Success Factors of Student Experience and Engagement Surveys

Insights from International Initiatives and Recommendations

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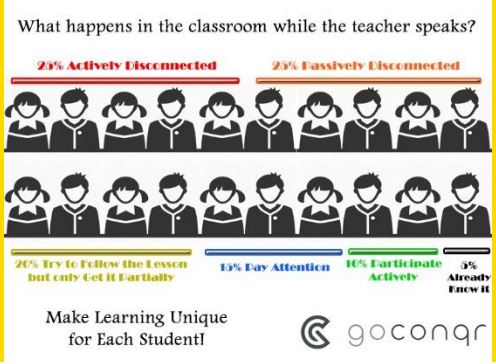

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- **Introductory remarks**
- **Student Experience & Engagement Surveys (SEESs) in context & overview of four prominent SEES initiatives**
- **Methodological limitations of SEESs**
- **Resulting recommendations for SEES governance & management**
  - **Policy (Performance Data Governance & Management Policy – PDGMP)**
  - **(Digital) PDM System**
  - **Qualities of successful SEE & related performance indicators**
  - **Methodological & ethical issues** (e.g data protection regulation & student analytics)

Background and motivation

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- Do we sufficiently understand **what's going on with currently 197 million students** globally (**262 million by 2025** according to UNESCO statistics) **while they are enrolled in HE**?

- **Student Experience and Engagement (SEE) data** is a **central tenet of evidence-based QM in HE**
  - HE learning and teaching: complex, dialectical, transformative, iterative process of ***student education & formation by teaching*** & ***student self-formation***
  - Insights from **monitoring** of institutional **performance at all stages of the student lifecycle** can allow HEIs to meet the evolving needs & expectations of students as well as other stakeholders' requirements by **evidence-based governance**, **quality management** (QM) & **organisational development** (OD)

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Background and motivation

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- How can **student experience of education & study outcomes be ensured & enhanced** on **system-wide** levels & on **institutional** levels at the same time?
- Are **nation-wide Student Experience & Engagement Surveys (SEESs) an advantage?**

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- **Only in few countries – obligatory/nation-wide/ standardised/ centralised – SEESs exploring** relevant **aspects** of the **student lifecycle** (ideally complemented by alumni & employer surveys) have a history worth mentioning, while in many parts of the (higher education) world this history is still in its infancy, including continental Europe.

- Give **pragmatic overview** & related assessment of approaches based on SEES initiatives reports & research literature & own research

- The analysis is not based on immediate self-experience with SEESs or the practical application of SEESs.

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Definition – Student Experience and Engagement

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- Students' **representation and participation** (learning, communication, feedback, consultation, partnership, leadership, …) **in L&T processes & development** (L&T environment; Learning; Teaching; Learning outcomes & assessments; …), **quality assurance** and **institutional governance** as well as **further life experiences** entangled with university study (also cf. Ashwin & McVitty, 2015)

- Yet, SEE definitions are said to be contested: "Judging from the systematic review of the literature [2000-2014], there remains **no clear definition on the notion of student experience**" (Tan et al., 2016, 220).

