

# Review of the National Student Survey

Report to the UK Higher Education Funding Bodies by NatCen Social Research, the Institute of Education, University of London and the Institute for Employment Studies

## Summary Report

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This document summarises the key findings of a review of the National Student Survey (NSS). The NSS, first launched in 2005, collects feedback from undergraduate students in the UK, via a survey, on their experiences of various aspects of their courses. The review was commissioned by the UK Higher Education funding bodies, and undertaken by NatCen Social Research in partnership with the Institute of Education and the Institute for Employment Studies.

This review arises from the recommendations of an earlier 2010 review of the NSS<sup>1</sup> and has been undertaken alongside a statistical analysis of the NSS data.<sup>2</sup>

The aims of the current 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.

This report makes a series of recommendations and suggestions about how the NSS might be changed. These revisions are informed by the findings of research conducted between July 2013 and February 2014 as part of the review. The research consisted of:

- An extensive literature review (Appendix A)
- Interviews with, and a survey of, sector stakeholder bodies including funding agencies and other key organisations, and higher education (HE) providers (Appendix B)
- Focus groups and a survey of prospective, current and past students (Appendix C)
- Four half-day expert panel workshops which brought together HE stakeholders, policy and methodological experts.

## Purpose of the NSS (Section 2)

The NSS currently has multiple purposes including:

1. Informing prospective student choice

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Education (2010) *Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey*  
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouseerneeds/>

<sup>2</sup> HEFCE (forthcoming) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis*

2. Enhancing the student academic experience within HE institutions
3. Ensuring public accountability.

The first two purposes were considered the most important for the future, especially its role in enhancing the student academic experience.

## The effectiveness of the NSS (Section 3)

Policy and institutional stakeholders and students' views on the effectiveness of the current NSS in meeting these purposes were varied. They used the NSS to help enhance the quality of their provision and recognised the NSS's many strengths which needed to be preserved in a revised NSS. However, stakeholders and students thought the NSS had conceptual weaknesses concerning what it measured, and methodological weaknesses related to what it covered. In particular, they were concerned that the NSS's scope was too narrow in terms of students' experiences and their engagement in learning and teaching which undermined the NSS's efficacy in informing student choice and enhancing students' academic experience.

## Changing the NSS (Section 4)

There was a limited appetite among policy and institutional stakeholders and students for radical changes to the NSS and general support for retaining most of the existing NSS questions. Stakeholders' preference was for a small number of questions on student engagement to supplement the existing NSS.

However, the concepts of 'the student experience' and 'student engagement' are multi-dimensional and contested. There is no single agreed definition of these terms in the research literature, nor was there a consensus among the stakeholders and students participating in this review. The student experience and student engagement topics which potentially could be incorporated within a revised NSS are considerable. Yet, to help preserve the strengths of the NSS while addressing its weaknesses, the focus of the NSS questionnaire needs to be clear and bounded.

## Criteria for selecting new questions and assessing existing questions (Section 4.2)

To delimit the NSS questionnaire and to facilitate the process of selecting appropriate topics about the student experience and student engagement to be included in a revised NSS, the following generic selection criteria were devised:

1. Be about something that HE providers can influence
2. Be about the academic experience, especially learning and teaching
3. Be, as far as practical, universally applicable across all types of HE providers, modes of study, disciplines, and countries in the UK
4. Cover measurable and valid issues

5. Be meaningful and useful to students, HE providers and other stakeholders
6. Produce results that are unambiguous in direction
7. Address issues of enduring importance in UK HE rather than transient policy interests
8. Meet at least one of the three key purposes of the NSS.

**We recommend that all questions in the core NSS conform to these emerging criteria.**

## Student engagement (Sections 4.4, 4.5)

There was a broad agreement amongst policy and institutional stakeholders and students involved in this review, underpinned by existing research and other survey instruments on the student experience, that the following areas and questions on student engagement should be included in a revised NSS:

- Academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning
  - My course has challenged me to achieve my best
  - The teaching has encouraged me to think about the course content in greater depth [OR My course has provided me with opportunities to analyse ideas, concepts or experiences in depth]
  - My course has encouraged me to apply what I have learnt to practical problems or new situations
  - My course has enabled me to bring information and ideas together from different topics to solve problems
- The learning community/collaborative learning
  - I do not feel part of a group of students and staff committed to learning
  - I have not been encouraged to talk about academic ideas with other students
  - I haven't had opportunities to work with other students on my course
- Student voice
  - Staff appear to value the course feedback given by students
  - I am clear about how students' comments on the course have been acted on
  - I have had enough opportunities to provide feedback on this course
  - On this course, students' ideas for improvement are taken seriously

**We suggest that these new core questions are considered for inclusion in a revised NSS and strongly recommend that they are tested and piloted rigorously, and adapted as appropriate, prior to inclusion.**



**We do not recommend the inclusion of questions about hours of teaching contact or learning time.** Our assertion is that these matters might be best addressed through means other than the NSS, for example administrative data and time-use diaries with a sample of students. **We suggest that the funding bodies together with HE institutions consider ways in which this might be achieved.**

## Suggested other new questions (Section 4.6)

New questions were proposed on the following:

- Experience of the Student Loans Company (Section 4.6.1). The proposed question does not meet several criteria for the selection of new questions and so **we do not recommend its inclusion.**
- Environmental sustainability (Section 4.6.2). The proposed question may not meet some of the criteria for the selection of new questions nor is it appropriate for the NSS to make recommendations about what is taught in HE institutions. **We do not recommend the inclusion of this question within the core NSS. Broader questions, for example about the campus and environmental sustainability, community engagement, and the wider student experience of sustainability might be included as part of the optional bank of questions.**
- International benchmarking (Section 4.6.3). It can be misleading to compare student experiences across different countries given the large variations in HE systems. This is true even where identical questions are used. **We do not recommend inserting new questions specifically for the purpose of international benchmarking.**

## Reviewing existing NSS questions (Section 4.7.1)

The questions in the NSS remain virtually unchanged since the NSS was launched in 2005.<sup>3</sup> The 2010 review of the NSS noted the importance of keeping the NSS up to date.<sup>4</sup> This review was an opportunity to assess if any of the existing questions needed to be changed and to take on board some of the criticisms of specific questions voiced by policy and institutional stakeholders and students participating in the research.

To reflect broader changes in the HE academic experience and conceptualisations of the student experience, and in line with feedback from stakeholders, **we propose that the following questions are reworded:**

Learning resources	
Existing question	Recommended revised/new question
16. The library resources and services	The library, including its digital services,

<sup>3</sup> An additional question about students' unions has been added since 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Institute of Education (2010) *op cit.*

are good enough for my needs	are good enough for my needs
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to	I have been able to access course information and virtual learning facilities when I needed to <sup>5</sup>
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to	I have been able to access specialised equipment, software and facilities when I needed to
	I have been encouraged to use technology to enhance my learning

A criticism of the NSS is that some questions may inadvertently encourage HE institutions to act in ways which do not enhance students' academic experiences. **It is suggested that the wording of the following should be changed:**

Existing question	Recommended revised question
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt	Feedback on my work has been timely
8. I have received detailed comments on my work	I have received helpful comments on my work

The wording of some existing questions may not meet the selection criteria discussed above; this includes Q23 about the students' union and Q19-21 about personal development. There was no clear consensus on how these specific questions should be changed. **We suggest that the funding bodies and the National Union of Students (NUS) work together to formulate the new wording of Q23. We also suggest that some additional questions about personal development that currently appear in other student surveys, notably the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) and the US National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), might be considered and that they are trialled in a pilot study alongside the existing questions.**

## Deleting existing NSS questions (Section 4.7.2)

To help ensure that the NSS questionnaire does not become too long, and to make way for new core student engagement questions, some existing core questions could be deleted.

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<sup>5</sup> Note that this is a new question. If there is concern about changing this question in this way it could be reworded: 'I have been able to access IT resources, including virtual learning facilities (e.g. VLE), when I needed to.'

The wording of the following questions is very similar so might be regarded as superfluous and might be deleted:

Q8 'I have received detailed comments on my work' and Q9 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand' are apparently addressing a similar aspect of feedback on students' assessed work.

Q13, Q14 and Q15: In the 'organisation and management' scale, Q15 'The course is well organised and is running smoothly' is effectively a summary of Q13 'The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned' and Q14 'Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively' (which also fails to meet Criterion 3 in relation to distance learners). This suggests that Q13 and Q14 could be deleted.

This overlap in what questions are attempting to capture was confirmed by some statistical analysis of the relationship between items and questions. For example, the correlation between Q2 'Staff have made the subject interesting' and Q3 'Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' is 0.62 and the correlation between Q8 and Q9 is 0.73 – suggesting that these pairs of items are addressing very similar issues and so some of these questions might be deleted. However, **since we do not know what the effect of additional questions on these relations will be, we recommend that these items are retained until after the pilot study. If they continue to be highly correlated, then one of each pair might be removed.**

## Piloting and testing (Section 4.8)

It is premature to reach definitive conclusions about the addition and removal of particular questions. **We recommend that all proposed new, re-worded and revised questions are piloted and trialed, and that the piloting is preceded by a phase of cognitive qualitative testing of the proposed new questions alongside the existing NSS questions. We also strongly recommend that the piloting and testing of a revised NSS should consider the impact on HE institutions and on their behaviour.**

## Methodological issues (Section 4.10)

- Location of new questions on student engagement in core questionnaire (Section 4.10.1): **We recommend that an additional three blocks of questions are added for each new aspect of student engagement. It might be possible, following the testing, to merge the items on academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning with those on 'The teaching on my course'.**
- Optional bank of questions (Section 4.10.2): The NSS currently has optional banks of questions covering areas of the student experience not included in the core questionnaire, and these were seen by stakeholders as one of the NSS's strengths. The new proposed core questions on the 'Learning community/collaborative learning' and the 'Student voice' draw heavily on those used in the optional bank. **We recommend that the optional bank questions on 'Feedback from students' (B6) and 'Learning community' (B11) are withdrawn, if they are included as part of the core NSS questionnaire. We also suggest that some more longitudinal analysis is undertaken by the funding bodies regarding which sets of**

**questions in the optional bank are most frequently used with an eye to deleting those used very infrequently.** To maintain one of the strengths of the optional bank of questions and to encourage their continued use for improvement purposes **we recommend some flexibility in the application of the question selection criteria to the optional questions specifically in relation to Criterion 3, but do not recommend that the results are placed in the public domain. The funding bodies might also want to explore whether any additional optional banks of questions are required.**

- Open questions (Section 4.10.3): The NSS currently has open questions at the end of the main questionnaire. Students are invited to comment on any particularly positive or negative aspects of their course that they would like to highlight. Given their popularity, **we recommend that these are retained.**
- Institution-specific questions - optional (Section 4.10.4): **We propose that these remain unchanged.**
- Coverage of the NSS (Section 4.10.5): Students on short courses (courses equivalent to one year or less of full-time study) are excluded from the NSS primarily because of practical problems in identifying these students in time to be included in the NSS. This also affects students who do not complete their course, most of whom leave in their first year of study. Including these groups also raises other methodological issues. **We suggest that the HE funding bodies explore if some of the practical barriers to including these students can be overcome and, if it is not possible to overcome these practical problems, that these students continue to be excluded from the remit of the NSS. It may be desirable for HE institutions to develop more sophisticated exit surveys for non-completers which include some of the questions currently contained in the core NSS.**
- Threshold for the publication of NSS data (Section 4.10.6): In order for NSS results to be made publicly available, a publication threshold of 23 respondents and 50 per cent response rate has to be met. The funding councils are currently examining these thresholds. **We suggest review of the thresholds is progressed by the funding councils with further input from the sector.**
- Year of study and timing of the survey (Section 4.10.7): Currently only students who are (predicted to be) in their final year of study are surveyed and so complete the NSS on one occasion only during their undergraduate career. **We suggest that because of the NSS's prime purposes it continues to be run during the final year of study/end of programme.** The NSS is launched every year in January and is closed just after Easter. **We suggest that the HE funding bodies explore the feasibility of changing the timing of the NSS to post exams/graduation and consider the implications of such a change for overcoming some of the practical barriers to broadening the coverage of the NSS discussed above.**
- Answer scale (Section 4.10.8): The answer scale ranges from 'definitely agree' to 'definitely disagree'. **We do not recommend any changes to the answer scale. However, we suggest that the NSS includes more on-screen information and guidance to help students understand the answer scales, especially the**

difference between ‘neither agree nor disagree’ and ‘not applicable’. We also do not recommend a change to the way results are reported. However, we do suggest that at least one group of questions is phrased negatively to counter the problem that some students are completing the NSS without sufficient thought, as confirmed by the statistical analysis of student responses.<sup>6</sup> Research on survey design suggests that this approach is preferable to distributing negative questions throughout the questionnaire. **Furthermore, we recommend that pop-up ‘warnings’ (triggered by 5 to 10 identical answers) be included in the online questionnaire.**

- Mode (Section 4.10.9): Currently students can complete the NSS online (including on mobile devices), by telephone, or in a paper questionnaire. With the increasing use of smartphones amongst the student body and the popularity of ‘apps’, **the funding bodies might consider the development of an NSS app to help improve response rates to the NSS.** Students could then complete the NSS survey through the NSS app. In addition, the NSS app could allow current/prospective students to look at the NSS results, as an alternative to the Unistats website which is the primary method for publishing NSS results. With the increasing proportion of students completing the NSS online **we also suggest that the funding bodies consider phasing out the postal questionnaire.**
- Bunching (Section 4.10.10): The high scores recorded for a large number of institutions undermine the credibility of the NSS in some stakeholders’ eyes. **We recommend that the benchmark NSS data be publicised more widely, and that information on how to use the NSS is provided to the press and others using the NSS data. We suggest the HE funding bodies consider a code of practice around the reporting of the NSS results as has been done by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia, which administers the CEQ.**
- The use and abuse of NSS data (Section 4.10.11): **We suggest clear guidance about the risks and issues associated with using the NSS results for purposes of comparison are provided by the funding bodies both when the NSS is administered and when its results are reported. We also propose that any HE provider level comparisons continue to be calibrated for subject area mix using benchmarks.**

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<sup>6</sup> HEFCE (2014) *op cit.*

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

This document summarises the key findings of a review of the National Student Survey (NSS). It makes a series of recommendations about the NSS and how it might be changed. It draws on an extensive literature review and wide-ranging research with higher education (HE) stakeholders and prospective, current and past students. The study was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), on behalf of the UK HE funding bodies, and was undertaken by NatCen Social Research in partnership with the Institute of Education and the Institute for Employment Studies.

