

Institution: The Open University

Unit of Assessment: C25 Education

Title of case study: The impact of the National Student Survey: changing the behaviour of institutions, teachers and students

1. Summary of the impact

Open University (OU) researchers were responsible for the development of the National Student Survey (NSS). It is an influential and widely cited source of information about the experience of students in higher education. Around 287,000 students at more than 300 institutions responded to the 2012 NSS. It has been incorporated into the league tables published annually by *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Guardian* and the online *Complete University Guide*. Performance in the survey has led institutions to take actions and initiatives to improve the student experience. The Ramsden report for the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) indicates it has become an important element in quality enhancement.

2. Underpinning research

In 2000, HEFCE agreed that the sector would publish key data to enable prospective students to make more informed judgements on where to study. Because of concerns about the adequacy of existing data, HEFCE commissioned the project *Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE*. This was carried out by a joint project team consisting of members of academic staff from the OU, staff from SQW Limited and members of the NOP (National Opinion Polls) Research Group.

Working collaboratively across the different areas of the project, the team aimed to:

- identify good practice in obtaining student feedback
- make recommendations to institutions concerning the design and implementation of feedback mechanisms
- 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.

A number of outputs resulted from this work, including a literature review on ways of obtaining student feedback (Richardson, 2005). The project's main finding showed that it would be feasible to introduce a uniform national survey to obtain feedback from all recent graduates about their programmes of study (Brennan et al., 2003).

HEFCE then commissioned a pilot study to explore the implementation and value of such a survey. This was carried out during 2003 by the OU researchers. 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. However, the timing of this survey was thought not to be optimal because the results would only inform students seeking to enter university two years later. HEFCE resolved to address this and other issues by exploring the idea of a national survey of final year undergraduate students. The same OU team was commissioned to undertake another pilot study early in 2004 to investigate the feasibility of such a survey. The results confirmed its feasibility, and HEFCE resolved to proceed with a full NSS early in 2005 and annually thereafter (Richardson et al., 2007).

Later work by Locke et al. (2008), at the OU, carried out in collaboration with staff from Hobsons plc, demonstrated that league tables which incorporate the NSS data in their ranking methodologies had a major impact on institutions' strategic planning. Ashby et al. (2011), also at the OU, extended the earlier work by examining anomalous patterns of responses that affected NSS ratings obtained from distance-learning students.

Key researchers

John Brennan Professor of Higher Education Research (since 2011 Emeritus); William Locke,

Principal Policy Analyst (2006–10); John Richardson, Professor in Student Learning and Assessment; John Slater, NSS Coordinator (2003–06); Ruth Williams, Principal Policy Analyst, (until 2011)

3. References to the research

Ashby, A.N., Richardson, J.T.E. and Woodley, A. (2011) 'National student feedback surveys in distance education: an investigation at the UK Open University', *Open Learning*, vol. 26, pp. 5–25 [Online]. DOI:10.1080/02680513.2011.538560.

Brennan, J., Brighton, R., Moon, N., Richardson, J., Rindl, J. and Williams, R. (2003) *Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE* (Report RD08_03) [Online], Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available at http://oro.open.ac.uk/11876/4/6D7D5FC2_b.pdf.

Locke, W., Verbik, L., Richardson, J.T.E. and King, R. (2008) *Counting what is measured or measuring what counts? – League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England* (Publication 2008/14) [Online], Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available at http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2008/08_14/.

Richardson, J.T.E. (2005) 'Instruments for obtaining student feedback: a review of the literature', *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 387–415 [Online]. DOI:10.1080/02602930500099193.

Richardson, J.T.E., Slater, J.B. and Wilson, J. (2007) 'The National Student Survey: development, findings and implications', *Studies in Higher Education*, vol. 32, pp. 557–80 [Online]. DOI:10.1080/03075070701573757.

All journals named above employ an anonymised peer review process.

Research funding

2002: £98,750 awarded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to Professor John Brennan, The Open University, for a project entitled 'Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in higher education'.

2003–04: £371,395 awarded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to Professor John Slater, The Open University, for a project concerned with pilot studies towards the development of a National Student Survey.

2007–08: £33,600 awarded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England to Mr William Locke, The Open University, for a project entitled 'League tables and their impact on higher education institutions in England'.

4. Details of the impact

The survey encompasses final year students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland funded by HEFCE, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. Most Scottish universities have opted to join the NSS, as has the private University of Buckingham. In total 287,000 students responded to the 2012 survey, an increase of 20,000 on the previous year. This has produced key indicators of the quality of teaching, learning and student experience within the four major league tables of UK institutions, published annually by *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *Guardian* and the online *Complete University Guide*. Positive NSS ratings are often highlighted on institutions' websites.

HEFCE

The central role of our research in underpinning the development of the NSS has been confirmed by Heather Fry (Director of Education, Participation and Students, HEFCE). She indicates that 'The Open University, most notably John Richardson, John Brennan and John Slater, was heavily involved in developing the NSS. In particular the OU team listed made a significant contribution to the development of the NSS including timing and evaluation of the survey instrument ...' In her view, it remains 'a robust tool for enabling comparisons between courses in the same subject and has remained largely unchanged to date', although it is now entering a review period. In her view,

the introduction of the NSS 'has had an impact in two main areas; student choice and institutional behaviour'.

