

## Making it count

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Reflecting on the National Student Survey in the process of enhancement

Alex Buckley







# Contents

Section		Page
	<b>Foreword</b>	4
<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	8
	1.1 About this report	10
	1.2 About the Institutional Working Group	11
	1.3 About the author	12
	1.4 Acknowledgements	12
<b>2</b>	<b>Staff-student partnerships</b>	13
	2.1 Student representation	13
	2.2 Student exploration	19
	2.3 Closing the loop	23
<b>3</b>	<b>Institutional structures</b>	28
	3.1 Staff attitudes	28
	3.2 Integration into decision-making	33
	3.3 Impetus for change	35
<b>4</b>	<b>Analysis and exploration</b>	39
	4.1 Limitations and challenges	39
	4.2 Triangulation with other data	44
	4.3 Benchmarking	48
	4.4 Using qualitative data	52
<b>5</b>	<b>Summing up and going further</b>	56
	5.1 Suggestions for good practice	56
	5.2 Questions for reflection	59
	5.3 Further reading	61
	5.4 Additional HEA resources	63
	<b>Appendix A: Information about the NSS</b>	65
	<b>Appendix B: Core NSS items</b>	66



## Foreword

### The question is what you do with it...

Since its introduction in 2005, the National Student Survey (NSS) has been subject to extensive debate and discussion. While there have been concerns about the validity of questions, the relevance of student satisfaction as a quality indicator or the role of the NSS in league tables and the apparently consequent promotion of consumerism, there has equally been a new level of sector engagement with student views and the role of these within learning and teaching developments. Not least influenced by the introduction of higher student fees, more choice for students and increased information provision for prospective learners, the role of league tables means that the influence of NSS results has become an aspect no institution can afford to neglect.

The NSS can support a range of approaches to enhancement. The annual production of league tables by newspapers is an obvious driver for institutions to take enhancement of the student learning experience seriously. Regardless of what our ethical judgement of that ranking motivation is, it is without a doubt helpful for enhancement in the classroom if improvement activity is supported and recognised by the institution.

More positively perhaps, the comparison of student satisfaction over a number of years within a discipline has helped us evaluate the effectiveness of enhancement previously introduced. Certainly student comments to open questions are of great use to interpreting the statistical data, while the additional bank of questions can give a deeper insight into specific aspects, from workload, careers and work placements to course delivery, or – my personal favourite – feedback from students.

And yet, in my institution, the major enhancement from the annual NSS results came perhaps not from the statistics, but from the debate and discussions that came from the evaluation of results. In our case, NSS-based enhancement activity has led to a substantial growth of reciprocal engagement between students and staff. An explicit ethos has been established that influences the quality of learning far beyond the reach of the NSS. At Bath we take the view that the real quality of learning and teaching lies where it is owned: at the level of the discipline, where staff and students co-own their education. Underpinned by that principle, we have engaged staff and students in a learning and teaching enhancement process with outstanding effects for quality. It has also resulted in outstanding levels of student satisfaction, putting the University of Bath consistently in the top five for most satisfied students.

### Student engagement – the Bath approach

Student satisfaction – as measured by the NSS – is not a matter that the corporate level of a university can influence directly. Instead, student satisfaction relates directly to the experience of students in their classroom or online, to interaction with teaching staff and departmental support staff, to the general organisation of students' studies and to interaction with fellow students. Surely, a better quality learning experience would equate with a higher level of student satisfaction, and who is better positioned to make that experience the best in can be, than students and staff working together on this directly?

Based on that realisation – education is a process owned by students and staff, not the institution – the University of Bath and the Students' Union have taken an educational enhancement approach to the NSS. We decided that the NSS – or at least particular questions within it – give us an insight into how well students and staff engage with each other in relation to the learning process. That approach allowed us to view the NSS as a tool for enhancement and increased engagement. Essentially, since 2006 our joint approach has been to make the interaction between staff and students on matters of learning as 'reciprocal' as is feasible. We believe that a co-owned education would be a better education, while allowing for discipline differences, local educational cultures, habits and preferences. For students this means an expectation of taking responsibility for learning, for giving feedback to staff and for engaging in enhancement activity. For staff it means a listening ear, flexibility in relation to delivery and in many cases, the motivating experience of working with a more engaged student audience.

Our Students' Union plays a key role in this partnership approach. In the early days of the NSS, our Students' Union saw the survey as a tool for enhancement as well. However, they were also driven by a strongly felt view that a strengthening of the student voice was important. Hence, the SU proposed to run online elections for our student representatives, allowing an unbiased, fully elective (as opposed to locally selective) approach to finding representatives for student opinion. Alongside this, the SU supported elected representatives with training and ongoing briefings so they would stay abreast of new educational or political developments, be prepared for taking effective part in the committee structure and able to develop well underpinned proposals on those topics where students wanted to see change. Our student representatives are highly informed, have access to the same data and information that our staff have and are very prepared and able to ensure a fair representation of student opinion is given. We have many visitors to the University – ranging from interested colleagues in other universities to QAA reviewers – who have commented on the impressive political and diplomatic capital of our student representatives and sabbatical officers. Needless to say, this 'professionalisation' of the student voice has greatly helped to make students full partners in the strategic as well as enhancement processes<sup>1</sup>.

Embracing the possibilities the empowered and highly representative student voice gave, the University reviewed its arrangements for staff-student liaison committees at departmental level and its formal governance structure more generally. Student representation on learning and teaching related committees is now standard at all levels of the University. Student members at the higher levels are sabbatical officers, faculty representatives or elected student representatives who are supported by our Students' Union's outstanding Representation and Research Manager. Her contribution relates not only to supporting the student representatives before and at committee meetings, but also to support continuity across the years on the many topics under discussion.

Though such a high level of engagement with the formal committee structure is no doubt influential in the mid to longer term, the real strength in relation to NSS-measured student satisfaction comes from the effectiveness of staff-student exchanges at the level of the discipline. Our staff-student liaison committees are increasingly chaired by students themselves, to the great satisfaction of discipline staff across the board. Allowing such an arrangement was initially felt to be controversial, but it appears that the level of responsibility students wish to take for their learning experience is creating highly effective and constructive discussions and results, not least in relation to avoiding a consumerist approach by students. Clearly, when students take co-responsibility for their study experiences the nature of discussion changes, and in our case much for the better.

In practical terms, the staff-student liaison committees resolve many issues of interest or concern to students at the level at which these issues occur. Not all matters

<sup>1</sup> For a perspective from our Students' Union, see Section 2.1.

can be resolved at this level and this is why the committees have a formal annual feedback route to the Students' Union. By reporting annually on issues that have been discussed, the Students' Union is able to have an accurate and well-informed overview of any issues that need attention above the discipline level and that have not yet been raised during the year through other means. A summary of findings with recommendations formulated by the incoming new Vice-President Education (a Students' Union sabbatical officer) is then received by the very first University-level learning, teaching and quality committee, so that a clear agenda for enhancement is set. Again this illustrates how seriously the University of Bath takes the well-informed and co-responsible student voice.

Beyond the highly empowered student voice, the University itself of course also takes action after reviewing annual NSS results. Within each programme, the results are scrutinised and placed alongside other data, such as student evaluations of individual units, assessment results, staff evaluations and programme data. Staff and students have worked together on setting an enhancement agenda for the programme, which we've centrally supported especially where NSS results were disappointing. All enhancement activities are undertaken as a joint project by students and staff, thereby ensuring that solutions to identified problems meet the interests of both parties. We believe that this reciprocal engagement approach creates a change in the way staff and students view each other, allowing a better alignment between teaching and learning. In essence, the NSS helped stimulate a joint interest in outstanding learning and our academic community has avoided the trappings of a consumerist culture where the teaching staff supply and the students consume.

It is also the NSS itself that gives us some data as to what extent students feel their department engages with their feedback. The additional bank of questions has a question set called 'Feedback from students' which features the question 'It is clear to me how students' comments on the course have been acted upon' (additional bank of questions, Question B6.3). Time and again we see how an upward trend on this question results in a stronger outcome on the core NSS questions – especially on the academic aspects. It appears that the more students know their voice is heard, the more they rate the teaching, assessment and overall satisfaction they experience. On further discussion with students – we don't go by statistics alone – we found that a sense of co-ownership leads to a better alignment of expectations and practices, both for staff and students.

Our results on that 'engagement indicator' question suggest we are well above the top quartile within the country, something we take great pride in. However, we are by no means the only institution that has undertaken this kind of internal debate and found new ways of interaction with the student voice. Until recently Birmingham City University hosted a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning on partnerships and an important part of their work was on staff-student partnerships. The University of Exeter introduced the concept of 'Students as Change Agents', while the University of Lincoln developed 'Students as Producers' as part of their educational ethos. Based in the Scottish framework, SPARQS has had a major influence on the sector's thinking about the student voice in quality mechanisms and the NUS also has several publications on student engagement that are worth a look. It appears that the student voice is stronger than ever and, undeniably, the NSS has been part of the process of achieving a change in how the student voice is perceived, which – in my view – helps align teaching and learning more closely to each other.

### What next?

The NSS was introduced in 2005. Eight years on, we must accept that perhaps a reconsideration of the tool is needed – even for enhancement purposes. The scores become more and more 'bunched' with institutions now reaching overall scores at the very top of the scale. Of course, if this truly indicates that our student body across the sector is outstandingly pleased with the education they enjoy, this may be a positive. However, other statistics available within institutions such as the Student Barometer,

the Student Opinion Survey or home-grown programme evaluations tell a different story: there is still room for improvement and development in particular areas that the NSS does not reach. More importantly, the question still remains whether student satisfaction is really such a good indicator for a high quality learning experience. Perhaps it is not satisfaction that matters, but the level of actual engagement with all the opportunities for learning on offer. After all, even if students are very satisfied with the learning experience on offer, it will only create actual intellectual progress, if students actually engage with those opportunities.

With engagement in mind, an interesting comparison is often made with the National Survey of Student Engagement that is used in the US. This annual survey – second in size only to the US census – takes a rather different approach to evaluating the student experience. Instead of concentrating on what educational offer is made to the student, this survey turns the tables and evaluates how the students engage with what is offered. Although controversial in some quarters as it aims to measure behaviour as an indicator of learning, perhaps this approach offers a possibility of looking more closely at the level of actual engagement by students – both in the setting of learning as well as the wider student experience.

What will matter ultimately are the choices the sector wishes to make. Taking a sector-wide enhancement point of view, I cannot help but wonder what will ultimately stimulate enhancement of the student learning experience more. The NSSE data that capture how the students experience their engagement with learning do not allow for competitive use in ranking, but give a stronger insight into engagement than the NSS. And yet, the NSS has meant that universities – almost without fail – have noted their students' views more than ever and engaged in substantial efforts to improve the student experience. Where the NSSE gives us the quality of responses that allows for enhancement, the NSS has been very effective at making teaching and learning enhancement an institutional priority sector-wide – perhaps even more strongly so, than any other efforts before. Maybe the future lies in the best of both worlds: a combination of data for enhancement and data that can be used as a quality indicator. Whatever happens next, let's hope that at least the debate about student engagement continues in institutions across the sector.

**Gwen van der Velden**  
**Director of Learning and Teaching Enhancement**  
**University of Bath**

Gwen van der Velden researches institutional engagement with the student voice based on her leadership of that agenda at the University of Bath, her own experience of students' union activism and advisory work with a range of universities. Gwen was invited to write on the topic for the QAA ("Whose Education is it anyway?"<sup>2</sup>) and was a member of the panel that drafted the recently published QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education chapter on student engagement.<sup>3</sup>

2 <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/student-engagement.aspx>  
[accessed 10 October 2012]

3 <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/informationandguidance/pages/quality-code-B5.aspx>  
[accessed 10 October 2012]



# I. Introduction

The NSS is a powerful force in UK higher education. It has been praised for helping to open up the world of undergraduate study to scrutiny and debate. It has been the target of heartfelt criticism from those opposed to the idea of students as consumers and the rise of the market in higher education. It is now a key part of the current Government's plan to use student choice as a more powerful lever for quality improvement. But above all, the NSS has attracted attention. Most of that attention has focused on the role of the survey in the accountability of universities, and in providing information to prospective students. What is typically overlooked in this polarised debate is the part that the NSS can play in institutional processes for the enhancement of learning and teaching.

The use of the NSS for enhancement is becoming increasingly common within institutions themselves, but there is a lack of shared practice and discussion about how that can be achieved. This report, based on the experiences of a range of institutions, is designed to provide an overview of the role of the NSS in enhancement, alongside specific examples of institutional practice. It is also intended to raise awareness of this aspect of the survey, and to provoke debate about the opportunities and obstacles of using it in this way.

The NSS did not originate as a tool for enhancement. The primary intention was to create a student survey that would a) yield information that could be used by prospective students to choose suitable courses, and b) provide a light-touch form of quality assurance and public accountability<sup>4</sup>. With the recent changes to the UK HE system (most notably in England) the first of those roles has become particularly prominent, but ever since its introduction in 2005 the NSS results – through reporting in the media and use in league tables – have had a profound impact on how institutions are presented to the public.

That development has forced institutions to pay attention to students' perceptions of their learning environment. The NSS has a high level of visibility within institutions, and there are often sophisticated methods for internal dissemination of the data to faculties, departments and programme leaders. The survey results often also play a key role in decision-making processes as an important source of management information. [Section 3.2 Integration into decision-making]

The simplistic use of the NSS scores in the media can lead to an understandable suspicion and resentment on the part of academic staff, especially if they perceive this perspective in the attitude of institutional managers. Those managers' legitimate concern about the outward-facing aspects of the NSS (such as participation rates and comparisons between universities and courses) can then be interpreted by 'front line' staff as a simplistic pressure to raise scores without concern for genuine improvements in learning. [Section 3.1 Staff attitudes]

However, concomitant with the kind of deficit model inspired by league tables, the NSS brings an increased focus on learning and teaching, that for some institutions can be both novel and welcome. When used well, it can be a powerful lever for

4 HEFCE (2004) National Student Survey 2005: Outcomes of consultation and guidance on next steps. Bristol: HEFCE. Available from: [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120118171947/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04\\_33/](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120118171947/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2004/04_33/) [accessed 11 October 2012]

change, inspiring conversations about learning and teaching, and engaging staff in the enhancement process. [[Section 3.3 Impetus for change](#)]

The contributions to this report strongly suggest that while the prominence of the NSS was initially inspired by its impact on institutional reputation, recruitment and finances, the focus has started to shift towards how it can support the genuine improvement of learning and teaching. The use of the NSS for enhancement may be a by-product of its reputational impact but it nevertheless has the potential to be an important tool for improving practice.

Using the NSS in this way is not without its complications. The fact that it was not primarily designed with enhancement in mind causes problems, as does the way in which the media use it as a summative measure of teaching quality. The focus that it creates on students' satisfaction with what they have received, rather than the level and quality of the effort they invest, is also a challenge. [[Section 4.1 Limitations and challenges](#)]

But despite these obstacles, institutions have found innovative and interesting ways of deploying it effectively within the enhancement process. Probably the most important element of this is the acknowledgement that the NSS is only a partial picture of students' experiences, and works best as a starting-point for further investigation. It can indicate areas of possible concern or success, but it will never, used in isolation, yield a definitive understanding of educational quality or the level of student learning. [[Section 4.2 Triangulation with other data](#)]

The simplistic comparisons made by the media may be unhelpful, but the appropriate use of benchmarking is a vital aspect of using the NSS. Comparing scores with comparator courses or institutions can be a useful step in identifying areas for improvement and good practice, provided that differences in context are taken into account. [[Section 4.3 Benchmarking](#)]

The benchmarking and analysis of the numerical NSS scores provides a good first step, but some institutions have found success in using the student comments from the survey to gain richer information. Focus groups are another useful source of qualitative data, allowing issues to be explored, and possible solutions to be considered. [[Section 4.4 Using qualitative data](#)]

The use of focus groups is one way of involving students in the exploration of NSS results, but a striking feature of how enhancement strategies have developed over recent years is that the involvement of students in the NSS stretches far beyond simply being sources and objects of data. There are many examples, including some in this report, of the NSS providing an extra spur and a useful focus for staff-student partnerships, and being used in a positive way to put the student voice at the heart of learning and teaching cultures.

