

Tracking student satisfaction in an uncertain tourism education market

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SUMMARY

The hospitality industry, and as a consequence hospitality education, are extremely sensitive to global events such as the 2003 SARS epidemic or the 2004 South East Asian Tsunami disaster. This paper presents a case study of Swiss Hotel Schools, where a student survey has been used to monitor fluctuations in attitudes and satisfaction on a longitudinal basis. The survey began in 2000 on one campus and has since been extended to cover all campuses. Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT) formed the basis of the survey, as it allowed students' unbiased concerns to be regularly collected and quantified. From the PAT data a closed questionnaire was developed which could be used to monitor satisfaction, and the PAT and questionnaire data were used together to produce regular important-performance (I-P) charts showing the strengths and weaknesses of the operation. The technique allowed the schools to monitor and respond to change on an ongoing basis. The results were used to inform and improve the management of the library, reception, student social and sports provision, and information technology services. The case had all the features suggested by Schein (1988) for a typical change process, but it is too early to claim that a lasting change had occurred, since the development of the change seemed still to be occurring and no "re-freezing" was evident. The general level of awareness among both management and staff was also still quite low. However, there was evidence of an incipient interest in measurement and evaluation as a result of this survey, that could ultimately develop into the kind of established culture that distinguishes a learning organisation.

Key words:

importance-performance analysis; organisational change; quality management; Switzerland

INTRODUCTION

As global events, such as the 1997 Asian economic crisis, the 2003 SARS epidemic or the 2004 South East Asian Tsunami disaster, have a rapid, adverse effect on tourism and hospitality demand, so they also profoundly affect the magnitude and mix of demand for hospitality and tourism education (Larsen, Martin and Morris 2002).

In this changing environment, many schools seek feedback processes that will allow them to monitor the student experience (e.g. Elliott and Shin 2002; Martensen, Grønholdt, Eskildsen and Kristensen 1999) in an increasingly holistic way (Hand and Rowe 2001). However, there are significant problems in identifying and assessing the aspects students consider important

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in a sensitive way that automatically adapts to changes in student perceptions.

The study reported here concerns a student survey based upon a process developed by one of the authors, which allows the responsive yet continuous assessment of students' perceptions. The survey was initiated in 2000 in order to obtain systematic information about the satisfaction of graduating students. In the following years, Glion Hotel School became Glion Institute of Higher Education (GIHE) and was purchased by Laureate Inc. (formerly Sylvan) who also owned Les Roches schools in Bluche (CH) and Marbella. Les Roches Bluche has been accredited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) since 1996 and GIHE since 2001. The initial survey reflected a need to measure quality and satisfaction in the run-up to GIHE's first NEASC visit. In 2003 it was decided that both Laureate Swiss schools should change their accreditation within NEASC from the Technical, to the Higher Education commission. In addition it was decided that GIHE would seek recognition by the Swiss Federal tertiary education system.

This environment of multiple change has increased the need for management information, and the Laureate Swiss schools have embraced and extended the original survey. It is now used on all campuses, is known and recognised by individuals at most levels of the organisation, and has contributed to a number of strategic and operational initiatives. This paper discusses the survey process, its institution-wide adoption and its implications as a case study in educational management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1980s there has been a steadily growing interest in assessing the service quality of students (see e.g. McElwee and Pennington 1993) and customer satisfaction (e.g. Aldridge and Rowley 1998). Business schools have led the way in this movement, and have typically used standard instruments and approaches. For instance, Pariseau and McDaniel (1997) used SERVQUAL to study the service quality offered by one business school, while Aldridge and Rowley (1998) developed a market survey using the Student Charter as a yardstick for measuring satisfaction among students at another. The usefulness of student feedback of this kind is not in doubt.

It is related for instance, to student retention, to word of mouth promotion and hence to an institution's image and its marketing effectiveness (e.g. Russell 2005). However, it is debatable whether education can be boiled down into a generic service (McElwee and Redman 1993) and this casts doubt whether educational service quality should be measured by a generic instrument like SERVQUAL. Although the Student Charter is an institutional, and hence presumably well considered document, one might also ask whether it is sufficiently comprehensive to measure students' satisfaction in all situations, at all times. Another questionnaire, derived by considering course-related aspects such as teaching-learning strategies, course content and support materials, was analysed using quality function deployment and conjoint analysis in order to improve course design (Wiklund and Wiklund 1999). However, it has not been established whether this potentially valuable approach gives completely reliable results.