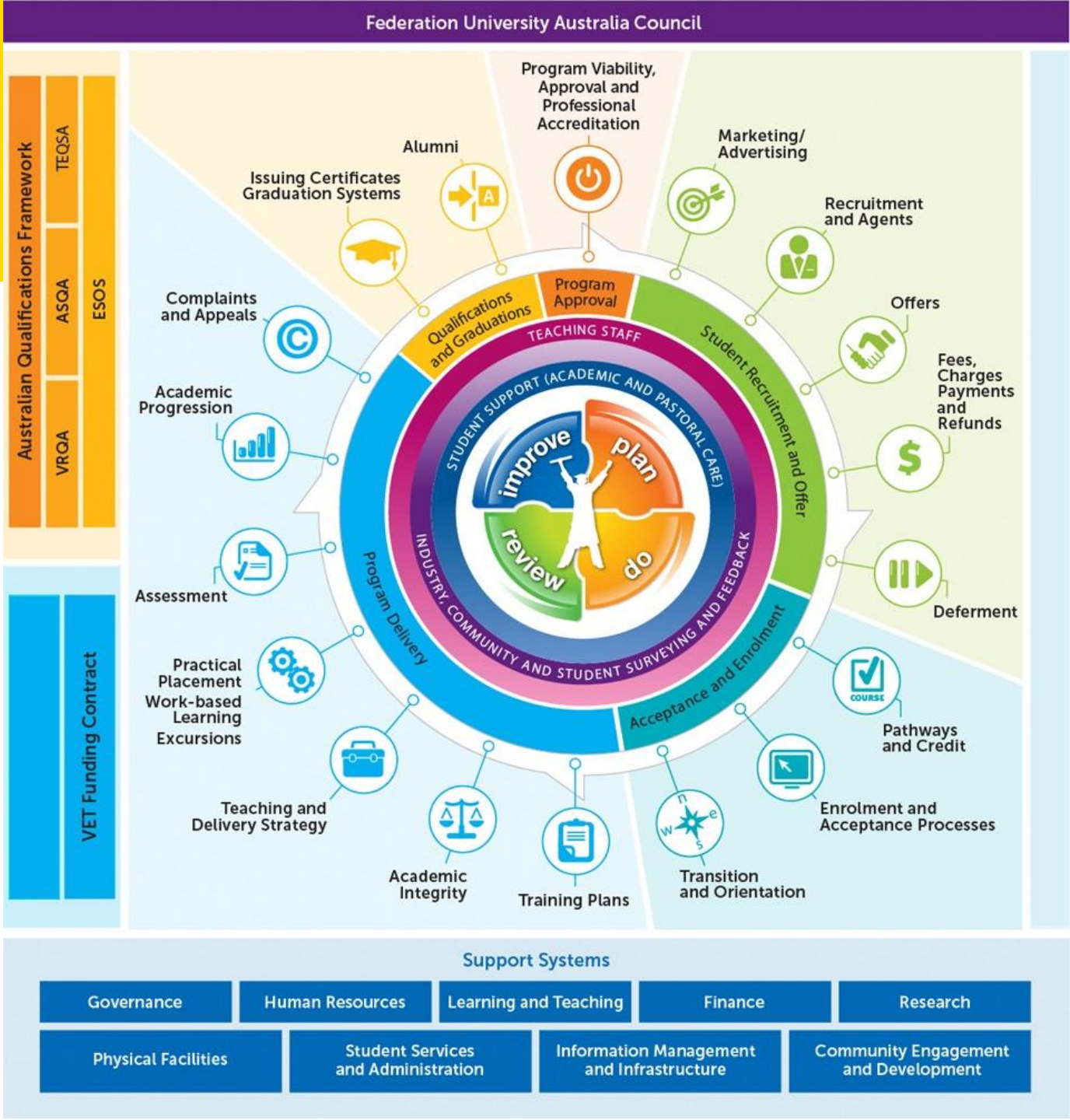
- Actually, **used definitions are usually implicit** (in semantics of survey items & criteria etc.)

Background and motivation

Student life-cycle and the external regulatory bodies and University operational areas that govern and support student activities

Example of
Federation University Australia, Victoria, Australia

https://federation.edu.au/staff/governance/quality/student-life-cycle



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'Path-breaking research is, by definition, exploratory' (Gerring, 2004, p. 349).

