



The Role of Student Satisfaction Data  
in Quality Assurance and Enhancement:  
How Providers Use Data to Improve  
the Student Experience

Subscriber Research Series 2015-16

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## Subscriber Research Series 2015-16

In 2014-15, following a call for expressions of interest open to its subscribers, QAA commissioned six small-scale primary research projects intended to encourage collaboration between providers and promote the formation of communities of practice.

This report is one of two on the topic of **the role of student satisfaction data in quality assurance and enhancement**. It was submitted to QAA by the University of Kent, and written by Dr Joanna Williams and George Mindano.

The reports are not QAA documents, so we have respected the authors' approach in terms of style and presentation. We hope that you will read them with interest.

Other topics in the series are the transition experiences of entrants to higher education from increasingly diverse prior educational experiences; and an impact study of the guidance documents for higher education providers published by QAA in 2013.

For more information, and to read other reports in the series, visit [www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/research](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/improving-higher-education/research)

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# 1 Background

This research aimed to investigate how Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) use student satisfaction data to improve the student experience. In the UK, various institutional and national practices exist for gauging student feedback, a measure which is often crudely equated with student satisfaction. Of these, the National Student Survey (NSS) has become pre-eminent and a crucial feature of the contemporary UK HE landscape. Although the NSS is arguably not a satisfaction survey (Callender et al, 2014:41), it does employ a 'satisfaction percentage' as a benchmark when compiling results, and many HEIs refer to their NSS data in marketing literature. However, it remains unclear exactly how HEIs use this satisfaction data to improve the student experience. The main aim of this study, therefore, was to establish how HEIs use student satisfaction data to improve the student experience. This was achieved through the following overarching research questions.

- How do key practitioners within HEIs analyse and make sense of the NSS data relating to their institution?
- How is the NSS data interpreted in relation to student satisfaction?
- What interpretation of the NSS data is disseminated to staff and students, and in what form?
- What practical changes have occurred as a result of the NSS data?
- Have institutions evaluated the impact of practical changes made as a result of the NSS data?

# 2 Methodology

We found qualitative research best suited to answering the research questions that focus on constructing knowledge, as it allowed us to generate data and ideas to advance our understanding of how HEIs use student satisfaction data to improve the student experience. We therefore employed qualitative interviews with four key informants in four different UK universities. The informants were all employed at a senior level within the institution and had significant responsibility for teaching and learning and/or the student experience.

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews each lasting 45 mins to 1 hour. The selected institutions represented a diversity of geography, history and a range of positions within the popular league tables. Two institutions were placed in the top 25% of the Guardian university league tables (labelled University A and University B), while the other two came from the bottom 25% (labelled University C and University D). This gave us an idea of how universities view the NSS based on their positions in the league tables. Interviews focused on the analysis and interpretation of NSS data and any subsequent implementation of practical changes. The respondents included Pro Vice-Chancellors/ institutional heads of learning and teaching, institutional heads of student experience, heads of faculty and heads of academic departments. Four interviews conducted at four institutions equated to 16 hours of interview data in total.

The interviews were supplemented by a (qualitative) discussion and analysis of publicly available data relating to the student experience and student satisfaction within the four institutions. The institutional documentation was not limited to NSS data and included: learning and teaching strategy documents, student charters, institutional publicity material, mission statements and 'You said, we did' style posters. Analysis was benchmarked from the data gathered and issues explored in the literature review. For the data not readily available in the public domain (for example the NSS breakdown and analysis documents), we sought access from institutional key contacts.

## **2.1 Analytical framework**

The interviews were digitally recorded and recordings were transcribed in full. We then anonymised the data before using a comparative thematic approach to analyse both the interview transcripts and the institutional documentation. From this, we identified several key terms which were then used alongside an analytical data management programme called NVivo to produce a more detailed analysis and account of the data. We encouraged respondents to ground their statements with concrete examples. This has the added benefit of promoting greater reflection upon the issues under consideration (Kvale, 1996).

We were very conscious of the sensitive nature of the project. We obtained full ethical approval and we have been very careful to anonymise the participating institutions. We have not identified institutions by age or geography in order to protect anonymity. However, we compared the approach of institutions according to their broad position in league tables.

## **3 Contextualising the NSS and student feedback processes**

### **3.1 Historical perspective of the NSS and current status**

In the 1990s, subject review was the principal mechanism of quality assurance in UK higher education. Panels of specialist and non-specialist assessors visited departments, inspected documentation, and attended teaching sessions. They also interviewed teaching staff, current students, graduates and employers. At the conclusion of their visits, the panels evaluated each department on several dimensions and published a formal report giving the reasons for their evaluation. According to Richardson et al, (2007: 557), the experience of subject review was often arduous for the relevant departments. Richardson (2013) further suggests that the system was also expensive: the annual cost to the UK higher education sector was estimated to be £50 million.

It was, perhaps, not surprising that in 2000, following representations from the higher education sector, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) proposed to abandon the extensive subject review mechanisms that had been set in place to assure quality of provision. The agreement with the UK Government was that the sector would publish key data on quality matters to help enable prospective students to make more informed judgements on where to study, and thus help to discharge the accountability function of a sector in receipt of large sums of public money. The previous quality assurance process was rapidly dismantled before any replacement was defined, leading to the feeling in some quarters that institutions should be self-regulated with no external checks on the quality of teaching and learning (Richardson et al, 2007:557). This was indeed a clear shift in motivation.

