

# **2007 UTAS Service climate and stakeholder wellbeing survey**

## **Summary of results**

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## Introduction

A growing emphasis on the discourse of “student as customer” in the tertiary education sector has increased the relevance and salience of the concept of service climate in universities. Service climate reflects the degree to which employees feel that the organisation places significant value on the expressed needs of its client or customer base. A strong service climate functions as an important source of competitive advantage, particularly in relation to its contribution to high levels of both staff and customer satisfaction. Whilst there have been several recent papers arguing against treating students as “customers”, most university employees would be highly cognizant of the fact that students perceive themselves in a customer role and have expectations about course content, teaching styles and other administrative aspects of service they receive in return for their fees.

It has been argued that these changing expectations have led to increased demands on university staff because they have occurred in an environment of decreasing resources. Indeed, recent research shows that both academic and general staff are reporting high levels of work-related stress. This should be of concern to university administrators as the “emotional contagion hypothesis” proposes that customers experience the expressed emotions of employees and contribute to their evaluations of service received. Considerable research supports this hypothesis, although the data is often correlational and has been largely collected in banking and retail environments.

This research was designed to test a model of reciprocal determinism in the relationship between staff perceptions of service climate and student satisfaction and student perceptions of service climate and staff satisfaction. The study also provided the opportunity to gather descriptive data on a range of variables of importance to the university related to staff and student emotional wellbeing. The study was funded by the UTAS Institutional Research Grants Scheme and received full ethical clearance prior to commencement. An academic article is in preparation regarding the hypotheses of the study, however descriptive data which may be of interest to members of the University community is provided in this report.

# Survey 1

## Sample and procedure

The first survey aimed to collect descriptive baseline data on service climate and emotional wellbeing from both staff and students. Useable responses were obtained from 389 staff and 1458 students. This represents a response rate of approximately twelve percent for each population group. Demographic characteristics of participants are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1: Demographic profile of Survey 1 participants*

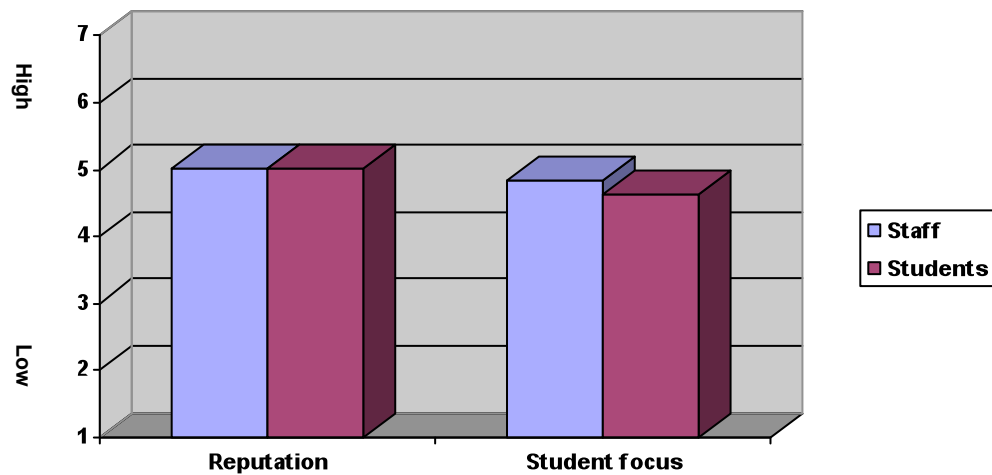
<b>Demographic variables</b>	<b>Staff</b>	<b>Students</b>
Mean age	42.3 years	27.9 years
Mean length of time at UTAS	7.9 years	2.7 years
Males	112 (28.8 %)	457 (31.6%)
Females	270 (69.4%)	991 (68.4%)
Faculty of Arts	43 (11.1%)	348 (23.9%)
Faculty of Business	19 (4.9%)	250 (17.1%)
Faculty of Education	16 (4.1%)	163 (11.2%)
Faculty of Health Sciences	59 (15.2%)	219 (15.0%)
Faculty of Law	7 (1.8%)	77 (5.3%)
Faculty of Science, Engineering & Tech.	100 (25.7%)	319 (21.9%)
Other (e.g. divisional staff)	145 (37.3%)	82 (5.6%)
Full time status	275 (70.7%)	1184 (81.5%)
Part time status	69 (17.9%)	268 (18.5%)
Casual status (staff only)	41 (10.6%)	N/A
Academic staff	150 (39.2%)	N/A
General staff	227 (59.3%)	N/A
Other staff	6 (1.6%)	N/A
Undergraduate students	N/A	1088 (24.0%)
Postgraduate students	N/A	343 (76.0%)

## Service climate

The fifteen questions assessing service climate within UTAS have been grouped under questions relating to student focus (e.g. the University cares about student concerns, UTAS provides students with value for their fees) and questions relating to institution reputation (e.g. UTAS has a good reputation as a tertiary education institution, UTAS has a positive image in the community).

