

Title page

Abstract

Higher education in Ireland today is facing significant challenges including internationalization, intense competition and changes in the demographic of students. The reintroduction of student fees, as anticipated to be proposed by the forthcoming 'Hunt Report', could potentially contribute to further commercialization of education, which means that fee-paying students may behave more like customers. As a result, higher education providers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of student satisfaction as it impacts on student motivation, retention, promotion, recruitment and fundraising (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Elliott and Shin, 2002; Jurkowitsch *et al.*, 2006; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005). However, the research in this field does not show a consistent pattern for student satisfaction. There is a significant shortage of academic literature reflecting the Irish experience in the research area.

The aim of this research is to assess various views on student satisfaction in Waterford Institute of Technology. To represent the Institute's perspective on the matter, interviews were conducted with seven WIT decision-makers, who were selected for their strategic and operational involvement in the policy as well as experience in co-operation with students. To represent the views of students on the phenomenon of student satisfaction, two focus groups were carried out with a total of 13 mature students who were participating in a range of Master of Business programmes.

The study reveals a number of contrasting viewpoints of student satisfaction between the Institute and students. A key contribution of the study is that from the Institute's perspective student satisfaction is defined in terms of a long-term success of the graduate. The students, however, are very much concerned with their present situation and therefore determine their satisfaction based on their current perceptions of the experience. In light of the identified gap, the author recommends the development of an official Institute-wide student satisfaction strategy.

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Ethical Declaration

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter overview

This chapter provides a general introduction to this dissertation. Initially, the rationale for the study is presented as a reflection of the reasoning behind the research. This is followed by the outline of the research question, objectives and the contribution of the study. Next, there is a brief outline of the research methodology employed. Finally, the organisation of the dissertation text is presented to give an overview of the study contents to the reader.

1.2 Rationale of the study

Higher education providers in Ireland are being forced by the global environment to compete internationally. According to the Times Higher Education Supplement (2006), Trinity College Dublin is the only Irish university in the world top 200 university rankings. As the league tables increasingly determine the reputation of Irish academic institutions, being the 'best in Ireland' is no longer suffice and now Ireland needs to "stand well against the best in the world" (Prospectus Strategy Consultants, 2007). In addition to the internationalization challenge, intense competition in modern higher education environment forces universities to differentiate from the competitors (DeShields *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, the institutes face increasing demands from a diverse cohort of students. The number of 'traditional' students has been decreasing notably and the new growing category includes mature students, students who study part-time, students who enrol in postgraduate programmes and professional courses (Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005). This trend is supported by HEA Higher Education Key Facts and Figures (2009) noting the increase of 19.5% in the number of mature (age 23 and over) enrollments compare to 2008. The Institute of Technology sector is progressively being seen as an attractive

option for students to undertake master degree programmes, with the overall enrollment increase of 14% since 2008.

At the moment higher education in Ireland operates 'free fees' policy; however the strategy is viewed as one of the main barriers to the international competitiveness of Irish academic institutions (OECD, 2004). It is anticipated that the 'Hunt Report' on national higher education strategy, which is due to be published in October 2010, will put third level fees firmly back on the agenda (Flynn, 2010). The reintroduction of student fees could potentially contribute to further commercialisation of education, which means that fee-paying students may behave like customers, expecting 'value for money' and be more demanding of aspects of their student experience (Watson, 2003). In light of the identified issues, higher education providers should become aware of the importance of student satisfaction due to its impact on student recruiting, fundraising, motivation and retention (Elliott and Shin, 2002).

1.3 Research question and objectives

The research question put forward by this study is to assess various views on student satisfaction in Waterford Institute of Technology to identify the gap, if any, between the Institute's and students' perspectives on the matter. From the research question the following primary research objectives arise:

- 1) To establish constructs of student satisfaction in higher education context;*
- 2) To examine the Waterford Institute of Technology's strategies and perspectives on the student satisfaction issue;*
- 3) To investigate the constructs of student satisfaction within the parameters of WIT Graduate School of Business;*

- 4) *To critically evaluate the gap between business postgraduate students' perspectives and the Institute's perspective on student satisfaction.*

1.4 Contribution of the study

First, the topic of student satisfaction in the Institute of Technology sector in Ireland has not been addressed in the literature. Furthermore, there is no coherent body of knowledge defining the components of student satisfaction in Irish Institutes of Technology. This represents a crucial gap as student satisfaction can be regarded as one of the measures and ways of improving quality in higher education, as well as a means of enhancement of overall student university experience (Harvey, 2003; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). Therefore, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the body of academics as it attempts to fill the identified gap. In addition, the study aims to provide ideas for further research in this area.

From the practical point of view, this study may offer a useful reference for higher education institutions in Ireland, particularly for Waterford Institute of Technology. It is also hoped that by providing the insights into postgraduate mature student satisfaction, the study will encourage Waterford Institute to Technology to include student satisfaction in its strategy.

This study also makes a personal contribution to the researcher. The author appreciates the benefits of undertaking an academic dissertation at a master level due to its contribution towards opportunities for further research and future career development.

1.5 Research methodology

A full assessment of the research methodology for this study is provided in *Chapter 3*. In summary, a qualitative based study was deemed to be most suitable. For the purpose of this dissertation a case study design was adopted and it explores student satisfaction phenomena in WIT. After careful consideration, it was decided to employ interview and focus group methods in primary research.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen to facilitate the collection of data on the Institute's strategies and perspectives on student satisfaction issue. A total of seven face-to-face interviews were conducted with selected WIT decision-makers from different managerial levels: two females and five males. Interviewees were chosen based upon their strategic and operational involvement in policy making as well as experience in co-operation with students. As one of the objectives of research is to represent students' views on student satisfaction in higher education institutions, the method of focus group was deemed appropriate. Literature suggests that it was decided to conduct two focus groups with 1) full-time mature students participating in a range of Master of Business programmes in WIT; and 2) students undertaking one of these programmes on a part-time basis. A total of 13 students from three postgraduate programmes participated in the study.

1.6 Dissertation structure

This dissertation consists of six chapters outlined in *Table 1.1*.

Table 1.1 *Dissertation structure*

Chapter 1 provides a general introduction to the study including study foundation and justification, research question and objectives, methodology and contribution.

Chapter 2 incorporates a critical review of the academic literature on a subject matter. It is dedicated to setting up definitions, exploring factors and dimensions of student satisfaction phenomena in higher education context.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed assessment of the research methodology pursuant to this research study. It includes the philosophical background to the research, a detailed assessment of the research problem, question, objectives and research design. The credibility of the study is also addressed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings from the primary research undertaken for this study. It is hoped that these findings may help to contribute towards filling in the gap in the literature which exists in the research area.

Chapter 5 provides the primary research findings in the context of the literature reviewed. To address the specified research question and objectives, the outcomes are discussed in detail and the author's interpretations of same are presented.

Chapter 6 presents the conclusions based on the overall research study, as well as the author's recommendations to Waterford Institute of Technology on how to bridge the gap between students' and the Institute's perspectives on student satisfaction. Suggestions for further research are also indicated.

1.7 Summary

This chapter introduced the context and the framework of the dissertation. The rationale of the study was presented to introduce and justify the research area. The research question and objectives were outlined. The contributions of the study at academic, practical and personal levels were noted. A brief overview of the research methodology employed was also provided. The next chapter is dedicated to the review of the literature currently available on the topic.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter overview

This chapter comprises a critical review of the academic literature relevant to the chosen subject matter. First, there is an overview of higher education as a service industry. Next, a concept of 'student as customer' of higher education is examined. This is then followed by the exploration of the concepts of student satisfaction and service quality in higher education, including a student satisfaction model and specifics of satisfaction with the university experience to mature postgraduate students.

2.2 Higher education as service provider

Shank *et al.* (1995) states that higher education possesses all the characteristics of the service industry since educational services are intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable from the person delivering it, variable, perishable and the customer (student) participates in the process. At the same time, it is widely accepted that higher education is different to for-profit service organisations due to the nature of the service provided (Herbst, 2007). Rowley (1997) elaborates that higher education is a unique service in that most customers must meet stringent academic and sometimes personal criteria before being permitted to admission.

According to Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006), higher education is being forced by the global environment to compete internationally. Domestically, the demographic of students is also changing. Notably the number of 'traditional' students has been decreasing and the new growing category includes mature students, students who study part-time, students who enroll in postgraduate programmes and professional courses (Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005). All of these changes promote increasing commercialisation of education, which means that fee-paying students may behave like customers, expecting 'value for money'

and be more demanding of aspects of their student experience (Watson, 2003). In order to compete effectively in the marketplace, an educational institution needs to differentiate itself from its competitors. In this context the use of marketing concepts could be beneficial to educational institutions (Joseph and Joseph, 1997). For example, Gremler and McCollough (2002) provide empirical support to the use of a student satisfaction guarantee, which includes a formal promise made to students about the service they will receive. Similarly, Dann (2008) promotes the application of services marketing practice for the design, delivery and quality assurance of postgraduate research supervision. His findings suggest that academic research supervisors can benefit from the use of the service delivery quality systems which aid in supervision design, understanding of student needs and expectations, and addressing gaps between what the student perceives, and the supervisor believes is occurring in the supervision arrangement.

Not all authors, however, justify the use of marketing concepts in a higher education setting. Houston (2008) argues that industry- and customer-focused definitions of quality over-simplifies the demands of higher education and therefore fit the context of higher education poorly. He notes that the purpose of educational institutions is to impart knowledge and skills, whereas the main purpose of marketing is to make a profit which makes marketing incompatible with the educational mission. Nevertheless, Jongbloed (2002) claims that one of the challenges faced by higher education today, such as reduction in government funding, has resulted in a transition from universities operating as not-for-profit organisations to a business oriented model where each institution is seeking its own sustainable competitive advantage. In the context of higher education, researchers seem to accept that a strong relationship exists between customer satisfaction and competitive advantage (Ham *et al.*, 2003). Elliott and Shin (2002: 199) state that "for many universities, student satisfaction is an avenue through which a competitive advantage can be gained". Seeman and O'Hara (2006) propose that viewing students as customers provides a competitive advantage for higher education as it enhances a college's ability to attract, retain and serve its customers.

2.3 Student as customer of higher education

Literature confirms that all of the higher education stakeholders can be categorised as customers: students, staff, government, professional bodies, families, future employers, society (Hewitt and Clayton, 1999; Watson, 2003; Voss *et al.*, 2007). However, the stakeholder with the most influence – a student – is often referred to as the main customer of higher education (Pitman, 2000; O'Neill, 2003; Redding, 2005; Seeman and O'Hara, 2006; Meirovich and Romar, 2006).

According to Kamvounias (1999), there is a big debate in the literature about who exactly is the customer of higher education. As a result, the concept of customer in the university environment is not clearly defined, which makes institutions difficult to manage from a marketing point of view (Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005). In addition to 'customer', the following metaphors are used to describe student-university relationship:

- Student-as-client (Armstrong, 2003);
- Student-as-citizen of the university community (Svensson and Wood, 2007);
- Student-as-aspirant (Khalifa, 2009);
- Student-as-partner (Clayson and Haley, 2005);
- Student-as-junior partner (Ferris, 2002);
- Student-as-co-producer of education (Kotzé and du Plessis, 2003).