The NSS collects feedback from students in the UK, via a survey, on their experiences of various aspects of their undergraduate courses, with the aim of contributing to public accountability, helping prospective students make informed choices about their future studies and providing feedback to institutions to help enhance quality.

The NSS has been running each year since 2005. Since then, and since the last 2010 review of the NSS<sup>7</sup> there have been considerable shifts in the HE landscape (Appendix A, Section: 2). The NSS has not been changed to reflect these developments, as the 2010 NSS Review did not recommend major amendments. That review concluded that the main questionnaire (with its 22 questions) was effective and efficient; that the optional and open questions were useful and did not compromise high response rates; that there was no need to add questions about student engagement or other aspects of the student experience to the core instrument; and that a comprehensive review should take place 10 years after its inception. It was against this background that the UK funding bodies commissioned this work, and slightly earlier than the 10-year point. This review has been undertaken alongside a comprehensive statistical analysis of the NSS data.<sup>8</sup>

## 1.2 Aims and objectives of the research

The aims of the review were to explore:

- Purpose: What is the purpose of the NSS both now and in the future?
  - What role does the current survey play, e.g. in terms of informing student choice, promoting quality enhancement and providing public information?
  - In which areas should the NSS potentially play a role in the future?

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<sup>7</sup> Institute of Education (2010) *Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey*  
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/>

<sup>8</sup> HEFCE (forthcoming) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis*

- Effectiveness: How effective is the current NSS?
  - Does the survey meet its current purposes?
  - What possible future purposes might be identified, and to what extent does the NSS meet them?
- A new NSS: How might the NSS change to meet its purposes more effectively?
  - Do we need to introduce new questions, e.g. to cover student engagement and the broader student experience?
  - Do we need to make any changes to the methodology, e.g. range of students to be included, timing, format?
  - How should data from the survey be published and used?

### 1.3 Our study – what we did, whom we talked to, and whom we surveyed

The following research techniques were used to meet the aims and objectives of the study and to capture the views and opinions of a wide range of groups and policy and funding stakeholders, including: HE providers; funding bodies; sector bodies and organisations; potential and current students; and graduates. Further details of the methods used can be found in the relevant appendix.

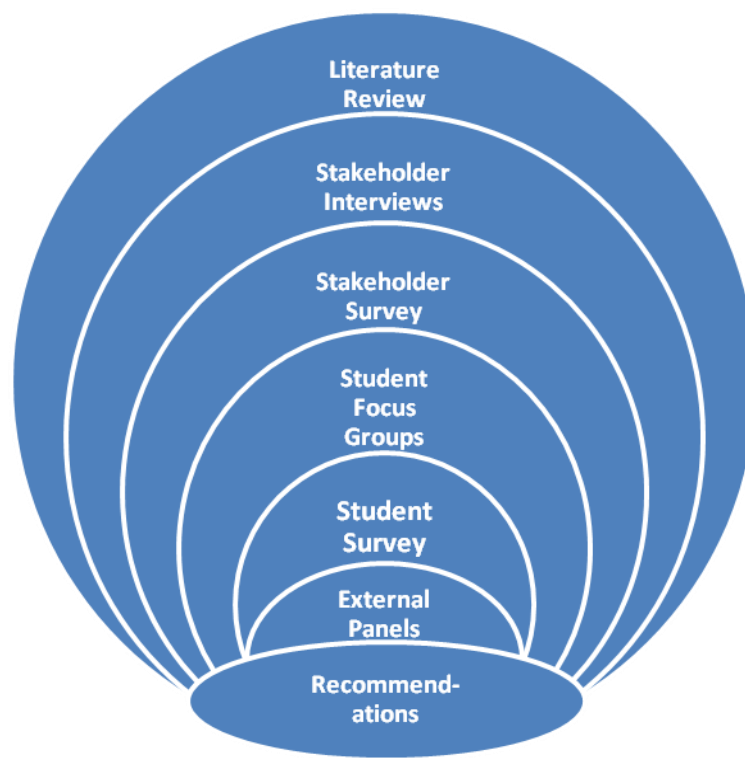
- Literature review of UK and international research about the use and performance of the NSS and surveys similar to the NSS (Appendix A).
- Stakeholder strand (Appendix B)
  - Twenty interviews with sector stakeholder bodies including funding agencies and other key organisations, and HE providers including a private provider, further education (FE) college and an HE institution with a large number of mature and part-time students (Appendix B, Section: 2)
  - An online survey of 560 stakeholders, 91 per cent of whom were HE providers (Appendix B, Section: 3).
- Student strand (Appendix C)
  - Three focus groups with current students and one with prospective students (Appendix C, Section: 2)
  - An online survey of a total of 1,198 respondents. Of these, 559 were current students, 301 graduates and 338 prospective students (Appendix C, Section: 3).
- Four half-day expert panel workshops which brought together HE stakeholders, policy and methodological experts to garner feedback on the study's findings and to

help develop recommendations as to how the NSS should change, involving a total of 60 individuals.

All four strands of research were conducted between July 2013 and February 2014.

As Figure 1 suggests, the research was designed to be an iterative process, although given the time allocated for the study not all the elements were sequential. Consequently, all four research strands feed into the final report and recommendations.

**Figure 1: The research process**



The literature review (Appendix A) and the initial interviews with institutional and policy stakeholders (Appendix B) were particularly important in informing the subsequent strands of the research, especially the questions asked in the surveys of stakeholders and students. The expert panels played a significant role in firming up our more detailed recommendations, outlined in this report.

The literature review helped to shape what we asked institutional and policy stakeholders in the initial interviews.

So together the literature review, alongside the initial interviews with stakeholders, provided insights into:

1. The history of the NSS – its origins and how the original purpose of the NSS since being introduced in 2005 has changed over time, along with information on how the NSS is used, and how these uses of the NSS have changed over time, sometimes in unanticipated and unintended ways (Appendix A, Section: 3.1)



2. The effectiveness of the NSS, including its perceived and actual strengths and weaknesses (Appendix A, Sections: 6, 7)
3. The different meanings and understandings of the terms the 'student experience' and 'student engagement' (Appendix A, Sections: 4, 5)
4. The survey instruments broadly equivalent to the NSS that are used in the UK and elsewhere, and their respective strengths and weaknesses (Appendix A, Section: 8)
5. Some of the methodological issues that needed to be addressed to improve the NSS's overall effectiveness (Appendix A, Section: 7)
6. Finally, the literature review highlighted the need to identify some of the boundaries to the scope of the NSS, and to think about criteria for selecting whether or not a particular topic and question should be included in the core NSS questionnaire (Appendix A, Section: 9).

## 1.4 Outline of the summary report

This summary report synthesises findings from the four strands of research and seeks to answer the questions set for the review. The complete literature review is contained in Appendix A, while full findings from the stakeholder and student strands are presented in Appendices B and C respectively.

Section 2 of the summary report examines the current and future purpose of the NSS. Section 3 explores the effectiveness of the NSS in meeting these purposes, including its strengths and weaknesses. Section 4 discusses how the NSS might change to meet its future purposes and to make it more effective in doing so by addressing the perceived weaknesses of the NSS. It includes suggestions for new questions and revisions to existing ones, as well as identifying ways in which some of the methodological challenges might be resolved. The final section, 5, summarises all proposed changes to the core NSS questionnaire outlining what the new survey might look like once any revisions have been tested and piloted.

## 2 Purpose: What is the purpose of NSS both now and in the future?

### 2.1 Current purpose of the NSS

There was widespread consensus among institutional and policy stakeholders (Appendix B, Sections: 2.1.1; 3.1.2) and among students (Appendix C, Sections: 2.1.1; 3.1.6) that the NSS had more than one purpose. Indeed, the majority of stakeholders surveyed (73 per cent) said that the NSS had three or more purposes (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.2).

Of the NSS's multiple purposes, the dominant two were:

- Informing prospective student choice
- Enhancing the student academic experience within HE institutions.

Interviewees also highlighted the importance of ensuring public accountability.

In the survey of stakeholders, 39 per cent reported that the main purpose of the NSS was to provide information to prospective students, 38 per cent identified providing information to HE providers, eight per cent mentioned providing information to government and funders, and four per cent cited ensuring public accountability (see Appendix B, Section: 3.1.2, Figure 3.2).

### 2.2 Informing prospective student choice

The stakeholders interviewed felt that informing student choice was achieved through the Unistats website,<sup>9</sup> which is the primary method for publishing NSS results, and through league tables. Parents and employers were also acknowledged as potential users of the NSS data via these sources (Appendix B, Section: 2.1.1).

The student strand explored in more detail how the NSS could inform student choice (Appendix C, Sections: 2.1.1; 3.1.5). The students surveyed considered that the most important uses of the NSS (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.6, Table 3.28), in order of importance, were:

1. Giving information to prospective students about whether current students are satisfied with the teaching and learning on their courses (38 per cent)
2. Helping prospective students to make a choice about which course to study (23 per cent)
3. Allowing prospective students to compare courses and universities against each other (e.g. in league tables) (15 per cent).

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<sup>9</sup> The Higher Education funding councils are currently conducting a review of Unistats.

Focus groups with students highlighted how data from the NSS was part of a wider package of information that students used to inform their HE decisions. Students suggested that NSS data were likely to be viewed alongside other information sources in the decision-making process including: prospectuses; personal contact with staff and current students; and open days and university visits. They saw NSS results as an important filtering or verification tool, to confirm students' choices and/or to remove any institutions on the basis of negative results (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.1).

## 2.2.1 Enhancing the student academic experience within HE institutions

The stakeholders interviewed, particularly those from HE institutions, spoke about the purpose of the NSS in terms of supporting quality enhancement within HE institutions. They suggested the NSS was a powerful and useful tool for internal enhancement which could not be ignored. Others mentioned how the inclusion of NSS results in league tables acted as a driver within universities to internal action. In addition, the fact that NSS results were in the public domain, created peer pressure. One representative from an HE institution argued that the NSS acted as “a catalyst for improvement” (Appendix B, Section: 2.1.1). From these stakeholders' perspective, the NSS was a tool for improving their courses and students' learning experiences.

Similarly the focus groups with current students highlighted the role of the NSS in driving up quality. These students considered the NSS as a key tool for identifying areas for improving courses and for pinpointing problems with specific courses. They also saw the NSS as providing an important opportunity to capture the student voice and identify areas for action (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.1).

## 2.3 Future purpose of the NSS

Stakeholders very broadly agreed that two key current purposes of the NSS should continue in the future, alongside ensuring public accountability (Appendix B, Sections: 2.1.2; 3.1.3).

When the NSS was originally devised in 2005, its primary rationale was to inform prospective students and their advisers in choosing what and where to study and to contribute to public accountability. Enhancing quality was seen as a minor function (Appendix A, Section: 3.1). Now this purpose is viewed as increasingly important by both policy makers and HE institutions (Appendix B, Section: 2.1.1).

Policy and funding stakeholders agreed about the future role of the NSS for quality enhancement. They recognised the growing significance of this as a result of the changing UK HE policy context, and developments which put a spotlight on the quality of the academic experience with its emphasis on an HE system designed around the needs of students. However, they did question the future purpose of the NSS both in terms of informing student choice and public accountability. Stakeholders believed that the NSS would be just one of many information sources used to inform student choice and to provide public information about the HE sector. Indeed, they speculated that in the future the NSS may become less about public accountability as the proportion of funding invested by the taxpayer decreased,

and more about information for students as the funding invested by students themselves (via tuition fees) increased (Appendix B, Section: 2.1.2).

## 3 Effectiveness: How effective is the current NSS?

### 3.1 Perceived strengths of the NSS

There was considerable support among the policy and institutional stakeholders we consulted for a survey like the NSS (Appendix B, Section: 2.1.1). Only a very small number of 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 (Appendix B, Section: 2.2.2; Appendix C, Section: 2.1.2) and both groups especially valued its usefulness for quality enhancement. Policy and institutional stakeholders identified the following key NSS strengths (Appendix B: Section 2.3.2), which are also borne out by research explored in the literature review on the NSS (Appendix A: Section 6):

- 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.

Indeed, our wider examination of the research literature (Appendix A, Section: 6), 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.

## 3.2 Criticisms of the NSS and perceived weaknesses

The NSS is influential and contentious. Both the survey itself and the way it has been used have attracted criticism, and these issues are discussed at length in the literature review (Appendix A, Section: 7). For example, one controversial issue concerns what the NSS measures and, whether what it measures are the correct things to measure. A series of critics<sup>10</sup> have argued that it is measuring the wrong things because it is based on ideas about students' evaluations of teaching. Thus, as discussed at length in the literature review (Appendix A, Section: 7.2) it is styled as a survey of students' views of what HE institutions provide, when what is needed instead is a survey of what students put into their courses – in other words, of their engagement with learning, assessment, curriculum and the co-curriculum.

