The double-edged sword of 'best aspects' and 'needs improvement' in student experiences: A qualitative analysis

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Abstract

Improving student experiences in higher education is of ongoing interest to colleges and universities across the globe. Non-university higher education institutions (NUHEIs) have outperformed universities in Australian national surveys on student experience. The present study examines qualitative responses of the Student Experience Survey within the context of Alphacrucis College (AC), a faith-based, private NUHEI to provide a contextualised understanding of NUHEIs as well as to explore reasons why NUHEIs outperform universities in most student experience categories. Content analysis revealed several themes in areas of 'best experience' and 'needs improvement.' Results were examined across AQF levels and three study modes, namely online, blended, and on-campus. Findings are discussed in terms of the NUHEI student experience, lecturer training, lecturer performance indicators, and institutional infrastructure.

Keywords

Student Experience, NUHEI, qualitative research, higher education

Student experience, completion, and retention are essential measures for Higher Education (HE) institutions. Government regulators in countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia use student feedback to measure and improve the quality of learning and teaching, graduate outcomes, and student experience. Although many educational institutions focus on preparing students for an increasingly globalised marketplace (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2020), the emphasis on curriculum design should be held in balance with efforts to improve the quality of student experience. In Australia, there are six categories of HE providers which are commonly divided into University and Non-University HE Institutions (NUHEI). While both types of providers deliver equivalent Australian Higher Education Qualifications, those operating using the word 'university' meet additional criteria as outlined in the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)* 2015. Unlike NUHEIs, Australian Universities are eligible for additional funding schemes.

Both Universities and NUHEIs participate in the annual Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) suite of surveys (https://www.qilt.edu.au/). Although QILT quantitative data are widely used to benchmark institutional performance and assess student experience (Shah & Richardson, 2016), there is little research on students' open-ended responses (Grebennikov & Shah, 2013). Additionally, there is a lack of contextualised research in NUHEIs (Nair et al., 2012) with many questioning the quality and standards of these institutions (Shah & Lewis, 2010; Shah & Nair, 2011). Yet, the NUHEI sector is of interest because of its continued growth, with 120,890 students in 2018, 8 percent of the sector, commencing at a NUHEI compared to 64,187 students in 2010, 5 percent of sector (https://www.education.gov.au/student-data). NUHEIs consistently outperform universities in the areas of teaching quality, skills development, learner engagement, student support, and overall educational experience (QILT 2020). Arguably, NUHEIs are almost always smaller than universities and hence able to offer smaller classrooms and personalised student experiences, one could anticipate that NUHEIs would perform well in student support and perhaps even teaching quality while underperforming in learning resources. However, it would be simplistic to assume that their size alone accounts for observed results.

To gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the markers of high quality that NUHEIs represent compared to similar markers of universities' performance, a contextualised, nuanced understanding of NUHEIs is needed. As the affordances offered by NUHEIs are typically not directly aligned to their university counterparts, the direct comparison of QILT data, whether it be qualitative or quantitative, may not be enough to reveal the core reasons behind the differences in evaluation results between the two sets of institutions. Furthermore, an exploration of the context of a NUHEI may well provide insight into the motivations behind the students' responses to QILT items. Such insight may not be possible by analysing quantitative data alone.

The present study thus takes a case study approach. Kervin et. al. (2006) describe this type of case study as 'explanatory where the researcher is trying to establish why things are the way they are' (p. 70). The study aims to not only fill a gap in the literature by analysing qualitative student data of students' experiences in a specific institution, but also sheds light on potential reasons why NUHEIs outperform universities in most student experience categories. While the findings presented are drawn from data associated with one institution, the methodology may be replicated by other similar institutions who are interested in understanding the rationale behind students' responses as an attempt to improve the quality of students' experiences, reduce attrition and increase retention.