Connecting the use of the NSS with the wider process of student representation has been important to many institutions. By working in partnership with the students' union, and by encouraging and supporting course and faculty representatives to participate in the discussion of NSS results, a sense of shared ownership has been fostered. [[Section 2.1 Student representation](#)]

Institutions have also involved students in the analysis and exploration of the results, through supporting them as researchers, or through more informal means such as conferences and workshops. [[Section 2.2 Student exploration](#)]

And a lot of effort has been invested in 'closing the feedback loop', reporting back on the actions that have been taken in response to the NSS. Building the survey into a genuine dialogue between staff and students depends on student feedback being visibly acknowledged, just as it requires institutions to avoid treating NSS results simply as demands. [[Section 2.3 Closing the loop](#)]

The NSS is influential and controversial. Both the survey itself and its impact on the sector have attracted criticism, by no means all undeserved. Nevertheless, more conversations have taken place – in institutions, faculties and departments – about learning and teaching enhancement as a result of the survey. And there are signs that the survey can be used in a way that does not strengthen a damaging consumerism, but in fact promotes ideas of student empowerment, involvement and representation. This report is an attempt to recognise that contribution of the NSS to enhancement, and to help support and structure the conversations which are inspired by the NSS, but are ultimately concerned with improving student learning.

## 1.1 About this report

This report is based on the experiences of the Higher Education Academy's NSS Institutional Working Group, made up of individuals who work closely with the NSS in central roles within higher education institutions. The group meet twice-yearly to discuss and share ways of using the NSS for enhancement (see below for more detail). The main text is based primarily on responses of group members to a short set of open-ended questions, and follow-up conversations. Those questions focused on how the NSS is perceived and used, how students are involved, and the respondents' own thoughts about its benefits and drawbacks. The structure of the report is based on the themes that emerged. In addition to these written responses, the report also draws on notes, conversations and presentations from meetings of the group.

The main text of the report has been anonymised, to enable individuals to be honest and open both about their institutional practices, and their personal views of the NSS. Quotations from the written responses are used within the report (indented and italicised) and these have, if necessary, been paraphrased in order to prevent identification of individuals or institutions. The report also contains 9 short case studies, contributed by members of the group, that provide more detailed, specific and non-anonymous examples of institutional practice.

The report is divided into three main chapters, looking at [Staff-student partnerships](#); [Institutional structures](#); and [Analysis and exploration](#). The chapters each consist of several sections which include, alongside the main text and case studies, key points and questions to prompt further reflection. The key points and questions are collected together at the end as, respectively, [Suggestions for good practice](#) and [Questions for reflection](#).

The report is not designed to provide answers, but to offer ideas, examples and inspiration for practice. By distilling the experiences and reflections of a group of people who are closely engaged with the NSS within a range of institutions, we hope it will encourage and enable others to reflect on their own use of the survey for the enhancement of learning and teaching. It is important to note that the report does not give the HEA's view of the NSS, nor should it be assumed to represent the view of any individual member of the group, or their institution.

What does this report do?

- It supplies an overview of institutional practice, covering the broad range of issues that arise when using the NSS as part of the enhancement process.
- Through the short case studies included in each section, it provides a range of specific examples of how named institutions have used the NSS.
- It describes the challenges and difficulties of trying to use the NSS as an enhancement tool, with examples of how institutions have attempted to overcome them.
- It includes suggestions for institutions to consider in their own activities.
- It promotes critical reflection, through prompts and questions designed to foster debate and discussion of the role and potential of the NSS.

What does this report not do?

- It does not give specific advice on statistical techniques or methods of data reporting.
- It does not attempt to supply interpretations of low or high scores for particular questions or scales.
- It does not provide ideas for simply improving NSS scores, beyond the suggestions for making genuine improvements to learning and teaching.

Who is this report for?

- Staff working directly with NSS data, or data from other student surveys, whether through analysis, dissemination or action planning.
- Staff interested in how the NSS could be useful for informing enhancements to learning and teaching.
- Senior managers wanting to make the most of the NSS in planning and review processes.
- Although the report is drawn from, and aimed at, staff within institutions, it may be useful to students and students' unions wanting to engage with the NSS as a way of understanding and responding to student feedback.

The report is intended to be used alongside other sources of information. Section 5.3 describes a small number of useful research publications, and other resources produced by the HEA (including data analysis) are listed in Section 5.4.

## 1.2 About the Institutional Working Group

The NSS Institutional Working Group meets twice each year to share practice around using the NSS for enhancement, and to discuss common problems and challenges. The group is hosted and supported by the HEA. The members of the group use the NSS in a range of capacities, but they mostly work with the survey at an institutional level, in learning and teaching units or roles related to educational quality.

Meetings focus on discussions and workshops, and on presentations from group members highlighting interesting and innovative aspects of institutional activities. The group offers a space for free and frank conversation, in that – like the main text of this report – no comments made within meetings are attributed to individuals. It is a valuable space where people working closely with the NSS, and at the forefront of using it for enhancement, can meet and collaborate on an issue that is often at the heart of competition between institutions. The group regularly publishes case studies, such as those contained in this report. Earlier case studies are available at the following locations:

2007 case studies:

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/subjects/bioscience/nss-case-studies.doc>

2010 case studies:

[http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/EvidenceNet/Case\\_studies/NSS\\_case\\_studies\\_Nov\\_2010.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/EvidenceNet/Case_studies/NSS_case_studies_Nov_2010.pdf)

Current and recent members of the group:

University of Bath – Shaun McCall (Learning and Teaching Development Officer)  
Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln – Vicky Mays (Policy Officer)  
Cardiff Metropolitan University – Nicola Poole (Student Retention Officer)  
Coventry University – Andrew Turner (Teaching and Learning Programme Manager)

University of Derby – Sue Morrison (Senior Assistant Registrar, Student Experience)  
Durham University – Richard Harrison (Head of the Academic Support Office)  
University of Glamorgan – Denize McIntyre (Senior Projects Officer)  
Goldsmiths, University of London – Clare Blake (Quality Administrator)  
University of Hertfordshire – Catherine Rendell (Deputy Director of Academic Quality Assurance)  
University of Huddersfield – Kathy Sherlock (Head of Registry)  
Lancaster University – Adam Child (Assistant Registrar)  
University of Leeds – Jenny Lyon (Assistant Registrar)  
Leeds Metropolitan University – Alison Jones (Head of Strategic Planning)  
Liverpool John Moores University – Clare Milsom (Head of Academic Practice)  
Queen's University, Belfast – Nuala Toman (Educational Developer)  
Sheffield Hallam University – Jason Leman (Senior Lecturer in Research and Evaluation)  
Southampton Solent University – Chris Rapley (Senior Research Officer)  
University of Stirling – Bob Matthew (Director, Centre for Academic Practice and Learning)  
University of Sunderland – Beatrice Ollerenshaw (Director of Academic Services)  
University of Winchester – Yaz El-Hakim (Director of Learning and Teaching)  
University of Worcester – Julian Martin (Head of Quality Assurance and Enhancement)

### 1.3 About the author

Dr Alex Buckley works in the Student Surveys team at the HEA, and leads on their activities supporting institutions to use the NSS for enhancement. Since joining the HEA in January 2010, he has facilitated the Institutional Working Group as part of his role. His work also includes data reporting, and research on student surveys, student engagement and the connections between the two. Before joining the HEA, Alex taught applied and professional ethics at the University of Leeds, after gaining a PhD in philosophy from the same institution in 2008.

### 1.4 Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank all the members of the Institutional Working Group for their active contributions at meetings. Those meetings have formed the background to this report, and the meeting notes and presentations have provided material for the text. I would additionally like to thank those members of the group who submitted written responses to the survey: Clare Blake, Clare Milsom, Chris Rapley, Jason Leman, Jenny Lyon, Richard Harrison, Nicola Poole, Alison Jones, Beatrice Ollerenshaw, Nuala Toman, Adam Child, Denize McIntyre, Bob Matthew, Kathy Sherlock, Yaz El-Hakim, Julian Martin and Catherine Rendell. Those responses were detailed, often lengthy, and provided honest assessments of the NSS as an enhancement tool. Extra thanks goes to those members who also contributed short case-studies. And we are also grateful to the representatives of students' unions who contributed their perspectives at short notice: Alex Pool, Vice-President (Education) at the University of Bath Students' Union, Ruth Foster, President of the Students' Union at Cardiff Metropolitan University and Kate Wilkinson, Vice-President (Academic Quality) at Liverpool Students' Union. I am very grateful to Gwen van der Velden for writing the foreword to the report, sharing both her viewpoint on the NSS and the inspiring developments at Bath. Finally, thanks to Paul Bennett, Jason Leman, Catherine Rendell, Clare Milsom, Nicola Poole and Anna Highmore for comments on earlier drafts of the report.



## 2. Staff-student partnerships

### 2.1 Student representation

#### Key points

- NSS results need to be connected to the wider process of student representation, to ensure that the survey is part of the wider conversations between institutions and students.
- If students are going to play an active part in the discussion of NSS results in committees and working groups, then they need support, training and full access to the relevant resources and documents.
- Partnerships between institutions and students' unions are one of most important elements of involving students in the NSS, but both the opportunities and the challenges should be openly acknowledged and discussed.

Most institutions feel strongly that the NSS has increased the visibility and impact of the 'student voice'. The reputational effect of the NSS means that institutions are now impelled to give greater consideration to their students' opinions, but some are clear that this has had a genuinely positive impact on staff-student relationships.

*The work involved in the promotion of the survey, the analysis and dissemination of results, and the reacting and responding to results has generated a strong collaborative approach ... This sense of shared responsibility and ownership has enhanced how the institution implements change more generally.*

For the NSS to be part of the conversation between students and the institution rather than simply a set of demands, it is important that the survey is integrated into the systems of student representation. A powerful message from several institutions is that the use of the NSS as a tool for enhancement depends on the extent to which it helps to build productive staff-student partnerships.

One of the key aspects of student representation is the involvement of students in committees and working groups, at the level of modules, courses and departments right through to institutional-level committees and senates. As NSS data usually trace a yearly course through those committees, an important mechanism for connecting the NSS to student representation more widely is the inclusion of students in that process. The next section looks at how students can be involved in the analysis and investigation of the data themselves; this section is focused on how students are involved in how the data are responded to.

As the name suggests, this kind of student involvement is most common in staff-student liaison committees, but there are other ways in which students are included:

- many institutions include student representation on faculty and institutional learning and teaching committees;
- one institution reported that groups containing students are often set up specifically to discuss student feedback, often focusing on the NSS;

- some institutions have faculty forums where senior staff and student representatives meet and discuss newly released NSS results;
- one institution has annual forums to allow senior managers and students' union (SU)<sup>5</sup> officers to discuss the results. These forums reward high-performing areas, identify priorities for enhancement, and create action plans;
- another institution creates *ad hoc* working groups to deal with specific issues that have arisen from NSS results.

The student members of these committees, groups and forums need to be actively included if their presence is to be meaningful, which requires that they are provided with the resources and support that they need, and are treated as genuine partners in the conversation.

Several institutions ensure that student representatives on these groups have access to the NSS results, and this is also a priority for many SUs (Section 2.2 looks in more detail at how institutions have supported students to undertake analysis of the data). In relation to other support, some institutions provide training to student representatives, as well as facilitating access to other sources of data to allow them to contextualise the NSS results for themselves. At a national level, the National Union of Students (NUS) provides useful support and resources<sup>6</sup>, and SPARQS in Scotland are focused on providing training and support for student representatives<sup>7</sup>.

Acknowledging the time investment that effective student representation can involve, several institutions have created paid part-time representative posts to provide a connection between the institution (and its constituent schools and departments), the SU and the student body. These posts, explicitly modelled in one case on the NUS' 'NSS Ambassadors'<sup>8</sup> can cover a range of activities, including collating informal feedback from peers, promoting the NSS and other surveys, and acting as representatives of student groups.

## Case study: The role of students in quality assurance and enhancement at the University of Huddersfield

The University values the student voice as an important element of quality assurance and enhancement. Students are represented on University-wide committees, for example Council, Senate, University Teaching and Learning Committee (UTLC), Annual Course Evaluation and at School level on School Boards, Course Committees and Student Panels. In addition Sabbatical Officers are panel members on Student Appeals, Complaints, Disciplinary and Fitness to Practice Committees. In relation to the NSS the results are analysed by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) before being put into a more understandable format by the Planning and Information Service to be discussed at University and School levels. The results are made available to the Students' Union to allow them to engage in discussion on responses.

5 The student representation organisations in some Scottish institutions are called 'students' associations'. In this report the expression 'students' union' is intended to cover these organisations.

6 <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/nss/> [accessed 6 October 2012].

7 <http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/> [accessed 6 October 2012].

8 <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/nss/ambassadors/> [accessed 6 October 2012].

The Quality and Standards Advisory Group (QSAG) is the 'workhorse' of UTLC; it is chaired by the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) and membership includes staff drawn from Schools, Services and the Students' Union. At QSAG's first meeting of the year NSS results are reviewed and those Schools whose results are below a certain level of student satisfaction are asked to provide actions plans addressing the issues, and these have to be available for the next meeting. School action plans are monitored by QSAG and the University's Senior Management Team.

In 2008-09 the University implemented student representation on Thematic Reviews and Reviews and Revalidations. The latter had been revised from two separate processes into one activity. The panels had always met with students as part of the reviews; however, now members of the Students' Union Executive are included on the panel and involved in discussions about the student experience and NSS outcomes. Reviews can take up to two days out of a working week and this is the main reason why students are represented here by the Sabbatical Officers. A Thematic Review on the subject of assessment and feedback led to an HEA Change Academy with the SU President as a member of the project. The benefits of the project have been demonstrated year on year with improved levels of student satisfaction in assessment and feedback, which are now some of the best in the UK.

The University recognises all of the above can take up valuable free time of the student and has worked with the SU developing mechanisms to ensure students are supported with appropriate training and ongoing support. In recognition of the contribution made by students, the SU and the University's Careers Service developed the Student Training and Recognition Scheme (STARS) providing students with a structured method to record and reflect on their experiences, enhancing their CV and future employment prospects and gaining a graded recognition of this awarded jointly by the University and the SU.

Universities should not underestimate the benefits of working collaboratively with the SU. At times in the past it was not always easy to track down who should be attending various committees and especially at the start of the year when there was a new SU Executive and new student representatives. In 2009, however, the SU appointed a full-time Democratic and Student Representation Co-ordinator and we have definitely benefited from this appointment. Alongside the bespoke training and committee structure we jointly organise the annual Student VOICE conference, with approximately 60 student representatives and the Senior Management of the University acting as facilitators, and the 'Ask Tim' sessions, where students meet with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning – 'Tim') in open meetings on five or six occasions throughout the year.