A related criticism<sup>11</sup> is that the NSS is merely a survey of 'satisfaction' when it would be preferable to survey learning gains directly or to assess students' commitment to the academic and social environment. However, the NSS does include questions on personal development which represent a self-assessment of generic learning gains. In addition, these critics suggest that student satisfaction is not related to student performance or learning (Appendix A, Section: 7.2). In fact, the NSS was not designed to be a satisfaction survey and only two of its questions mention satisfaction (Q22 and Q23). The positioning of the NSS as a satisfaction survey might be partly attributable to a view of it as a component of a broader process of 'commodification' of HE through an emphasis on student choice and 'the student experience'. Nevertheless, the current NSS does not explicitly evaluate student engagement or learning gains.

An associated conceptual and methodological issue raised in the literature (Appendix A, Section: 7.1) is the overall coverage of the NSS. In other words, that the survey is too narrowly drawn, covers only certain aspects of the student experience, and that the questions asked are too generic and high level, leaving gaps. Consequently, the NSS may not provide useful information for informing prospective students' choice of HE institution. Specific issues identified in the literature<sup>12</sup> include:

- The lack of information about other factors not directly related to teaching and learning

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<sup>10</sup> For example Kandiko, C. and Lewthwaite, S. (2012) *What are student experience surveys for? Shared and contested ambitions*, SRHE Annual Conference (abstract); Ertl, H., Hayward, G., Wright, S., Edwards, A., Lunt, I., Mills, D. and Yu, K. (2008) *The student learning experience in higher education. Literature review report for the Higher Education Academy* (pages 70-74) York: Higher Education Academy (HEA); Van der Velden (2012) *Student engagement: whose education is it anyway?*, *Talking about Quality*, Issue 3, QAA.  
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/ImprovingHigherEducation/debate/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> Graham Gibbs (2010) *Dimensions of quality*. York: HEA

<sup>12</sup> Buckley, A. (2012). *Making it Count*. York: HEA (page40)

- An absence of detail about the particular experiences of part-time students
- A lack of data about students' perceptions of aspects of the course related to employability.

Further concerns raised in earlier research relate to some of the unintended consequences of the NSS and the way the media use NSS results to create league tables which may shift HE provider behaviour from educationally appropriate to educationally inappropriate (Appendix A, Section: 7.4). In other words, HE institutions may be seen to focus too much on criticising poor performing areas and too little on sharing good practice as a means of improvement.

The validity or otherwise of these criticisms are discussed in the review of existing research (Appendix A, Section: 7). They, along with other perceived shortcomings of the NSS identified through the existing research examined for this review, can be summarised as follows:

Conceptual:

- Ignores student contributions to their own learning
- Focuses on satisfaction rather than on how often students carry out desirable activities
- Coverage too narrow in terms of students' experiences and student engagement in learning and teaching
- Potentially, missing questions (e.g. on employability and co-curriculum)
- Does not identify reasons for positive and negative student experiences

Methodological:

- Lack of context (some questions too vague and general)
- May not provide useful data for informing prospective student choices
- Most differences between HE institutions are not large (but the NSS was not designed to compare institutions)

Unintended consequences:

- Inappropriate use in league tables and marketing.

Some of these issues were raised by the policy and institutional stakeholders in their interviews (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.2) such as the vagueness and ambiguity of some existing NSS questions; gaps in the coverage of the survey, especially a lack of questions about student engagement/the wider student experience; the perceived manipulation of NSS results by the media in the production of league tables; and wider concerns that NSS results were feeding a growing consumerism within the UK HE sector. To this list they added:

- Alleged manipulation of results by some HE institutions (i.e. gaming) and concerns that the NSS created perverse incentives for HE institutions to manipulate students' responses, on the basis that poor overall scores would devalue their degrees
- A range of methodological issues including:
  - Students who were excluded from the survey such as students on short courses and those who did not complete their studies
  - The course and response thresholds that needed to be met for inclusion in the published NSS results
  - The answer scales used, especially 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'not applicable' responses; raising particular concerns that students inaccurately used neutral responses rather than 'not applicable' in relation to services that were not provided by their HE institutions
  - The student's union question (Q23) was criticised for being too general and lacking in context to produce useful results.<sup>13</sup>

The focus groups with students echoed some of these perceived limitations (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.4). They were particularly concerned about the meaningfulness and possible ambiguity of some existing NSS questions (i.e. whether students really understand what is being asked of them). The students in the focus groups thought this was exacerbated by the fact that students, when completing the NSS, had to make decisions based on the whole course experience, one which extended over three or more years and encompassed many taught modules. They felt that some questions were not specific enough and thus open to interpretation.

Focus group participants also expressed concerns about:

- The relevance of questions to all members of the student population
- Students not completing the survey with sufficient thought
- Students not understanding how important the NSS is and therefore missing the opportunity to feed back to their institutions for the benefit of future cohorts
- The role expectations play in shaping how 'satisfied' students are with their HE experience
- Universities potentially 'gaming' NSS results.

All these limitations, perceived weaknesses, and concerns about the NSS have informed our recommendations, discussed in the remainder of this report.

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<sup>13</sup> The NUS has also criticised the format, wording, and lack of context of Q23 – see NUS (2013) *The Future of the National Student Survey*



## 3.3 Effectiveness

Views on the effectiveness of the current NSS in meeting the purposes outlined above (in Section 2) were varied and some of the criticisms of the NSS (outlined in Section 3.2) question the NSS's efficacy in meeting these purposes.

### 3.3.1 Informing student choice

The NSS can inform student choice through the Unistats website, the Key Information Set (KIS), and league tables although the data presented in league tables may be inappropriate and thus misleading. However, it was recognised by organisational and policy stakeholders that the NSS was one of a number of information sources used by prospective students, and other sources were felt to be potentially more useful. These included institutional open days and websites (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.1). This is confirmed by other research.<sup>14</sup> In addition, as discussed in Section 3.2 some commentators consider the NSS to be too narrowly drawn and as such feel it cannot fully inform student choice.

Some institutional and policy stakeholders thought that prospective students might find the NSS data difficult to interpret (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.1).

Some 93 per cent of students surveyed thought that the views of other students had been/would be useful in informing their study choices (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5; Table 3.21). Our student survey also explored which specific areas covered by the NSS prospective students, current students and graduates found useful when deciding on a course. It indicated (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5; Table 3.18) that students were most interested in getting information on:<sup>15</sup>

- The overall quality of the course (70 per cent)
- Teaching on the course (e.g. whether staff are good at explaining things and make the subject interesting) (63 per cent).

It was on these topics that survey respondents most frequently sought and successfully accessed information (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5, Tables 3.19 and 3.20). Three-quarters of

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<sup>14</sup> Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University (2010) *Understanding the Information Needs of Users of Public Information about Higher Education*. Bristol: HEFCE  
[https://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd1210/rd12\\_10b.pdf](https://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/hefce/content/pubs/2010/rd1210/rd12_10b.pdf);

Diamond, A., Roberts, J., Vorley, T., Birkin, G., Evans J., Sheen, J., Nathwani, T. (2013) *Advisory Study and Literature Review to support the Review of the Provision of Information about Higher Education*. Leicester: CFE Research.

<sup>15</sup> Some research e.g. Diamond *et al.* (2013) *op cit* questions the usefulness of such information in informing student decision-making and argues that students use post-hoc rationalisations to explain their actions in intelligible ways. In turn, this “casts doubt on the usefulness of *ex-post* survey analysis to help us understand information use and decision-making, and yet most of the empirical literature on HE decision-making relies on these methods.” (page 18)

all respondents<sup>16</sup> had successfully accessed information on satisfaction with the overall quality of their course and 63 per cent had successfully accessed information on satisfaction with the teaching on their course. This suggests that the NSS was effective in informing student choice in relation to these topics.

By comparison, student survey respondents were least likely to rate as useful information on whether the course had helped with personal development (e.g. confidence, communication skills and problem-solving). Some 36 per cent of survey respondents rated this information as very useful (see Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5; Table 3.18). Also respondents were least likely to seek information on issues related to personal development - 40 per cent had sought out and successfully accessed information on the topic. However, an important finding from the student survey was that even when students identify specific information as useful, they did not necessarily seek out information about it: a finding reflected in other research.<sup>17</sup>

Current and prospective students in the focus groups also suggested that the NSS questions on personal development were the least useful because they did not offer students any real insight into what the course or university was like. Participants suggested that because these were the least useful questions in the NSS that they could possibly be dropped from the core questionnaire or alternatively be reshaped (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.3).

### 3.3.2 Enhancing teaching quality

Research examined in the literature review (Appendix A, Section: 6) indicates that the NSS provides useful information for improvement purposes for the HE sector as a whole; has had a major impact on quality enhancement in individual institutions and generally across the sector; and has helped to move learning and teaching higher up the national policy agenda (Appendix A, Section: 6).

Most HE institutions involved in the stakeholder research also reported that the NSS was an effective tool for quality enhancement, identifying many ways in which they had employed it to improve their courses and students' experiences. For instance, they used the NSS:

- To benchmark subjects/programmes against similar institutions
- To learn from good practice within their institution
- To identify areas in which improvements to teaching could be made
- To generate action plans and targets for improving teaching quality
- To promote dialogue between students and staff
- To review institution-wide performance (Appendix B, Section: 2.2.2).

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<sup>16</sup> Seventy-nine per cent of respondents had sought information on satisfaction with the quality of their course and of these, 94 per cent had successfully accessed information on the topic. Seventy per cent had sought information on the teaching of their course; of these, 90 per cent had successfully accessed information.

<sup>17</sup> Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University (2010) *op cit*.

In contrast, policy and funding stakeholders had more mixed views about the effectiveness of the NSS as a means of enhancing quality. They too believed the NSS had encouraged institutions to make improvements and had driven change at a programme and subject level. Their main criticism was that NSS questions focused on student satisfaction. They regarded this focus as a poorer proxy for quality than other indicators and believed that it risked distracting HE providers from improving the quality of students' teaching and learning experiences.

Furthermore, some policy and funding stakeholders suggested how the NSS might be improved. In line with other commentators discussed in the literature review (Appendix A, Sections: 7.2; 7.6), they felt that the quality enhancement purpose of the NSS could be better supported if questions on the broader student experience and on student engagement were included (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.1).

Similarly the focus groups with students gave testament to the effectiveness of the NSS in enhancing quality (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.2). However, some students were concerned that the survey could potentially divert HE providers' attention away from other key areas requiring enhancement – areas that were either a) not measured by the survey or b) had received reasonable NSS results, but nevertheless had scope for improvement. Student participants felt that this could result in complacency from HE institutions. In addition, they felt that the NSS should be one of a number of tools HE institutions used for quality enhancement purposes and that the NSS should be valued and used alongside universities' own module evaluations.

### 3.3.3 Ensuring public accountability

Stakeholder interviewees felt that the NSS was generally effective in terms of meeting its public accountability purpose (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.1). Only a very small proportion of survey respondents saw public accountability as the main purpose of the NSS (four per cent), which suggests that public accountability was seen as a secondary purpose, rather than a key one (see Appendix B, Section: 3.1.2, Figure 3.2). However, it was typically seen to be effective in fulfilling this role (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.3, Table 3.2).

# 4 A new NSS: How might the NSS change to meet its purposes more effectively?

## 4.1 Introduction

The perceived weaknesses of the NSS need to be addressed, where feasible, to ensure the NSS meets its future purposes as effectively as possible. These weaknesses, alongside the NSS's strengths and insights gained from our examination of alternative instruments used in the UK and in other countries (Appendix A, Section: 8), suggest that any proposed changes need to be guided by the following principles:

- Fitness for purpose – the information is used to suit the purposes for which it is designed to be used
- Consistency – the information is consistently collected and comparisons can be made over time
- Auditability – the information can be scrutinised
- Transparency – the information has a clear meaning
- Timeliness – the information readily enables institutions to enhance their quality of teaching and learning.<sup>18</sup>

In applying these principles, our review of research and other student survey instruments points to a limited number of salient domains of student experiences that can be addressed through such surveys. They would appear to be as follows:

1. How students connect with their studies and their institutions ('learner engagement', 'student approaches to learning')
2. Students' evaluations of the quality of teaching and support, including learning resources (and potentially many other aspects of support)
3. Student development (students' self-reports of learning and skills developed through their experiences of HE).

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<sup>18</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) (2011) *Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education: Discussion Paper*.  
[www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/.../DevelopPerformanceMeasuresHigherEd\\_Finaldiscussionpaper.pdf](http://www.innovation.gov.au/HigherEducation/.../DevelopPerformanceMeasuresHigherEd_Finaldiscussionpaper.pdf)

## 4.2 Criteria for selecting new questions and assessing existing questions

Central to the design of any survey questionnaire is the need for a clear and bounded focus whereby the topics covered are limited. This focus and what is measured are dictated by the overall purpose of the questionnaire.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the NSS, it aims to collect data from students in order to inform student choice, enhance the student academic experience within HE institutions, and to ensure public accountability.

As we have seen (Section 3.2), key criticisms of the current NSS centre on what it measures and covers. There is strong support to widen the coverage of the NSS and to include more questions about the student experience and in particular, student engagement. Yet, as discussed in greater depth below, both the concept of ‘the student experience’ and of ‘student engagement’ are multi-dimensional and contested. There is no single agreed definition of these terms. The list of ‘the student experience’ and ‘student engagement’ topics which potentially could be incorporated within a revised NSS is expansive.

