



## National Student Survey consultation – US response

### Section one: Scope of the NSS

#### **Question 1: Do you agree we should retain the current criteria for NSS core questions?**

Yes, we agree these should be retained.

We agree that the three key purposes of the NSS are still appropriate and agree that the questions must also meet the criteria as set out in the NSS core survey criteria.

### Section two: Changes to the NSS questionnaire

**Question 2: What are the consequences – positive and negative – of changing to the use of direct questions for the NSS? (By ‘direct questions’ we mean questions which elicit respondents’ views on an issue of interest by asking about it directly. The questionnaire response options are tailored specifically to match the question.)**

We recognise the need for questions and surveys to evolve over time and, if carefully worded, direct questions could help students respond in a way that is meaningful for them.

We do however have concerns about moving to direct questions for 2023 and suggest caution for the following reasons:

#### **Questions are still under testing and a conclusive outcome is still not known**

In general, the evidence cited as supporting the move to a direct question format only partially does so. Piloting showed that whilst there were signs that the direct question format might reduce the mode of response effect and decrease acquiescence amongst respondents, it also found that students participating in the direct question pilot were more likely to use the ‘I cannot answer this question’ option, in tension with the theory that direct questions are easier to understand and respond to than questions using agree/disagree response scales. This pilot also had slightly higher levels of inapplicability and was described as not displaying many of the benefits that are often associated with direct question surveys.

We recognise that further testing and piloting is planned, and welcome this, as it may help to resolve issues with the questionnaire and/or the design of testing and piloting that might be preventing some of the theoretical benefits from being realised. We would also like to understand whether testing also includes representation from across the student population, e.g., by mode of learning, to ensure that part time and online learners are also included.

A decision on the move to direct questions should only be taken once there is confidence, from testing and piloting, that the revised questionnaire represents an improvement, and better demonstrates the expected benefits. Members are concerned that introducing questions that have not been fully tested for the April 2023 survey will impact the survey’s rigour and reliability.

## **Break with the current five-year time series**

We strongly regret that the changes would mean a break with the current five-year time series making comparisons between versions of the questionnaire difficult. Institutions want to be able to build a meaningful time series going forward to support their quality assurance and enhancement work. We note that the new survey would, for example, no longer include questions on timetabling or on feeling part of a community, which in particular have been linked to overall satisfaction and are relevant to issues surrounding mental health and wellbeing.

A move to direct questions using different response scales also means it will be much more difficult for providers to make comparisons across responses to individual questions.

Institutions will also no longer be able to undertake UK wide institutional comparative analyses which are of significant value to members. The time series data allows institutions to measure, in a statistically robust way, progress due to enhancement activity and to identify new areas of focus and development.

Small specialist institutions have also reported that time series information is extremely important for them as NSS outcomes can vary significantly year to year so being able to take a more longitudinal approach on questions and outcomes is important to identify consistent issues and improvement over the long term.

Moreover, it would be useful to be able to compare 2023 with the existing time series in order to see the impact of the post-covid period.

## **Changes to a 4-point scale**

We welcome proposals aimed at ensuring questions focus on a single concept, as this will be helpful to respondents, and agree that the five-point Likert scale could helpfully be replaced with scales specifically designed for particular questions, provided those scales make sense in the context of what is being asked.

Some members have commented that moving to a 4 rather than 5-point scale will be problematic. The ability to choose a mid-point (neither agree/disagree) is a valid response to survey questions and asking the questions in a direct manner but not providing a mid-point option risks inaccurately capturing student opinion.

## **Changing to direct questions could impact response rates**

Changing the structure to direct questions, phrased in different ways, and with differing response options, will significantly increase the complexity for students responding to the survey, especially if needing to adjust for different scales for different types of questions. As well as increasing the likelihood of students being unable to respond to the question, this could also likely result in a significant drop in the survey response rates.

## **Changes to wording of questions**

Whilst members report that changing to questions rather than statements could be beneficial [once tested fully and evidence shared] if questions focus on a single concept, care needs to be taken on the wording. Members have commented that some of the proposed questions are poorly phrased, with the language open to interpretation and could be seen to be based on perception rather than experience.



Language in questions must be appropriate across the range of institutions in the UK and also be consistent. Direct questions may not apply readily across all types of providers and indeed, smaller member institutions have commented that “a one size fits all” approach is often problematic for them and direct questions often have unintended negative consequences for them. Direct questions also assume a standard university experience for all students. They rely upon students recognising this, understanding the terminology and interpreting how they fit into that model in order to answer the question. This could result in less meaningful and measurable outcomes.