These studies represent isolated initiatives from Europe, where there is no standard, recognised approach to gathering student feedback. However, such an instrument, the *Student Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness* (SETE) does exist in the USA, where it is used extensively by educational administrators, ostensibly as a tool for monitoring and improving the quality of instruction, although its data are often influential when teachers are considered for promotion and tenure. SETE has been criticised for many years, on the grounds that it predominantly measures a lecturer's popularity (e.g. Kleiner 1989) and that a good score does not correlate with a teacher's ability to foster learning (e.g. Emery, Kramer and Tian 2003). Crumbley *et al.* (2001) claim that students punish lecturers who use certain teaching/ learning strategies and that this encourages them to sacrifice learning rigour in an effort to increase their SETE scores. The whole area of student satisfaction is fraught with such issues. For instance, Emery, Kramer and Tian (2001) note that some organisations treat their students as customers, while others regard them as "products". These authors conclude, rather controversially, that the learning performance of students whose institution treats them like customers is poorer than that of students who are treated as products.

Further, SETE only covers the classroom experience, while the student experience is widely held to be broader than this. As service customers, students are also co-producers of their own education (Kotzé and du Plessis 2003).

Many studies dealing with satisfaction limit this problem by restricting the scope of study, for example to a course, to the IT tools used on a course (Roy and Elfner 2002) or to summer courses (Marzo-Navarro, Pedraja-Iglesias and Rivera-Torres 2005). However, the last of these studies takes a perspective somewhat beyond the classroom, concluding that the most important factors are teaching staff, enrolment and course organisation. Russell's (2005) study is also broader in scope, although it does not differentiate between marketing factors that might be known to students before they arrive on a course, and satisfaction factors, which arise from and colour their experience while the course is progressing. Among the latter she records a spectrum of key factors in the satisfaction of Asian students, including English language teaching facilities, academic concerns, homesickness, pastoral support within school, university counselling service, and academic support. Russell's article is of interest because it relates to a group of students who are far from home and dependent on the educational institution (in this case Bournemouth University) for virtually everything. This is a similar situation to that at the Laureate Swiss schools.

Another approach to the management of student satisfaction uses importance-performance (I-P) analysis, a strategic planning tool widely employed in service industries (Ford, Joseph and Joseph 1999). This entails independently determining students' perceptions of

the importance of specified quality areas and also of the extent to which these areas have been successfully performed. The questionnaire used in this study (see also Joseph and Joseph 1997) was derived with the aid of focus groups and interviews, and it identified a number of satisfaction issues besides the purely academic ones. These were reduced to seven factors, as shown in Table 1.

An alternative way to conduct I-P analysis is offered by the profile accumulation technique (PAT) developed by Johns and Lee-Ross (1996). This technique employs pre-structured free-response forms which can be sent to comparatively large numbers of potential respondents. PAT has been used in a variety of settings and has been compared with other service quality measurement tools such as SERVQUAL (Johns, Lee-Ross and Tyas 2000). The pre-structuring allows relatively easy analysis, and the free responses can be used to derive performance-questionnaire items for which importance scores are already known. (i.e. the frequency with which respondents mentioned it on the PAT forms) and hence used to generate an I-P grid in which the two dimensions are determined by completely different processes. The viability and validity of this style of I-P monitoring is discussed elsewhere (Johns 2001). In the changing global environment, the advantage of the PAT method is that it offers a cost effective way not merely to generate a questionnaire, but also to update it on a regular basis.

Table 1
STUDENT SATISFACTION FACTORS

Factor name and number	Contributing items
Programme issues (Factor 1)	Options available, flexibility to move within school of study, degree provides flexibility, specialist programmes provided, flexible entry requirements, practical component in degree.
Academic reputation (Factor 2)	Reputable degree, excellent instructors, excellent academic facilities.
Physical aspects/cost (Factor 3)	Reasonable cost of accommodation, excellent accommodation facilities, excellent sports and recreational facilities, reasonable cost of education.
Career opportunities (Factor 4)	Graduates easily employable, excellent information on career opportunities.
Location (Factor 5)	Ideal location, excellent campus layout and appearance.
Time (Factor 6)	Acceptable length of time to complete degree.
Other (Factor 7)	Family and peers influence university choice, word of mouth influences choice of university.