In recognition of the need to delimit the NSS questionnaire and to facilitate the process of selecting appropriate topics and questions about the student experience and student engagement to be included in a revised NSS, a set of generic selection criteria was devised.

These criteria were initially informed by our review of the literature and interviews with policy and institutional stakeholders. They were subsequently refined following discussions with experts at the internal and external panels.

The emerging criteria that this research suggests all NSS questions in future should adhere to are as follows:

1. Be about something that HE providers can influence
2. Be about the academic experience and especially, learning and teaching
3. Be, as far as practical, universally applicable across all types of HE providers, modes of study, disciplines, and countries in the UK
4. Cover measurable and valid issues
5. Be meaningful and useful to students, HE providers and other stakeholders
6. Produce results that are unambiguous in direction
7. Address issues of enduring importance in UK HE rather than transient policy interests
8. Meet at least one of the three key purposes of the NSS.

**We recommend that all questions in the core NSS conform to these emerging criteria.**

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<sup>19</sup> Fowler F.J. (1995) *Improving Survey Questions: Design & Evaluation*. *Applied Social Research Methods Series*. Vol. 38. London: Sage

As discussed (Section 2), the NSS has multiple purposes, and consequently not all questions, including potential new questions, will meet all the purposes outlined above. However, each question should have a contribution to meeting one or more purposes and the questionnaire as whole must meet all of them. In addition, the multiple purposes have implications for any new questions that might be included. It is necessary to include questions that reflect characteristics of institutions related to their teaching and programmes of study rather than features of student behaviour. For instance, questions need to assess what the institution offers rather than the individual characteristics of students and what students bring to their experience such as their academic ability, or socio-economic backgrounds.

### 4.3 The student experience

As discussed in the literature review (Appendix A, Section: 4), most commentators acknowledge that the term 'student experience' has multiple meanings and that student experiences are unique to each individual. While different aspects of the student experience can be listed, the list is potentially endless. For instance, the policy and institutional stakeholders interviewed cited a wide range of areas such as pre-enrolment activities, the experience of study at an HE institution including accommodation; extra-curricular activities (societies, sports); transport; health services; careers services; social life; and employment outcomes (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.7).

The stakeholder survey showed high levels of support for collecting information on the student experience (66 per cent) (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.7). However, alongside general support for the inclusion of experience questions were very strong arguments as to why some aspects of the student experience, such as accommodation and social facilities, should not be included in the core NSS. The stakeholders interviewed and surveyed who did not think that the NSS should include questions on the student experience believed that any future survey should maintain a focus on the academic experience of HE, especially teaching and learning. They also felt that HE institutions had limited control over most aspects of the student experience beyond teaching and learning. They argued that the NSS should only cover areas that HE institutions could influence – to give them an opportunity to improve poor scores and address any identified areas of weakness (Appendix B, Sections: 2.4.1; 3.1.7).

Some of areas of the student experience listed above are covered by other national surveys, and in far more depth than would be possible in the NSS. For instance, the employment outcomes of HE is the focus of the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) annual survey of Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE), designed to capture information from graduates on employment outcomes.<sup>20</sup> The National Union of Students (NUS) regularly runs a survey on student accommodation. Other areas are covered in the optional banks of questions which form part of the NSS, such as issues related to careers services.

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<sup>20</sup> Data from DLHE are included in the KIS , and so are readily available to prospective students.

In addition, some areas of the student experience listed above do not fulfil the selection criteria outlined in Section 4.2. In turn this is related to the differences between the individual student experience and institutionally intended student experience patterns. The NSS is designed to reflect aggregated impressions of the student (learning) experience, not to reflect individual experiences (bar perhaps in the open comments).<sup>21</sup>

## 4.4 Student engagement

Central to the student experience and to high quality undergraduate courses is student engagement. Overall, there was greater support amongst stakeholders for additional NSS questions focusing on student engagement than for those on the wider student experience. Nearly three-quarters (73 per cent) of stakeholders surveyed believed that the NSS should gather information on student engagement (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.6) - echoing one of the often cited shortcomings of the current NSS, discussed above (Section 3.2).

Stakeholders' preference was for a small number of engagement questions to supplement the existing NSS. Indeed there was general support for retaining most of the existing NSS questions, at least for the present. Stakeholders also argued that a revised NSS should not be much longer than the present one.

Stakeholders interviewed felt that including questions on student engagement in the NSS would help the survey better meet its purposes. Such questions would support the enhancement agenda and help HE institutions to improve provision for students. They believed that HE providers would be able to use engagement data to see where changes might be made and that such questions would give students a stronger voice in decisions about improving their experience. Some contributors also felt that information on engagement would provide prospective students with a more rounded picture of university life and the kind of activities in which students participate. In turn, this might lead to more informed decisions about which HE institution or course to choose. It was also suggested that this could better communicate the distinctive nature of HE to prospective students (in particular, its focus on independent learning and intellectual challenge) (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.6).

However, as our exploration of existing research revealed, there is no consensus in the literature about what is understood by 'student engagement'. There are numerous and diverse conceptualisations, interpretations, definitions and meanings (and misunderstandings) attributed to the term (Appendix A, Section: 5). This was also evident in our interviews with stakeholders, who had different and potentially contradictory understandings of the term (Appendix B, Sections: 2.4.1; 3.1.6).

The literature review (Appendix A, Section: 5) identified the following broad aspects of student engagement:

- Policies and practices related to the notion of educational gain and the degree to which students approach their studies in a way that contributes towards desired learning outcomes. These outcomes are typically those described by academics as

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<sup>21</sup> Our thanks to Gwen van der Velden for this observation.

‘imaginative understanding’, ‘critical thinking’, ‘seeing the broader perspective’, ‘seeing relationships within what students have learned’, ‘an enquiring, independent approach’, ‘critical self-awareness’, ‘learning how to learn’, ‘the capacity to apply theoretical knowledge in real settings’ and ‘personal fulfilment’.<sup>22</sup> These generalisable outcomes inform most analyses of graduate attributes and generic skills and are part of what employers say they most value in graduates.

- Issues associated with ‘the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes’.<sup>23</sup> This behaviourist approach, popular in North America, focuses on what students do, rather than how they perceive or understand academic tasks.
- Policies and practices supporting student involvement in shaping their learning experiences which may involve feedback, representation and inputs to curriculum design informed by important ideas related to the co-production of knowledge between teachers and students. This helps ensure that the ‘student voice’ becomes a central component of quality enhancement, and a means of re-affirming the collegial nature of the student-academic relationship.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the widespread support for additional questions on student engagement amongst the stakeholders surveyed, there was no unanimous agreement among the policy and institutional stakeholders interviewed about whether questions on student engagement, or what aspects of student engagement, should be included in a revised NSS.

To help clarify what aspects of student engagement might be included in the revised NSS, the stakeholder survey asked those who agreed in principle that the NSS should gather information on student engagement (nearly three-quarters of all surveyed) to advise on the aspects of student engagement the NSS should cover. Whilst many stakeholders believed that ‘all’ aspects of student engagement should be covered in the NSS, the three primary themes which emerged from responses mapped closely onto stakeholders’ definitions of engagement. The three elements were all concerned with learning and teaching (the academic experience), as opposed to broader aspects of university life, such as accommodation. In particular, they identified and favoured (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.6) new questions on:

- **Academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning:** The NSS might include questions on students’ approaches to studying and academic tasks. Stakeholders talked about the ‘effort that students spent on independent learning’, ‘their engagement

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Ramsden, P. (2003) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education* Abingdon: Routledge Falmer; Biggs, J. and Tang, C. (2007) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, Maidenhead: Open University Press; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society* [The Dearing Report]. London, HMSO.

<sup>23</sup> Hu, S. & Kuh, G.D. (2002) Being (dis)engaged in educationally purposeful activities: The influences of student and institutional characteristics. *Research in Higher Education*, 43, pp555–575

<sup>24</sup> See for example van der Velden, G.M. (2012) *‘Talking about Quality: Student engagement’*. QAA <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/student-engagement.aspx>



with the curriculum', 'how they have developed as learners over the duration of their course', the quality of engagement with coursework (e.g., whether they are intellectually inquisitive), and the extent to which they undertake learning tasks that go beyond the material presented to them in lectures (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.6)

- **The learning community/collaborative learning:** whether students are participating in academic activities and studies with other students both inside and outside the formal academic environment and the extent to which students felt part of a learning community (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.6)
- **Student voice:** how empowered students feel to initiate change and shape their own learning experiences; whether they are able to engage at a variety of levels from sharing their views to being proactive in shaping and delivering change; how much they feel they are listened to as valuable partners in improving their educational experiences<sup>25</sup> (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.6).

The student focus groups also were similarly supportive of questions about student engagement being included in the NSS and felt that issues about teaching and learning should remain at its core. They were especially keen on topics related to opportunities for feeding back to their course leaders and being actively involved with their own learning and in helping to shape provision (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.5). The student survey respondents (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.7, Table 3.29) also were generally supportive of these topics:

- Seventy per cent thought it important to know whether current students feel that their feedback is valued and that there are meaningful opportunities to work with course leaders to improve the student experience
- Sixty-eight per cent considered it important to know whether current students were engaged with the course content
- Forty-three per cent thought it important to know whether current students feel part of a wider learning community.

Unlike some commentators who argue that number of hours of studying and the number of 'contact hours' are key indicators of quality and learning gain (Appendix A, Section: 5), stakeholder<sup>26</sup> interviewees argued that a high number of contact hours, or large amounts of time spent on private study, did not necessarily mean that a student was productively 'engaged' (Appendix B, Section: 2.4.1). What was more important to them was the quality of a student's learning activities (both inside and outside the classroom). **We do not recommend the inclusion of questions about hours of teaching contact or learning**

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<sup>25</sup> A recent University and College Union (UCU) document argues for all these topics to be included in a revised NSS which they believe should focus more on student engagement. Copeland, R (2014) *Beyond the consumerist agenda* London: UCU  
[http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/j/q/ucu\\_teachinginhe\\_policy\\_feb14.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/j/q/ucu_teachinginhe_policy_feb14.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Students were not specifically asked questions about hours of study as part of the research, but a small number mentioned the usefulness of information about contact time and private study in response to the survey's open questions.

**time.** Our assertion, arising out of conducting this study, is that these matters might be best addressed through means other than the NSS, for example, administrative data and time-use diaries with a sample of students. **We suggest that the funding bodies together with HE institutions consider ways in which this might be achieved.**

Overall, there was little enthusiasm among policy and institutional stakeholders for replacing the NSS with an engagement survey such as the US's National Survey of Student Engagement <sup>27</sup> (NSSE),<sup>28</sup> although some critics of the NSS favour the NSSE.

Our critique of the NSSE in the literature review, based on existing analyses and evaluations of the survey, questions whether the NSSE could replace the NSS (see Appendix A, Section: 8.4.1). The emphases of the NSSE and the NSS are different and they have somewhat different purposes. The NSSE aims to provide benchmarking data for individual HE institutions and is primarily a formative measure - focusing on what students say they do rather than on their evaluations of their teaching, assessment and support. An important feature of the NSSE, that strengthens its formative purpose, is its use in the first and final years of the college experience, allowing comparisons to be made and longitudinal data acquired. The NSSE's results provide an estimate of how undergraduates spend their time and what they gain from attending college. And because of the dominance of the NSSE's formative role, the results for individual HE institutions are not in the public domain. In contrast, the NSS cannot be regarded purely as a tool for enhancing the student learning experience. It also has to serve as a summative measure of students' evaluation of their courses and fulfil other purposes such as informing student choice and public accountability (Section 2). And, it is unclear if the NSSE could provide a comparative measure of institutional quality – an essential requirement of the NSS.

While it is an exaggeration to say that the NSSE represents a fundamentally different approach from the NSS ('engagement' rather than 'satisfaction'), or to argue that the NSSE is a technically superior instrument,<sup>29</sup> there is an argument for taking on board some aspects of the NSSE in a revised NSS such as questions about how students engage with learning tasks or about the frequency of their study activities.

As the literature review shows (Appendix A, Section: 8.4.1), while the NSSE has strengths in terms of its coverage and scope, it also has weaknesses including, for instance:

- Its length – it is nearly five times as long as the NSS
- Only one part of the NSSE questionnaire covers student engagement as understood in the UK, and many of the other areas covered are already included in the NSS

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<sup>27</sup> <http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm>. The survey is formally styled as The College Student Report.

<sup>28</sup> See, Buckley, A. (2013) *Engagement for enhancement: Report of a UK survey pilot*, York: HEA, for more information about the NSSE.

<sup>29</sup> The statistical qualities of the NSSE appear to be inferior to those of the NSS (its scales are less reliable, for example) and its results do not predict learning gains.

- There is potentially a circularity in the NSSE’s assumption that active engagement is linked to learning gains because while there is an association between active engagement and learning gain it is difficult to say if active engagement actually causes learning gains as learning gains may lead to more active engagement
- US ideas of student engagement may not be directly transferable to the UK
- The validity and performance of the NSSE are subjects of lively debate in the US
- It is open to question whether the behaviours represented in many of the NSSE items are accurate measures of engagement
- The ‘engagement’ questions in the NSSE reflect what students bring to their experience as much as what their institution offers; this may reduce the value of the results for accountability purposes.<sup>30</sup>

## 4.5 What new questions on student engagement should be included in a revised NSS?

Given the findings discussed above, and a desire expressed by students and policy and institutional stakeholders for a greater emphasis on students as partners actively engaged in their learning which is underpinned by the research literature, **we recommend that the new core questions on student engagement cover the following areas:**

- **Academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning**
- **The learning community/collaborative learning**
- **Student voice.**

These different dimensions of student engagement were the three most frequently identified in our discussions with stakeholders (Appendix B, Sections: 2.4.1; 3.1.6) and they were considered essential amongst stakeholders participating in the expert panels. The topics of academic challenge and the student voice were also popular among the students surveyed. Around seven out of 10 students surveyed felt that these elements of engagement were important for students to know about. However, they were less enthusiastic about issues related to the learning community and collaboration. Just over two in five respondents thought it important to know whether current students on their course feel part of a wider learning community (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.7, Table 3.29).