Student experience and the SES
Student experience is a broad and complex variable. Sometimes discussions about quality HE overlook the holistic student experience by primarily focusing on learning and teaching (Coates,

2005). At other times, the student experience is too abridged (Sabri, 2011), especially within league tables and public policy, where students are seen as a homogenous group (Darwin, 2020). Yet, positive student experiences are vital to maintaining high levels of retention and completion. Although student experience priorities have been normative in the Australian university sector, attention given to the experiences of NUHEI students is recent (Nair et al., 2012).

The national Student Experience Survey (SES) has remained relatively unchanged since 2014. It comprises forty-six standardised questions categorised into five conceptual groups: Learner Engagement, Teaching Quality, Learning Resources, Student Support, and Skills Development. Additionally, two open-ended questions address 'best aspects' and aspects that 'need improvement'. Hamshire et al. (2017, p. 51) encourage providers to use student narratives in addition to numerical performance indicators to better understand the complex 'expectations and experiences of a diverse student population.' However, while investigation into the student experience is frequently recommended (Krause & Reid, 2013), there is limited research on qualitative analyses of the open-ended questions (Grebennikov & Shah, 2013) and much of the qualitative data gathered in past decades have yet to be fully mined to understand the nuances of the higher education student experience, especially the data representing students attending NUHEIs. This is typically attributed to 'the burden of analysing open-ended responses and other qualitative data' (Richardson, 2005, 401–402). Whilst many institutions opt for an automatic computer coding approach to analyse the qualitative data (such as CEQuery or NVivo [See Shah & Pabel, 2019, p. 196]), Symons (2006) argues for manual analysis. She notes, while it is labour intensive, it 'better serves the needs of quality enhancement processes, and provides a more thorough scrutiny and evaluation and reporting process' and allows for the inclusion of historical knowledge of those in academic governance and course administration (p. 32). Nair and Shah (2011) assert that the student experience should be 'shaped by student judgment' rather than the institution's summaries (115). They conclude that institutions need a framework to understand student experience not only across cohorts but also across study modes and location.

The literature on attrition and completion also recognises that the factors influencing student retention are as unique as the students themselves and the institutions to which they belong (Astin, 1997; Naylor et al., 2018). The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency's (TEQSA 2017) review of attrition identified four clusters of Australian HE institutions[1] based on shared characteristics likely to result in high attrition rates and the Grattan Institute report identified a range of variables that impact Australian HE student completion (Cherastidtham et al., 2018).

Alphacrucis College

Alphacrucis College (AC) is a faith-based, self-accrediting, private institution, with a higher percentage of part-time, online students compared to full-time, on-campus students. AC has campuses in six major cities in Australia, in addition to overseas partnerships, with an overall student population of approximately 4,000 at the time of the present study. AC's majority student profile fits characteristics that have a high impact on non-completion as per the Grattan Institute report.

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[1] Cluster 1 is a university-only cluster that is research-focused and have students enrolled across all fields of education. Cluster 2 is composed of smaller institutions that have a high percentage of external, part-time and postgraduate students in the field of Society and Culture, and higher proportions of Indigenous students and those admitted as mature-aged entrants. Cluster 3 is a cluster of medium-sized institutions with a significant casual academic workforce that are focused on international students' education in the field of Management and Commerce (many at the postgraduate level) with students admitted on the basis of VET studies. Cluster 4 is a cluster of medium-sized institutions with a strongly casualised workforce and a focus on undergraduate domestic students in a range of fields. The graduates of these institutions are more likely to continue with full-time higher education study rather than to enter full-time employment. (*Characteristics of Australian Higher Education Providers*, 2017)

While factors that contribute to higher levels of attrition across the sector are clear, what is unclear is AC students' contextualised perception of student experience across the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) levels (https://www.aqf.edu.au/) and study modes. The AQF is the national policy for regulated qualifications in Australian education and training. Students' best experiences and self-identified areas of institutional improvement provide critical information toward retention goals. AC has participated in the QILT since 2015.

