

Institutional Case Studies: Use of the National Student Survey for Enhancement

November 2010

The following short case studies have been written by members of the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Institutional Working Group for the National Student Survey (NSS). They provide real examples of how UK higher education institutions are using the NSS data to enhance the student experience, and the impact these activities have had.

We are keen disseminate examples of institutional practice in this area. If you have a case study you would like to share through [EvidenceNet](#), the HEA's online repository of learning and teaching resources, please use the [template available](#) on EvidenceNet, or email it to: nss@heacademy.ac.uk.

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Cross-institutional approach to interpretation and utilisation of National Student Survey outcomes through student engagement

Case study by: Julian Martin, University of Worcester

Situation

Approximately 9,000 students study at the University of Worcester, a number which has expanded dramatically over the past 5 years. A significant proportion (c. 10%) of these students study at a partner organisation. During this time, it has become increasingly apparent that locally-based, informal approaches to enhancing quality through student engagement have become increasingly difficult. As such, the University has been exploring methods by which students can be increasingly involved as partners in the management of quality. Clearly, a significant factor has been the way in which the University approaches and responds to the National Student Survey.

Activity

From the onset of the 2010/11 academic year, the University of Worcester has embarked upon a project to embed understanding and encourage utilisation of National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes. The approach is threefold:

Access to information about the NSS: to ensure that all staff had access to relevant information about the NSS, including not only potential uses but also potential hazards. Further information was therefore provided with the University's initial analysis, backed up by two staff briefings/workshops to explore the data and discuss best use, using examples from other HEIs and internally.

Student Voice in Quality Processes: to ensure that quality processes, as appropriate, included reference to the student voice and, in particular, to findings from the NSS. Links with the Annual Evaluation (Annual Reporting/Monitoring) process were strengthened, as were those with Periodic Review. Both of these processes have recently been revised to encapsulate the student voice more explicitly. Primarily, this has been achieved through the redevelopment of the University's student representation system in conjunction with the Students' Union. Through this mechanism, students are now directly involved in discussions leading up to, and following, key quality processes.



Discussion of NSS Outcomes with Students: course teams are expected to discuss outcomes of the NSS alongside external examiner reports, PSRB reports, etc. directly with student representatives and disseminate outcomes through the StAR system (online) to ensure that all students have a voice and are party to University and course-level discussions around the NSS.

Impact

It is still relatively early to tell, but from those measures currently available to us (attendance at briefings/workshops and evidence through the Annual Evaluation process), it seems clear that the desire/willingness of staff across the University and at partners to understand and engage with the NSS is increasing.

From a quality enhancement perspective, students are now more clearly involved in such discussions and, whilst for some this is a considerable learning curve given the background knowledge necessary to usefully interpret and act on NSS findings, it seems likely that some real change, for the better, will arise from these discussions. In one case, for example, students have been able to explain potential reasons for otherwise irrational data emanating from the NSS. We would anticipate that this trend continues as the StAR system is developed further.

Reflections

In many ways, the aims of this project were modest. Although the days are now past whereby NSS data might be dismissed due to the joint problems for smaller institutions of JACS categorisation and threshold numbers, understanding of NSS outcomes appears to be on the increase and students are already experiencing direct discussions with staff to disentangle and dissect outcomes with the aim of making continuous improvements to provision.

The next steps will be to gather evidence over the next couple of months to clarify these initial findings and also to see if there is a direct impact as a result. In one way, this impact will be demonstrated by an increase in student/staff discussion of NSS data, leading to, we hope, a development of the culture of evidence-informed enhancement of learning and teaching. More tangentially this may be evidenced by an improvement in the NSS outcomes pertaining to the student voice itself, one of the additional bank of questions to which we always seek a response.



Using the student voice to drive the quality enhancement agenda through the production of Staff Student Liaison Committee Annual Reports

Case study by: Shaun McGall, University of Bath

Situation

The University of Bath works in partnership with the Students' Union (SU) to foster an environment where students are encouraged to provide open and honest feedback on all aspects of their student experience, and to undertake a role as peers and not as passive consumers.

Activity

Two years ago, the University worked with the SU (alongside academic departments) to revise its QA Code of Practice Statement for Staff Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs). Distinctive features of the new statement include the appointment of student chairs and secretaries, the submission of an annual report on SSLC business by departments, and the dissemination of good practice from annual reports. In addition, templates are provided to SSLCs to help structure these annual reports.

This is the second year that SSLC annual reports have been submitted to the SU, to enable the Vice-President (Education) to submit an overview report identifying cross-institutional themes to the University Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee. The SU Overview Report highlights a series of good practice examples and recommends a range of quality enhancements. These recommendations are then passed back to all academic departments and professional student support services for implementation.

Impact

The strengthening of the informed student voice through SSLC Annual Reports has initiated enhancements in a number of pedagogical areas, such as assessment and feedback, enhancing learning through technology, evaluation, and teaching and learning practices. Specific examples include:

- introduction of departmental level Feedback Policies which have been developed in partnership between academic colleagues and students;



- an audit in 2010/11 of peer mentoring schemes at the University;
- reviewing by SSLCs of the accuracy and usefulness of unit information provided to students selecting optional units.

Reflections

The introduction of the SSLC Annual Reports and the associated Overview Report written by the SU has impacted positively on the role and standing of SSLCs within the University. Although not all SSLCs have used the template provided for their Annual Report, the Overview Report produced by the Students' Union has been able to draw attention to a range of student concerns and issues to which the University has been able to react. This approach helps to highlight to students that their comments are valued and listened to by the University, and emphasises the importance of the student voice and the determination of the University to ensure that students' comments on their programme have been acted upon. One key indicator of the success of this approach can be seen in the NSS results where Question B6.3 (It is clear to me how students comments on the course have been acted upon) places the University of Bath nine percentage points above the top quartile threshold.