A report for HEFCE by Ramsden et al. (2010) indicates: 'The NSS forms part of the national Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for higher education ... Although the NSS was originally conceived primarily as a way of helping potential students make informed choices, the significance of the data it collects means that it has become an important element in quality assurance (QA) processes and in institutional quality enhancement (QE) activities related to the student learning experience ... We found striking the emphasis that institutional managers placed on the way the NSS findings allowed them to identify potential problems in the student experience, and to act on them quickly' (p. 3).

The authors noted that the similarity between the NSS and the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was due to the influence of the original report by Brennan et al. *Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE* (p. 26). The 2010 study included interviews with a variety of stakeholders, and the authors listed a variety of ways in which respondents had used NSS results for quality enhancement purposes (p. 41).

The National Union of Students reports that the NSS has encouraged institutions to take student opinion more seriously and has campaigned to encourage institutions to improve their ratings in the area of assessment and feedback

(<http://www.nus.org.uk/en/campaigns/higher-education/national-student-survey/>). The Union provided the inquiry by Ramsden et al. (2010, pp. 84–88) with case studies from 11 institutions to illustrate how student unions had used NSS results to campaign for improvements in areas such as feedback on assessment, personal tutoring, library facilities and student representation.

Use of NSS results by the Higher Education Academy (HEA)

The HEA supports institutions in using NSS results to enhance the quality of the student experience (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/ipp/Issue5-NSS>). The HEA has sponsored investigations of issues arising from NSS results in particular subject areas, such as art and design (Vaughan and Yorke, 2009) and social work and social policy (Crawford et al., 2010). A recent report for the HEA by Buckley (2012) described the pivotal role of NSS data in institutional quality enhancement and its impact on staff and students. New HEA-funded research (2013) by Pegg at the OU is examining cases of cross-institutional curriculum change and has identified NSS results as one of the key drivers for change.

Institutional case studies

NSS results have prompted institutions to implement initiatives aimed at enhancing the student experience, especially with regard to assessment and feedback. Published accounts include Sheffield Hallam University (Flint et al., 2009), Oxford Brookes University (Handley and Williams, 2011), Leeds Metropolitan University (Brown, 2011) and the University of Reading (Crook et al., 2012). Most of these initiatives provided evidence of changes in teachers' behaviour or changes in students' expectations and behaviour. Others provide evidence of changes in institutional policies or strategy, for example the University of Exeter has linked its strategic plan to future NSS results (<http://www.exeter.ac.uk/about/vision/strategicplan/delivering/>).

The future

Ramsden et al. (2010, p. 57) recommended that a version of the NSS should be introduced for postgraduate taught programmes. In fact, the HEA has been running a Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey, modelled on the NSS, since 2009. Data derived from the NSS have become one of the key sources of information in the course comparison website, Unistats, which was developed by HEFCE to provide information to prospective students and parents.

In becoming such a key indicator of the student experience and in achieving such significant visibility, the NSS has changed the behaviour of institutions, their teachers and their students.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. Director of Education, Participation and Students, HEFCE.
2. Brown, S. (2011) 'Bringing about positive change in the higher education student experience: a case study', *Quality Assurance in Education*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 195–207 [Online]. DOI:10.1108/09684881111158027.
3. Buckley, A. (2012) *Making It Count: Reflecting on the National Student Survey in the Process of Enhancement* [Online], York, Higher Education Academy. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/nss/Making_it_count.pdf.
4. Crawford, K., Hagyard, A. and Saunders, G. (2010) *Creative Analysis of NSS Data and Collaborative Research to Inform Good Practice in Assessment Feedback* [Online], Southampton, Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work. Available at http://www.swap.ac.uk/docs/projects/nss_report.pdf.
5. Crook, A., Machline, A., Maw, S., Lawson, C., Drinkwater, R., Lundqvist, K., Orsmond, P., Gomez, S. and Park, J. (2012) 'The use of video technology for providing feedback to students: can it enhance the feedback experience for staff and students?', *Computers and Education*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 386–96 [Online]. DOI:10.1016/j.compedu.2011.08.025.
6. Flint, A., Oxley, A., Helm, P. and Bradley, S. (2009) 'Preparing for success: one institution's aspirational and student focused response to the National Student Survey', *Teaching in Higher Education*, vol. 14, no. 6, pp. 607–18 [Online]. DOI:10.1080/13562510903315035.
7. Pegg, A. (2013) *"We think that's the future": curriculum reform initiatives in higher education*, York, Higher Education Academy. Available at: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/Research/curriculum-reform>
8. Pokorny, H. and Pickford, P. (2010) 'Complexity, cues and relationships: Student perceptions of feedback', *Active Learning in Higher Education*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 21–30 [Online]. DOI:10.1177/1469787409355872.
9. Ramsden, P., Batchelor, D., Peacock, A., Temple, P. and Watson, D. (2010) *Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey* [Online], Bristol, Higher Education Funding Council for England. Available at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd1210/rd12_10a.pdf.
10. Vaughan, D. and Yorke, M. (2009) *'I can't believe it's not better': The Paradox of NSS Scores for Art & Design* [Online], Brighton, Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Art, Design and Media. Available at: <http://www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/adm-hea-projects/national-student-survey-nss-project>.