



# Student Engagement: Student Expectations, Institutional Performance and Teacher Priorities—An Institutional Case Study

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## Abstract

This case study reports on research at a New Zealand institute of technology, a state-funded polytechnic delivering applied vocational education to more than 10,000 students every year (4500 equivalent full-time students). The institute provides a range of nationally and internationally recognised certificates, diplomas and degrees in automotive, business, exercise science, vet nursing and animal care, information technology, construction and built environment, engineering, hospitality, creative technologies, funeral services, hairdressing and beauty, English as a second language (ESOL), travel and tourism, and health.

The case study was part of a Teaching and Learning Research Initiative-funded research project on student engagement that involved nine institutions. The case study investigated two engagement strands<sup>1</sup>: transactional engagement (students engage with teachers), and institutional support (institutions provide an environment conducive to learning). Data from a student survey, teacher survey, and student interviews were used to compare student expectations, institutional performance, and teacher priorities on a range of dimensions. The institute performed well on most factors that students thought were important, but there was some evidence of it not fully meeting student expectations. Five factors important to institutional mission were examined—application of knowledge in practice, support, independent learning, working with others, and respect for cultural diversity. The institute performed well on these but there were some mismatches between institutional performance, teacher priorities and student expectations.

Several themes and recommendations emerged from the case study. The importance of good teaching to help students engage with difficult or unpopular subjects was reaffirmed, including the importance of interaction, prompt and useful feedback, respect, support and encouragement. Opportunities to apply learning were also important, so “theory” needs to be integrated with practice and taught in a practical context, not as a separate component. Learning support services were important in complementing but not replacing support and encouragement from teachers.

Informing students how institutional rules and systems work was not performed well by the institute or given high priority by teachers, but was regarded as important by students. Given that the institute provides considerable information on these matters

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<sup>1</sup> The conceptual organiser used for this project was developed from reviews of literature over time. Consequently it has evolved in terms of the number of lenses/strands used and terminology used. The evolving nature of the project explains the differences in the way the organiser is presented from the overview papers.

via handbooks, course outlines and orientation, an evaluation of the effectiveness of these is needed.

Being able to work independently is an important skill for the workplace and it is important to the institute's mission to provide applied vocational learning, but students did not regard it as very important. However, the interviews revealed that they undertook quite a lot of independent learning, but mostly in the form of reading and rote learning. Teachers may therefore need to provide help to improve students' self-directed learning.

Students did not think being encouraged to work with others was highly important, but this seemed to relate to negative experiences with group assessments. Students and teachers need training so that group assessments are well structured and managed.

All ethnic groups considered the institute performed well on respect for cultural identity and teachers accorded this a high priority in their practice. The importance of these efforts was confirmed by the finding that for students operating in an unfamiliar cultural environment, cultural respect was highly important.

There was no evidence that the needs of certificate and diploma/degree students differed. Therefore an approach to teaching that focuses on assumed differences (or deficits) between different types of students is not justified. Meeting the needs of different student groups and subjects is core business for teachers, not something just needed for certain groups of students.

In summary, the case study confirmed the importance of transactional engagement (students engage with their teachers and each other), teacher support and guidance, and cultural respect. Recommended areas for action include the teaching of "theory" in a way that integrates it with practice, ensuring students know how institutional systems and administration work, developing effective self-directed learning, and the management of group assessment.

## **Introduction**

Student engagement is a multi-faceted concept. It can be defined in terms of what students do, for example, "the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities" (Kuh, 2001); in terms of what institutions do, for example, to "generate conditions to stimulate involvement" (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009); and in terms of other influences affecting students' interactions with their institution. It is a complex process involving a range of student, institutional and external factors (Krause, 2005).

Student engagement has been widely researched in overseas contexts. In the United States much of this relates to the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which focuses on

four-year colleges and universities, and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) which focuses on two-year institutions. The NSSE uses five scale descriptors for engagement: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student–faculty interaction, supportive campus environment, and enriching educational experiences (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2009). Much of the research in the United States is based on the NSSE data (see for example Hu & Kuh, 2002, 2003; Kuh et al., 2005). The Australian equivalent of the NSSE is the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) which uses six scale descriptors: active learning, academic challenge, student and staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, supportive learning environment, and work integrated learning (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008). In the United Kingdom there is the National Student Survey, and some research has been generated from the Learning and Teaching for Social Diversity and Difference project (see for example Hockings, Cooke, & Bowl, 2007; Hockings, Cooke, Yamashita, McGinty, & Bowl, 2008); and by Barnett and Coate (2005), Bryson and Hand (2007), and Yorke (2006).