Mean scores for the data from the first survey are presented in Figure 1 for both staff and student respondents. Appendix A shows the individual questions and the percentage of respondents who agreed with each the statement.

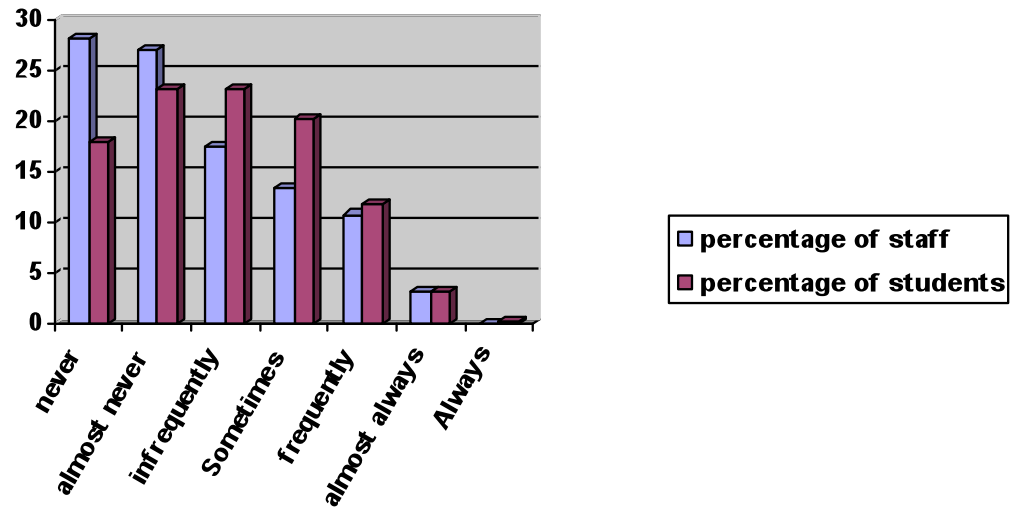
Figure 1: Mean scores for dimensions of University service climate



## ***Emotional wellbeing***

Mean scores for the data from the first survey assessing the frequency with which participants reported feeling upset, depressed, anxious at UTAS are presented in Figure 2 for both staff and students. Again, response analyses show the percentage of mean scores at each level of the scale.

*Figure 2: Frequency of experiencing negative emotions whilst at UTAS*



## Survey 2

### Sample and procedure

The second survey obtained responses from 206 staff and 727 students. This represents a retention rate of approximately 50% of the original group of respondents which is quite typical in longitudinal studies. The demographic profile of the retained participants was not significantly different to that presented in Table 1.

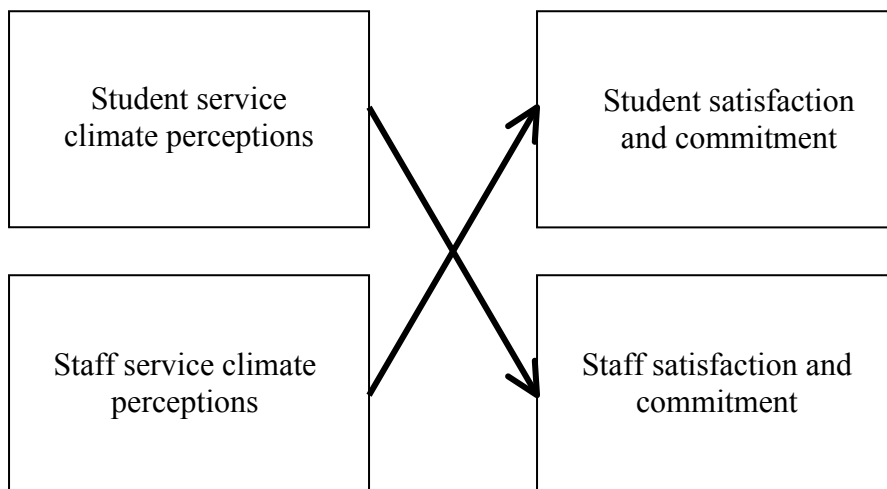
The second survey aimed to examine interactive effects of student ratings of service climate on staff, and staff ratings of service climate on students using a quasi-experimental methodology. The research objective was to determine whether reciprocal determinism occurs in relation to satisfaction among staff and students. That is, whether the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of students can positively or negatively influence staff satisfaction and wellbeing (and also in reverse with staff satisfaction affecting student satisfaction).