Nevertheless, following continuing deliberations with the Government, as well as wide-ranging discussions in a task group set up in 2001, it was agreed that some external mechanism was needed but that, to avoid extra weight on institutions, use would be made as far as possible of existing data, of which an important part was feedback from students (HEFCE, 2001, 2002, Richardson et al, 2007). This prompted discussion on the appropriateness of the feedback that was being collected within institutions. Most feedback was module-based rather than programme-based. As Richardson et al (2007:558) suggest 'it was suspected to be patchy in coverage, often obtained from small numbers of respondents'. The questions put to students were thought to vary markedly across institutions and sometimes across disciplines within the same institutions, rendering most comparisons meaningless. Most crucially, institutions claimed that their rationale for collecting student feedback was to support quality enhancement. It was also understood

that using student feedback to inform prospective students would involve putting the data to a different use.

As a result, HEFCE commissioned a project on collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE. The project aimed to identify good practice in obtaining student feedback, to make recommendations to institutions concerning the design and implementation of feedback mechanisms, and to make recommendations on the design and implementation of a national survey of recent graduates, the results of which would be published to assist future applicants to higher education. Chaired by Professor Sir Ron Cooke, the group proposed that data from students about their experience of quality and standards should be an essential element of the published information. The group advised that there should be a national survey of recent graduates' opinions, based on the instrument used in Australia for this purpose (the Course Experience Questionnaire, or CEQ) and supplementary to the existing HESA First Destination Survey (now the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey (DLHE)), (Williams et al, 2003; Richardson et al; 2007; Callender et al, 2014).

However, issues were raised, in particular about the timing of this survey which was thought not to be optimal, because the results would only inform students seeking to enter university two years later. Richardson et al (2007) assert that following discussions with the Government, HEFCE resolved to address this and other deficiencies (such as a poor return from overseas students) by exploring instead the idea of a national survey of final-year students. Subsequently, as a result of consultation, this proposal was revised. A separate national survey of final-year students (rather than recent graduates) was recommended from which student feedback, disaggregated by institution, would be published. It was intended to complement this information with a more consistent process for collecting feedback from students through HE institutions' own surveys. The Report of the Student Feedback Project Steering Group noted that these recommendations were taken up in the English Government White Paper: *The Future of Higher Education* (2003). The relevant section of the White Paper reads:

To become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information. We will ensure that the views of students themselves are published in a national annual survey available for the first time in autumn 2003, which will explicitly cover teaching quality.

Several tensions emerge from this historical perspective. These include internal quality control (emanating from getting feedback from the students); marketing recruitment (developing a mechanism to ensure that overseas students are not missing out and attract them as much as possible); and student empowerment (ensuring that students remain satisfied and have a voice in their student experience).

Nevertheless, HEFCE commissioned a pilot study to explore the feasibility and value of conducting a national student survey. This was carried out during 2003 by the Open University, staff from SQW Limited and members of NOP Research Group. The results suggested that it was possible to design a short, robust instrument that would measure different aspects of the quality of the student experience.

Richardson, et al (2007) report that in developing an instrument to be used in the first pilot study, the project was informed by a comprehensive literature review of the use of questionnaires to obtain student feedback and by annual reports published by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia containing the results of surveys carried out with the CEQ. However, the latter instrument was criticised because it contains items that are not appropriate for certain groups of students (for example those studying by distance learning:

Richardson and Woodley, 2001, cited in Richardson et al (2007)), and also because it does not include items relating to broader aspects of the student experience, such as pastoral support and the organisation of the curriculum (McInnis et al, 2001). The consultants, therefore, began by assembling a list of 45 items concerned with different aspects of the student experience, with the expectation that the results of the pilot study would enable its reduction to a shorter questionnaire for use in a full national survey.

The results of the two pilot studies were presented through HEFCE to the sector, and it was resolved that a full national survey should be administered early in 2005 to all full-time final-year students and all equivalent part-time students at institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (HEFCE, 2004. Both the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council and the English Department of Health declined to participate in the first year). The survey was administered by an independent agency. Within a relatively narrow window, institutions could choose the precise timing of the survey to suit their internal activities.

Bótas and Brown (2013) posit that the Government, through HEFCE and the NSS, claim that as well as helping applicants to make informed choices of subject, programme and institution, the NSS provides a mechanism for public accountability of teaching in higher education. The threshold for publication of the results is 50% of respondents for institutions and at least 23 students for subjects (HEFCE, 2009b).

Currently, the survey has three parts, with 71 questions in total. The scales of the answers vary from N/A (Not applicable), 1 (Definitely disagree), 2 (Mostly disagree), 3 (Neither agree nor disagree), 4 (Mostly agree) to 5 (Definitely agree). The first part has 24 questions measuring students' perceptions of the teaching on their course (4); assessment and feedback (5); academic support (3); organisation and management (3); learning resources (3); personal development (3); overall satisfaction with the quality of their course (1); and two open questions asking the students to highlight the positive and negative aspects of their experience. Another additional question asks students to rate their Students' Union, based on its support, activities and academic representation.

The second part has 41 optional questions for students to measure their satisfaction with careers (3); course content and structure (3); work placements (6); social opportunities (3); course delivery (5); feedback from students (3); the physical environment (2); welfare resources and facilities (2); workload (4); assessment (2); learning community (5); and intellectual motivation (3).

The third part is aimed only at NHS-funded students, with five questions related to their practice placements; this part was included for the first time in 2007. Respondents may choose to complete the survey online<sup>1</sup> or on paper.