In New Zealand, there has been growing interest in engagement as part of the attention being placed on retention and success, but until recently little research. In 2007, Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) funding was obtained for a two-year research project on student engagement that involved nine institutions, and of which the case study reported in this paper was part. The first stage of the overall project was a literature review. Initially the review used the themes from the NSSE but in the end four strands were identified (Zepke et al., 2008). Based on the literature review and an evaluation against data collected from the TLRI project, Zepke and Leach (2009) developed a revised conceptual organiser for student engagement. They identified six strands: motivation and agency (engaged students are intrinsically motivated and want to exercise their agency); transactional engagement (students engage with teachers); transactional engagement (students engage with each other); institutional support (institutions provide an environment conducive to learning); active citizenship (students and institutions work together to enable challenges to social beliefs and practices); and non-institutional support (students are supported by family and friends to engage in learning).

The case study discussed in this paper is based on data from one of the participants in the TLRI project, an institute of technology, in relation to two of these strands: transactional engagement (students engage with teachers), and institutional support (institutions provide an environment conducive to learning). The institution is a state-funded polytechnic delivering applied vocational education to more than 10,000 students every year (4500 equivalent full-time students). It provides a range of nationally and internationally recognised certificates, diplomas and degrees in automotive, business, exercise science, vet nursing and animal care, information technology, construction and built environment, engineering, hospitality, creative technologies, funeral services, hairdressing and beauty, ESOL, travel and tourism, and health.

The focus of the institute’s mission is providing applied tertiary education and applied research in a vocational context. Implicit in this are the importance of applying learning in practice, the ability to work independently, and the ability to work with others – skills highly valued in the

workplace. The institute also has a commitment to fulfilling its Te Tiriti O Waitangi obligations, meeting the needs of Pacific peoples, and supporting the learning needs of all students. This case study reports on the extent to which these elements of institutional mission were being met and whether there were differences between ethnic groups and types of programme.

## Method

Three sources of data collected as part of the TLRI project were used in this case study: a student questionnaire ( $n = 155$ ), follow-up interviews with 10 students, and a teacher survey ( $n = 48$ ). In the student questionnaire, data was drawn from question 2, which focused on transactional engagement and institutional support. This question asked respondents to evaluate 26 items using two four-point scales: one asked how important the item was (very important, important, not important, or no importance), and the other asked how well it was being done (very well, quite well, not well, or poor). The 26 items covered transactions between teachers and students, transactions within the wider institution, and the effect of the teaching environment. The same 26 items (with some minor wording changes) were used in the teacher survey. This case study uses data from questions 2 and 3 in the teacher survey. Question 2 asked teachers how important they thought the items were to students on a four-point scale (very important, important, little importance and no importance), and question 3 asked teachers what priority these had in their teaching practice on a four-point scale (top, high, low or no priority). Descriptive statistical techniques were employed to analyse the data. Qualitative data from the interviews were also collected and used to supplement the quantitative data from the questionnaires.

## Results

The results for the 26 items from the student survey are in Table 1. The table shows how important the item was (% very important or important), how well the item was being done (% quite or very well), and the difference between the two ratings. For the purposes of analysis, a rating greater than 80 percent is considered “high”, between 50 percent and 80 percent “medium”, and below 50 percent “low”.