AC was chosen as the case for the present study not only because of the authors' access to the institution but also because, as indicated in Table 1, AC outperformed the university and national averages in the areas of overall educational experience, teaching quality, student support, and skills development for both undergraduates and postgraduates in the years 2018-2019 which are in focus for the present study. Further, like other NUHEIs, AC underperformed in the area of learning resources compared to universities. AC is thus a typical case for closer examination of NUHEIs' performance in comparison to universities.

Table 1
SES quantitative data 2018-2019 (%)

Provider Type Average	Overall educational experience		Teaching quality		Learner engagement		Learning resources		Student support		Skills development	
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
Undergraduate												
National Average	79.0	78.9	80.9	81.3	63.2	63.4	83.9	84.2	73.1	73.7	81.0	81.3
University Average	78.9	78.9	80.8	81.1	63.0	63.2	84.7	85.0	72.7	73.3	80.9	81.3
NUHEI Average	79.5	79.4	83.1	82.8	65.3	65.9	75.3	76.3	77.1	77.5	82.4	82.2
AC	81.6	80.8	85.0	84.5	52.5	57.3	79.4	81.1	75.6	74.8	82.7	82.8
Postgraduate												
National Average	76.1	76.3	80.6	80.7	60.3	60.8	82.4	82.9	73.2	74.0	80.6	80.9
University Average	75.8	75.8	80.6	80.6	60.5	60.6	83.4	84.0	72.9	73.6	80.7	80.9
NUHEI Average	79.7	80.0	81.1	81.7	59.0	63.6	71.8	72.5	76.4	77.0	80.0	80.9
AC	83.1	84.9	89.3	88.9	37.5	38.9	75.0	79.4	76.3	81.9	84.2	83.7

Method
Data
Data for the present study were derived from institutional qualitative responses to the 2018 and 2019 rounds of the SES. The population (N = 1067) included commencing and completing, onshore and offshore, diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students, enrolled at AC.

The participants (f = 602, m = 465) were part-time (n = 602) and full-time (n = 465) students. Ages ranged from under 25 (n = 293) to over 50 (n = 192), with 582 participants aged in between those two groups. Three QILT study areas were represented: Education (n = 66), Management and Commerce (n = 93), and Society and Culture (n = 908). Twenty-three courses were represented across five AQF levels: Level 5 (n = 389), Level 6 (n = 17), Level 7 (n = 416), Level 8 (n = 65), and

Level 9 (n = 180). Participants consisted of Australian citizens (n = 925), and international students (n = 142). Sixteen participants self-identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Most participants were either commencing (n = 568) or completing (n = 388) their course, with a small number in the middle stages of their course (n = 111).

The study involved an analysis of responses to the open-ended items of the SES: 'What have been the best aspects of your <course>?' (n = 988) and 'What aspects of your <course> most need improvement?' (n = 770). Only students who responded to at least one of these items were included.

Six unique datasets were created based on the respondents' level of study and mode of study. Level of Study was identified based on the AQF levels, consolidated into AQF 5 (n = 374) and AQF 6-9 (n = 693) to reflect a distinction in academic standards and learning experiences of those at pursuing study at sub-bachelor level (AQF 5) and those at the traditional higher education levels (AQF 6-9). Mode of Study was identified by participants' response to, 'Campus where studies were based'. Study modes were consolidated into Online (n = 500), Blended (n = 209), and On-campus (n = 358).

Analysis

Table 2
Best aspects thematic labels

Themes	Sample Comments
Personal Skills & Spiritual Growth (PSSG)	Developing my knowledge and growing in confidence to share it.
Course Content & Structure (CCS)	Content is excellent. Video lecturers are great. Learning outcomes are achievable and practical.
Learning Environment (LE)	I have found it fantastic as a learning environment and would recommend it for anyone wanting to undergo study.
Lecturers & Staff (LS)	Lecturers and overall learning is very good. Support staff are very helpful and understanding.
Support & Engagement (LE)	The feeling of inclusion has been great and knowing that services and support are there for me if needed is reassuring.
Resources	A large, well-produced online library of resources.