The first run of the NSS was in 2005 and surveyed approximately 280,000 students in their final year as undergraduates. As noted by Child (2011), the report resulting from the previous year's pilot suggested that there was still room for improvement in the survey and it had to be shortened in length. It also had to be determined whether the survey captured the essential dimensions of teaching quality (HEFCE, 2004). What is most interesting about this report are the warnings it offered about the inability of the overall satisfaction question to be used as a publishable result and the need to avoid using the NSS as a way to compare institutions across the whole sector without taking account of the individual institutional contexts (HEFCE, 2004).

Indeed, this was also evident in our findings where institutions bemoaned how the NSS 'unfairly' compares institutions against each other, despite the fact that different cohorts of

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1 Available at: [www.thestudentsurvey.com](http://www.thestudentsurvey.com).

students and different types of universities have different issues, as will be discussed in the following chapter.

Worth noting is that both inter-institutional comparisons and the publication of NSS results are now occurring in the form of league tables. Each year the NSS results are published on the Unistats website, and are available through published sources such as *The Times Good University Guide*, published in association with Price Waterhouse Coopers, and a special supplement to the *Guardian* newspaper.

## 4 Discussion of findings: Interviews

It has been suggested that the NSS has made a number of positive contributions to the UK higher education sector, ranging from changes made by universities to giving students a voice and some of these contributions are set out below.

### 4.1 Increased collaboration

Buckley (2012) asserts that most institutions feel strongly that the NSS has increased the visibility and impact of the 'student voice'. Without providing a compelling clarification on how the NSS gives students a 'voice', Buckley argues that 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, adding that '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' (Buckley, 2012: 13).

Our findings indeed confirm existence of camaraderie between students and staff at various institutions, as suggested by this informant from University C:

A very good example would be something like online assessment marking, which was resisted for years and getting students on board, hearing the student voice has enabled us to completely change the way in which we submit work and provide feedback to students. We're not there yet but I think actually they help us. Like many public services, they can be very producer dominated and I think we do have students who we are serving and I think they enable us to understand what it's like to be a student and how we can better provide a service for them.

Ramsden (2008) appears to agree with this assertion and suggests that universities and colleges are increasingly positioning students as engaged collaborators rather than inferior partners in assessment, teaching, course planning and the improvement of quality, and are using student representatives as central contributors to the business of enhancing the student experience. Apart from indicating that student satisfaction data has indeed contributed to various changes, including increased collaboration between academics and students, our findings also suggested that institutions are placing more emphasis on ensuring student involvement in issues affecting them:

I think there's been a lot more involvement in students on committees where decisions are made, so I think student voice is heard a lot more. I think there is a big push by staff I think to engage students in the decision making process, when you're designing things, when you're thinking about making changes. The students are the people who are dealing with it and addressing it. So involving students where the feedback from the students is going to be valuable, not just making assumptions about how students might react to things, involvement in committees. (University A)



However, student involvement in practices like assessment and teaching is debatable as a positive impact and has attracted reservations from a section of the academic community who believe that such an encroachment of students in presumably academic roles may not only lead to academics losing their freedom but may also breed a consumerist ethos, as suggested by this interviewee from University C commenting on the centralised module evaluation feedback process:

I think a lot of academics thought it was another example of the sort of big brother culture and the surveillance culture and they were not happy about it at all and I know even from my point of view, there are one or two questions that I really object to, there's one about are there enough resources in the library and I can't do anything about that, so for my score to be brought down on that is beyond my remit to do anything about it.

So there are problems, from a department point of view. It's been quite helpful to pick up on areas of concern. On the other hand, heads of department are still relatively limited in terms of what they can do as a result of those evaluations but I think a lot of academics have felt very uncomfortable about them.

## **4.2 Enhanced engagement between universities and students**

Closely related to the issue of collaboration, it has also been well documented in the literature that the NSS has enhanced the relationship between students and institutions. For example, Shah and Nair (2009) argue that institutions are increasingly working in partnership with students and Students' Unions both before and after student surveys, with increased communication about the survey to optimise response rates, and working closely with the study body to implement improvements.

Our findings demonstrate how senior academics acknowledge the high level of student engagement in institutions, particularly through incorporation of student representatives at various institutional levels, as suggested by this senior academic:

Student reps are a good sounding board. If they're engaged with being a rep, they're a good sounding board for if things are working or not, you can say to them 'How is this going? Have you had any feedback? Do people like this? Is this working?' 'Is there something else?' They're members of those committees so you talk to them. So student reps are very important. (University A)

Indeed, this concurs with Shah and Nair (2009) who further posit that the engagement of students in external quality audits by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) has also increased the prominence of the student voice in UK higher education, with students playing an important role in the assessment and enhancement of quality. Buckley (2012) supports this assertion and notes that several institutions ensure that student representatives on these groups have access to the NSS results, and this is also a priority for many Students' Unions. As some of our informants suggest, it is almost common now in universities to provide training to student representatives, as well as facilitating access to other sources of data to allow them to contribute to various meetings and at times, to contextualise the NSS results for themselves.

## **4.3 Increased university visibility**

Looking at other feats the NSS is said to have achieved, there is a prevailing belief in the literature that the NSS has helped raise profiles of several universities. For example, Callender, et al (2014) in their current review of the NSS observe that ever since its introduction in 2005, the NSS's 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, they argue, has forced institutions to pay attention to students' perceptions of their learning environment. They further note that apart from becoming an important component of the quality assurance and enhancement system for the HE sector, 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. They therefore suggest that the survey results often also play a key role in decision-making processes as an important source of management information. This is also prevalent in our findings, where universities admit that student satisfaction surveys indeed get fed into various policies and strategies, a development that helps raise their visibility as admitted by this senior academic from University D:

I think for us as a university, league tables and survey results are very important. I don't think students necessarily always look at them or prospective students but I think it gives you something to stand up and talk about and use as a recruitment tool at open days and I think it is a good measure of just how good your courses are.

