Appendix A: Literature Review

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Appendix A: Literature Review

1 Introduction

The purpose of this review of literature was to locate the Review of the National Student Survey (NSS) in a broader context of higher education (HE) policy and existing surveys of the student experience. The aim was to inform the overall research project by raising issues and questions the review needed to consider. In turn, these helped shape the subsequent strands of the research, especially the questions asked in the interviews with, and surveys of, stakeholders and students, and informed the review’s recommendations.

This literature review comprises an analysis of published materials relevant to a reconsideration of the purposes and performance of the NSS. It was intended to update material discussed in the 2010 interim review\(^1\) to reflect more recent developments. The review entailed searching journal and publisher databases for keywords such as ‘student engagement’, ‘student experience’, ‘NSS’ and ‘National Survey of Student Engagement’/‘NSSE’. Special attention was given both to published accounts of surveys designed to evaluate students’ engagement with their experiences of HE, and to theoretical discussions of the idea of student engagement. The main literature search was undertaken in the summer of 2013, at the outset of this research study.

This literature review begins by examining the policy context for the NSS and how that context has changed since the survey was implemented. It provides a detailed account of the origins of the questionnaire and its theoretical background as an instrument designed to fulfil the multiple purposes of informing the choices of prospective students, making a contribution to national quality assurance and public accountability in HE, and providing a means for enhancing the quality of students’ experiences of HE.

Two sections of this literature review consider the various meanings of ‘the student experience’ in relation to the NSS, the issue of ‘student engagement,’ and whether the NSS needs to be amended in order to address issues of engagement. The notion of student engagement, we conclude, is a disputed topic and it carries with it several meanings. It is used to describe the involvement of students in quality processes; it is also used, particularly in North America and Australia, to describe a series of student behaviours that are thought to relate to more effective learning. It is sometimes unclear whether it is an antecedent of learning or an outcome of it.

We examine the strong points of the current NSS, including its validity and reliability and its effectiveness in fulfilling the purposes outlined above. We conclude from this analysis that it is a successful survey that has led to a more robust focus on the student experience. We

\(^1\) Institute of Education (2010) Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey
https://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/
then consider a series of criticisms that have been made of it, including methodological assessments, the argument that it is merely a survey of student satisfaction and the use of NSS results in an uninformed way to create league tables. While we show that some of these criticisms are unfounded (for example, the instrument was not designed to compare HE institutions or to measure satisfaction), we also note a series of limitations, including the fact that it does not transparently address how students engage with their academic experiences.

The review next considers a number of alternatives or complements to the NSS. The principles on which they are evaluated are: fitness for purpose, consistency, auditability, transparency and timeliness. The options examined are:

- Tests of learning outcomes (such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA))
- Profiles
- Institutional surveys and surveys of the broader student experience
- Surveys of student engagement (such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) and the Higher Education Academy’s (HEA) pilot study of an engagement survey based on the NSSE)
- Surveys of students’ approaches to learning and studying
- The Australian University Experience Survey (UES)

Our conclusion from this exhaustive examination of alternatives is that, as long as the NSS’s multiple purposes are to continue, then there would be no advantage (and several disadvantages) in adopting one of them as a replacement for the NSS. Specifically, the NSSE and AUSSE do not provide viable alternatives, although the HEA’s engagement pilot may supply a complement to the NSS for purposes of institutional quality enhancement.

There are, however, specific questions in other surveys on approaches to learning tasks, on students’ perceptions of how their feedback is used and on learning in partnership and that could become part of a revised NSS. Some of these questions already exist in the optional blocks of the current NSS and might become part of the core instrument.
2 The policy context

Since its introduction in 2005, the NSS has become an important component of the quality assurance and enhancement system for the HE sector. It achieves high response rates; it is used by HE institutions as a component of their internal quality systems; it is able to identify systematic differences between subject areas and groups of students; it is a valuable means of promoting increased student involvement and dialogue. The latter function has been described and endorsed in several reports, including recent ones from the HEA. The enthusiastic adoption of the NSS by institutions that were not originally required to use it (many of them in Scotland) reflects its attractiveness as a means of benchmarking and quality enhancement.

In 2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) commissioned the University of London’s Institute of Education (IoE) to conduct an interim review of the NSS. Three key conclusions were that the NSS was effective and efficient; 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. The present report constitutes that major reconsideration.

Although minor changes have been made to the NSS since the interim review, it remains largely as it was in 2010. However, the context has now changed. It is a primary aim of this review to reflect these changes in recommendations for the future of the NSS.

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2 See, for example, Institute of Education (2010) Enhancing and Developing the National Student Survey (specifically Chapter 4, Section 2) http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/ Last accessed 29/05/2014;

3 See, for example, Brickwood, A. (2008) op cit.


Two matters in particular are now more prominent. There is an increased emphasis on value for money and the accountability of HE institutions to those who fund them. This development is linked to renewed desire on governments’ part to ensure that students are able to make more informed choices about programmes and institutions. It is also related to a wish for institutions to improve their services to students and to be more responsive to student demand and study preferences. All governments in the UK subscribe to the notion of HE provision designed more around the needs of students and improving the quality of the student experience (although the policy levers and mechanisms for achieving this may vary between countries).

For example, the English 2011 Government White Paper, Students at the Heart of the System, in part prompted by a policy of HE marketisation and the introduction of higher tuition fees, signalled an intention “to improve the quality of students’ academic experience and to increase their educational gain”: students should expect to obtain excellent teaching; variations in how much time they are engaged in various activities should be scrutinised; wider and better information for potential students would encourage the development of a market in which better informed customers would choose institutions that offered good value for money – thus driving up teaching quality through competition. The Welsh Assembly Government’s 2009 For Our Future - The 21st Century Higher Education Strategy and Plan for Wales highlighted the challenge of “ever greater expectations on higher education to deliver a return on the investment made in it by individuals, businesses, employers and governments”. And the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)’s corporate plans for delivering the Welsh Assembly Government’s strategy similarly discuss the student experience and ensuring that the student learning experience is of high quality. Its most recent corporate plan goes further by talking about securing excellent quality HE and student experience, enhanced by the student voice. In Northern Ireland, Graduating to success: A

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6 The developers of the NSS did in fact include a question on value for money in their pilot study, but it was removed since it did not add anything to the item on overall satisfaction (John Richardson, personal communication).

7 Department for Business, Innovation & Skills (BIS) (2011) Students at the Heart of the System http://bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/higher-education/docs/h/11-944-higher-education-students-at-heart-of-system.pdf Last accessed 29/05/2014

8 BIS (2011) op cit. (page 25)


Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland\(^2\) discusses the need to ensure that students are able to access high quality, relevant and timely information on all aspects of HE. Although the student funding regime is very different in Scotland, issues about improving the learner journey, including through more imaginative means of providing information, products, services and guidance, are central to the Scottish Government’s HE strategy.\(^3\)

An essential component of this approach to making the HE system more responsive to students is the Key Information Set (KIS) which was developed following research, published in 2010, on the information needs of students.\(^4\) Each institution has to make course and other information publicly available (including: the results of a collection of NSS questions; the proportion of time spent on different learning and teaching activities and assessment methods; course accreditation by professional, statutory and regulatory bodies; employment and salary information including the destination of graduates six months after graduation; and costs and financial support including tuition fees). Since the NSS’s launch in 2005 the results have been publicly available.\(^5\) However, arguably the launch of KIS and the renewed importance attached to improving course information to inform student choice has helped to raise the profile of the NSS. Indeed, it was primarily because of the introduction of KIS that all HE institutions in Scotland participated in the NSS.

The second change is related to the first. It is possible that students may want or need additional information, beyond the immediate context of teaching and learning, about their institution. More weight is now attached to the totality of the student experience – including extra-curricular and co-curricular experiences, student services and support, and above all student engagement with learning, student learning outcomes and students’ involvement with the process of shaping their learning experiences.\(^6\)

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\(^5\) Originally through a teaching quality information website and then subsequently through various iterations of Unistats - See  [http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/](http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/)

\(^6\) See for example BIS (2011) op cit.  [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/enh/studentengagement/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/enh/studentengagement/)  Last accessed 29/05/2014
These developments are reflected in the growing use across the world of instruments that seek to evaluate student experiences which go beyond the immediate academic environment, such as the Australian UES\textsuperscript{17} and the NSSE,\textsuperscript{18} and in the increasing take up of the services of companies such as iGrad that provide tailored surveys covering all aspects of student life from accommodation to lecturing performance.\textsuperscript{19}

As Gibbs has noted,\textsuperscript{20} institutional behaviour is increasingly being driven by data. HE institutions are increasingly using NSS results for marketing and monitoring purposes. It is important that this information regime focuses on the right variables. Any changes to the NSS must ensure that it produces valid quality indicators for KIS and other purposes in order to help steer institutions towards appropriate actions.

### 2.1 Implications for the NSS review

In the light of these policy developments and the evolution of the NSS’s function we asked the following questions in relation to the review:

- Should the NSS be changed in order to address these developments?
- In its current form, is it still fit for purpose?
- If it should be changed, what needs to be done?
- What is the best way to collect nationally comparable data on student experiences?

The NSS in its current form has evolved to serve several functions, including:

- Quality assurance
- Quality enhancement
- Informing student choice
- Providing public information about the performance of institutions and the system


\textsuperscript{18} NSSE (2012) \textit{National Survey of Student Engagement} http://nsse.iub.edu/ Last accessed 29/05/2014

\textsuperscript{19} http://www.i-graduate.org/services/

In turn, this raises other questions for the review:

- Should all these functions continue?
- Are there additional ones?
- Is the NSS valid across all these areas?
- Does the NSS effectively capture information on all these areas?
3 Development and operation of the NSS 2005-2013

3.1 Origins and historical context

The origins of the NSS lie in the development from 2001 onwards of a new method for quality assurance in HE in England. A fundamental element of the method was to be information about the quality and standards of learning and teaching that each institution would publish to address the needs of students and other stakeholders.

The Information Needs Working Group, chaired by Professor Sir Ron Cooke, proposed that data from students about their experience of quality and standards should be an essential element of the published information. The group advised that there should be a national survey of recent graduates’ opinions, based on the instrument used in Australia for this purpose (the Course Experience Questionnaire, or CEQ) and supplementary to the existing HESA First Destination Survey (now the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey (DLHE)).

Subsequently, as a result of consultation, this proposal was revised. A separate national survey of final-year students (rather than recent graduates) was recommended, from which student feedback, disaggregated by institution, would be published. It was intended to complement this information with a more consistent process for collecting feedback from students through HE institutions’ own surveys.

The Cooke Report\textsuperscript{21} identified three principles to guide the approach:

\begin{itemize}
\item The need to meet public information needs – particularly students’ needs – for reliable information about teaching quality in different institutions
\item The need to recognise the responsibility of HE institutions for generating and publishing information about their own quality and standards
\item The need to reduce the burden on institutions at the same time as ensuring proper accountability.
\end{itemize}

The Report of the Student Feedback Project Steering Group\textsuperscript{22} noted that these recommendations were taken up in the English Government White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (2003). The relevant section of the White Paper reads:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} HEFCE (2003) Report of the Student Feedback Steering Group
\item \textsuperscript{22} HEFCE (2003) op cit.
\end{itemize}
To become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information. We will ensure that the views of students themselves are published in a national annual survey available for the first time in autumn 2003, which will explicitly cover teaching quality. We also expect institutions to make progress on their own internal systems for securing student feedback.23

A team of consultants was appointed to make recommendations about the national survey and the internal surveys. The steering group determined that:

The primary purpose of the national survey would be to help inform the decisions of prospective students and the judgements of other stakeholders about the quality and standards of teaching. The national survey would also contribute to securing public accountability for the use of public funds, by indicating where there are high levels of student satisfaction.24

However, quality assurance and enhancement in HE institutions themselves would best be ensured through internal feedback systems; the national survey would only ‘provide some useful supplementary information for institutions.

The steering group accepted the consultants’ recommendations that:

- The questionnaire should focus on the quality of learning and teaching
- The Australian CEQ should be the starting point for designing the national survey
- There should be a pilot study to test the questionnaire
- The survey should be designed to produce results at subject level
- The survey should be of undergraduate students shortly after graduation (subsequently amended to a survey towards the end of their final year of study).

Following the testing phase, the NSS, substantially in its current form, was first conducted in 2005 at HE institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as part of the revised Quality Assurance Framework for HE. From 2006, a number of institutions in Scotland opted in to the survey: this involvement was not centrally funded as was the case at that time elsewhere in the UK.25 Subsequent developments included the addition of a series of optional questions, the inclusion of HE students in FE colleges, a separate set of questions

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24 HEFCE (2003) op cit. (page 4). This is an early reference to the NSS as a ‘satisfaction’ survey.

25 By 2011, all Scottish institutions participated in the NSS, a change driven largely by the introduction of KIS. Institutions continue to meet the costs associated with participating in the survey.
for National Health Service-funded students and the addition of a core question on satisfaction with students’ unions.

The NSS had from the outset more than one purpose:

- The primary rationale was to inform prospective students and their advisers in choosing what and where to study
- It was also expected to contribute to public accountability.\(^{26}\)

An underlying principle was that providing prospective students with information collected from past students would enable them to make more informed consumer choices (as ‘intelligent customers’).

It is clear from the Cooke Report and subsequent developments that the survey’s use within institutions for quality assurance and enhancement purposes was initially seen as a minor function only. The survey’s close relative, the CEQ, was designed explicitly as a ‘performance indicator of teaching quality’ at sector level.\(^ {27}\) The establishment of the NSS on this model was consistent with its intended use for national accountability and stakeholder information rather than for local quality assurance and improvement purposes.

### 3.2 Implications for the NSS review

One of the aims and objectives of our review of the NSS is to assess the purposes of the NSS both now and in the future. Whether or not the purposes have changed, therefore, is central to the other strands of research in our study. Our examination of the history of the development of the NSS usefully reminds us of the original main purposes of the NSS. These were to inform prospective students’ decision making and to contribute to public accountability. In contrast, the quality enhancement purpose of the NSS was far less significant. These main two purposes of the NSS, therefore, act as a benchmark against which to assess if the purposes of the NSS have changed over time and how they may have changed. Any departure from the NSS’s original conception might have implications for the questions included in a revised NSS to reflect a new or more important purpose or one that has become less significant.

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4 The student experience and student experiences

It has been argued that the NSS may not be a good indicator of a high quality student learning experience.28 What is ‘the student learning experience’ or (as it is often more succinctly styled) ‘the student experience’? This section aims to address this question.

The expression became popular in HE policy circles in the first decade of the 21st century, though its origins probably lie in research into HE students’ learning undertaken in Britain, Sweden and Australia in the 1980s and 1990s.29 The phrase has become associated with the idea of students being ‘at the centre of the process of learning and teaching’30 and it (or a close version of it) appears in many influential recent government reports from across the UK.31

For example, Students at the Heart of the System dedicates an entire chapter to ‘better student experience and better qualified graduates’.32 It identifies the ‘student experience’ as one of the three challenges the government’s reforms aimed to tackle. It talks about how ‘institutions must deliver a better student experience; improving teaching, assessment,
feedback and preparation for the world of work. It argues that ‘all universities must offer a good student experience to remain competitive’. It continues:

“The changes we are making to higher education funding will in turn drive a more responsive system. To be successful, institutions will have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers. Putting financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice meaningful.”

