

GuildHE NSS Consultation Response:
Review of information about learning and teaching, and the student experience

Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions

Introduction

This response is from GuildHE, a representative body for higher education institutions in the UK. Our members reflect the diversity of the higher education (HE) sector: including multi-faculty universities as well as smaller, specialist, vocationally-focused or ethos-led universities and colleges. Our membership includes traditional 'publicly-funded' universities and colleges, as well as a number of private HE providers. Some of our members are also large 'mixed economy' Further Education Colleges who provide a significant number of apprenticeship programmes.

Changes for 2017

Unistats

1. Do you agree with the respective roles we have identified for institutions and funding bodies in meeting students' information needs?
 - We broadly agree with the proposals in the consultation, and welcome the consultative way in which HEFCE have developed and amended these proposals, through HEPISG, meeting with the GuildHE quality managers network, regular catch-up discussions with GuildHE and others as well as the wider research. We do however a number of specific amendments to the proposals which we outline below.
 - In the consultation document Figure 1 is particularly helpful to identify the information journey that prospective students make from deciding to go to university to narrowing down to which institution they want to study at. The proposals seem to reflect the different information needs – and indeed different places that students will search – at different points in the journey.
 - It is important to recognise that data provided by the funding bodies is also used and re-used by other third-party organisations and this is a valuable function as part of the wider dissemination information about the HE sector. It might be worth reconsidering how HEFCE monitors and ensures that the data that it provides under licence is used by these third-parties to ensure that it still meets the needs of students to provide transparent and accurate information.

2. Do you agree that our proposed changes to Unistats and the Key Information Set will improve the accessibility of information and ensure that the data we provide is meaningful for students?
 - As highlighted above we broadly agree with the direction of travel. It is however important to consider the importance of comparability of information between institutions, and if there is greater expectation that institutions provide this locally on their own website, rather than centrally, there should be guidance on providing comparable information.
 - There is still a question about providing the information that first year students say they wish they had known but prospective students don't necessarily know to ask for. This

was part of the principle behind developing a “key information set”, and as we move away from this idea we shouldn’t lose sight of the fact that not all prospective students will know what to look for and helping them recognise this at an early point is likely to be linked to successful outcomes and retention. As we make additional information available beyond the 17 pieces of key information this could include additional information already collected such as retention, degree class and entry tariff data.

3. Do you have any comments on our proposals for Unistats and the areas we propose to ask institutions to provide on websites? Are there any gaps?
- In the information journey there is some information, such as accommodation costs, that is unlikely to be necessary – and possibly even confusing - at an early point in their decision making process before the student moves from national information to institutional websites. It would therefore more logically sit on the institutions own website, this would emphasise the principle behind the information journey that students are able to find the right information at the right point in their decision making process.
 - At the moment, with little variability in tuition fee information the same could currently apply to that, but in a future scenario of much greater variability then fee information could play a more important part in the decision making at an earlier stage. It might therefore be worth not removing it at the moment, but rather keeping it under review.
 - The removal of the information about the proportion of time spent on various learning activities is better located on an institutional website, where it can more accurately reflect the actual experience of different courses rather than averaged across the whole qualification, this is also unlikely to be a key determining factor in a students’ choice at an early stage in their decision making and so may not need to be provided centrally. It will, however, be important to consider the political risks associated with removing data that was originally put in place to respond to Ministerial concerns about contact hours, and ensure that this does not raise its head again if we remove the data.

The National Student Survey

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| 4. Do you agree with the criteria we propose should be applied to the main NSS questionnaire? |
| 5. Do you have any comments on this proposal? |

- In principle it is helpful to have criteria as a guide, but we should not be bound slavishly to the criteria – particularly the point about the NSS only relating to academic experience. There may be occasions when there are no other ways of gathering an important piece information and the criteria should not be used as a way of justifying inaction.

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| 6. Do you agree that we should include questions on student engagement, to strengthen the role of the survey in improving learning and teaching? |
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7. Do you have any comments on the proposed themes, terminology or sequencing of our proposed student engagement questions, or any wider comments about this proposal?

- Yes, we strongly agree with the addition of the extra questions surrounding student engagement. This is a more helpful indicator than satisfaction and will provide additional areas of enhancement for institutions. It is worth reflecting on these questions to ensure that they place the student as active participant in the process rather than a passive consumer of HE.
- It will be important to consider the implications of TEF, which has indicated that it intends to reflect student engagement as one of the metrics used as the process evolves in future iterations of the TEF. Not all the proposed questions would be appropriate for this purpose and HEFCE should liaise with BIS to ensure that the questions meet their needs.
- It would be worth looking again at the second question “My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas and concepts in depth” and whether this meets the needs of creative and practice based disciplines. It might be worth inserting the word “and practices” after ideas and concepts.
- The phrasing for the questions about having the “right opportunities” should be reconsidered, the word “right” could be based on too many assumptions.

8. Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on learning resources?

9. Do these questions include all the areas relating to learning resources which are of importance to institutions and students? If not, which aspects are missing?

10. Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on assessment and feedback?