Table 1 **How important are these to your learning and how well are they being done? % very important or important, and very or quite well**

Item	Importance %	How well done %	Difference %	
Teachers teaching in ways that enable me to learn	99	90	-9	*
Learning to use subject knowledge in practice	99	89	-10	*
Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning	98	87	-11	*
Teachers providing prompt feedback	97	86	-11	*
Teachers being enthusiastic about their subject	97	91	-5	*
Receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study	97	86	-11	*
Teachers making the subject really interesting	95	91	-5	
Having access to the learning resources I need	95	88	-8	*
Being challenged by the subject I am learning	95	92	-4	
Staff creating a pleasant learning environment	95	88	-8	*
Teachers providing opportunities to apply my learning	94	85	-9	*
Teachers challenging me in helpful ways	93	86	-7	*
Knowing how to contact people to get help	93	88	-5	
Teachers caring about my learning	92	92	0	
Teachers making themselves available to discuss my learning	91	84	-7	*
Knowing how to find my way around	90	84	-6	
Being given information on how systems work	86	77	-9	*
Teachers valuing my prior knowledge	82	82	0	
Learning support services being available at the times I need them	79	87	7	
Teachers encouraging me to work independently	79	90	11	*
Teachers recognising that I have family and community responsibilities	76	76	0	
Teachers encouraging me to work with other students	76	89	13	*
Learning to effect change in the community/society	74	82	8	
Teachers recognising that I am employed	72	79	7	
Being encouraged to question teachers' practice	71	73	2	
Having my cultural background respected	68	88	20	*
Mean	88	86		
Standard deviation	10	5		

\* Statistically significant difference at 5% level

About two-thirds of the items were rated “high” importance. Most of these related to direct transactions between teachers and students. The importance of student engagement with their teachers was reinforced in the interviews. When asked about the things that engaged their interest in the subjects they were studying, two themes dominated. One was interest in the subject: “it’s all about a passion what I’m doing ... always had an interest in [subject]” (6); “[subject] that’s my passion” (10). The other was the teacher: “to have good teachers definitely helps” (2); “I found the tutor very good. It makes a big difference” (3). Even when interest in the subject was low, a good teacher was able to engage the students. One student commented that they had never liked a particular subject, but that they “had a really friendly teacher [who] made it easier to learn” (2). Another was worried that a subject would be boring but found that the teacher “was good and made it easy to understand” (1). Students wanted interaction: “encouraging questions and to-ing and fro-ing ... that is important because that’s where you learn” (3); “student interaction was great” (5); “that’s why I came to [polytech], to be in a classroom and be surrounded by other students” (3). They also wanted a relationship with their teachers that was based on respect: “they don’t talk down to you” (5).

It’s not like they are superior – they are on the same level as you ... to be spoken to like a human being ... at [secondary] school sometimes you get treated like crap ... they respect us and that helps, makes us want to learn. (6)

Teacher interest in supporting and encouraging student learning was also important. This ranged from low key support and encouragement to more active involvement and help:

They are on the same level as you but they know more ... and want to show you. ... They come over and are interested in what you are doing – they come over and ask questions. ... They have enthusiasm and it rubs off. ... They are not superior but someone [who] helps you. (6)

They push you ... it’s really good ... if you are about to give up she gets persuasive. (4)

Items in Table 1 related to support services, working independently and with others, family and community commitments, and cultural background were less important. In relation to support services, the findings are consistent with earlier research that most students use few support services but for those that use them they are crucial (Wilson, 2006). In the interviews, several students referred to specific instances where support services had helped; for example, the students’ association had helped one student with an issue: “they were good – we got a resolution” (3). Another used the learning centre for help with her first essay – “he was helpful and really great” (5) – but had not needed them since. Another used learning support for only one subject: “[it] was really tough and one of the people from the [learning] support services helped me so much” (10). Nearly all the students interviewed also referred to the support given by their teachers and how important this was for their learning: “if I’m struggling I talk with my tutor” (6). For most, their teachers were the first point of call if they didn’t understand something followed by the learning centre: “the tutors are really good – you can go straight to them. If they can’t give you detail on everything there is the learning centre and they are very good” (4).