So the English 2011 White Paper calls for ‘a new focus on the student experience and the quality of teaching’ while the ‘overall goal is higher education that is more responsive to student choice, that provides a better student experience and that helps improve social mobility.’ It is clear that the officially approved understanding of the student experience is inseparable from the idea that students should be judges of the quality of HE. Their power to demand satisfaction and to choose among alternatives will oblige HE institutions to become more reactive to their needs – and thus more accountable.

By way of contrast but in a similar vein, the Welsh Government’s Policy statement on Higher Education calls for a ‘diverse and distinction student experience’ with learners at the heart of HE in Wales. This document also argues that:

Demonstrable, robust, publicly credible, independent and rigorous scrutiny of higher education that offers assurance and confidence about quality is essential. HE institutions need to strive beyond maintaining academic standards and focus on improvement to ensure that students are provided with the highest-quality learning experience.

And this is also important for Welsh universities to remain competitive:

To become the destination of choice and attract the best students and the best staff from at home and abroad, HE institutions must communicate the positive student experience and excellent learning and teaching that students can expect from studying at a Welsh university. (Emphasis in the original)

33 BIS (2011) op cit., (page 4)
34 BIS (2011) op cit., (page 5)
35 BIS (2011) op cit., (page 5)
36 BIS (2011) op cit., (page 8)
38 Welsh Government (2013) op cit., (page 24)
39 Welsh Government (2013) op cit., (page 20)
Northern Ireland’s *Graduating to success* 40 also devotes an entire section to a higher quality learning experience, proposing that:

Higher education must deliver a learning experience of the highest quality, supported by a fit-for-purpose quality assurance framework; provide opportunities for students to improve their employability skills; and maintain a supportive learning environment. The Strategy has a strong emphasis on the quality of the student experience. 41

Finally, Scotland’s *Putting learners at the Centre* uses somewhat different language focusing on the broader ‘educational experience’ and the learner journey. 42 This may be because the way in which the quality assurance and enhancement process in Scotland (through Enhancement-led Institutional Review (ELIR) carried out by QAA Scotland) interacts with public information in HE is somewhat distinct from that in the rest of the UK. In the Scottish system, there is no separate judgement on public information. Rather, Section 5 of the Technical Report of an ELIR (‘Self-evaluation and management of information’) will reflect on the way in which an institution manages public information. 43

It is not surprising that by 2012, ‘the student experience’ had attracted the attention of critics of recent reforms to HE, specifically those reforms that aim to place more financial control in the hands of students as consumers of HE. For example:

One outcome of this [consumer orientation] is a new emphasis on the quality of the student experience. Indeed the phrase ‘student experience’ is now reiterated, as if de rigueur, in university policy statements and in the burgeoning literature on student satisfaction that is produced by the higher education sector and its supporting professional bodies. The argument in such documents runs, in brief, that only those universities that offer a good student experience will remain competitive and that a good student experience is one that combines good quality with value for money. 44

The expression now carries a heavy burden of political thinking that forms an inescapable background to the NSS. An emphasis on the student experience is frequently deprecated as part of the ‘commodification and customerisation’ of HE, which is in turn regarded as a threat to academic standards (surrendering authority to learners) and academic freedom (increasing surveillance of performance by managers and governments). 45 Critics of the NSS

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41 Department for Employment and Learning (2012) *op cit.*, (page 4)

42 Scottish Government (2011) *op cit.*


have asserted that its emphasis on the positive and negative aspects of students’ learning experiences drives a wedge between students and academics: ‘This highlights an implicit measure of students as consumers of education… The NSS discourse of satisfaction evokes oppositional relationships between university and student’.46 Others go further, suggesting that ‘the student experience’ has become indistinguishable from a conception of education as a product or service delivered to an undifferentiated mass of students.47

Most commentators on the student experience acknowledge that the term has multiple meanings and that student experiences are unique to each individual. There is no such thing as a single ‘student experience’. An increasingly diverse and changing student population means that even the word ‘student’ has a range of meanings.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make out aspects of the student experience, but as Palmer points out,48 the list is potentially endless, ranging from pre-enrolment activities, the experience of first year and subsequent years of study, graduate studies – and even employment outcomes. (Moreover, some ‘student’ experiences are indistinguishable from broader life experiences. A broad summary of different aspects is provided by Baird and Gordon (Table 1).49

However, Brennan et al. help to focus attention on learning and teaching, arguing:

> Questions about the nature of the student experience cannot sensibly or easily be separated from questions of what students are meant to be learning, or expressed more broadly, from questions about the personal and professional changes which are expected to occur as a result of the experience of higher education.50


49 Quoted in Palmer (2011) op cit.

Table 1: Defining the student experience (from Baird & Gordon, 2009)\textsuperscript{51}

- Life experiences of all students while they are students
- All experiences of an individual student while a student, including wider life experiences
- All experiences of an individual student while in their identity as a ‘student’
- All experiences of facets of the university experienced by an individual student (e.g. a sense of ‘belonging’, wider social activities linked to the university)
- ‘Consumer’ experiences of an individual student, e.g. administrative procedures, catering, IT support, availability of amenities, accommodation, car parking accessibility, child care etc.
- All experiences of an individual student that contribute to their personal development as learners (sometimes described as the ‘student learning experience’).

Some aspects of student experiences are linked to the quality of their learning outcomes and their academic achievement;\textsuperscript{52} indeed, academic attainment might itself be regarded as a characteristic of a high quality experience. Measures of accountability and performance in HE institutions are thus likely to require information about achievement, retention, completion rates, teaching and learning (including assessment, feedback, course organisation and interactions with teachers), the quality of support services, study time, engagement with peers and participation in enriching educational experiences, employment outcomes and indexes of learning and development. Similar information may be needed for assisting prospective students in their choice of programmes and institutions.


If the information is to be used for enhancing quality, more fine-grained data about experiences are probably required. For instance, Gibbs,\textsuperscript{53} while recognising that dimensions of quality vary by HE institution, in different departments, and are difficult to quantify, has identified the following dimensions of a high quality learning experience:

- Class size
- Cohort size
- Extent of close contact with academics
- Levels of student effort and engagement
- Volume, promptness and usefulness of student feedback
- Proportion of teaching undertaken by full-time academics and proportion of those with postgraduate teaching qualifications.

So this would require open comments, information about approaches to studying and engagement with learning tasks, perceptions at course level (and at the level of individual academics in order to assess their effectiveness/performance) of teaching and intellectual challenge, clarity of goals and perceptions of contact with teaching staff.

No single indicator can capture the multiple meanings of ‘the student experience’. Needless to say, surveys cannot address all the aspects we have identified. A key recommendation of the \textit{Review of Australian Higher Education}\textsuperscript{54} was that the quality of teaching and the extent of student engagement in their education should be included in any framework for assessing institutional performance. These features are evidently measurable through surveys. It might be argued that teaching quality, assessment and feedback, and engagement with learning are the most vital aspects of a high quality student experience; they are in keeping with the idea of \textit{Students at the Heart of the System} and are linked to beneficial outcomes.\textsuperscript{55}


4.1 Does the NSS assess the student experience?

Attempting to efficiently achieve these multiple purposes with a single survey is an insurmountable challenge. Instruments such as the NSS will almost inevitably fall down in some respects.

For example, although the NSS covers the central issues of teaching quality, assessment, programme organisation and the development of generic skills, it is not the best instrument for improving teaching and learning at programme or module level – in contrast to some other instruments discussed at length in Section 8 below. It says very little in detail about the quality of student support and does not provide information about aspects of student life such as social and extra-curricular experiences; nor does it ask students how they engage with their courses and learning. It is more effective at identifying broad areas of good practice and outlying cases where programmes are functioning badly. When the NSS is used for enhancement, it is useful as a starting point for further investigation.\(^{56}\) Like most student evaluation surveys, it tells us nothing about causes and additional information is required to diagnose the reasons why some programmes are less positively rated than others.

The focus of the NSS on accountability at programme level reflects its origins as a development of the CEQ which was designed as one of a suite of performance indicators intended to assess the quality of HE – as a global index of perceived teaching quality\(^ {57}\) - rather than as a comprehensive instrument focused on the improvement of a broad range of student experiences.

4.2 Should the NSS continue to focus on learning and teaching or in future focus on the broader student experience?

Given the very broad range of activities that might be said to constitute the student experience, it is hard to justify a national survey of every final year undergraduate that would cover all of them. The survey instrument would be lengthy and unwieldy; the amount of data produced would be hard for institutions and prospective students to filter, digest and use.

We have noted above, however, that some aspects seem more important than others. They include:


- Quality of teaching, course organisation and assessment
- Indications of learning gains (development of generic skills)
- Approaches to learning tasks (quality of engagement).

A revision of the NSS needs to bear in mind the relative salience to a beneficial educational experience of issues as diverse as the quality of teaching and the accessibility of car parking. The addition of new domains should probably be justified by a clear rationale such as the advantages to institutions and prospective students of information about levels of engagement and the perceived benefits of specific activities such as independent research and team-based learning. Understanding how much time students spend on specific teaching and learning activities might also be useful both to institutions (for enhancement purposes) and prospective students (for helping them to choose whether a programme is a good fit to their needs).

4.3 Implications for the NSS review

This review of the literature clearly shows that ‘the student experience’ is central to national HE policy throughout the UK, and especially to learning and teaching policies. The expression is imbued with political thinking and forms an inescapable background to the NSS. However, even in the academic literature ‘the student experience’ has multiple meanings. The term covers numerous activities at different points in time in a student’s life and journey such as their accommodation, social life, extra-curricular and ‘consumer’ experiences, and careers. So the term is not confined to issues about students’ academic experience and their learning and teaching, despite both being inseparable from the student experience. Consequently, there is no single indicator which can capture the multiple meanings of the student experience nor can a single survey address all the aspects of the student experience.

The NSS does cover some facets of the student experience discussed in this literature but certainly not all. The NSS focuses primarily on the academic experience and teaching and learning rather than on other broader aspects of students’ lives and experiences at university. But some aspects of the learning experience are not included in the NSS. For instance, the NSS does not ask students about how they engage with their courses and learning.

These findings raise a range of questions for the review.

- In line with the NSS’s future purposes, should broader facets of ‘the student experience’ be included in a revised NSS, and if so, which aspects?
- Should the scope of the NSS be broadened to include issues beyond teaching and learning or should it retain its current focus on students’ academic experiences?
- Should certain dynamics of the academic experience, which are currently excluded from the NSS, be incorporated in a revised NSS, and if so, which aspects?
• Do we need to make a distinction between each individual student’s unique HE experience and what HE institutions can influence systematically and in aggregate?

• How do all these issues align with any changes in the purpose of the NSS?
5 Student engagement

“Student engagement is a current buzzword in HE, increasingly researched, theorised and debated with growing evidence of its critical role in achievement and learning. Trowler and Trowler’s (2010, p. 9) recent review goes so far as to suggest that ‘the value of engagement is no longer questioned’. With governments increasingly interested in measuring student outcomes (Zepke and Leach 2010a), and suggestions that student engagement can act as a proxy for quality (Kuh 2009b), a clear understanding of this vital construct is essential.”

The chapter in Students at the Heart of the System on the student experience asked “how higher education institutions can create a learning community where engagement of students is encouraged, their feedback valued and complaints resolved transparently and as soon as possible.” It did not explain what it understood by the term ‘engagement of students’.

However, the idea of student engagement is central to most contemporary understandings of the student experience. It has acquired a number of different meanings: it is complex, multifaceted and ‘an overarching “meta-construct” that aims to draw together diverse threads of research contributing to explanations of student success.’ It has also, like ‘the student experience’ itself, become associated with political issues related to the reform of HE funding in England.

In the discourse of HE quality assurance and enhancement in the UK, student engagement typically refers to policies and practices supporting student involvement in shaping their learning experiences. These may involve feedback, representation and inputs to curriculum design, as in for example the NUS/HEA project that aims to engage students and HE institutions jointly in these processes. The ways in which NSS results can be used in partnership with students to enhance quality have been described in detail in a 2012 HEA report.


59 BIS (2011) op cit. (page 33)

60 Kahu (2013) op cit. (page 758)

61 http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/student-engagement/toolkit/ Last accessed 29/05/14

62 Buckley (2012) op cit.
of re-affirming the collegial nature of the student-academic relationship, are also available.\textsuperscript{63} Van der Velden has emphasised that ‘more student engagement’ is less important than the quality of the engagement; moreover, the kind of engagement that works well in one HE institution may not work in another.\textsuperscript{64}

The second principal use of the term ‘student engagement’ refers to 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 ‘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’.\textsuperscript{65} These generalisable outcomes inform most analyses of graduate attributes and generic skills and are part of what employers say they most value in graduates. They are related to the notion of educational gain. They also build upon and incorporate detailed content knowledge, problem-solving skills and facility with technique. The general goals gain meaning through the specific subject or professional content in which they are expressed.\textsuperscript{66}

In a synthesis of nine key papers on student engagement that employ a qualitative methodology, Wimpenny and Savin-Baden identify four themes:

- Inter-relational engagement – whereby student engagement was characterised and experienced through connection to a wide set of relationships including student to tutor, student to student, student to family, and student to career
- Engagement as autonomy – this related to how students shifted from unfamiliarity and self-consciousness to self-sufficiency in learning
- Emotional engagement – this was illustrated by intra-personal capacity, in terms of student resilience and persistence

\textsuperscript{63} See for example Van der Velden, G., (2012) ‘Student engagement: whose education is it anyway?’, \textit{Talking about Quality}, Issue 3, QAA. \url{http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/student-engagement.aspx} Last accessed 28/04/14

\textsuperscript{64} Van der Velden (2012) \textit{op cit.}


\textsuperscript{66} Ramsden (2003) \textit{op cit.} (Chapter 3)
• Engagement as connection and disjunction – there was a variety of student experience from those who made associations to those with a strong sense of disjunction.\textsuperscript{67}

A substantial accumulation of evidence collected over many decades reveals common factors related to a student’s success in achieving desirable learning outcomes. In summarising the evidence, Andrew Norton remarks on the importance of student engagement as one of these factors.\textsuperscript{68} HE requires students to undertake a substantial amount of self-directed activity, so it is not surprising – indeed it is almost a tautology – that the time, energy and effort that they dedicate to their studies significantly influences how well they do. As Pace has argued, ‘College can’t\textit{ give} you an education, but if you go to college, and fully use the facilities and opportunities it provides, you can\textit{ get} an education.’\textsuperscript{69}

In practice this form of engagement would appear to be related in a circular way to achievement, since the sense of accomplishment that arises from successful academic work is a spur to further engagement. ‘Engagement’ in this sense is not dissimilar to the idea of a ‘deep approach to learning’ or a ‘meaning orientation to studying’ – concepts that lie beneath the teaching, assessment and organisation questions in the NSS and which are also associated with higher quality learning outcomes and academic performance.\textsuperscript{70}