Data were analysed using inductive content analysis. The manifest content was analysed with recurring themes as the unit of analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Each dataset was independently coded by two researchers, identifying common themes. Each researcher followed an iterative process of coding for content similarity. Once each researcher had finalised the themes, researchers compared results and followed a third round of theme identification. Overlapping themes were noted. For each of the six datasets, there were at least four to five overlapping themes in the five to seven overall themes identified by individual coders. Disparate themes were discussed with the purpose of either consolidating them into existing themes where appropriate or identifying them as unique themes. This was done based on belonging; that is, comparing a data instance against disparate themes as well as the 'best fit' theme to ensure that the data instance belonged to the chosen theme (Dey, 1993). Themes were then further refined and, where appropriate, consolidated for

precision (Tables 2 and 3). Some comments consisted of references to multiple distinct themes. Such comments were given all corresponding codes and counted as an instance for each of the relevant themes. For example, 'I have really enjoyed the content, aspect of it all. The lecturers have been so insightful and helpful', comment in 'best aspects' was coded for Course Content & Structure as well as Lecturers & Staff. Numbers of instances in each theme were noted for purposes of ascertaining the pervasiveness of a theme rather than numeric analysis.

Table 3
Needs improvement thematic labels

Themes	Sample Comments
Assessment Clarity & Feedback Quality (ACFQ)	I only learnt what I did wrong, not what I could've done better.
Support & Lecturer Access (SLA)	Access to tutors, teachers and support staff when studying online.
Course Design (CD)	I feel Old Testament and New Testament for the Intro to the Bible could be 2 separate subjects. It was a huge topic to cover.
Online Content & LMS (OCLMS)	A few of the online lectures were a little difficult to hear. The sound level was quiet even when the volume on the computer was at maximum.
Administration & Facilities (AF)	Computer systems and people that are there to run it.
Lecture Quality (LQ)	Quality of some of the online lectures is quite low in terms of production quality, as well as presentation by the lecturer.
Resources	More access to libraries.

Results

After the initial identification of themes, datasets were consolidated across AQF categories to identify 'best aspects' and 'needs improvement' by study mode, producing the results summarised in Tables 4 and 5. The themes were also consolidated across study modes to identify 'best aspects' and 'needs improvement' by AQF level, producing the results summarised in Tables 6 and 7.

Dataset 1: AQF5 online learning

Five themes for 'best aspects' and four themes for 'needs improvement' were identified. The results are displayed in Table 4. Thirty-one participants either provided no response or stated there was nothing of note that needs improvement.

Dataset 2: AQF5, blended learning

Six themes in 'best aspects' and five themes in 'needs improvement,' were identified (Table 4). Thirteen respondents either offered no comment or noted no areas that needed improvement.

Table 4
AQF level 5 consolidated across study modes

Dataset	Category		Frequency
AQF Level 5, Online			
Best Aspects (N = 136)	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	76
	Course content & structure	CCS	61
	Learning environment	LE	31
	Lecturers & staff	LS	16
	Resources	R	15
Needs Improvement (N = 90)	Support & lecturer access	SLA	68
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	57
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	34
	Administration & facilities	AF	11
AQF Level 5, Blended			
Best Aspects (N = 62)	Learning Environment	LE	31
	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	24
	Course content & structure	CCS	18
	Lecturers & staff	LS	16
	Support & engagement	SE	11
	Resources	R	6
Needs Improvement (N = 43)	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	30
	Support & lecturer access	SLA	26
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	15
	Administration & facilities	AF	7
	Resources	R	6
AQF Level 5, On-Campus			
Best Aspects (N = 148)	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	62
	Learning environment	LE	43
	Course content & structure	CCS	33
	Lecturers & staff	LS	21
	Support & engagement	SE	15
Needs Improvement (N = 71)	Support & lecturer access	SLA	38
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	33
	Course design	CD	32
	Administration & facilities	AF	17
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	16
	Lecture quality	LQ	5
	Resources	R	5

Dataset 3: AQF5, on-campus learning

Five themes in 'best aspects' and seven themes in 'needs improvement,' were identified (Table 4). Four participants offered no response to 'best aspects.'