By way of comparison, teachers were asked how important they thought each of the 26 items was to students. Figure 1 compares these ratings with the student ratings. For most of the items the student and teacher ratings were similar. The overall means were the same (88 percent), although the teacher ratings were more varied (standard deviation 14 percent versus 10 percent for the student ratings). However, four outliers are evident: knowing how to work within organisational rules, information about how the administration works, learning to effect change in the community, and having cultural background respected. The first three were more important to students than teachers had thought they would be and the fourth was less important. All four differences were statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

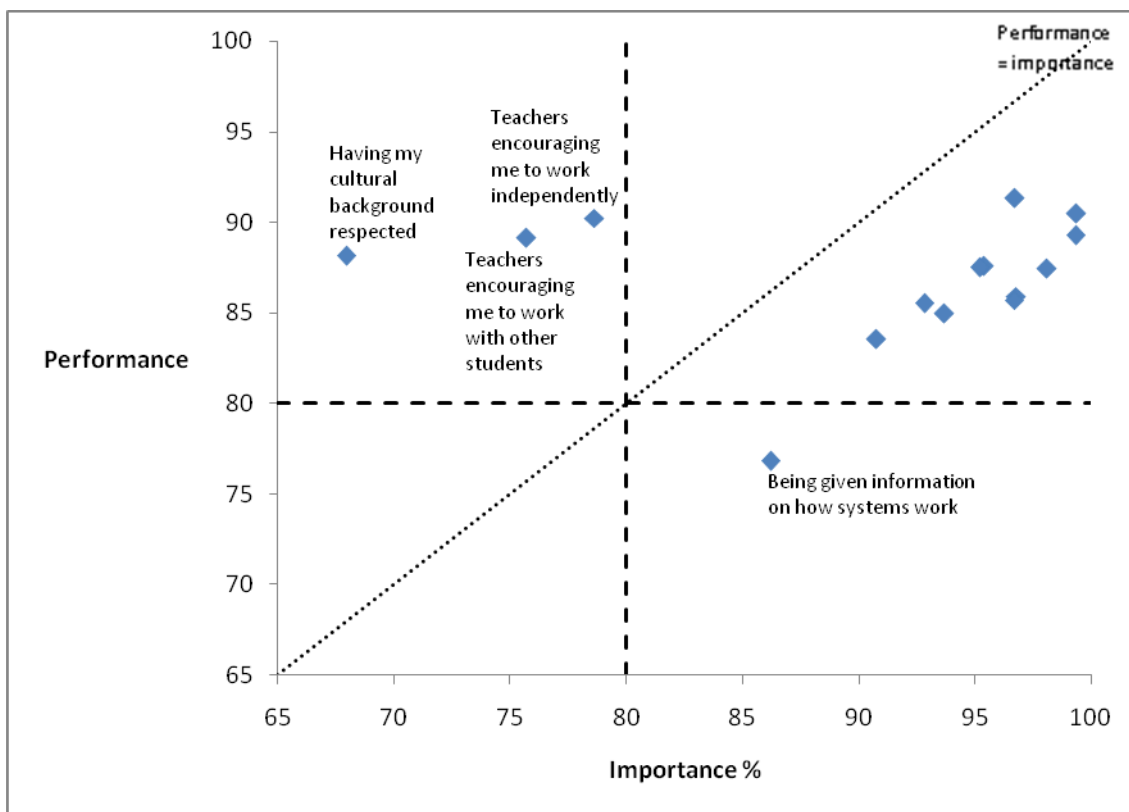




the items in the upper left and lower right quadrants where there is a mismatch between expectations and performance. These are discussed below.

Student expectations were also compared with teacher priorities to see whether teacher priorities were aligned with student preferences. In the teacher survey, respondents were asked what priority they placed on each of the 26 items in their teaching practice on a four-point scale (top, high, low, no priority). The percentage of teachers placing a high or top priority on each item is compared with the student importance ratings. The results are shown in Table 2.

Figure 2 Importance and performance compared—significant differences only



Most items (17) in Figure 2 were in the upper right quadrant, indicating that the institution did most of the things that mattered to students quite well. There is, however, a suggestion that the institution may not have fully met student expectations in relation to these, a finding consistent with those for the other institutions in the TLRI project (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2008).

Two of the items in the upper right quadrant in Figure 2, “learning to use subject matter in practice” and “providing opportunities to apply my learning”, relate closely to the institute’s mission to provide applied vocational learning. Teachers also accorded these items high priorities in their practice (98 percent and 94 percent – see Table 2). Students in the survey, particularly those enrolled in practical trades courses, commented on the importance of linking theory to practice and the importance of teachers relating their teaching to the “real” world: “most of them [tutors] have been in [industry] for years and have practical experience and they ... relate it to the real world” (2). One student explained that they found the theory tricky, but that when it was related to the practical “it clicks” (9). On the other hand, if there is “a tutor who just stands there and [talks] ... we’re not going to learn much” (9). In this regard timetabling may be important. There was evidence that in some instances the timetabling separated the theory and practical and therefore discouraged a linking of theory and practice: “in the morning we have a theory class ... we usually go through a book a week ... so theory in the morning and practical later”.