Engagement as a self-directed academic activity is also consistent with the argument that hours of studying are a key indicator of quality.\textsuperscript{71} However, England’s 2011 White Paper, for instance, engagement is linked both to time spent in private study and to time involved in teaching activities:

While there is no single “right” measure for the amount of study that should be required for a degree, potential applicants and employers should know how much time will be spent on different learning and teaching activities before they select a course. This is why we are expecting higher education institutions to provide information on the proportion of time spent in different learning and teaching activities. This should be supported by links to more detailed information at module


\textsuperscript{69} Pace, R (1982) \textit{Achievement and the Quality of Student Effort} Washington, DC: National Commission on Excellence in Education (ED). (page 38): \url{http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED227101}


\textsuperscript{71} Gibbs (2012) \textit{op cit.}
level, for example about the time engaged in different types of teaching and learning activities including lectures.\textsuperscript{72}

In the mainstream North American tradition popularised by George Kuh, engagement is defined as ‘the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes’.\textsuperscript{73} This is a distinctly behaviourist approach – one focused on what students do, rather than how they perceive or understand academic tasks – and has historically\textsuperscript{74} not found favour on this side of the Atlantic. Trowler\textsuperscript{75} has noted that the expression ‘student engagement’ is inextricably linked to a body of research into student involvement (which has also been taken up in Australia) and is connected to large-scale surveys:

The term ‘student engagement’ has its historic roots in a body of work concerned with student involvement, enjoying widespread currency particularly in North America and Australasia, where it has been firmly entrenched through annual large scale national surveys... The most prolific authors (in particular, George Kuh and Hamish Coates) have affiliations with the organisations that have developed, implemented and supported these national surveys of student engagement, located variously within universities or private companies. By way of contrast, the body of work produced in the UK which could be said to address student engagement traces its roots back to other traditions, such as student feedback, student representation and student approaches to learning...the literature flagged as ‘student engagement’ is heavily skewed towards the North American/Australasian tradition.\textsuperscript{76}

This tradition contains important assumptions that reflect primarily a US view of the student experience:

Despite evidence of diversity, the prevailing models of student life from the US assume an optimal level of student engagement with the university or college in a campus-based environment. These include the assumptions that: a positive experience is unlikely to occur in a social vacuum; that learning in a group is critical to the quality of student life; and that there are important learning outcomes from university beyond the mastery of subject matter.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{72}BIS (2011) \textit{op cit.}


\textsuperscript{74}The HEA’s recently launched UKES draws heavily on this approach.

\textsuperscript{75}Trowler, V. (2010). \textit{Student Engagement Literature Review}. York: HEA

\textsuperscript{76}Trowler (2010) \textit{op cit.} (page 3)

Ella Kahu\textsuperscript{78} has provided perhaps the most useful single synthesis of research into student engagement. She identifies four perspectives within it:

1. Psychological: engagement as an internal psycho-social process
2. Socio-cultural: engagement as the impact of the broader social context on the student experience
3. Behavioural: engagement as what students do and how teaching practice affects what they do
4. Holistic: the perceptions, expectations and experience of being a student and the construction of being a student.

The third perspective (behavioural) is the most relevant to the development and use of surveys of the student experience; it dominates questionnaires such as the NSSE, AUSSE and UES – which, as we will discuss in the next section, potentially represent models for an alternative to the NSS. A weakness is that it does not distinguish between engagement and its antecedents (and was not designed to do so), i.e. between what influences engagement and engagement itself. Nor does this perspective on student engagement satisfactorily discriminate between engagement and the effects of engagement. For example, Zepke and Leach’s synthesis of research on student engagement includes ‘high quality learning’ as a component of engagement.\textsuperscript{79} However, others suggest that NSSE was explicitly designed to try and capture the processes of education, rather than the inputs (“antecedents”). So it was an intention of the design.\textsuperscript{80}

We might be entitled to ask: where does student engagement stop? Table 2 summarises the numerous and diverse meanings attributed to the term student engagement in the literature reviewed. Its apparently limitless meanings, including learning outcomes and precedents as well as experiences themselves; the circularity surrounding it; its use as a political tool in arguments against changes perceived to disempower academics and students; its use as representative of a predominantly US view of the student experience of HE; its use as a shorthand for quantifying the various forms of teaching that students receive – together these suggest that it has become a convenient expression for almost any allegedly appealing aspect of the student experience in HE (see Table 2). If it is to be used as a basis for enhancing the NSS, more precision would be necessary, just as precision is needed regarding ‘the student experience’.


\textsuperscript{80} Alex Buckley private communication
Table 2: The many meanings of student engagement

- A component of quality enhancement and assurance: engaging students more effectively in shaping their learning experiences; the ‘student voice’
- Participating in activities that lead to learning and development gains
- Feeling a sense of belonging to (rather than disjunction from) an institution
- Learning with and from other students
- Learning on campus in a social community
- A sense of accomplishment from successful academic learning
- Adopting a deep approach to learning when undertaking academic tasks
- Self-efficacy in learning; intrinsic motivation
- Not being alienated through academic power and culture or market-driven changes to HE (especially non-traditional students)
- “Engaging the whole person” \(^{81}\)
- Emotional attachment to learning deriving from good teaching, curriculum, assessment, resources and support \(^{82}\)
- ‘Student-centred’ education (teaching that focuses on students’ needs)
- Involvement in learning, including time on task, participation in extra-curricular activities, enjoyment and interest.

5.1 Does the NSS assess student engagement?

The answer to this question depends, needless to say, on which meaning is attached to ‘engagement’. If it is seen to be about how teaching and course organisation influence what students do and how they learn, then the NSS undoubtedly does address it. Van der Velden has noted that the answers to some questions in the NSS provide ‘an insight into how well students and staff engage with each other in relation to the learning process’. \(^{83}\) Implicit in the NSS (deriving from its basis in the CEQ) is the idea that certain teaching practices influence how students engage with learning tasks. It is no surprise that students who respond

\(^{81}\) Kahu (2013) op cit. page763

\(^{82}\) Kahu (2013) op cit. page764

\(^{83}\) Van der Velden in forward to Buckley (2012) op cit.
positively to the questions on teaching and course organisation are more likely also to report learning gains.  

Similarly, if engagement is about learning and development gains themselves, then the NSS addresses it. It has been asserted that the NSS does not address learning development (‘only two questions relate – rather cosmetically – to learning. This highlights an implicit measure of students as consumers of education… It does not engage with students’ intellectual development’). But this seems to be an overstatement: the NSS contains a small and narrow set of questions inviting students to assess their own personal development: ‘The course has helped me present myself with confidence’, ‘My communication skills have improved’ and ‘As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems’, and other questions are available as part of the optional scales.

However, the core NSS does not directly assess certain aspects of engagement. These include such matters as self-reports of what students do inside and outside the classroom (including how they allocate their time), the extent to which they learn collaboratively with other students, the extent of participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities and the degree to which students adopt approaches to learning (such as relating ideas from different parts of the course) that are associated with higher achievement.

In concluding this discussion we should note that there seems to be considerable overlap between surveys of student engagement and NSS-type surveys. Richardson, for example, found that two instruments representing the two types shared 83 per cent of their variance. This suggests that there is an intimate relationship between students’ perceptions of courses and their experiences of engagement.

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84 [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/nss/NSS_report_2011_FINAL.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/nss/NSS_report_2011_FINAL.pdf) (Table 2.3). Last accessed 28/04/14. This report also provides evidence that the strongest predictor of overall satisfaction is the quality of teaching. The scale with the weakest impact on overall satisfaction is learning resources; the assessment and feedback scale also is only modestly related to overall satisfaction.

85 [Student Engagement in the UK: A Review and Testing of Student Engagement Survey Items.](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/learningteaching/kli/research/student-experience/heaproj-2013.aspx) Last accessed 28/04/14

5.2 A framework for understanding student engagement

Kahu proposes a framework that separates influences, types of engagement and the consequences of engagement (Figure 1). She attempts to disentangle the four dominant research perspectives on student engagement: the behavioural perspective, which foregrounds student behaviour and institutional practice; the psychological perspective, which clearly defines engagement as an individual and internal psycho-social process; the socio-cultural perspective, which highlights the critical role of the socio-political context such as institutional culture, disciplinary power, academic culture and an excessive focus on performativity; and, finally, the holistic perspective, which takes a broader view of engagement. Kahu highlights the problems with these approaches and in particular poor definitions and a lack of distinction between the state of engagement, factors that influence student engagement and the immediate and longer term consequences of engagement. These limitations inform her conceptual framework which views student engagement as a psycho-social process, influenced by institutional and personal factors, and embedded within a wider social context, which integrates the socio-cultural perspective with psychological and behavioural views. It will be useful to bear this framework in mind when we explore alternatives to the NSS.

Figure 1: Kahu’s framework of engagement, antecedents and consequences

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Kahu (2013) *op cit.* (page 766)
5.3 Implications for the NSS review

This review of the literature highlights how the idea of student engagement is central to most contemporary understandings of the student experience and to debates regarding quality enhancement. Like the term ‘student experience’, there are multiple interpretations and understandings of the concept of student engagement. For instance, in the discourse of HE quality assurance and enhancement in the UK, student engagement typically refers to policies and practices supporting student involvement in shaping their learning experiences. Other commentators conceive student engagement as the degree to which students approach their studies in a way that contributes towards desired learning outcomes. A more behaviourist approach to engagement defines it as the quality of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities that contribute directly to desired outcomes.

The core NSS does encapsulate some of these conceptualisations of student engagement but not all. For instance, it does not directly explore what students do inside and outside the classroom (including how they allocate their time), the extent to which they learn collaboratively with other students, the extent of participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, and the degree to which students adopt approaches to learning (such as relating ideas from different parts of the course) that are associated with higher achievement.

These findings are particularly important if there is a desire to put a greater emphasis on the quality enhancement purpose of the NSS because they help to identify the competing notions of ‘student engagement’ and what might be included in a revised NSS.

These findings also raise a range of questions for the review:

- Are these differing conceptualisations of student engagement relevant to the UK system of HE, and do they have purchase among UK stakeholders and students?
- Should the NSS include more issues about student engagement or are the current questions adequate?
- Should those dynamics of student engagement, which are currently excluded from the NSS, be incorporated in a revised NSS, and if so, which ones?
- How is the review to decide systematically which aspects of the student experience and student engagement might be included in a revised NSS?
- To ensure the NSS meets its purposes more effectively and to help create some boundaries to the scope of the NSS (because it cannot cover all aspects of the student experience and student engagement discussed in the literature), do some criteria need to be devised for selecting whether or not a particular topic and question should be included in the core NSS questionnaire? And what might these criteria be?
6 Strengths of the NSS

Ever since its introduction in 2005 the NSS’s results – through reporting in the media and use in league tables – have had a profound impact on how institutions are presented to the public. That development has forced institutions to pay attention to students’ perceptions of their learning environment. The NSS has a high level of visibility within institutions, and there are often sophisticated methods for internal dissemination of the data to faculties, departments and programme leaders. The survey results often also play a key role in decision-making processes as an important source of management information… the NSS brings an increased focus on learning and teaching that for some institutions can be both novel and welcome. When used well, it can be a powerful lever for change, inspiring conversations about learning and teaching, and engaging staff in the enhancement process. It is now a commonplace that NSS results are responsible for concrete changes within institutions. There are numerous examples of institution-wide initiatives, designed and implemented in response to NSS results viewed as poor or unsatisfactory… [and] how the survey is increasingly built into planning and review systems.  

How effective has the NSS been in relation to the purposes listed in Section 2: quality assurance, quality enhancement, informing student choice, providing public information about performance, informing policy and generating league tables?

Evidence of the effectiveness of the NSS as an aid to institutional quality assurance and enhancement was collated in the IoE’s interim report in 2010 and is referred to below. More recently, Richardson has recorded eight published accounts in which NSS results have been used for quality enhancement purposes within individual HE institutions. In addition, a major HEA report has documented a series of case studies in which the NSS had been used effectively by HE institutions as a force for improvement in students’ experiences – and had also helped in focusing attention on students as active participants in educational decision-making and change. A number of institutions have for practical purposes delegated the administration and interpretation of the NSS to students. Student engagement in quality processes may help to ensure the success of those processes; the report argues that increased engagement has been a useful derivative of the survey’s use.

In a similar way, Van der Velden has argued that the NSS appears to have strengthened institutional mechanisms for engaging with the ‘student voice’, although she also notes that

88 Buckley (2012) op cit. (pages 8-9 and page 35)


91 Van der Velden (2012) op cit.
some commentators have expressed doubts about its positive effects on student engagement.

According to Buckley, the NSS has helped to create a new focus on the student learning experience. NSS results are responsible for concrete changes within HE institutions to teaching and assessment practices. The report documents numerous examples of institution-wide initiatives designed to address unsatisfactory NSS results and to share good practices.

A 2013 report on a recent NUS consultation presents the views of students' union officers and staff on the NSS. Respondents were largely positive about the survey’s usefulness:

The most common use of the data was to understand the views of students from different departments (83.8%). Providing evidence in meetings (78.4%) and for existing campaigns (74.3%) were also popular responses. Benchmarking against other institutions was used by 74.3% of respondents, and 73% of respondents used the data to identify potential academic campaigns. Lower numbers, but still a majority of respondents, used the survey as part of annual quality reports (55.4%), as a starting point to identify future research (56.8%) or to understand different demographics (58.1%) … the most frequently cited reason for liking the survey was its comparability, both year on year and between institutions. The survey’s accessibility, both to students and to those seeking to use the data, was also ranked highly. The presence of open text comments was highlighted as useful to respondents. Other areas praised were the question categories, optional questions, the departmental breakdown, the survey’s reputation and the high response rates.

There were also a number of aspects of the survey that student representatives disliked and they made a series of proposals for improvements. These are considered in the next section.

It is informative to compare the comments made above with some of the conclusions of the 2010 interim report. That report noted the remarkable success of the survey as a means of quality enhancement – a view shared by students, student representatives and HE institutions alike – and proposed that there should be more active dissemination of the use of the results for improvement purposes. The report also encouraged the greater use of the results by quality assurance agencies, notably the QAA – a development that has also taken place. There appears to be general agreement that the NSS has been a useful means of helping to improve the student experience and has also been of value in HE institutions’ internal quality assurance processes.

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92 Buckley (2012) op cit.