Boylston and Jackson (2008) in an article dedicated to adult student satisfaction claim that treating students as customers shifts the focus of education from strictly teaching courses to additionally providing services that individuals need to achieve academic goals. They argue that by improving the curriculum, services, and institutional effectiveness, universities strengthen their programmes and attract more students.

Kamvounias (1999: 32) ascertains that due to the difficulty in using the word 'customer' to describe the student-university relationship, "the debate must move away from identifying the customer and now focus on universities as service provider". According to Eagle and Brennan (2007), a student-as-customer concept is acceptable in the higher

education environment, but should be interpreted at a more sophisticated level. A simplistic understanding of the student-customer relationship as 'customer is always right' is contrary to the best interest of students themselves. For the purpose of this dissertation the view of Eagle and Brennan (2007) is adapted.

2.4 Service quality in higher education

Green *et al.* (1994), cited by Watson (2003), highlights that due to the complexity of the concept there is still an ambiguity in the definition of quality in the context of higher education. Snipes and Thomson (1999) agree in that one of the reasons for a lack of focus on customer satisfaction in higher education is due to difficulties with definition and measurement of service quality. O'Neill and Palmer (2004: 42), however, define service quality in higher education as "the difference between what a student expects to receive and his/her perceptions of actual delivery".

According to Oldfield and Baron (2000), much of the published work on service quality in higher education is concentrated on the quality of the programmes, effective course delivery mechanisms and teaching. However, the findings of their research suggest that students' perceived service quality has three dimensions: 'requisite elements', which are essential to enable students to fulfill their study obligations; 'acceptable elements', which are desirable but not essential to students; and 'functional elements', which are of a practical nature. Oldfield and Baron (2000) confirm that perceptions of service quality change over time, with 'acceptable elements' having increasing in importance the longer the students have been on the course.

Hill (1995) notes that in higher education service productivity and quality depend not only on the service provider's personnel, but also on the performance of the customer, which make quality management problematic. In addition, many service encounters require close personal interaction between a service provider and a customer. Whether or not such interaction is perceived by a student to be satisfactory may depend on a variety

of factors that are difficult to control, for example: the appearance of the academic and support staff, their perceived competence and their personal characteristics.

Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) identified the following five dimensions of service quality:

- *Tangibles*. Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel and communication materials.
- *Reliability*. Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- *Responsiveness*. Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- *Assurance*. Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence.
- *Empathy*. Caring, individualised attention the organisation provides to its customers.

In a context of university sector, Smith *et al.* (2007) found that some of Parasuraman's *et al.* (1988) dimensions tend to amalgamate. For example, for academic staff items responsiveness and assurance load together; on the other hand, for students assurance and empathy items form a single factor. The significance of the later service quality dimensions is also noted in study of Hasan *et al.* (2008). Using regression analysis they determine that empathy and assurance are the most critical factors in students' satisfaction. Oldfield and Baron (2000) stress the importance for institutions to evaluate what students themselves consider to be elements of service quality. This is in line with Hill (1995) who suggests that greater efforts should be made to gather information about the needs of students over their time at college, as these may not always be apparent to service providers.

2.4.1 Expected and perceived quality of service

The gap between expected and perceived service quality is a core element of the management of service quality (Dann, 2008). According to Parasuraman *et al.* (1988), overall quality is a multidimensional construct composed of differences between perceptions (P) and expectations (E), producing the equation $Q=P-E$. Thus, service

quality is an evaluation comparing customers' perceptions of service experiences with their expectations of what the service performance should be. A service quality gap occurs when service perceptions fall short of expectations; on the other hand, the level of satisfaction exists when the perceived performance exceeds predicted expectations (Ham, 2003). Hill (1995) states that it is very important to have an understanding of customer expectations, the development of these expectations and their significance in relation to service quality. He suggests that service expectations play a key role in customers' quality perception; therefore it is important for the company to manage such expectations effectively. Likewise, Shank *et al.* (1995) focus on students' expectations as a measure of potential satisfaction with the quality of university services. The study compares professors' views and students' expectations of professors' knowledge, respect for students, and the university physical environment. The results indicate that students' expectations of university services are much greater than those of professors and these expectations vary among different university types. Shank *et al.* (1995) suggest that universities have no systematic way of monitoring and understanding student expectations, which results in the emergence of a student-university expectation gap.

There is a significant body of research confirming a strong, positive relationship between perceived service quality and customer satisfaction in the service sector, including higher education (Ham and Hayduk, 2003; Kozloski Hart *et al.*, 2009; Krelin, 2000; Petruzzellis *et al.*, 2006). According to Hill (1995) customers are satisfied when the service fits their expectations, and dissatisfied when the service falls below their expectations. Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) agree that in order to increase students' satisfaction it is necessary to balance students' expectations and perceptions of service quality effectively. However, the idea that excellent service quality means that customers' expectations should be met or exceeded, depends on whether or not the expectations are reasonable (Bryslan and Curry, 2001).

According to Kerlin (2000), higher education institutions as service organisations should train their staff to analyse and meet the needs of the customer, both through attitude and knowledge. Furthermore, universities can educate the customer about his/her role in the

service encounter. This is in line with research confirming that students' unreasonable expectations can be adjusted through induction information sessions about what is expected from them and likely to be attained during the course of their study (Appleton-Knapp and Krentle, 2006; Ham and Hayduk, 2003; Watson, 2003).

2.5 Student satisfaction in higher education

Borden and Owens (2001), cited by Nasser *et al.* (2007), highlight that there are limited studies addressing student satisfaction with academic and other experiences in the context of higher education. Jurkowitsch (2005) defines student satisfaction as an individual, subjective, overall evaluation of experience felt by actual students based on what was expected and what was received from a higher education provider to date. Zhao (2003) sees student satisfaction as satisfaction with course quality, instruction interaction, peer collaboration and an institute's support services. Elliott and Shin (2002) add that student satisfaction is being shaped continually by repeated experiences in campus life and is affected by many factors, such as classroom experience, students' assessment of the quality of the course, physical facilities, and the extent of interaction between the student and university personnel.

Douglas *et al.* (2006) conducted research among 864 undergraduate students only to confirm that the most important aspects of student satisfaction are associated with teaching and learning, while that least important are those associated with physical facilities, such as layout and decoration of tutorial rooms, catering facilities and availability of parking. The research also confirmed the differences between the dimensions of part-time student satisfaction with the ones of full-time students. Overall, the results of the survey confirmed that university's physical facilities influence students' decisions to enrol at this particular institution. Once students have enrolled, it is the quality of the teaching and learning that influence the level of student satisfaction with academic life. Wiers-Jenssen *et al.* (2002) agree that the academic quality of teaching is crucial to student satisfaction. However, they argue that social climate, physical infrastructure and quality of administrative services should not be underestimated when

trying to improve student satisfaction and opportunity to learn. This is in line with Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) who claim that in addition to the academic quality of teaching, relationships, infrastructure and quality of services from administration personnel also influence student satisfaction.

Sevier (1996), cited by Elliott and Shin (2002: 198), argue that universities typically focus on the academic dimension of students' educational experience paying little attention to other aspects that might be important to students. As a result, students are generally satisfied with academic programmes, but are less satisfied with other services provided by higher education, such as counseling, career planning, library and computer services (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Oldfield and Baron (2000) state that institutions concentrate their attention on accreditation and course reviews, and tend to collect student feedback based upon what the institution perceives its students find important; therefore other factors affecting satisfaction of students often remain unnoticed.

The literature suggests that student satisfaction, loyalty, retention and recruitment are closely linked (Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Elliott and Shin, 2002; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005). According to these studies, the aim of the higher education providers should be to maximise student satisfaction, minimize dissatisfaction and, therefore, retain students to improve the institutions performance among others. The importance of easy access to comprehensive quality information to students is highlighted by Nasser *et al.* (2008). They found that students who had better knowledge of services, policies and procedures were more inclined to be satisfied with overall academic experience. The study also established that university standing produces different results in terms of student satisfaction: Seniors were less satisfied with programmes and services than Freshman students. This is explained by higher pressure towards the end of the course and career planning activities. The work of Nasser *et al.* (2008) is in line with Oldfield and Baron (2000) findings suggesting that student evaluation of certain aspects of service quality may change over time resulting from student experience and course content.

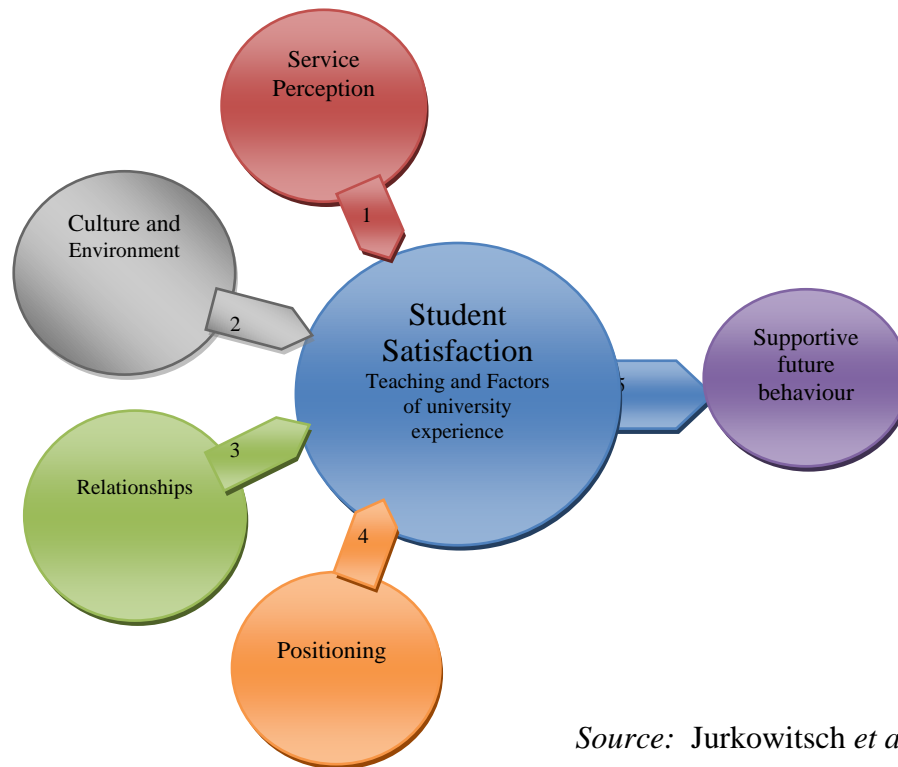
It should be noted that there is a disparity among members of different disciplines regarding the importance of student satisfaction (Kozloski Hart *et al.*, 2009). Some pedagogues view students as the product of education, therefore students' satisfaction is perceived as largely irrelevant; however other academics, especially those who are more familiar with the benefits derived from satisfied customers due to the subject matter of their research, view achieving students satisfaction as an important goal.