#### **4.4 League tables: a necessary evil?**

The issue of league tables is as controversial and contentious as satisfaction surveys themselves. Many within academia do not seem to be convinced that league tables bring much benefit to the HE landscape and this is confirmed in our data:

I think the problem with the NSS now is that we've all converged to such a small number of responses, the dynamic range of the responses are now so tightly grouped that a 1% shift moves people around because the obsession has become about league table position and not about outcomes. The thing about league tables is that those that construct league tables, it's in their interest for there to be changes shown. So the pity with the NSS is that we've lost sight of the fact that most or the vast majority of students, a very high level of satisfaction is represented.  
(University B)

However, another section believes the league tables, which mostly emanate from student satisfaction data, bring some positives with them. For example, in their study of the impact of league tables on higher education institutions, Locke et al (2008) observed that league tables and the individual indicators used to compile them appear to be having a significant influence on institutions' actions and decision-making, although HEIs themselves are reluctant to acknowledge this. Thus, Locke et al suggest that the fact that league tables are being used by many institutions as key performance indicators and, in some cases, strategic targets, and as one of several drivers for internal change, is good in itself. This, too, was corroborated in both institutional documents and in interviews with our informants:

So in our current university plan, one of our targets is aimed at the *Guardian* League Table. Of course that one doesn't use research in its rankings but it does use NSS a lot, so that's why it's important to us, NSS, student outcomes, student employability, that's the three things we're trying to drive. So yes it is a key part of what we do. Consequently a lot of the activities going on at the moment are around looking at those areas that aren't performing and trying to look at what's going on with them. (University D)

However, Locke et al (2008) caution that while it is understandable that an institution values its public image as represented in league tables, each institution also needs to manage the tensions between league table performance and institutional and governmental policies and priorities. Perhaps this is where divisions of the importance of league tables begin.

Nevertheless, Locke et al's (2008) position goes some way towards confirming Carey's (2013) observation that as NSS findings contribute to university league tables, the university's agenda becomes continuously to improve its position and failure to do so can be catastrophic. From Carey's (2013) observation, it can be suggested that competition, whatever the form, is good and the more universities try to improve their position in the tables the more they become innovative and invest in mechanisms that can help them beat competition. Indeed, our findings too suggest that universities are left with no choice but to listen to the student voice and abide by students' demand, failing to do so has repercussions on student satisfaction league tables:

I can't think of any department that does not look at its student satisfaction data and think very hard about what do we need to address here? I can't think of a department that just goes 'That's over there, we don't need to worry about that', so departments are going to be looking at that anyway. You just couldn't function. If you didn't look at that, you wouldn't survive because if you don't do something about your scores, then all the measures that are out in the public domain are going to just fall, you're not going to recruit any students, and you're just going to disappear. (University C)

## 4.5 Criticisms of NSS

Despite aforementioned positive impressions of the NSS, there has also been an array of criticisms. The criticisms have included questioning the methodology of the survey; accusing students of using the NSS strategically (Streeting, 2008; *Times Higher Education* 2014); accusing universities of being obsessed with league tables (Bótas and Brown, 2013; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005) and subsequently piling unnecessary pressure on academics (Williams, 2012; Child, 2011; Sabri 2011) and that the NSS is not an embodiment of student experience and voice (Callender et al, 2014; Sabri, 2011; Furedi 2012). Notably, one of the strongest criticisms has indeed been the survey's methodology.

### 4.5.1 'Worthless' methodology?

One of the high profile cases of criticism of the NSS was in 2008 when Lee Harvey quit as the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) director of research and evaluation after a letter by him was published in the *Times Higher Education* magazine criticising the survey as 'bland' and 'methodologically worthless'. Harvey, an internationally respected expert on higher education added thus: 'The National Student Survey is rapidly descending into a farce. As has been shown in other spheres, such as external quality assurance, institutions and academics are good at manipulation. While quality assurance is flexible and can be adapted to minimise the game playing, the NSS is a simplistic device that is easy to out manoeuvre... What we have is an illusion of a survey of student views. However, it is so superficial and so open to abuse as to be useless.' (*Times Higher Education* magazine 13 June 2008). Additionally, there have also been claims that some institutions have pressurised students into giving positive answers. For example, one lecturer at Kingston University was recorded telling students to up their scores because 'if Kingston comes bottom...no-one is going to want to employ you because they'll think your degree is [worthless]' (Swain, H, 2009). Again in the early years of the survey, some student unions started to boycott the survey as they saw it intrusive and over simplistic (Cambridge University Students' Union, 2010).