Dataset 4: AQF 6-9, online learning

Five themes were identified in 'best aspects and six themes were identified for 'needs improvement' (Table 5). Eighteen respondents offered no response to 'best aspects,' and fifty-two participants offered no response or noted no areas that needed improvement.

Dataset 5: AQF 6-9, blended learning

The results identified four themes in 'best aspects,' and siz themes in 'needs improvement' (Table 5). Five participants offered no response to 'best aspects' and twenty-eight participants offered no response or noted no areas that needed improvement.

Table 5

AQF levels 6-9 consolidated across study modes

Dataset	Category		Frequency
AQF Levels 6-9, Online			
Best Aspects (N = 331)	Course content & structure	CCS	199
	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	127
	Lecturers & staff	LS	66
	Support & engagement	SE	46
	Learning environment	LE	41
Needs Improvement (N = 297)	Support & lecturer access	SLA	113
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	90
	Course design	CD	86
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	68
	Resources	R	24
	Administration & facilities	AF	22
AQF Levels 6-9, Blended			
Best Aspects (N = 131)	Course content & structure	CCS	106
	Lecturers & staff	LS	49
	Support & engagement	SE	28
	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	27
Needs Improvement (N = 113)	Support & lecturer access	SLA	46
	Online content & LMS	PCLMS	30
	Administration & facilities	AF	23
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	22
	Lecture quality	LQ	16
	Resources	R	14
AQF Levels 6-9, On-campus			
Best Aspects (N = 180)	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	66
	Lecturers & staff	LS	63
	Course content & structure	CCS	62
	Support & engagement	SE	36
	Learning environment	LE	26
Needs Improvement (N = 156)	Administration & facilities	AF	65
	Support & lecturer access	SLA	40
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	32
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	25
	Resources	R	23

Dataset 6: AQF 6-9, on-campus learning

Five themes were identified in 'best aspects' as well as in 'needs improvement' (Table 5). Twenty-six participants offered no response to 'best aspects' and forty-nine participants offered no response or indicated no areas that needed improvement.

Table 6
Consolidated data across study modes

Dataset	Category		Frequency	Rank
AQF 5, all study modes				
Best Aspects	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	162	1
	Course content & structure	LCS	112	2
	Learning environment	LE	105	3
	Lecturers & staff	LS	53	4
	Support & engagement	SE	26	5
	Resources	R	21	6
Needs	Support & lecturer access	SLA	132	1
Improvement	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	120	2
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	65	3
	Administration & facilities	AF	35	4
	Course design	CD	32	5
	Resources	R	11	6
	Lecture quality	LQ	5	7
AQF 6-9, all study modes				
Best Aspects	Course content & structure	CCS	367	1
	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	220	2
	Lecturers & staff	LS	178	3
	Support & engagement	SE	110	4
	Learning environment	LE	67	5
Needs	Support & lecturer access	SLA	199	1
Improvement	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	145	2
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	122	3
	Administration & facilities	AF	110	4
	Course design	CD	86	5
	Resources	R	61	6
	Lecture quality	LQ	16	7

As indicated in Table 6, data consolidated across study modes for AQF 5 identified six themes for 'best aspects' and seven themes for 'needs improvement.' For AQF 6-9, five themes for 'best aspects' and seven themes for 'needs improvement were identified.

