



Options for the future of the NSS

Issue

1. This paper sets out the context and rationale for our review of the National Student Survey (NSS). It gives a brief overview of the history of the survey, previous reviews and how the NSS is currently used. The paper outlines the scope and activities of a two-stage internal review process; the first phase addressing the issues agreed between the OfS chair and the Secretary of State, and the second phase with a broader scope.

Recommendations

2. The board is invited to:
 - a. note the terms of reference for the first phase of the review.
 - b. to discuss the issues raised in the paper and to agree the two-phase approach to the review proposed in this paper.
 - c. to agree that the 2021 NSS should go ahead with the approach and changes proposed in paragraphs 40-43.

Further information

3. Available from Conor Ryan, Director of External Relations and Emma Maskell, Head of Student Engagement and Information.

Summary

4. The NSS has remained one of the main student surveys in the UK and internationally since its launch in 2005. It is the principal way that OfS engages with all undergraduate students. It is used by the OfS for student information and forms part of the metrics for the current TEF and is being considered as an important part of quality regulation under the B conditions.
5. The NSS is jointly owned by the UK funding councils and regulators and managed by the OfS on their behalf under the terms of a memorandum of understanding. The last large-scale review of the NSS was undertaken in 2014. Proposals for its use in the monitoring of B conditions and to expand the survey in addition to concerns raised by the DfE suggest another review would be worthwhile.
6. The OfS is undertaking a two-phase internal review. The first phase, by mid-December 2020, will:
 - Assess the bureaucratic burden the NSS places on providers and how this could be reduced.
 - Explore the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the NSS for provider behaviour, and how these could be prevented, including whether the NSS drives the lowering of academic standards and grade inflation.
 - Examine the appropriate level at which the NSS could continue to provide reliable data on the student perspective on their subject, provider and the wider system, and what could be done without depending on a universal annual sample.
 - Examine the extent to which data from the NSS should be made public including the implications of Freedom of Information legislation
 - Ensure the OfS has the data it needs to regulate quality effectively.
 - Ensure the NSS will stand the test of time and can be adapted and refined periodically to prevent gaming.
7. The second phase will look more widely at the survey's use and what questions should be asked to support regulation including through the B conditions on quality, TEF and student information in addition to widening its scope to more UK wide issues on behalf of the other UK funders who jointly own the survey. It could also potentially examine the potential use for access and participation and value for money regulatory purpose.

Background

8. The National Student Survey (NSS) has provided a voice to over four million students since it was launched in 2005. Its introduction coincided with providers being able to charge students up to £3,000 per year to study. The survey was designed to capture students' views on the quality of their course in this context. It is now one of the largest surveys of its kind in the world. More than 300,000 students respond each year. In 2020, it had a response rate of 69%.
9. The NSS is the international benchmark for student surveys – in recent years, the OfS survey team has advised colleagues from Japan, the Netherlands and Malaysia on developing surveys.

10. NSS data provides information for prospective students and stakeholders to support improved learning outcomes. It does so by gathering students' perceptions about key aspects of the academic experience. Its main objectives are to:
 - Inform prospective students' choices.
 - Provide data that supports providers in improving the quality of the student's academic experience.
 - Support public accountability.
11. Additionally, the NSS has an increasingly important role in regulation, providing insights at a sector level through course, subject and provider level results. The results inform Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) metrics. As the OfS strengthens its expectations of quality in English providers, the NSS has an increasingly important regulatory role in providing objective and comparable insights. Student engagement in wider regulatory activity such as TEF and access and participation plans usually relies on smaller groups of engaged students, making the NSS the principal mechanism the OfS has for engaging with all undergraduate students.
12. NSS results at sector, provider and subject-within-provider level are published annually on the OfS website and by many other independent student information providers, including UCAS. Results are also published on the Discover Uni website to help inform prospective students' decisions. Individual providers and student representative organisations can access a more detailed breakdown of the NSS results via a dissemination portal. This allows providers to identify areas of strength and weakness and to make changes to improve the student experience.
13. The survey is a key component of the wider UK higher education regulatory landscape, and is valued by funders and regulators in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Participation in the survey is compulsory for regulated providers in England. Providers are required to provide individual student data necessary for the NSS as part of their ongoing conditions of registration.