2.5.1 Student satisfaction model

The literature contains a number of student satisfaction models (Williams, 2002; Schertzer and Schertzer, 2004; DeShields *et al.*, 2005; Marzo-Navarro *et al.*, 2005; Sakthivel *et al.*, 2005; Jurkowitsch *et al.*, 2006; Douglas and McClelland, 2008). Researchers Schertzer and Schertzer (2004) propose a conceptual model that considers student values congruent with the university and faculty as a significant component of academic fit and ultimate student satisfaction and retention. The focal point of the model is retention, and student satisfaction is viewed as a route to its improvement. Similarly to Schertzer and Schertzer (2004), DeShields *et al.* (2005) develop a student satisfaction and retention model, but they concentrate on student satisfaction as the main aim of higher education providers. DeShields *et al.* (2005) use a modified version of Keaveney and Young's (1997) model, which considers the impact of faculty, advising staff and classes on students' partial college experience and, subsequently, their satisfaction.

For the purpose of this dissertation it is decided to employ a model that represents a more holistic view of students' educational experience compared to the models outlined above. Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) state there is a need for a coherent student satisfaction model in order to better manage the student satisfaction rate concerning the product, the organisation, the relationship, the marketing, and alumni activities in higher education. To enable students in management decision making, they examine how student satisfaction can be broken down into dimensions of the student's learning experience. After testing and validating the pre-conceptualised propositions, Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) put forward a student satisfaction model presented in *Figure 2.1* on the next page.

Figure 2.1 *Student Satisfaction Model*



Source: Jurkowitsch et al. (2006)

Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) highlight that in order to grasp the complexity of the learning experience, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to student satisfaction:

- *Service perception.* This factor covers student perceptions of academic service quality. It has two aspects of influence: the academic staff and the specific course content. In this section, students' opinions sought in relation to lecturers' accessibility and assistance, teaching skills, assignments, study content and course management. Research shows that aspects associated with teaching and learning are perceived to be the most important to student satisfactions (Angell *et al.*, 2008; Doughlas *et al.*, 2006).

- *Culture and environment.* Hill (1995) states that non-academic services become crucial success factors for many students and therefore form one of the university's competitive advantages. In the student satisfaction model, culture and environment factors consist of support facilities of the university, infrastructure, social climate and responsiveness of staff. All these aspects are proven to be important to student satisfaction (DeShields *et al.*, 2005; Wiers-Jenssen *et al.*, 2002).
- *Relationships.* In the context of this model, forming empathic relationships with staff and bonding with peers is proposed to be important to higher education students. This is in line with the studies of Smith *et al.* (2007) and Hasan *et al.* (2008) who discover that empathy and assurance are the most critical factors of student satisfaction. The levels of reciprocity between students and the academic staff are also thought to reflect on student satisfaction (Guolla, 1999).
- *Positioning.* Gwin and Gwin (2003), cited by Jurkowitsch (2005: 112), define positioning as "how customers think about proposed and/or present brands in a market". The positioning of university as a brand and university image develops a sustainable competitive advantage in the students' mind (Palacio *et al.*, 2002). The brand itself is a part of communication, therefore positioning statements need to be carefully considered (Jurkowitsch *et al.*, 2006).

All of the above factors are proposed to affect overall student satisfaction with teaching and university experience. Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) suggest that positive experience will result in *Supportive Future Behavior* such as the promotion of the institute, recommendation to others and contribution to the alumni association. For the purpose of this dissertation, the above model is taken as a starting point for studying student satisfaction in Waterford Institute of Technology.

2.5.2 Measuring student satisfaction

With the expansion of the university sector, the concerns with quality and the growing 'customerism' of higher education there has been a significant growth of, and sophistication in, processes designed to collect views from students (Harvey, 2003). Douglas *et al.* (2006) agree that measuring student satisfaction with their experience in higher education is now commonplace. Student opinions are sought on their programmes of study as well as on the complete range of student activities that constitute 'academic life'. According to Petruzzellis *et al.* (2006), in recent years the student body has become strongly diversified: there are, for example, more students who work while attending college. These dynamics justify and call for tools to assess student satisfaction not only of the programmes, but also of the services provided. Douglas *et al.* (2006) note, however, that due to the diverse dimensions of academic life that include the quality of teaching, learning activities as well as quality of on-campus support facilities, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find one way of monitoring and measuring student satisfaction.

Harvey (2003) summarises the variety of ways in which student views may be collected:

- Informal discussion or conversations;
- Formal qualitative sessions (focus groups, suggestion boxes, facilitated discussions);
- Representative or consultative committees;
- Questionnaires.

In addition, Dawes and Rowley (1999) note that information about student experience and perception of quality can be obtained from external examiners or industry advisors comments, student complaints schemes and retention rates. They emphasise that in order to improve service and performance, higher education providers need to collect data from numerous sources using quantitative as well as qualitative methods.

Currently student satisfaction is mainly measured via surveys using single-item rating scale (traditional approach) or multi-attribute rating scale, which are deemed to be a more appropriate type of measurement (Elliott and Shin, 2002). Watson (2003) argues that

student satisfaction surveys are crucial for universities and are, in fact, the only tool available to senior management in assuring quality in higher education. Nonetheless, Wiers-Jenssen *et al.* (2002) note a number of problems related to student satisfaction surveys, such as the inability to capture learning directly, ignoring the effect of students' prior merits, cognitive skills, and personal motivation. All of the above factors tend to influence students' satisfaction.

A number of previous studies into student perceptions of quality and satisfaction have utilised the SERVQUAL technique (Sahney *et al.*, 2004; Snipes and Thomson, 1999; Sohail and Shairh, 2004). This technique was developed by Parasuraman *et al.* (1988) and was originally conceived as a generic measure that could be applied to any service. It entails collecting quantitative data using a scaling method to measure the gap between service quality perceptions and expectations. Some researches hold a negative view of SERVQUAL, arguing that current performance best reflects customer perception of service quality and that expectations should not be part of this concept (Buttle, 1996; Cuthbert, 1996). An alternative instrument, SERVPERF, developed by Corin and Taylor (1992), is also widely used to measure students' satisfaction. It enables researchers to focus on service quality performance, which, Corin and Taylor (1992) argue, better reflects customers' perceptions. Douglas *et al.* (2008) employ Critical Incident Technique (CIT) as an alternative method of measuring student satisfaction with their experience in higher education. They argue that the use of traditional student feedback questionnaires restricts students to questions that have been predetermined. The benefit of this technique is that it allows respondents to freely describe their experiences and unreservedly express their feelings without being constrained to specific areas. CIT employs quantitative as well as qualitative data collection methods.

According to Williams (2002), although student feedback is collected by most higher education providers, there is little standardisation in how feedback is collected or what is subsequently done with it. Harvey (2003) agrees with this view and suggests that students' feedback can be utilised for internal improvements and external information to increase public confidence. He also stresses the importance of closing the feedback loop

by acting upon the result of student satisfaction surveys and informing students on these actions. Richardson (2005) provides theoretical backup to the fact that student feedback is an important evidence for assessing quality; therefore, it can be used to improve quality. He also notes that positive students' feedback is useful to attract prospective students.

2.5.3 Measuring student satisfaction in Ireland

The Irish Higher Education Quality Network (2009) recommends to Irish institutions to ensure that students have the opportunity to provide regular feedback on all educational services and are involved systematically in quality assurance and enhancement initiatives. Surveys for obtaining student feedback on a national level are well established in North America, Australia and the UK (Richardson, 2005). In Ireland, however, measuring student satisfaction is not a common practice. Only recently the Irish University Association attained to develop a large web-based survey system targeted at 3rd and 4th level university sector students in Ireland. The survey endeavors to fill a vital information gap relevant to planning for individual services, institutions, government policy, as the lack of such information was criticised in the European University Association review (www.iua.ie).

The first round of the project, presented in the Irish University Association report (2009), surveyed 3,700 undergraduate and taught postgraduate students across seven Irish universities in relation to student demographic variables, life satisfaction, life-goals, socioeconomic status, health, time-use, and earning expectations. One of the aims of further rounds of the survey is to create a student feedback system in all aspects of the students' experience in university, from teaching and tutorial satisfaction to satisfaction with university systems and supports.

2.5.4 The role of student satisfaction for adult and postgraduate learners

Bean (2005: 262) states that world-wide there is a "push to encourage universities to be more accountable for postgraduate learning", and as a result quality assurance of

postgraduate education is becoming increasingly important. A study conducted by Angell *et al.* (2008) highlights that postgraduate students find 'academic' and 'industry link' aspects of the service to be more important than issue of 'cost' and, particularly, 'leisure'. These findings indicate that postgraduates see the postgraduate experience as a stepping stone to a career, rather than the life experience opportunity often associated with undergraduate study. A similar study is conducted by Bean (2005) among 180 Masters and PhD students in New Zealand. The author of the study subsequently compares the outcomes of postgraduate student feedback with the external peer review reports. It appears that academic audit reports contain recommendations that are evenly spread across the three domains of management, supervision and support. However, postgraduate students emphasise the importance of one particular area - the appropriate support, which includes information, services, culture and resources. Bean (2005) recommends the utilisation of this information in order to improve the quality of the postgraduate education experience.

The Boylston and Jackson (2008) study reveals that adult students have particular needs which affect their satisfaction levels. The researchers surveyed and subsequently interviewed 53 nursing students over 25 years of age to identify factors that determine adult student satisfaction. The findings reveal that instructional effectiveness and academic advising are deemed the most important aspects on the satisfaction scale. This is closely followed by campus climate and service excellence. As adult learners, respondents stress the importance of complex personal and professional issues that were not included in survey questions, such as ability to juggle school, family, and work. The results of the study suggest that meeting all of the above needs of the adult student population is critical to improving satisfaction.

Guolla (1999) presents rather interesting findings in relation to postgraduate student satisfaction. He examines MBA students' satisfaction levels with the quality of teaching. As expected, learning had the greatest impact on student satisfaction, followed by valuable and fair assignments. Surprisingly, interaction was not significantly related to course satisfaction. However, the most unexpected significant negative relationship was

found between rapport and course satisfaction. This finding suggests that in that particular context, the more friendly the instructor was and the more interest was expressed in students, the less satisfaction was experienced by the students in relation to delivery of the course and teaching qualities of the instructor.

2.6 Summary

Despite difficulties in applying marketing concepts to higher education, it is evident from the literature that today's reality forces universities to operate more like businesses. As a result, higher education providers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of student satisfaction as it impacts student motivation, retention, recruiting and fundraising (Elliott and Shin, 2002). Although a number of academics attempted to contribute to a better understanding of student satisfaction, the literature seems to be very fragmented. This conclusion is in line with Wiers-Jenssen *et al.* (2002: 185) who claim that "research in this field does not show a consistent pattern for student satisfaction". There is also a gap in the literature in relation to what the dimensions of student satisfaction are and how they can be managed effectively by higher education providers (Harvey, 2003). The next chapter will describe the design of the research methodology used to investigate these issues.

Chapter 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter overview

This chapter endeavors to provide a detailed assessment of the research methodology pursuant to this research study.