**Kathy Sherlock**  
**University of Huddersfield**

The primary intended benefit of students taking an active part in these groups and committees is to ensure that the decisions taken in those meetings are informed by students' perspectives, and have some element of buy-in from the student body. This requires an environment in which student representatives can voice their opinions and experiences, engage in open discussion, and have genuine input into the output, whatever it may be. Ensuring that students are treated as genuine partners in these meetings is therefore as important as training and access to data. One institution has tried to achieve that through a number of methods.

- they have given students access to all papers before the meeting;
- they have included students in the circulation of all minutes, plans and reports that result from the meetings;
- they have made sure that there are no confidential items on the agenda.

*Student representatives are present on all groups and are given access to the data reports and the action plans – there is no 'closed' business.*

Another institution was careful to ensure that the issues that student representatives might be more keen to discuss were not placed at the end of agendas, or buried in long meetings amid bureaucratic and procedural items.

It is also important that institutions acknowledge both the academic processes and terminology with which students are unlikely to be familiar; and the power relationships that may exist. Student representatives may well be commenting on NSS results for courses that they themselves are taking, in discussions with academics who are both teaching them, and assessing their work. It is important that this issue is acknowledged and approached with sensitivity by both students and staff, if student participants are to fulfil their job of representing the views of student groups.

There are examples of institutions involving students beyond the meetings themselves:

- one institution asked course representatives to read and comment on departmental action plans. This produced unexpected outcomes, with the students expressing concern that the action plans were unrealistic, and that this may have a demoralising effect on staff.
- another institution tasked the SU and an academic member of staff to co-produce a summary report based on the annual reports of the individual staff-student liaison committees around the institution. This report contained recommendations for the university learning and teaching committee, which were then turned into the institutional action plan.

Several institutions highlighted the role of the SU in this kind of support for, and engagement of, student representatives. SUs have a level of reach, expertise and enthusiasm that make them invaluable partners in involving students in the process of using the NSS. Most of the institutional examples of successful attempts to involve students have involved co-operation with the SU.

*One of the benefits of the NSS is that it provides a context for improved collaboration within the University and between the University and the Students' Union and the wider student body.*

## The view from a students' union – University of Bath

The NSS is a worthwhile tool that enables a dialogue between the University and the Students' Union. Like any survey it has its limitations, but by creating that discussion it can be incredibly beneficial for both parties concerned. The NSS hosts a range of questions which can then be used to benchmark not just externally with other institutions but also internally between departments. From that process we can look at identifying good practice and rolling that out University wide – that can only take place through student feedback and consultation. Students are the only ones who are experts in what it is actually like to be a student, therefore if a department or a particular question on the NSS is scoring lower than the others it is important that instead of hypothesising the reasons students are just asked. Therefore proposals can be identified and together the University and Students' Union can work together to make the Student Experience at Bath stronger. Likewise if one department is excelling at an area then we can share best practice across the University.

We identify best practice through a number of areas, whether it's Academic Reps sitting on Staff-Student Liaison Committees, Faculty Reps on Faculty Learning and Teaching Committees or Students' Union Officers having one-to-one meetings with University staff. At Bath we have an incredibly strong system of engaging with reps – we have Academic Council every three weeks where all of the Academic Reps from across the University come together to discuss issues. The NSS gives a good steer of areas to investigate and develop for the year ahead. Only by the University and Students' Union working together can issues properly be identified, best practice identified and shared, and the general Student Experience strengthened.

**Alexander Pool**  
**Vice-President (Education)**  
**University of Bath Students' Union**

Working with the SU does of course create challenges. Two institutions described the tension between the need to build up stable and long-term relationships with the SU, and the short-term elected status of students' union officers. With terms lasting one or two years, and priorities and attitudes often changing with each new post holder, it can be challenging to create lasting plans. This risk can be mitigated by ensuring that projects involve the paid students' union staff, who are usually around for longer, alongside the elected officers. This is felt to provide a basis of continuity that can help to create sustainable projects and partnerships.

SUs can differ in their level of engagement with the student body. One institution expressed their concern about the SU's engagement with particular groups such as ethnic minorities, part-time students and postgraduates. For some types of students, the SU may not be a short-cut to engagement, and institutions and SUs may have to work together to involve those students in the kinds of activities described in this section.

*Staff-student interactions around change have significantly increased. Some of this may well have happened without the NSS, but it has been a major lever for change.*

These are a range of ways in which students have been involved in discussing the response to NSS results, primarily through institutional committee structures. Those committee structures may be necessarily complex, but within each individual meeting or forum the issue is simple: to create an environment where both staff and students are able to provide personal input, in the form of experiences, views and suggestions, on how student feedback should be responded to. In the next section we look in more detail at how students can be involved in analysing and investigating the NSS data.

### Questions for reflection:

- Are students present on all the committees and groups where NSS results are discussed in any detail?
- Are student representatives sufficiently supported to allow them to play an active role in meetings?
- Does the institution and the SU work together on the NSS, in a way that is honest, productive, sustainable and acknowledges the challenges that exist?

## 2.2 Student exploration

### Key points

- With support and advice, students can play an active role in the analysis of NSS data, whether as paid researchers, through the SU or through their studies.
- Joint staff-student events, such as workshops and conferences, can provide an informal but effective method of involving students in the exploration of NSS results.
- SUs are entitled to receive full access to the data, which creates excellent opportunities for staff-student collaborations on data analysis and investigation.

NSS data do not arrive accompanied by their interpretations. They need to be unpacked, discussed and contextualised in order to be useful as guides to the learning experiences of students, and as foundations for quality enhancement. Chapter 4 of this report is focused on institutional processes for analysing and supplementing the data. Section 2.1 looked at how staff and students can work together to respond to student feedback. This section is focused on something related to both of these: how students can be involved in exploring and investigating the NSS data themselves.

One of the most common ways of involving students in NSS exploration is as participants in focus groups. This is discussed in Section 4.4, while this section is focused on how students can play an active role as researchers and partners in the process of exploration.

### The view from a Students' Union – Liverpool John Moores University

As you would expect, we start with an analysis of students' satisfaction with their course in each of the key NSS question areas, including overall satisfaction. We then take a targeted approach to each of these courses, especially those with the least satisfied students.

This year this targeted approach means that we firstly talk to the Programme Leader about their course, what priorities they have for the year ahead, and where they think they can improve student satisfaction. We also discuss with them the NSS qualitative comments, meaning that by the first few weeks of the academic year we know the key themes that we need to raise with students and Course Reps to see student satisfaction rise.

We then start going out and talking to these students around campus, normally we will know when and where their biggest lecture is so that we can target them. We also provide prioritised support from the Course Reps on these courses, so that we can be sure that they are doing their job properly, they feel supported, and they are having impact. Occasionally, if there is a specific issue that a Programme Leader or a Course Rep wishes to address, we will facilitate a focus group on that issue and send recommendations to the relevant people involved. All this work is then written up into a "Faculty Student Voice Report" for each of our faculties, and sent to the relevant Dean.

Since the insertion of the new NSS question 23 on student satisfaction with their students' union we have also looked to enhance the student experience of those courses who are least satisfied with ourselves. This means that we have targeted these courses for academic societies (if they don't have them already), trips that could enhance their academic experience and also specific communications with those students to ensure that they know what we do for them. We also analyse these students' satisfaction with the university, so that if they are dissatisfied with both institutions we can work with these students to secure improved satisfaction for both parties.

**Kate Wilkinson**  
**Vice-President (Academic Quality)**  
**Liverpool Students' Union**

SUs have very similar access to the NSS data as institutions, through the NSS Results Website. While this does not provide access to individual responses, it does provide access to aggregated results for groups as small as ten responses. This is more detailed than the publicly released results, and this access to relatively fine-grained data means that there are significant opportunities for SUs to engage in analysis and exploration, opportunities that SUs seem to be often taking up.

*The Students' Union gets a full copy of all the NSS data – they do an analysis for themselves.*

On the part of the institution, help can be provided in the form of training and expertise shared by staff with experience of working with survey data:

- one institution supported a student researcher, recruited by the SU in order to scrutinise the comments from the NSS;
- another institution incorporated analysis of NSS data, and examination of the survey instrument, as coursework on a statistics module;
- several institutions describe helping SUs to uncover yearly priorities and objectives from the data;
- at one institution, a course leader 'commissioned' some research from student representatives working together with staff, looking at students' desire for more practical content in the course.

Beyond this, a further level of co-operation can exist where institutional teams and students' union researchers work together in single teams to explore the data. In contrast with the partnerships around responding the data described in Section 2.1, these kinds of collaborations on data exploration seem rare.

*The Students' Union has recruited a researcher who has been scrutinising student data, including the NSS. He has been supported by the University analysis team in this, and is currently working with University staff in analysing the student comments, both at a top level separation into NSS categories and then doing a more thorough qualitative coding.*

## Case study: The National Student Survey at Queen's University Belfast – building staff and student partnerships

The response rate to the National Student Survey (NSS) at Queen's University Belfast had plateaued at 60%. In order to build the response rate a student partnership approach was established. The partnership was driven by the PVC Education and Students, the Centre for Educational Development and the Students' Union. An emphasis was placed upon developing student-led feedback and utilising student peer networks to encourage uptake of the survey. Mirroring the NSS Student Ambassador approach Student Ambassadors were recruited from Schools and programmes across the institution. Student Ambassadors were tasked with encouraging students to participate in all forms of feedback and to consider ways in which to close the feedback loop.

Queen's students could participate in feedback processes in a number of ways including module evaluations, student surveys and class representative discussions. It was noted that Queen's students did not have a forum in which to reflect upon and discuss their university experiences with each other and with staff. The Your Queen's Experience Conference was developed to address this gap. This initiative was led by the PVC Education and Students in partnership with the Student's

Union. Student Ambassadors were paired up with members of staff from across the institution to facilitate discussions at the Conference.

The Conference was attended by 150 students and 50 staff from across the institution. Discussions centred around the key themes within the NSS and reflected upon NSS scores and institutional strategies and programmes. A key aim of the discussions was to ensure students had an added opportunity to shape institutional policy and practice. As a result of these discussions and wider strategies associated with the NSS:

- policy and practice in assessment and feedback is being transformed across the institution;
- library provision and opening hours have been enhanced;
- student concerns and priorities are identified earlier through institutional surveys, new approaches to the evaluation of teaching, and new course representative structures;
- student representation has been enhanced through increased participation in student elections, increased numbers of students voting in elections and stronger course representative structures and enhanced training programmes;
- student engagement has increased;
- NSS response rates have increased and scores are more representative of student opinion.

Maintaining student and staff partnerships requires continual attention and priority. The institutional context can change from year to year and relationships within the partnership can change from year to year. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the changing priorities and approaches of elected student representatives. In order for the partnerships to succeed it is important to be clear about roles and responsibilities. It is necessary to have clear strategies for communication and action. It is important to take the time to reflect on progress and to adjust and change approaches when necessary.

The partnership agreed the following approach to addressing and using NSS scores to enhance policy and practice at Queen's:

- the provision of year-on-year comparisons of NSS results to Schools and academic-support units and the Students' Union;
- detailed commentaries prepared for Students' Union and University committees;
- institutional priorities and strategies for improvement developed and identified by PVC Education and Students, CED, academic schools and students';
- subject specific and thematic action plans are developed;
- NSS is integral to module and academic programme review;
- emphasis upon "closing the loop";
- course representative structures provide impetus for both addressing and communicating change.

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**Nuala Toman**  
**Queen's University Belfast**

Less formal involvement of students in exploring the meaning and implications of NSS results do exist. Some institutions hold events and conferences inspired by the NSS and other student feedback.

These events bring together staff and students, are often loosely structured around the findings of the data, and can have a variety of explicit topics such as responding to NSS results, preparing for next year's survey, or specific themes such as assessment and feedback. The common feature is that they are used to create a conversation between staff and students about learning and teaching issues. Not only do they allow staff to hear first-hand from students about their experiences, they also allow students to play a role in unpacking what the survey results mean.

#### Questions for reflection:

- Do students have a direct role in the exploration and interpretation of the NSS results, or is their role limited to the promotion of the survey and attending committee meetings as student representatives?
- Is support provided to the SU to enable them to undertake their own exploration of the NSS data?
- Is there scope to recruit students (including postgraduate students) as paid researchers and data analysts, or to involve the NSS in relevant modules, e.g. social science research methods?

## 2.3 Closing the loop

### Key points

- Feeding back to students on the actions taken in response to the NSS is a key part of engaging them with the survey.
- 'You said... we did' provides a very direct method of feedback, but there may be alternative wordings that more strongly emphasise partnership and dialogue rather than responding to consumer demands.
- If the survey data are being used appropriately, as part of a broader set of information, it may be hard to locate changes made specifically in response to the NSS. In this case, the message that is fed back to students may be more subtle and complex.

So far in this chapter we have seen how students can be involved both in discussing the actions taken in response to the NSS (Section 2.1) and in exploring and analysing the data themselves (Section 2.2). This section looks at an important stage later in the process: feeding back to students on the changes that have been made in response to the NSS, or 'closing the feedback loop'. Giving students a clear sense that their feedback has been listened to and acted upon is one of the most important ways to engage students in the NSS. Conversely, promoting the survey to students and then failing to inform them how the results have been used can lead to resentment and disengagement.

*We have a system where we give feedback to the students on the portal in terms of 'last year you said in the NSS ... and we have now done ...'. I think this is the start of seeing the NSS as an enhancement tool rather than a league table instrument.*

Institutions have employed a wide range of methods for getting the message to students about actions that have been taken:

- information has been included on websites, such as main university pages, departmental websites and virtual learning environments;
- some institutions have inserted actions taken into student newsletters, and module and programme handbooks;
- institutions have used dedicated forms of communication, such as leaflets and merchandise, designed specifically to convey information about what has been done in response to NSS results;
- public displays have been used, in the form of posters and electronic screens on campus;
- a common activity is to include these forms of feedback as part of the standard promotion of the survey when invitations to respond are being sent out.

Beyond these relatively straightforward forms of communication, some institutions have worked with student representatives and the SU to feed back to the student body. For instance, at one institution an article for the student magazine is co-written by the SU and the learning and teaching enhancement unit.

*We work with the Students' Union and talk to our student representatives to make them aware of the outcomes of the NSS and to enlist their support in raising awareness about the NSS and other surveys with their fellow students.*

Other methods used by institutions include the following:

- specific events have been run in order to demonstrate and discuss how students' view have been responded to;
- one institution has presented information about how feedback from a number of sources, including surveys, has been responded to through a 'feedback fortnight';
- another institution has made the NSS action plans – created by departments in response to their NSS results – publicly available, so that students can see directly and in detail what responses have been put in place.

The content of these messages is typically focused on the actions that have been taken in response to the results, but institutions have also provided information about the results themselves, as well as response rates, to give students a sense that their participation has been worthwhile.

## Case study: Students' opinions count at Cardiff Metropolitan University

One area that has been a challenge and often overlooked by institutions with regard to the NSS is that of closing the feedback loop. This is important for both staff and students. The students are often bombarded with information about the survey when the time comes for them to complete the survey, but how much is actually followed through with the changes that are made in relation to the combination of NSS scores and open comments that students make regarding their satisfaction with their university experience. Although changes will often be made it is important to let students know that something is being done to in relation to their concerns. This is essential if students are going to feel they have a greater ownership over their student experience. Staff also need to be made aware of how at different levels across the institution changes are taking place so that information can be passed on to students through them.

The initial problem is being able to identify and attribute changes that have been made to the NSS scores. Once this can be established then the next stage is to be able to make the students aware of the changes and in some cases just simply explaining why certain processes have to be adhered to.

At Cardiff Metropolitan we have worked hard at trying to identify changes. This has meant the introduction of a process where as soon as results are released they are 1) analysed, 2) discussed, 3) action plans created, 4) plans progress reported on both to staff and students – in order to close the feedback loop students and staff have to be involved at all stages.