Discussion

The NSS questionnaire

14. The current survey has 27 questions in eight broad areas covering the academic experience, with opportunities for students to make open-ended comments on positive and negative aspects of their higher education experience. There are also six questions for nursing, midwifery and allied health placement students. Similarly, all students in the final year of a degree apprenticeship programme are asked questions about the workplace element of their training. The open-ended questions are anonymised and given to providers to help them identify their strengths and how they can improve their students' experience. Several optional questions, for the information of participating providers only, follow the main questionnaire. This is valued by many providers as a way of avoiding multiple surveys and creating student survey fatigue.
15. The survey uses a Likert scale designed to measure collective student responses to a concept – for example 'learning community'. As concepts are multifaceted, multiple questions are asked

to measure each concept. Students respond to each question by choosing from five points on the scale, ranging from 'Definitely agree' to 'Definitely disagree', or by choosing 'Not applicable'.

Impact

16. Much of the change and innovation the NSS has brought has been at a provider level, as our recent Insight brief showed. Most notable is the use individual universities and colleges make of their results to enhance their courses. As a result of NSS student feedback, providers have extended library opening times, bought more e-books, and created more spaces for group work.¹
17. At course level, the survey results can highlight effective teaching practices and shine a light on outlying cases where courses are less well regarded by their students.² As well as enhancing teaching practices at universities and colleges, this information makes the NSS a useful source for prospective students who want to compare teaching and assessment across providers.
18. There are several other student surveys including ones run by Advance HE, HEPI and university league table publishers (see annexe b). The absence of NSS would likely lead to the replacement of the information within league tables with numerous surveys being conducted by the publications themselves, or other survey providers

Governance and funding

19. The UK higher education funding and regulatory bodies – who jointly fund the survey - work in partnership on the NSS to provide information to students and other stakeholders about learning and teaching, and the student experience and is covered by a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between the UK funding councils and regulators. Students from across the whole of the UK are therefore eligible to complete the survey and feedback on their experiences of higher education. The OfS runs and manages the survey on behalf of the four UK nations.
20. Many students (and employers), both domestic and international, see the HE sector as UK wide and don't recognise its devolved administration. For example 4% of English undergraduates study in another UK nation and 25% of Welsh students study in England.³ This perception has benefits reputationally with international students but also highlights the importance of providing comparable, consistent, impartial student information for student decision making purposes and public accountability. The DfE in England contributes 82% of NSS costs through programme funding to the OfS. The survey is delivered by Ipsos-Mori under contract to OfS on behalf of the UK funders. A contract is now in place for surveys in 2021 and 2022. In some other countries of the UK this cost is borne by providers on a per head basis.

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/the-national-student-survey-consistency-controversy-and-change/>

² Tuck, Jackie, 'Academics engaging with student writing: Working at the higher education textface', 2017, p102.

³ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/16-01-2020/sb255-higher-education-student-statistics/location>

21. Governance is through the UK Student Information Group, which includes representatives from the funders and education departments of the four UK nations. At present, the survey takes place in the final year of undergraduate study only.

Current OfS strategy for NSS

22. The OfS board has previously agreed plans to widen the scope of the NSS population, to include final year students on short courses and to trial a survey of students in all years of study. The board recognised that this expansion would deliver a range of significant benefits, including:

- I. Capturing the views of students who withdraw from their studies before they reach the final year of their course
- II. Offering additional information to OfS on students' perceptions of their higher education experience, for assessments of quality
- III. Incentivising providers to improve the student experience throughout the whole student lifecycle.
- IV. Improving the data available for providers
- V. Offer a richer source of information for students making choices about where to study.
- VI. Offering the potential for greater detail when reporting by subjects and students' characteristics.

Using the NSS in regulation

23. At present, the NSS is used by providers to help them understand students' views on where improvements may be needed. For this information to be valuable for provider-level regulation, it needs to be at subject level. Publication is one of the regulatory levers available to the OfS and the publication of the NSS is one way in which we incentivise providers to improve the student experience.

24. The OfS's regulatory framework says that we will use 'national surveys of students' views' for individual providers to judge whether the B conditions for quality are satisfied. This means that, for example, answers to NSS questions on the design and delivery of courses give us important signals about whether there are issues in a provider that require further investigation and regulatory action. As we reintroduce our more normal regulatory approaches, we are embedding the signals we receive from the NSS into our monitoring approach for quality. As part of this process, we are considering whether the NSS is asking students the right questions to ensure that such signals are meaningful indicators for regulatory purposes.