3.2 Philosophical background to the research

Saunders *et al.* (2009) suggests that it is important to be aware of different philosophical paradigms as they will influence the researcher's decisions in relation to the research approach and strategy. In order to identify the philosophical positioning of this research, positivist and interpretivist approaches were considered. According to Denscombe (2003), positivists aim to discover patterns and frequent happenings of the social world through the use of scientific methods. On another hand, interpretivists' primary concern is in-depth understanding of human behavior and social actions (Bryman and Bell, 2007). This study is dedicated to the exploration of the student satisfaction phenomenon, its construct and influencing factors, thus the author would argue that this research belongs to the interpretivism paradigm.

3.3 Quantitative and qualitative research strategies

Bryman and Bell (2003) describe research strategy as a general orientation to the conduct of the research. *Table 3.1* outlines fundamental differences between quantities and qualitative research strategies.

Table 3.1 Quantities vs. Qualitative research

	Quantities	Qualitative
Principle orientation to the role of theory in relation to research	Deductive; testing theory	Inductive; generation of theory
Epistemological orientation	Natural science model, in particular positivism	Interpretivism
Ontological orientation	Objectivism	Constructionism

Source: Bryman and Bell (2003)

Bush and Burns (1998: 175) describe quantitative research as "research involving the use of questions where the response options have been predetermined and a large number of respondents is involved". Hair *et al.* (2003) therefore note that quantitative data research is most useful for testing hypotheses, tracking trends or gathering statistics and relies on the researcher's analytical rather than interpretative skills. Quantitative research is usually conducted through surveys, questionnaires, experiments and observations (Domegan and Fleming, 2007). In contrast, qualitative research inquires "into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2007: 37). Qualitative research does not provide statistical answers, but open to interpretation (Domegan and Fleming, 1999). One of the greatest advantages of this research strategy is that it allows the researcher to get deeper and more substantial understanding of the data. The main research methods associated with qualitative research are interviews, focus groups, the collection and qualitative analysis of texts and documents (Bryman and Bell, 2003).

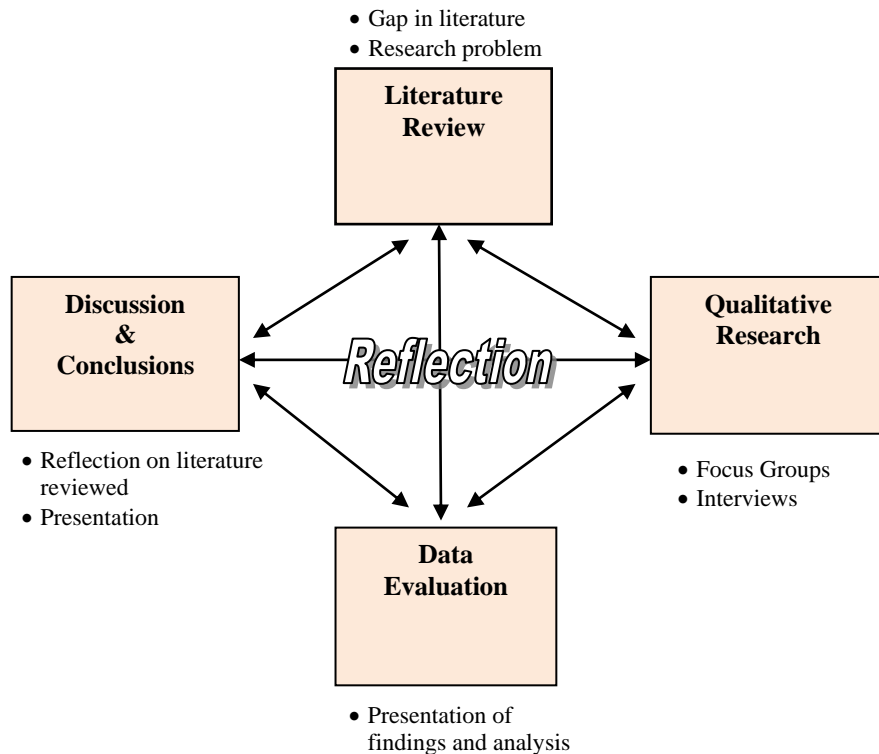
A point of orientation of this dissertation is "the perspective of those being studies – what they see as important and significant" (Bryman and Bell, 2003: 302). In addition, O'Neill and Palmer (2004: 41) suggest that qualitative methods "provide an interesting insight into the mindset of individual students". Considering the philosophical positioning and the nature of the research, the author decided to undertake a qualitative research strategy.

3.4 The research process

According to Brannick (1997: 3), the research process provides a "systematic, planned approach to a research project and ensures all aspects of the project are consistent with

one another". The research process is seen as a series of steps which interact with each other and often take place at the same time (Tull and Hawkins, 1993). Several authors including Sekaran (1992), Cooper and Schindler (1998), Domegan and Fleming (1999), Malhorta and Birks (2000) propose frameworks for the research process. After reviewing these studies, the following research process model is put forward (*Figure 3.1*). The model represents the journey pursued by the author during the course of this dissertation from the conception to the final analysis.

Figure 3.1 *Author's Research Process Model*



3.5 Research problem, question and objectives

The research problem is the starting point of all research studies and refers to the entire situation wherein the researcher identifies a possible need for research and problem-solving (Sekaran, 2003). Moreover, a research problem statement "must integrate concepts and theoretical perspective of the literature into the problem to be addressed" (O'Connor, 2000: i).

Due to an increasingly competitive educational environment, as well as challenges of the changing demographic of students, higher education providers are now recognising the importance of student satisfaction (Elliott and Shin, 2002). The emphasis is now made on adapting more student-centric approach in higher education and the importance of student views is on the agenda worldwide (Watson, 2003). Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) is no exception as in its mission statement it declares to "foster student-centered environment" (*Appendix B*). In recent years, student satisfaction received vast attention in North America, Australia and United Kingdom (Richardson, 2005). In Ireland, however, measuring student satisfaction is not a common practice, especially in the Institute of Technology sector. Form the research problem identified above, the research question can be formulated as follows:

***Bridging the gap? Assessing variant views on student satisfaction
in Waterford Institute of Technology.***

The research objectives are generated from the research question and should provide clearer sense of purpose and direction for the researcher (Saunders *et al.*, 2003). The following primary research objectives arise from the research question identified above:

- 1) To establish parameters of student satisfaction with higher education experience;***

The Objective 1 is sought through analysis of the current mainstream literature. Chapter 2 Literature Review is dedicated to setting up definitions, exploring the factors and dimensions of student satisfaction phenomena in higher education context.

2) *To examine the Waterford Institute of Technology's strategies and perspectives of student satisfaction issue;*

The literature suggests that higher education providers are mainly concerned with the quality of their academic programmes offerings. Although the academic quality of teaching is a crucial determinant of student satisfaction, other aspects of student experience, such as social climate, physical infrastructure and the quality of administrative services are also proposed to be important to students. To answer the second research question empirical research is conducted to examine the Institute's understanding of student satisfaction.

3) *To investigate the constructs of student satisfaction within the parameters of WIT Graduate School of Business;*

Secondary research, presented in Chapter 2, has evidenced that although a number of academics attempted to contribute to a better understanding of student satisfaction, the research does not show a consistent pattern for student satisfaction. Various factors influencing student satisfaction can be recognised in the literature; however, information available is very fragmented. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature in relation to a holistic student satisfaction approach that would take into account all aspects of student university experience. Objective 3 seeks to address this gap through empirical research by exploring academic and non-academic factors influencing postgraduate student satisfaction in School of Business in WIT.

4) *To critically evaluate the gap between postgraduate students' perspectives and the Institute's perspective of student satisfaction.*

On the basis of the primary and secondary research the gap between students' and the Institute's perspectives on student satisfaction will be discussed in Chapter 5. The recommendations will be made on how to bridge this gap in order to enhance students' experience in WIT.

3.6 Research design

According to Bryman and Bell (2007), research design is a structure that guides the execution of a research method and the analysis of the subsequent data. They propose five types of research design, namely experimental design; cross-sectional; longitudinal design; case study; and comparative design. According to this classification, this thesis adapts a case study design. This Master's dissertation is dedicated to the exploration of student satisfaction phenomenon in WIT. This is a single organisation case study and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth elucidation of it; therefore, a qualitative approach to the empirical research has been chosen.

3.7 Primary and secondary data

The data presented in this study was collected from primary and secondary sources. According to Domegan and Fleming (1999), secondary data is information collected by another person for reasons other than the problem in hand. Amongst justifications for use of secondary data is the fact that it forms the basis for primary research (Malhotra and Birks, 2000; Sekaran, 2003). Secondary data had a crucial role in forming a focus of this study and facilitated the identification of the gap in the literature, research question, and the development of the research objectives. This secondary data is presented in Chapter 2 Literature Review and was primarily sourced from the WIT library and online databases of academic journals and articles.

After the theoretical framework was identified through the secondary data, the primary data was collected to test it. Aaker *et al.* (2001) defines primary data as data that is collected personally by the researcher specifically to answer the research question at hand. It is also noted that the researcher is fully engrossed in converting primary data into knowledge (Hair *et al.*, 2003). In this study the collection of primary data was carried out through the application of qualitative methods.

3.8 Primary research

Most of the literature reviewed on the topic appeared to be conceptual or quantitative in nature as it mainly concerned with measurements of student satisfaction levels. However, this study acquires in-depth evaluation of factors deemed to be important to a particular group of students and their reasoning, which can be more effectively obtained through qualitative methods. Thus, the primary data for this research was collected by means of focus groups and interviews.

3.8.1 Focus Groups

Patton (1990) describes a focus group method as an interview with a small group of people of a specific topic. It's typically composed of six to ten participants who are selected because they have certain characteristics in common. These participants are led by a moderator in an in-depth discussion on a particular topic of concern (Domegan and Fleming, 2007). Stewart *et al.* (2007) note that focus group method is particularly useful for exploratory research when rather little is known about the phenomenon of interest. It is also believed to provide useful insights into organisational issues, such as quality management and customer satisfaction (Krueger and Casey, 2009). As the aim of the research is to understand the phenomenon of student satisfaction in higher education institutions, the method of focus group was deemed appropriate.

There are many advantages of the focus group, including low cost and richness of the data (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997). The method benefited this research in the following ways:

- comparisons that participants made between each other's experiences proved to be a valuable source of insight into complex issue of student satisfaction;
- focus group method allowed to increase the sample size for qualitative study without the dramatic increase in the time required of the researcher;
- the method provided efficiency to the study in terms of data collection and data analysis.

The focus group method is not without weaknesses. The limitations include unpredictability, group conformity and possibility of domination by one or two participants (Flick, 2006); smaller sample size compare to surveys, inherent subjectivity of the results and difficulties with interpretation (Domegan and Fleming, 2007). The main difficulty associated with the method, however, is that the quality of the research results depends greatly on considerable skills of the moderator to facilitate and manage effective focus group discussion (Domegan and Fleming, 2007; Krueger and Casey, 2009). As a moderator, the author found it particularly challenging to maintain the focus of the discussion and to keep certain participants evolved. The discussion was moderated in accordance with the guideline developed by the researcher (*Appendix C*).