A key finding from the literature review is that there is no ‘off-the-shelf’ set of questions about student engagement that can be incorporated wholesale into a revised NSS. Our examination of alternative surveys of the student experience and student engagement

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<sup>30</sup> For our discussion of weaknesses associated with the Australian equivalent to NSSE, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), see Appendix A, Section: 8.4.2.

conducted both in the UK and elsewhere, especially in the United States and Australia, highlighted both their strengths and weaknesses (Appendix A, Section: 8). Those related specifically to the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE),<sup>31</sup> which is the principal student engagement survey from which all other engagement surveys are derived, are discussed above in Section 4.4. Surveys testing the general learning outcomes of HE (Appendix A, Section: 8.1) would not meet the purposes of the NSS set out above (Section 2) while wider student experience surveys (Appendix A, Section: 8.3) are too broad to meet these purposes and other criteria for inclusion (Section 4.2). Surveys of student approaches to learning (Appendix A, Section: 8.5), like student engagement surveys (Appendix A, Section: 8.4), focus on what students say they do rather than on their evaluations of their teaching, assessment and support. However, in seeking to strengthen the NSS by incorporating important aspects of student engagement with learning tasks, some of the questions contained within the student approaches to learning and student engagement surveys could be modified for the revised NSS.

A useful source of potential new engagement questions was the sets of questions in the optional bank of questions which forms part of the NSS. Some questions on engagement are currently contained in the optional bank questions on 'Learning community' (B11) and 'Feedback from students' (B6) and these engagement items could be shifted to the core NSS. The advantage of drawing on this source was that the questions have already been used for some time and accepted by institutions. Another fruitful source, as suggested above, was other surveys, most notably but not exclusively,<sup>32</sup> the American NSSE. New questions derived from NSSE needed to be adapted to meet the selection criteria discussed above (Section 4.2) especially the UK university context. In addition, NSSE questions needed to be reworded because we recommend that, for ease and speed of completion, a single set of answer scales - those currently used in the NSS - are retained and used in the revised NSS.<sup>33</sup> We also recognised the opinion expressed by external stakeholders that NSS questions should continue to focus on students' evaluations of teaching and courses rather than the characteristics of students.

There were numerous drafts of the wording of the proposed questions, specified below. Draft questions were discussed and analysed at all four expert panel workshops and then revised following participants' comments and feedback. In drafting these questions, we were mindful of research on questionnaire design<sup>34</sup> and the need to ensure that all questions met the selection criteria (Section 4.2).

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<sup>31</sup> <http://nsse.iub.edu/html/about.cfm>. The survey is formally styled as The College Student Report.

<sup>32</sup> We called on the following existing surveys when devising the additional questions: Approaches to Studying Surveys: Student Engagement Questionnaire (developed by David Kember and Doris Leuing) and the Academic Engagement Form (developed by John Richardson).

<sup>33</sup> In the NSS, students are asked whether they agree or disagree with a statement. In NSSE, students are most often asked to quantify the frequency of an activity. For a fuller discussion on the answer scales used in the NSS see Section 4.10.8.

<sup>34</sup> Fowler F. J. (1995). *op cit*, Oppenheim, A. N. (1992) *Questionnaire design, interviewing and attitude measurement*. Continuum.

#### 4.5.1 New questions on academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning

Given support for the inclusion of student engagement questions, **we suggest that the following new questions be considered for inclusion in a revised NSS. We also strongly recommend that these questions are tested and piloted rigorously, and adapted as appropriate, prior to inclusion (see Section 4.7 for our recommendations about piloting the new instrument).**<sup>35</sup>

- **My course has challenged me to achieve my best**
- **The teaching has encouraged me to think about the course content in greater depth [OR My course has provided me with opportunities to analyse ideas, concepts or experiences in depth]**
- **My course has encouraged me to apply what I have learnt to practical problems or new situations**
- **My course has enabled me to bring information and ideas together from different topics to solve problems**

#### 4.5.2 New questions on the learning community/ collaborative learning

**We suggest that the following new questions are tested and piloted, and be considered for inclusion in a new NSS.**

- **I do not feel part of a group of students and staff committed to learning**
- **I have not been encouraged to talk about academic ideas with other students**
- **I haven't had opportunities to work with other students on my course**

All these questions are worded negatively. This is in response to concerns raised by the student focus groups that students were not completing the NSS with sufficient thought (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.4) which is borne out by analysis of student responses.<sup>36</sup> This could be a way of managing “yea-saying” which could be tested in both cognitive testing and piloting. See Section 4.10. 8 below for a full discussion.

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<sup>35</sup> Variations on these questions are being used in the HEA's UK Engagement Survey 2014 according to personal communication with Alex Buckley.

<sup>36</sup> See HEFCE (forthcoming) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis*.

### 4.5.3 New questions on student voice

**We suggest that the following new questions are tested and piloted and be considered for inclusion in a revised NSS.**

- **Staff appear to value the course feedback given by students**
- **I am clear about how students' comments on the course have been acted on**
- **I have had enough opportunities to provide feedback on this course**
- **On this course, students' ideas for improvement are taken seriously**

## 4.6 Suggested other new questions to be included in a revised NSS

### 4.6.1 Experience of the Student Loans Company

The Student Loans Company (SLC) Stakeholder Forum has suggested a new NSS question which assesses students' satisfaction with the service provided by the SLC. However, such a question does not meet the selection criteria for inclusion in the NSS identified above (Section 4.2). Students' experiences of the SLC are not directly related to the academic experience, and learning and teaching in particular (Criterion 2), neither are they applicable to all students as only a minority of part-time students receive loans (Criterion 3), nor are HE institutions in a position to influence the service provided by the SLC which shapes students' experiences of the SLC (Criterion 1). For these reasons, **we do not recommend the inclusion of such a question about the SLC.**

### 4.6.2 Environmental sustainability

The UK HE funding bodies are committed to environmental sustainability and it has been suggested by HEFCE and the NUS that new questions be added concerning this, including whether issues concerning sustainable development are covered in the curriculum. However, this was not an issue that came up in the stakeholder or student consultations. Furthermore, it is open to debate as to whether such issues meet the selection criteria for inclusion in the NSS identified above (Section 4.2), especially their relationship to the academic experience (Criterion 2).

More significantly, it is not the place of the NSS to make recommendations about what is taught in HE institutions. In line with ideas of HE institutional autonomy and academic freedom, decisions about what is taught lie with the academic staff who are responsible for devising the course curriculum and with the HE institutions which have their own internal procedures for approving the contents of courses. **We do not recommend the inclusion of such a question within the core NSS. Broader questions, for example about the campus and environmental sustainability, community engagement and the wider student experience of sustainability might well be included as part of the optional bank of questions, assuming HE providers were interested.**

### 4.6.3 International benchmarking

It has been suggested that some new questions might be inserted that specifically facilitate international benchmarking. Several of the present NSS questions and the proposed new questions are already similar to those used in other national surveys. However, it can be misleading to compare student experiences across different countries given the large variations in HE systems within which their experiences are located. This is true even where identical questions are used. **We do not recommend inserting new questions specifically for the purpose of international benchmarking.**

## 4.7 Reviewing existing NSS questions

The questions in the NSS remain virtually unchanged since the NSS was launched in 2005.<sup>37</sup> The 2010 review of the NSS noted the importance of keeping the NSS up to date.<sup>38</sup> This review was an opportunity to assess if any of the existing questions needed to be changed and to take on board some of the criticisms of specific questions.

### 4.7.1 Rewording existing NSS questions

Some questions may need rewording:

- To reflect broader changes in the HE academic experience and conceptualisations of the student experience
- Because they may inadvertently encourage HE institutions to act in ways which do not enhance students' academic experiences<sup>39</sup>
- Because the current wording may not adhere to the question selection criteria (Section 4.2).

#### Changes in the HE academic experience

There are currently three questions about learning resources. Given that these questions were written nearly 10 years ago, as might be expected they do not reflect technological advances or changes in student expectations concerning ICT<sup>40</sup> that have taken place since

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<sup>37</sup> An additional question about students' unions has been added since 2005.

<sup>38</sup> Institute of Education (2010). *op cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Some have suggested that this should be included as one of the selection criteria for the inclusion of a question in the NSS questionnaire. In practice, it would be hard to apply and for this reason has not been included in Section 4.2.

<sup>40</sup> Beethem, H. and White D. (2013) *Students' expectations and experiences of the digital environment* <http://digitalstudent.jiscinvolve.org/wp/students-expectations-and-experiences-of-the-digital-environment-phase-1-study/>

the NSS was originally devised in 2005. This was an area raised in the stakeholder consultation (Appendix B, Section: 2.4.1). We therefore propose the following changes.

<b>Learning resources</b>	
<b>Existing question</b>	<b>Recommended revised/new question</b>
16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs	The library, including its digital services, are good enough for my needs
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to	I have been able to access course information and virtual learning facilities when I needed to <sup>41</sup>
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to	I have been able to access specialised equipment, software and facilities when I needed to
	I have been encouraged to use technology to enhance my learning

Beethem and White's<sup>42</sup> research suggests that students expect ubiquitous free-at-the-point-of-use access to the web and robust and ubiquitous wifi across campus locations. However, this is not necessarily available at all institutions/campuses. Despite this, it is likely to become available in the next couple of years. Alternatively, wifi itself could become an old technology and so such a question would become redundant. It is for these reasons that a question specifically about wifi-access has not been included in the revised NSS.

### **Enhancing students' experiences**

One of the criticisms of the NSS is the alleged gaming by HE institutions (Section 3.2). Some stakeholders have argued that Q7 and Q8 might not encourage HE institutions to act in ways

<sup>41</sup> Note that this is a new question. If there is concern about changing this question in this way it could be reworded: "I have been able to access IT resources, including virtual learning facilities (e.g. VLE), when I needed to."

<sup>42</sup> Beethem and White (2013) *op cit.*



which enhance students' academic experiences. It is suggested that the wording should be changed as follows:

Existing question	Recommended revised question
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt	Feedback on my work has been timely
8. I have received detailed comments on my work	I have received helpful comments on my work

### Meeting the criteria for selecting new questions and assessing existing questions (Section 4.2)

**Q13**, 'The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned', does not meet Selection Criterion 3 listed above (Section 4.2) because reference to 'timetable' is not relevant to students studying exclusively through distance learning. (See also Section 4.7.2 for further discussion). As the NUS and others believe strongly that this question should remain, further consideration will be required.

**Q23** asks how satisfied students are with the students' union (association or guild) at their institution. As currently worded, the question does not fulfil all the selection criteria outlined above (Section 4.2). In addition, this question was criticised by stakeholders (Section 3.2)<sup>43</sup>. Both our review (Appendix A, Section: 7.1) (see also Appendix B, Section: 2.4.2) and research conducted by the NUS<sup>44</sup> found that respondents thought the question was too general and lacking in context to produce useful results. At the time of writing the NUS was consulting with its members about how the question might be changed to better reflect the student academic experience. **We recommend, therefore, that the funding bodies and NUS work together to formulate the new wording of Q23.**

There was some debate as to whether the questions in the 'personal development' scale (Q19-21) met the selection criteria (Section 4.2). Some argued that these questions focus on specific skills and issues related to employability skills rather than students' academic experience.<sup>45</sup> Students taking part in the focus groups and in the survey reported finding information on personal development the least useful (Appendix C, Sections: 2.1.3; 3.1.5 Table 3.18). They thought that the questions on personal development were unhelpful because they did not offer students any real insight into what the course or university was

<sup>43</sup> Some of the stakeholders we interviewed thought that this question should be deleted (see Appendix B, Section: 3.4.2).

<sup>44</sup> NUS (2013) *The Future of the National Student Survey*. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Note here we differentiate between employability skills, and issues specifically about careers and the careers service. Some stakeholders and students wanted to see more coverage of issues associated with careers (Appendix B, Section: 2.4.1; Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5).

like. Yet students were interested in information on how their course improved their career prospects (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5, Table 3.25). Arguably, the acquisition of employability skills covered by Q19-21 is one way in which employment prospects can be enhanced. These contradictory views pose difficulties for making a firm recommendation. Furthermore, most comparable surveys (such as the NSSE and the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ)) invariably include questions about self-reported student development. Indeed, the NUS has proposed adopting the personal development questions from the NSSE.

There was no consensus in the consultations on what any new questions on personal development should be, nor was there an opportunity to test new questions in this area. **We suggest that some additional questions that currently appear in other student surveys, notably the CEQ and the NSSE, might be considered and that they are trialled in a pilot study alongside the existing questions.**

These include:<sup>46</sup>

- My course has helped develop my ability to work as a team member
- This course has sharpened my analytic skills
- This course has helped me to develop my problem-solving skills
- This course has helped me develop the ability to plan my own work
- This course has helped me to solve complex real world problems
- My course has contributed to my understanding of people from other national, ethnic or political backgrounds
- My course has helped me become a more active and informed citizen.