Source: Joseph and Joseph (1997).

Thus changes in student perception due to changes in the mix of incoming students, in local conditions, or in the service itself, can be conveniently and responsively monitored with a moderate outlay of resources.

The project discussed in this article set out merely to monitor exit-point student satisfaction. However, as it progressed the value of the survey became more widely recognised within the organisation. Thus although there has been no formal attempt at change management, adoption of the survey has occurred at several levels of Laureate, and new research initiatives have spontaneously sprung up around it. This is of interest because remarkably little has been published on the institutionalisation of this kind of grass roots initiative. Wiklund and Wiklund (1999) discuss implementation at programme management level, and in a later paper (Wiklund, Klefsjo, Wiklund and Edvardsson 2003) the same authors discuss the role of total quality management (TQM) in promoting quality in higher education. Pariseau and McDaniel (1997) describe an initiative in two US business schools in which SERVQUAL was used to benchmark student satisfaction and also to identify gaps between the service perceptions of faculty and students. Acceptance of their survey by the universities was patchy, but they sum up: "On a positive note, we are encouraged by the steps taken by both schools to begin implementing TQM" (Pariseau and McDaniel 1997: 216).

Schein (1988: 243 *et seq.*) identifies five conditions accompanying organisational change: (1) unlearning something old to learn something new, (2) a prerequisite motivation to change, (3) organisational change always mediated through the personal changes of key individuals, (4) changing values and attitudes is always initially painful and threatening and (5) all stages of the change cycle must be negotiated before change can be said to have occurred. Schein identifies three key stages: unfreezing/motivating, accomplishing the change and re-freezing/stabilising. Consultants such as Crosby (1984) recommend that in order to accomplish these stages senior management must take the lead through a top-down dissemination of information, which effectively unfreezes the organisation, preparing the way for the instructions and initiatives that will create the change. Re-freezing is often accomplished through an established, iterative process. For instance, quality management systems seek a cycle of continuous improvement, usually based upon measurement of quality and cost, that never ends, becoming "the way

we do things around here" (Crosby 1984). This is similar (and in an education institution ought in principle to be identical) to the notion of the learning organisation, which is pervaded by a culture of lifelong learning, where all employees continually seek, and are assisted by their managers, to acquire and share knowledge (Noe, Hollenbeck, Gerhart and Wright 2005: 17). There are numerous allusions to learning organisations in the literature, but seem to be none relating specifically to academic institutions, although this aspect of academic leadership is discussed by Rowley and Sherman (2003). Of course, learning is a part of most academics' working life, but with the current emphasis upon the management of educational quality one might also expect to see more reports of academic institutions learning to adapt themselves, for instance to market forces.

The present study is significant because it not only describes the use of a relatively unusual approach for measuring student satisfaction, but also examines its spontaneous adoption and development throughout the organisation. The aim of this article is to describe this process, and this is achieved by describing how the technique was used and some key results it gave, and then by examining the views of key individuals within the organisation and their progress and plans in developing the measurement culture still further.

METHODOLOGY

The PAT technique, and its adaptation to produce I-P information, is outlined above and have been described in detail elsewhere (Johns 2001). The focus here was the whole student experience, and since final semester students were in a position to look back at their whole time in the school, the exercise focused on them. The first PAT data, 50 in all, were gathered from final semester students at one of GIHE's campuses (here designated Campus A) in autumn 2000 and a 22 item questionnaire produced from these PAT results was completed by each cohort of leaving students from Spring 2001 onward. The format of this questionnaire was a series of statements closely reflecting the PAT comments, accompanied by a 7-point Likert-type scale.

In autumn 2003, a larger project was launched, supported by the school's Research Steering Committee (RSC). PAT forms, sent to exiting students at all three Swiss Laureate campuses (here shown as Campuses A, B and C) produced a total of 250 responses.