Prior to commencing the second survey, participants were exposed to what were ostensibly different levels of feedback from the first survey (positive, negative and neutral) via the presentation of a graph similar to those shown in the figures above. The effect of this feedback on a range of individual and organisational wellbeing indicators was examined.

## Relationship between staff and student perceptions

Results of regression analyses showed that the job satisfaction and affective commitment of staff were influenced by the level of student rated service climate. That is, those staff shown more positive forms of feedback from students were more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction and commitment than those who were shown negative or neutral feedback. The same result was shown for the effect of staff feedback on students' levels of overall satisfaction with their course and their affective commitment to the university. These analyses controlled for baseline service climate ratings and emotional wellbeing, as well as age, gender and length of time working/studying at the university (data gathered in Survey 1).

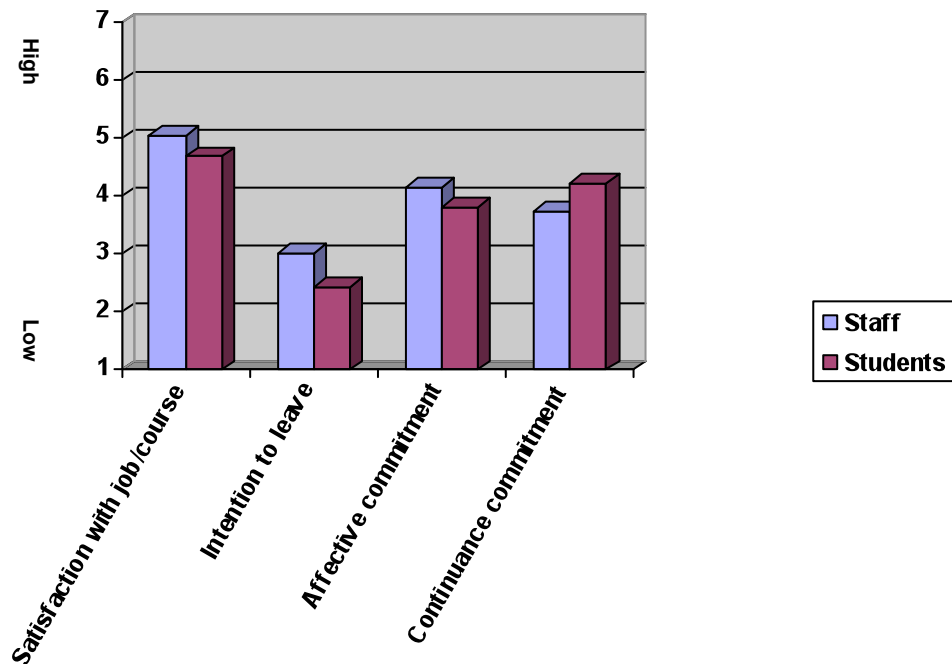
*Figure 3: Reciprocal relationship between staff and student perceptions*



## Commitment, satisfaction and intention to leave

Descriptive analyses of commitment and satisfaction data collected in the second survey were also conducted and the results are shown in Figure 4. Response analyses also showed the percentage of mean scores above the neutral midpoint of the scale (4) indicating agreement of some level with the statements listed. 63.8% of staff and 51.3 % of students were satisfied with their job or course. In relation to turnover intentions, 17.5% of staff and 4.5 % of students reported an intention to leave their job or course within the next 12 months. Commitment to the institution was measured with affective commitment, or emotional ties to the organisation and continuance commitment, or loyalty stemming from a need to stay with the organisation for practical reasons. 24.5% of staff and 15 % of students felt a level of emotional attachment to UTAS. 27.2% of staff and 34.3% of students felt a level of continuance commitment to UTAS. Again, further detail at the item level is provided in Appendix A.