Table 7 shows data consolidated across AQF levels identified six 'best aspects' themes and five 'needs improvement' themes for online learning. For blended learning, six 'best aspects' themes and six 'needs improvement' themes were identified. Finally, for on-campus learning, the five 'best aspects' themes were and six 'needs improvement themes were identified.

Table 7
Consolidated data across AQF levels

Dataset	Category		Frequency	Rank
All Levels, Online				
Best Aspects	Course content & structure	CCS	260	1
	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	203	2
	Lecturers & staff	LS	82	3
	Learning environment	LE	72	4
	Support & engagement	SE	46	5
	Resources	R	15	6
Needs	Support & lecturer access	SLA	181	1
Improvement	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	125	2
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	124	3
	Course design	CD	86	4
	Administration & facilities	AF	33	5
All Levels, Blended				
Best Aspects	Course content & structure	CCS	124	1
	Lecturers & staff	LS	65	2
	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	51	3
	Support & engagement	SE	39	4
	Learning Environment	LE	31	5
	Resources	R	6	6
Needs	Support & lecturer access	SLA	72	1
Improvement	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	52	2
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	45	3
	Administration & facilities	AF	30	4
	Resources	R	20	5
	Lecture quality	LQ	16	6
All Levels, On-Campus				
Best Aspects	Personal skills & spiritual growth	PSSG	128	1
	Course content & structure	CCS	95	2
	Lecturers & staff	LS	84	3
	Learning environment	LE	69	4
	Support & engagement	SE	51	5
Needs	Administration & facilities	AF	82	1
Improvement	Support & lecturer access	SLA	78	2
	Assessment clarity & feedback quality	ACFQ	65	3
	Online content & LMS	OCLMS	41	4
	Course design	CD	32	5
	Resources	R	28	6

Limitations

The results presented must be read within parameters of the following limitations. Firstly, although the researchers mitigated potential biases by independent coding procedures, inevitable variations in human judgement must be acknowledged. Secondly, there may be conceptual disparities in some of the themes when the initial round of themes was consolidated based on best fit. For example, it was difficult to ascertain whether a comment such as, 'the video lecture was hard to understand', was about the quality of the video recording or the quality of the lecture delivery. Such comments

were coded under OCLMS because of the reference to video content, although a case could be made for putting the comment in LQ. Thirdly, most student comments were very brief, even a single word (e.g. 'lecturers', in response to 'best aspects'). As such, our analyses are limited to the brevity of the data, compared to analyses of in-depth interview data, for instance. Finally, the overrepresentation of society and culture students skewed the results in favour of response from this cohort, presenting a limitation to understanding the expectations and experiences of those in the underpresented fields of business and management, and teacher education. Despite these limitations, the results merit further discussion.

Discussion

This study sought further understanding of why NUHEIs, specifically AC, outperformed universities in some SES categories while underperforming in others. Open-ended responses from the 2018-2019 SES were analysed using content analysis, the results from which present several points of note.