A focus group approach was also considered for data collection from WIT decision-makers. However, Stewart *et al.* (2007) note that setting up a focus group with executives can be problematic. In addition, participants might be reluctant to reveal their true motives and attitudes in a group setting (Domegan and Fleming, 2007). Therefore, the use of face-to-face interviews with WIT managers was deemed to be more appropriate.

3.8.2 Interviews

Interviewing is "a data-collection method in which the researcher asks for information verbally from the respondents" (Sekaran, 1992: 367). There are three main types of interviews: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Denscombe (2003: 175) describes a structured interview as having tight control over format of the questions and answers; in this respect, structured interview "lends itself to the collection of quantitative data". In unstructured interviews, the researcher usually has only a list of topics to cover and the style of the interview is informal and conversational (Bryman and Bell, 2007). To facilitate the collection of factual as well as attitudinal information, it was decided to employ semi-structured interviews in this study – the author had a list of themes and questions to be covered, although it could vary from interview to interview. The interview template was designed for the author's guidelines only and is available in *Appendix D*. The advantages and disadvantages of semi-structured interviews (*Table 3.2*) were taken into account by the researcher prior to conducting this method.

Table 3.2 *Advantages and Disadvantages of Semi- Structured Interviews*

Advantages of Semi-Structured Interviews	Limitations of Semi –Structured Interviews
The researcher is likely to gain valuable information based on the depth of the information gathered	Requires skill, time and effort in the interviewing and analysis stages
Interviews are generally prearranged, offering a greater response rate	High costs to the researcher if the interviewees are geographically dispersed
Interviewees have an opportunity to expand their ideas and explain they views, opinions and priorities	Analysis, transcribing and coding of the interview is very time consuming
Interviews are more personal and can be a rewarding experience for the interviewee as they may enjoy the opportunity to discuss their experiences, ideas, opinions and thoughts to a non critical audience.	Recording devices can hinder the interview as many people prefer to speak off the record and maintain confidentiality
Consist of Open and Closed ended questions Non standardized - Omit Questions / Change order of questioning	The interviewer can present personal bias

Source: Denscombe (2003)

3.9 Credibility of the study

According to Bryman and Bell (2003), questions of validity and reliability are considered the most prominent criteria for the evaluation of business and management research, though these criteria seem to be geared mainly to quantitative rather than qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, qualitative researchers also need to demonstrate that their studies are credible. Although reliability and validity are treated separately in quantitative studies, these terms are not viewed separately in qualitative research. Instead, terminology that encompasses both, such as credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness is used (Golafshani, 2003). To demonstrate the rigor of the research conducted, several strategies were employed, including member checking, reflexivity and thick description. The details of these strategies and its application to the study can be found in *Appendix E*.

3.10 Sampling

To identify potential focus group participants, a list of students undertaking business Master programmes was sourced from the Office of the Registrar, WIT. In April 2010 17 mature students were personally approached by the researcher. To represent the changing student cohort (Section 1.2), only full-time self-financed mature students were invited to participate in the Focus Group I, seven of them agreed to participate. The author had personal contacts with all part-time mature students. All six of them agreed to participate in the Focus Group II. The academic profile of the focus group participants is presented in *Table 3.3*.

Table 3.3 *Focus Group profiles*

Programme	Focus Group I (full time mature self-financed)	Focus Group II (part time mature)
Master of Business (various streams)	2	6
Master of Business in Internalisation	3	-
Master of Accounting	2	-
Total	7	6

To organise interviews, the author sent an email-invitation (*Appendix F*) to the selected WIT decision-makers. Interviewees selected for the study were from different managerial levels, who have strategic and operational tasks in WIT as well as experience in co-operation with students. A list of managers agreed to participate in the research is presented in *Table 3.4* below.

Table 3.4 Interviewees' Profiles

Company	Respondent Name	Position	Reasons for choice of interviewees
Waterford Institute of Technology	Dr. Derek O'Byrne	Registrar	Involved in the development of the Institution's policies and procedures. Lead author of WIT strategic plan.
Waterford Institute of Technology	Dr. Richard Hayes	Assistant Registrar	Responsible for development and implementation of the Institution's policies and procedures.
Waterford Institute of Technology	Dr. Thomas O'Toole	Head of School of Business	Major contributor towards development of strategies and policies of the School of Business
Waterford Institute of Technology	Dr. Denis Harrington	Head of Graduate Business	Major contributor towards development of strategies and policies of the Department of Graduate Business
Waterford Institute of Technology	Mr. Neil Quinlan	Quality Manager	Lead author of student satisfaction surveys in WIT.
Waterford Institute of Technology	Ms. Martina Harte	Head of Student Life & Learning	Responsible for a range of student support measures designed to encourage student retention and progression
Waterford Institute of Technology	Ms. Siobhan Harkin	Strategic Innovation Fund Project Manager	Previously worked in HEA, was involved in the development of higher education environment – one of the influencing factors of student satisfaction.

3.11 Operational activities

The primary data collection commenced on 6th May 2010 and continued for six weeks. It was the researcher's primary concern that the focus groups were conducted before the end of the final examinations while students are still on site. Once participants were

identified, an email with the research aim and operational details was sent to the individuals (*Appendix G*). Considering that focus groups consisted of several people, a decision was made to video record the sessions in order to facilitate accurate data transcription.

The face-to-face interviews with the WIT's decision-makers had to be conducted before the end of the academic year on the 18th June 2010, as most of the managers would leave the Institute for the summer. The details of the primary data collection timetable and interview duration can be found in the *Table 3.5* below.

Table 3.5 **Primary Research Schedule**

May 2010					June 2010			
6 th	17 th	19 th	26 th	28 th	8 th	16 th	17 th	18 th
Focus Group I <i>85min</i>	Interview A <i>65min</i>	Focus Group II <i>70min</i>	Interview B <i>85min</i>	Interview C <i>70min</i>	Interview D <i>100min</i>	Interview E <i>55min</i>	Interview F <i>75min</i>	Interview G <i>70min</i>

The study posed no serious ethical problems. A written consent was gained from the focus group participants to be video recorded. The interviewees were provided with the statement of confidentiality before the interviews were audio recorded.

3.13 Limitations of the research

As in any other research, there are some limitations to this study with regard to primary and secondary data:

- The study is constrained by time limitations and research requirement related to the Master of Business programme. Greater time and resources could have facilitated more in-depth study.
- As outlined in *Chapter 2*, Ireland is relatively new to the concept of student satisfaction in higher education. Therefore academic literature which focuses on

the Irish experience in the research area is very limited. Secondary data obtained for this thesis mainly represents the UK and European experience.

- Most of the data collected are respondents' personal opinions and therefore prone to bias and subjective to interpretation. The research reliability is therefore affected by the latter issues.

3.14 Summary

This chapter described the research methodology used in the study. The identified research question and objectives revealed that the study is explorative in nature and therefore positioned in the qualitative research domain. The primary research methods employed in this study were discussed in detail, including development, justification and application. The next chapter will present the research findings.

Chapter 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Chapter overview

The purpose of the chapter is to present findings from the primary research undertaking in this study. First, there are findings from the interviews that embody the Institute's perspective on student satisfaction. Next, the finds of the focus group method are presented to highlight the views of mature business graduates on their satisfaction as students.

4.2 Interview Findings

Seven WIT managers were interviewed in the course of the research. To maintain confidentiality the interviewees are referred to as *Interviewee A, B, C, D, E, F* and *G* in chronological order of interviews conducted.

4.2.1 Student-University relationship

All interviewees agreed that students are the immediate and major stakeholders of WIT. However, when asked to identify student-Institute relationship, interviewees had different points of view. *Interviewees A, B, C* and *E* view student as co-producer of education, when *Interviewee F* and *G* argue that traditional master-apprentice model is more relevant to education: "...Just to be provocative, why should a student have a say in his education? The professor knows more than a student..." (*Interviewee F*). Despite these differences, all interviewees agreed that student-as-customer view can be very damaging in higher education context:

Students are challenged and motivated in all the different ways...if student-as-customer attitude is allowed to take too much prevalence in the minds of students - it's not helpful for educational purposes, for the students themselves (*Interviewee C*).

Many interviewees noted that treating student as a customer does not fit the unique nature of education. One of the examples would be the following quote from the *Interviewee B*:

This is not the normal sort of service that you buy...as the major part of the education is examination, development, there is a challenging perspective in it.

The *Interviewee G* reinforced this view by stating that "heavy customer orientation would damage the fundamental purpose of higher education, which is generation and imparting of new knowledge". However, the respondent also adds that "while there are dangers in it, it's also important in terms of the reform agenda in higher education, as it must to respond to needs and demands of the changing student body".

As *Interviewee D* highlights that the student relationship with the Institute is at multiple levels, therefore in some contexts it can be necessary to define student as a customer. Most interviewees supported this view and agreed that student can be rightly treated as a customer in other than classroom setting. But even within the academic size, there was a view that customer expectations can be legitimate:

...Students are entitled to get module descriptors and programme handbook to get a good clear idea on how the assessment will be done and what they are expected to learn at the end of the module (*Interviewee C*).

4.2.2 Student satisfaction concept

Most of the respondents recognised the importance of the student satisfaction concept as in many cases it was perceived as the major factor influencing reputation of the Institute.

If you have a situation when you have a large number of students graduating from programmes...and they are very satisfied with their experience...satisfied with the engagement and interactions, it most certainly affects the reputation of the School. Reputation is very important to us (*Interviewee A*).

Satisfaction is a very important in terms of understanding where we are actually at...it's a measure of how we are doing our business and the quality of how we do it (*Interviewee D*).

Many interviewees noted that though they feel that student satisfaction cannot be ignored, they would have an issue with terminology used. The issue of using customer oriented terminology came up during every interview conducted. *Interviewee A* explains:

I think [student satisfaction] is very important to talk about...I would have an issue around the language of treating students as customers. It is a very different type of engagement and relationship and transaction, if you want to use this terminology...

Yes, I would [have a problem with terminology]. It is rhetoric of the consumer, you know, 'student satisfaction', the same as we are satisfied with the bus service... (*Interviewee F*).

Satisfaction has meaning both in popular and in academic senses and I think in popular satisfaction is a loaded word that does not serve well [to education]. The sense of satisfaction can have a very negative connotation of ease and happiness as opposed to diligence and hard work (*Interviewee D*).

As a solution, the *Interviewee E* proposed to use a term "engagement" instead of "satisfaction", as "it reflects the felt benefit on a student's part; it reflects students' interest and participation, and it reflects an outcome for a student". The *Interviewee D* agreed that "at some level the difference between satisfaction and dissatisfaction is about engagement and how the student is given the opportunity to engage. The measure of satisfaction is the measure how students engage".

Some of the interviewees put forward their own definitions of student satisfaction, which are presented in *Table 4.1* below.

Table 4.1 ***Managers' definitions of student satisfaction***

<i>Interviewee A</i>	A student is satisfied in my view if they feel after completing the program that they have grown intellectually, personally and professionally from the participation on the programme.
<i>Interviewee B</i>	What I would be concerned about is that the student is satisfied with the learning that they experiences in the classroom. It's just one dimension, but it's still my number one.
<i>Interviewee D</i>	Student satisfaction has got to be related to the actual achievement of outcomes that are set.
<i>Interviewee C</i>	Student satisfaction is about meeting expectations and exceeding them.
<i>Interviewee F</i>	Student satisfaction should mean 'I got a good education'; whether students are happy about it or not, whether they felt good about it or not is sort of irrelevant.