From these data it was possible to construct a more extensive (40 item) but similarly formatted questionnaire, which has been administered to exiting cohorts on each campus every semester since Spring 2004. Results from the survey were presented to the RSC, and to a group of researchers who meet regularly at the School. They were also distributed to senior management through the Academic Director and, as interest grew, they were also presented at a cross-campus meeting of all faculty. Evidence about the impact of the survey was gathered by personal observation and by interviews with managers at various levels of the organisation. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using a grounded theory process.

RESULTS

A typical I-P chart, that for autumn 2004 responses, is shown in Figure 1. The most interesting points are those in the two upper quadrants (the numbers on the figure, and also in parentheses below refer to the item numbers on the questionnaire). Most outstanding in the *high importance, performing well* quadrant were: “I gained a lot of knowledge and skills” (24), “I benefited a lot from being with the other students” (17), “I learned a lot from the international environment at the school” (22), “The teachers are helpful, friendly and approach-

able” (39). Two points appeared in the *high importance, performing poorly* quadrant: “IT and Internet facilities are efficient and adequate” (21) and “Food at the School is good and plentiful” (4). I-P charts like this were also produced for each individual campus.

The items were sorted into four groups: *Academic, Facilities, General* and *Management* on a pragmatic basis according to the area of responsibility under which they fell. I-P charts were drawn up for each of these groups. The *General* group contained issues such as the benefits of being with other, international students and the schools’ reputation. The *Facilities* group was concerned with IT, food, lodging and other services. *Management* included timetabling, communication and fees issues and *Academic* was about teaching, learning, internships and the library. A “master” I-P chart allowed comparison of the means of items in each of these groups, as shown in Figure 2. This figure provides a useful summary of the way the different groupings varied by campus.

The survey became a focus of interest for faculty and academic managers as soon as the first cross-campus results were available internally (July 2004) - an event that coincided with the need to prepare a self-reflective report for NEASC (North Eastern Association of Schools and Colleges) accreditors.