There is one item in the lower right quadrant in Figure 2, “being given information on how systems work”. Importance was “high” but the institution did not perform well in this regard. This

item was also accorded relatively low priority by teachers with only 42 percent according it top or high priority. Similarly, the item “helping students with organisational guidelines” received a priority rating of 71 percent compared to a student importance rating of 90 percent. The interviews provided two examples related to these. One student commented in relation to her first assignment that she had been unaware of the options for obtaining help:

I didn't understand. ... All those big words and I was scared to go and ask the tutor. I didn't know they would do that here. After the first assignment they told us. We were told to go to them. (4)

Table 2 **Student importance and teacher priority compared**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Student survey – importance (% important or very important)</b>	<b>Teacher survey – priority in practice (% top or high priority)</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Informing students about how the administration works	86	42	-45
Students having their cultural background respected	68	98	30
Teachers accommodating students who are employed	72	52	-20
Helping students work within organisational rules, guidelines	90	71	-19
Teachers encouraging students to work independently	79	96	17
Students learning to effect change in the community/society	74	57	-17
Teachers recognising students' family and community responsibilities	76	60	-16
Teachers encouraging them to work with other students	76	92	16
Students being encouraged to question and challenge teachers	71	85	14
Learning support services being available when needed	79	92	12
Teachers valuing students' prior knowledge and experience	82	92	10
Teachers caring about students' learning	92	100	8
Teachers making themselves available to discuss students' learning	91	98	7
Students being challenged in helpful ways	93	98	5
Students being challenged by the subject they are learning	95	92	-4
Teachers providing prompt feedback	97	100	3
Students knowing how to contact people to get help	93	96	3
Teachers making the subject really interesting	95	98	3
Students receiving feedback that improves their learning	98	100	2
Staff creating a pleasant learning environment	95	94	-2
Students learning to use subject knowledge in practice	99	98	-1
Teachers being enthusiastic about their subject	97	98	1
Students receiving helpful guidance and advice about their study	97	96	-1
Teachers teaching in ways that enable students to learn	99	100	1
Students having access to the learning resources students need	95	96	-1
Teachers providing opportunities to apply learning	94	94	0
Mean	88	88	0
Standard deviation	10.1	16.7	

The other area where students may not have been given information on how things work related to the institution's online learning facility. Many courses have online materials, but some students did not seem to know how to access them or whether they were important for their learning.

There are three items in the upper left quadrant in Figure 2, indicating items that students did not rate as highly important, but on which the institution performed well. Two of these relate closely to that part of the institution's mission to provide applied learning in a vocational context. The two items "teachers encouraging me to work independently" and "teachers encouraging me to work with other students" were performed well by the institute, and accorded high priority by teachers in practice (96 percent and 92 percent respectively). Both are skills highly valued in the workplace, but they were not rated as important by the respondents.

Although respondents to the survey did not rate being encouraged to work independently as highly important, most students interviewed did indicate that they undertook independent study to help them understand the work. One student's approach to this was to seek understanding rather than "learning it off by heart ... [because] if you can't tell somebody what it means you don't really understand it" (7). However, most students interviewed relied on reading and rote learning: "it's best to learn it off by heart ... and try and remember it" (1); "we had a topic I didn't have a clue about ... I just sat down, got my book out, started reading and looked through the PowerPoint [slides]" (2); "first read through what you need to learn ... keep reading until you [understand] it" (4); and "first of all I do a lot of reading, read over stuff until I get my head around it" (5).