Firstly, results from data consolidated across study modes (Table 6) show that the top two themes for 'best aspects,' Course Content & Structure (CCS), and Personal Skills and Spiritual Growth (PSSG), are consistent across AQF levels. This pattern is further evidenced in the study mode data consolidated across AQF levels (Table 7), in which the top three themes across all study modes are CCS, PSSG, and Lecturers & Staff (LS). The results thus indicate that AC students, regardless of level or study mode, are experiencing meaningful, relevant learning experiences and development of skills; all of which are characteristics that support retention (Roberts & Styron, 2010; Thomas, 2012). Although the present analysis cannot establish causation, it is reasonable to surmise that the content and structure of the courses and the quality of lecturers and staff are likely contributors to students' sense of achievement in personal skills and spiritual growth. Students' feedback regarding growing in their personal faith through studies, for example, potentially explains students' overall satisfaction with their educational experience above the national average. In other words, AC's faith-based mission and supporting curriculum may be contributors to attracting students closely aligned with institutional mission and hence disposed to feeling higher levels of belonging and overall satisfaction when their learning experiences affirm their personal faith (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). This is is consistent with Tinto's (1998) view that student learning and persistence occurs where there is an alignment of values between student and provider. In fact, as outlined in Table 8, a comparison of SES quantitative data between faith-based (FB) and non-faith-based (NFB) NUHEIs supports this point, showing higher performance in every category by FB NUHEIs except postgraduate Learner Engagement (LE). These results are consistent with the present case study, as AC underperformed in LE compared to University, NUHEI and national averages. The results could be attributed to the design of the questions relating to students' opportunities to engage 'other' and 'very different' students. As the results of this survey indicate, personal and spiritual growth is paramount to overall student experience and satisfaction, so it might be that students at FB providers focus on the common faith and worldview shared by their peers, rather than those characteristics which differentiate them. This again highlights the value of analysing the narrative responses to the survey for explaining numerical data and achieving a better understanding of students' complex educational experience. It also leads the authors to suggest that NFB NUHEIs ensure their unique mission is integrated into their course structure and content. If students feel their personal values are growing through studies, providers may potentially see an increase in students' overall satisfaction with their educational experience.

Table 8
Performance of faith-based vs non-faith-based NUHEI in SES categories (%)[2]

Provider Type Average	Overall educational experience		Teaching quality		Learner engagement		Learning resources		Student support		Skills development	
	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019	2018	2019
Undergraduate												
FB	88.77	89.10	91.38	91.90	67.95	70.79	84.37	85.35	87.55	88.53	88.00	89.13
NFB	77.63	78.53	80.99	81.83	66.04	65.59	74.05	76.70	75.38	77.03	81.43	81.35
Postgraduate												
FB	93.65	90.25	93.80	91.67	58.05	51.79	89.35	83.81	89.75	87.03	87.70	93.65
NFB	78.19	79.65	78.96	80.83	50.97	60.12	70.66	73.61	74.20	76.52	78.04	78.19

Secondly, in regards to the 'needs improvement' themes, Support & Lecturer Access (SLA) and Assessment Clarity & Feedback Quality (ACFQ) appear within the top three themes in data consolidated across study modes (Table 6) as well as the consolidated data across AQF levels (Table 7). This was unexpected, as the themes were not contained to the formative AQF 5 or online students, highlighting the importance of addressing these needs for all students, as a matter of priority. Further, while CCS was a 'best aspect,' ACFQ is not. Well-designed assessments are arguably an aspect of course content and structure. However, students have highlighted a lack of clarity in assessment expectations and the need for clear and prompt assessment feedback as areas that need improvement. Notably, students' lack of satisfaction in association with assessment matters is not a new theme in higher education research, described by as some as a 'wicked' problem (Deeley, Fischbacher-Smith, Karadzhov, & Koristashevskaya, 2019). Additionally, the British National Survey results identified assessment and feedback as a category of student dissatisfaction (Pitt & Norton, 2017). There is some evidence to suggest that students can have difficulty identifying what feedback is, and hence faculty should provide clear expectations for timing and nature of feedback (Tucker et al., 2013; Weaver, 2006). Furthermore, some students may not have the emotional maturity to process the feedback especially against their preconceived criteria of a good grade (Pitt & Norton, 2017). Nevertheless, ACFQ requires institutional and sector attention.

Thirdly, although the quality of 'Lecturers & Staff' is noted as a 'best aspect,' as is, 'Support & Engagement,' support from and access to lecturers (SLA) is noted as an area that needs improvement. It could be reasoned that students are having a good experience during lecture delivery, but not a good follow-up experience. This aligns with Scott's (2005) findings. While lecturers seem to be performing well in course design and content delivery, there needs to be an improvement in the clarification of assessments, timely and relevant feedback, and availability to students for ongoing support (Rhoades, 2012). O'Keeffe (2013) observes HE institutions must create a welcoming environment and foster interactions between students and faculty to achieve positive student experiences. AC and other institutions would benefit from adapting suggestions in the literature to maximise opportunities to create community amongst students and lecturers, regardless of learning mode by availing themselves to the unique opportunities of online learning spaces, as suggested by Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote (2017), for example. Recommendations by Garrison, Anderson and colleagues (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005) about how to design humanised learning environments, characterised by teacher presence, cognitive presence and social presence, may also be enacted in future iterations of online and blended courses at AC and other institutions.