Figure 1
I-P CHART FOR ALL CAMPUSES FOR AUTUMN 2004

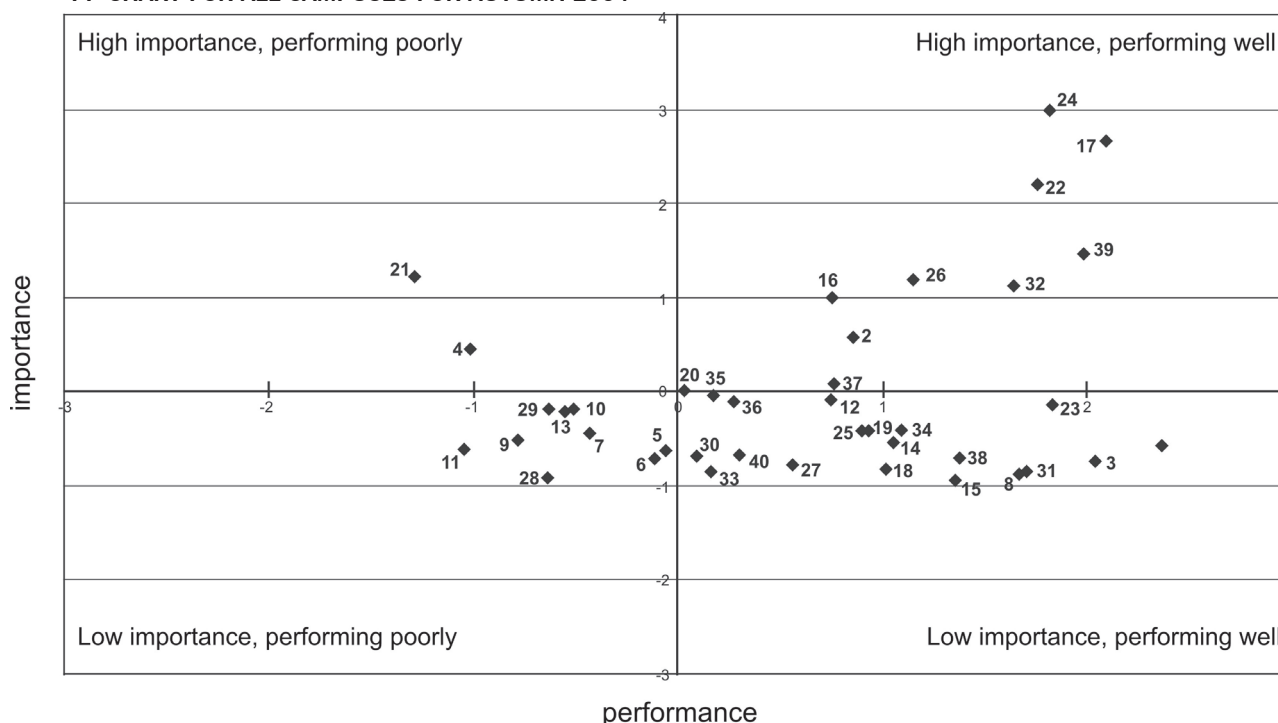
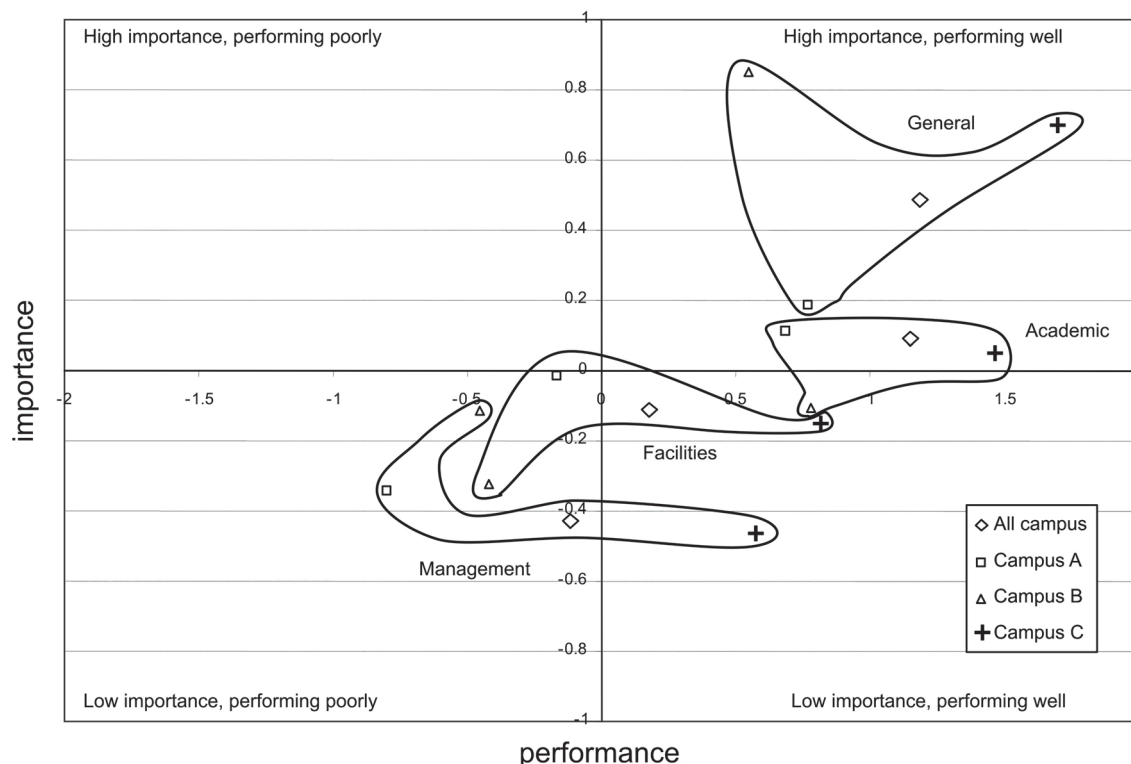


Figure 2
I-P CHART OF GROUP MEANS BY CAMPUS, AUTUMN 2004



NEASC requires evidence to back up these reflective statements, but at the time there were relatively few sources of such evidence, and thus the survey filled an important gap. Evidence cited in the NEASC statement included mean responses to specific items about the library, IT services, social facilities, accommodation and many others. However, the survey results were used on a much wider basis. They precipitated serious, ongoing discussions about the IT facilities, the quality of the food and food service, the library, and various management issues, such as timetabling and communication.