Using NSS data around assessment and feedback to enhance practice: engaging students and staff as partners in the process.

Case study by: Claire Taylor, Bishop Grosseteste University College

Situation

Bishop Grosseteste University College has used NSS data to highlight areas for enhancement across the full range of learning and teaching activity. This case study focuses particularly on assessment and feedback and an approach that has sought to engage both staff and students concurrently in enhancement activity.

Activity

The strategies used since 2007 have included:

1. conference-style poster displays of assignment feedback proformas from across the University College to stimulate discussion, constructive comment and understanding of 'best practice' across the academic staff body;
2. a variety of accessible staff development resources, e.g. a VLE-based 'assessment toolkit' showcasing assessment feedback proformas and covering issues such as student self-assessment and peer assessment/feedback; drop in 'bite size' lunchtime sessions covering feedback issues; whole-staff learning and teaching conference focus upon assessment and feedback;
3. student focus groups, seeking to unpack more specific issues related to NSS scores around assessment and feedback, with student comments presented to staff as 'What our students say about...'
4. 4. Study skills guides for students focusing upon 'How to use assessment feedback'.

By seeking to engage both students and staff in enhancement activity, the aim has been to develop a shared understanding of key issues around assessment and feedback.

Impact

Bringing student perspectives to staff has been powerful in highlighting the



issues that students care about most (such as feedback that is explicitly matched to the assessment criteria, feedback tutorials, more use of self and peer assessment). Furthermore, flexibility of developmental support for academic staff has been very important in ensuring engagement with enhancement activity across the academic staff community. In addition, working with students to help them to understand issues faced by staff (particularly around the manageability of assessment and feedback) has brought balance to the enhancement strategy. NSS scores for assessment feedback in 2010 are higher than in 2007, although the rising profile has not been without dips along the way.

Reflections

Working concurrently with staff and students is the first step towards working more collaboratively with staff and students. This is being developed at Bishop Grosseteste University College through student engagement with learning and teaching committees and through student presentations at staff learning and teaching conferences. There is no doubt that staff 'hearing' the student voice has a clear impact upon enhancement activity. Truly shared endeavour around the enhancement of assessment and feedback practice is something we aspire to develop further.



Designing a template to present/disseminate NSS data in a quick and easy to digest format

Case study by: Nicola Poole, University of Wales Institute Cardiff

Situation

The Annual National Student Survey (NSS) results are analysed and disseminated by the Student Experience team within the Learning and Teaching Development Unit in the University of Wales Institute Cardiff. Each year the results are analysed and then presented to the Schools by the lowest level breakdown possible.

Activity

This information is used to help inform meetings that are held with each individual school to discuss the results and formulate an action plan. It is also used by Programme Directors to complete their APR's. The issue being addressed was that the results were previously presented in a written report. The aim was to try and design a much more visually receptive presentation to move away from simply a verbal presentation of the information.

Impact

The new template is colour coded, so it immediately draws the reader to the areas that have had positive and negative responses. There is a graphical representation that allows for comparison between years to enable the perception of trends. This method prevents too much repetition of text and is easier to send out individual results to programmes without extensive explanation of what the different results mean.

Reflections

This new method of presenting the results has led to a much more efficient communication of NSS information. We were unsure whether the grids and graphs would be received positively, but staff seem to appreciate being able to immediately focus on specific areas of concern. It is likely that people are more likely to read and absorb the results in a more dynamic format than a purely text-based presentation. It also allows for easy comparison against multiple programmes etc. and for use in course review documents etc.



Using "what if scenario" analysis of institutional NSS results to prioritise and focus quality enhancement.

Case study by: Jason Leman, Sheffield Hallam University

Situation

The following case study is in the context of a large post-92 Higher Education Institution (HEI) that has around fifty subject groups reported on in the National Student Survey (NSS). From 2008 to 2009 there was a significant downturn in the institutional results for the University. This left a need to understand whether this shift was due to a general problem across the University, or something more specifically located in particular subject groups

Activity

In order to determine the location of the change, an analysis explored "what-if-scenarios", where results for individual subject areas for 2008 were substituted for results for 2009, and the impact on the institutional score assessed. This analysis quickly identified that the majority of change in institutional scores was caused by movements in a few subject areas. Action could then be focussed on areas that were not otherwise highlighted by simple comparisons or trends. For example, one small subject area experienced a large downturn in satisfaction that influenced the institutional score by half a percentage point, similarly a large subject area influenced the institutional score by over a percentage point in a priority NSS area. As a result, these subject areas were flagged as being of concern to the Executive.

Impact

The identification of subject areas that most impacted on the institution enabled institutional priorities to be set. The areas in question were highlighted and therefore became priorities for action. All of the areas experienced improvements in NSS scores for 2010, and the hope is that these improvements will continue. This methodology has been supported by executive members and expanded to consider what impact subject areas might have on the institutional score if they improved to an institutional or relevant competitor score. Analysis also now includes tests of significance to assess whether causes of change are due to coherent changes across student groups, rather than being due to random individual variation in response.



Reflections

Rather than a scattered approach, or one based on a simple assessment of shift in scores, this approach benefits both executive and students. Although the approach may be interpreted as focussed on raising institutional scores, it is an effective and simple method of highlighting areas of concern to the institution. Just as we might aim for society to have the greatest utility at any one time, this measure aims to identify where resources should be focussed to ensure an institution has the best student experience at any one time. The measure is a small part of wider processes and analysis of the NSS, not least the actions of the subject areas to identify what issues are associated with falling NSS scores, and address them. However, by ensuring the priorities of the institution are informed, it can enable such actions to take place.