We have built a close relationship with the Students' Union and they are an important part of helping to promote all parts of the NSS. They are involved in gathering students together for the discussion of the results in September/October and the SU president attends all meetings from which information is used for the Dean of Learning and Teaching of each individual School to create their yearly action plan.

They are also involved with the learning and teaching development unit and marketing department in putting together information on what changes have been made and where and how to disseminate them. This occurs through a

number of activities including adverts on TV screens around all campuses, regular articles in the student newspaper on change and effects that are occurring and where the need for these changes has come from. The School Representatives' blogs are also used as a vehicle to raise awareness and discuss any issues and actions that have taken place in response to the NSS results and discussions. The NSS is also discussed at Student-Staff Course Committees and staff are required to complete a section regarding their NSS scores as part of their annual evaluation of academic programme report. Examples of actions that have taken place and that are discussed at committees and through the student rep system include improved allocation of funding to the library – not just the amount but the way the money was spent – an increase in e-journals and e-books, and the inclusion of a one page synopsis regarding general feedback for the whole class prior to full individual written/audio feedback in response to students feeling feedback was not prompt enough to assist in their next assignment.

So it has moved away from a just a 'You said...we did' process to an annual cyclical process where students hopefully can really start to feel that their opinions count and that they can be involved in change at all stages from start to end.

**Nicola Poole**  
**Cardiff Metropolitan University**

More complex than the method is the tenor of these messages. A common approach is 'You said...we did' a form of words that succinctly communicates the existence and nature of a specific action taken in response to student views. However, some institutions have moved away from that tone, feeling that it expresses a sense of responding to consumer demands. Institutions have tried a number of alternative approaches:

- institutions have tried messages based on the idea of listening, rather than concretely responding: 'listening to you', or 'you said...we listened';
- other institutions have included specific scores and comments, with some general information about how the institution is responding to those opinions.

These moves away from the simple 'You said...we did' are unsurprising, given the tension between its perceived consumerist tone and the increasingly widespread sense that students are partners in the educational process, and that genuine dialogue is more appropriate than responding to demands. Two institutions have attempted to build that sense of partnership into their efforts to close the feedback loop by undertaking activities throughout the year. This emphasis on continuous feedback and dialogue between staff and students, rather than a one-off message sent en masse, is felt to promote and support the idea of a common learning community.

One institution uses optional questions in the NSS to monitor that sense of a learning community; there is a group of three questions called 'feedback from students', which asks students about their opportunities to provide feedback and how that feedback has been valued and acted upon. This institution feels that these questions provide a good measure of the extent to which students feel engaged and involved.

*The University communicates its use of the NSS data to the wider student body through a Facebook site called 'Listening to you', although this same site can be used to feed back to students on all changes made as a result of their input, i.e. the change may not have arisen exclusively from NSS feedback.*

Aside from creating and maintaining a tone that fits with how the institution views its relationship with the student body, there are a number of other challenges to

successfully closing the feedback loop. One of these is due to the fact that the NSS surveys only final-year students. How do you feed back to students who will have graduated and most likely left by the time that you even receive the results? There are moves beginning to attempt to do so, as part of the process of connecting with alumni, but the primary communication will take place with successive cohorts of students, those who will themselves soon be asked to respond to the NSS. The efficacy of this is likely to depend on the sense in which students think of themselves as a single community.

### The view from a students' union – Cardiff Metropolitan University

Cardiff Metropolitan University Students' Union has been involved with the University around the National Student Survey in a number of different ways, and the relationship has grown since the University's involvement at the pilot stage. We are now involved with both explaining the purpose of the survey and encouraging students to complete the survey (through articles in our student newspaper, information passed on through our student representative system, and joint talks with the Learning and Teaching Development Unit on the purpose of the survey to 3rd Year students). Another aspect of the survey on which we place a high level of importance is the use of results to enhance the student experience. The SU President is involved in the arrangement of meetings between students, the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of Learning and Teaching. They are also present at the meetings to help ensure the voice of the students is heard and to keep abreast of any issues that the students may raise. These discussions form part of the information that Directors of Learning and Teaching use to compile their action plans to address student issues and improve the learning experience. The President and the Vice-President also sit on a number of Boards including the Board of Governors and Learning and Teaching Board, and are involved in NSS discussions at all levels.

**Ruth Foster**  
**President**  
**Cardiff Met Students' Union**

A second challenge relates to an issue that will be the focus of a later section of this report (Section 4.2), the need to use the NSS as one of several sources of data. The NSS does have many virtues as a source of information about students' experiences, but it can never provide a complete or precise picture of what is going on. It functions best as a starting point for further investigation, and as part of a triangulation process with other sources of information such as internal surveys, informal conversations and dialogue with the students' union. This creates a tension with the need to provide information to students about how NSS results have been acted upon. Several institutions acknowledged the difficulty of reporting actions taken in direct response to the NSS, when changes are likely to have arisen from consideration of a range of data.

*Concrete changes that can be directly attributed to the NSS are more difficult to substantiate. Changing practice is part of an ongoing process of dialogue with various stakeholders within the institution, including students, and the NSS is only one contributory element that informs the process of dialogue.*

#### Questions for reflection:

- Are students aware of the value that is placed on the NSS results, and the impact that those results have on decisions within the institution?
- Are the optional questions in the NSS, that ask students about how the feedback that they provide is responded to (Question B.6), used within the institution? If not, do you have other ways of gathering that information?

- If you are unable to cite actions taken in direct response to NSS scores (because decision-making is more complex) how else can you make clear to students that the survey results are taken seriously?
- Does the tone and method by which the messages are fed back to students embody the institution's vision of the staff-student, and institution-student, relationship?



## 3. Institutional structures

### 3.1 Staff attitudes

#### Key points

- The common perception that the NSS is a 'stick to beat us with' can be mitigated by capturing and communicating good practice where results are better than expected, and not just focusing on the areas with disappointing survey scores.
- Just as involving students in the NSS can be beneficial, engaging staff at all levels in the process of promoting, exploring and responding to the NSS is a key part of using the survey for enhancement.
- The NSS can often be a powerful but unspoken presence; there are benefits in bringing it out into the open so that its strengths, limitations and impact can be honestly discussed.

The use of the NSS to create positive changes to learning and teaching depends on the willingness of staff at all levels to be involved in the process of discussing and acting on student feedback. The NSS can suffer from being viewed as a managerial and bureaucratic exercise in box-ticking, and some institutions report that while a small number of staff may enthusiastically embrace the use of data about students' experiences, there has often been little interest among academics in general. However, there is also a sense that this is changing, and that the increased focus on student choice and information about HE (and the KIS in particular), is increasing the visibility of the NSS throughout institutions.

*There is a mantra, 'we might not like it, but it's here, so deal with it'. Ignoring or dismissing the NSS, perhaps a common response of teaching staff in the earlier days, is no longer seen as an option.*

A common view is that the NSS is close to the heart of students, while being distant from the lives of academics. One institution commented that the reality is the reverse: most students complete the survey simply due to the level of reminders that they receive, and in fact do not invest their response with a great deal of emotion or attention. Academic staff, on the other hand, especially those in management positions, can find that the NSS is a central, highly visible, and often emotive element of university and departmental processes during specific parts of the year.

This level of visibility that the NSS possesses among staff does not necessarily equate to high levels of positivity or enthusiasm, and one of the most widely experienced obstacles to staff involvement, reported by most institutions, is the sense that the NSS is used as a stick to beat departments and faculties, rather than as a positive encouragement to improve. This deficit model may be projected through the kinds of activities that can be standard parts of the planning and reporting cycle discussed later in this report, in Section 3.2:

- focusing on poor-performing areas;
- requiring departments to write action plans addressing weaker scores;
- emphasising the negative impact of low scores on issues such as recruitment and retention.

These activities are undoubtedly natural consequences of the pressure that senior managers themselves come under, which is often to take an outward-facing perspective that focuses on league tables and other metrics. Not only does this demoralise staff and create a natural sense of resentment, some institutions report that it also leads to a defensive attitude; NSS data are not seen as useful data that can be used in conjunction with other information in order to inform enhancement activities, but as simple measures to be defended, explained away, undermined or dismissed. One institution cited the damaging situation where staff are asked to respond to very small – in fact statistically insignificant – differences in results, because of an effect on the league-table position. Another institution reported pressure being placed on departments because of a drop in rankings, when that was purely due to the improvement of others, rather than a decrease in their own scores.

*The way the NSS is managed nationally and by senior managers within universities creates a sense of imposition and inconvenience that is difficult to get past.*

As institutions have recognised this perception of a deficit model, many have tried to address the issue:

- some try and promote a focus on areas of good practice as well as areas of concern, to convey the sense that departments can learn from each other and share things that are going well, to address things that aren't;
- one institution has explicitly focused on the areas with the most positive scores, and encouraged staff in those areas to create case studies that can be shared throughout the institution;
- another institution runs workshops that bring together the high- and low-performing departments in order to share good practice;
- another approach has been to make wider use of the text comments yielded by the survey. The fact that such data do not lend themselves to simple better/worse judgements has helped to soften the sense that the NSS labels departments as weak. The comments made by students can also have a more formative feel, as they are more personal and engaging, and contain students' thoughts about how things could be improved. The emotive nature of the comments made by students, although they need to be interpreted and used with caution, can open up discussion in a way that the numerical scores often cannot. The use of qualitative data is discussed further in Section 4.4.

That process of engaging staff in discussions around the interpretation and use of NSS data has been found by some institutions to be a key part of the effective use of the NSS as an enhancement tool. Just as we have seen in Chapter 2 how engaging students with the NSS is key to exploiting its potential, it seems that staff engagement can make the difference between the NSS supporting a simplistic mechanism for quality assurance and supporting a sophisticated, informed and positive process of quality enhancement.

## Research study: Academics' views on the NSS

*Adam Child reflects on his research into academics' views about the NSS*

In 2010-11 I undertook a study designed to explore the views of academic staff towards the NSS, particularly as a potential tool for the enhancement of learning and teaching. Over 300 staff from 12 pre-1992 universities completed a questionnaire that posed a series of questions about how the NSS was used within their institution, and asked respondents to rate the extent of the NSS's impact. This was particularly interesting given the discussions taking place at a national level on the future of the NSS and the possible introduction of a similar survey for postgraduate students. I was especially curious to determine if the conclusions of the 2010 evaluation of the NSS were corroborated by a broader study.

It was clear from the responses I received that the NSS is perceived as a largely top-down concern, with the majority of respondents stating that the impulse to respond to the NSS comes from the management within their institution (loosely defined as those with seniority outside their own department), and that the NSS is of more interest to these institutional managers than to individual teachers. This is likely to be related to the desire of an institution to appear further up university league tables, most of which place a heavy emphasis on the raw scores of the survey. It was apparent from the comments submitted that league tables were at the forefront of people's thinking. What is also interesting is the way in which this emphasis on media presentation is actually preventing more meaningful engagement with the NSS (and other internal surveys) from taking place. A key finding of the study is that the role of the NSS as a public performance indicator can hamper its more recently emphasised purpose as a tool for enhancement.

I also found that less than 10% of respondents agreed that the NSS was their preferred method of gathering student feedback and over 70% felt that there were other more appropriate tools for obtaining student views. This suggests that a key way of using the NSS is to incorporate a discussion of these metrics into a wider discussion about provision. As the data available from other forms of feedback are likely to be departmentally or programme focused this in turn means that the discussions around the NSS have to be at this level. At Lancaster, my own institution, this is facilitated through annual teaching reviews, where many other forms of data are provided to departments along with their NSS scores. Departments are able to take whatever action they deem necessary to respond to the NSS within their wider contexts.

This research raises some issues about how the NSS is perceived and how this impacts on its use. There is now empirical evidence demonstrating that negative staff perceptions towards the NSS exist and can adversely affect engagement with the survey. It also points towards strategies institutions can use to increase engagement: inform and persuade colleagues of the benefits of using the NSS alongside other information and in collaboration with students. A key to this appears to be breaking the link between the NSS's multiple facets, separating its use as a simplistic indicator of performance from its potential as a rigorous quantitative survey of student perceptions. Achieving this segregation may not be straightforward, but if it is achieved we will be able to start discussions on a much more positive footing.

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**Lancaster University**

This research was presented at the Surveys for Enhancement conference in 2011, please see [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/evidencenet/Rage\\_against\\_the\\_machine](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/evidencenet/Rage_against_the_machine) [accessed 15 October 2012]. A full account of the research can be found at <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/2424/> [accessed 15 October 2012].

One institution commented that it is important that efforts to involve students in the use of the NSS do not lead to 'front-line' staff being sidelined. 'Staff engagement' as an overlooked counterpart of student engagement is an increasingly common theme of discussions around quality enhancement. An institution suggested that a National Academic Staff Survey, exploring academics' perceptions both of their students' experiences, and of the pressures of their own working lives, could be the next step to consider.

One part of the process of engaging staff is helping to create dialogue between staff and students. An institution has done this by inviting staff to complete the survey themselves, reflecting on how they would expect their students to respond to the statements. The staff and the students have then discussed their responses, as a way of exploring interpretations, expectations and ultimately the students' experiences of their courses.

*There has been a shift in attitude about the NSS over the past couple of years. Academics now see this as a valuable source of information on which to base enhancement activity. In the early days of the NSS it was viewed with more suspicion.*

A common challenge cited by institutions is the lack of open discussion about the NSS and the data it yields. Those data may be widely reported and included in the decision-making processes without being explicitly addressed in conversations. To overcome this, several institutions have attempted to create an environment where, while the presence of the NSS as a fact of life is acknowledged, there can be open discussion of the merits and limits of the survey. They feel that if staff can raise concerns about aspects of the validity of the data, and can receive honest answers based on evidence, it may be easier to promote the message that the NSS is simply a good source of data to be used alongside others, rather than an accurate summative assessment of the quality of a course.

*We try to remove the previously negative stigma attached to poor management of the data and promote it as much more of a data set to be engaged with at many levels, to better understand deficiencies or areas where the sharing of practice could benefit the student experience.*

Alongside this more open approach, some institutions have found, unsurprisingly, that staff are more willing to engage with the NSS if a rigorous evidence-informed approach is adopted. A critical but constructive attitude is not only the most appropriate way of using data, it is also behaviour that academics expect within their disciplines. This means that not only should data analysis be performed accurately and appropriately, but the presentation and further use of the data should be fully informed by the research that does exist on the strengths and limitations of the information yielded by the NSS. One route that institutions have taken is to acknowledge the importance of using multiple sources of data, not the NSS alone, when providing information to staff. This issue is the focus of Section 4.2.

Many institutions have found that one of the key ways of encouraging departments to use NSS data is to ensure not only that the analysis is – and is seen to be – robust, but that data are broken down to the appropriate level. Effort expended on providing fine-grained detail, at the level of departments and courses, has proved worthwhile in generating staff engagement:

- one institution has found success in developing a format that allows course teams to quickly review their data year on year;
- other institutions have found that having dedicated and publicised points of contact for NSS queries has smoothed the process of providing accurate and targeted data.

*There was a considerable level of distrust of the results when they were not available at a fine grain of detail. The breakdowns to small department areas and courses has done much to encourage engagement.*

More generally, a few institutions report that by giving staff some ownership over the whole NSS cycle – the promotion, analysis and response – staff engagement has increased. One institution explicitly reduced bureaucracy in order to allow academics the space to think critically about student feedback, and to come up with innovative responses. Given the importance of staff investment for the success of any attempt to improve student learning through responding to feedback, institutions universally report that efforts to inform staff about the potential of the NSS (as well as its limitations) are worthwhile.