Facilities staff reacted particularly positively to the survey. In 2003 an intern (*stagiaire*) was appointed as social events co-ordinator in response to a low survey score at Campus A. In 2004, when a low score was obtained at Campus B, a similar post was created there. In early 2005, the GIHE Campus Director approached the authors of this paper to develop a questionnaire specifically to monitor food and food-service, since this aspect of the school's service received consistently low scores. This project is ongoing.

Laureate Swiss schools have a twice yearly intake and twice yearly graduation. I-P charts were prepared each semester from 2000 onward, using data obtained from exiting students. Reports went primarily to the Academic Director, who shared them with heads of department and with the Academic Dean at Campus A, at that time the only campus concerned. It provided documentary support for a long-discussed need to enhance the library at Campus A, and money began to be made available for this purpose.

The first all-campus I-P report was produced in July 2004 and was shared at the Academic Director's weekly meeting with the deans. At that time, it was also shared with other senior executives. Groups were set up in early 2004 to write a reflective statement for NEASC as part of the accreditation process. The student survey reports were heavily used to support many of the statements in this document. In December 2004, two of the present authors gave a presentation about the project to all faculty, which was greeted with general interest.

Follow up interviews with senior managers in the organisation were used to examine the management impact of the survey. The Academic Director and Campus Director said they referred regularly to the survey reports and used them to tackle perceived areas of weakness. The survey did not show the clear trends that had been expected at the start, but the more complicated picture that was produced (due to changing characteristics of the student body) was nonetheless helpful and actionable. Resources were redirected into the library, reception, student social and sports services and information technology as a direct result of the survey. The Campus Director made several changes to the food and food service but with little effect upon the students' surveyed perceptions, and finally came to the present authors requesting a new survey instrument that would give a more precise insight into food service issues. Deans commented positively about the survey, saying it provided useful measurements, and a helpful insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the school's services, for example:

I think what it's probably done is helped flag up... my perception of a problem and it's given a weight to it... a numeric weight... so that we can start to use it in a more proactive way, whereas if you listen to isolated student comments... you don't always get a particularly good picture.

Faculty members and even lower middle management were less aware of the survey. For them, it was a new initiative and for the time being it had been relegated to a back-burner, presumably until something more urgent came from it. For example, a programme leader said:

Well I knew you did a survey with the students. To be honest I don't remember the details... I sat through the presentation and saw the problems and the strengths, but you know other than that I have little knowledge of it ... It's something that sort of passes me by, as it were.

However, during May 2005, the authors were approached by the Careers Officer and the Alumni Officer to help in preparing surveys related to these specific areas, and this provided evidence that a measurement culture may be coming at the schools.

Senior management had been aware of the survey since 2000, but during that time there had been several changes at this level, and although the initiative had

remained the personal interest of the Academic Director, it was not generally accepted until a need for definitive organisational statistics arrived with the next periodic NEASC inspection. The Academic Director noted:

Well firstly, most of them don't really remember what it is, [when I bring it up at meetings] so we have a great debate on the lines of "what are you talking about... Ohh that" And it's taken a while for my very senior colleagues, but because it's now littered through the NEASC Report and we've been complimented on in various responses, they now beginning to see it as a more... valuable tool.

DISCUSSION

PAT is respondent-centred and collects the unbiased concerns of students at the Laureate schools at the moment they are given. The questionnaire produced from the PAT data should be instantly recognisable and meaningful to students. Results from both the PAT and the instrument derived from it suggest that this is the case and that the technique provides a truly responsive picture of students' concerns. Unfortunately, the very sensitivity of the technique means that the questionnaire derived here would not be valid in another situation; the present study assumes, in fact, that the same questionnaire will not be valid in the same situation at another time. However, the results are undoubtedly useful and relevant to the situation, and the ongoing nature of the survey has the effect of keeping issues alive, so that they get dealt with eventually, if not immediately. An important feature of this survey is that it makes no assumptions on the locus of student satisfaction, and therefore does not concentrate upon one area, such as academic courses or classroom practice. The results have clearly been useful and have informed management decisions in a number of important areas. They have also precipitated calls for measurement instruments for other areas of service provision.