93 The Future of the National Student Survey. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.

There is ample evidence of the use of the NSS to inform policy at national level. An emphasis on the student learning experience and the importance of students’ evaluations of those experiences has, as we have seen, formed a prominent part of government strategy. Sector agencies, the NUS and the media have paid more attention to the quality of education obtained by students; a common perception, also reported by Buckley, is that learning and teaching have moved higher up national agendas:

Institutions generally feel that the impact of the NSS is due to the role of the results in the public perception of institutions. This, in turn, is felt to be due to the use of NSS rankings in the media, and to the contribution of the NSS to the various league tables intended to influence prospective students. From September 2012, the Key Information Sets are expected to increase this effect. Not only do these mechanisms create a general motivation to monitor and improve NSS scores, they are also added pressures on those institutions with disappointing rankings or league table positions.95

The 2010 report examined the case for changes to the NSS, including proposals to include questions on student engagement and, as we have seen, concluded that this should not take place immediately but that the instrument should be kept under review. It identified the value and use of the free text and optional questions as key strengths. It encouraged the more widespread communication to students of actions taken as a result of HE institutions’ examination of NSS data. Since 2010, the more prominent profile that the NSS has achieved has brought these conclusions into sharper focus and the issue of whether the survey should address additional aspects of the student experience has become more pertinent.

6.1 Validity, reliability and basis in theory

There is evidence of the NSS’s reliability and validity as a survey instrument. Richardson’s overview of the development and performance of the NSS96 and Surridge’s reports97 provide confirmation of the scale structures and the performance of the questions; the scales have high internal consistency and the relations between the scales and the overall satisfaction item are consistent with the expectation that perceptions of good teaching and organised courses should be positively associated (i.e. that students who rate the teaching they experience highly should be more likely to be satisfied).98 Teaching and organisation are also associated with self-reported personal development; this is consistent with studies of the CEQ which show that the scale scores predict both self-reported learning gains and

95 Buckley (2012) op cit. (page 35)
97 For example Surridge, P. (2009) The National Student Survey three years on: what have we learned? York: HEA
98 Results are reinforced by a recent HEFCE review of NSS data. Thorn, E. (forthcoming) UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis. Bristol: HEFCE
academic achievement.\footnote{For example Lizzio et al (2002) \textit{op cit}; Diseth, A., Pallesen, S., Brunborg, G.S. and Larsen, S. (2010) ‘Academic achievement among first semester undergraduate psychology students: the role of course experience, effort, motives and learning strategies’, \textit{Higher Education} 59:3, pp 335-352. Work is in progress at HEFCE to examine the relations between NSS scores and academic achievement in HE; initial results indicate that, after taking into account many other factors, NSS scores and achievement are positively associated. Surridge’s (2009) analysis suggests a modest relationship between A level scores and NSS scores.} The far-reaching and well-established theory underlying the NSS has already been discussed above: the NSS is derived from the CEQ, the results of which are associated with how students engage with learning tasks and ultimately with their academic achievement.

Qualitative results from case studies reported in Buckley’s overview\footnote{Buckley (2012) \textit{op cit.} See, for one example, the case study of Sheffield Hallam University (page 41).} provide illustrations of relations between NSS responses and existing good practice in teaching and learning. These associations support the external validity of the NSS, although some of the studies are small scale.

Results from other surveys of the student experience, such as the joint Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and HEA Student Academic Experience Survey,\footnote{Soilemetzidis,I., Bennett, P., Buckley, A., Hillman, N., and Stoakes, G. (2014) \textit{The HEPI–HEA Student Academic Experience Survey 2014}, York: HEA http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/05/21/hepi-hea-2014-student-academic-experience-survey/} present independent confirmation of the accuracy at sector level of the NSS. For example, 86 per cent of students surveyed in 2014 agreed that the quality of their course overall was good.\footnote{Although the methods of these surveys are not as robust as those of the NSS, the parallels are nevertheless striking.}

### 6.2 Summary: effective aspects of the NSS

- Reliable and valid instrument (including some evidence of external validity)
- Most aspects are based on extensive and well established theory
- Provides useful information for improvement purposes; has had major impact on quality enhancement in individual institutions and generally across the sector; has moved learning and teaching higher up the policy agenda
- Supports internal quality assurance processes
• Provides overview of sector performance and reinforces accountability

• Provides comparable results – both across time and between institutions; can identify and map trends in student experiences and make reliable comparisons between institutions.

6.3 Implications for the NSS review

Another aim of our review is to explore the effectiveness of the current NSS in meeting its purposes. This part of the literature review questions the effectiveness of the NSS in meeting a variety of purposes, not just those identified when the NSS was first conceived and introduced back in 2005. It particularly confirms its success and its usefulness in promoting quality assurance and enhancement, and in informing policy at a national level. In addition, the literature verifies that the NSS is a reliable and valid survey instrument.

These findings raise the following questions for the Review:

• What other or new evidence is needed to substantiate the effectiveness of the NSS in meeting a variety of purposes, and especially any new purposes, given the changing HE landscape?

• Does new analysis of the NSS’s results need to be undertaken to verify whether or not the NSS continues to be valid and reliable, namely, an analysis examining NSS results over a longer time period and since its inception in 2005?

• How do we ensure that the reported strengths of the NSS are not diluted by any proposed revisions to the NSS?
7  Criticisms of the NSS

The use of the NSS to create positive changes to learning and teaching depends on the willingness of staff at all levels to be involved in the process of discussing and acting on student feedback. The NSS can suffer from being viewed as a managerial and bureaucratic exercise in box-ticking, and some institutions report that while a small number of staff may enthusiastically embrace the use of data about students’ experiences, there has often been little interest among academics in general… The level of visibility that the NSS possesses among staff does not necessarily equate to high levels of positivity or enthusiasm, and one of the most widely experienced obstacles to staff involvement, reported by most institutions, is the sense that the NSS is used as a stick to beat departments and faculties, rather than as a positive encouragement to improve. This deficit model may be projected through the kinds of activities that can be standard parts of the planning and reporting cycle.

The NSS is influential and contentious. Both the survey itself and the way it has been used have attracted criticism. In this section we attempt to summarise these negative perceptions, some of which are clearly valid, some of which may be questionable, and some of which are inherent limitations of the instrument.

7.1  Methodological

Wide-ranging general criticisms have been made of the NSS’s methods and its supposed inadequacy as a measurement tool. It has been styled ‘bland’ and ‘methodologically worthless’. Similar comments have been made about the Australian CEQ (‘a broad, generic instrument that might be criticised for being bland, superficial and unlikely to detect important nuances of the educational environment in specific contexts… the CEQ is not an appropriate instrument for measuring the quality of problem-based or enquiry-based learning

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104 In fairness, this would probably apply to any national student survey and is not a specific criticism of the NSS.

105 Buckley (2012) op cit. (page 28)


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environments”). It has also been argued that its methods make it vulnerable to manipulation.

Surridge, and also Cheng and Marsh, conclude that the NSS shows large differences between subjects of study. Since the NSS was not designed to make comparisons between subject areas, but within them, it is not clear that this issue constitutes a fundamental weakness – although the non-comparability of NSS results across subject areas is rarely taken into account in the media's league tables. Subject area differences led to a recommendation in the 2010 review that comparisons should only be made between programmes within the same field unless the results are calibrated by subject area. In HEFCE's presentation of institutional results, this calibration is apparent in the publication of benchmark scores.

Comparisons between programmes in the same field should also be cautiously undertaken, since only the extremes of the distribution of results are practically different from the majority. Small differences are subject to a large measure of error; therefore:

When institutions use the NSS to create targets and KPIs [Key Performance Indicators], it is important to bear in mind the limitations of the data, and the need to triangulate NSS scores with other sources of information.

Surridge notes that the NSS shows us 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’. The high scores (an average of 86 percent of students in the whole system were positive about the teaching they had experienced, for example, in 2008), 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

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111 See http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2013/ Last accessed 28/05/14

112 Buckley (2012) op cit. (page 33)

113 Surridge (2009) op cit. (page 37)
institutional scores may imply that is it questionable just how far the NSS can discriminate accurately between different levels of the quality of students’ learning experiences.\textsuperscript{114}

But whether the issue of small differences between programmes and institutions constitutes a serious weakness of the NSS is uncertain.\textsuperscript{115} When appropriate adjustments are made – as in HEFCE’s presentation of institutional differences\textsuperscript{116} – clear differences between HE institutions are still apparent, although only a minority of institutions are significantly above or below the averages.

There are other challenges that relate more closely to the NSS questions themselves. Buckley remarks that:

Many institutions have noted that the survey items are not sufficiently detailed or exhaustive to capture everything they would like. The items are by necessity generic and high level, but this also leaves gaps. Specific issues raised include:

- the lack of information about other factors not directly related to teaching and learning, such as car parking and local surroundings
- 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

In addition, one contributing institution also felt that the survey is focused on ‘traditional’ three-year, single subject, face-to-face courses, and so is not well-suited to yield information about students on joint Honours courses, studying part time or at a distance. These issues all raise challenges for those using the NSS for enhancement, and reinforce the need to supplement the data with other information.\textsuperscript{117}

Somewhat similar remarks can be found in the NUS consultation report.\textsuperscript{118} In that report, the most negative responses related to Q23 (satisfaction with students’ unions) which was not part of the original NSS. Respondents thought it was too general and lacking in context to produce useful results. Lack of context was also a criticism of the NSS generally; how students interpreted the questions was felt to be unclear; some questions (e.g. those on

\textsuperscript{114} Gibbs (2012) \textit{op cit.}

\textsuperscript{115} There is a concern when results are presented at programme level, using the publication threshold of 23 responses. Differences between programmes may not be reliable. This is not of course primarily an issue with the survey but with the reporting.

\textsuperscript{116} See [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2013/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/lt/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2013/) Last accessed 28/05/14

\textsuperscript{117} Buckley (2012) \textit{op cit.} (page 40)

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{The Future of the National Student Survey}. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.
personal development) were thought to be too vague. These criticisms of individual questions are partly associated with the need for a survey that is pitched at a very general level and that is not designed to explore more detailed aspects of the student experience – a role which more in-depth institutional surveys are better fitted to play. However, as Buckley points out\(^{119}\) while institutional surveys are well-suited to complement the necessarily generic NSS data with more detailed and bespoke data, one of the unintended consequences of the NSS has been that many institutional surveys have been changed to mirror the NSS. This has resulted in a loss of information useful for enhancement efforts.

### 7.2 A survey that ignores student contributions and a survey merely of satisfaction?

A controversial issue is what the NSS measures – and whether what it measures is the right thing to measure. A series of critics have argued that it is measuring the wrong things because it is based on ideas about students’ evaluations of teaching.\(^{120}\) Thus 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 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. Gibbs documents the NSS’s positive impact but has also argued that the NSS emphasises student satisfaction – which he says is not related to student performance or learning\(^{121}\). He maintains that surveys of effort and engagement are better surrogate measures of quality. Similar arguments have been made in Australia about the need to replace the CEQ with a survey of student engagement.

Are these criticisms correct? There are only two questions in the core NSS that mention satisfaction (Q22 and Q23), one of which refers to students’ unions and was not developed as part of the original instrument. Although the NSS can be used as proxy for satisfaction – by reporting levels of agreement with the questions as the proportion of students who are ‘satisfied’ – there is a view that this is a limiting perception if the aim is to align students’ experiences with the design of teaching and courses. Prosser makes this point explicitly:

\(^{119}\) Buckley(2012) *op.cit.*


\(^{121}\) The evidence points in the other direction: satisfaction, perceptions of teaching and courses and academic achievement are all related to each other. See above, footnote 79. It is important to reiterate that the NSS was not designed as a measure of student satisfaction; criticisms of it as such are inaccurate (see Richardson, J. T. E., Slater, J. B., and Wilson, J. (2007) *op cit.*).
Probably the most common way of interpreting the results of student evaluations of teaching – such as the National Student Survey (NSS) – is in terms of student satisfaction. Students make judgements about the quality of the teaching and the courses they receive. But such an interpretation is not particularly helpful in using the results to improve the students’ actual experiences of learning. Indeed, interpreting the results as satisfaction ratings, and using them to change the way you teach and how you design your courses to improve the ratings, may actually be counterproductive to improving student learning experiences – and incidentally their satisfaction ratings.

Over 30 years of research into the way students learn in higher education have shown that a much more productive way of interpreting such results is as indicators of student experiences of the context in which their teaching and learning occur. The way students experience their teaching is a complex interaction between their previous experiences of teaching and learning, their present life experiences, and the way we design and teach our courses. That is, students on a course experience the same teaching and the same course, but they experience them in different ways. Becoming aware of those differences, and trying to understand them, is the key to improving students’ experiences of learning.¹²²

The NSS is not fundamentally a satisfaction survey. In fact, the single question in the original NSS that mentions satisfaction (Q22) was only included initially to validate the instrument as a measure of the quality of the student experience. Moreover, the notion of ‘satisfaction’ represented in these criticisms of the NSS is typically untheorised and regarded as unproblematic; satisfaction in consumer theory typically defines the congruity between a consumer’s expectations and their experiences of a particular product – an approach which would require an instrument very different from the NSS.¹²³

The issue of ‘satisfaction’ is not unique to the NSS; one could report responses to surveys of how often students feel challenged by their courses as satisfaction measures, for example. Implicit in every survey of student experiences is the view that some aspects of those experiences are more acceptable than others; for example, we have seen that the NSSE emphasises that learning in a group is critical to the quality of student life.

What seems to underlie this criticism of the NSS is the view that self-reports of how often students are doing certain desirable things are preferable to measures of their agreement or disagreement with questions about teaching, assessment and courses. In other words, the view is not that the NSS is inadequate as a survey, but that a survey that measures different things (reported activities rather than perceptions of quality) would be preferable. Whether such a survey would address the need to provide accountability, encourage enhancement and facilitate student choice is a different issue.


¹²³ Taken from comments made by John Richardson on an earlier draft of this review.
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, as discussed above. A majority of respondents to the NUS initial consultation were in favour of introducing questions on students’ engagement in their learning.124

### 7.3 Ineffectiveness of the NSS as a means of informing student choice?

A weakness of the NSS concerns its perceived lack of effectiveness as a means of assisting students to make more informed choices of institutions and programmes. This intended function was prominent from the outset and has been regularly underlined (most recently in the 2011 White Paper and in KIS developments).

Stakeholders interviewed for the 2010 review remarked that the purpose of helping to inform student choice was the least effective aspect of the NSS. Members of the National Student Forum felt the results of the NSS were used more by institutions and by students’ unions than by prospective students. Moreover:

- Some institutional representatives were more strongly negative about the student information function, although their views were probably not based on evidence about the actual decision-making process of students. It was ‘a failure’ for this purpose, said one; others believed that its use was ‘misconceived… students can’t use it to make choices – the variation between universities is too small’; it was ‘dishonest’ to pretend that it was useful in this respect; there was no apparent correlation between the scores and student decisions; it did not help students (such as HE in FE students) who did not apply through UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service]; it did not influence the choices of students whose main options were limited to local universities or colleges; the small group sizes in many FE colleges meant that few courses reached the threshold for reporting.125

In the 2013 NUS initial consultation report, only 27 percent of respondents said that the purpose of the current NSS was wholly or primarily to inform the choices of prospective students.126

These concerns about the usefulness of the NSS for informing student choice point up a need to reconsider the issue of purpose. It seems that one of original functions of the survey (assisting the decision making of prospective students) may have become less important at

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124 The Future of the National Student Survey. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.