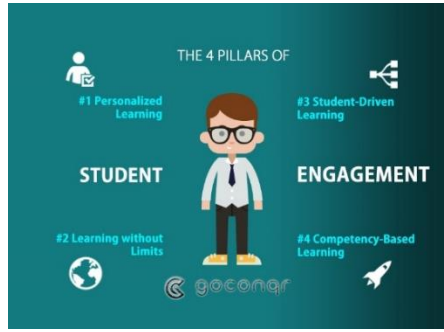
Goals and Methodology

- ⟶ Worthwhile to **analyse** some **prominent** initiatives of "comprehensive" **Student Experience and Engagement Surveys** (**SEESs**) in the HE sector:

Selected sample SEESs			
U.S. (& **Canada**) National Survey of Student Engagement/ **NSSE** 2018	**Australian** Student Experience Survey/ **SES** 2017	**UK** Student Academic Experience Survey/ **SAES** 2018	**Irish** Survey of Student Engagement/ **ISSE** 2018

In addition

- Analyse contemporary research literature on
  - **Validity & reliability of SEESs data for QA/QM/EBOCD**
  - **SEESs as part of student lifecycle (data) analytics**



- Methodology: Qualitative and comparative text and concept analysis

SEESs in context and overview of four prominent SEES initiatives

Most common student surveys originating from the U.S., then "imported" to Australia, UK and other countries

(Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015, p. 363)

Table 1 Most common student surveys

Types of surveys	Examples of most influential or international surveys
Student profiles	EUROSTUDENT[a]
Assessment of student learning outcomes	OECD's Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)[b]; United States Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) (Shavelson 2010), The Educational Testing Services' Proficiency Profile (ETS 2014; Coates and Lennon 2014)
Student course evaluations	Institution/study-program-based
Student approaches to learning and studying	ASSIST (Approaches and Study Skills Inventory for Students)[c]; The Study Process Questionnaire (Biggs 1987a); The Learning Process Questionnaire (Biggs 1987c)
Student experience (satisfaction) and engagement surveys	The North American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)[d], which has been adapted into a number NSSE-based national surveys[e]; Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)[f]; Student Experience in the Research University (SERU)[g]; National Student Survey in the UK (NSS)[h]; Dutch National Student Survey (NSE)[i]; Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE)[j]
Student mobility surveys	International Student Barometer Survey[k]
Graduate employment surveys	Accenture College Graduate Employment Survey[l]

[a] http://www.eurostudent.eu/
[b] http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/testingstudentanduniversityperformancegloballyoecdsahelo.htm
[c] http://www.etl.tla.ed.ac.uk/questionnaires/ASSIST.pdf
[d] http://nsse.iub.edu/
[e] NSSE-based surveys were administered in Australia, China, South Africa, the UK, Ireland and several other countries (Coates and McCormick 2014)
[f] http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse
[g] http://www.cshe.berkeley.edu/SERU
[h] http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/
[i] http://www.uu.nl/EN/informationfor/students/facilities/NSE/Pages/default.aspx
[j] http://studentsurvey.ie/wordpress/
[k] http://www.i-graduate.org/
[l] http://www.accenture.com/us-en/Pages/insight-2014-accenture-college-graduate-employment-survey.aspx

SEESs in context
and overview of four prominent SEES initiatives

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Stakeholder groups	Areas and tasks for using SEESs data
Teaching staff	Instructional processes; action research; assessment practices; learning processes; teaching effectiveness; teaching evaluation
Students	Learning processes; self-monitoring of own academic progress
Researchers	Student-centred research initiatives; pedagogy research; learning-related research
Department heads/ Programme directors	Teaching effectiveness; teaching evaluation; programme ealuation; student flow-through; student dropout rates & failure; student retention strategies
Deans	Empowering education research; enhancing reputation; improving accountability
Government & policy makers	Improving accountability; creating transparency; assessing impact of policy changes
Community & donors	Educational outreach
Executive officers	Process optimisation; improving graduation rates; improving retention rates; empowering education research; enhancing reputation; improving accountability
Survey supervision staff	Improving user experience; improving survey usability & performance; improving survey design
Administration staff (Student Affairs)	Monitoring student progress, student flow-through; managing student intervention (at-risk students); developing retention strategies

