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A CROSS-PERCEPTUAL STUDY OF QUALITY IN A UNIVERSITY DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMME

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ABSTRACT

This thesis reports a study carried out at a large New Zealand university. It investigated the major dimensions of quality in undergraduate Business Studies courses taught in the distance mode. In particular, it examined whether different stakeholders had the same or different perceptions about these dimensions.

The study reported used both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect information from three groups of stakeholders - students, teaching staff and senior managers. Focus groups were carried out with students and staff and individual interviews were conducted with senior managers. The qualitative data collected from these, in combination with themes from the international literature, were structured into seven broad phenomenological scales: course structure and content; face-to-face contact; assessment; communication; standards and evaluation; and programme integrity. These provided the basis for the design of a questionnaire which was sent to a sample of undergraduate students and teaching staff in the Faculty of Business Studies at Massey University.

The triangulation of methods and data permitted the comparison of the perceptions of the three groups of subjects on a number of aspects of quality on each of the scales. This analysis revealed substantial areas of congruence as well as some incongruence in perceptions of quality. There were also some differences in perception between students with relatively low experience of learning at a distance and those with high experience. From the analysis, implications and conclusions were reached about good practice and how quality could be improved. This has particular relevance in relation to the satisfaction levels of the primary stakeholder group, students, as well as for improving the cost efficiency and the effectiveness of the distance education operation.
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