Indeed, some of our informants were also quick to question the surveys' methodology, arguing that the results are not worth bragging about:

I think in relation to the NSS, not because it's an annual thing, people know the score, they know that yes, if you do well, you brag about it, that's great, if you do less well, you try to see how you can do better...we take the NSS very seriously,

we're pleased to do well but we're aware there are problems at over-claiming, partly because of its methodology and it may not be entirely robust, but also because we don't want our strategy in relation to teaching and learning, to be unbalanced by the NSS. (University A)

However, one of the most detailed analyses of the NSS datasets was conducted by Marsh and Cheng (2008). Their study aimed to test the structure of the NSS instrument and to determine how much of the variance was attributable to background statistics such as discipline. Marsh and Cheng came up with several key findings from this study, one of which suggested that the overall satisfaction question (Question 22) could actually be appropriately used as a summary score. They also found that some subject areas, such as History and Philosophical Studies had a higher average score than other areas. This, they argued, leaves us with the question as to whether the teaching is more effective in this subject across the board, or whether there is something inherent in the subject leading students to rate it more positively. It is this difference between global subject areas which led Marsh and Cheng to conclude that meaningful comparisons could only be made between units of different disciplines when they were within the same institutional context. Additionally, they argued that discipline units of the same subject could be compared across universities. Thus as part of questioning the NSS' validity as a way of differentiating between universities and courses based on responses from all UK universities, it was concluded by Marsh and Cheng and later by Surridge (2009) that comparisons using the NSS data had to be treated with caution (see also Child, 2011).

We concurred with Marsh and Cheng's (2008) findings, which were further expounded in our findings, leading to most senior academics to describe the NSS as a blunt instrument, at times misleading. In particular, the issue of question 22 of the NSS, asking students about their overall satisfaction has created endless debates in academia, if not confusion, with professionals arguing that it is methodologically and professionally wrong to base league tables on a single question which is not in itself clear. Various senior academics we spoke to concurred with this theme.

#### **4.5.2 NSS, a blunt instrument for holding HEIs to account**

One of my concerns that I have with the survey is what is it actually measuring? What is it measuring and the higher education sector is being held to ransom, based on a survey that's not. It's partly about quality, it has elements of satisfaction, is it a good overall indicator of how students have performed or learned or anything else? I think not. I think it's a very, very crude tool and I have personal experience of saying my results in the survey do not match with my experience nor my outcome, as an academic. (University A)

#### **4.5.3 NSS not a good measure of student satisfaction**

I don't think it is a good measure of student satisfaction because it only captures the final semester of the final year, of less than 20% of your student body. You want to know your student satisfaction, you've got to look at what all your students are saying, so equally important in any university which is considering what it does, it is what PTES says, which is the Postgraduate Taught Experience Study, PRES, which is the Postgraduate Research Experience Study and whatever a university uses for the Level 5 or Level 6 students, first year and second year students and Level 4 students. The NSS itself only gives you a fairly crude measure of student satisfaction. (University A)

I think it's probably very crude, I think it's probably not drilling down into 'What is satisfaction?' I still come back to what does satisfaction mean for the student?

What is it? I think we assume we know what it is and I don't think we do, I don't think we have ... and I'm not sure when people fill that in, that in their heads of 'Am I satisfied?', it's all the same thing that they're assessing, so I think we're just getting, it might just be 'Do I feel good about ..?', so I think it's a bit crude. (University D)

Kane et al (2013) further question the NSS's methodology by arguing that the NSS cannot reflect key institutional issues. They also note that all institutions are measured against each other despite differences of institutional culture and resources, as well as the nature of the student body. The thrust of their argument was that student experience varies according to the type of institution that they attend, the type of programme they study on, their educational attainment and the disciplines they study. Hence, Kane et al (2013:60) further posit that 'the survey is often (anecdotally) thought to be a crude instrument; is too short and broad to focus on specific institutional issues and the then proposed NSS supposedly measured mathematically proven concepts such as teaching and learning, even though such notions are preposterous'.

While partly confirming the sentiments of Kane et al (2013), our findings suggest that some institutions, especially those placed in the bottom 25% of the *Guardian* university league tables complained about how league tables emanating from the NSS do not take into account differences in universities when generating the rankings. However, there is also a prevailing understanding that the NSS is the only tool available and it is best if institutions simply embrace it:

I think it is a blunt instrument but it's one of those...that's the only one we've got. That's what we are given. And despite the fact it's a blunt instrument, it doesn't really talk about enhancement. It doesn't really measure students' engagement with their course. Because of the way the figures are presented, every university compared against every other, it doesn't allow for the fact that different cohorts of students and different types of universities have different issues. A university like ours will struggle to get the kind of satisfaction rates that someone might get. If all their students are getting two A Stars and an A and ours are coming in with 250 points at A Level, our students have got very different expectations, different motivations for being here and it's the same with league tables, the comparisons, the measures we use aren't always going to be helpful to us. (University D)

#### **4.5.4 NSS has not addressed quality teaching**

The NSS was initially commissioned by HEFCE as a project on collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE. However, one of the prominent issues to emerge from our data was institutions questioning if the NSS has indeed raised standards of education, with the majority arguing on the contrary:

NSS has been very useful I think in raising the issue about student experience, what it hasn't done necessarily is address the issue of learning experience, the quality of the learning, as you've already intimated are two different things. It's kind of like people first of all assumed that they were the same thing and they're not so I still think we're struggling with how to address the latter and make sure that quality is improving, not just the relative expectation of that experience. (University B)

I think we're measuring what is easy to measure but it's not necessarily a good reflection of the quality of the course or the quality of the learning because I think for many of these students, the quality of the learning will only become evident after they've done it and not immediately after they've done it, when they're being asked to fill out the survey but a couple of years down the line, they'll suddenly go 'ah, I'm now beginning to see, I now understand, I now work in the discipline'. (University A)

#### **4.5.5 Teaching staff under pressure**

Child (2011) conducted a study of academics' views of the NSS as a quality enhancement tool, results of which, among others, suggested that the NSS is perceived by lecturers 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.