#### Questions for reflection:

- Does the institution respond to poor-scoring areas in the NSS in a supportive way? Are areas that consistently perform well in the survey highlighted?
- How much freedom do academics have about how they respond to NSS results? Are they constrained by an overly bureaucratic procedure that prevents them from engaging and innovating?
- Is the NSS openly discussed and debated? Is the relevant research literature read and applied?

## 3.2 Integration into decision-making

### Key points

- Integrating the NSS into planning and review cycles can promote a more reflective quality enhancement approach.
- When institutions use the NSS to create targets and KPIs, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of the data, and the need to triangulate NSS scores with other sources of information.

In the last section we saw how the NSS was becoming more visible to academic staff, and how institutions were trying to engage staff with the survey as a tool for enhancement. One element of that, also prompted by the increasing impact of the NSS on student choice, is its integration into the institutional structures both for reviewing previous activity and planning for the future. It has become a key source of information when making decisions, and a key source of both evaluation information and performance targets.

One prominent change has been the development of an annual planning and reviewing cycle related to the survey itself. This typically includes monitoring of response rates, performance against competitors, and year-on-year trends. At some institutions it also involves visits by the pro-vice-chancellor or even vice-chancellor to departments or faculties, to discuss NSS response rates and results.

*The NSS is promoted as an enhancement tool through its integration with the annual planning and review cycle.*

In addition to this discrete NSS cycle, results are usually integrated into the wider review processes. Institutions have incorporated use of NSS results into a wide range of processes, including module review, programme review, and reviews of enhancement activities. These reviews don't only involve NSS scores, but such scores now often form a key part of the data set that teams are required to consider. Several institutions are finding success in providing example quotes from students' comments for teams to review alongside the numerical scores. While the use of student feedback in this context has perhaps been largely optional or implicit for many years, what does appear to have changed is that in many institutions, the explicit consideration of NSS results has become a requirement.

*The NSS has changed institutional practice in that there is now explicit discussion of NSS results as part of the University's rolling review processes at school, faculty and central committee level.*

Not only does the NSS now play a role in module and programme reviews, it is also playing a powerful part in determining strategic decisions at institutional level. Several institutions report that their key performance indicators explicitly relate to the NSS, e.g. an aim to improve satisfaction levels year on year, or to be within a particular group of institutions (such as the top quartile) nationally. This must be done cautiously, given the reflections in Section 4.2 that the NSS should not be used in isolation from other sources of data. Some institutions also use the NSS to identify cross-institutional themes for consistent action, such as assessment and feedback. The inclusion of NSS results within these processes is seen by some as an increasing and welcome focus on the enhancement of quality, alongside more rigid quality assurance processes. Some institutions report that the consideration of student views can foster more reflective enhancement-led approaches.

*Through its use of the NSS, the University has been able to address both the KPI/business objective aspect of the NSS, and the more reflective quality enhancement issues. While these are undeniably linked there are important distinctions between the two.*

One of the most universal and prominent effects of the NSS within planning and review processes is the creation of NSS-specific action plans, and the increasing relevance of NSS results to general learning and teaching action plans at all levels within institutions.

The decision whether or not to require dedicated action plans for NSS results is not necessarily straightforward. At least one institution has made a decision not to do so, in order to make sure that staff focus on wider strategic issues rather than the narrow issue of specific survey scores. At the other extreme, another institution has felt it beneficial to harness the visibility and consequent leverage of the NSS, by making the survey central to the wider enhancement action planning process, even to the extent of calling those wider action plans 'NSS action plans'. This issue of whether there are separate structures for the NSS, or whether it is embedded into the standard processes, is also raised by the fact that some institutions have created 'student voice' posts, or even entire units, dedicated solely to the use of student feedback. One institution has set up a 'student voice' programme, supported by dedicated student representatives, who are in turn supported by the students' union and the institutional Quality Office.

The specific mechanisms of action planning vary markedly, but here are some examples:

- several institutions draw on a range of numerical data, including NSS results but also results from internal surveys;
- one institution has instigated NSS 'action groups', to allow larger teams than normal to consider how to respond to student feedback;
- in some institutions, the requirement to produce action plans is targeted in specific ways, commonly on departments with disappointing scores;
- one institution encourages departments to think about the message they want to communicate to students, rather than treating action planning as a purely staff-focused process;
- as described in Chapter 2, some institutions explicitly involve student representatives in the action planning process, for example by encouraging them to comment on draft plans, or by publishing all departmental action plans on the university website.

As the NSS has increased in prominence, its role within decision-making processes has become both more formalised and more pronounced. In most institutions, departments and faculties are now required to respond to their NSS results, especially where those results are disappointing. The NSS seems to have helped to increase the prevalence of annual cycles for the monitoring and improvement of educational quality.

#### Questions for reflection:

- Is the NSS embedded in your planning and review systems in a way that prompts critical reflection and innovation by course teams?
- Are academics encouraged to use student comments from the NSS alongside the numerical scores when reviewing modules and courses?
- Do institutional NSS targets sufficiently take into account the limitations of the data?

### 3.3 Impetus for change

#### Key points

- The NSS has helped to create a new focus on the student learning experience.
- The simplistic use of the NSS in the media is a double-edged sword. While it causes resentment and sometimes a narrow focus on raising scores, it also creates a lever for change.
- Individuals working to enhance learning and teaching can use NSS results to persuade colleagues of the need for change.

It is now a commonplace that NSS results are responsible for concrete changes within institutions. There are numerous examples of institution-wide initiatives, designed and implemented in response to NSS results viewed as poor or unsatisfactory. We have seen in Section 3.2 how the survey is increasingly built into planning and review systems.

Why do institutions feel compelled to invest such effort in reacting to NSS scores? The almost universal message from institutions is that the advent of the NSS, and the huge number of responses it receives, has helped to create a more powerful focus on the improvement of the student learning experience. This added focus is also apparent at the national level, with governments, sector agencies and the National Union of Students paying new attention to the quality of education received by students. Although there is a lot of institutional variation, a common perception is that learning and teaching have moved higher up the agenda.

*One of the benefits of the NSS is a national and institutional focus upon learning and teaching, student experience and student satisfaction.*

Institutions generally feel that the impact of the NSS is due to the role of the results in the public perception of institutions. This, in turn, is felt to be due to the use of NSS rankings in the media, and to the contribution of the NSS to the various league tables intended to influence prospective students. From September 2012, the Key Information Sets are expected to increase this affect. Not only do these mechanisms create a general motivation to monitor and improve NSS scores, they are also added pressures on those institutions with disappointing rankings or league table positions.

As we saw in Section 3.1, the impact of league tables on institutional priorities can often be a source of discomfort and negativity. Staff are resentful of having to respond to simplistic metrics, and to the idea that the marketing 'tail' is wagging the research and teaching 'dog'. One aspect of this concern is that NSS results are used to the exclusion of other information about students' perceptions, and can define and limit institutional enhancement activities in ways which are not always educationally appropriate. As we shall see in Section 4.2, NSS results only provide an initial overview of how students are perceiving their courses, and they cannot bear this kind of weight.

This reputation-led concern for NSS results can, however, have a positive impact on quality enhancement, as the attention that it receives within an institution may provide a source of leverage for change. Several institutions have found that NSS results can be used to start (or accelerate) enhancement activities that otherwise would not receive attention. Senior staff, including pro-vice-chancellors and vice-chancellors, may often be motivated by NSS results when other information has failed to have much effect. While some institutions believe that this positive outcome for quality enhancement has been an accidental by-product of the NSS rather than an intended result, there is a broad consensus that the NSS has brought genuine benefits for learning and teaching.

The external profile that an institution's NSS results have, through league tables and other mechanisms, thus proves to be a double-edged sword. While the inappropriate and simplistic use of the data has created real resentment among staff, as well as causing effort and resources to be misdirected, there is also an acknowledgement that without the existence of the NSS, there are likely to have been fewer conversations about learning and teaching within UK institutions.

*The fact that the data is published, and informs league tables, helps those of us who advocate quality enhancement to persuade colleagues of the value of bringing about change.*

## Case study: Using the NSS at the University of Glamorgan - slightly easier than climbing Everest

The University of Glamorgan has around 16,500 undergraduates; bringing its NSS 'sample' to around 3,500. It sounds fairly straightforward, but the 'shape' of Glamorgan turns a walk in the park into an ascent of Everest! Undergraduates are spread across 14 locations – including the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, a separate HEI (but not for NSS purposes). So ascending Everest is easy in comparison. NSS high response rates and effective action planning is not!

During the survey, a multitude of actions are taken to raise response rates in this complex institution – one such is the roving giant ginger goat called Gandalf who wanders with a 'minder' and Wi-Fi laptop for the use of NSS students who dawdle long enough to stare at this mascot of the Students' Union!

Using the results is a little easier than climbing Everest. For three years systematised action planning has looked backward and forward, Janus fashion. What worked last year? What'll work now? Faculties, Students' Union, the College and Learning Support team (IT/library) are provided with action planning 'kits' of statistical reports, which, taken as a whole, should pinpoint most issues. To make life easier for colleagues at that taxing point in the Autumn term, some satisfaction reports are even produced 'numberless' but using a traffic light 'picture' of where the subject fits in comparison to its sector average. All action planning is completed by early November, with the Learning Support Team's plan coming along slightly later as its supporting actions underpin academic plans. All plans involve discussion with student reps.

The fullest involvement of students in the use of the NSS is challenging. Asking students what makes them satisfied generates inevitable responses about acres of car parks and swimming pools. As we question, so we set expectations running and this is managed (if possible) through continual dialogue about the NSS. Looking back to 2005, the survey has nudged Glamorgan out of its 'comfy' position with student reps into fuller, more meaningful engagement at every level. Using the results as a vehicle for dialogue has led to a clearer understanding between the University and its students. The data (with other metrics) are now the cornerstone of annual monitoring, curriculum planning, quality reviews and space utilisation (yes!). Business processes, too, have changed, such as the publication of grades and changes to enrolment. Glamorgan will go further: an idea picked up at the HEA's Surveys for Enhancement conference has prompted the inclusion of actions originating with the students themselves and the University is keen to see how this pans out.

Real, practical use of these data makes a difference, and it certainly does to students! Although sustained improvement, by definition, can't be quick. So the University will continue using NSS results as one of its tools (it's the deluxe monkey wrench of a tool: strongest, most reliable, effective, and always there). There are significant others: valued, listened-to student reps; responsive staff and systems; and moderately simple things such as a stable timetable. Nothing that's worthwhile was ever easy, as someone once said.

**Denize McIntyre**  
University of Glamorgan

How are people using this ability of the NSS to initiate and support change? Some institutions have tried to move beyond the kinds of damage-limitation exercises required by institutional marketing. Instead, there is a recognition that what is often needed is to genuinely change the discourse, to develop a culture where students' needs, learning and teaching are openly discussed. The NSS provides a frank, if unfinished, picture of the experiences of students, and this has been used by some institutions to help foster a more student-centred focus. As we saw in Chapter 2, the NSS has been used to create better partnerships between the institution and students, and their representatives. In short, although the NSS was designed and implemented largely as a summative measure of student perceptions, there are many institutions attempting to use it in a more formative and developmental way, as a focus for further investigation and a guide to enhancement efforts.

*It's not just about marketing but about changing the discourse.*

Many of these initiatives are focused on issues around assessment and feedback. Students are almost universally less positive about those areas, and institutions often react by developing new systems for creating, providing and monitoring feedback. Large-scale reactions to the NSS are common, but one institution has commented that not all changes are, or need to be, so all-encompassing, and some institutions have focused instead on smaller, more local concerns. A lesson learnt by one institution is that interventions can often take time. Although some responses to NSS scores may yield immediate benefits, more often an improvement in the next year's results is unlikely to occur. Important changes can be made, but patience will often be required.

*A lot of changes have been made as a result of the NSS data. It is very important to say that not all of the changes need to be large scale projects.*

The NSS is not the only factor that has contributed to a greater focus within the UK HE sector on the student learning experience. Other developments include:

- changes to the national funding systems;
- a requirement by the Quality Assurance Agency for greater focus on public information;
- the increasing sense that students are partners in the educational process;
- an increase in the market-like properties of the sector;

These changes have all combined to focus people's minds on the ways that students are experiencing their learning. While there are risks, complications and negative consequences of these changes, there are examples of institutions using the increased focus on the student experience, partly due to the NSS but also to these other developments, to make genuine improvements to how their students learn and develop.

### Questions for reflection:

- Has the NSS created a greater institutional focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching? Or is the main impact on marketing, recruitment and quality assurance?
- Has the net impact of the NSS on student learning been positive or negative?
- Has the NSS contributed to a 'student as consumer' approach within the institution, or has it helped to support a genuine dialogue and engagement with students?



## 4. Analysis and exploration

### 4.1 Limitations and challenges

#### Key points

- It is crucial that there is awareness and honesty about the limitations of the NSS as a tool for enhancement.
- The NSS only provides a partial picture of students' experiences, and needs to be supplemented in order to be useful.
- The NSS gives prominence to student satisfaction, but it is important that institutions gather data on other aspects of learning, in order to have a rounded view of educational quality.

As we have already seen in this report, the NSS has the potential to make a useful contribution to the enhancement of learning and teaching. However, as with any research method, there are also limitations that need to be acknowledged and discussed so that they are mitigated where possible. This section will not address the survey tool in itself, such as the validity or reliability of the survey, but will focus on the issue relevant to this report; the obstacles that arise when using it for enhancement<sup>9</sup>.

*I think there is always value in collection of survey data on this kind of scale – provided we remain conscious of the limitations of such information and utilise it wisely.*

We have just seen, in Section 3.3, how the use of the NSS in the media is a double-edged sword. While it does create an impetus for change, it can lead to resentment and disengagement among staff. Section 3.1 described how attention to league tables and media rankings can create the perception of a deficit model, which ignores success and good practice and focuses on failure. This is a clear obstacle to the use of the survey as part of a reflective and partnership-based approach to quality enhancement. Those sections also contain ideas for minimising the effect of that kind of simplistic use of the NSS in the media.

Another obstacle is the idea that the NSS can be used in isolation as an accurate measure of the quality of students' educational experiences. This view of the NSS is partially caused by the way it is employed in the media to make simple comparisons, but the survey cannot bear the weight of being used as a stand-alone measure of quality. This would be true of any such large-scale and high-level survey, as it will always provide only a starting point for investigation. It will not provide all the detail and nuance that is required regarding the issues that it covers, nor will it cover all the issues that are relevant to improving teaching and learning. As we shall see in the next section, it needs to be used alongside a range of other data in order to provide a meaningful picture of students' perceptions. Some institutions feel that an insufficient appreciation of this can lead to misdirected effort, with time and resources being focused on areas of

<sup>9</sup> For some of the literature on the technical properties of the NSS, please see the further reading in Section 5.3.

apparent concern, when further information and contextualisation would reveal that the supposedly 'poor' NSS scores do not reflect genuine problems.

In addition to these obstacles caused or exacerbated by external pressures, there are other challenges that relate more closely to the survey tool itself. Many institutions have noted that the survey items are not sufficiently detailed or exhaustive to capture everything they would like. The items are by necessity generic and high level, but this also leaves gaps. Specific issues raised include:

- the lack of information about other factors not directly related to teaching and learning, such as car parking and local surroundings;
- an absence of detail about the particular experiences of part-time students;
- a lack of data about students' perceptions of aspects of the course related to employability.