### **Question 3: What are the consequences – both positive and negative – of removing the summative question for England only?**

Our members strongly oppose the removal of the summative question for England, as the data is useful for institutions across the UK and a key strength of the NSS is its UK-wide applicability. It would no longer be possible for institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to compare Q27 results with those of institutions in England, individually or collectively, and institutions in England would no longer have the data for themselves. It will also lead to inequity of what is being measured between English students and those in the rest of the UK

The removal of Q27 for England also impacts the ability for universities in Scotland to look at longitudinal changes in performance and evaluate performance across the UK. Members have commented that this question enables comparisons to be made at discipline level and represents a lost opportunity to discover exemplars of good practice.

Q27 is also important for prospective students to compare institutions across the UK and its removal could impact on cross- border student recruitment for students considering institutions in both England and Scotland. According to [HESA data](#), in 2020/21, 11.6% of first degree UG student enrolments in Scotland are domiciled in England and removing this question impacts upon student choice and removes their ability to compare across the UK.

Additionally, having a standard question across all 4 nations is essential for institutions in Scotland that have no comparator. The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, for example, as a small institution uses the summative question to benchmark with peer institutions in England and to provide longitudinal context on any variation in results. It is even more challenging to consider how the Open University in Scotland will be affected by this decision as it will be caught between SFC outcome agreements and OfS regulation.

One of our members suggested that as the concern about the use of the summative question is driven by inappropriate use by the media in England, this could be alternatively addressed via updated data dissemination guidance to ensure responsible use of the data, as is the case with [Graduate Outcomes data](#)

### **Question 4: Should we retain the current summative question for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, or move to the revised question with a focus on quality not satisfaction?**

We strongly favour retaining the current summative question for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. We note concern around the use of ‘satisfaction’ but retaining the current question would



enable our time series to continue. It is unclear to us what students will understand by 'quality', which may vary considerably between students, institutions and programmes. Members have commented that no evidence has been provided to demonstrate why a move away from "satisfaction" would be preferable. Additional testing will be required to understand the nuances in how students approach a question relating to the concept of *satisfaction* over one focussed on the concept of *quality*.

**Question 5: Should a question on freedom of expression be asked as an additional question after the core questionnaire?**

We do not support the inclusion of questions relating to freedom of expression in the NSS, as it does not fall within the scope of the NSS and would not meet the core survey criteria.

The proposed question is unclear, difficult to interpret, and it is doubtful whether it will address the issues surrounding freedom of expression as identified in the consultation document.

Our members feel that there is little evidence that there is a widespread problem with freedom of expression within the sector and as it is subjective to different people, meaningful and actionable feedback will not be possible.

Some members have also queried the rationale for adding additional questions after the core set of questions. Not only will it lengthen the survey and therefore possibly impact response rates, it also raises a query as to where this question fits within the survey overall. The consultation does not suggest that it is included as part of the bank of optional questions and therefore should be considered a core question.

**Question 6: Should a question on mental wellbeing provision be asked as an additional question after the core questionnaire?**

Student mental wellbeing is a priority for the entire Scottish HEI sector, including the Scottish Funding Council and Scottish Government, and is something institutions and others are investing in to support. Institutions already capture information about mental wellbeing in their own temperature check surveys, and institutions' own questions might be more focused and timelier, sometimes repeated more than once through the year, and more valuable for taking action.

We do not think the NSS is the right place for this question and would favour considering alternative means of capturing data on mental wellbeing issues that are more targeted and include more sophisticated questioning. This question does not appear to fall within the scope of the NSS and would not meet the core survey criteria.

We think that the question on feeling part of (belonging to) a community of staff and students should be retained in NSS, as there is evidence to suggest that feeling connected to other students and staff is largely beneficial for student mental health, widening access and retention.



Mental health and well-being support services can be accessed via many different routes, which are not always recognised by students at the time, for example access to counselling, clubs and activities, mentorship arrangements etc and it would be difficult for a single question to include this activity and provide actionable insight.

Our members are interested in better understanding the student experience from a mental wellbeing perspective and how support services in institutions can be enhanced, but we do not think the proposed wording will address any of the key issues. We do not think that a lack of knowledge or awareness is the most significant issue, for example, in addressing student mental wellbeing issues. This was shown in the [Thriving Learners survey \(2021\)](#), which found generally high levels of awareness amongst students at Scottish HEIs, but lower levels of usage. Translating awareness into student action should instead be prioritised.