25. Work is underway to explore the use of the NSS in an OfS regulation dashboard, which would use questions and, more likely, question scales on sections of the survey relevant to the B conditions on quality. The overall satisfaction question is unlikely to be part of this dashboard. Analysis is underway to explore the use of the proportion of respondents who 'strongly disagree' on these questions to identify areas of poor performance.

26. The positive impact of the NSS has included tangible improvements to assessment and feedback practices across the whole sector, as well as numerous provider-level improvements. It also provides transparent information to prospective students to support

them to make good decisions about what and where to study. More recently, data drawn from several of the NSS questions are used in the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) metrics.

Concerns about the NSS

27. There are concerns about the NSS. The Department for Education has argued that the NSS is contributing to grade inflation because academics have an incentive to mark students more favourably to improve course scores on the NSS in particular because of the use of the NSS in league tables. The NSS has also been considered by the DfE alongside wider data collections as part of a drive to reduce regulatory burden on providers as set out in the Reducing bureaucratic burden in research, innovation and higher education statement and the strategic guidance letter 14/9/2020 below:

“Since its inception in 2005, the NSS has exerted a downwards pressure on standards within our higher education system, and there have been consistent calls for it to be reformed. There is valid concern from some in the sector that good scores can more easily be achieved through dumbing down and spoon-feeding students, rather than pursuing high standards and embedding the subject knowledge and intellectual skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace. These concerns have been driven by both the survey’s current structure and its usage in developing sector league tables and rankings. While government acknowledges that the NSS can be a helpful tool for providers and regulators, we believe its benefits are currently outweighed by these concerns. Further, its results do not correlate well with other, more robust, measures of quality, with some of the worst courses in the country, in terms of drop-out rates and progression to highly skilled employment, receiving high NSS scores. Accordingly, the extensive use of the NSS in league tables may cause some students to choose courses that are easy and entertaining, rather than robust and rigorous.

The Government shares concerns raised by some in the sector that, in its current form, the NSS is open to gaming, with reports of some institutions deliberately encouraging their final year students to answer positively with incentives/messaging about their future career prospects. Academics have also criticised the cost and bureaucracy the NSS creates, arguing that the level of activity it generates can be a distraction from more important teaching and research activities. There is a sense that the level of activity it drives in universities and colleges has become excessive and inefficient. For example, we are aware that some providers employ analysts to drill down into NSS performance, in some cases at module level, and investigate any sub-par performance.”

28. While we have not seen evidence to this effect, we will actively seek out any such evidence during phase one of the review. As the DfE statement suggests, there is a perception held by some that the NSS is too much of a burden on providers, although, the survey is largely managed by an independent contractor – to date, this has been Ipsos Mori. The provider is required to ensure the supply of accurate student contact details to the contractor, to allow them to carry out the survey. However, providers are encouraged to promote the survey to its students and many providers spend time analysing the results on individual courses, which can be resource intensive.

29. In recognition of such concerns, the OfS chair and the Secretary of State have agreed that there should be a review of the NSS to investigate the extent of such adverse impacts and to develop practical ways to mitigate and eliminate any such adverse impacts.

A new review of the NSS

30. There have been several reviews of the NSS since 2005. The largest of these was conducted as part of a wide review of student information in 2014, details of which can be found at annex A. It may therefore be appropriate and timely to take this opportunity for a more fundamental re-evaluation of the NSS, including its frequency, the range of questions and the extent to which it covers the range of undergraduate views.

31. Since that time, the regulatory environment has undergone significant change following the introduction of HERA (2017). A review of the NSS, therefore, offers the chance to consider the continued value of the survey for the UK higher education system. It would provide an opportunity to look at the timing of the survey – is it right to continue with an annual survey, rolling survey or could a triennial or biennial survey provide a cost-effective and less burdensome alternative? Is there merit in having sector level smaller scale surveys in years where a full-scale survey does not take place? Should the survey be conducted across all years of undergraduate study?

32. The new review of the NSS is an opportunity not only to consider the appropriate timing of the NSS, but also to look again at the range of questions asked, to consider their usefulness for informing prospective students, supporting improvements in university and colleges and for regulatory purposes.

33. Finally, a review could examine any evidence for the concerns set out above about unintended and negative consequences of the NSS, as well as the issue of the degree of burden it places on those providers through the internal management of the survey and possible behavioural consequences including grade inflation. The review is an opportunity to identify mitigations for those concerns to ensure that it remains valuable without such unintended consequences.

34. All current development work including work to pilot the expansion of the NSS previously approved by the Board in May 2019 will need to be put on hold until after the review.