11. Do you have any comments on our proposal to amend these questions?

- The proposals around the assessment and feedback questions look fine.
- The questions around learning resources is the area that might need a bit more testing.
- It might be worth re-ordering them so that you start with the middle question on IT. This would then have a more logical progression from institution to library to subject specific in terms of the three questions.
- The wording of the question about IT jars a bit, this is the only question that refers to “University/College”, it might either be worth using “institution” or if it is moved above the library question this may remove the concern that was suggested that respondents might assume it referred to the library IT facilities and so remove the need to make reference to institution.
- In the question about the library does it need the word “library resources” rather than, say, “learning resources” given the different ways in which institutions now refer to these facilities? It might also be worth adding journals after books, and maybe also online forums and services (or another phrase that more accurately captures the institutional VLE than “online services”).

- In addition, there was a suggestion from members that these questions should be reworded to reflect students as active participants, rather than passive consumers, and also that the questions of learning resources seem to ignore the role that Libraries play as spaces and staff.
- The question about subject specific resources could be amended to say “I have had the opportunity to...” rather than “I have been able to...” In the case of a student trying to get a popular book at the last minute they may not be able to if they haven’t planned in advance.

12. Do you agree that we should remove Q3, Q5 and Q9 from the survey to ensure that it remains short?

13. Do you agree that we should remove some or all of the personal development questions and consider how we can gather this information through an alternative route?

14. Do you agree that we should remove Q23 and instead include an optional bank of questions related to student unions?

15. Do you have any comments on our proposals for changes to the optional banks, including that the choice should be made jointly with the student union or student guild?

16. Do you have any comments on our proposals relating to discontinued questions?

- Whilst we recognise the challenge of maintaining the length of the survey a number of members responded that they use and value the personal development questions and would be reluctant to see them moved to the optional bank.
- We agree with the removal of the duplicate questions, in particular retaining Q2 and 8 whilst deleting Q3 and 9. It might be worth reconsidering retaining Q5 rather than Q6 since asking about the criteria would provide the institution a clear issue to resolve, whereas asking if the marking is “fair” prompts follow-on questions about how and why.
- Q23 was originally introduced in response to the Oakleigh research which asked students what information they would want to help inform their decisions. Q23 was introduced as there was no other data that provided the information about students’ unions. At the time of the Oakleigh research we didn’t explore exactly what it was students wanted – whether it was about the way in which the students’ union is involved in academic issues, or more likely as a proxy for the wider student experience such as sports, clubs and societies and event night life. Since then the question has been the least reliable in the NSS and more likely to result in a response of “Don’t Know” and so there is an argument to move it out of the core questions. However it does potentially result in an information gap about this wider student experience, and it should be considered how this information might be provided.
- There was a suggestion by HEFCE officers during the consultation event that question 23 is likely to be well utilised, even when moved to the optional bank, and so the result may be that it is published. It would be useful for HEFCE to produce criteria around the publishing of data from the optional banks. If optional bank data is published is it important that it is robust and representative of the sector as a whole. It is also worth considering unintended consequences such as if an institution thinks an option bank will be published, and that they do not perform well in that aspect, they may not select it.

15. Do you have any comments on our proposals for changes to the optional banks including that the choice should be made jointly with the student union or student guild?

- GuildHE believe that students are partners in their education and we welcome the proposal to increase involvement of students and students' unions. In principle this sounds like a sensible proposal, however it is worth considering ways in which this might be introduced in practice.
- It is currently good practice that the university and the students' union/ guild/ association jointly select the optional banks. But in reality these types of decisions are not taken by the individuals involved such as the VC and SU President, but rather by academic board, teaching and learning committee or similar body and we would not want to lose this wider consultative process which we would see as at the heart of a partnership approach.
- It is also worth considering that many institutions that use the optional bank, select a bank of questions and then use it for at least three years in order to get trend data and assess impact of their interventions. If there is an annual process of approval with the VC and SU President, the students' union may have different views year on year depending on the individual which could cause unnecessary turbulence in the questions asked.
- As the NSS is extended to a wider group of HE Providers the students' union may be at an earlier stage of development and representativity. It might therefore be worth retaining the notion that it is good practice to involve students' unions in the decision, rather than making it mandatory, but maybe formalise that the decision is not taken in a committee that does not involve student representation.

17. How do you or your institution use the optional banks?

18. How could we improve the usefulness of the optional banks? Have we identified the right additional themes for new banks?

- As suggested in response to question 14 if there is a proposal to publish the responses to optional bank it will be important to consider the criteria for publishing this information. It does however raise the wider question that we might need to consider what the purpose of the optional bank is?
- If the optional bank is intended as a way for an institution to find out additional information on an institutional basis and use this to drive enhancement then we should have a wide range of potential questions in the optional bank so that institutions can select the options that they would like.
- However if there is a suggestion that we are moving towards publishing the optional banks – even if only national level data – then it might be worth only having a couple of options so that we get the response rate necessary for publication. These options might change every couple of years so that a wider report could be produced. This might be a way of providing information on a particular theme that is currently provided through HER which may not be available in the future.