In addition, one contributing institution also felt that the survey is focused on 'traditional' three-year, single subject, face-to-face courses, and so is not well-suited to yield information about students on joint Honours courses, studying part-time or at a distance. These issues all raise challenges for those using the NSS for enhancement, and reinforce the need to supplement the data with other information, the topic of Section 4.2.

There are similar, though less widespread, concerns about the generic nature of the questions requesting text comments, which are looked at in Section 4.4. Questions which asks students to highlight positive and negative aspects of the course might be improved if they were made more focused and increased in number. One institution proposes that questions asking students to list three things they would change about their programme, or including an option to leave a comment after every group of questions, would improve the ability of staff to understand the quantitative results.

## Case study: Understanding student responses to the NSS – cognitive interviewing at Sheffield Hallam University

The National Student Survey has been validated as a reliable survey instrument and has been responsible for a great deal of enhancement. However, what the results actually mean has often been less clear. As one member of staff said "we have low results for the course is organised and running smoothly, but we have no idea what students are referring to when they say that". At our institution, a large teaching-orientated university, we decided to use Cognitive Interviewing to better understand student responses. This technique aims to uncover how survey items are interpreted and what respondents think about when responding. The methodology is very similar to structured interviewing; however, the aim is to get interviewees to verbalise their thought processes as they complete the survey. A pot of development money was up for grabs, and with approval for staff time and the funds for incentives, we set about recruiting final-year students for one-to-one interviews.

Recruitment for interviews was not easy post-NSS, as we were heading towards final exams and project hand-ins. Our focus was to be on individual courses across the institution. This was so that we would have several groups of students with similar learning and teaching experiences within groups, but

diverse experiences across groups. An added benefit was being able to offer an in-depth picture of the student experience on courses to raise staff interest. The selection of courses was largely on best and worst performers, agreed with senior faculty staff. Recruitment of students varied from a random selection of students on a course, to lecturers suggesting names of regularly participating students, to students recruiting friends. It was 'whatever works' recruitment. The study ended up with a fairly self-selected group of students (none disagreed that they were satisfied with the course) and self-selected group of courses. Getting engagement from staff and students at a pressured time of the year was sometimes impossible. However, the courses did include a broad range of subjects and as for the students, more in a moment.

Three interviewers carried out the 40 one-to-one interviews. Based on a previous study we decided to take written notes of verbal responses and offered an opportunity for the student to type reflections. After comparing notes and using a verbal only method for the final interviews, it was thought audio recordings would be best in future to capture the full depth of responses.

The first surprise was the wide diversity of student experience within the same course, despite the self-selected nature of the sample. The variability captured by the NSS really did reflect how a course could be perfect for one student and yet be viewed far less positively by another. It evidenced the challenge to course design in satisfying diverse factors such as: need for support, ability to gain support, interest in content and life goals. Despite this diversity strong themes emerged around the survey items. Key findings were:

- responses to the NSS correlated with known good practice in learning and teaching, including around active learning and effort;
- for any one item most respondents referred to multiple experiences, which could have both a negative or positive influence on responses;
- for some questions there was a big gap between staff interpretation of responses and what students were actually referring to;
- for at least some questions there was variability in interpretation across subjects that impacted on response;
- included in the responses were strong reflections of the student's own engagement and ability to seek help, highlighting that the responses were a reflection of both cohort and staff.

So how does an institution use this information? First, it can help unpick what students might be referring to when looking at results. Second, it can help staff gain an overview of how students perceive issues such as feedback. Third, it helps underline that while some items do give a valid reflection of learning and teaching, the responses also reflect the diverse needs and experiences of a cohort of students. The results from the study are being made available online, and will contribute to our knowledge of student surveys. However, it is the embedding of this knowledge in the institutional reporting of results and action plans that has perhaps been most pleasing. Survey results have a tendency towards lists of numbers and bold sentences; this research has helped blur the edges of those statements and inform interpretation.

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A common complaint from institutions concerns the level of access they receive to the NSS results. One important element of the appropriate use of the data is detailed and rigorous analysis, but several institutions feel that this is hampered by the incomplete nature of the data they receive. For reasons of confidentiality, institutions only receive aggregated data, with the smallest group being ten responses. This is designed to prevent institutions from identifying individual students, but as a consequence institutions are unable to track students through their courses. Institutions feel that better access would allow them to connect NSS results with data regarding expectations, experiences, engagement and learning outcomes, and learn a great deal about the impact of specific teaching practices and strategies on a wide range of desirable outcomes, including learning gain or 'value added'.

*A key drawback of the NSS is the lack of access to the full dataset, even long after the student has finished their course. The ability to track individual students through institution would be welcome. The ability to scrutinise differences across populations within the institution would be beneficial to students.*

Finally, some institutions express some concerns about the focus of the NSS on student satisfaction:

- some members of staff have principled objections to the idea that student satisfaction should receive such prominent attention;
- one institution believes that student satisfaction is not an appropriate measure of quality in higher education, when the underlying intention is to prepare them for life after university;
- some staff view the focus on satisfaction as contributing to the kind of consumer culture that damages the relationship between staff and students.

*Student satisfaction is not a measure of quality in education. Many students might be satisfied – but that's not really what it is about.*

One institution has claimed that this limitation can be overestimated, as staff are not necessarily required to focus on satisfaction just because the survey is; they are free to look at other aspects of learning, such as engagement. This will be discussed in the next section, but regardless of what other information is gathered, the NSS

will always give a level of prominence to satisfaction and students' positivity about the education they have received. This may be something to address in future developments of the NSS.

#### Questions for reflection:

- Do the benefits of the NSS for quality enhancement outweigh the drawbacks?
- Is the NSS a good measure of educational quality? What other types of information provide a complementary or superior measure?
- Does the NSS contribute to a damaging consumer culture, or can it be harnessed to improve the pedagogic relationship?
- How do you use your understanding of the limitations of the NSS to make more effective use of it for enhancement?

## 4.2 Triangulation with other data

### Key points

- To gain a more rounded and useful understanding of students' experiences, and to investigate the reasons for the scores and ways to respond, institutions have to use NSS data in conjunction with a much wider range of information.
- For some issues, supplementary data are required in order to corroborate and unpack NSS scores. For other issues, the NSS may be entirely silent.
- Some institutions are exploring the use of engagement surveys, as ways of understanding what students are putting into their courses, rather than what institutions are providing.

The previous section briefly described how the use of the NSS in isolation can seriously hamper its use as a tool for enhancement. Institutions are well aware that its rationale and design means that it can only provide a very high-level, coarse-grained overview of students' experiences of their course:

- being intended for use in all institutions and all subjects, the questions lack the kind of context-specific focus that is essential to gaining a true picture of those experiences;
- being designed with a view to providing a high response rate, the questions are limited in number and complexity;
- and being created primarily for the production of information that can be useful to prospective students in making course choices, the survey has a particular focus that is not always ideal for enhancement efforts.

These factors mean that the NSS – like any single source of information – is only part of the picture and should be used as one tool alongside others.

*NSS data always needs to be reviewed in the context of other information – it is becoming increasingly apparent that vagaries in the interpretation of the data (i.e. jumping to conclusions on the basis of NSS data alone) can lead institutions down wrong, often resource-intensive paths.*

There is a virtually universal acknowledgement that the NSS should be used as part of a holistic process of gathering and acting on data about learning and teaching. In many cases this is expressed as the idea that the NSS should function as a starting point for further investigation; as an indication of areas that would benefit from further exploration, rather than definitive data about successes and failures. Several institutions make the point that the NSS results on their own will not provide much information on the specifics of any problems, the reasons lying behind high or low scores, or what actions could be taken in response.

Section 4.4 looks at how qualitative data, gathered through the NSS and by other means, can illuminate and supplement the numerical NSS results. This section will focus on the wider use of quantitative data.

The need for a wider range of information is particularly pressing for areas where the NSS does not yield relevant data. Institutions have cited the following examples of issues that 'fall through the gaps' in the NSS:

- there is a lack of information about the wider student experience, such as car-parking and local climate;
- while the NSS is useful for employability issues, there is a need to gather more focused data;
- aspects of part-time learning are not addressed in the survey, and progression and retention data may be particularly relevant;

- due to the way that their responses are allocated to subjects, the collection of the views of joint honours students requires further work;
- for international students, some institutions feel the need to undertake more bespoke work, and the International Student Barometer has been found useful (though not universally so).

## Case Study: Exploring assessment and feedback at the University of Winchester

Within the sub-cultures and micro-cultures of institutions and programmes respectively, the triangulation of data (particularly qualitative and quantitative data) often allows a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon being investigated, which contributes to the, sometimes, abstract numbers. In evaluating the power of the NSS, one of the regular complaints is that it does not inform programmes as to why the scores that year were higher or lower than those of the previous year. This has remained a common bone of contention given that league tables utilising the data do not typically generate measured changes, but often more knee-jerk reactions without fully understanding the issues.

Although the NSS provides a valuable perception from the student cohorts as to the areas of (dis)satisfaction, there is little information, data or direction as to what could be done to enhance this aspect of the student learning against their expectations or to fully interrogate the students' perception of it. TESTA, the three-year, HEA-funded, national project, worked across seven programmes in four universities and employed a methodology that spoke to the need for: useful data around assessment and feedback experiences, data to be highly related to the programme, qualitative data in describing the experience of students, collaborative evaluation and reflection. This built from the NSS, in using additional sources of data that could better triangulate the aspects of the assessment and feedback environment, from which enhancement activity could then follow. The data collected within TESTA included: the Assessment Experience Questionnaire (AEQ), an audit of each programmes' assessment environment and focus group data from students within their third year of study across the seven programmes.

Case profiles were then written and presented back to the whole course teams, where a particularly collegiate approach was taken to ensure that staff did not feel they were being told what to do, but instead, were being allowed to explore the data and debate the findings through their own lenses and as a team. The triangulated data allowed the programme teams to relate to the types of data that most spoke to them and to view the audit, AEQ and focus group data together. Similarly the space provided allowed a rich discussion around some of the underlying principles, some of which were established 20 or 30 years. This allowed staff to try and identify key practical solutions to the assessment and feedback environment/practice in a way that saw some quite significant changes developed and implemented by the programme teams (with no stick or carrot in sight).

Given the relatively slow nature of change across institutions could it be that one should expect the same level of slow evolution with assessment and feedback as illustrated from the NSS scores over time – I think not. Could it instead be that multiple sources of data can generate evaluation, reflection and change from programmes teams, if they are afforded the time, space and resource to truly reflect and enhance programmes, based on useful evidence

and increased awareness/understanding of their students' assessment and feedback experiences? I think the NSS accurately focuses attention, but it is incumbent upon institutions to fully interrogate the elements utilising additional data, before changing things on a whim or a hunch.

**Yaz El Hakim**  
**University of Winchester**

Institutions often claim that they use a process of 'triangulation', but what does that mean? In basic terms, this refers to the process of comparing NSS results with other sources of information in order to create a more accurate picture, a more detailed picture, or a more comprehensive picture. The range of other sources of information used by institutions in this process is vast, and the following is just a very partial list of examples: retention statistics, employability data, degree classifications, module grades, internal institutional survey results, module evaluation questionnaire data, equality data, external examiner reports, and withdrawal surveys. Most triangulation processes are simple, but at some institutions those investigations have led on to complex externally funded research projects.

*NSS data is only ever one motivating factor in change. The overarching approach is to triangulate issues arising from the NSS with other data and analysis, and make changes in policy and practice in the light of this full analysis.*

Many institutions highlight the importance of paying attention to alternative sources of student feedback. The NSS receives such a vast amount of attention that there may be a tendency to overlook or underuse other ways in which students can provide information about their experiences; ways which might better suit certain purposes or might better address particular issues. A common alternative source of feedback is internal institutional surveys, which have existed for many years as essential sources of information for the evaluation and improvement of teaching. Efforts to contextualise and understand NSS scores can be greatly assisted by having results on those very same questions from students earlier in their courses of study, and several institutions have adopted NSS questions for their first- and second-year surveys. However, there is also an awareness that institutional surveys offer an opportunity to gain more detailed and context-specific information from their students, that is missed if NSS questions are used.

There has been a lot of talk recently about the possibility of gaining information about the level and quality of the effort that students put into their courses. The NSS largely focuses on the other side of the process, the educational provision, and so some institutions have started to look elsewhere. Several have implemented engagement surveys, based on the North American NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement)<sup>10</sup> and its Australasian variant, the AUSSE (Australasian Survey of Student Engagement)<sup>11</sup>. Those surveys ask students about their behaviour and development, focused around the time spent preparing for class, the amount of engagement with the course material and with peers and teachers, and the depth of their learning. Institutions believe that these surveys allow them to gather more detail about the learning environment, and ascertain whether course leaders' intentions are borne out by the students' behaviour.

*More information is needed in order to be fully informed, and the NSSE and AUSSE do look at engagement, which is also an omission – I can be very satisfied with my gym membership and facilities but it doesn't mean I have used them very well or very often.*

<sup>10</sup> <http://nsse.iub.edu/> [accessed 15 October 2012].

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.acer.edu.au> [accessed 15 October 2012].

The overwhelming benefits of using the NSS as part of a range of information are widely acknowledged, but it also brings challenges:

- there are significant practical issues involved in mapping individuals and subject groups across different surveys and datasets;
- one institution feels that the message emerging from the NSS becomes blurred and confused, and concrete actions become more difficult to justify;
- another institution worries that the defensive attitude of some staff towards the NSS can lead them, when faced with a range of information, to 'cherry-pick' the data that presents their activities in the best light.

These are all issues to be aware of, but they have not dissuaded any of the concerned institutions from using the NSS as part of a wider set of information.

The intention to use the NSS alongside other sources of information is virtually universal among institutions. The tendency of the media to see it as an accurate summative measure of teaching quality can create pressures to use it in isolation, but institutions are typically well aware of the need to look beyond the NSS in order to understand their students' experiences.

#### Questions for reflection:

- Is the NSS used as a stand-alone measure of teaching quality, or is it treated as one tool among others?
- What information about learning and teaching is required to inform enhancement activities? How does the NSS fit into that?
- If the NSS just tells you where to look, what is the best way of exploring further? What information would help you decide how to respond?

## 4.3 Benchmarking

### Key points

- Institutions universally attempt to make like-for-like comparisons when using their scores, and there are a range of methods adopted.
- Comparisons between item scores should only be made cautiously, because of the different concepts in operation.
- Rankings and league tables using NSS scores are only crude methods of benchmarking, as they do not take into account important institutional characteristics.
- Benchmarking is an important element of the NSS cycle, but it is also important not to get bogged down; what is crucial is exploring issues further using other information sources, and undertaking enhancement activities in response.

Many institutions feel that the ability to compare data on student perspectives is one of the key benefits of the NSS. The compulsory and universal nature of the survey, and the publication of the results, means that the NSS is an unprecedented tool for benchmarking students' perceptions at institution and subject level.

*It is very useful for people to have an idea of where they sit relative to other institutions and for people to be prompted to think about what they do*

Institutions expressed a range of more specific points, such as the feeling that benchmarking opportunities were limited before the introduction of the NSS. It was also stated that the availability of nationally comparable data has led to greater attention to the student experience and the student voice, and that the design of the NSS means that it provides neat and simple comparisons.

There are various approaches to comparisons and benchmarking, but all institutions attempt to compare 'like-with-like'. This can simply mean comparisons with the mission group that the institution belongs to, or it can mean comparisons against a bespoke group of institutions, felt to represent institutions with relevantly similar characteristics. For example, a Scottish institution reports that it compares with the rest of Scotland, as that is felt to be the relevant peer group. This kind of benchmarking is felt to be important for ascertaining whether a concerning score represents a genuine problem, or whether that score is actually within appropriate expectations, given the nature of the institution.