Terms of reference of a proposed review

35. Given the timescales given by the DfE for the outcome of the review we are proposing a two phased approach. The first, which has already started, is looking at the specific concerns agreed in the exchange of letters between the OfS chair and the Secretary of State. The second phase of the review would be informed by the outcomes of the first review and would address wider issues as to how the NSS could be adapted to fit a new policy landscape both in England and across the UK. The results of the first phase of review will be reported to the board in January 2021. The second phase will run from January-June 2021. We would need to consult on any changes to the NSS from May-August 2021.

NSS review: phase one September-December 2020

Terms of reference

36. The terms of reference, which include those agreed between the OfS chair and the Secretary of State and reflected in the strategic guidance letter of the 14/9/2020, are to:
- I. Clarify the purpose of the NSS in the current HE landscape
 - II. Assess the bureaucratic burden the NSS places on providers and how this could be reduced
 - III. Explore the unintended and unanticipated consequences of the NSS for provider behaviour, and how these could be prevented, including whether the NSS drives the lowering of academic standards and grade inflation.
 - IV. Examine the appropriate level at which the NSS could continue to provide reliable data on the student perspective on their subject, provider and the wider system, and what could be done without depending on a universal annual sample.
 - V. Examine the extent to which data from the NSS should be made public including the implications of Freedom of Information legislation
 - VI. Ensure the OfS has the data it needs to regulate quality effectively
 - VII. Ensure the NSS will stand the test of time and can be adapted and refined periodically to prevent gaming
 - VIII. Ensure the UK wide role of the survey is considered in any recommendations

Working Group

37. The review is being internally led by Conor Ryan, Director of External Relations, with Richard Puttock, Director of Data, Foresight and Analysis (DFA) as deputy chair. In addition to those with expertise within OfS, the group will include representatives of university management, students and academics across different types of provider. They are being supported by a project group of officers within OfS.

Methodology

38. We plan to use a combination of stakeholder surveys and roundtables to include students, student unions, university and college leaders and academics. DFA analysis will examine possible sampling approaches and historic results to help identify any link between the NSS results and grade inflation. We will take evidence from academic and polling experts as part of our deliberations

NSS review: phase two January-June 2020

39. Phase two of the review will look more widely at the role of the NSS including the questions being asked, as well as the survey's role in quality assurance, regulation and student information across all four countries of the UK. It will examine if changes to the questions are required and how the survey could be made more responsive to changing needs across the UK. Specifically, for the OfS, the second phase will examine its role in regulation, incentivising performance above the baseline (through the TEF) and its role in student choice. It will be informed by the findings and recommendations arising from the first phase of the review. It will be important that there was some funding available to commission new research to inform these deliberations.

NSS 2021

40. The Minister of State's strategic guidance letter 14/9/2020 to the Chair states: "It is my strong view that the NSS should not be carried out in again in the same format as it was last year."
41. Significant work is already underway for the NSS 2021. It is simply not possible to change the whole nature of the NSS in 2021, as any such changes would require cognitive testing, consultation and piloting to ensure the continued integrity of the survey. There is also a significant risk that if we were not to run or were to cut the NSS in 2021, given the disruption arising from the pandemic, it would look as though we were trying to cover up students' views in what will inevitably be a challenging year.
42. Moreover, we will not have the outcomes from the root and branch review until end of December. Pending the outcome and a subsequent decision by the board and the devolved nations, we don't know yet what format the review will want the NSS to take. As we cannot radically change the NSS in 2021 at this late stage, we propose to use broadly the same format in 2021 as in 2020, but to aim to introduce any changes resulting from the review for the 2022 survey.
43. However, we propose to take immediate steps to reduce any burden on providers by removing the requirement for providers to promote the survey internally with the bulk of promotion being done directly through Ipsos Mori to students. We adopted this approach after the declaration of the pandemic this year, without significant adverse impact on participation.

Risk implications

44. The timeframe for phase one is very ambitious and conditional on a timely announcement from the DfE for public engagement to commence
45. The resourcing of the review will mean a delay to the development of an all years and PGT survey as previously agreed by the Board in May 2019.

Communications and engagement

46. The DfE currently planned to announce the review as part of a wider announcement on the reduction of bureaucratic burden early in September
47. The review will require significant engagement with the sector, providers and students

Paper publication date

48. The paper will be published alongside other papers from the September board meeting, assuming the DfE announcement has already taken place.