SEESs in context and overview of four prominent SEES initiatives

SEESs	U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement/ NSSE 2018	Australian Student Experience Survey/ SES 2017	UK Student Academic Experience Survey/ SAES 2018	Irish Survey of Student Engagement/ ISSE 2018
Foundation year	Ca. 2000	2015	2012	2013
Goal	To assess student engagement in & exposure to proven educational practices that correspond to desirable learning outcomes*	To collect feedback on HE student experience on a **national level**; focus on measurable aspects of student experience that are linked with **learning & development outcomes**, & potentially able to be influenced by HEIs; provide **source data for QILT website** (https://www.qilt.edu.au/)	To measure (full-time) undergraduate students **satisfaction with value for money**; **how fees are spent**; experience vs. expectation; learning gain; teaching intensity; teaching quality; assessment quality; ethnicity; policy issues	Focus on students' engagement with their learning & their learning environments (e.g., no direct exploration of students' involvement in quality assurance or in institutional decision-making)
Participation for HEIs	**Voluntary***	'**Pseudo-voluntary**' ("all public universieties & many others took part", based on obligatory nation-wide HE Information Management System data); voluntary: 'additional population' samples on a fee-for-service basis	**Obligatory** for publicly funded HEIs in the UK*	**Voluntary** but based & relying on an established network of a majority of Irish HEIs ('collaborative partnership'). Co-sponsored by the Higher Education Authority (HEA), institutions' representative bodies (Irish Universities Association, IUA; Technological Higher Education Association, THEA) & the Union of Students in Ireland (USI)')
Theoretical foundations	For the **concept of student engagement** see (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015; Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For approaches to **L&T theories to justify SEES items & related performance indicators** (PIs) see (Åkerlind, 2004; Ambrose at al., 2010; Arnold, 2015; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Illeris, 2018; Keshavarz, 2011; Leiber, 2016; Leiber, 2019b; Lodge & Bonsanquet, 2014; Ramsden, 1991).			

* Adopted and further developed from (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015, p. 368-369)

SEESs in context and overview of four prominent SEES initiatives

SEESs	U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement/ NSSE 2018	Australian Student Experience Survey/ SES 2017	UK Student Academic Experience Survey/ SAES 2018	Irish Survey of Student Engagement/ ISSE 2018
Survey content: topics	Participation in educationally purposeful activities, institutional requirements of coursework, perceptions of the college environment, educational & personal growth, etc.	The SES measures five aspects of the student experience: Skills Development, Learner Engagement, Teaching Quality, Student Support, & Learning Resources	Satisfaction with teaching quality, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, personal development, overall experience, etc.*	Learning (types), learning strategies, student-faculty interaction, teaching practices, supportive environment etc.
Survey content: validity and reliability studies	(McCormick & McClenney, 2012; Pike, 2013)	(Whiteley, 2016)	(Callender et al., 2014; Richardson et al., 2007)	www.studentsurvey.ie
Data collection: sample	Census-based/random sample survey of first-year & senior students*	Census-based survey of 'commencing' & 'later years' students (undergraduates & postgraduates); **sophisticated definition & selection & HEI verification of survey population & sample**	Census-based survey of last year students*	Census-based survey of 'commencing' & 'later years' students (first year undergraduates, final year undergraduates, postgraduates)
Data collection: method and frequency	Online & paper-based; once a year*	Online; once a year	Online & paper-based; once a year*	Online; once a year
Data collection: response rates (completed)	**25-30 %***	2017: **36 %** 2018: **568,976 invitations** (undergraduates & postgraduates; universities & non-university HEIs)	**20 %** 2018: over 70,000 invitations; 14,046 responses	**28 %** 2018: 137,025 population; 38,371 student responses

* Adopted and further developed from (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015, p. 368-369)