### Case study: Benchmarking at the University of Hertfordshire

In constructing benchmarks we use three different categorisations; JACS Code Level 3, HESA Courses and 40 Department ID codes (comprised of groups of discipline-related programmes within a School).

The performance by Department ID and HESA Course on each section and each question of the survey is put into a zone, depending on how that area is performing relative to the mean for that NSS section or question. The zones are identified and colour coded as follows:

- Zone 1** More than two standard deviations below the mean  
(seriously underperforming)
- Zone 2** Between one and two standard deviations below the mean
- Zone 3** Up to one standard deviation below the mean
- Zone 4** Up to one standard deviation above the mean
- Zone 5** Between one and two standard deviations above the mean
- Zone 6** More than two standard deviations above the mean  
(exceptional performance)

A similar process is used with the JACS Code Level 3 data to ascertain the performance of disciplines relative to disciplinary performance across the sector. Three separate colour-coded spreadsheets are produced; one for each of the three different categorisations.

The benchmark data are used to identify and celebrate excellence as well as for identifying programmes of concern. Additionally, it is used in target setting for Schools. However, the benchmarks also play a key role in promoting enhancement through the development of School Action Plans. Where results for a particular section of the survey fall into Zones 1-3 of the 'traffic light' system, Schools are asked to generate an action.

Action planning is facilitated through the holding of a half day NSS Forum, explicitly designed to be both sharing and supporting, which brings together areas that are 'underperforming' along with those with high satisfaction scores. The NSS Forum is attended by senior managers from all Schools (e.g. those responsible for providing learning resources), senior staff from central units (e.g. those charged with supporting the enhancement of the student learning experience), student representatives from each School and Students' Union Sabbatical Officers. The session starts with a short presentation, in which University-level quantitative data are considered alongside the themes that have emerged from the comments made by students as part of their NSS response. Next, using their knowledge of the data and of learning and teaching activities within the Schools, staff from the Learning and Teaching Institute group Schools together to work on areas where action is required. Schools with high levels of satisfaction in a particular area work with those with lower levels of satisfaction. The students help to contextualise the comments and importantly, work with the staff to develop a School Action Plan. The Action Plans, which form part of the Annual School Report, include a communication strategy designed to ensure effective feedback to students on how a School plans to address identified challenges.

### **Recommendations for others**

As staff are very aware of the variability of satisfaction scores from one discipline to another, it has been important to reflect these differences in the benchmarking process. By providing an enhancement focus, a supportive environment, and an effective mechanism for sharing good practice, the NSS Forum has gone some way to alleviating staff concerns regarding the potential of the benchmarking process to focus on failure and underperformance.

**Catherine Rendell**  
University of Hertfordshire

Comparisons at subject level can be particularly useful, especially considering the impact of subject of study on students' learning experiences<sup>12</sup>. Some institutions benchmark their departments and courses internally, against each other and the institutional average. More institutions, however, compare departments and courses against similar departments and courses in other institutions, to get a more accurate sense of where there are areas of weakness and strength.

One institution believes that it is important to be aware that each item prompts different responses, some referring to quite specific experiences, others to a broad range. If an item receives a low score relative to other items, that does not automatically indicate a priority problem, or a relatively high score indicate that there is no issue. It is crucial to recognise that item scores are best compared against the item scores for the sector or for specific groups of peers. Given the different concepts in operation for the different items, comparisons between item scores should only be made cautiously, especially for items in different question groups.

Of course, one of the primary methods of comparing institutional and course scores, and certainly the most visible to the public, is through rankings and league tables in the media, and the websites that compare the new Key Information Sets. These comparisons certainly play a key role in how the NSS is perceived and used within institutions, and several institutions highlighted the impact that position in league tables can have on the perspective that is taken, especially by senior managers. One institution even commented on the effect on staff attitudes of a change in the algorithm used by a prominent newspaper in the construction of their league tables, giving more weight to the NSS.

Several institutions highlighted the problem that this causes. They comment on the fact that league tables compare institutions using their raw scores, without regard to the factors that affect those scores, such as subject mix, demographic profile and size. The important element of benchmarking is comparing like-with-like, something which the media standardly overlook.

*The way the press use it for league tables bothers me, we are not comparing like with like as institution mission etc. is not taken into account.*

One institution felt that there would be benefit in HEFCE providing more forceful guidance to the media on how the survey data should and should not be made use of. HEFCE is certainly aware of the concerns, and attempted to respond by, from 2011 onwards, producing benchmarked results for overall satisfaction, which take into account important institutional factors such as subject and gender mix. Not only does this communicate the subtleties involved in interpreting NSS results, it also addresses the institutional concern that the media do not compare like-with-like. However, one institution stated that the benchmark scores are too complex and hard to understand to have a real impact on the activities of the media. They suggested that instead HEFCE facilitate a process whereby benchmarking clubs can be created, including institutions with similar characteristics.

One institution stated that they were starting to look beyond the traditional approach to benchmarking, and investigate the student perspective. What does a student think that a 'good' score is? Is that the same as what appears to be a 'good' score in sector comparisons?

Finally, there was a sense that it is important not to get bogged down in the process of benchmarking and comparison. While it is an important stage in the NSS cycle, it is crucial to use the results as starting points for investigation, and to move on to the key step of undertaking enhancement activities in response.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the impact of subject, see the literature in the Section 5.3.

### Questions for reflection:

- What specific information are you trying to gain through the process of making comparisons?
- Are benchmarking exercises designed to serve marketing and recruitment, or quality enhancement?
- Do you compare departments and courses with each other within the university, or with similar departments and courses around the sector?
- Does league table position have an impact on the response to the NSS, regardless of whether the league table methodology is accepted?

## 4.4 Using qualitative data

### Key points

- Institutions use the comments from the NSS to explore the reasons behind the patterns in the quantitative results.
- Institutions find the comments to be more effective at engaging staff in discussions around student feedback.
- The use of student and staff focus groups, especially at departmental and course level, allow much deeper exploration of students' experiences of their course.

In Section 4.2 we saw how institutions tend to use the NSS alongside other sources of information, allowing them to explore issues in more detail and work out how to respond. For many institutions, an important element of that process is the use of qualitative data. There are many ways to gather qualitative data about students' experiences, ranging from informal conversations in corridors through to large-scale research projects. One ready-made set of data exists in the comments that students can submit as part of their response to the NSS, which have the benefit of being completed by the same people, at the same time, and with the same focus; their course-level experiences. The investment of significant amounts of energy in the use of the free-text data, especially in relation to data analysis, seems to be a relatively recent and growing phenomenon. More and more institutions appear to be incorporating the coding, analysis and reporting of the students' comments into the survey cycle, alongside the routine analysis and reporting of the numerical scores.

Institutions report a range of motivations for exploring the NSS comments, with the most common being to shed light on the numerical results. The reasons for a course's low score may be entirely invisible in the quantitative data, but any simple and powerful concerns that the students have are likely to emerge in their comments. For staff seeking to make sense of often surprising results, the comments have proved useful. In addition, the comments can sometimes surface issues, such as value for money and employability, that are not directly addressed by the NSS. The comments provide a holistic picture of students' experiences that numerical responses are unlikely to capture.

*The staff find the open comments very helpful in trying to make sense of the figures the survey produces.*

Another motivation cited by institutions is the positive response from academic staff. Whereas some colleagues may be disengaged by numerical scores, or adopt defensive attitudes, there is a sense from some institutions that the comments are more effective at generating interest and discussion. The emotive and direct nature of students' comments seems to aid the use of the survey as a prompt for reflection and enhancement; they are seen as the 'softer side' of the NSS. One institution believes that the higher level of engagement when the qualitative data are the focus is partly due to the fact that it moves debate away from the robustness of the quantitative data towards discussion of the fundamental learning and teaching issues.

*More recently we have been using the free text comments in a more developmental way.*

# Case study: Semantic analysis of free-text comments at Liverpool John Moores University

## What we did

We recognised that the qualitative free-text comments of the NSS tend to be underutilised but had the potential to provide a valuable source of institutional feedback. At LJMU we also conduct our own 'mirror' surveys at Years 1 and 2, providing opportunity to contrast the student experience across three levels of study. However, collectively these surveys provide c. 150,000 words of qualitative comment, which is no small challenge to interpret. We analysed free-text data from NSS and LJMU student survey (identical to NSS for Years 1 and 2) using semantic analysis software Leximancer (<https://www.leximancer.com>). The software identifies textual structure of student comments by revealing key concepts and broader overarching themes (concept clusters). Concept maps generated by the software identify the most important areas of experience, surface inter-relationships between these concepts and identify their associated sentiment, the statistical likelihood of students referring to the concept in favourable or unfavourable terms.

This institutional-level analysis was carried out over two years, enabling us to identify changes in the 'student satisfaction landscape', including appearance of new concepts, dynamics of sentiments and thematic transformations. The findings surfaced significant differences in the student priorities and attitudes across the levels of study. The longitudinal analysis demonstrated the impact of major institutional initiatives/interventions and organisational factors on student satisfaction and its representation on the concept map. The outcomes of the analysis were widely used in various academic enhancement/development sessions across academic faculties and professional service teams.

## Why we did it

The free-text comments constitute a rich source of student feedback with the potential to not only illuminate scores, but to identify significant themes that fall through the gaps of the survey categories. Institutional level analysis of such a copious dataset as NSS free-text comments is time- and resource-consuming, but could be of great value to institutional policy makers and academic developers as they identify 'meta-themes' that cross subject/faculty boundaries. That's why automated semantic analysis was piloted initially.

## Whether it worked

This approach to analysis proved to be successful. Looking at the concept maps longitudinally helped to detect changes in student attitudes, perceptions and understandings and presented a dynamic institutional view of the student experience, in their own words.

## Recommendations for others trying it out

Although Leximancer visibly reduces time of the analysis, the underlying meaning(s) of a specific concept can only be identified through manual interrogation of the comments. So prepare to do some intense reading and sense making.

Be aware that there are some limitations to what the software can provide. Some concepts represented by narrow vocabulary (e.g. 'lecture' or 'library') favour a strong representation. While others (such as 'work based learning'), have a greater likelihood of being diluted on the concept map (e.g. between placements, field trips, 'life' projects and so on). A separate, tailored analysis could be done to explore these 'diluted' concepts. Triangulation with other data sources is needed to create a more comprehensive picture of the student experience and satisfaction.

**Elena Zaitseva, Clare Milsom and Martyn Stewart**  
**Academic Enhancement Unit, Liverpool John Moores University**

Some institutions do report complexities and sensitivities around the use of the NSS comments:

- one institution reports that they have not found the effort required – which is often considerable – to be worthwhile;
- another feels that the comments of the students tend to be fairly generic, and are only useful when there are one or two very specific issues affecting a large proportion of the students;
- one institution believes that while the analysis of the comments is highly beneficial to enhancement activities, it needs to be done by expert researchers in order to yield robust data that can be relied upon. However, they say that while this is resource-intensive, it is better to undertake that analysis in a sophisticated manner than to put effort into gathering more data from other sources;
- another is concerned that while the comments themselves may be more immediately engaging for staff, they lack the leverage possessed by the numerical scores, due to institutional pressure to respond.

It has been observed by two institutions that though useful, the comments are still relatively superficial. They are usually brief, and often too individual to paint a general picture, and they cannot by themselves provide a reliable picture of the student learning experience. What is likely to be needed, as discussed in Chapter 2, is a dialogue with students, necessitating other, more in-depth, ways of gathering qualitative data

- one institution recruits new first-year students to create photo diaries over the initial month, photographing and commenting on things that strike them as particularly good or bad;
- another institution tracks five individual students through their university careers, gathering detailed information about their experiences as they progress.

Some institutions have found success in using the NSS comments as prompts for discussion in focus groups. By asking participants to comment on, to unpack and to explore the implications of representative comments, institutions have found an apparently effective way of getting richer information. More generally, focus groups are a common method that institutions use to investigate NSS results, with or without the use of the qualitative data.

*Faculties also use focus groups to explore particular issues.*

A particularly common strategy is to use focus groups within courses and departments that have achieved either very high scores, or very low scores. Some institutions have also run parallel focus groups with staff and students, in order to discover similarities and discrepancies and provoke reflection on the part of the staff. One technique used is to ask staff to complete the survey themselves, from what they feel to be the point of view of their students, and then to compare their answers with the actual scores received. Discussion of these data within the focus groups can initiate a discussion about how students are perceiving their courses, and areas in which staff and students have divergent perceptions.

Whatever source institutions utilise, and however they then put them to use, qualitative data seem to be an effective option for going beyond the numerical scores in order to gain a richer understanding, and engaging staff (and students) in the process of enhancement.

#### Questions for reflection:

- What is the right balance of formal and informal methods for gathering qualitative data about the experiences of students?
- How should student comments be used in staff meetings and focus groups, in a way that maximises engagement and discussion but is sensitive to the emotive nature of students' comments?



## 5. Summing up and going further

### 5.1 Suggestions for good practice

The following are the key points from throughout the report. As stated in the Introduction, they are intended to be useful prompts for consideration and reflection, rather than universal recommendations.

#### Staff-student partnerships

- 1 NSS results need to be connected to the wider process of student representation, to ensure that the survey is part of the wider conversations between institutions and students.
- 2 If students are going to play an active part in the discussion of NSS results in committees and working groups, then they need support, training and full access to the relevant resources and documents.
- 3 Partnerships between institutions and students' unions are one of most important elements of involving students in the NSS, but both the opportunities and the challenges should be openly acknowledged and discussed.
- 4 With support and advice, students can play an active role in the analysis of NSS data, whether as paid researchers, through the SU or through their studies.
- 5 Joint staff-student events, such as workshops and conferences, can provide an informal but effective method of involving students in the exploration of NSS results.
- 6 SUs are entitled to receive full access to the data, which creates excellent opportunities for staff-student collaborations on data analysis and investigation.
- 7 Feeding back to students on the actions taken in response to the NSS is a key part of engaging them with the survey.
- 8 'You said... we did' provides a very direct method of feedback, but there may be alternative wordings that more strongly emphasise partnership and dialogue rather than responding to consumer demands.
- 9 If the survey data are being used appropriately, as part of a broader set of information, it may be hard to locate changes made specifically in response to the NSS. In this case, the message that is fed back to students may be more subtle and complex.

### **Institutional structures**

- 10 The common perception that the NSS is a 'stick to beat us with' can be mitigated by capturing and communicating good practice where results are better than expected, and not just focusing on the areas with disappointing survey scores.
- 11 Just as involving students in the NSS can be beneficial, engaging staff at all levels in the process of promoting, exploring and responding to the NSS is a key part of using the survey for enhancement.
- 12 The NSS can often be a powerful but unspoken presence; there are benefits in bringing it out into the open so that its strengths, limitations and impact can be honestly discussed.
- 13 Integrating the NSS into planning and review cycles can promote a more reflective quality enhancement approach.
- 14 When institutions use the NSS to create targets and KPIs, it is important to bear in mind the limitations of the data, and the need to triangulate NSS scores with other sources of information.
- 15 The NSS has helped to create a new focus on the student learning experience.
- 16 The simplistic use of the NSS in the media is a double-edged sword. While it causes resentment and sometimes a narrow focus on raising scores, it also creates a lever for change.
- 17 Individuals working to enhance learning and teaching can use NSS results to persuade colleagues of the need for change.