- This is an issue that might need further consideration and discussion and reflection before making a decision.

Changes after 2017

First-hand accounts

19. Do you agree with the principle of making balanced first-hand accounts from students available?
20. Do you have any comments about the possible use of NSS open text comments, or suggested alternative approaches to gathering and presenting such information?

- In the consultation event there was a natural reaction against this proposal, highlighting questions around anonymising the data and resource implications of this, potentially impacting on the honesty of what students might say if they think it's going to be published, the availability of this type of information elsewhere and whether prospective students would trust the information anyway if provided by the institution. These are all legitimate questions and would need to be considered as part of any further development of this proposal.
- However as mentioned above some students already provide this through sites such as thestudentroom or Ratemyprofessor or similar sites, and indeed prospective students are searching for this information. It is therefore worth reflecting on the fact that the students that provide feedback on these sites are more likely to be those with strong opinions – one way or the other – given the very nature of voluntarily providing the information, whereas the proposal of using NSS data might ensure a more robust and representative sample size. It is therefore worth giving the suggestion further thought.
- One suggestion might be to include a third open-text box which the student filling in the NSS will know is for publishing for prospective students, and could be something like “What I wish I’d know about this course and University/College before starting?”

Extending the coverage of the NSS

21. Have we identified the correct priorities for extending the coverage of the NSS?
22. Do you agree that we should develop a flexible online survey to include all students who are on short or flexible courses?
23. Do you have examples of how data and feedback from non-completers are currently collected by institutions?
24. How should we give students who withdraw from their studies an opportunity to provide feedback, and how could their views be shared?

- It is an important principle that as many prospective HE students as possible are able to make informed choices based on the views of students and so we support the proposed extension to those studying short or flexible courses.
- Gathering the views of those students that decide, for whatever reason, not to continue their studies is an important information gap to fill, however we need to consider how this

information might be presented. Those institutions that do most to widen participation are often those with the highest non-completion and so it will be important to reflect how this information is presented in a way that does not have unintended consequences that could result from, say, publishing this information separately at an institutional level. In the first instance it might be worth presenting sector-level information, whilst giving institution the data to drive enhancement. However we do recognise the important of extending the survey to these students.

Information for taught postgraduate students

25. Do you agree that we should consider collecting feedback for publication from taught postgraduate students about their experiences?

26. In light of changes to higher education fees and funding, do you agree that all three purposes of information (paragraph 24 of the consultation) are relevant to a summative taught postgraduate feedback survey?

27. Which themes would it be important to gather and provide information on?

28. Do you have any other comments on this proposal?

- Providing prospective PGT students with good information to inform their choices is key to ensuring completion and good outcomes. However it is worth noting that the PGT cohort is very diverse and for the purposes of this consultation it may be worth looking at the different needs of home and international PGT students as well as the differences between full-time and part-time.
- PGT students that have previously studied in the UK will have a better understanding of the higher education than prospective undergraduate students, and also have advanced research skills to be able to find out much of what they might like to know. This is not to say that they won't need information about the experience but they will have a better understanding of wider sector. This wider information and questions to consider will be supported by the recent development of the HEFCE [Steps to Postgraduate Study](#) website. This is a welcome addition to the information landscape, however, it will be important to monitor both the impact of this information, and also how widely it is embedded in the places that prospective students go for their information such as institutional websites.
- International students are a major part of the PGT student cohort and they may have both less understanding of the UK higher education system and also less opportunity to find out. They will often get their information from in-country agents. It might be worth considering undertaking a piece amongst these agents to explore the information that they need and use to recruit PGT students to study in the UK to explore whether there are any existing gaps.
- When thinking about part-time PGT students, they will usually want to study close to where they live or work. It might be worth exploring how they currently identify the potential options for study, not least as the higher education sector become increasingly diverse and new options for study become available that prospective students may not be aware of. Is there currently some kind of map of HE providers, it would probably be too burdensome to try and create a map of local provision by subject, and if there isn't currently a map of providers this might be an additional element of the HEFCE Register of HE Providers? HEFCE could develop a map showing HE Providers, with a postcode search so that a prospective student can insert their postcode and see all HE Providers within a 5, 10 and 20 mile radius.

- HEFCE has previously explored the possibility of developing its own PGT NSS and decided against this, not least given the cost/benefits and question of when to run the survey. There are other challenges, in particular the smaller cohort sizes of PGT courses that would make robust reporting of data in an NSS-style survey unfeasible. However, it is worth considering better ways of using data already gathered through PTES. PTES covers over 100 HEPs, and has been developed over several years identifying the core areas that it is important to cover, and whilst originally developed with enhancement in mind, there may be elements within the survey that could be made more publicly available.
- It will also be worth considering what information we might need to support the TEF move into assessing postgraduate taught programmes, both in terms of getting the coverage of the information and also ensuring that it is robust enough to be used to make the kind of judgements that it will be expected to support.
- In response to question 28 preparation for employment and further study – key factors for prospective student choice – aren't well currently covered and could be included in the optional bank questions.