One of the themes reoccurring throughout the interviews was the notion of looking at satisfaction from a student lifecycle point of view. It is perceived that the relationship between the Institute and the student is evolving, as "different things are important to students at different times" (*Interviewee E*). It was also noted by numerous interviewees that student satisfaction has short-term and long-term effect, and the latter is perceived to be more significant. *Interviewee F* argued that sometimes one is "not even well-placed to decide whether you got a good education, you realise it years later". *Interviewee B* noted that current student satisfaction "is good, but it's only a minor quality". *Interviewee A* agreed:

I think sometimes, one needs to be careful that you can meet students directly after they have finished examinations or two or three months after, they might not yet realise how they have grown in areas of their personal development or their professional development. But if you talk to students five or eight years after their programmes and they reflect back to their experience, that what I tend to look for.

4.2.3 Managing expectations

One of the themes that became apparent over the course of the interviews is the importance of managing students' expectations, as "satisfaction is ultimately about meeting expectations and exceeding them" (*Interviewee C*). It was maintained that the Institute needs to clearly communicate to students, at the very start and though out their lifecycle, what is to be expected from the experience, including hard work, pressure, challenges, judgment and other issues.

The important thing is to make sure that the students know what is expected of them, and that expectation should be high. Students should be aware of the responsibilities they have to their education, it's something that you have to make them explicit at the Institution, but also be seeping out of the walls. Every encounter between student and staff should be in the way of highlighting of these expectations (*Interviewee F*).

The importance of communication in management of expectations was brought up by several interviewees. "We need to codify what we do and we need to be very, very explicit with students" (*Interviewee D*). Currently expectations are managed through the

provision of information on programmes and assessment strategies. Communicating the 'good news' about the high standards of quality in WIT is perceived as another way of managing students expectations:

It all comes back to quality and explanation of it, so students ultimately know that they are going to have a quality education when they are here. The bad news tend to make the most noise...the only way you can counteract that the good news, such as successful Institute Review, are translated to the students to show how and why this is relevant to them (*Interviewee G*).

4.2.4 Measuring student satisfaction

The interviews revealed that student satisfaction is not measured systematically in WIT. Student feedback is mainly gathered in an informal way through student representatives and course leaders reporting back on the issues to the School. Students are also invited to participate on programme boards. Some areas of WIT use surveys and questionnaires, but not on a regular basis. As the *Interviewee B* disclosed, "We don't measure it systematically. We should be, but we don't". The results of student satisfaction assessment are fed back into the system and acted upon in two ways. More immediate issues are dealt with on the departmental level, when the larger Institute-wide issues are reported to the Academic Council and could lead to a change in regulations. However, all interviewees agree that the official way of dealing with student feedback is yet to be developed.

One of the recommendations from the School Reviews that at a local level the Departments need to collect this information in a formal and systematic way (*Interviewee F*).

Four out of seven interviewees expressed their concerns in relation to the use of surveys and questionnaires when measuring student satisfaction:

...because rating scales measure very small elements of what satisfaction actually means and they are not always effective...We need to pick up more qualitative data and more improvement orientated data...The only way you can really judge satisfaction is if you have got a benchmark to operate satisfaction against. Otherwise you don't really know (*Interviewee D*).

It was proposed that student satisfaction should be measured in terms of learning outcomes, student engagement and future employability. Demand for programmes was

also named as an indication of student satisfaction. There is a sense across the Institute that students are very satisfied with their experience in WIT. This assumption is mainly based on the results of a recent Institutional Review as well as general feedback from students.

4.2.5 Factors influencing student satisfaction

Most of the respondents expressed criticism of Jurkowitsch's *et al.* (2006) student satisfaction model, mainly due to its simplicity and being too 'formula-like'. For example, *Interviewee D* referred to the aspects of the model as 'hygiene factors' - things that, according to Hertzberg's (1968) theory, can cause dissatisfaction if missing, but would not matter to the students if increased. While putting different weight on factors of the model, there was consensus amongst the interviewees in relation to the importance of the quality of the academic programmes and teaching to the student experience as the ultimate goal of higher education.

I think if they found that other services were not as good, they may deal with that, but if they found that what actually happens in the classroom is not of benefit to them, then that is a key area we need to be aware of. Everything else should support learning; learning is a primary thing (*Interviewee E*).

Service Perception and Relationships

One of the most reoccurring themes across the interviews was a link between the relationships and the service perception factors of the model. Six out of seven interviewees identified this link. Relationship between peers in class was deemed as important to creating a learning experience as relationships among students and staff.

I do think that the quality of the academic programmes and the quality of teaching very much depends on how those relationships are developed in the classrooms with students (*Interviewee A*).

I see it as one dimension because teaching is inherently an interactive discipline and because it's interactive – it is based on relationships. Relationships impact on the quality of the academic programmes (*Interviewee E*).

Relationships build into the whole delivery of the programmes, because the academy that is open to interacting with students will constantly strive to take on board what they say in a meaningful way, not just listen to the noise (*Interviewee G*).

Relationships factor is perceived as a great strength of WIT as well as potential weakness. All of the interviewees agreed that student-centeredness of WIT enhances student experience and facilitates good education. At the same time it was noted that the Institute must be aware that the quality of student's education could be sabotaged through the 'overfriendliness' and 'spoon-feeding'.

Culture

Overall culture perceived as one of the main factors influencing student satisfaction in higher education. The culture of WIT is viewed as a determinant for pastoral care and a high level of interaction that is endorsed between the academic staff and the students. Four out of seven interviewees mentioned that culture should be a separate dimension to the environment as presented in the model.

I just couldn't put these two together. Environment, infrastructure, resources – it's all physical...The culture of the Institute is pervasive, it's absolutely everything. It should be an over-arching dimension in the model (*Interviewee E*).

I would need to take culture as a separate item...Culture is probably the most fundamental shaper of expectations, one of the real cornerstones of whether somebody is actually going to be happy. You are underpaying culture substantially (*Interviewee D*).

Environment

It was found that from the managers' perspective the environment is not a defining feature of students' experience. It was noted that from student life cycle point of view, the environment could serve as a very good attraction prior to the entry. As for current students it was deemed 'important, but not essential'.

I think environment is unquestionably a hygiene factor. Nobody ever gets excited over the institutional environment (*Interviewee D*).

However, there was an interesting link identified between the infrastructure and service perception factor of student satisfaction:

I cannot separate the infrastructure, the built environment, with the quality of the academic programmes...pedagogically the infrastructure of the Institution is part and parcel of the quality of the academic programmes to facilitate them there...I couldn't actually put it [the infrastructure] in culture and environment segment" (*Interviewee G*).

Positioning

It was also noted that positioning shape expectations of perspective students, thus is a very important communication instrument. Similar to the environment, the interviewees shared the consensus that positioning shouldn't have an ongoing impact on student satisfaction. However, interesting point was made by the *Interviewee E* in relation to how positioning may affect the current student cohort:

Any branding has huge influence on public perception, even if they are not aware of it. There is a good image of WIT out there and students would be proud to say that they have a qualification from WIT.

Additional factors

Although the interviewees agreed that the student satisfaction model captures a number of fundamental dimensions of student satisfaction, many highlighted that satisfaction is not only about 'taking', but also about 'giving'. The major missing factor was perceived to be students' creative engagement in their education. It was noted that engagement empowers student to take ownership of the education – one of the main challenges of higher education.

Let's not underplay the critical importance of that creative engagement in the classroom with our students, because this ultimately can affect the overall perception of satisfaction... (*Interviewee A*).

The 'arrow out' where the engagement of the student impacts his satisfaction with the educational experience. But it also requires us as an Institute to actually change our model of interacting with students more towards a model where students can actually influence curriculum and become a more of a partner in the creation of their own learning (*Interviewee G*).

In the light of the notion that student satisfaction should be looked at from the student lifecycle point of view, several interviewees highlighted the absence of the external factors influencing student satisfaction, such as expectations prior to the admissions and employability after the graduation.

4.3 Focus Group Findings

Thirteen mature postgraduate students from School of Business WIT participated in two separate focus groups. To maintain confidentiality, the students are randomly referred to as *Participant 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12* and *13*. While there were many topics recorded during the two sessions, a few themes emerged as important in these discussions and are summarised below.

4.3.1 Overall student experience

As one of the main reason for the selection of WIT for postgraduate studies, the participants named proximity and affordable cost of participating on the programme. The fact that WIT has a good image and reputation across employers was also named as a factor. The other prominent factor appeared to be supportive and close relationships that are promoted between the staff and the students.

I had no problem with the undergrad, it was a good course and my course head, you know, there wasn't anything he couldn't do for us. My perceptions coming in here were top notch. I had a really good time here (*Participant 4*).

Reflecting back on the year doing the postgraduate programme, most students, not all, noted that despite many challenges and very hard work ultimately they felt satisfied with the experience.

I knew it was going to be hard, but for me I think I found it a little bit harder than I expected. To me it will mean a hell of a lot more coming out at the end, because I found that a little bit harder (*Participant 13*).

Amongst the challenges students named intensity of the programme, over-assessment, difficulties with group work, differences between expectations and the reality.

What was listed on the website and the subjects that we actually covered were completely different...It is certainly didn't meet my expectations from what I signed up for (*Participant 1*).

4.3.2 Student satisfaction concept

During the discussion, students revealed their understanding of the concept. Interestingly, all participants defined student satisfaction in terms of quality of the academic experience and its benefit to their future development. The following phrases were used when defining satisfaction from the student perspective:

Table 4.2 *Students' definitions of student satisfaction*

<i>Participant 3</i>	Satisfaction would be the quality of your lecturers, that they're of good quality... For me, satisfaction is actually the practicalities of getting your education. And it would really stem from the lecturers that we had.
<i>Participant 4</i>	Satisfaction is when you get exactly what you need (and more!) in order to be competent in your future profession.
<i>Participant 8</i>	Gaining something. Not just doing it for sake of doing, but actually gaining knowledge and experience.
<i>Participant 13</i>	You need to benefit from it in the end of the day. Personally and professionally.

Some of the participants felt that they should have been treated as customers. A number of participants made a significant financial investment in their education, which they felt illustrated their commitment. By 'treated as customers' the students understand being treated with respect, being listened to and their needs being accommodated.

4.3.3 Factors influencing student satisfaction

In order to facilitate the reader in visualising the findings on the factors influencing student satisfaction, a mind map of the emerged themes is presented in *Figure 4.1*. The summary of the findings follows thereafter. The students' quotes in relation to each of the dimensions of student satisfaction are detailed in the *Appendix J*.