Another study on the impact of league tables by Locke et al (2008) found that, despite widespread scepticism about league tables and their methodologies within HEIs, rankings affect staff morale.

As an extension to such studies, our findings suggest that much as institutions celebrate the triumphs of lecturers whose subjects do well on the NSS and use such success stories to motivate others, teaching staff whose subjects continue to attract low scores are under pressure to perform.

In some instances, heads of institutions feel that they are not putting 'underperforming staff' under much scrutiny:

There are the high performing courses where we want to celebrate their success, as we did and we will do so again with colleagues. We also want to use that group to work with other teams who may be under-performing. So we've got this high performing group up there, we've got a group at the bottom who are habitually under-performing. Personally, I don't think we've been tough enough with that group. I think if students are consistently, year on year saying to the institution that they're highly dissatisfied with their teaching, their learning, the way they're being assessed and supported, that tells me something is going very badly wrong and needs strong management action to deal with it and personally, I don't think we've been forceful enough in those areas. (University D)

As part of listening to students, our findings revealed that universities may change personnel in response to student feedback data:

The programmes change every year so sometimes it's because the subject changes but very often it's because students have expressed discontent with something. Therefore, you change the personnel teaching it. You change the way you teach it. You change the content, you change the assessment, you change the feedback, you change something about it. Or sometimes you just drop it. (University B)

#### **4.6 The challenge of dissemination and evaluation of NSS results**

There are some inconsistencies when it comes to how institutions disseminate and subsequently evaluate changes instigated by student feedback surveys. While some institutions suggest that they go back to the students through student representatives to explain the changes they have made in response to the feedback surveys, a term called 'closing the feedback loop', others suggest that closing the loop is a serious challenge to universities.

## **i Staff-Student Liaison Committees used to close the feedback loop**

I think one of the things that people are now trying to be very good at, is making sure that in those staff-student liaison committees, that there is a closing of the loop, if something is raised and something is discussed and we say we're doing something because this has come up in NSS, there's a closing, try to get better at closing the loop. (University D)

This agrees with Shah and Nair (2009) who argue that UK higher education has made significant progress in using student survey results to close the loop on areas needing improvement. However, perhaps the limitation to such assertions is that Shah and Nair (2009) did not give concrete research-based examples where this has worked and how success was measured.

Nevertheless, our findings suggest that other universities have challenges with closing the feedback loop.

## **ii Some universities rarely close the feedback loop**

This is one of the biggest problems universities have found that they're facing and it's called closing the information loop, or closing the feedback loop. You get better responses if the person making a response sees that they've been listened to. That is very difficult to do with things like the NSS, when the very next thing you do is take your finals and leave and these results don't come out. But the same thing happens throughout your life as a student. If you're not careful, you'll fill in these questionnaires and you don't know what's happened which is why it's difficult to get people to fill them in. I've seen some very innovative approaches of closing the loop, one of them is if I put you in a classroom and give you a quality questionnaire to fill out; I can almost guarantee you'll fill it out. If I tell you that there's a quality questionnaire online, will you fill it out? Odds on you won't. Why would you? (University A)

### **4.6.1 'You said, we did' debate: universities still divided**

Whereas some institutions continue to happily employ the 'You said, we did' model, others feel there is no need to 'broadcast' changes they have made to their institutions, regardless of whether or not they were instigated by feedback surveys.

#### **i 'You said, we did'**

We have a very big emphasis on 'You said, we did', I give the first talk when people come in, so on Monday morning of welcome week at 9 o'clock I'm the first person they see and I always have the NSS scores from the previous year and I say 'This is what you're joining, these are the fantastic scores, the only way we can carry on doing that is by you telling us if there's anything going wrong, so just email your unit coordinator, email your tutor, email me if you want to and tell me if there's anything that's not going to give us really good scores again because last year, people said that they wanted more access to the cafeterias or a printer in the common room', or whatever it happens to be 'and now there is one', so you just give them a really simple idea of what previous people have said and what you did about it and they think 'That would be good'. (University B)

#### **ii No need to publish changes made**

Our Vice Chancellor a few years ago absolutely said he did not want some clichéd, 'You said, we did' or something like that and I think we've always taken that to heart.

Do we have well established ways of the university feeding back to students about what previous NSS have said? I'm not sure we do and I think that's a very interesting point and perhaps we should do more of that.

Have we broadcast it [changes] around the university? I don't think we have. But we certainly then had a session at student senate, where we talked about the success of online assessment and marking. It wasn't so much us telling them, it was actually encouraging the students on that senate to talk about their experience of Moodle and so it wasn't so much of 'You told this, we did this and we've now done it', maybe we've taken our Vice Chancellor to heart a bit too much. (University C)

Hence, authors like Buckley (2012: 180) ask if students are present on all the committees and groups where NSS results are discussed in detail and if the institution and the Students' Unions work together on the NSS, in a way that is honest, productive and sustainable, and acknowledges the challenges that exist.

## **4.7 Practical changes instigated by the NSS and other emerging themes**

Our data revealed that institutions have employed various changes in response to issues students raise in the satisfaction surveys. Among other practical changes, universities have:

- recruited academic advisors and officers to take charge of the NSS
- mapped internal surveys to mirror the NSS
- renewed their focus on learning and teaching
- revisited and improved timetabling systems
- raised structures including building sites, teaching rooms and sports complexes
- revisited their feedback and assessment mechanisms
- organised briefings with students to enlighten them about feedback and assessment, the NSS and its benefits
- replaced subjects, at times personnel, whose NSS scores keep falling
- introduced or empowered various forums and platforms to meet several times in a year to discuss the NSS, among others.