126 The Future of the National Student Survey. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.
the same time as its use for enhancement purposes has increased in significance. This implies that any changes to the NSS should take account of the importance of increasing its value as an enhancement instrument. However, the NSS also has a role in informing student choice, but it has to compete with other sources of information available to students, and students’ lack of interest in seeking out NSS data.

7.4 Unintended consequences and league tables

An unplanned negative consequence of the NSS is the uneasiness and disapproval that have arisen (particularly among some academic staff) from the simplistic use of the results (‘the marketing “tail” wagging the teaching “dog”, as Buckley puts it127). This has been a particular problem when NSS results have been used by the media to produce rankings and league tables using simplistic metrics; but it is also probable that the inclusion of NSS results in the KIS will increase pressures on institutions to monitor and improve NSS scores. In fact, this is already happening: several universities (such as Exeter and Coventry, for example) include increased NSS scores in their strategic goals. In addition, as Gibbons et al.128 show, the NSS has a small, statistically significant effect on applications at the university-subject level. This effect operates primarily through the influence of the NSS scores on a university’s position in separately published, subject specific, league tables, implying greater salience of league table rankings. The impact of rankings is greater amongst the most able students, for universities with entry standards in the upper-middle tier, and for subject-departments facing more competition.

It could be argued that the use of NSS results in this way may define and limit enhancement activities, so that their focus shifts from educationally appropriate to educationally inappropriate.129 In other words, HE institutions may be seen to focus too much on criticising poorly performing areas and too little on sharing good practice as a means of improvement. In mitigation, Buckley argues that the reputation-led concern for NSS results may provide a source of leverage for change, so that enhancement activities which would otherwise have been ignored become implemented in practice. A related unintentional effect is the emergence of the view that the NSS is inadequate because it is merely a popularity survey focused on promoting HE institutions (‘A comparative marketing exercise… Its entire point is publicity, to guide future applicants in their choices’).130 As we saw earlier, the NSS has also been portrayed as part of a conception of HE that diminishes academic identity through focusing on the student experience, casting academics as mere providers and students as

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127 Buckley (2012) op cit. (page 35)


129 Buckley (2012) op cit. (page 35)

130 Wolff, J. (2008, May 6). Criticism, we love it: but only the constructive kind. The Guardian. http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/may/06/highereducation.students1 Last accessed 28/05/14
In the 2013 NUS report, some respondents were critical of the use of the NSS for marketing purposes.  

7.5 Limitations

The design of the NSS prevents it from addressing a number of issues:

- Although it effectively identifies strong points and areas of concern regarding the quality of teaching and courses, it says nothing about why some groups of students have more positive experiences than others.

- The NSS is a starting point for further explorations of the student experience. It is necessary to supplement NSS results with more detailed examinations of causes and consequences; other modes of data collection are required. (However, the results from the open questions frequently shed light on underlying issues).

- As previously noted, the NSS operates at a very general level; it takes no account of subject differences. It is no substitute for evaluations of individual courses within programmes of study (although it was never intended to replace instruments that evaluate individual courses, being designed instead as a complement to them).

- At the level of the sector as a whole, issues that are of policy concern need more thorough examination than the NSS can provide, possibly through discussions with groups of students.

7.6 Summary: perceived weaknesses of the NSS

- Most differences between HE institutions are not large (but the NSS was not designed to compare institutions)

- May not provide useful data for informing prospective student choices (it is probably fairer to say that students tend not to use the information that it provides)

- Coverage may be too narrow in terms of students' experiences and student engagement in learning and teaching

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132 The Future of the National Student Survey. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.


134 Although the free text comments may shed light on the reasons.


• Potentially, missing questions (e.g. on employability and co-curriculum)

• Ignores student contributions to their own learning

• Supposedly focuses on satisfaction rather than on how often students carry out desirable activities (but, as we have noted above, the NSS was not designed to be a satisfaction survey)

• Lack of context (some questions too vague and general)

• Unintended consequences (e.g. inappropriate use in league tables and marketing)

• Does not identify reasons for positive and negative student experiences (although the open comments can help institutions to identify these).

7.7 Suggestions for improvements to the NSS

Implicit in several of the criticisms reviewed above are proposals for improvements to the NSS. In this section we summarise some additional suggestions. Most of these were made in the report of the NUS consultation.

Respondents to the NUS consultation proposed improvements in particular to Q23 (satisfaction with students’ unions): either more questions were needed on this issue, or a free text comment box should be provided. Other questions should be made more specific and it was argued that questions relating to engagement, and possibly to learning and development, should be added. There was support for additional questions related to extra- and co-curricular activities, student support, student services and relationships with staff. Respondents proposed sharper differentiation between questions asked about courses and those asked about their experience of the institution as a whole.

Respondents were given five suggestions for changes to the survey, and asked to rate them from “very good idea” to “very bad idea”... The most popular suggestion was that the survey should clearly differentiate between those questions asked about a student’s specific course, and those asked about their experience at the institution as a whole: 93.5% of respondents rated this idea 4 or 5 out of 5. 83.6% of respondents agreed that the survey should ask questions about students’ engagement in their learning, and 77.1% agreed that it should ask about students’

[137] The other four suggestions for change were as follows: The survey should measure students’ satisfaction compared to their expectations rather than in absolute terms; The survey should ask questions about students’ engagement in their learning (e.g. participation in class, hours spent in independent study, etc.); The survey should ask questions about students’ engagement in the wider community of their institution (e.g. participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, engagement with staff); The survey should focus on enhancement rather than satisfaction. Provided by the NUS and used in the questionnaire for their report The Future of the National Student Survey. NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013.
engagement in the wider community of their institution (e.g. participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities, engagement with staff).\textsuperscript{138}

On the engagement issue specifically, there were, however, some differing views:

Most respondents were positive about the idea of introducing questions on students' engagement with their learning, although around half these respondents wished to compare engagement with satisfaction rather than replace it completely. Those who were negative about engagement questions cited lack of comparability of engagement data, and the resulting possibility that institutions may be less likely to change their practices in response to the survey.\textsuperscript{139}

There was a strong opinion that the survey should in future continue to focus on students’ academic experiences.

Another contemporary commentary on the NSS\textsuperscript{140} has suggested that it needs ideally to be more sensitive to subject differences, although the writers acknowledge the practical difficulties (such as the unrealistic option of different questions for different subject areas) that this would imply. This commentary links the problem to the use of the NSS for multiple purposes (provision of information, public accountability and institutional enhancement activity).

Yorke and his colleagues also propose that the present comprehensive review should incorporate qualitative evidence relating to the extent to which the intentions of the NSS and student responses to it are aligned, and in this respect they echo some of the comments made by students’ unions in the report referred to above.

7.8 Implications for the NSS review

The overall aim of the research is to ensure that the NSS is fit for purpose. This part of the literature review explores whether the NSS is ‘fit for purpose’, highlighting some of the weakness and key criticisms of the NSS. Such criticisms are wide-ranging. Some focus on the NSS’s methodology; others on the idea that the NSS is purely a student satisfaction survey and so ideas about student contributions to their learning are overlooked; some

\textsuperscript{138} \textit{The Future of the National Student Survey.} NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013 (page 4). But note that when the NSS was developed in the early 2000s, the researchers carried out a fairly sophisticated analysis of students’ open-ended comments to see whether there were any aspects of quality that they had missed. They came to the conclusion that they had not. See Richardson \textit{et al}. (2007) \textit{op cit.}

\textsuperscript{139} \textit{The Future of the National Student Survey.} NUS Initial Consultation, July 2013, page 5.

suggest the NSS is ineffective as a means of informing student choice; yet others point to some of the unintended consequences of the NSS and its use in league tables. Moreover, the literature points to some of gaps in the coverage of the NSS. Some of these critics have produced suggestions about how the NSS might be improved in light of its perceived shortcomings. These criticisms also give us some insights into how the NSS might need to change to meet its purposes more effectively – the third aim of the study.

These findings are central to the review and raise the following questions:

- Are all of these criticisms valid and well-founded? Do they all have equal weight?
- Are the criticisms factually correct? Are some of them indicative of differing ideological perspectives reflecting different interpretations and conceptualisations about for instance, the student experience and student engagement? And do they reflect the ideas of particular interest groups?
- Are similar criticisms voiced by other stakeholders and students?
- How widespread are the problems reported?
- Can these criticisms be addressed by the NSS review, or do they lie outside the scope of the review?
- Are all the limitations of the NSS amenable to reform/change? So would changing the NSS in some way solve the problem, for instance, in addressing the unintended consequences of the NSS?
- Which of these criticisms can be addressed through changing the core NSS questionnaire and which by changing the way in which the survey is conducted and administered?
- In reality, just how supportive of changing the NSS are stakeholders and students?
- Which of all the limitations raised undermine the NSS’s effectiveness in meeting its purposes?
8 Alternatives to the NSS: What can we learn from other surveys of the student experience?\(^{141}\)

We have identified key issues which illustrate that the strengths of the NSS are balanced by a series of drawbacks. It has been an important practical means of encouraging and supporting quality enhancement; it is a valid and reliable instrument; it enables comparisons across institutions and across time; it is useful in demonstrating accountability and in assuring quality. On the other hand, it has been criticised for not paying enough attention to how students engage with learning and with their institutions, for not providing information that discriminates clearly between institutions, for not covering all relevant aspects of the student experience and for producing a number of unintended and undesirable side-effects.

In this section we examine surveys that might be regarded as alternatives or complements to the NSS and which might contain lessons that could help to mitigate its perceived weaknesses.

Any alternative to or development of the NSS should seek to retain its strengths as well as to address its weaknesses. The initial position we take is similar to that arrived at by the developers of the Australian UES following extensive consultation.\(^{142}\) In evaluating the potential of other instruments and systems for a modified NSS, we will 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 applied across uses and time
- **Auditability** – the information can be scrutinised
- **Transparency** – the information has a clear meaning

\(^{141}\) A detailed review of internal student feedback surveys undertaken by HE Institutions was not part of the review’s brief. Instead the review has focused on examining national surveys (not local ones, which are quite different) to try to inform how the NSS can be improved.

- **Timeliness** – the information readily enables institutions to enhance their quality of teaching and learning.\(^\text{143}\)

A survey of student experiences should focus on aspects that are *measurable* (and that stakeholders *want to measure*), that are *unlikely to be available* in any other way, that are linked to *learning and development*, and that are *capable of being influenced* by what HE institutions can realistically do.

Applying these principles, the salient domains of student experiences that can be addressed through surveys 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).

Although we do not include ‘satisfaction’ in this list, it can be inferred from responses to the three domains and also assessed by means of a single item referring to an ‘overall rating of experience’ or ‘overall satisfaction’.

### 8.1 Tests of learning outcomes

There are a number of tests that seek to evaluate broad graduate attributes or generic skills among HE students. The most ubiquitous is the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)\(^\text{144}\), others include the Australian Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA)\(^\text{145}\) and the OECD’s Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO).\(^\text{146}\)

#### 8.1.1 Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA)

**Origins and where used:** The CLA was developed by the Council for Aid to Education (CAE) and is used mainly in the USA.

**Purpose:** To assess the quality of undergraduate education by measuring student learning outcomes through performance tasks. Provides guidance to students and data to faculty and

\(^{142}\) DEEWR (2011), *op cit.*


\(^{146}\) Described in Coates and Seifert (2011) *op cit.*
administrators for making decisions about grading, scholarships, admission, or placement. Also used to access additional admissions information for applicants.

**Assumptions underpinning the survey:** Generic skills are an important outcome of HE. Information about their development is useful to HE institutions for benchmarking and assessing the value added by HE.

**Areas covered:** Measures critical thinking, problem solving, scientific and quantitative reasoning, writing, and the ability to critique and make arguments.

**Strengths:** Rigorous measure of broad learning outcomes and learning gains; said to be useful to HE institutions and students.

**Weaknesses:** Does not fulfil the principles of producing an instrument that measures how students engage with their studies and their institutions, provide information about students’ perceptions of the quality of teaching and support, or provide self-report data on learning and skills development – and was not designed to do so. Its emphasis on generic skills is unlikely to be suitable for the UK context, which has a much greater emphasis on discipline specialisation. When proposed as a measure of HE institution quality in Australia, strongly opposed by sector interests and discarded.

**Implications for NSS:** Not a measure of student experience. An entirely different approach focused on generic learning outcomes and gains. Not likely to be acceptable to HE institutions as a means of quality assurance. The CLA results are used by institutions to benchmark their students’ performance, but results by institution are not made public, unlike those of the NSS.

### 8.1.2 Graduate Skills Assessment (GSA)

**Origins and where used:** Australian Council for Educational Research; trialled in Australian HE institutions.

**Purpose:** Assessment of graduate skills.

**Assumptions underpinning the survey:** Generic skills are an important outcome of HE. It is possible to compare institutional performance in terms of learning outcomes.

**Areas covered:** Measures critical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal understandings, written communication.

**Strengths:** Rigorously developed as measure of generic learning outcomes. Formerly used by some Australian universities in its development phase.

**Weaknesses:** Strongly correlated to academic performance at discipline level – unclear whether the skills tested are genuinely ‘generic’. Does not fulfil the principles of producing an instrument that measures how students engage with their studies and their institutions, provide information about students’ perceptions of the quality of teaching and support, or provide self-report data on learning and skills development. When proposed as a measure of HE institution performance in Australia in the early 2000s, strongly opposed by sector interests and not proceeded with.
Implications for NSS: Not a measure of student experience. An entirely different approach focused on generic learning outcomes and gains. Not likely to be acceptable to HE institutions as a means of quality assurance. The results are not made public, unlike those of the NSS.

8.1.3 Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)

Origins and where used: OECD; 17 OECD countries; under development. The generic skills component is an adapted version of the CLA (see above).

Purpose: Assessment of graduate skills, including some discipline-related skills in economics and engineering, plus some aspects of the learning environment.

Assumptions underpinning the survey: Represents itself as consistent with a growing international focus on student learning outcomes and student-centred learning.

Areas covered: Critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving and written communication. Economics and engineering tests include a performance task and multiple choice questions.

Strengths: ‘Allows students and HE institutions to set their own priorities, concentrate on their strengths, address their weaknesses, and plan their futures as they see fit’. Results showed a reasonable level of validity together with international and disciplinary variations in the performance of the instrument.147

Weaknesses: Not intended to be used for comparing institutions; use voluntary. Still in the testing phase. Does not fulfil the principles of producing an instrument that measures how students engage with their studies and their institutions, provide information about students’ perceptions of the quality of teaching and support, or provide self-report data on learning and skills development.

Implications for NSS: Not a measure of student experience, although some contextual data on student backgrounds, satisfaction and learning environments are collected. The test is focused on learning outcomes and gains and is not designed to make comparisons between institutions. The results are not publicly available, unlike those of the NSS.