## 4.7.2 Deleting existing NSS questions

To help ensure that the NSS questionnaire does not become too long, and to make way for the new core student engagement questions, some existing core questions could be deleted. The length of the questionnaire was a major concern among stakeholders, who felt that a longer survey may have a negative impact on response rates (Appendix B, Sections: 2.5; 3.1.5; 3.1.6; 3.1.8). While evidence suggests a small increase in length may not impair response<sup>47</sup> it would create extra work for providers in processing NSS results and disseminating the information. Additionally, concerns about length need to be balanced with

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<sup>46</sup> Variations on these questions are being used in the HEA's UK Engagement Survey 2014 according to personal communication with Alex Buckley.

<sup>47</sup> Evidence regarding additional, optional bank questions suggests that once students are engaged in the questionnaire they are willing to answer additional questions. Roughly 80 per cent of students who are offered the opportunity to complete the optional banks online go on to do so, and there is limited drop-out (HEFCE, personal communication).

stakeholders', especially HE institutions', desire to retain questions in order to maintain the time series.

There are several reasons why some existing NSS items might be regarded as superfluous and so might be deleted, for example, because:

- The wordings of questions are too similar
- They appear to be redundant, especially in the light of statistical analysis of correlations between questions.

### **Similar wording/overlapping questions**

**Q8** 'I have received detailed comments on my work' and **Q9** 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand' are apparently addressing a similar aspect of feedback on students' assessed work.

**Q13, Q14 and Q15:** In the 'organisation and management' scale, Q15 'The course is well organised and is running smoothly' is effectively a summary of Q13 'The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned' and Q14 'Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively' (which also fails to meet Criterion 3 in relation to distance learners). This suggests that Q13 and Q14 could be deleted. This would have implications for the 'organisation and management' scale and raises the issue of whether there is an intention to report scale totals as well as the scores on individual items in future. If it is not intended to publish scale totals, then Q14 and Q15 could both be deleted and Q15 retained as the single item that addresses course organisation and management.

However, the NUS do not think that Q15 adequately captures the content of Q13 and Q14. They argue that timetabling is a major issue for their members, particularly those in post-92 HE institutions and colleges. The NUS are aware that Q13 does not meet Selection Criterion 3 (Section 4.2) but that this issue is of such importance to the vast majority of students that it would be disproportionate to exclude it.

Similarly, whilst the NUS agree that the wording of the question on communication may be too specific, they believe there is scope for further discussion around including a question on communication. This is not adequately covered by the proposed Q15.

### **Statistical analysis of the relationship between items and questions**

Several questions in the NSS appear from a superficial examination of simple correlations to be potential candidates for deletion. For example, the correlation between Q2 'Staff have made the subject interesting' and Q3 'Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' is 0.62 and the correlation between Q8 and Q9 is 0.73 – suggesting that these pairs of items are addressing very similar issues. If these items are deleted, however, the practicability of reporting scale totals is diminished (although this may not be an issue if there is no intention to report such totals in future). **Nevertheless, since we do not know what the effect of additional questions on these relations will be, we recommend that these items are retained until after the pilot study. If they continue to be highly correlated, then one of each pair might be removed.**

## 4.8 Testing and piloting a revised NSS

It is premature to reach definitive conclusions about the addition and removal of particular questions. There should be extensive pilot trials and qualitative testing of the proposed new questions alongside the existing NSS questions.

### 4.8.1 Cognitive testing

**We recommend that piloting is preceded by a phase of cognitive testing.** This qualitative technique (based on methods used in cognitive psychology) is employed in questionnaire design to help prevent measurement error, and promote the validity and accuracy of the survey.<sup>48</sup> In this case it would be used to explore students' understandings of new, reworded and current questions, as well their reasoning when selecting particular answers. For example, 'think-aloud' and 'probing' methods would be used to encourage respondents to articulate their thought processes when selecting a particular response, allowing the interviewer to ascertain whether or not a question is being interpreted as intended. Any questions that prove difficult to interpret or understand, are subject to misunderstanding/are problematically ambiguous, or appear to be either interrelated or too similar to each other, can be removed or redrafted and retested. Only those questions which perform well in cognitive testing (i.e. are clear and meaningful to students) would be taken forward into the new pilot instrument.

The cognitive testing would need to be undertaken across a range of institutional, subject, mode of study (full-time, part-time and distance learners) and student characteristics, as reactions to questions may well vary by student profile. We recommend using a carefully constructed sampling frame to ensure key student groups are included in cognitive tests.

The recent cognitive testing undertaken for HEA which assessed the viability of using items derived from the NSSE in the UK<sup>49</sup> also presented students with different versions and layouts of the survey. It is proposed that this is also done as part of the cognitive testing.

Following the cognitive testing new and re-worded questions will need to be revised, amended or deleted.

### 4.8.2 Scope of the piloting

Following the cognitive testing, **we recommend that all proposed new, re-worded and revised questions are piloted.** Indeed, it is very likely that two or more consecutive pilot studies will be needed to refine the questionnaire and confirm that an altered version is working satisfactorily. Again, the pilot will need to include students from a range of institutions, subjects, modes of study (full-time, part-time and distance learners) and student characteristics.

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<sup>48</sup> See also Diamond *et al.* (2014) *op cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Kandiko C. and Mato, F. (2013) *Engagement for enhancement: Full qualitative testing report of a UK survey pilot* York: HEA

Details of hit rates (including the number of students opening the questionnaire and partially completing it) would need to be collected alongside response rates and the average time it takes students to complete the questionnaire.

An essential part of the piloting will be statistical analysis to examine relations between existing and new NSS questions. This should enable realistic decisions to be made about (a) which existing questions might be deleted and (b) which new questions might be included in a revised NSS.

## 4.9 HE institutions' reactions to NSS changes

The consultations with stakeholders and students confirmed that the current NSS had led to positive developments in relation to quality enhancement, but had also contributed to some negative outcomes and had produced perverse incentives (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.2, Appendix C, Section: 2.1.4). Such reactions may have been intensified by the use of NSS results (often inappropriately or incorrectly) in a variety of league tables, which may encourage HE institutions to maximise their NSS scores. For instance, many of the league tables average out responses, which are not benchmarked, to develop a 'score' for an HE provider and then compare this 'score' with those of another HE provider. But, the NSS was not designed for such purposes, and such comparisons are misleading as they fail to acknowledge the subject mix of an HE provider or their student characteristics (i.e. benchmarked scores). In fact, the NSS was designed for comparisons at subject level at different HE institutions, which can be affected by the subject mix and the make-up of the student population at an HE institution.<sup>50</sup>

Both the stakeholder and student consultations raised issues about how HE institutions might react to a revised NSS. It was recognised that any modifications were likely to influence the behaviour of HE providers, for better or worse. Altering the NSS might unintentionally encourage behaviour which is not necessarily beneficial to students and has unforeseen and unintended consequences on institutions' actions. For instance, there was talk amongst stakeholders and students, perhaps fuelled by media reports,<sup>51</sup> of HE providers 'gaming' the NSS, but little hard evidence to prove this (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.2; Appendix C, Section: 2.1.4). Stakeholders saw the alleged manipulation of NSS results by some HE institutions as one of the NSS's weaknesses (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.2). Some stakeholders thought that gaming was encouraged by league tables which they also believed helped to promote competition and limited collaborative working between institutions (Appendix B, Section: 3.1.8). However, if the results of the NSS are to remain in the public domain, as they must (as this is a key strength of the NSS), it is hard to totally prevent the abuse and manipulation of NSS data in a more marketised HE system aimed at promoting greater competition within the sector. What can be done is to limit opportunities for the misuse of the NSS data (see below Sections: 4.10.10; 4.10.11), and to try and ensure

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<sup>50</sup> For further discussion see Section 4.10.11.

<sup>51</sup> Groves, J. (2013) 'Hold bad news about grades until after the NSS', *Times Higher Education*, 15th August 2013, suggests that the nature and timing of the NSS provides opportunities for institutional 'game playing'.

that the questions are worded in ways to promote positive provider behaviour, which we have attempted to do.

It was apparent from the stakeholder consultations, that some were resistant to the idea of any changes to the NSS. Many others agreed to the need for revisions in principle, but might not approve the details of the actual changes made (Appendix B, Section: 2.6). The general feeling from the stakeholder survey was that the current questionnaire was about the right length, and that there was limited scope to increase it. Nevertheless some institutional and policy stakeholders would prefer a shorter survey, while others see opportunities to expand it slightly (Appendix B, Section: 2.5).

It is impossible to predict how HE providers might react to the very detailed changes to the NSS outlined in this document. The external panel events conducted as part of this study included HE providers and other stakeholders. Their comments, including how HE providers might respond to some specific changes to the NSS, were taken on board when formulating the recommendations. However, given the timing of the study, all the detailed, finalised recommendations contained in this document could not have been shared with HE institutions.

**We strongly recommend, therefore, that the piloting and testing of a revised NSS should consider the impact on HE institutions and on their behaviour.** Specifically, it is suggested that information is gathered on HE providers' reactions to the proposed NSS changes including what impact, if any, these alterations might have on their teaching methods and/or reporting practices. It will also be important to explore and guard against inadvertently providing opportunities for HE institutions to manipulate NSS results. This feedback could be achieved through a dialogue with staff at HE institutions with responsibility for the NSS. Several HE staff participating in the external panel events, conducted as part of this study, expressed a willingness to engage in such activities.

## 4.10 Methodological issues

This section of the summary report addresses some of the NSS's weaknesses, as identified in the literature review and in the stakeholder and student strands of this study, and discussed above in Section 3.2.

### 4.10.1 Location of new questions on student engagement in core questionnaire

The current questions are presented in scale blocks and the new ones would also need to form new scales. In theory, some new questions could be added to existing scales. For instance, all the new proposed questions on 'Academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning' could be incorporated into the current scale 'The teaching on my course'. The impact of any such changes would need to be tested and piloted. If the funding bodies wished to report using scales, they would need to ensure that any questions added either formed new scale blocks or fitted into existing scales. **We recommend that an additional three blocks of questions are added for each new aspect of student engagement. It might be possible, after the results of testing are known, to merge the items on**

**academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning with those on ‘The teaching on my course’.**

## 4.10.2 Optional bank of questions

The NSS currently has optional banks of questions and these were seen by stakeholders as one of the NSS’s strengths (Section 3.1), although some suggested that they are underutilised. The bank of questions covers 11 different topics. HE providers can have up to six topics included but the results of the optional questions are provided to the HE institution only and do not enter the public domain. In 2013, the most popular set of optional questions were about:<sup>52</sup>

- Careers (B1)
- Feedback from students (B6)
- Course delivery (B5)
- Learning community (B11)
- Welfare resources (B8).

Generally stakeholders thought the question banks were useful. However, their usefulness was limited because students could only complete them online and so the number of responses was somewhat reduced. This should improve in the future because the number of students completing the survey online is increasing year on year (see also discussion about mode – Section 4.10.9).

Among student survey respondents, the information provided by the optional NSS question banks that they most often rated as ‘very useful’ for informing prospective students’ HE decisions were:

- That the course improved their career prospects (e.g. through providing good careers advice) (65%)
- They were satisfied with the course content and structure (62%) (Appendix C: Section 3.1.5, Table 3.25).

In contrast, respondents were least likely to rate information about social opportunities, the physical environment and welfare resources/student support as valuable to prospective students when deciding on a course (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5, Table 3.25).

Overall, stakeholders raised very few issues about the optional bank of questions. They suggested that some of the optional questions, especially those about student engagement, could be included in the main questionnaire. Indeed, some of the proposed new questions on student engagement have been taken directly from the current optional bank question on engagement.

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<sup>52</sup> The popularity of ‘Learning community’ (B11) and ‘Feedback from students’ (B6) is testament to HEIs’ appetite for data on these areas of student engagement.

Students taking part in the focus groups proposed that questions on careers be included in the core questionnaire too (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.5) but we have argued against this elsewhere (Section 4.3). Instead, we suggest that questions about careers remain as part of the optional bank of questions which were rated highly by students surveyed (Appendix C, Section: 3.1.5). However, these questions could be expanded.

Other stakeholders thought that some of the optional bank of questions may now be less meaningful and relevant for students given contextual shifts in the HE sector, and could be deleted. However, their comments were at a very general level and they did not identify specific topics/questions for deletion. Overall, there was some appetite for streamlining the optional question banks. At the same time, other stakeholders wanted the scope of the optional bank questions broadened to include different aspects of the student experience such as accommodation and extra-curricular activities (Appendix B, Section: 2.4.1). Yet others were wary of compromising the NSS by allowing too many 'optional extras' (Appendix B, Section: 2.5). The funding bodies felt that questions on environmental sustainability might also be added to the optional bank (see Section: 4.6.2). **We suggest the funding bodies might also want to explore whether any additional optional banks of questions are required.**

As discussed, some of the proposed additional questions on student engagement, listed in Section 4.5, particularly those on learning community/collaborative learning (Section 4.5.2) and the student voice (Section 4.5.3) have drawn heavily on questions from the optional banks, especially those related to 'Learning community' (B11) and 'Feedback from students' (B6). **We recommend that the optional bank questions on these two topics are withdrawn, if they are included as part of the core NSS questionnaire. We also suggest that some more longitudinal analysis is undertaken regarding which sets of questions in the optional bank are most frequently used with an eye to deleting those used very infrequently.**

The results from the optional bank questions are not currently made public, unlike those from the core NSS questionnaire. Neither the stakeholders nor the students participating in the research specifically discussed whether or not the results from the optional questions should be made public. However, given the way HE providers used the optional questions to explore areas of potential weakness knowing the results would remain unpublished, and to encourage the greater use of the optional questions for improvement purposes, **we recommend that these results are not placed in the public domain.**

For some HE providers, one of the attractions of the optional bank of questions is that they include broader elements of the student experience which are not covered by the core NSS questionnaire. In addition, some questions are tailored to certain student groups e.g. students with a work placement. Under these circumstances, such questions cannot meet all the question selection criteria (see above, Section 4.2). **We, therefore, recommend some flexibility in the application of the selection criteria (see above, Section 4.2) to the optional questions, specifically in relation to Criterion 3.**

### 4.10.3 Open questions

In the open questions at the end of the NSS questionnaire, students are invited to comment on any particularly positive or negative aspects of their course that they would like to



highlight. These questions were viewed positively and generally well used by stakeholders (Appendix B, Section: 2.5) and were highlighted as one of NSS's strengths (Section 3.1). According to the stakeholders interviewed, they have proved to be extremely useful in enabling HE providers to interpret the quantitative data and identify areas for enhancement (Appendix B, Section: 2.5). For instance, HE providers employed the findings in developing strategic plans, in their quality enhancement activities, and to add explanation to numerical responses. Some stakeholders and students felt that the number of open questions could possibly be expanded slightly but open questions are often expensive to analyse.