Figure 4.1 Factors influencing student satisfaction

Service Perception

The quality of academic programmes and the quality of teaching were perceived to be the major influencing factor on student satisfaction. A number of sub-factors determining students perception of service included programme content, delivery, assessment, feedback, engagement, consistency and the standard of the academic staff. Students highlighted that at a Master level they would expect to be involved in the creation of their own learning through engaging and innovative teaching methods. Respondents highlighted that the programmes were very challenging, however, the hard work was expected by most students prior to admission and was not perceived as problem. The main subject discussed was the issue of over-assessment. Students felt that the intensity of the assessments did not add value to their education. It was perceived that a lesser amount of projects would let the respondents learn more in much deeper detail, which was justified against rushing through the assignments "just of the sake of completing them on time". Feedback appeared to be one of the main factors influencing students' perception of service quality. Participants felt that the timely comprehensive feedback on assignments contributed greatly to their learning. They suggested that it should be formalised and consistent across all subjects.

Relationships

The participants perceived that the relationships factor is closely connected to the quality of academic programmes. In terms of relationships with lecturers, students discussed topics of partnership, closeness and respect. Participants appreciated supportive and close relationships that they enjoy with their lecturers, and this was perceived as one of the advantages of WIT. However, it was noted that this intimate relationship can potentially compromise the learning experience. As a result students felt that they would prefer to have partnership based relationship with their lecturers, where mutual respect is a must. Peer relationships materialised in discussions of bonding and group work. The participants noted that the social aspect of the postgraduate studies was an add-on benefit and therefore would not be as important as the relationships formed with the lecturers. The issue of groups work was discussed at length, and while it was perceived beneficial

in many respects, the discrepancy amongst group members in levels of motivation, commitment and maturity reflected negatively in students' discussion.

Culture and Environment

When asked about culture and its influence on student satisfaction, the participants kept coming back to the relationships segment. On the other hand, the environment and particularly facilities were deemed as important facilitators of quality academic experience. The learning environment of WIT, such as the access to the dedicated postgraduate area, personal computer and printing facilities, received positive remarks. It was noted, however, that the quality of students' learning experience could be enhanced further with the use of the blended learning mode through Moodle.

Positioning

In the area of positioning students discussed the impact of image, reputation, promotion and the university issue on their satisfaction. The respondents noted that the reputation of the Institute influenced their decision to undertake the postgraduate studies in WIT. It was also perceived to be important in the future when seeking employment, as the qualification from WIT is highly regarded amongst employers, but at the moment the reputation and image of the Institute is not affecting student satisfaction with the experience in WIT. Similarly, the fact that the Institute is seeking a university designation does not influence current student satisfaction, however it is perceived to be important when entering the outside world.

Additional Factors

The participants noted that several external factors would impact on their satisfaction as students. One of the additional factors is availability of finance prior to the admission. It was deemed important as certain financial freedom would facilitate students' ability to concentrate on their learning. The other external factor is future employability. Employability and future career growth is viewed as an ultimate goal and the reason for

undertaking the postgraduate studies, and therefore would greatly influence whether or not students are satisfied with their educational experience.

4.4 Summary

This chapter initially provided key findings from the interviews with WIT decision-makers. Subsequently, it presented the findings from the focus groups conducted with the business postgraduate students. In the next chapter the author will discuss the above findings in the context of existing literature.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter endeavours to synthesise the primary research findings with the literature reviewed and discuss any implications arising therefrom. The discussion will be presented in four sections following the structure of the research objectives outlined in Chapter 3.

5.2 Student satisfaction construct

In terms of the student satisfaction concept, the findings suggest that the business slogan 'the customer is always right' is contrary to the best interest of students themselves, which in this respect supports the view of Eagle and Brennan (2007). Nevertheless, Eagle and Brennan (2007) argue that the student-as-customer concept could be accepted in higher education considering it is treated at a more sophisticated level. The findings reveal that although the higher education providers do not discard the idea of student-as-customer entirely, they most definitely struggle with the business-like terminology of the concept. The term 'student satisfaction' is seen as ambiguous and full of assumptions. In this the WIT managers' views are very much in line with Houston (2008) who argues that customer-focused definitions inadequately fit the context of higher education. This might suggest that in order for the higher education providers to recognise the potential benefits of student satisfaction, alternative terminology needs to be adopted in the context of higher education.

In terms of the student satisfaction construct, the findings herein align with the work of Oldfield and Baron (2000) and Elliott and Shin (2002) in that student satisfaction is being shaped continually throughout the student lifecycle in the Institute. The Institute

acknowledges that students have different needs and expectations depending on the stage of their programme as well as the previous educational experience. The findings are also in line with the literature asserting the importance of expectations in student satisfaction (Appleton-Knapp and Krentler, 2006; Ham, 2003; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004). However, the research reveals that current student satisfaction holds less significance to the Institute compared to the satisfaction that would be potentially experienced by a student in the future. Thus, a key contribution of the study is that from the Institute's perspective student satisfaction is defined in terms of the long-term success of the graduate.

The students, however, are very much concerned with their present situation and therefore determine their satisfaction upon the current perceptions of their experience. From the mature postgraduates' perspective student satisfaction is defined in terms of perceptions of quality of academic programmes and lecturing staff. Moreover, students emphasised the importance of their current experience contributing to their professional and personal development. This is in line with definitions of student satisfaction available in the literature, such as Elliott and Shin (2002), Zhao (2003) and Douglas *et al.* (2006), who highlight that teaching and learning are the most important aspects of student satisfaction.

5.3 Institute's strategies and perspectives on student satisfaction

Institute's perspectives on student satisfaction

From the Institute's perspective the main constituents of student satisfaction are the quality of the academic programmes and teaching, relationships, culture and student engagement in their learning. One of the key findings in this area is that managers in WIT see the quality of the academic experience and relationships as one dimension. This could be explained by the Institute's commitment towards the inclusive student-centred environment, which is based on distinct close relationships between students and staff. Unlike Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) model, culture is considered a separate dimension to the

environment and is seen as an over-arching element that influences every other aspect of the student experience in WIT. Physical environment and positioning, though important matters influencing decision-making of prospective students, are not deemed by the managers to affect student satisfaction to a notable degree. This is also a significant finding, as many authors put emphasis on the importance of the environment and positioning to student satisfaction (Elliott and Shin, 2002; Jurkowitsch, 2005; Palacio *et al.*, 2002). In contrast, DeShields *et al.* (2005) propose that these aspects are the hygiene factors, and therefore do not contribute to overall student satisfaction. This study's findings are in agreement with DeShields *et al.* (2005), that from the Institute's perspective, environment and positioning are important, but do not determine student satisfaction.

Another key finding in this area is the effect the students have on their own satisfaction. The interviewees highlight the importance of students' engagement in their education and subsequent creation of the satisfied feeling with the experience. This is new to the literature, as the studies reviewed to date mainly concentrate on factors influencing student satisfaction outside the student's own responsibility. However, as student commitment to hard work is inherent to higher education (Rowley, 1997; Svensson and Wood, 2007), the effort of the students themselves should be included as an influencing factor of student satisfaction.

Institute's strategies

Managing expectations of incoming and current students is perceived as a major contributor towards achieving student satisfaction. The managers assert the need to clearly communicate to students what is expected of them throughout the process and what is to be expected from the Institute. This finding is in line with the work of Hill (1995) and Brysland and Curry (2001) who suggest that achievement of student satisfaction would depend on whether or not students' expectations are reasonable. However, some managers stress the importance of setting high expectations of students more so than the need for the Institute to meet students' expectations about the college. This observation can be explained by the fact that educators from different disciplines

treat student satisfaction differently. It substantiates the argument of Kozloski Hart *et al.* (2009) that student satisfaction is viewed as irrelevant in some disciplines, while in others, especially within the business field, achieving student satisfaction is viewed as an important goal.

Although the shared view is that student expectations need to be managed, it is evident from the findings that it is not consistently addressed across the Institute. Some elements of expectation management are addressed through student induction and course materials; however it varies within the Institute. This finding is of concern as according to Shank *et al.* (1995) a lack of monitoring and understanding student expectations will lead to the emergence of a student-university expectation gap, which will subsequently negatively reflect on student satisfaction. This issue is important in light of the work of Aldridge and Rowley (1998) who stipulate that levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction affect the student's success or failure of learning.

Similarly to managing expectations, student satisfaction is measured haphazardly in WIT. The findings reveal that there is no clear reporting and action mechanism on student feedback across WIT. At present it is attempted through mostly informal networks of information gathering, such as communication between student representatives and course leaders. Some departments undertake questionnaires and surveys, but these tools are viewed as ineffective in gathering meaningful information on reasons underlying students' perceptions. The need for an alternative student satisfaction measurement is extensively covered in the literature (Abdullah, 2006; Douglas *et al.*, 2008; Wiers-Jensses *et al.*, 2002). Similarly to Dawes and Rowley (1999), the managers highlight the need to collect data from students using a range of methods including quantitative and qualitative techniques.

The author proposes that there are a number of potential problems that might occur in the absence of an official Institute-wide strategy on student satisfaction. Firstly, there is a potential for the filtering of the feedback, as the Institute might underplay or ignore some of the students' concerns. Secondly, the Institute might miss the opportunity to collect feedback from the majority of students – students who are not normally involved in

programme boards and would not interact with WIT officials on a regular basis. Thirdly, in the absence of an official student satisfaction strategy there is a great danger of wasting the valuable data obtained and failing to use it to affect change and improvement. Finally, students' commitment and trust for the Institute could be jeopardised through the lack of official response to their feedback. The importance of process transparency is noted in the literature (Harvey, 2003; Williams, 2002), which highlights that when students see that there is no follow up to their feedback and no communication of the outcome, they are likely to cease participation and withdraw their support for the Institute.

5.4 Views of mature business postgraduates on student satisfaction

When presented with Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) student satisfaction model, the participants felt that all of the aspects of the model have impacted on their satisfaction; however, some factors were deemed more important than others. Similarly to the WIT managers, the mature graduate business students feel that the quality of the academic programmes and teaching are the most influential factors of their satisfaction. This finding is in line with the main body of literature suggesting that programme content, delivery, assessment, feedback and standard of academic staff have a major impact on postgraduate student satisfaction (Angell *et al.*, 2008; Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Guolla, 1999).

The findings suggest that relationships are also very important to graduate business students in WIT. Relationships with lectures are perceived to be more important to student satisfaction than the peer relationships in class. This finding complements the work of Angell *et al.* (2008) who highlight that postgraduate students see the postgraduate experience as a stepping stone to a career, rather than the life experience opportunity often associated with undergraduate study. Students' views are in accord with studies of Smith *et al.* (2007) and Hasan *et al.* (2008) who assert that empathy and assurance are critical factors of student satisfaction. Although supportive relationship with staff is perceived as a great advantage of WIT, students share the managers concern that overfriendly or too close relationships can sabotage the quality of education. This

finding reinforces the work of Gualla (1999) who discovers a negative relationship between rapport and course satisfaction in MBA students. Therefore, it can be suggested that in order to contribute towards student satisfaction at postgraduate level the academics should maintain the balance between professionalism and approachability.

The issue which received particular attention from postgraduate students is the importance of being treated with respect. They feel that the maturity, commitment, financial and emotional investment in their study differentiates them from the undergraduate student, and therefore should be recognised by the academic staff. Although the factor 'respect' is new to the literature reviewed, it contributes to the stream of literature that promotes the idea of students being treated as partners in their education, especially at a postgraduate level (Clayson and Haley, 2005; Ferris, 2002).