Figure 4: Commitment and satisfaction

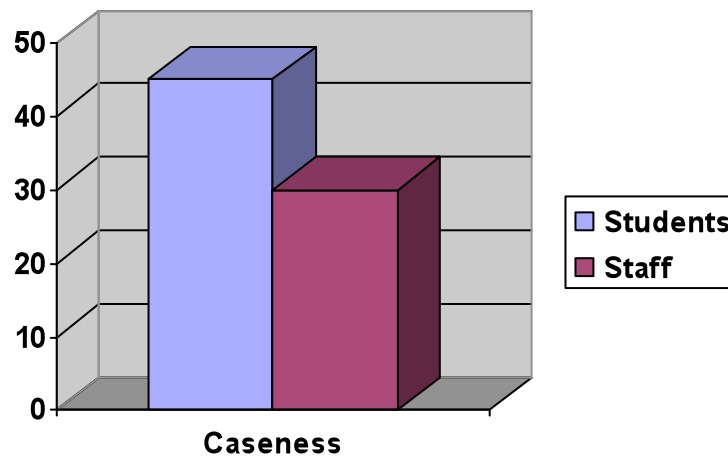


## Psychological wellbeing

Using a world validated screening tool for psychological dysfunction (depression and anxiety symptoms) a large number of participants scored above the “caseness” threshold used to determine referral to psychiatric assessment (approximately 30% of staff and 45% of students).

As the sample of respondents who completed the second survey is quite small, it is difficult to say whether these rates of dysfunction, considerably higher than those observed in the general population, are representative of the population of UTAS staff and students. It is quite possible that response bias occurred with distressed persons being more likely to participate in the survey. However, it does indicate that approximately 60 staff and 330 students who participated in the survey may be in need of professional psychological support.

*Figure 5: Percentage of sample reporting symptoms that meet ‘caseness’ criteria for psychological disorder*



## **Qualitative comments**

In the second survey, respondents were asked to respond to the following qualitative questions:

1. What is the most important aspect of service climate at the university that needs to be improved?
2. What is the most important issue affecting your personal wellbeing at the University?

Stage two of the data analysis for this project will involve a systematic analysis of these comments in order to identify any major themes in the issues discussed.

It is recommended that the themes be utilized in the development of a co-ordinated wellbeing program for students and staff.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The first survey showed that reported levels of service climate were above average for both reputation and student focus, although student focus was rated slightly lower by students than it was by staff. Results showed that satisfaction levels among staff and students were moderate, but like service climate levels, still present a case for improvement. Affective commitment among students was particularly low and this is highlighted as an area in which activities to increase student engagement within the university community could be directed. The frequency of negative emotions whilst at UTAS in survey 1 and the psychological dysfunction scores in survey 2 are also of concern. The research hypothesis relating to the reciprocal determinism of staff and student perceptions of service climate and indicators of satisfaction and wellbeing was generally supported, indicating the need for strategies targeting both groups simultaneously. **In sum, the results suggest there is considerable scope for improving the service climate within the University and increasing attention to both staff and student wellbeing.**

The academic literature suggests that improving service climate involves strengthening (i) human resource practices (ii) responsiveness to consumer input, and (iii) the processes and procedures for enabling performance in the delivery of service to customers. Issues for managerial consideration include mechanisms that facilitate service delivery such as adequate physical and material resources and supportive supervision, or aspects of the environment that impact on an employee's experience of the organisation, such as job autonomy, work group cohesion, or recognition of service performance. No doubt many of these objectives are currently the focus of ongoing efforts of the senior management team. If employees perceive that their capacity to deliver services is impeded by the policies and procedures of the organisation, it is likely they will demonstrate a diminished ability to provide services. Furthermore, employees need to feel that their own needs have been met within the organisation to effectively meet the needs of their client groups. Thus, managers must create two related but distinct climates: (i) a climate for service and (ii) a climate for employee well-being. Both are necessary conditions for a positive service climate, but alone, neither is sufficient.

**The design and implementation of a staff and student wellbeing program which follows principles of mental health promotion is strongly recommended.** Mental health promotion interventions that are designed as preventative are often classified as universal, selected or indicated. Universal interventions target the general population or healthy individuals, aiming to prevent the development of mental disorders. Selected interventions target individuals or subgroups of the population whose risk of developing mental disorders is significantly higher than average. Finally, indicated interventions target high risk or symptomatic individuals who do not currently meet diagnostic criteria for a mental disorder.