The open comments can currently be viewed in the following ways:

- Institution level: This allows the institution to see all comments made by their students, in this view the comments are not assigned to departments or Joint Academic Coding System (JACS) codes so all comments are viewable.
- Department level: This allows institutions that provide department codes for survey collection to view by department code. If there are fewer than 10 respondents the comments would not be viewable against the department code.
- JACS subject level code: This allows institutions to view by JACS code level 3. If there are fewer than 10 respondents the comments would not be viewable against the JACS code.

**We recommend that the current open text questions are retained.**

#### 4.10.4 Institution-specific questions

Neither stakeholders nor students interviewed and surveyed for this research raised issues about institution-specific questions. Given the absence of evidence provided to suggest that these should be changed, **we propose that institutional-specific questions remain unchanged.**

#### 4.10.5 Coverage of the NSS

A series of criticisms levelled at the NSS, raised by policy and institutional stakeholders (Appendix B, Sections: 2.3.2; 2.5) related to the coverage of the NSS and students who were excluded from the remit of the NSS.

##### **Students on short courses**

Stakeholders interviewed were concerned that students studying on short courses did not take part in the NSS (Appendix B, Section: 2.5). Amongst some, this had led to a misconceived perception that HE students studying in FE were excluded from the NSS (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.2).

The NSS surveys predominantly final year undergraduate students or those predicted to be in their final year. However, students enrolled on short courses, those that are equivalent to one year or less of full-time study, are not included in the NSS. A variety of students taking different qualification are affected. Students who complete a foundation degree and then take a 'top up' degree course lasting one year, are most often excluded from the NSS.

These degree students are not eligible for the survey because their 'top up' degree course is classed as a short course. Nor are students following HNC programmes eligible to complete the survey. Similarly, HND students who move on from an HNC course to an HND course are excluded from the survey where they have been enrolled on two one-year courses, meaning that they will be classed as being on two short courses. Many HND students take these qualifications at FE colleges. In addition, students, primarily in Scotland, who move from an ordinary degree to an honours degree, are not eligible to take part in the NSS.

Some of these students will have had the opportunity to participate in the NSS when undertaking their initial qualification (i.e. foundation degree or ordinary degree), and so will not have missed out completely. However, they are unable to reflect on the 'first degree' element of their course which is likely to be of a different nature, and even at a different institution, compared with their initial qualification.

The stakeholders interviewed and surveyed had not considered the methodological and practical ramifications of their desire to include within the NSS students on short courses. According to the HE funding bodies, there are practical problems in identifying these students in time to be included in the NSS. There are also practical issues around publication which uses course attributes taken from the previous year's HESA data and which is not available when the one year runs on the October to July pattern.

Furthermore, based on our knowledge of the NSS, we argue that there are the following other methodological issues:

- Including these students in the NSS for a second time could be seen as introducing a bias, since they would have double the voice of other students
- In practice, given the timing of the NSS, students would be making judgements on their course between 4-6 months into their course
- In institutions where the numbers involved are small, including these students in the NSS risks introducing biases in NSS results as the experiences of those on one year courses would have to be analysed alongside those on courses lasting three years or more.

**We suggest that the HE funding bodies explore whether some of these practical barriers can be overcome, and, if not, that these students continue to be excluded from the remit of the NSS.**

### **Students who do not complete their studies**

Policy and institutional stakeholders interviewed raised the issue about the exclusion from the NSS of students who leave their course early (Appendix B, Section: 2.3.2). As discussed, the NSS surveys predominantly final year undergraduate students, consequently students who do not complete their courses cannot participate in the NSS.<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>53</sup> Non-continuation rates for full-time first degree UK domiciled entrants to HE institutions in England stood at 7.4 per cent in 2010-11. See HEFCE (2013) *Non-continuation rates at English HEIs: Trends for entrants 2005-06 to 2010-11*. Bristol, HEFCE Table 1 p 6.

stakeholders interviewed were concerned that this meant that the views of some of the potentially most dissatisfied students were not captured by the NSS and that this led to selection bias.

Some have argued that if the year of study and timing of the NSS was changed (see below Section 4.10.7) then the NSS could capture non-completers. This may be the case. However, other research shows that undergraduates are most likely to drop out in their first year of study.<sup>54</sup> For most students who do not complete their studies, therefore, their final year is their first year. Consequently, some of the practical and methodological problems associated with the NSS and students taking short courses, also apply to students who leave within their first year of study. In addition, it is well documented that response rates in surveys among non-completers tends to be low.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the survey outcomes would not necessarily be comparable to those for completers and the NSS is specifically designed for students who have completed their course and they would be unable to reflect on a completed experience. **While it may be desirable to include non-completers within the remit of the NSS, unless and until the practical and methodological issues surrounding students on short courses are resolved, we do not suggest their inclusion. It may be advantageous to HE institutions to develop more sophisticated exit surveys for non-completers which include some of the questions currently contained in the core NSS.**

#### 4.10.6 Threshold for the publication of NSS data

In order for NSS results to be made publicly available, a publication threshold of 23 respondents and 50 per cent response rate has to be met. The thresholds are based on absolute student headcounts (not full-person equivalents). Some policy and institutional stakeholders interviewed were concerned that this prevented very small specialist courses from benefiting from the NSS which they thought presented particular problems for FE colleges due to their typically smaller cohort sizes (Appendix B, Section: 2.5). One stakeholder felt that the 50 per cent response threshold for inclusion was not high enough. Yet it is worth noting that according to HEFCE's analysis, the NSS consistently achieves response rates well above 50 per cent. However, in line with basic survey and statistical principles, both a minimum number of respondents and a minimum response rate are normally required to maintain the robustness and reliability of NSS data. Furthermore, if there are only a very small number of respondents on a particular course, then the respondents' anonymity may be put at risk.

At the time of writing, the funding bodies had already discussed the issue of the thresholds for publication with affected institutions and were going through a process to:

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<sup>54</sup>. See National Audit Office (2007) *Staying the Course: The Retention of Students in Higher Education*. London, The Stationery Office. <http://www.nao.org.uk/report/staying-the-course-the-retention-of-students-in-higher-education/>

<sup>55</sup> For some of the methodological challenges of surveying students who do not complete their course see Davies, R. and Elias, P. (2003) *Dropping out: A Study of Early Leavers from Higher Education*, Research Report RR386, London: Department for Education and Skills

- Model the impact of lowering the thresholds
- Seek expert statistical advice on the potential issues associated with lowering the thresholds
- Convene a focus group to consider the advice received.

**We therefore suggest review of the thresholds is progressed by the funding bodies with further input from the sector.**

#### 4.10.7 Year of study and timing of the survey

Currently only students that are (predicted to be) in their final year of study are surveyed and so complete the NSS on one occasion only during their undergraduate career. Policy and institutional stakeholders and students had mixed views about whether these arrangements should change. Many stakeholders interviewed were content with the status quo and saw no reasons for change. However, others suggested surveying students at multiple points in their course, i.e. during their first (and possibly second) year as well as their final year (Appendix B, Section: 2.5). These stakeholders saw this as a potential opportunity to use the survey to capture different dimensions of the student experience and/or to assess student expectations before asking about satisfaction in the final year.

Similarly, students participating in the focus groups felt that first and second year students should be included in the NSS as well as those in their final year (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.6). This, students argued, would be particularly beneficial to current students as it would mean changes arising from students' suggested improvements could be delivered while they were still at university.

As recognised by some policy and institutional stakeholders interviewed, both the frequency of such a survey and when in a student's undergraduate career he or she is surveyed, is closely linked to the survey's purpose. For example, if the prime purpose of the survey is to enhance the learning experience of current students then surveying first year students makes sense so that changes can take place while they are still at university. If the sole purpose is to measure learning gains, then surveying students at the start and end of their programme of study might be required.

However, as the discussed in Section 2, the NSS's current and future purposes are not solely to enhance the learning experience of current students or to measure learning gains. The NSS seeks to inform prospective students' HE choices while at the same time enhancing teaching quality and ensuring public accountability, and it is designed to fulfil those purposes. These NSS purposes were fully supported by both the policy and institutional stakeholders and students participating in this research. And, as suggested in relation to the NSSE (Section 4.4), the NSS is not purely a formative tool but is also a summative measure for quality enhancement. This has implications for the timing of the survey. A summative survey needs to be directed at final year students, while a formative survey (intended to enhance the experience of current students), would include those at an earlier point in their course.

If there is a desire to strengthen the enhancement aspect through collecting information earlier in a student's career, this might best be addressed through a survey such as the HEA's UK Engagement Survey (UKES).

Moreover, surveying students at multiple points in their course is likely to be expensive and time consuming for HE institutions, especially if HE providers in England become financially responsible for the NSS survey as they are in Scotland, and will be in Wales from 2014-15.

While recognising that stakeholders and students are divided about in what year or years of study students should be surveyed, for the time being, **we suggest that because of the NSS's prime purposes that it continues to be run during the final year of study/end of programme.**

The NSS is launched every year in January and is closed just after Easter. Both the policy and institutional stakeholders and the students in this research also had mixed views about the timing of the NSS. This issue was the most frequently discussed and debated topic in relation to methods among the stakeholders interviewed (Appendix B, Sections: 2.5; 3.1.8). Stakeholders and students wanting the timing amended, typically advocated a shift to the post-exam/post-graduation period, rather than earlier in a student's programme of study. They felt this would allow students to reflect retrospectively on their experiences, and would avoid sending survey requests during a particularly busy and stressful time (Appendix B, Section: 2.5; Appendix C, Section: 2.1.6). However, if delayed until post-graduation or after the students' final exams, some stakeholders feared that the NSS response rates might be compromised since HE institutions have limited or no direct contact with students. Stakeholders thought it would be possible to increase response rates through more intensive follow-up processes, but this would increase the cost of the survey.

Most stakeholders recognised that there was no easy solution to problems with timing, rather that there was a need to capture as broad an experience for students as possible without adding to students' existing time pressures.

**We suggest that the HE funding bodies explore the feasibility of changing the timing of the NSS to post exams/graduation, and consider the implications of such a change for overcoming some of the practical barriers to broadening the coverage of the NSS discussed above (Section 4.10.5).**

#### 4.10.8 Answer scale

The answer scale for every NSS question is currently:

Definitely agree	Mostly disagree
Mostly agree	Definitely disagree
Neither agree nor disagree	Not applicable

When the stakeholders interviewed discussed the five-point answer scale (Appendix B, Section: 2.5), they generally considered it appropriate in terms of the granularity of response, believing that a finer grain scale would introduce artificial distinctions. However, both stakeholders and students (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.6) thought that the central point in the scale - 'Neither agree nor disagree' - was potentially problematic for two reasons. First, they

argued that students answering 'Neither agree nor disagree' incorrectly interpret this as 'not applicable'. Stakeholders thought that students needed more information to accurately complete the survey. **We recommend that the NSS includes more on-screen information and guidance to help students understand the answer scales.**

Secondly, the 'Neither agree nor disagree' scale was criticized by some stakeholders and students because they were under the misapprehension that such responses were grouped with negative answers. Stakeholders thought that students had not intended to give a negative response when selecting 'Neither agree nor disagree' and that this should be reflected in the results. In fact, 'Neither agree nor disagree' responses are not included with negative results nor are they included with positive results. Moreover, evidence from funding council analysis of NSS results shows that responses to the scale are not linear (the 'disagree' category appears to be closer to 'neither agree nor disagree' than 'strongly disagree'). **We do not recommend a change to the way results are reported.**

A related issue about the scale concerns whether or not the 'not applicable' category is necessary. As suggested, it is sometimes misinterpreted by students completing the NSS and so deleting this from the scale would largely solve this problem. However, stakeholders viewed having a distinct 'not applicable' answer category as important if the NSS survey asked questions that were not relevant to all students surveyed. While concerned about the current answer scale, stakeholders felt the issue would be difficult to address, particularly as they were reluctant to compromise the time series data. Given these sentiments, and following our discussions with experts in survey design, **we suggest that the 'not applicable' category is retained but that every effort is made to word NSS questions so that they apply to all students, in line with Selection Criterion 3 (Section 4.2).**

One of the concerns raised by the student focus groups was that students were not completing the NSS with sufficient thought (Appendix C, Section: 2.1.4). HEFCE analysis of NSS responses<sup>56</sup> demonstrates that since the start of the NSS there has been an increase in the proportion of students giving the same answer to all 22 questions. In 2005 1.0 per cent of respondents gave the same answer to all 22 questions which had risen to 5.4 per cent by 2013, the majority answering 'strongly agree' to all questions. When the prizes and incentives that institutions offer were considered in the analysis, this occurred regardless of the type of prizes or incentives on offer. This means that there was no indication that there was any link between the incentives or prizes offered by institutions to their students for completing the survey and the proportion of students giving the same answer to all 22 questions.

