

Concurrent Session B
Monday 31 August
11.45am – 12.35am



Session 6
Professional Staff, Service Culture and the Student Experience
Mr James Armit, Kristen Emes
RMIT University

James is an innovative and experienced higher education professional and held a number of senior roles in UK Universities before moving to Melbourne in 2013.

James was a 'student experience early adopter' having been appointed Director for Student Experience at the University of Bedfordshire in 2011. Throughout his career he has specialised in creating and implementing strategies for developing and enhancing the student experience.

He has spoken about the student experience agenda at several events and conferences, including the AUA (UK) annual conference.

Kirsten is currently on secondment to RMIT Europe from her substantive position as Manager, Planning & Resources in the Graduate School of Business & Law at RMIT University. She has held management roles across departments in RMIT, Monash University and the University of Exeter. Kirsten has experience in project management roles across the higher education sector with a focus on service design and process development in the areas of student services and academic administration. She has also worked for Royal Mail group in the Strategy & Regulation team and in executive support at Deutsche Bank in the UK. She holds a BA, History & Politics (Monash University) and is currently finishing her MPhil in Public Policy and Management.

As government subsidies diminish and student contributions grow, Universities are increasingly seeking to find a competitive edge through their commitment to 'the student experience'.

Drawing on the speaker's experience of the UK and Australian University sectors, this presentation explores the impact of the student experience agenda on professional staff; whether they work in direct contact with students or in 'behind the scenes' roles. In particular it examines the challenges and opportunities faced by administrators, managers and leaders in addressing this increasingly important aspect of their work. It seeks to pose, and offer some ways of addressing the question – what can I do to enhance the student experience?

Starting with a broad brush overview of emerging student experience trends and strategies in the UK, and how these are now being developed in Australia, the presentation moves on to explore the impact of service culture on frontline professional staff and student-centred strategic initiatives on managers and leaders.

The presentation will discuss some of the key challenges facing professional staff faced with delivering a high quality service, in a complex operating environment to a very diverse student population including:

- Understanding and managing diverse student expectations – do students see themselves as (just) customers?

- Listening and acting on student feedback – are we really listening and are we really acting on what we hear?
- Understanding service culture with respect to global learners – many students never set foot on campus so how can we ensure they aren't isolated?
- Owning problems and solutions – do we have a problem with accountability in a complex operating environment?
- Changing culture of Universities – what are the challenges of changing our own attitudes and practices, and those of our colleagues?

In addressing these challenges, the presenter will examine the key skills and competencies required by professional services staff, and offer some insights into the opportunities for staff to further their professional development, and careers, by engaging with the student experience agenda.

Moving on from an operational perspective, the second half of the presentation will focus on leadership and management issues by asking what leaders and managers can contribute to the student experience beyond ensuring their teams offer an efficient and friendly service to their students. The presenter will examine whether managers have a role to play in influencing academic leaders to focus on knowing who their students are, what they are looking for from their University, and how Universities might benefit from engaging positively with its students.

Drawing on past and present experience, the presenter will reflect on his experience of advocating for investment in projects that benefit students, providing a platform for hearing the student voice beyond surveys and bringing project management expertise to deliver on student experience initiatives.

The presentation will close with a discussion of what professional services staff can do to engage with 'the student experience' in an uncertain and ever-changing environment.