A strong business case is emerging from the evidence base in the workplace mental health promotion literature. It is increasingly argued that the utilisation of the workplace as a site for the delivery of interventions designed to prevent, screen for, or treat depression and anxiety amongst the employee population is both logistically attractive, as the workplace provides access to a large proportion of adult population, and socially responsible as a corporate strategy. Recent research has linked depression to impaired work performance, workplace safety and high levels of absenteeism and early retirement, creating considerable financial imperative for organisations to contribute to its prevention and management. **It is recommended that a working party be established for this purpose with members of the University community who represent public and occupational health researchers, Human resources, University management and Student services.** In addition to working on preventative strategies, it is recommended that the Employee Assistance Program and Student Counseling Service be more actively promoted in order to try and reach those participants who reported moderate to high levels of mental health symptoms.

A considerable amount of qualitative data was collected in the second survey focused on identifying the major issues for staff and students regarding the improvement of service climate and their own wellbeing. Whilst the comments cannot be presented here due to confidentiality issues, systematic analysis of this data may give a good indication of important issues to focus on in the development of a strategy that the working party could consider.

## Appendix A: Summary data by individual survey questions

		Staff	Students
<b>Service climate</b>		<b>% Agreement</b>	
1	I would recommend UTAS as a place to study for close friends and family members.	79.4	77.8
2	Staff at UTAS do their best to support students.	80.8	69.5
3	UTAS puts students first.	58.7	52.2
4	UTAS provides good quality academic training to students.	70.7	71.1
5	UTAS is responsive to student needs.	66.1	56.0
6	UTAS provides students with value for their fees.	63.0	50.4
7	UTAS students are investing in a high-quality education.	67.9	65.2
8	UTAS has a positive image in the community.	79.9	76.0
9	Student needs are given a low priority at UTAS.	13.6	19.5
10	UTAS cares about student concerns.	63.7	58.2
11	Students get a pretty good deal at UTAS.	66.4	56.9
12	UTAS does not compare well with other tertiary education institutions.	19.6	20.0
13	Student fees are put to good use at UTAS.	37.7	35.8
14	UTAS students do not get good value for their fees.	15.3	21.5
15	UTAS has a good reputation as a tertiary education institution.	67.1	64.9
<b>Satisfaction, commitment and intention to leave</b>			
16	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my UTAS job/course.	67.8	66.4
17	I often think about leaving my job/ course at UTAS.	30.3	19.1
18	I plan to leave my job/withdraw from my course at UTAS within the next 12 months.	16.0	5.9
19	If I could change institutions I would be happy to leave UTAS.	24.0	18.9
20	I would be very happy to finish the rest of my career/studies at UTAS.	55.8	74.5
21	I enjoy discussing the University with people outside of it.	61.6	58.3
22	I really feel as if the University's problems are my own.	25.9	17.2
23	I do not feel like 'part of the family' at UTAS.	29.7	38.8
24	I do not feel 'emotionally attached' to UTAS.	24.8	42.9
25	UTAS has a great deal of personal meaning to me.	42.4	28.9
26	I feel a strong sense of belonging at UTAS.	44.2	33.2
27	I have too few options to consider leaving UTAS.	31.2	33.2
28	Too much in my life would be disrupted if I left this University now.	45.5	57.2
29	It would be hard to leave this University right now, even if I wanted to.	39.5	50.8

		Staff	Students
<b>Psychological wellbeing</b>		<b>% Less than usual or much less than usual</b>	
30	Been able to concentrate on what you are doing?	28.2	41.1
31	Felt that you are playing a useful part in things?	21.0	23.8
32	Felt capable of making decisions about things?	17.0	18.8
33	Been able to enjoy your normal day to day activities?	28.2	33.9
34	Been feeling reasonably happy all things considered?	26.5	26.0
35	Been able to face up to your problems?	10.2	17.7
		<b>% More than usual or much more than usual</b>	
36	Lost much sleep over worry?	10.2	32.2
37	Felt constantly under strain?	22.4	47.4
38	Felt you could not overcome your difficulties?	15.7	23.5
41	Been feeling unhappy and depressed?	20.9	26.0
42	Been losing confidence in yourself?	16.6	29.6
43	Been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?	7.3	15.3