Such forums found at nearly all institutions include: NSS forums, student experience action plans, education boards, NSS improvement forums and learning and teaching advisory groups.

Various issues and themes also emerged from the interviews with senior academics from the institutions, many of which related to response to student feedback data as discussed below.

### **4.7.1 More student involvement**

The interviewees suggested that they are more proactive in their involvement with students and appreciate the importance of looking at issues from a student perspective:

We do try to engage student reps in the faculty, not just 'What do you think?' but tell us beforehand, so it's a positive, it's not always just 'We want your reaction but we want the prompting for us to take action', I think that's got much better. (University B)



### **4.7.2 Institutions taking students' demands seriously**

The data revealed that universities take seriously issues that students point out in the surveys and their feedback is incorporated in many decisions that institutions make:

Schools do spend time analysing their results, looking at where they think things need to be improved, taking that as part of the mix of all the other measures and all the other things that come in...sometimes actually external examiners say 'Why don't you do so and so?' and you can say 'When we explored that after our student result, students did not want that'. (University A)

I think it's been driven by a really fantastic thing which is we listen to our students and we take the people who we are serving, however we want to describe it, seriously and we're not willing to put up with, they're less willing to put up with a shoddy service. (University C)

### **4.7.3 Feedback and assessment**

One of the issues that attract low scores in the NSS is feedback and assessment. Our findings revealed several theories on this issue, which included senior academics arguing that assessment in particular is crucial to students, has a personal impact and students answer beyond what they are asked in the NSS because they are fixated on the mark. It was considered that students had little understanding of the variability of assessment designs to various steps universities have taken, including changing turnaround periods and increasing moderation, as well as educating students what constitutes feedback and assessment. Nevertheless, our findings revealed two main approaches to these issues. Some institutions accept it that it is a universal challenge and have now started to engage students more so that they can find a way forward and subsequently improve their ratings in the student satisfaction league tables:

A very good example would be something like online assessment marking, which was resisted for years. Getting students on board, hearing the student voice has enabled us to completely change the way in which we submit work and provide feedback to students. We're not there yet but I think actually they help us, like many public services, they can be very producer dominated and I think we do have students who we are serving and I think they enable us to understand what it's like to be a student and how we can better provide a service for them. (University C)

On the other hand, there was a suggestion from some that universities should find ways of getting things right as opposed to simply being satisfied with the idea that feedback and assessment is a general problem:

What the NSS results have done is to focus our attention on assessment and feedback. So in some senses, the NSS results, the consistently lower scores, when you look across schools, when you look across university, lower scores on that category indicate that it's something that needs to be addressed. I don't accept that it's always lower for everybody 'We just have to accept it's lower for everybody', I don't accept that. I think it's pointing to this as an area where if you get it right, you really could have an impact on satisfaction. (University A)

### **4.7.4 Results feed into strategy**

The findings from the interviews also collaborate with data from institutional documentation about how feedback from student satisfaction surveys informs various institutional strategies:

We are writing our learning and teaching strategy at the moment and that will be partly in response to this. So one of the areas where we dipped a lot is around intellectual challenge and around some personal development stuff. All that should be easy, everyone should be able to make their course interesting so there'll be a reiteration on why we're doing that and putting our focus around the personal development stuff. So that's how it feeds into strategy there. (University D)

What the programmes do is they do have staff-student consultative committee. So they do kind of bring to those in particular and also to the programme boards which the student reps sit on, the kinds of scores and concerns and issues that have been raised and then agree what they'll do to address it. And then they will bring those up in those staff-student consultative committees and make the programme reps aware as well, that these are the kinds of changes that we've made because this is what the students have told us. We do reiterate that at department level as well. If there's a big issue that has caught my attention across a range of programmes then I'll drive change in that area. (University C)

## **4.8 How universities interpret data**

As earlier alluded to, as part of changes which universities have made, the data revealed that institutions have employed various strategies including introducing and empowering various forums like NSS forums, student experience action plans, education boards, NSS improvement forums and teaching and advisory groups. These groups, our findings reveal, meet several times in a year to discuss and subsequently digest the student survey results. Institutions, therefore, employ various strategies to interpret the data.

### **i Scores across schools compared**

We use it for comparison purposes and we use it to indicate 'Here are some things why you need to take NSS as being important within the school because here are some things that it affects', subject area satisfaction. So this was to show really, within the University, which schools were performing slightly better than others. (University D)

### **ii Schools with low scores held to account**

If you're looking to benchmark against what people do because then what you do is say, 'You've got a good score on this, why? How? What do you think accounts for this?' So anything that's green would be things where you say 'Go and benchmark, go and see what they do, talk to them about what they do, here's some areas of good practice and see how they use it', if you've got a red then you need to find out what you're getting wrong because in the whole university, you're coming out quite low. (University B)

### **iii NSS used to compare institutions against each other**

The other thing that we do with the data is obviously to pick out trends, so we say as an institution, where across the board are we not doing very well? And you talked about the learning and teaching strategy, year on year we have tracked through. We have what's called an NSS forum, where the data is discussed, the benchmark data is presented 'This is how we're performing versus competitor groups, this is how it's performing in comparison to last year', that is, have we improved or have we gone down?