Respondents to the student survey also did not rate being encouraged to work with others as highly important. The interviews suggested there were two aspects to this: (a) working with others in informal groups to discuss work and share problems, and (b) working with others to complete group assessments. In relation to the former there was plenty of evidence in the interviews that students formed groups with other students in their classes "to talk about different issues and problems" (2), and "get different ... points of view" (4); and that these informal groups were important for their learning: "it's better than a formal group" (2); "you get a team atmosphere, students helping each other, you learn quite a bit off other students" (3). One student commented on his performance in a correspondence course where there was no interaction with other students:

Although I passed ... I thought I could have done better if I'd been able to knock ideas around ... the easiest way to learn is to try to teach someone ... when you sit down with another student ... you can teach them something they are struggling with and vice versa – that's why you do it and how you learn. (3)

However, several students talked negatively about their experiences with group assessments. This included complaints about "freeloaders": "some people made more effort than others and it was a struggle" (3). Having to sit there and listen to group presentations also received adverse comment from one student who commented: "how much longer is this [presentation] going to go on for ... I don't know how much learning I got out of that" (5). Another student found her experience in a group assignment "degrading ... [because] one person dominated everyone else ... I gave her my

[contribution] ... and she changed the whole thing – half the words I couldn't pronounce" (4). On the other hand when a group worked well it helped the learning: "getting their knowledge and strengths is good – we worked that out in the first meeting – we worked out our strengths" (7).

The institute has a commitment to fulfilling its Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and meeting the needs of its culturally diverse student body. In this regard, it was interesting to note that the other item in the upper left quadrant in Figure 2, "having my cultural background respected", was the least important of all the items (68 percent) but that ratings for institutional performance (88 percent) and teacher priority (98 percent) were both high. The data for this item is analysed by ethnicity in Table 3. Although the sizes of the subgroups are relatively small, the data seems to show that the greater the institutional recognition accorded the cultural background of each group, the less important cultural respect becomes. For those groups operating in an unfamiliar cultural environment, the importance of cultural respect was "high". The data also show that the institute performed well across all ethnic groups. Few students commented on this in the interviews. All said they felt comfortable and at home at the institute, and one Māori student commented favourably on Te Whare Awhina, the institute's Māori support centre, in this regard. An international student commented that inappropriate behaviour can be a barrier to interaction with other students: "for example, pointing a finger is a negative for us but it's a positive for them" (10). However she felt accepted and valued because "everyone is friendly" (10).

Table 3 **Having my cultural background respected**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Importance %</b>	<b>How well done %</b>
NZ European	103	53	86
NZ Māori	25	70	91
Pacific	13	83	100
Asian	18	94	87
All non-NZ European	61	84	93

The institute is committed to supporting the learning needs of all its students. In this regard it is worth noting that institutional performance (see Table 1) and teacher priority (see Table 2) in relation to the availability of learning support services and access to learning resources were high. However, the items related to accommodating students who were employed and recognising students' family and community responsibilities were both accorded low priority by teachers (52 percent and 60 percent). On the other hand, institutional performance was higher (79 percent and 76 percent).

An analysis of the data according to the type of programme was also carried out to compare the results for certificates and diplomas/degrees. Anecdotally, some teachers thought that certificate students may have been more dependent on their teachers than diploma/degree students and may therefore have rated the importance of direct transactions with their teachers more highly, been

more reliant on support and guidance, and less inclined to work independently. Some teachers also thought that certificate teachers may use different teaching approaches in relation to these items and that this may be evidenced by respondents' ratings of how well these were performed.

Tables 4 and 5 show the differences in ratings for certificate and diploma/degree students where the differences were greater than 5 percent. In only four of the 26 items were the differences in importance greater than 5 percentage points (Table 4). None of these differences support the assumptions concerning differing student needs and none were statistically significant ( $p>0.3$ ). Nine of the differences in the performance ratings were greater than 5% points (Table 5). There was no difference in the performance rating for teachers being 'available to discuss my learning', and a lower performance rating by certificate students for availability of learning support services. On the other hand certificate students rated institutional performance in providing 'information on how systems work', 'prompt feedback', 'feedback that improves my learning', and 'guidance and support' more highly than did diploma/degree students. These differences may suggest greater efforts by certificate teachers to supporting their students. However, none of the differences were statistically significant ( $p>0.3$ ). Therefore, it can't be concluded with any certainty that there were differences between certificate and diploma/degree students and their teachers.