The adoption of this survey shows many of the elements of organisational change proposed by Schein (1988). Change has been considerable since 2000. For example, there were at that time no quality procedures and no formal committee structure capable of collecting and referring the comments of students or faculty. In Schein's terms, therefore, unlearning something old to learn something new has occurred, as a general reliance upon informal anecdotal information has been

replaced firstly by programme committees and other structures, and then by the increasing availability of, and desire for, management information like this survey. Undoubtedly, there has been a motivation to change, fuelled by the schools' need to provide evidence of its activities in order to gain accreditation from outside bodies. The change has been mediated by several key individuals, including the authors of the survey itself, the Academic Director, and an increasing circle of senior and middle management, who have steadily recognised the value of the survey and adopted it as a basis for action. Now, five years on from the introduction of the survey, much of the pain of changing values and attitudes in the early days is forgotten and, in hindsight, it may have been a wise decision to keep the survey confidential as a management tool for several years. On the other hand, one cannot say that all stages of Schein's change process: unfreezing, setting and refreezing have been negotiated. As evidence of the arrival of change, new surveys are being planned along the PAT lines in specific areas of the operation, but on the other hand some top management and many faculties are unaware or only dimly aware of the survey. It is simply too early to comment on any re-freezing process. In any case, the change process goes much deeper than measurement. It includes the development of academic maturity and reflective practice based upon evidence from many different sources. However, a key feature is a growing confidence within the organisation, based upon accepting, and responding to, a student's eye view of the academic life and support services it offers.

Management commitment which, according to Crosby (1988) is a prerequisite for successful change, was patchy in this case, due to the changes in ownership and in the management team, but the whole process was championed from the start by the Academic Director.

However, the fact that senior managers are now aware of the power of this survey, and of the need to extend the scope of organisational monitoring, suggests that the rate of change will be maintained. Quality measurement, the core of the present case, and the focus of most of the change, is in fact another aspect emphasised by Crosby. In a learning organisation, all staff should be encouraged to seek and exchange new knowledge. In academic institutions most faculty are committed to learning that impinges directly upon their teaching. Expertise is generally fragmented between different subject areas, making sharing relatively difficult within the organisation. However, a survey of the type discus-

sed here is universally relevant to members of the institution and therefore could form a basis for schools of this type to develop themselves as learning organisations; a culture of quality monitoring and feedback being the focus of the learning. The present case is a long way from this ideal, but the seeds of it can be observed.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This paper presents the case of Laureate Swiss Hotel Schools, where a survey of students was begun in 2000 and has been since extended to cover all campuses. The survey is based upon PAT, a technique that allows students' unbiased concerns to be regularly collected and quantified, and this technique, together with a closed questionnaire derived from the PAT data are used to prepare importance-performance charts showing the strengths and weaknesses of the operation. The results have been used to inform and improve the management of the library, reception, student social and sports provision, and information technology services. The case has all the features suggested by Schein (1988) for a typical change process. However, it is too early to claim that a lasting change has occurred, since the development of the change seems still to be occurring and no "re-freezing" is evident. The general level of awareness among both management and staff is also still quite low. However, there is evidence of an incipient interest in measurement and evaluation as a result of this survey that could ultimately develop into the kind of set culture that distinguishes a learning organisation.

Despite the relatively early state of the research, these results have a number of potential implications for achieving change in institutions. They show that measurement, which is in any case generally a requisite of change management, can itself be the focus of the change process. It can be clearly seen that the measurement exercise must have a leader or "champion". The champion does not necessarily need to be very senior in the hierarchy of the organisation, but will inevitably become the main protagonist of change. However, the momentum of the change process definitely does depend to some extent on the organisational status of the champion, and this individual will probably move up the hierarchy ladder as the power of the measurement process and the importance of the change become clear. It is also essential that the measurement process has inherent credibility and is endorsed by

faculty and staff. In doing so, it fulfils another criterion of change management, that of a common purpose within the organisation.

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