SEESs in context and overview of four prominent SEES initiatives

SEESs	U.S. National Survey of Student Engagement/ NSSE 2018	Australian Student Experience Survey/ SES 2017	UK Student Academic Experience Survey/ SAES 2018	Irish Survey of Student Engagement/ ISSE 2018
Data collection: survey period		Aug – Oct 2017	5 Feb – 10 March 2018	Feb – March (3 weeks duraction, different periods for different institutions)
Data collection: average survey completion time			16 minutes	(67 question items)
Data collection: incentives			**£1 AMAZON gift voucher**	
Data analysis	Centralised approach* Engagement indicators (benchmarks) and item by item comparisons*	Centralised approach Comparison of groups of students, study areas, institutions, international (U.S. & UK) (structural **similarity to EU Multirank**) (https://www.qilt.edu.au/)	Centralised approach* Item by item comparisons*	Centralised approach
Data use	**Mostly internal**: for benchlearning, voluntary accreditation, decision-making support*	**Mostly external**: to inform prospective – foreign – students' choice of the academic program, to create league tables, for marketing purposes* (structural similarity to EU Multirank) Internal use intended, has yet to be proved	**Mostly external**: to inform prospective students' choice of the academic program, to create league tables, for marketing purposes*	**Mostly internal**: for quality enhancement

* Adopted and further developed from (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015, p. 368-369)

Methodological limitations of SEE Surveys
(and other information collection methodologies)

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Three fundamental common challenges cut across **any** performance data governance and management (PDGM) model which may include SEESs, learning analytics, academics analytics etc.

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- **Ownership** of performance data and information
  – the inherently distributed ownership must be transparently and reliably **regulated**

- **Interpretation capabilities** of performance data and information
  – the inherently distributed interpretation capabilities (values, missions, visions and further interpretation criteria) must be transparently and reliably **regulated**

- **Evidence-based decision-making capabilities** based on performance data and information
  – the inherently distributed decision-making capabilities (e.g. timeliness, competences) must be transparently and reliably **regulated**

“[B]est practice is a myth” (Fernie & Thorpe 2007, p. 328).

Methodological limitations of SEE Surveys
(and other information collection methodologies)

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Hard or impossible to fix

- **Explanatory power** and generalisability of survey results is **low** (e.g., it is hard to explain statistically more than 15% of variation in data; survey focus on statistical groups)

- Students’ abilities to **comprehend survey questions** & **make informed judgments** are often **overestimated** (e.g. fluent groups; different kinds of learning orientation & program engagement; engagement in QM often rather low) (also cf. Bennett & Kane, 2014)

- **Accuracy** of information on engagement and learning gains as **self-reported by students** is **contested** (strong tendency to **social desirability bias**)

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- **Survey fatigue** implying low response rates which accentuate possible biases in survey responses (e.g. underrepresentation of disengaged, non-traditional and minority students) [‘students are perhaps among the most surveyed populations world-wide’ (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015, p. 362).]

- ‘**Stakeholders seem increasingly unresponsive**’ to results from SEESs (Borden & Coates, 2017, 91) (e.g., over the years strategic rationalising of responses developed; habituation to the results)

Methodological limitations of SEE Surveys
(and other information collection methodologies)

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Not impossible to fix

- More **generic surveys** (like centralised, national ones) might **fail to discern 'the contextual dimensions** and variables [the "local circumstances"] which could add most value to a formative use of such data' (Klemenčič & Chirikov, 2015, p. 371)
- **"Local" surveys** are more **expensive** and more **prone to methodological errors**
- **Poor quality** (validity; reliability) **of data; questionnaire items** themselves may need **sharpening** (UK NSS; cf. Bennett & Kane, 2014; Hora et al. 2017, 41)
- The **range of questionnaire questions** may need **widening** (UK NSS; cf. Bennett & Kane, 2014)
- Choice of 'independent variables' (factors that are expected to influence student learning & success) is prone to **observational & theoretical biases** (e.g., **interpretive frameworks of SEESs are biased** according to a limited range of student experience, especially given the growing diversity of student learners and learning environments (Museus, 2014); **we prefer to measure what's easy enough to measure …**)