Table 4 **How important are these to your learning? Percentage important or very important**

	<b>Certificates (n = 88)</b>	<b>Diplomas and degrees (n = 55)</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Teachers valuing my prior knowledge	86	76	9.7
Teachers encouraging me to work independently	82	75	6.2
Teachers making the subject really interesting	93	98	-5.2
Being encouraged to question teachers' practice	70	76	-6.5



Table 5 **How well were these done? Percentage very well or quite well done**

	<b>Certificates (n = 88)</b>	<b>Diplomas and degrees (n = 55)</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Being given information on how systems work	79	73	6.4
Receiving helpful guidance and advice about my study	88	82	6.0
Teachers providing prompt feedback	89	83	6.0
Teachers providing feedback that improves my learning	89	84	5.8
Teachers challenging me in helpful ways	89	83	5.6
Teachers caring about my learning	90	96	-5.5
Having access to the learning resources I need	85	92	-7.0
Learning support services being available at the times I need them	83	91	-8.2
Having my cultural background respected	86	95	-9.6

## Discussion

Several themes and implications for practice emerge from this case study. First, the importance of good teaching is reaffirmed in the study. Good teachers can help students learn and help them engage with difficult or unpopular subjects. Students learn best when lessons are interactive, they are provided with prompt and useful feedback, and when they are respected, supported and encouraged. Opportunities to apply learning are also important. This has particular implications for the teaching of “theory” in the practical trades programmes offered by institutes of technology. “Theory” needs to be taught in a practical context, not as a separate component. Teachers need to link theory and practice in their lessons, perhaps by teaching theory in the workshop where possible. Also, separate timetabled theory classes without an immediate link to practical work should be avoided.

Learning support services, while not highly important for most students, play an important role for students who need them. This role is to complement but not replace support and encouragement from teachers. In this regard there is a need for learning support staff and teaching staff to work closely together.

Items related to knowing how things work were not performed well by the institute or given high priority by teachers, but were regarded as important by students. The two examples in the interviews related to information about the help available when completing assignments and the teacher’s role in that, and information on the institute’s online learning facility. Related to these may be other things that teachers often assume students know; for example, how to research and write an assignment or how to do self-directed study. Given that the institute provides considerable information on these matters via handbooks, course outlines and orientation, an evaluation of the effectiveness of these is needed.

Being able to work independently is an important skill for the workplace and important to the institute's mission to provide applied vocational learning. Students did not regard this as very important, but did indicate in the interviews that they undertook quite a lot of independent learning. However, this mostly took the form of reading and rote learning. These do not necessarily suit all subjects or topics, appear to be relatively unappealing ways to learn, and rote learning may encourage surface learning. This may explain the low importance placed on independent learning in the student survey. Teachers may therefore need to provide help, resources and activities to improve students' self-directed learning. It cannot be assumed that students know how to work independently in ways that best suit the material being studied.

The survey results indicated that students did not think being encouraged to work with others was highly important. From the interviews it seemed that this may relate to negative experiences with group assessments. It cannot be assumed that students know how to work effectively in groups and how to manage group difficulties. This suggests that for the benefits of group assessment to be realised, students may need training in these matters. Teachers may also need training so that group assessments are well structured and managed. On the other hand, students reported that working in informal groups with other students to discuss their work and share problems helped them learn. Teachers may have a role to play in fostering this by providing opportunities for interpersonal interactions and relationship building with other students.

The institute attracts a diverse range of students, so it was pleasing that all ethnic groups considered the institute performed well on respect for cultural identity and that teachers accorded this a high priority in their practice. The importance of these efforts was further confirmed by the finding that for students operating in an unfamiliar cultural environment, cultural respect was highly important.

There was no evidence that the needs of certificate and diploma/degree students differed. This suggests that an approach to teaching that focuses on assumed differences (or deficits) between different types of students is not warranted. Good teaching and support is the best approach for helping all students learn. This must be contextualised for the subject and student group being taught, but meeting the needs of different student groups and subjects is core business for teachers, not something just needed for certain groups of students.

In conclusion, this case study has confirmed the importance of transactional engagement (students engage with their teachers and each other), teacher support and guidance, and cultural respect. Areas for action include the teaching of theory, ensuring that students know how things work, developing effective self-directed learning, and the management of group assessment.

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