8.1.4 Could a test of general learning outcomes replace the NSS?

To replace or complement the NSS with a test of generic skills would constitute a new departure. Such a test would not fulfil the principles of producing an instrument that measures how students engage with their studies and their institutions, provides information

147 http://www.oecd.org/edu/skills-beyond-school/testingstudentanduniversityperformancegloballyoecdsahelo.htm Last accessed 28/05/14
about students’ perceptions of the quality of teaching and support, and provides self-report data on learning and skills development (it would, of course, produce external data on skills development and educational gain). Nor does it fulfil all the purposes required of a revised NSS discussed in the Summary Report (Sections 2 and 4.2). Moreover, the experience in Australia of the GSA and the CLA has been that the HE sector has vigorously opposed the mandatory introduction of such tests as a component of quality assurance, and the likelihood of a similar response in the UK would need to be borne in mind.

8.2 Profiles

There is an international movement towards the production of evidence-based profiles for HE institutions.

8.2.1 U-Multirank

Origins and where used: Originates in the European Community; currently under development; the first results, for 500 institutions, will be published in 2014.

Purpose: Seeks to become a new university ranking for HE institutions of all types, from all parts of Europe. User-driven and examines institutions’ performance across a wide range of HE missions including teaching and learning.

Assumptions underpinning the survey: Rankings of HE institutions should contain multiple dimensions or ‘multiple excellences’; institutional diversity is a desirable phenomenon.

Areas covered: Compares the performance of universities and colleges not only in research, but also in teaching, knowledge transfer, international orientation and regional engagement. Presents performance profiles for universities across the five dimensions using a number of performance indicators. It will provide these performance profiles at two levels: for the institution as a whole and at the level of different disciplines (initially mechanical and electrical engineering, business and physics).

Strengths: Includes some results from surveys of student satisfaction and student perceptions of the provision of courses, organisation of programmes and interactions with teachers and facilities.

Weaknesses: U-Multirank is essentially a way of describing differences between institutions rather than a way of generating information about quality; there is a lack of evidence about whether it would be useful in quality enhancement or assurance, or for informing student choices; it does not examine patterns of student engagement. It might be seen as a summary description of multiple aspects at a more general level than would be required for

148 http://www.umultirank.org/#!/home?trackType=home Last accessed 28/05/14

public accountability. There are also difficulties arising from differences in HE systems, data collection challenges and the fact that the project is not complete.

Implications for NSS: It is not clear that a profiling exercise would represent a viable alternative to a survey of student experiences.

8.2.2 Profiling diversity of Australian universities\textsuperscript{150}

A derivative of U-Multirank is the Australian profiling exercise that first published its results in mid-2013. Each institution profile contains five dimensions: Teaching and Learning, Student Profile, Research Involvement, Knowledge Exchange, and International Orientation. The ‘Teaching and Learning’ dimension includes number of fields of study offered, recognition of teaching (number of staff awards in a national scheme, staff/student ratios and student retention rates). There is no attempt to include the results from student surveys in the Australian profiles.

The same weaknesses and implications for the NSS apply to this exercise as to U-Multirank (see above).

8.2.3 Could a profiling exercise replace the NSS?

Profiles have a fundamentally different focus from the NSS’s concentration on the student learning experience. Although we have included them for completeness, they do not appear to constitute a possible replacement.

8.3 Institutional surveys and surveys of the broader student experience

As noted in the 2010 interim review, there has been an expansion of institutional use of surveys of the student experience. There are many different types of survey in use. Some draw closely on the NSS; some are focused on more specific institutional needs; some are at module level and some at programme level; some show evidence of careful question and survey design and others do not. A report on how the Australian CEQ was adapted to programme and module level by one institution illustrates how national surveys can form templates for internal surveys.\textsuperscript{151}

\textsuperscript{150} http://www.lhmartinstitute.edu.au/documents/publications/lhmi-acer-research-briefing-australian-institution-profilesupdated050613.pdf Last accessed 29/05/14

A review of these surveys is beyond the scope of this report but it could provide useful guidance for additions to NSS questions. We do not believe there is reason to suggest that internal surveys could entirely replace the NSS.

We observed in the interim report that the account of ‘Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE’, despite being ten years old, provided an excellent overview of student experience surveys. The subsequent guide to good practice also remains helpful. Updated versions of both reports might assist in informing future NSS developments.

### 8.3.1 Integrated Survey Solution (ISS) – I-Graduate

**Origins and where used:** A service offered commercially by I-Graduate. It is used by several institutions as a complement to the NSS. Oxford, for example, uses the ‘Oxford Barometer’ across all divisions, departments and colleges; Surrey has used the service to replace 28 internal surveys.

**Purpose:** These surveys provide an opportunity for HE institutions to carry out benchmarking by study area and study level and to identify areas for improvement.

**Assumptions underpinning the survey:** It is possible to identify aspects of the student experience with which students are more and less satisfied and it is useful to compare an institution’s performance with its peers.

**Areas covered:** Much wider than the NSS, including satisfaction with:

- The quality of living arrangements for resident students
- Financial support
- Social activities
- Work experience
- Transport and accommodation
- Teaching and assessment.

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152 We have for instance excluded any examination of the HEPI survey on student hours which in 2013 and again in 2014 was sponsored by Which? See [http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2013/05/15/2013-student-academic-experience-survey/](http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2013/05/15/2013-student-academic-experience-survey/) Last accessed 29/05/14

153 See [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/RDreports/2003/rd08_03/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/RDreports/2003/rd08_03/) Last accessed 29/05/14


155 [http://www.i-graduate.org/services/](http://www.i-graduate.org/services/) Last accessed 29/05/14
Strengths: Helps address the problem of quality and rigour in local surveys; custom-built for each HE institution; provides benchmark data; helps address the issue of ‘survey fatigue’, whereby students are faced with multiple institutional questionnaires on numerous occasions over several years.

Weaknesses: The surveys are lengthy, running in some cases to 60 or more question groups and several hundred questions. Evidence of validity and reliability is limited. Since the service offers customised questionnaires, national comparability is not possible.

Implications for NSS: It is a matter to be resolved through consultation as to which if any of the areas covered by ISS might be incorporated in a revised NSS, although it seems evident that only a small proportion of them could be included in a national survey. Since ISS is already quite widely used by HE institutions it might be regarded as a complement to a future version of the NSS.

8.3.2 Times Higher Education Student Experience Survey

Origins and where used: This is an example of a national survey that focuses on students’ wider experiences. Undertaken annually by THE with a sample of students from most HE institutions.

Purpose: Enables THE to construct a ‘league table’ of the student experience in HE institutions based on the responses to the survey.

Assumptions underpinning the survey: It is valuable to construct a single index of quality from a series of questions covering a wide range of students’ experiences.

Areas covered:

- High quality staff/lectures
- Helpful/interested staff
- Well-structured courses
- Good social life
- Good community atmosphere
- Good extracurricular activities/societies
- Good environment on campus/around university
- High quality facilities
- Personal requirements catered for

http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/the-student-experience-survey-2013/2003450.article
Last accessed 29/05/14
• Good students’ union
• Good support/welfare
• Good personal relationship with teaching staff
• Centralised/convenient facilities
• Good industry connections
• Good accommodation
• Good security
• Cheap shop/bar/amenities
• Tuition in small groups
• Good library and library opening hours
• Fair workload
• Good sports facilities
• I would recommend this university to a friend.

The scores are summed to produce a weighted average overall score, with the first nine items receiving the highest weights.

**Strengths:** Extensive treatment of many different aspects of students’ HE experiences. Very economical because of the small sample size.

**Weaknesses:** No evidence of validity and reliability or of the relevance of the questions to all students. Small number of respondents from each institution (e.g. Birmingham N=198; Exeter=130 in 2013) and no evidence that they are representative of all students. No justification for the relative weights attached to each question; unsophisticated construction of an uncalibrated overall score.

**Implications for NSS:** The areas covered provide a sense of the range of issues that might be included in an NSS that attempted to embrace many different aspects of students’ satisfaction with a wide variety of experiences. However, rigorous criteria are needed to decide which experiences should, and should not, be included in a revised NSS that is relevant to all groups of students.

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157 Nevertheless, the overall scores relate surprisingly well to the benchmarked institutional scores from the NSS for the overall satisfaction item. For the 16 HE institutions that were assessed by HEFCE as having significantly higher overall satisfaction, the mean score on the THE survey was 80.5. For the 15 HE institutions that were assessed as having significantly lower overall satisfaction (and for which data are available from the THE survey), the mean score on the THE survey was 69.
8.3.3 Nationale Studenten Enquête, (NSE)

Origins and where used: The Dutch NSE is the responsibility of the Studiekeuze123 Foundation, which is a joint initiative of representative bodies for HE institutions and student organisations. Used in all accredited programmes in the Netherlands.

Purpose: To contribute to transparent and high-quality HE in the Netherlands. Used by institutions for enhancement purposes and quality assurance; results from an ‘overall satisfaction’ question appear on a website designed to assist students’ choices of programmes and institutions.

Assumptions underpinning the survey: Judgments of students about their programmes and institutions provide essential information about quality. Satisfaction scores are valuable for improvement and accountability purposes and for assisting student choice.

Areas covered: Background characteristics of respondent; overall satisfaction; satisfaction with content, organisation, teaching, assessment; general and scientific skills acquisition; relevance to careers and employment; contact time; teaching group sizes; study facilities and environment; use of teaching evaluations, experiences of the local environment (e.g. transport, accommodation, physical surroundings); experiences of internships/placements; workload; suggestions for improvements.

Strengths: Wide coverage of student experiences, including contact time, facilities, use of evaluation results, workload as well as satisfaction with teaching and course organisation. Use by institutions for improvement and marketing purposes.

Weaknesses: Very lengthy: over one hundred questions, some of which relate to areas outside the institution’s control (e.g. the ‘cultural offer’ of the city in which it is located). No questions about engagement with learning tasks. Relatively low response rates (about 37 per cent). There does not appear to have been an evaluation of the use of the results by students for making decisions about programmes and institutions.

Implications for NSS: There are some areas covered by the NSE which might be considered for inclusion in a revised NSS, such as questions about teaching time and group sizes and about how the results of evaluations are communicated to students.

8.3.4 Could a survey of the wider student experience replace the NSS?

There is the potential for some of the areas covered by these surveys to be included in a revised NSS, although none of the surveys provides a satisfactory alternative. Problematic issues include length, lack of methodological rigour (in some cases), the inclusion of areas outside an institution’s control and differences in purpose.

158 http://www.studiekeuzeinformatie.nl/nse/over-nse Last accessed 29/05/14

159 Although this is strictly a weakness in the implementation of the survey rather than of the survey itself.
8.4 Surveys of student engagement

These surveys attempt to address the issues discussed above concerning students’ engagement with their programmes and institutions. They aim to determine students’ involvement in their educational experiences through questions about student attitudes and behaviours; they may also seek to provide evidence of student achievement and satisfaction.

8.4.1 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)\(^\text{160}\)

**Origins and where used:** Conceived in 1998 as a new approach to gathering information about collegiate quality by Indiana University. Widely used in the USA; 621 colleges and universities participated in NSSE 2013.

**Purpose:** For institutional assessment purposes. ‘Institutions use their data to identify aspects of the undergraduate experience inside and outside the classroom that can be improved through changes in policies and practices more consistent with good practices in undergraduate education. This information is also used by prospective college students, their parents, college counsellors, academic advisers, institutional research officers, and researchers in learning more about how students spend their time at different colleges and universities and what they gain from their experiences.’\(^\text{161}\)

**Assumptions underpinning the survey:** That certain student and institutional behaviours are associated with desired outcomes of college. The underlying ideas of the NSSE derive from Chickering and Gamson’s ‘Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education’: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity and responsibility.\(^\text{162}\) The survey presupposes that a predictor of successful HE is the ‘involving quality’ of the basic learning communication between staff and students. Reciprocal transactions involving both giving and seeking information (clear explanations, interest in student difficulties, making the subject interesting, ‘conversations’ between staff and students in which students are active collaborators) are seen to be fundamental to engagement in learning and to higher quality outcomes.\(^\text{163}\)

In addition, energetic engagement with an extensive range of activities (such as learning with other students, attending campus events, discussing issues with people who have different religious beliefs from one’s own, talking about career plans with staff, giving a course presentation, connecting learning to societal problems, combining ideas from different courses) is understood to be critical to educational gains. (What is not clear is

\(^\text{160}\) [http://nsse.iub.edu/](http://nsse.iub.edu/) Last accessed 29/05/14  The survey is formally styled as The College Student Report.

\(^\text{161}\) [http://nsse.iub.edu/](http://nsse.iub.edu/) Last accessed 29/05/14


\(^\text{163}\) Most of these assumptions are also reflected in the NSS.
whether successful students do these things because they are successful or whether doing these things leads to success).

**Areas covered:**

- Academic challenge – including higher-order learning, reflective and integrative learning, quantitative reasoning, and learning strategies
- Learning with peers – including collaborative learning and discussions with diverse others
- Experiences with faculty – including student-faculty interaction and effective teaching practices
- Campus environment – including quality of interactions and supportive environment
- High-impact practices – Special undergraduate opportunities such as service learning, study abroad, research with faculty, and internships that are believed to have positive effects on student learning and retention.

**Strengths:** Covers a large number of different aspects of the student experience. It has been heavily researched and so there is a large amount of evidence about its properties. It is underpinned by theory in a way that is much clearer than other surveys. Several questions refer to hours of studying and to personal development and one question is effectively a measure of ‘overall satisfaction’ (‘How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?’). As we have seen, a number of critics of the NSS prefer the NSSE’s emphasis on how often students are engaging with aspects of the academic and social environment to the NSS’s emphasis on evaluating teaching, assessment, organisation, academic support, resources and personal development.  

Substantial changes to the questions were made in 2013. Of interest to this review is the introduction of additional questions that strengthen the area of academic challenge (making it more similar to questions in the European tradition of student approaches to learning; see below) and the area of experiences with faculty (making this area closer to the NSS). They include, for example, ‘How often have you connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge?’ and ‘To what extent have your instructors taught course sessions in an organized way?’

**Weaknesses:**

1. The NSSE is nearly five times as long as the NSS. Although styled as a student engagement survey, in a UK context, this is only one of the areas it deals with.

2. The NSSE contains many questions that either resemble existing NSS questions or that attempt to assess similar dimensions of the student experience (such as aspects of teaching quality and personal development). Replacing one set of (validated) validation.

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164 See above, page 37.
questions with another that measures the same qualities may not be advantageous.\textsuperscript{165}

3. There is a circularity in the NSSE's assumption that active engagement is linked to learning gains. Success or the expectation of success may lead to engagement rather than the other way around. An extreme view would be that the connection is no more than a trivial statement of the obvious: high achieving students are likely to do more, and do it more energetically, than weaker ones.