Annex A: Previous reviews of the National Student Survey

There have been three major reviews of the NSS since its inception in 2005, with the largest conducted in 2014.

2014

An independent review of the NSS was undertaken by NatCen Social Research in partnership with the Institute of Education and the Institute for Employment Studies in 2014.

This review arose from the recommendations of an earlier 2010 review of the NSS and was undertaken alongside a statistical analysis of the NSS data. All of which can be found below.

The aims of the 2014 review were to explore:

- The purposes of the NSS both now and in the future
- The effectiveness of the current NSS in meeting these purposes
- How the NSS might change to meet its purposes more effectively.

Findings and recommendations

There was considerable support among policy and institutional stakeholders consulted for a survey like the NSS. Few stakeholders said that NSS was not needed at all. Both policy and institutional stakeholders and students valued and used the NSS in many different ways and both groups especially valued its usefulness for quality enhancement. Policy and institutional stakeholders identified the following key NSS strengths, which are also borne out by research explored in the literature review on the NSS:

- Robustness of data
- Trusted source/accountability
- High response rates
- Benchmarking function - by providing comparable results both across time and between institutions, HE institutions can identify and map trends in student experiences and make reliable comparisons between courses at different institutions
- Accessibility/simplicity of the data
- Time series/consistency
- The opportunities afforded by the NSS in strengthening of the student voice
- The availability of contextual and explanatory data from the open text questions
- The set of optional question banks, the results of which are not made public.

The wider examination of the research literature within the review suggests other strengths and effective aspects of the NSS, including:

- Reliable and valid instrument (including some evidence of external validity)
- Based on extensive and well-established theory
- Supports internal quality assurance processes
- Provides an overview of sector performance and reinforces accountability.

The trends analysis 2005-2013 found the NSS question scales are valid across all years of the NSS.

The outcomes of this review lead to a consultation on the implementation of the recommendations of the review including changes to the survey. Changes were made to the survey from 2017 onwards with new questions introduced. A further pilot of the expansion of the survey to include students on a course of one year in length was undertaken in 2020.

2017

An evaluation of the implementation of a newly revised National Student Survey (NSS) in 2017 surveyed providers and students and found that the implementation of the survey had met its aims.

Links to previous review information and findings

2020 OfS Insight Brief

<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/the-national-student-survey-consistency-controversy-and-change/>

2017 review

Unpublished paper. Presented to the Student Information Advice and Guidance (SIAG) steering group. NSS 01/18. Item 4. 27 February, 2018.

2014 review

NSS review summary- <http://natcen.ac.uk/media/457944/nss-review-summary.pdf>

NSS review stakeholder views- <http://natcen.ac.uk/media/457946/nss-review-stakeholder-view.pdf>

NSS review student views- <http://natcen.ac.uk/media/457947/nss-review-student-view.pdf>

NSS review literature review- <http://natcen.ac.uk/media/457945/nss-lit-review-.pdf>

NSS consultation response

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405122559/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/Year/2016/201615/>

National Student Survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013-

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405120957/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/>

2010 Review

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115829/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/reports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/>

2007 review

National Student Survey 2005-2007: findings and trends-

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405120524/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/reports/year/2008/nss05-07findingsandtrends/>

Annexe B: Other student surveys

Several surveys ask questions about aspects of the student experience currently available. None has the coverage of the NSS. Some of the surveys listed are compiled for marketing purposes and are not subject to the same rigour and independence as the NSS and their methodology could be open to gaming by providers. Most can only provide representative results at sector – and in some cases - at provider level only. Many of the surveys use the same YouthSight panel.

Survey	Coverage/sample	Reporting level	Onward use
HEPI Student experience survey	2020- 48,452 members of the YouthSight panel and 7,667 from Pureprofile were invited to complete the survey. In total, 10,227 responses were collected, a response rate of 18%.	Sector level	Sector level policy information
THE Student experience survey	Youth Sight panel members. Some providers encourage students to sign up and participate (therefore could be subject to gaming). Around 20,000 responses annually.	Subject level within providers	Marketing- THE league tables
What Uni Student choice	Student reviews (normally from provider selected students, therefore could be subject to gaming). Around 41,000 responses annually.		Marketing- What Uni student choice awards and league table
UK Engagement survey	Members of Advance HE can opt in as part of their subscription model. Providers can choose their sample. 30,000 students (all UG years). (31 providers 2019 and average of 960 responses per provider	Sector level report Internal only, provider and course level	Enhancement purposes