can be done to improve performance on these items. We will then identify ways the gaps can be closed before implementing a quality improvement process. We will make sure that this work continues to be in culturally appropriate ways, as we agree with Watene (2006) that this is likely to further increase both student engagement and success. A second step is to continue with an active professional development approach for our staff. The culture and wairua that permeates this organisation has been the result of deliberate and well-planned professional development (both internal and external) and modelling. We recognise that the continued success of this organisation and its students rests with our staff—our most valuable asset. To this end we recognise that we must continue to develop their skills and talents. Ongoing professional development must continue to be a key focus of this organisation. Further, the research has shown us the value of regular feedback and a commitment to facilitate change where appropriate. This process will continue to develop within the organisation.

Conclusion

The results reported in this case study are gratifying for our organisation—staff, students and management. They support our philosophies, practices and ultimately the outcomes for our students. The project has also been confirmation of Solomon Group’s commitment to “good practice” for this sector. The results of this research should enhance our opportunities for ongoing and perhaps increased government contracts in the future. Solomon Group has greatly appreciated the opportunity to participate in this valuable research alongside our tertiary education partners. We wish to acknowledge Nick Zepke and Linda Leach for inviting our private training establishment to take part.

Ngā mihi nui ki a kōrua.

We would like to think that this research may help to raise the profile and credibility of the private training sector. It is a very important sector which serves a large and potentially valuable population of the community, yet often tends to be seen as the overlooked “poor cousin” in tertiary education.

Finally we would like to mention aroha ki te tangata (social responsibility) which is a core value for Solomon Group. The opportunity to develop the true potential of non-achieving adults is so vital because these people can, in the future and with caring, quality service, contribute significantly to the well-being of New Zealand communities. In the end, it is about helping realise the full potential of human capital of each of our students.

Ui mai, he aha te mea nui, māku e kī atu he tangata, he tangata, he tangata

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