In variation to Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006), WIT business graduate students do not distinguish between cultural and relationship factors. This could be explained by the fact that in WIT culture is communicated through the close relationships endorsed between the academic staff and students, making it difficult to separate the two. In relation to the environment, the findings confirm the work of Douglas *et al.* (2006) that physical facilitates are minor to student satisfaction. The graduate business students feel that environment is not essential to their satisfaction, though they recognise it as an important supporting element of the academic quality. This view is in agreement with managers' belief that environment as a hygiene factor must be of top quality so as not to cause dissatisfaction. The other contradiction found to the Jurkowitsch *et al.* (2006) model, as well as the work of Palacio *et al.* (2002), is in the importance of the Institute's positioning to student satisfaction. The students share the view of the managers that image and reputation would be important for prospective students, as well as for graduates looking for jobs. However, positioning is insignificant to satisfaction with actual university experience. Conversely, business graduates note a number of external factors that do contribute to their satisfaction as a student. These include the initial availability of finance and future employability. These conflicting findings substantiate the literature confirming the complexity of student satisfaction concept (Douglas *et al.*, 2006; Hill, 1995).

Though the comparison between full-time and part-time students is not a focus of this study, it should be noted that the findings confirm a difference in needs and opinions of the part-time students to the full-time postgraduates. This is in line with the work of Boylston and Jackson (2008) who state that adult working learners need to be facilitated in balancing work, family and study, through special arrangements and additional support. Issues such as understanding and respect are also deemed important to WIT graduate business part-time students.

It should be noted that the focus group discussions were mainly based around issues of concerns rather than affirmations. This can be partially explained by one of the interviewees statements - "the bad news tends to make the most noise". The other explanation can be found in the work of Nasser *et al.* (2008) who highlight that senior students tend to be less satisfied with programmes and services due to higher pressure towards the end of their course and career planning activities. In addition, it is a personal view of the author that the graduate experience is full of challenges and dissatisfaction, which is not necessarily a bad thing, as it motivates a student to improve. These 'growing pains' are inherent to the process of intellectual development. In consideration of the above, the author maintains the view of Harvey (2003: 5) that the student perspective "although it is not the only perspective", is a direct view of the main participant of the process, which can provide a wealth of information in relation to strategy development and quality enhancement.

5.5 Students versus the Institute: evaluation of the perspectives gap

When comparing the views of WIT and the students, the first apparent difference is the fact that the Institute has a general perspective on student satisfaction and the students provide a more detailed account of the concept. The main gap is between the Institute's long-term view on student satisfaction compared to a more immediate view on satisfaction from the students' perspective. It should be recognised by the Institute that student satisfaction matters both in terms of enhancing the learning process and ensuring

the long-term success of a programme. Putting the emphasis on the latter at the expense of the former can lead to negative word-of-mouth promotion, decrease in retention, and ultimately fall in student admissions (Elliott and Shin, 2002). The Institute cannot rely entirely on long-term student satisfaction. It cannot afford to wait a number of years for the graduates to realise the benefits of their students' experience, and to then finally promote the Institute. The research shows that the managers believe that students of WIT are satisfied with their experience, while the focus groups did not quite confirm it. Although the views were only collected from a particular group of students, this finding questions the effectiveness of current strategies used by WIT to gather feedback and evaluate student satisfaction.

The study confirms that the quality of the academic programmes and teaching are the most influential factors of student satisfaction both from the Institute's and students' perspective. This suggests that in order to enhance student satisfaction, quality improvement in these areas should be targeted. One potential area of development is the formalisation of feedback provided to students. At the moment not all lecturers offer comprehensive timely feedback on students' assessments, which highly dissatisfies business graduates. As findings confirm a strong link between appropriate feedback and effective learning, a lack of feedback reflects negatively on students' perception of the education quality. The students also feel that feedback they provide to WIT is not being listened to, although the Institute maintains that students' feedback is taken very seriously. The reason for this perception gap is the possible lack of communication between the Institute and the students. The importance of closing the loop is detailed by Harvey (2003: 19) who alerts that "students become cynical and uncooperative if they feel no one really cares about what they think". This highlights the need to communicate to students the results of feedback collected as well as actions taken on it.

In accordance with Shank *et al.* (1995) there is a possibility of the existence of a student-university expectation gap in WIT. The students spoke about some of their expectations not being met, for example, in relation to programme content and classroom engagement. This highlights the need for the Institute to put more effort into setting and managing students' expectations of their learning experience. The Institute might consider

introducing a more expectation focused induction programme. This would ensure that correct information is available to students through an effective website and also ensure that students are fully aware of what is involved in their programmes – learning outcomes, assessment, level of engagement required. All of the above is proposed to contribute towards student satisfaction, as according to Nasser *et al.* (2008) students who have better knowledge of services, policies and procedures are more inclined to be satisfied with overall academic experience.

It should be recognised that student satisfaction is a complex concept and whether or not the experience is perceived by student as satisfactory may depend on a variety of factors that are difficult to control (Hill, 1995). This study found that student satisfaction is influenced by a number of external factors, such as the initial availability of finance and future employment over which WIT has limited influence. In addition, works of Jurkowitsch (2005) and Voss *et al.* (2007) underline that student satisfaction is a subjective evaluation based on individual views and values, which are mostly outside WIT's control. Due to the complexity of the concept not all students are always going to be satisfied, however the role of the Institute is to provide the best possible context in which student satisfaction can flourish.

5.6 Summary

This chapter discussed the primary research findings in the context of the literature reviewed pertaining to the research objectives. An analysis of the findings confirmed certain elements of the literature, whilst other findings added new perspectives. The next chapter provides conclusions from the overall research study and offers recommendations for WIT as well as suggestions for further research.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Chapter overview

This chapter aims to review and conclude the research objectives of the study. It offers tentative recommendations for WIT, as well as suggesting possibilities for the research. The chapter is concluded with a closing statement.

6.2 Conclusions from overall research

This part of the chapter endeavours to present reasonable conclusions from the overall study pertaining to the research objectives.

6.2.1 Research Objective 1

To establish constructs of student satisfaction in the context of higher education

In accordance with the main body of literature, the dominant interpretation of student satisfaction by the research participants referred to a perceived quality of the academic programmes and teaching experienced by students. It is also confirmed that student satisfaction is based on expectations and being shaped continually throughout the student lifecycle. A key contribution of the study is that from the Institute's perspective student satisfaction is defined in terms of a long-term success of the graduate. The students, however, are very much concerned with their present situation and therefore determine their satisfaction upon the current perceptions of the experience.

6.2.2 Research Objective 2

To examine the Waterford Institute of Technology strategies and perspectives on student satisfaction issue

From the Institute's perspective the main factors that constitute student satisfaction are the quality of the academic experience, relationships, culture and student engagement in their learning. The latter is a new finding, as the studies reviewed to date mainly concentrate on satisfaction factors outside the student's own responsibility. Environment and positioning, though important matters influencing decision-making of prospective students, are perceived to be the hygiene factors, and therefore do not determine student satisfaction.

The study confirms the absence of an official Institute-wide strategy on student satisfaction. There is an inconsistency in means adapted across WIT to manage student expectations, feedback gathering and the use of the data obtained. The Institute recognises the need for a student satisfaction strategy, including expectations management and clear reporting and action mechanism of student feedback.

6.2.3 Research Objective 3

To investigate the constructs of student satisfaction within the parameters of WIT Graduate School of Business

The study reveals that the most influential factors of mature business graduates' satisfaction are quality of the academic experience and relationships with the academic staff. Therefore, every aspect of the academic experience and relationships, including assessment, delivery, programme context, feedback, respect and closeness with staff, are of high importance to students. In agreement with the literature on postgraduate satisfaction, students prefer to have a partnership based relationships with their lecturers, where the balance between professionalism and approachability is maintained. Environment and positioning have a minor influence on student satisfaction. The new finding of the study in relation to this objective is the fact that student satisfaction is

influenced by external factors, such as initial availability of finance and future employability.

6.2.4 Research Objective 4

To critically evaluate the gap between postgraduate students' perspectives and the Institute's perspective on student satisfaction

The most interesting development from this study was perhaps the discovery of contrasting points of view of student satisfaction between the Institute and students. The Institute adopts a long term perspective versus the more immediate perspective of the student. This difference in perspectives might have implications for the students' perceptions of the quality of education received. As the study shows, there is a discrepancy in perceived levels of satisfaction between the Institute and students. By concentrating on the longer term perspective of student satisfaction, the Institute risks overlooking the significance of the current experience of students. In accordance with the literature, regarding the importance of the student 'university experience' in relation to motivation, retention and promotion, the issue of student satisfaction cannot be underestimated.

6.3 Recommendations

The author offers with caution the following recommendations for WIT. Potential areas for further research are also suggested.

6.3.1 Recommendations for WIT

With consideration to the issues raised in the study, the author recommends the development of an official Institute-wide student satisfaction strategy in WIT. Initially there is a need for the concept to be clearly defined and communicated across the Institute in order to achieve consistency in understanding and to ensure staff support for the strategy. Considering the importance of expectations in student satisfaction and

student success, it is recommended to include expectation management as a part of the student satisfaction strategy. Expectations could be set during the induction programmes and managed throughout the student lifecycle. An effective website and module descriptor facility would greatly enhance this. As a main part of the student satisfaction strategy, there is a need to establish a uniform method of dealing with student feedback. This must involve not only efficient and meaningful ways of data collection, but also an appropriate mechanism to close the loop. The purpose of the strategy is to make use of students' views. In the event where feedback is collected through qualitative means, it is advisable that persons outside the faculty structure undertake the research in order to facilitate more open and truthful discussion. The critical element of the student satisfaction strategy is an appropriate action cycle of dealing with student feedback. Communication of the feedback results back to students, regardless of the outcome, is essential. All of the above is proposed to increase student confidence, motivation, retention and satisfaction with the overall academic experience. It is envisaged that this would also build upon and sustain the reputation of the Institute as a centre of excellence and world-class learning.

6.3.2 Recommendations for further research

In consideration of the study conducted, the following areas for future research can be recommended:

- In light of academics' sensitivity towards business-focused definitions, there is a need for further research into the development of alternative terminology to reflect the interests and concerns of stakeholders in higher education in relation to quality improvement in general, and student satisfaction in particular.
- The majority of research on student satisfaction is conducted within the parameters of business discipline. A research of student satisfaction in other fields would contribute greatly towards a better understanding of the concept by providing a cross-disciplinary perspective on student satisfaction in the higher education environment.

- There is an apparent shortage of studies dedicated to student satisfaction in the Irish context. A broader study of the concept, particularly in the Institute of Technology sector, could be a very timely addition to the existing findings.

6.4 Closing statement

This study provides empirical findings to understand student satisfaction within the context of Irish higher education. The author feels that regardless of the limitations of the study, the research objectives have been achieved. The study endeavours to fill the gap in the literature in the area explored, to offer a reference for Waterford Institute of Technology, as well as to provide ideas for further research in the area.