We also at that forum, very often will split the data and this is where a little bit like the institutional level versus school level can be different, if you split it by campus,

by type of student, part-time, full-time, international, home, you then start seeing quite different trends. So it's important that we don't just believe the top level data, it has to be sliced and diced in different ways, so we can get a genuine sense of what is the experience for students, based on their background, based on where they're studying and so on. (University A)

## 4.9 Differences in league table positions and approach to the NSS

Our findings revealed differences in how institutions approach the NSS based on their positions in the NSS league tables. In particular, institutions placed in the top 25% of the league tables appear to have a relaxed view of the NSS. They appear to put particular emphasis on improving the student experience and argue that this automatically triggers a higher satisfaction rate than being 'obsessed with the NSS' and improving league table position:

I suppose the focus before we get the results is on the student experience and we do say to people: focus on the student experience, the NSS takes care of itself. The NSS is like the thing at the end and although it is listed in there as a KPI [Key Performance Indicator], we don't want people to become obsessed about the survey other than what they're doing on the ground. So until we get the results on 1 August, it's very much what are your students telling you, how can you make things even better for them? Come 1 August, the focus is all on the data and what that's then telling us... (University B)

Another institution in the top 25% of the league tables also reiterated that they prioritise challenging students and giving them a good education and everything else is secondary:

My concern is that if we were to become or the university were to become only concerned with the NSS, where doing well in the NSS is the only game in town that would denature the academic experience for students because it would. Fundamentally, we're engaged in education, not customer satisfaction and I think that's the key point. The NSS is useful for flagging certain things up, it's not of no value but it cannot be something which occupies the whole territory. (University A)

In contrast, institutions in the lower 25% of the student satisfaction league tables appear to place particular focus on improving their student satisfaction and subsequently their standings in the league tables:

We ask people to write a very short action plan for National Student Survey, which also might be informed by league tables. What we ask them to do is write down the three things that were real successes for the course this year and also the top three improvement agenda 'students said this to us, we're going to do this...'

The one in the Guardian which is the one we target, the things that you can affect is what we go for and one of them is data returns. So you do that and try and get those better. At Faculty level we also discuss how many people get good degrees? Are we doing the right kind of teaching to get them to where they need to be? What the student experience is in the NSS and then ultimately, employability. And that sort of follows from the other two in some ways. So these are things people should care about is the message we give. (University D)

Others admit that they promote the NSS by engaging students more to let them know how their institutions take the satisfaction surveys seriously:

Yes, we promote it, the university does promote it and each department, it's been more successful when the departments promote it and when we work alongside the Students' Union, so we work with the student reps but we also work with colleagues and to make it very easy for students, so if you take iPads into the lecture for example, things like that, they can see how quickly it is to fill it out, you can get it done and colleagues talk to them about the importance of it and let them know the things that we have changed as a result of what students have told us.

(University C)

## **5 Discussion of findings: Institutional policy documents**

As the interviews revealed, institutions seem to take a particular interest in student satisfaction data and this is reflected in both internal literature and documents in the public domain. We will not label these so as to protect the anonymity of the institutions at which we conducted the research.

### **i NSS in institutional documents**

The NSS features prominently in institutional strategy documents to:

- ensure a higher quality experience for our students as measured by the NSS (Publicly available document for prospective and current students)
- enhance the University's standing in all measures of educational performance including the University's ranking in the NSS (Publicly available document for prospective and current students).

We found that NSS Q22 is used as an institutional KPI. Institutional learning and teaching strategies are aligned to student satisfaction (NSS questions) in most institutional documents.

### **ii Marketing and Communication**

Marketing and communication aimed at both current and prospective students draws upon NSS data to:

- ensure the highest quality experience for all our students by presenting our expectations and commitments in a student charter (Student Charter)
- promote and develop opportunities for multi and interdisciplinary study, in response to student demand and to maintain market position and enhance reputation (Internal Learning and Teaching Strategy).

### **iii Changes in practice**

Institutions have committed to make various changes, in response to student satisfaction data:

- effective assessment and feedback to support learning (Internal assessment for learning and feedback strategy)
- engage students in the quality management process through student representation on committees, working groups and audits (Internal Learning and Teaching Strategy)
- to involve students in decision making about their university and in identifying improvements to academic programmes and the student experience (Publicly available document for prospective and current students).

## 6 Conclusions

Our data revealed that institutions use student satisfaction data for a diverse range of reasons. While institutions insist that the ultimate goal is to listen to students and improve their experience, there is a difference in approach to the surveys based on the institutions' position in the league tables. In particular, institutions in the top 25% of league tables (Universities A and B) appear to prioritise improving the student experience and let the NSS take care of itself, while those in the bottom 25% (Universities C and D) prioritise their NSS league table position and subsequently employ various tactics to promote the surveys.

Despite institutions adopting different approaches to the surveys based on league table positions, institutions generally listen to students' demands raised in surveys and have responded by instigating various changes including recruiting academic advisers and officers to take charge of the NSS; mapping internal surveys to mirror the NSS; raising structures including building sites and revising their feedback and assessment processes.

However, there are inconsistencies regarding dissemination and evaluation of such changes. While some institutions insist on the 'You said, we did' model by going back to students (mostly through representatives, and written materials) to acknowledge that they have responded to their demands, others argue that the NSS is not a game or competition and do not feel the need to broadcast the changes they make. Some institutions are unsure whether or not they close the feedback loop. This means that there are still inconsistencies in practice between institutions.

Despite criticising the NSS as being blunt, not a measure of good satisfaction and its failure to address quality teaching, among others, institutions still value student satisfaction data and this interest is reflected in various institutional policy documents, both internal and in the public domain.

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