Also cf. (Campbell & Cabrera, 2011; Gordon et al., 2008; Porter, 2011; Porter, 2013, Porter et al., 2011)

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Methodological limitations of SEE Surveys
(and other information collection methodologies)

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Not impossible to fix

- Staff's **lack of time** due to workload
- Staff's **lack of expertise with educational data (processing, interpretation, evaluation)**
- **Poor timing of survey data delivery**
- **Lack of tools & technology** (for survey data monitoring, integration, presentation, …)
- **Lack of human resources** (for survey data monitoring, processing, interpretation, …)
- **Lack of general culture** of using SEESs data and data-driven decision-making (e.g. "student-centredness" & SEES data not accepted as central tenets of EBOCD in HE)

Also cf. (Hora et al., 2017, 411ff.)

Methodological limitations of SEE Surveys
(and other information collection methodologies)

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Not impossible to fix

- **Multitude of surveys** is necessary to exhaust **complete student lifecycle**

- In reality, the **majority of HE(Is) worldwide utilises** a bulk and mix of **different student experience** & **student engagement feedback on course and/or institutional and/or national levels;** accordingly, 'faculty utilise a variety of information in their daily work' (Hora et al., 2017, 417)

'Path-breaking research is, by definition, exploratory' (Gerring, 2004, p. 349).

Recommendations
for SEES governance and management

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First & foremost: **Improve on above-listed "not-impossible-to-fix limitations"**

Three major, partially complementary "ways" – **no single panacea**

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- Continually **improve survey methodologies**
  (e.g. pilot-testing, implement measures to raise response rates [e.g. email reminder strategies; courtesy telephone calls; telephone reminders]; use mixed-methods approaches; apply **"local", de-centralised, "discipline-specific" SEESs** capturing the different student intakes profiles [cf. Bennett & Kane, 2014; Harvey, 2011]; apply **longitudinal survey designs**; **broaden ("holistify") samples and case studies** [e.g. international comparisons; transcultural dimensions; transdisciplinary dimensions; other stakeholders beyond students; …] (Baird & Gordon 2009; Kim 2007))

- **Organisational development** (e.g. define realistic core tasks and responsibilities; provide sufficient human resources & capabilities; provide adequate technology; etc.)

- **USE STUDENT DATA ANALYTICS** (thus **BYPASSING SURVEYS, AS FAR AS POSSIBLE**)

Recommendations
for SEES governance and management

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Privacy, **EU General Data Protection Regulation** (GDPR) and **data analytics in higher education** (learning a., academic a., student a., …)

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- **Consent** by stakeholders/students **must be obtained**
  - Where **special category data** is used (e.g. ethnic origin; time spent for studying; ...)
  - When **interventions** are at stake **with individual** stakeholders/students based on their analytics
- Requirements of GDPR for requesting consent include
  - **Keeping consent requests separate** from other terms and conditions
  - **Giving clear and specific information** to students/stakeholders about what they are consenting to
  - **Informing them of any third-party data controllers** who will rely on their consent
  - **Making clear the consequences** of either providing or withholding their consent
  - **Requiring clear, affirmative action** by the student/stakeholder; the use of pre-ticked boxes is not acceptable

Recommendations
for SEES governance and management

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- Notorious **success factors** of QM and OD are non-trivially (also) relevant for successful **development and application of SEESs**, among them
  - To foster and disseminate personal characteristics for **ethical behavior**, including **self-competences** and **social competences**
  - To oblige **leadership**
  - To assure data and reporting quality including proper **design**, tested **validity**, **reliability** and **communicated purposes** of surveys
  - To **involve relevant stakeholders** in all SEES development and application phases
  - To **close the quality** (Deming) **cycles**
  - To **restrain the various biases** of applied surveys
  - To **invest sufficient resources** (time, money, competences, human workforce)

Also cf. (Leiber, 2019a, 332ff.)

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