4. We cannot assume that the US idea of student engagement is directly transferable to the UK. The NSSE emphasises a North American perspective on the student experience and it reflects the 'culture' of US HE. Its applicability to the UK system is limited by the inclusion of issues such as service learning, intensive writing, internships and the development of lifelong bonds between institution and student. The 'college experience' is honoured in a quite different way in the USA from the experience of HE in the UK, Australia and New Zealand.\textsuperscript{166}

5. The validity and performance of the NSSE are subjects of lively debate in its home country. It has been criticised for its failure to demonstrate correlations with learning gains (particularly as a predictor of gains for the same student over a period of time); although there is some evidence of small but significant relationships between NSSE scores and learning gain.\textsuperscript{167} It has also been criticised for its vague questions; for its assumptions that students can accurately recall mundane events such as how often they have engaged with something over an academic year; and for difficulties in independently replicating the five-construct structure described above. Contradictory findings have emerged from studies designed to test these propositions.\textsuperscript{168} The

\textsuperscript{165} There is evidence to support the view that the concepts underlying NSSE and CEQ/NSS are closely related. In 2003, Richardson et al. (‘Academic engagement and perceptions of quality in distance education’, Open Learning, 18:3, pp 223-244) used a similar instrument to the NSSE and compared its results with OU students’ scores on the CEQ: the two instruments shared 83\% of their variance, indicating that there is an intimate relationship between students’ perceptions of courses and their experiences of engagement.


\textsuperscript{167} The Wabash National Study is the best of these: http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/study-overview/ Last accessed 29/05/14, a useful article is http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/January-February%202010/full-how-effective.html Last accessed 29/05/14

\textsuperscript{168} See http://www.oit.umn.edu/prod/groups/oit/@pub/@oit/@web/@evaluationresearch/documents/article/oit_article_377337.pdf Last accessed 29/05/14
dimensions of the NSSE are typically less internally consistent than those of the NSS.\textsuperscript{169}

6. There are also questions about whether the behaviours represented in many of the NSSE items are accurate measures of engagement. While some of them, such as quality of effort, are clearly important aspects of engagement, others – such as time on task and repetition – may actually represent busyness and surface approaches to learning rather than academic engagement.\textsuperscript{170}

7. While the NSS is administered only once, at the end of the final undergraduate year, an important feature of the NSSE is its use in the first and final years of the college experience, allowing comparisons to be made and longitudinal data acquired.

8. The ‘engagement’ questions in the NSSE reflect what students bring to their experience as much as what their institution offers. There may be value to these different approaches but this may reduce the value of the results for accountability purposes.

Implications for 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\textsuperscript{171}, there is an argument for taking on board some aspects of the NSSE in a revised NSS. The present NSS does not contain questions about how students engage with learning tasks or about the frequency of their study activities. One or both of these areas has been proposed for inclusion in a revised NSS by a number of the reports referred to earlier in this review. A stumbling block to replacing the NSS with the NSSE is the cultural specificity of many of the latter’s questions. Another disadvantage is the uncertain value of parts of the NSSE as measures of comparative institutional quality. Some aggregate national results are publicly available but not the results of individual HE institutions, unlike the NSS.

\textsuperscript{169} Fuller, M., Wilson, M. and Tobin, R. (2011) ‘The national survey of student engagement as a predictor of undergraduate GPA: a cross-sectional and longitudinal examination’, \textit{Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education} 36:6, pp 735-748; Richardson (2007) \textit{op cit.} There has been an attempt to rectify this for 2013, with a shift from the five benchmarks (which had low levels of internal consistency) to 10 ‘indicators’. \url{http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/2013/May-June%202013/refreshing-engagement-full.html} Last accessed 29/05/14


\textsuperscript{171} 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.
8.4.2 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE)\textsuperscript{172}

Origins and where used: The AUSSE is a version of the NSSE developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research. It has been used by a number of Australian and New Zealand universities. In 2012, 32 institutions participated.

Purpose: ‘The information collected by the AUSSE can be used by higher education institutions to improve student outcomes, manage and monitor resources, programs and services, and help identify how to attract, and importantly, retain students.’\textsuperscript{173}

Assumptions underpinning the survey: ‘Student engagement is linked with high-quality learning outcomes. Understanding and effectively managing students' engagement in higher education plays a significant role in enhancing learning processes and outcomes for students. Data from the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) provides information on the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities and on students' perceptions of the quality of other aspects of their university experience.’\textsuperscript{174}

Areas covered: Includes measures of six educational outcomes (self-reported) as well as measures of engagement. The engagement scales are:

- Academic challenge
- Active learning
- Student and staff interactions
- Enriching education experiences
- Supportive educational environment
- Work integrated learning.

The self-reported outcomes are:

- Higher order thinking
- General learning outcomes
- General development outcomes
- Average overall grade
- Departure intention
- Overall satisfaction.

\textsuperscript{172} http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse/overview Last accessed 29/05/14

\textsuperscript{173} http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse Last accessed 29/05/14

\textsuperscript{174} http://www.acer.edu.au/ausse Last accessed 29/05/14
Over 100 specific learning activities and conditions are surveyed. Data are also collected on self-reported time spent on a range of academic and non-academic activities.

**Strengths:** The Student Engagement Questionnaire, as the AUSSE instrument is also styled, is a psychometrically validated questionnaire. Like the NSSE, the AUSSE is completed by first and final year students, thus enabling comparisons between experiences at different stages of a student’s programme. The AUSSE is marketed as a ‘significant new perspective’ on areas of HE that are central to good practice. It ‘provides evidence about what students are actually doing, highlights the most critical aspects of learning and development, provides a learner-centred, whole-of-institution perspective, and gives an index of students’ involvement in study’.

**Weaknesses:** The AUSSE is a sample survey, unlike the census-based NSS. Its use is voluntary and results are publicly reported at sector level rather than institution or subject within institution level, restricting its potential as a tool for securing accountability or informing student choice. The AUSSE dimensions are similar to those in the NSSE and are subject to the same concerns, including length, whether there are substantial differences from the main foci of the NSS and relevance to different HE national ‘cultures’. Kahu has noted some other difficulties:

Due to its development as a tool for institutional improvement and comparison … the definition of student engagement within the behavioural perspective is limited and unclear. This restricts its usefulness as a research perspective for understanding student engagement. Blending institutional practices with student behaviour has resulted in a lack of clear distinction between the factors that influence engagement, the measurement of engagement itself, and the consequences of engagement. For example, there is considerable overlap between items included in the active learning engagement scale and the higher order thinking outcome measure. Much of the focus is on institutional practices such as support services; while these are important influences on engagement, they do not represent the psychological state of engagement.

Hagel, Carr and Devlin argue that the conception of student engagement adopted by the AUSSE is problematic since it involves transplanting a view from one national context to another – it is essentially about the traditional US college experience (see also above). They also maintain that the theory underlying the questions is disputed. For example, while asking questions or contributing to discussions may signal engagement, it may indicate very different things, such as validating intellectual abilities; while failure to ask questions may not signal disengagement but rather preferences for autonomy and self-regulation. Hagel *et al.* also criticise the instrumental focus of other groups of questions, such as the enriching...

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175 [http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=higher_education](http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=higher_education) Last accessed 29/05/14

176 [http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=higher_education](http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=higher_education) Last accessed 29/05/14

177 Kahu (2011) *op cit.* (page 760). These criticisms would also apply to the NSSE.
educational experiences and work-integrated learning scales. Students who appear to be engaged in these ways may simply be compliant and full of activity.\textsuperscript{178}

Implications for NSS: Very similar to those enumerated for the NSSE. There may be scope for including some questions from the AUSSE about how students engage with learning tasks and about the time they spend on various learning activities. The close relationship of the AUSSE to the NSSE raises similar issues about national relevance of the questions, both for UK students and for Australian students. The value of the AUSSE as a measure of comparative institutional quality is not established; the instrument was not designed for quality assurance or accountability purposes, nor as an aid to students when they are choosing a programme or institution.

8.4.3 HEA UK Engagement Survey (UKES)

Origins and where used: The HEA is leading a pilot of engagement-type survey questions. Nine UK HE institutions took part in 2013 pilot study but 36 HE institutions will be taking part in the 2014 survey. The questions are adapted from the NSSE\textsuperscript{179} and the 2014 survey has introduced a few new questions developed specifically for the survey.

Purpose: The purpose is to support institutions in gathering engagement data to enhance student learning. The HEA intend to allow institutions to incorporate questions about engagement within their regular internal institutional surveys, rather than requiring them to run an additional survey.

Assumptions underpinning the survey: Similar to those for the NSSE (see above). In addition, it is assumed that questions that are relevant for one national system of HE will be appropriate in the UK. However, the survey was developed following previous work by individual institutions, in response to demand from the sector, and in consultation with institutions. In addition, the questions used have undergone cognitive testing and been changed and adapted to reflect the results of the testing so it more suitable for the UK HE context.

Areas covered:

The following areas were covered in the 2013 pilot:

- Critical thinking (Sample item: ‘During the current academic year, how much has your coursework emphasised the following mental activities? a. Analysing in depth an idea, experience or line of reasoning’)

\textsuperscript{178} Hagel, Carr and Devlin (2012) op cit.

- Course challenge (Sample item: ‘In your experience at your institution during the current academic year, about how often have you worked harder than you thought you could to meet a tutor's/lecturer's standards or expectations?’)

- Academic integration (Sample item: ‘In your experience at your institution during the current academic year, about how often have you done each of the following? a. Asked questions or contributed to course discussions in other ways’)

- Collaborative learning (Sample item: ‘In your experience at your institution during the current academic year, about how often have you done each of the following? a. Worked with other students on course projects or assignments’).

The range of questions has been expanded for the 2014 survey.\(^\text{180}\)

**Strengths:** A short survey covering some important aspects of engagement.

**Weaknesses:** There are numerous areas that are not dealt with but which are covered in both the NSSE and NSS. This was intentional, to avoid questions overlapping with the NSS which all institutions participate in - the aim was that UKES would supplement the NSS, rather than replace it. Specifically, there are no questions on teaching quality, course organisation, overall satisfaction, learning resources and personal development. The ‘critical thinking’ group contains questions that are similar to questions on approaches to learning (discussed in the next section). The borrowing of student engagement questions from the USA means that the HEA pilot survey represents a conception of engagement that is drawn from the behaviourist psychological tradition and is linked to a particular national system of HE.

**Implications for NSS:** The notable absence of any questions on the quality of teaching suggests that the instrument would struggle to provide information for accountability or student choice purposes (while those purposes, of course, are not its intention, they are relevant to our consideration of a revised NSS).

The results of the pilot studies will be helpful in determining whether some of these questions on student engagement could be used to supplement existing NSS questions, or whether it might be wiser to see the HEA survey as complementary to a revised NSS. The instrument is still under development. The first pilot study, completed in 2013, produced mixed findings; while two of the four areas (critical thinking and collaborative learning) appeared to function as expected; the course challenge and academic integration scales did not produce satisfactory results and will be modified for the 2014 pilot.

8.4.4 Could a survey of student engagement replace the NSS?

For a variety of reasons, none of the student engagement surveys reviewed above appears to constitute a viable alternative to the NSS, although some of the areas covered by them might provide ideas for additional questions to supplement those in the NSS – particularly in the area of how students engage with learning tasks.

The principal student engagement survey from which all others described above are derived is the NSSE. Despite some suggestions to the contrary, it could be argued that it does not represent an essentially dissimilar approach from the NSS, since it covers many of the same issues in a slightly different form. Some of the areas that it addresses are already present in the optional NSS question blocks. There is no evidence that the NSSE or its derivatives are technically superior to the NSS. There are difficulties arising from the different systems of HE in North America and the UK which make the NSSE less relevant to the latter. It is not clear that an engagement survey could provide comparative measure of institutional quality – an essential requirement of the NSS.

8.5 Surveys of students’ approaches to learning and studying

We have seen that the NSSE and AUSSE derive from a specific body of research into student involvement and that the expression ‘student engagement’ has not until recently been a common one in the UK. However, as Kahu’s summary makes clear (see Figure 1), the European tradition of research into ‘student approaches to learning’ (SAL) addresses similar phenomena and reaches the corresponding conclusion that the quality of students’ understanding (and their academic achievement) is intimately related to the quality of their engagement with learning tasks (Figure 2).\(^{181}\)

\(^{181}\) Ramsden (2003) *op cit.* (Chapter 4).
Figure 2: Relations between perceptions of learning context and learning outcomes

Origins and where used: SAL ideas originated in qualitative studies of how students dealt with specific academic materials (such as academic articles), and were since applied to the development of student surveys.\textsuperscript{182} Developed from the work of Marton and Säljö, Biggs, Entwistle and Ramsden from the late 1970s onwards. Used in a very large number of studies that have examined the different ways students engage with learning tasks.

Purpose: To identify differences in approaches to studying arising from students’ experiences of the learning context in HE.

Assumptions underpinning the surveys: Approaches to studying are not characteristics of individual students but are students’ responses to different academic environments.

Areas covered: The broad distinction incorporated into these surveys is between deep and surface approaches to learning: attempting to understand and attempting more narrowly to fulfil what the student perceived as the requirements of assessment (see Table 3 for examples of the distinction between deep and surface approaches). Surface approaches have been shown to be reliably linked to poorer learning outcomes and measured academic achievement than the deep approaches. The former approach is associated also with

perceptions of inappropriate assessment, poor teaching and unsustainable workload; the
former is associated with perceptions of good teaching, fair assessment, clear goals and
well-organised courses.\textsuperscript{183}

**Strengths:** The SAL body of research has proved to be a productive framework for the
enhancement of the quality of student learning. Its value lies in a series of consistent results
demonstrating associations between students’ approaches to studying (forms of
‘engagement’), their experiences of teaching, learning and assessment and the outcomes of
their learning.\textsuperscript{184} There are several validated instruments available that have been tested
with UK HE students. The NSS is derived from the CEQ, which was validated through
demonstrating its links to approaches to studying. There is an overlap with the NSSE, since
a small number of questions in the revised NSSE are evidently derived from the same
tradition (Table 4).

**Weaknesses:** The instruments, as is the case with other surveys of student engagement, are
not direct measures of students’ experiences of the quality of teaching and courses. They
are not designed specifically to provide information about quality or to assist student choice.
While there is some evidence of cause-effect relationships between students’ experiences,
approaches and achievement,\textsuperscript{185} students’ approaches are potentially determined by their
previous experiences as well as current ones.

**Implications for NSS:** Whereas the NSSE and similar surveys are intended to produce
aggregate (institution level) data, and are not designed to reliably predict student learning
gains at individual level, a revised NSS that included measures of student learning of this
type would generate information that could more confidently be associated with
achievement. An ‘approaches to studying’ survey could not replace the NSS, but some
approaches to studying questions might strengthen it by incorporating important aspects of
student engagement with learning tasks.