The proposed question focuses on the communication of support services rather than the service itself or students' mental wellbeing in relation to their experience. The question does not take into account the different arrangements for mental health support in universities across the sector and that experiences can vary depending on NHS availability and support, or mode of study.

As with question 5, it is unclear as to why this question is not included in either the core set or optional bank questions, but instead to be asked to all after the core question set.

**Question 7: What are the unintended consequences of asking a question about students' awareness of mental wellbeing services where no support to respondents can be offered?**

All HEIs in Scotland offer mental wellbeing support to their students, and we would not be concerned about unintended consequences of asking the question from that point of view.

However, there is currently no way to flag when a student might not be aware of mental wellbeing services and then realise, they need them, and by the time NSS results are published and the institution realises a lack of awareness amongst a particular group of students, these students have left.

Students may make assumptions about how institutions will respond to mental health disclosures in a questionnaire.

**Question 8: Do you agree that the NSS should normally be reviewed every four years? Is the proposed timing between reviews a sensible balance between developing insight and maintaining capacity to change?**

We agree that a fixed review period would be beneficial and cyclical reviews at agreed time intervals would provide a better organised and understood way of managing future changes to NSS.

A four-year review period, noting that changes to the main questionnaire might not be deemed necessary at each review point, would allow for the development of a meaningful time series, which the sector values for the purposes of assuring, monitoring and enhancing quality.



It would provide a clearer basis on which to evaluate any changes made to NSS as a result of the previous review and, together with the NSS core survey criteria, a stronger framework for taking forward suggestions for future change.

Some members have commented that four years may be quite short, and this time frame could be lengthened to 5 or even 8 years for an even more meaningful time period to measure enhancements to quality. A longer time period may also ensure that questions better “stand the test of time” and are more reflective of long-term issues. Sufficient lead in time for consultation and testing will be required on top of any extension to the review period.

Members have also commented that the timescale for the 2023 survey appears to be very ambitious given the timing of the consultation and the testing still required. Furthermore, a time series covering the post Covid period, i.e., retaining the current questionnaire for 2023, could be very beneficial.

**Question 9: What would be the impact on students and providers of the fieldwork period running from mid-February to the end of April for all providers?**

We are broadly supportive of the proposal to change the fieldwork period as long as it does not impact upon response rates. Some institutions will need to amend their planning and commitment of resources for the timing of survey activities.

There will however be a significant impact to the Open University in Scotland as the opening of recruitment for the next academic year will fall within the proposed shortened timeframe and which will therefore pose significant operational difficulties.

Scottish institutions typically start the summer assessment period at the end of April/start of May. Retaining the end of April deadline is beneficial in terms of avoiding the end of year assessment period and enabling a July publication of results.

**Question 10: In relation to the design and use of NSS in Wales, what effect (if any), positive or negative, will the proposals outlined in this document have on: (a) opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?; (b) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?**

No comment.

**Question 11: In relation to the use of the design and use of the NSS in Wales, how could the proposals be changed so that the policy decision would have positive effects, or increased positive effects, on: (a) opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?; (b) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?**

No comment.

**12. Did you find any aspects of the proposals unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.**

Our members have raised the following issues:



- It is not clear why the question relating to students feeling part of a learning community has been removed and without consultation. It is felt that this is a significant question, especially in light of recent disruption to learning and teaching, and impacts both on the proposed question relating to well-being but also student satisfaction.
- The process and timeline for testing and piloting of the direct questions and any resultant consultation has not been made clear.
- Any changes and plans for the optional question banks have not been discussed, nor plans for these if direct questions are introduced.
- The timeline for this consultation suggests that any further consultation on the finalised questionnaire will be unlikely prior to the launch of the survey in February 2023 and we would like to understand if this is the only opportunity to provide comment and feedback.
- The amendment to the question set for 2023 removes the ability to systematically assess the change post-covid 19. 2021-22 academic year is the first delivered without impact from e.g., government lockdowns. It is vital that the question set is retained to allow institutions to measure improvement post covid.

**13. In your view, are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation (see paragraph 7) could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than is proposed here?**

This consultation has been undertaken over a 5-week period at a time of peak staff annual leave meaning that meaningful consultation with colleagues across the sector has been limited. More insight and considered views would have been possible had this time period been extended and therefore would have made this consultation more efficient and effective. Institutions need time to reflect on changes and what that could mean for internal complementary enhancement work and it is difficult to do this in such a short consultation period.