This may suggest that respondents might not be reflecting sufficiently on, or thinking about, the questions being asked – they answer all the questions in the same way because it is easy to do so. This problem is technically described as acquiescence bias, or 'yea saying' and is not uncommon in large scale online surveys,<sup>57</sup> but the extent of it in the NSS is higher than would be expected.

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<sup>56</sup> See HEFCE (forthcoming) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis* <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/>

<sup>57</sup> Krosnick, J. and Presser, S. (2010) 'Question and Questionnaire Design' to appear in the Handbook of Survey Research (2nd Edition) James D. Wright and Peter V. Marsden (Eds). San Diego, CA:

The conventional solution is to include questions to which a 'desirable' or positive answer requires the respondent to signify disagreement. This forces respondents to think about each statement rather than repeatedly saying 'agree' for each item. Research evidence, however, suggests that negatively worded questions increase the cognitive burden on survey respondents which is reduced somewhat if the negative questions are in one block rather than dispersed throughout a questionnaire.<sup>58</sup>

**We recommend that at least one grouping of questions should be presented in this way and that epop-up 'warnings' (triggered by 5 to 10 identical answers) be included in the online questionnaire.**

#### 4.10.9 Mode

Currently students can complete the NSS online (including on mobile devices), by telephone, or complete a paper questionnaire. Stakeholders believed that a mixed mode approach was best. They viewed online positively because they thought it was the most efficient and cost effective means of gathering information, and they felt phone chasing to be effective up to a point (Appendix B, Sections: 2.5, 3.1.8). With the increasing use of smartphones amongst the student body and the popularity of 'apps', the funding bodies might consider the development of an NSS app to help improve response rates to the NSS so students could complete the survey using the 'app'.

Currently, the results of the NSS are published on the Unistats website. The NSS app could also provide current/prospective students with an alternative means of accessing the NSS results. However, it is recognised that the costs of development a NSS app might be prohibitive. **We suggest that the funding bodies consider the development of a NSS app. The layout of the questions for an NSS app would also need to be extensively tested, as well as the technology for moving to such a platform.**

Furthermore, the funding bodies might want to consider the future of the NSS postal survey and paper questionnaire. This was not raised as an issue during the stakeholder and student research but was mentioned by one of the funding bodies. However, as online NSS completions have risen over the years, and with an increasing proportion of students having access to the internet through mobile devices, arguably there is less need for a paper-based survey. The telephone option should ensure that those unable to complete the online survey have an opportunity to participate in the NSS. Phasing out the paper questionnaire could also save money in the long run although the funding bodies would need to calculate the financial benefits of ending the postal survey against any additional costs associated with conducting more telephone interviews. **We suggest that the funding bodies consider phasing out the postal questionnaire.**

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Elsevier. Currently available at:

<http://communication.stanford.edu/faculty/krosnick/Handbook%20of%20Survey%20Research.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> D'Ardenne, J. and McNaughton Nicholls, C. (2010) Designing Measures of Perceptions of Unfair Treatment by Public Services: Executive Summary & Learning Points. Government Equalities Office. Available at [http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/301612\\_ExecutiveSummary\\_acc.pdf](http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/301612_ExecutiveSummary_acc.pdf)

#### 4.10.10 'Bunching'

As discussed in our review of the literature (Appendix A, Section: 7.1), one methodological issue raised is that the NSS shows that “the vast majority of students rate their higher education experiences positively, and the vast majority of institutions are not statistically different from each other in this regard”.<sup>59</sup> We have labelled this phenomenon as ‘bunching’. The high scores,<sup>60</sup> together with the fact that they are gradually increasing year by year, are potential limits to the usefulness of the NSS for prospective students and for comparisons of quality. The high scores gained by many institutions and the limited variability between raw institutional scores may imply that it is questionable just how far the NSS can discriminate accurately between different levels of the quality of students' learning experiences. And this potentially undermines the credibility of the NSS in some stakeholders' eyes.

But whether the issue of small differences between programmes and institutions constitutes a serious weakness of the NSS is questionable. The HE funding bodies have tried to deal with these concerns. They provide benchmarked results which control for different subject mixes in different HE institutions. Indeed, when the results are calibrated by subject area, quite large variations in overall satisfaction are apparent. For instance, HEFCE analysis shows a lot of institutions have a percentage that agree with a given statement that is statistically significantly different from their benchmark, and there is quite a large range in the results too. In English HE institutions alone, the results for 2013 range from 64 per cent to 97 per cent.<sup>61</sup>

Providing the benchmarked NSS data does not entirely solve the problem of bunching. However, it encourages NSS results to be examined at a sub-institutional level. It is important that the funding bodies try to ensure that users understand the survey and the need to examine course results to get the most out of the NSS.

Despite best efforts, the raw data are still used, especially in league tables, instead of the benchmarked data. **We recommend that the benchmark data be publicised more widely and that information on how to use NSS is provided to the press and others using the NSS data (see below). We suggest the HE funding bodies consider a code of practice around the reporting of the NSS results as has been done by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia, which administers the CEQ.**<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Surridge. P. (2009) *The National Student Survey three years on: what have we learned?* York: HEA.

<sup>60</sup> For details of the scores see HEFCE (forthcoming) *UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis*.

<sup>61</sup> See HEFCE 2013 *Teaching Quality Information*

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/it/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2013/>

<sup>62</sup> The Graduate Careers Council of Australia [http://www.adelaide.edu.au/planning/data-warehouse/reports/Code\\_of\\_Practice\\_2001.pdf](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/planning/data-warehouse/reports/Code_of_Practice_2001.pdf)



### 4.10.11 The use and abuse of NSS data

Results from the core NSS are in the public domain, and there were no suggestions from stakeholders or students participating in this study, or from information gathered for the literature review, that that this should change. This limits the extent to which the funding bodies or others can control how the NSS data are used. However, as discussed in the literature review (Appendix A, Section: 7.4), the simplistic use of the results in league tables and elsewhere causes uneasiness among in the HE sector, and may limit HEI's enhancement activities whereby their focus shifts from educationally appropriate to educationally inappropriate behaviour.<sup>63</sup>

Data from the NSS are often used inappropriately to compare student satisfaction at different HE institutions. As discussed, the NSS was not designed to compare HE providers. It was designed to compare the quality of programmes in similar subject areas in different HE institutions. The misconception may have arisen from the publication by HE providers and the media of overall HE institution results and the simplistic creation of HE league tables. Although both policy and institutional stakeholders (Appendix B, Sections: 2.3.2; 3.1.8) and students were concerned about the way in which the NSS results were used in this way, they recognised it is beyond the control of the funders to dictate or control how NSS data are used. However, in line with the recommendations made in the 2010 review of the NSS,<sup>64</sup> it is desirable to make available clear guidance about the risks and issues associated with using the NSS results for purposes of comparison. As discussed in the 2010 review,

The NSS results can be used responsibly in the following ways with proper caution:

- To track the development of responses over time
- To report absolute scores at local and national levels
- To compare results with agreed internal benchmarks
- To compare the responses of different student groups, including equity target groups
- To make comparisons, with appropriate vigilance and knowledge of statistical variance, between programmes in the same subject area at different institutions
- To help stimulate change and enhance dialogue about teaching and learning.

However, they cannot be used responsibly in these ways:

- To compare subject areas, e.g. Art & Design vs. Engineering, within an institution – unless adjustments are made for typical subject area differences nationally

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<sup>63</sup> Buckley (2012) *op cit.*

<sup>64</sup> Institute of Education (2010) *Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey*.  
<https://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/>

- To compare scores on different aspects of the student experience (between different scales, e.g. assessment vs. teaching) in an unsophisticated way
- To compare whole institutions without taking account of sources of variation such as subject mix and student characteristics
- To construct league tables of programmes or institutions that do not allow for the fact that the majority of results are not materially different.

We recommend that these features of the survey should be declared more clearly both when the NSS is administered and when its results are reported.<sup>65</sup>

**We fully support this recommendation and suggest clear guidance about the risks and issues associated with using the NSS results for purposes of comparison are provided by the funding bodies both when the NSS is administered and when its results are reported. We also propose that any HE provider level comparisons continue to be calibrated for subject area mix using benchmarks and, as discussed above, the funding bodies consider the introduction of a code of practice round the reporting of NSS data.**

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<sup>65</sup> Institute of Education (2010) *op cit.* (pages 64-65)

## 5 Revised NSS questionnaire summarising recommended changes

Below is a revised version of the NSS questionnaire which captures the key recommendations regarding its content.

<b>Revised NSS Questionnaire and summary of recommended changes</b>	
	<b>Comment</b>
<b>The teaching on my course</b>	
1. Staff are good at explaining things	
2. Staff have made the subject interesting	
<del>3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching</del>	Similar to Q2 and highly correlated with it. See Section 4.7.2. Mark as possible candidate for deletion after pilot study.
4. The course is intellectually stimulating	
<b>My course has challenged me to achieve my best</b>	<b>New questions</b> on academic challenge/reflective learning  See Sections 4.4; 4.5.1.
<b>The teaching has encouraged me to think about the course content in greater depth</b>	
<b>OR</b>	
<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to analyse ideas, concepts or experiences in depth</b>	

<b>The course has encouraged me to apply what I have learnt to practical problems or new situations</b>	
<b>My course has enabled me to bring information and ideas together from different topics to solve problems</b>	
<b>Assessment and feedback</b>	
5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance	
6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair	
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt <b>timely</b>	See Section 4.7.1
8. I have received detailed <b>helpful</b> comments on my work	See Section 4.7.1
<del>9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand</del>	Similar to Q8 and highly correlated with it. See Section 4.7.2. Mark as possible candidate for deletion after pilot study.
<b>Academic support</b>	
10. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies	
11. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to	
<del>12. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices</del>	Similar to Q10 and highly correlated
<b>Organisation and management</b>	
<del>13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are</del>	The term 'timetable' is

concerned	potentially ambiguous – so does not meet Selection Criterion 5. If ‘timetable’ is interpreted as when lectures occur then not applicable to distance learners, does not meet Selection Criterion 3 - see Section 4.2. Issue embedded within Q15, see Section 4.6.2.
<del>14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively</del>	Not applicable to a lot of students, does not meet Selection Criterion 3 - see Section 4.2. Issue is embedded in Q15, see Section 4.7.2.
15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly	See Section 4.7.2. This question is an effective summary of Q13 and Q14 so just keep Q15.
<b>Learning resources</b>	
16. The library, <b>including</b> resources and <b>its digital</b> services, are good enough for my needs	Question outdated and does not reflect technological advances - see Section 4.7.1.
17. I have been able to access <del>general IT resources</del> <b>course information and virtual learning facilities (e.g. VLE)</b> when I needed to  <b>OR</b> I have been able to access general IT resources, <b>including virtual learning facilities (e.g. VLE)</b> , when I needed to	Outdated - see Section 4.7.1.
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment (including computer software / programmes) <del>rooms</del> when I needed to	Outdated - see Section 4.7.1 - and does not meet Selection Criterion 3, as ‘rooms’ not relevant to distance learners.

<b>I have been able to use my own device(s) and applications) on campus or elsewhere to support my learning</b>	
<b>Personal development</b>	Debate over appropriateness of these questions. See Section 4.7.2. New questions derived from CEQ and NSSE to be piloted alongside existing ones (see below).
19. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence	
20. My communication skills have improved	
21. As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems	
<b>Learning community/collaborative learning</b>	<b>New questions</b>  See Sections 4.4; 4.5; 4.5.2. Reverse scored to help reduce acquiescent response style bias.
<b>I do not feel part of a group of students and staff committed to learning</b>	
<b>I have not been encouraged to talk about academic ideas with other students</b>	
<b>I haven't had opportunities to work jointly with other students on my course</b>	
<b>Student Voice</b>	<b>New questions</b>  See Sections 4.4; 4.5; 4.5.3.
<b>Staff appear to value the course feedback given by students</b>	
<b>I am clear about how students' comments on the course</b>	

have been acted on	
I have had enough opportunities to provide feedback on this course	
On this course, students' ideas for improvement are taken seriously	
<b>Overall satisfaction</b>	
22. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course	
<p>Students' Union (Association or Guild)</p> <p>Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement:</p>	
23. I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution	Needs to be re-worded to capture student engagement in academic representation, or deleted as does not meet selection criteria. See Section 4.7.1.
<p>Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects of your course you would like to highlight?</p> <p>(Please use the boxes below.) Please ensure that your comments do not identify you individually.</p>	
Positive	
Negative	

# List of abbreviations

AHELO	Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes
AUSSE	Australasian Survey of Student Engagement
BIS	Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
CAE	Council for Aid to Education
CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire
CLA	Collegiate Learning Assessment
DELNI	Department for Education and Learning Northern Ireland
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DLHE	Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education
DIISRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education
ELIR	Enhancement-led Institutional Review
FE	Further Education
FTE	Full-time equivalent
GPA	Grade Point Average
GSA	Graduate Skills Assessment
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEPI	Higher Education Policy Institute
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency



IoE	Institute of Education, University of London
ISS	Integrated Student Solution
JACS	Joint Academic Coding System
KIS	Key Information Set
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NSE	National Student Enquiry
NSS	National Student Survey
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
NUS	National Union of Students
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PPAQ	Public Policy for Academic Quality
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
SAL	Student Approaches to Learning
SERC	Spatial Economics Research Centre
SLC	Student Loans Company
SRHE	Society for Research into Higher Education
THE	Times Higher Education
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UCU	University and College Union
UES	The Australian University Experience Survey
UKES	UK Engagement Survey (HEA)
UUK	Universities UK