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[2] Australian institutions with an estimated population of 500 or more students according to the 'QILT Website Comparison Data' releases in April 2018 and January 2020.

Fourthly, institutional administrative and facilities infrastructure do influence students' sense of satisfaction. Students' learning experience is not disembodied from the institution, regardless of learning mode. In as much as institutions invest in the quality of lecturers and academic support, the results from the present study indicate that student-centred investment in administrative and facilities infrastructure cannot be overlooked (Baron & Corbin, 2012).

Finally, NUHEIs underperform in learning resources compared to universities. This finding is unsurprising considering NUHEIs do not receive federal funding and, being smaller and mostly dependent on tuition income, are arguably less equipped to commandeer vast resources. Nevertheless, AC's 'learning resources' average is higher than the NUHEI average. 'Resources' appeared as a 'best aspects' theme as well as a 'needs improvement' theme in the present study, indicating that while AC's resourcing is not dire, there is room for improvement.

Conclusion

The present study is one of the few that has utilised qualitative data from the SES of the Australian QILT survey suite to identify themes of valued student experiences as well as areas for improvement, within the context of AC. Although AC's unique context might not be directly applicable to many other institutions, other NUHEIs of a similar size, either Australian or international, may find the present study's methodology useful for analysing comparative data pertaining to their institution. Three general principles are noteworthy from the qualitative data that were analysed during this study. Firstly, an enjoyable in-class experience is not mitigated by lack of contact and academic support after-class. Lecturer training and performance appraisal criteria need to include performance indicators that are not only related to the quality of lecture delivery, but also the quality of on-going follow-up and support. Secondly, if performance in assessments is the indicator by which students are evaluated, then assessment clarity and quality and timeliness of feedback must be the indicators by which lecturers are evaluated. Based on the pervasiveness of ACQF as a 'needs improvement' theme, this point cannot be overstated. Thirdly, the responsiveness of administrative staff and appropriateness of student learning spaces must be considered in any institutional plan to improve the overall student experience.

This study delved into reasons why NUHEIs have outperformed universities in areas of overall educational experience, teaching quality, student support, learner engagement, and skills development, while underperforming in learner resources. While smaller classroom sizes in NUHEIs may certainly account for this phenomenon, the performance of FB NUHEIs compared to NFB NUHEIs is noteworthy. It is possible that students self-select FB institutions for personal faith alignment or alignment with other personal values, and, if that alignment is fulfilled in their learning experiences, then their satisfaction levels could be higher than students who choose institutions for reasons other than alignment with personal faith or spiritual values. There is evidence to suggest, for example, that persons who engage in religious behaviour based on personal meaning or significance also exhibit a higher sense of wellbeing (Abdel-Khalek, 2011; Neyrinck et al., 2006). Whether this accounts for, at least in part, for the higher levels of satisfaction of FB NUHEI's students compared to the students in their NFB counterparts cannot be concluded based on results from this study. Further research is needed from HE institutions based in Australia and other countries where FB and NFB institutions operate within the same sector. We hope that the present study will not only stimulate specific initiatives to enhance the experience of AC students but also provide insight for a wider conversation on increasing retention through improved student experiences. We invite other researchers to consider replicating the methodology adopted in our study to investigate the meaning and import of students' qualitative responses to sector wide

evaluation mechanisms.

Declaration of interest
The authors are employees of Alphacrucis College.

Data availability statement
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, C. Hodson, upon reasonable request.

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