### **Analysis and exploration**

- 18 It is crucial that there is awareness and honesty about the limitations of the NSS as a tool for enhancement.
- 19 The NSS only provides a partial picture of students' experiences, and needs to be supplemented in order to be useful.
- 20 The NSS gives prominence to student satisfaction, but it is important that institutions gather data on other aspects of learning, in order to have a rounded view of educational quality.
- 21 To gain a more rounded and useful understanding of students' experiences, and to investigate the reasons for the scores and ways to respond, institutions have to use NSS data in conjunction with a much wider range of information.
- 22 For some issues, supplementary data are required in order to corroborate and unpack NSS scores. For other issues, the NSS may be entirely silent.
- 23 Some institutions are exploring the use of engagement surveys, as ways of understanding what students are putting into their courses, rather than what institutions are providing.

- 24 Institutions universally attempt to make like-for-like comparisons when using their scores, and there are a range of methods adopted.
- 25 Comparisons between item scores should only be made cautiously, because of the different concepts in operation.
- 26 Rankings and league tables using NSS scores are only crude methods of benchmarking, as they do not take into account important institutional characteristics.
- 27 Benchmarking is an important element of the NSS cycle, but it is also important not to get bogged down; what is crucial is exploring issues further using other information sources, and undertaking enhancement activities in response.
- 28 Institutions use the comments from the NSS to explore the reasons behind the patterns in the quantitative results.
- 29 Institutions find the comments to be more effective at engaging staff in discussions around student feedback.
- 30 The use of student and staff focus groups, especially at departmental and course level, allow much deeper exploration of students' experiences of their course.

## 5.2 Questions for reflection

The following are the 'questions for reflection' from throughout the report..As stated in the introduction, they are intended to be used to inspire discussion and critical reflection.

### Staff-student partnerships

- 1 Are students present on all the committees and groups where NSS results are discussed in any detail?
- 2 Are student representatives sufficiently supported to allow them to play an active role in meetings?
- 3 Does the institution and the SU work together on the NSS, in a way that is honest, productive, sustainable and acknowledges the challenges that exist?
- 4 Do students have a direct role in the exploration and interpretation of the NSS results, or is their role limited to the promotion of the survey and attending committee meetings as student representatives?
- 5 Is support provided to the SU to enable them to undertake their own exploration of the NSS data?
- 6 Is there scope to recruit students (including postgraduate students) as paid researchers and data analysts, or to involve the NSS in relevant modules, e.g. social science research methods?
- 7 Are students aware of the value that is placed on the NSS results, and the impact that those results have on decisions within the institution?
- 8 Are the optional questions in the NSS, that ask students about how the feedback that they provide is responded to (Question B.6), used within the institution? If not, do you have other ways of gathering that information?
- 9 If you are unable to cite actions taken in direct response to NSS scores (because decision-making is more complex) how else can you make clear to students that the survey results are taken seriously?
- 10 Does the tone and method by which the messages are fed back to students embody the institution's vision of the staff-student, and institution-student, relationship?

### Institutional structures

- 11 Does the institution respond to poor-scoring areas in the NSS in a supportive way? Are areas that consistently perform well in the survey highlighted?
- 12 How much freedom do academics have about how they respond to NSS results? Are they constrained by an overly bureaucratic procedure that prevents them from engaging and innovating?
- 13 Is the NSS openly discussed and debated? Is the relevant research literature read and applied?
- 14 Is the NSS embedded in your planning and review systems in a way that prompts critical reflection and innovation by course teams?
- 15 Are academics encouraged to use student comments from the NSS alongside the numerical scores when reviewing modules and courses?

- 16 Do institutional NSS targets sufficiently take into account the limitations of the data?
- 17 Has the NSS created a greater institutional focus on the enhancement of learning and teaching? Or is the main impact on marketing, recruitment and quality assurance?
- 18 Has the net impact of the NSS on student learning been positive or negative?
- 19 Has the NSS contributed to a 'student as consumer' approach within the institution, or has it helped to support a genuine dialogue and engagement with students?

### **Analysis and exploration**

- 20 Do the benefits of the NSS for quality enhancement outweigh the drawbacks?
- 21 Is the NSS a good measure of educational quality? What other types of information provide a complementary or superior measure?
- 22 Does the NSS contribute to a damaging consumer culture, or can it be harnessed to improve the pedagogic relationship?
- 23 How do you use your understanding of the limitations of the NSS to make more effective use of it for enhancement?
- 24 Is the NSS used as a stand-alone measure of teaching quality, or it treated as one tool among others?
- 25 What information about learning and teaching is required to inform enhancement activities? How does the NSS fit into that?
- 26 If the NSS just tells you where to look, what is the best of way of exploring further? What information would help you decide how to respond?
- 27 What specific information are you trying to gain through the process of making comparisons?
- 28 Are benchmarking exercises designed to serve marketing and recruitment, or quality enhancement?
- 29 Do you compare departments and courses with each other within the university, or with similar departments and courses around the sector?
- 30 Does league table position have an impact on the response to the NSS, regardless of whether the league table methodology is accepted?
- 31 What is the right balance of formal and informal methods for gathering qualitative data about the experiences of students?
- 32 How should student comments be used in staff meetings and focus groups, in a way that maximises engagement and discussion but is sensitive to the emotive nature of students' comments?

### 5.3 Further reading

There are number of studies and reviews that provide useful information about the strengths and limitations of NSS data<sup>13</sup>. Relevant research produced by the HEA is described in the next section.

Alan Fielding, Peter Dunleavy and Mark Langan (2010) Interpreting context to the UK's National Student (Satisfaction) Survey for science subjects. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 34 (3), 347-368.

This is an investigation into the complex issues that can arise when interpreting NSS data. A number of important findings are contained in the article, such as the absence of a strong correlation between the experience of feedback and overall satisfaction, and the important subject differences in students' responses to the NSS items.

Abbi Flint, Anne Oxley, Paul Helm and Sally Bradley (2009) Preparing for success: one institution's aspirational and student focused response to the National Student Survey. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 14 (6), 608-618.

This article discusses the involvement of students in the process of using NSS data for quality enhancement purposes. Various activities are described, including an event to allow academics to hear student perspectives in detail, and the publication of a 'You said...we did' document to inform students of the changes that had resulted from their feedback.

Lee Harvey (2005) A history and critique of quality evaluation in the UK. *Quality Assurance in Education*. 13 (4), 263-276.

This paper maps the development of quality evaluation procedures and raises questions about current approaches. Harvey concludes that quality evaluations in the UK have been guided as much by political pragmatism as concerns with the quality of teaching.

HEFCE (2011) *National Student Survey: Findings and trends 2006 to 2010*. Bristol: HEFCE.

This is the latest annual report on the NSS by HEFCE. It provides an overview of the 2010 data, as well as looking at trends in the data from 2006 to 2010 around various demographic characteristics of the student population.

Mike Prosser (2005) *Why we shouldn't use student surveys of teaching as satisfaction ratings*. York: Higher Education Academy.

This very short but widely-quoted paper was written by Mike Prosser in 2005 when he was Director of Research and Evaluation at the HEA. It lays out the view that using the NSS to formulate league tables may hinder its use as tool for improving student learning experiences.

Paul Ramsden, Denise Batchelor, Alison Peacock, Paul Temple and David Watson (2010) *Enhancing and developing the National Student Survey: report to HEFCE*. Bristol: HEFCE.

This report, commissioned by HEFCE, provided an interim evaluation of the functions and performance of the NSS, in order to arrive at recommendations about whether the survey should be updated or developed. The study proposed no substantial changes to the survey, but recommended that a full review be undertaken in 2015.

John Richardson (2005) Instruments for obtaining student feedback: a review of the literature. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*. 30 (4), 387-415.

<sup>13</sup> A fuller annotated bibliography, compiled by the author, is available at <http://evidencenet.pbworks.com/w/page/28700535/NSS%20Resources>

This is a very useful review of the research literature concerning the different kinds of survey tools that can be used to gather information about students' learning experiences.

John Richardson, John Slater and Jane Wilson (2007) The National Student Survey: development, findings and implications. *Studies in Higher Education*. 32 (5), 557-580.

This article describes the history and development of the NSS, focusing on the mechanisms and findings of the two pilot surveys that took place in 2003 and 2004.

James Williams and Gill Cappucini-Ansfield (2007) Fitness for purpose: National and institutional approaches to publicising the student voice. *Quality in Higher Education*. 13 (2): 159-172.

This article compares the strengths and weaknesses of national surveys (which have large samples and provide comparability) and institutional surveys (which can be tailor-made for particular contexts). It focuses on the value of student engagement with surveys.

Ruth Williams and John Brennan (2003) *Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE*. Bristol: HEFCE.

This is a report commissioned by HEFCE in order to: i) to identify good practice in collecting feedback from students, for quality enhancement; and ii) to make recommendations about the design and implementation of a national survey of students. This report played an important role in the development of the NSS.

Keithia Wilson, Alf Lizzio and Paul Ramsden (1997) The development, validation and application of the Course Experience Questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*. 22 (1), 33-53.

This paper examines the history of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), and the empirical data concerning its usefulness as a performance indicator of teaching quality. As the design of the NSS was based on the CEQ, this paper provides useful information about the validity of the NSS.

Mantz Yorke (2009) Student experience surveys: some methodological considerations and an empirical investigation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. 34 (6), 721-739.

This article looks at a number of issues and controversies around the design and administration of sector-wide student surveys, including the NSS.

## 5.4 Additional HEA resources

The Higher Education Academy supports institutions and discipline communities to use student survey data to enhance the student learning experience. For more about our work on the National Student Survey, and to download our reports, please visit: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/nss>.

### Data reports

The HEA has produced a range of reports using the 2011 NSS results.

- 28 discipline reports, containing detailed data and comparisons for 67 subjects.
- A national-level report, which includes including comparisons for age, gender, mode of study, and a range of other student and institution characteristics.

### Research

The HEA has produced a number of key pieces of research relating to the NSS:

#### Dimensions of quality (2010)

Produced by Graham Gibbs, this report sets out to identify those factors that give a reliable indication of the quality of student learning. Its focus is broader than just the use of student survey data, but it provides a useful overview of different mechanisms of evaluating educational quality.

Available from: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/evidence\\_informed\\_practice/Dimensions\\_of\\_Quality.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/evidence_informed_practice/Dimensions_of_Quality.pdf).

#### The National Student Survey three years on: What have we learned? (2009)

This report by Paula Surridge summarises some key pieces of research to give an overview of findings relating to the NSS. It also gives recommendations for future work. It is a very useful guide to NSS data, especially regarding the important question of what it can and cannot tell us.

Available from: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/surveys/nss/NSS\\_three\\_years\\_on\\_surridge\\_02.06.09.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/surveys/nss/NSS_three_years_on_surridge_02.06.09.pdf).

#### National Student Survey of Teaching in UK Universities: Dimensionality, multilevel structure and differentiation at the level of university and discipline: preliminary results (2008)

This report, by Herb Marsh and Jacqueline Cheng, is a technical investigation of a number of issues, focusing in particular on the relative effects on NSS scores of various factors such as institution and discipline. It is a rich source of information that can help to illuminate raw NSS data.

Available from: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/surveys/nss/NSS\\_herb\\_marshall-28.08.08.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/research/surveys/nss/NSS_herb_marshall-28.08.08.pdf).

## Postgraduate surveys

In addition to supporting the sector to use NSS data for the enhancement of learning and teaching, the HEA has also developed its own national surveys, looking at the postgraduate student experience.

### Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey

PTES has been running since 2009, and in 2012 about 54,640 students from 83 institutions completed the survey. The survey asks students about a wide range of elements of their learning experience, including feedback, teaching and skills development. It also asks about the depth and sophistication of the learning they have engaged in.

For more information visit: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ptes>.

### Postgraduate Research Experience Survey

PRES is the sister survey of PTES and is aimed at postgraduate research students. It runs every two years, and in 2011 over 31,000 students from 102 institutions completed the survey. The survey will next run in 2013.

For more information please visit: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/pres>.

## Consultancy and change programmes

The HEA runs regular change programmes for departments and faculties wishing to explore their NSS results. More information can be found here: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/change>.

The HEA is also currently developing an institutional consultancy service, which will provide senior managers with advice, tailored analysis and support to help them use survey data to strategically address issues in learning and teaching. If you are interested in this service then please email: [nss@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:nss@heacademy.ac.uk).

## Appendix A: Information about the NSS

The NSS is a survey of final-year students on undergraduate programmes. It is compulsory for publicly funded HE providers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and some Scottish institutions take part on a voluntary basis<sup>14</sup>. Ipsos MORI administer the survey on behalf of HEFCE, and contact all suitable students using a variety of methods (including email and telephone). The survey was introduced in 2005, and in 2012 154 HEIs and 106 FECs took part, and 287,000 students responded – an overall response rate of 67%.

NSS data are currently available primarily from the Unistats website (<http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>), which allows visitors to compare overall satisfaction results at course and institutional level, as well as download spreadsheets with more comprehensive information. In addition HEFCE releases headline figures, as well as annual reports providing national-level analysis. From September 2012, course-level NSS data have been incorporated into Key Information Sets, which, as well as being available on Unistats, will be embedded on institutional websites.

For reasons of reliability and confidentiality, the threshold for public reportability of the results is a response rate of 23 responses, which must also represent at least 50% of the eligible students. Where there are less than 23 responses, responses from more than one year, or from across different courses, can be aggregated to produce publicly reportable data.

In addition to the public availability of the data, institutions receive their own data at a more detailed subject level. The reportability threshold for the data that institutions receive is ten responses, rather than 23. Data at the individual student level are also available for researchers on application to HEFCE.

The NSS is based to a significant extent on the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), which has been in use in Australia since 1993. There has been a significant amount of research on the CEQ, and a more limited amount on the NSS, and this research indicates that the two surveys are both reliable – they yield consistent and repeatable data – and valid – they measure what they purport to measure.

The NSS asks participants to rate their level of agreement with 23 positive statements, on a five-point scale (in addition to 'not applicable'): definitely disagree; mostly disagree; neither agree nor disagree; mostly agree; definitely agree. The statements are grouped into six areas, or 'scales', plus the overall statement and a statement about the Students' Union: quality of teaching and learning; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources; personal development.

As well as asking participants to rate their agreement with 23 statements, the survey also invites them to add free-text comments about particular positive or negative aspects of their experience. Institutions can choose to utilise a bank of optional statements in addition to the 23 core statements, which are not publicly reported.

14 15 Scottish institutions took part in 2012.

## Appendix B: Core NSS items<sup>15</sup>

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### The teaching on my course

- 1 Staff are good at explaining things
- 2 Staff have made the subject interesting
- 3 Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching
- 4 The course is intellectually stimulating

### Assessment and feedback

- 5 The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
- 6 Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair
- 7 Feedback on my work has been prompt
- 8 I have received detailed comments on my work
- 9 Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand

### Academic support

- 10 I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies
- 11 I have been able to contact staff when I needed to
- 12 Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices

### Organisation and management

- 13 The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned
- 14 Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively
- 15 The course is well organised and is running smoothly

### Learning resources

- 16 The library resources and services are good enough for my needs
- 17 I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to
- 18 I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to

### Personal development

- 19 The course has helped me to present myself with confidence
- 20 My communication skills have improved
- 21 As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems

### Overall satisfaction

- 22 Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

### Students' Union (Association or Guild)

- 23 I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution

<sup>15</sup> An electronic copy of the NSS questionnaire is available here: [http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/nss2012\\_questionnaire\\_english.pdf](http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/nss2012_questionnaire_english.pdf) [accessed 23 October 2012]. A full list of the NSS questions, including the optional questions (but prior to the introduction of Q23), is available here: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Publications/nss-questionnaire.pdf> [accessed 23 October 2012].



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