\textbf{Table 3: Students’ approaches to learning and studying}


\textsuperscript{184} See Biggs and Tang (2007) \textit{op cit.}

\textsuperscript{185} See for example Lizzio \textit{et al.} 2002 \textit{op cit.}; Richardson (1994 and 2006) \textit{op cit.}
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relating ideas to previous knowledge and experience</td>
<td>Treating course materials as unrelated bits of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for patterns and underlying principles</td>
<td>Routinely memorising facts and procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating evidence to conclusions</td>
<td>Focusing narrowly on assessment demands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examining logic and arguments analytically</td>
<td>Not thinking about the implications of what is learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relating academic ideas to real life examples</td>
<td>Uncritically accepting statements in texts and lectures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring one’s own developing understanding</td>
<td>Studying without reflecting on purpose or strategy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Table 4: Examples of questions about approaches to studying from surveys, including NSSE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Before tackling a problem or assignment, I first try to work out what lies behind it.</td>
<td>Much of what I’m studying makes little sense: it’s like unrelated bit and pieces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to relate ideas I come across to those in other topics or other courses whenever possible.</td>
<td>I find I have to concentrate on just memorising a good deal of what I have to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I’m working on a new topic, I try to see in my own mind how all the ideas fit together.</td>
<td>I concentrate on learning just those bits of information I have to know to pass.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?</td>
<td>I often have trouble in making sense of the things I have to remember.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments (NSSE)</td>
<td>During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…Connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge (NSSE)</td>
<td>…Memorizing course material (NSSE)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
8.5.1 Could a survey of student approaches to studying replace the NSS?

An ‘approaches to studying’ survey does not represent a satisfactory replacement for the NSS. Like an engagement survey, it focuses on what students say they do rather than on their evaluations of the quality of teaching, assessment and support. It would be difficult to make a case that students’ approaches are acceptable proxies for the quality of teaching and courses. However, since the questions in these approaches to studying surveys are derived from the experiences of students in the UK systems of HE, they might be more appropriate to it than the NSSE questions.\(^\text{186}\) In seeking to strengthen the NSS by incorporating important aspects of student engagement with learning tasks, it would be useful to examine the questions used in these ‘approaches to studying’ surveys.

8.6 The Australian University Experience Survey (UES)

The UES is of specific relevance to this review since it was created as a complement to, or potential replacement for, the CEQ, which was the precursor of the NSS.

**Origins and where used:** The UES was developed by the Australian government for use in the Australian HE system. The first stage of the work took place in 2010-2011\(^\text{187}\) and further development to refine the survey was undertaken in 2012\(^\text{188}\). The origins of the UES lie clearly in the Australian derivative of the NSSE, the AUSSE.

**Purpose:** Developed as a new means for measuring the quality of teaching and learning in HE; originally intended to be used in the performance funding of universities. Subsequently it has been proposed that the results form part of a website intended to help students make better informed choices about programmes and institutions.

**Assumptions underpinning the survey:** Presupposes that a sample survey of first and final year undergraduate students, focusing on several aspects of the student experience, can be used for purposes of quality assurance, quality enhancement and assisting student choice.

**Areas covered:** The survey contains 47 closed response questions and two open response (free-text) questions that are similar in scope to the NSS open questions. There is a proposal to incorporate institution-specific questions at a later phase. The UES aims to measure five aspects of the student experience:

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\(^{186}\) As noted above, however, the most recent versions of the NSSE incorporate some approaches to studying questions.

\(^{187}\) Radloff, Coates, James and Krause (2011) *op cit.*

- **Skills Development** (example: ‘To what extent has your experience at university developed your critical thinking skills?’)

- **Learner Engagement** (example: ‘At university during 2012, to what extent have you had a sense of belonging to your university?’)

- **Teaching Quality** (example: ‘During 2012, to what extent have your lecturers, tutors and demonstrators stimulated you intellectually?’)

- **Student Support** (example: ‘At university during 2012, to what extent have you experienced efficient enrolment and admissions processes?’)

- **Learning Resources** (example: ‘Thinking of this year, overall how would you rate the following learning resources at your university… Library resources and facilities?’)

In the 2012 development stage, a decision was made to incorporate selected CEQ questions (28 in total) within the survey. These include the scales of Good Teaching, Generic Skills, Overall Satisfaction, Clear Goals, Graduate Qualities and Learning Community.

**Strengths:** Many of the teaching quality, learning resources and student support questions bear a resemblance to existing questions in the NSS. The scope of the questions is broader than the NSS (for example, questions about student engagement are included). The UES incorporates questions that appear to fulfil the requirement for results which provide measures of accountability and are useful as an aid to prospective students.

**Weaknesses:** There are some important issues that would have to be addressed before the UES could be regarded as a template from which a revised NSS might be derived:

1. There are no questions in the UES that resemble questions in the NSSE and the various approaches to studying questionnaires previously described about how students engage with learning tasks.

2. There are no questions in the UES about frequency of study activities.

3. Although the UES has been subjected to rigorous analysis to establish reliability and validity, there appears to be no evidence of concurrent and predictive validity in terms of external measures of student achievement such as GPA or degree results.

4. There are such close relations between some aspects of the UES and the existing CEQ (and by implication the NSS) that it is unclear whether the replacements are measuring different things. For example, the correlation between CEQ Good Teaching and UES Teaching Quality is 0.79. In a survey, a correlation of this magnitude suggests that the scales are measuring the same feature.

5. There is as yet no evidence that prospective students will use the results.

6. The survey is lengthy; not all parts are intended to be completed by the whole sample of students.

**Implications for NSS:** There would appear to be scope to derive additional questions for a revised NSS from the UES. However, it does not cover some areas that we might expect a
revised NSS to include. The results of further tests of validity and dimensionality and of the relative performance of existing CEQ and the new UES scales are awaited. The UES does not at present provide a satisfactory alternative to the NSS.

Table 5 provides a summary of the major differences between the NSS, NSSE and UES.
### Table 5: NSS compared with NSSE and UES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NSS</th>
<th>NSSE</th>
<th>UES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of questions</strong></td>
<td>23 questions</td>
<td>100+ questions</td>
<td>47 questions (plus 28 from CEQ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origins</strong></td>
<td>Derives from European research on student learning experiences</td>
<td>Derives from US research on student involvement</td>
<td>Derives from NSSE via AUSSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Areas covered</strong></td>
<td>Teaching quality, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, personal development, overall satisfaction, satisfaction with students’ union</td>
<td>Academic challenge, learning with peers, campus environment, experiences with faculty, high-impact practices, study time, overall rating</td>
<td>Skills development, learner engagement, teaching quality, student support, learning resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key missing or incomplete areas</strong></td>
<td>Engagement with learning tasks (approaches to learning), study time</td>
<td>Aspects of assessment and feedback; aspects of engagement with learning tasks (surface/reproducing)</td>
<td>Engagement with learning tasks (approaches to learning), study time, overall satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Issues</strong></td>
<td>Lack of questions on engagement with learning tasks and study time; rating scale; generality of questions</td>
<td>Validity as predictor of achievement; rating scales; length; ‘cultural’ incompatibility</td>
<td>Lack of questions on engagement with learning tasks and study time; no evidence of external validity; covers some of same ground as NSS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 8.7 Implications for the NSS Review

The previous section in this literature review highlights how the NSS might need to change to meet its purposes more effectively. This part of the literature review provides a critical examination of broadly equivalent survey instruments to the NSS used in the UK and elsewhere. These surveys have been divided into six categories depending on their approach and include surveys which:
1. test learning outcomes;
2. produce evidence-based profiles of HE institutions;
3. focus on the broader student experience;
4. concentrate on students’ engagement with their programmes of study and their HE institutions;
5. examine students’ approaches to learning and study; and
6. the Australian UES.

For each survey reviewed, we evaluate their respective strengths and weaknesses and discuss their implications for the NSS.

One overall conclusion of this assessment is that none of these surveys is a viable alternative to the NSS. In other words, there is no suitable ‘off-the-shelf’ survey that could be used instead of the NSS.

These findings raise the following questions for the review:

- What lessons can be learnt from the strengths and weaknesses of these alternative surveys for improving the NSS?
- What areas do they cover that the NSS does not, and which, if any, of these missing areas should be covered by the NSS to meet its purposes more effectively?
- Can these surveys provide ideas for additional questions to supplement those in the NSS?
- Can some of questions included in these surveys be adapted for use in a revised NSS, especially questions focusing on different dimensions of student engagement?
- What are some of the pitfalls of borrowing questions from other surveys, especially those surveys originating outside of the UK?
- What insights can these surveys provide for the development of criteria for selecting what questions should and should not be included in a revised NSS?
9 Summary and conclusions

The purpose of this section is to summarise the implications of this assessment of the NSS and related surveys for the next phase of the review and to articulate the kinds of issues that might be raised in consultations with stakeholders.

9.1 Strengths of the existing NSS

The NSS has shown itself to be a resilient instrument that has had a positive impact on enhancing students’ experiences of HE and has proved useful in quality assurance and for assisting in student choice. It derives from a tradition of research that has provided consistent evidence of relations between students’ reported experiences and the quality of their learning.

Although there are valid criticisms to be made of it, notably that it does not tackle areas such as the wider student experience and the engagement of students with learning or with their institutions (other than in optional questions), it has shown itself to provide valid and reliable results that are useful in practice. It is not apparent that it is merely a survey of student satisfaction and it was not designed as such. Much of what it attempts to assess is also covered in surveys such as the NSSE and UES. In other words, there would seem to be considerable overlap between the issues addressed by these ostensibly quite different surveys.

9.1.1 Summary of strengths of the NSS

- Reliable and valid instrument (including some evidence of external validity)
- Based on extensive and well established theory
- Strengthens student voice and engagement
- Provides useful information for improvement purposes; has had major impact on quality enhancement in individual institutions and generally across the sector; has moved learning and teaching higher up the policy agenda
- Supports internal quality assurance processes
- Provides overview of sector performance and reinforces accountability
- Provides comparable results – both across time and between institutions; can identify and map trends in student experiences and make reliable comparisons between institutions

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189 See for example Flint et al. (2009) op cit.
9.1.2 Retaining strengths while addressing concerns

Changing a successful survey is not an exercise to be undertaken lightly. While all surveys should change and develop to meet new requirements, it goes without saying that any amendments should lead to practical improvements.

Summary: Weaknesses of the NSS

- Most differences between HE institutions are relatively small (although we should remember that the NSS was designed to compare programmes, not institutions)
- The NSS does not appear to provide useful data for informing prospective student choices (although, as noted above, this is not strictly a weakness of the survey but reflects prospective students’ lack of interest in using its results)
- Some questions that might be thought important are absent (e.g. questions on employability and co-curriculum)
- Ignores student contributions to their own learning
- Focuses on evaluations of teaching and courses rather than on how often students carry out desirable activities including engagement with learning and independent study
- Lack of context (some questions may be too vague and general)
- Unintended consequences (e.g. inappropriate use in league tables and marketing; may drive inappropriate institutional behaviour)
- Does not identify reasons for positive and negative student experiences (although the open comments may shed light on these reasons).

Unfortunately, there is no easy solution to these issues to be found in other surveys. Many of the same criticisms have been made about the NSSE, for example. It is not immediately apparent that a revised NSS should follow the lead given by the NSSE, AUSSE and UES:

- There are difficulties arising from the different ‘cultures’ of North American and UK HE; the NSSE represents a strongly US view of ‘the college experience’ and a behaviourist conception of the student experience in which student activities take precedence over perceptions of teaching quality and approaches to learning tasks - the former approach may be more useful for enhancement purposes and the latter approach more useful for student choice
- There are issues related to the much greater length of the alternative instruments. A survey that was a great deal longer would be more expensive to administer and would require more effort on the part of institutions in distributing and processing information. It might lead to lower response rates, although this is not certain. However, it would be possible to make use of a limited number of additional questions derived from other instruments (see below)
• The AUSSE and NSSE are not designed to assist prospective students to choose programmes or institutions; the UES will be part of the Australian equivalent of KIS but there is as yet no evidence that its results are used by intending students.

• The UES contains no questions on engagement with learning or study time.

• The validity of the NSSE and AUSSE, particularly their assumptions that a very wide range of ‘engagements’ determines learning gains, is contested.

• The NSSE and AUSSE are not only about students’ engagement with learning tasks; their combination of institutional practices and student behaviours is problematic and leads to confusion between antecedents and consequences.

• Other surveys in wide use already address issues related to extra-curricular activities and provide more detailed treatment of perceptions of the quality of support and resources.

• The differences between the NSSE and the NSS as measures of key aspects of the student experience such as teaching and assessment seem rather smaller in practice than some advocates of the former have made out.

Specific questions from other surveys that might be adapted to help improve a revised NSS include those on how students approach learning tasks, on students’ experiences of how much attention is given to their feedback and ideas for improving the course, and on how much students feel they are part of a community of learners. Some of these questions already exist in the optional blocks of the NSS and they might become part of the core instrument.

9.2 Options for development

The most reasonable interim conclusion is that there are several options for the direction of development of the NSS that might be tested out through consultations. Three of the possible alternatives might be:

1. Retain the current NSS and explore options for relatively minor change, such as a different rating scale, the addition of questions to strengthen existing dimensions and the addition of questions to explore overall satisfaction and satisfaction with students’ unions more thoroughly.

2. A major revision to the NSS. This might involve:

   a. replacement of the existing dimensions with ones that measure how often students engage with a range of teaching and learning activities
   
   b. additional questions on approaches to learning
   
   c. new questions distinguishing students’ experiences of, and satisfaction with, institutions and programmes.
3. A relatively minor revision to the NSS. This might imply retaining all the existing dimensions with the addition of questions on engagement, approaches to learning and other aspects of student experiences.

Of these three options, the second is probably the least feasible. As we have seen, there is no obvious replacement survey that focuses on ‘engagement’; moreover, the idea of engagement itself has many different connotations. Most importantly, it is uncertain how two key purposes of the NSS (providing public information about quality and information for prospective students) could be realised if the existing dimensions were eliminated.

9.2.1 Developing criteria for selecting questions

An implication of our reviews of alternative surveys, of the literature on evaluating the student experience and of the strengths and weaknesses of the NSS is that firm criteria are required to enable questions about students’ experiences to be selected from the long potential lists of items.

Drawing on our interim conclusions, a suitable survey should be fit for purpose, consistent, auditable, transparent and timely. It should focus on aspects that are measurable, that are unlikely to be available in any other way, that are linked to learning and development, and that are capable of being influenced by what providers can realistically do. It should aim to provide information for accountability, quality assurance, quality enhancement and policy purposes, as well as to generate information that can be used by prospective students to help them make decisions about appropriate study choices. These criteria build on and expand those used in the recent development of the Australian UES. ¹⁹⁰

We suggest that the above requirements entail questions which:

- Concentrate principally on students’ experiences of the academic context of their studies
- Provide an indication of students’ evaluations of the quality of teaching and support, including overall satisfaction with their experience
- Examine how the connections students make with their studies and their institutions (‘learner engagement’, ‘student approaches to learning’) are influenced by the quality of courses and teaching
- Ask about learning and development gains (students’ self-reports of learning and skills developed through their experiences of HE)

and which might also (subject to further consultation)

- Provide some information about the sizes of teaching groups experienced

• Provide some indication of the time spent on different aspects of teaching and learning, including independent study

• Ask about how internal student evaluations are conducted and how the results are used

• Ask about students’ perceptions of the relevance of the programme to employment.

Several of these aspects of the student experience (such as learning and development) are incorporated in the current NSS; the existing questions should also be reviewed through consultation to ensure that they appropriately address them all.