

Surridge P ‘The National Student Survey three years on: what have we learned?’ (2009)

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Overview

This report brings together key findings of three years of research using the NSS.

Aims and background

The National Student Survey (NSS) was first conducted in 2005, its original aims being to “inform the choices of future students” and “to contribute to public accountability by supporting external audits of institutions by the QAA” (pg 7). 21 items are grouped into six scales: teaching and learning (T&L); assessment and feedback (A&FB); academic support; organisation and management (O&M); learning resources; personal development. This report brings together key findings of three years of research using the NSS, and will be useful to potential students and the wider sector but is aimed primarily at those working in HEIs.

Methodology

The report summarises three key pieces of research: the analysis of the 2005, 2005, and 2007 NSS by Surridge; an analysis of gender and ethnicity effects on assessment and feedback by Fielding et al; and Marsh and Cheng’s research on the dimensionality and multilevel structure of the NSS. The research discussed in this report uses data collected via the NSS questionnaire linked with a student identifier to the student HESA records, data which is not available to individual HEIs (pg 10).

Key points

Response rates (pp 11-12)

The overall response rate is around 60%, with institutional response rates ranging from 20.3% to 84.2% in 2005 to 41.8% to 80.1% in 2007.

- *Late responders:* A multivariate analysis showed that the effect of being a ‘late’ respondent was not statistically significant. There is no evidence that scores would be materially different given higher response rates.
- *Thresholds:* The first 40% of responses in each HEI was analysed and revealed that at the aggregate sector-wide level the impact of a reduction in response rate would be negligible. Further, a reduction in response rate per HEI is unlikely to affect the scores for that HEI but may affect the rank ordering of HEIs overall.
- *Incentives:* Research by Surridge has shown that there is very little impact on response rates from institutional incentives.

Key findings: Surridge reports on 2005, 2006, 2007 data

- *Global trends:* The largest increases in mean scores were on the O&M, academic support and learning resources scales, while the A&FB scales had one of the smallest increases over time (pg 16).
- *Subject differences:* At JACS1 and JACS2 levels, the majority of subject groups showed the same effect for each of the three years. This raises questions such as why e.g. students on math. science courses are more positive about A&FB than law students, but less positive about T&L?



- Institutional effects: Analysing institutional residuals showed that most HEIs performed as expected given their student profile for each year.
- There is variation across the scales, so that an HEI performing well in one area of NSS may not be performing well in another.

Key findings: Fielding et al on A&FB, ethnicity and gender (pp 22-3)

The main aim of Fielding et al's analysis was to explore ethnic and gender difference on the A&FB scale, with a particular emphasis on how gender and ethnicity effects are mediated/moderated by other factors.

- Gender and A&FB: No statistically significant difference was found between males and females on the A&FB scale.
 - When gender is taken together with ethnicity females from Indian and Black Caribbean groups are more positive than their male counterparts.
 - Female students with high UCAS tariff scores are less positive about A&FB than are males.
 - The gap between males and females is smaller among those aged over 20 than those aged 18 or 19.
 - Females were more positive than males in computer science, mass communications and creative arts and design.
- Ethnicity and A&FB: Six of 12 ethnic groups used are significantly less positive than White students: Other White, Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Other Asian and Other.
- Once other variables including gender, age, disability and subject of study are added, four groups remain less positive than White students: Other White, Indian, Pakistani and Other.
- Black students were more positive in sciences or social studies, while Asian groups were more positive in medical schools.

Marsh and Cheng: dimensionality and multilevel structure (pp 24-5)

This report evaluates the structure of the NSS questionnaire, and to explore the multilevel structure of the data, particularly how much of the variation in scores can be explained at the level of student, subject area and HEI.

- *Dimensionality*: Factor analysis supports the original *a priori* design of the NSS questionnaire.
 - Two approaches could reasonably be used to generate a summary of overall satisfaction: a summation of individual items, or the single overall satisfaction measure in isolation.
- *Multilevel structure*: Focusing exclusively on overall satisfaction, multilevel models include three levels: students, subject groups and institutions. It is the first step in a wider examination of issues.
 - C.2.5% of variation is due to differences between HEIs.
 - Variance explained by subject level ranged between 3.5% and 7% depending on subject classification used.

Synthesis

Despite different perspectives, research shows a great deal of congruence (pg 27):

- Research into student groups shows stability in effects over time; Black students tend to be more positive about A&FB than White, while students from Asian backgrounds are less positive.



- Research agrees the proportion of variance at HEI level is small but produces reliable measures of small differences between HEIs.
- Research also agrees that there are large differences according to subject of study.

Potential future work

- The effect of teaching quality on outcomes (degree classifications and graduate destinations)
- The effect of context (e.g. course context, not institutional context)
- The impact of student profiles (e.g. how would an HEI's scores be affected if the proportion of mature students changed from 5% to 15%?)

Strengths and limitations (pg 29)

The NSS' strengths are its ability to document in detail differences between student groups, to identify and map trends in student experiences, and in making reliable comparisons between HEIs. It has provided the sole means by which, for example, differences in the experiences of Asian students have been evidenced. It is useful for highlighting where there are differences. It is, however, less useful in answering why e.g. Asian students have less positive experiences of some aspects of their courses.

Implications

- *For potential students (pg 29)*: NSS can reassure students that differences between HEIs on UniStats are reliable, not artefactual. It also evidences that the vast majority of UK HE students have very positive experiences with regard to teaching quality. In addition, the data as published for used by potential students does not take into account differences between student groups.
- *Institutions (pp 29-30)*: The data received by HEIs is relatively limited and does not allow the kind of analysis presented in this report. Three elements of this research are key for HEIs:
 - The need to contextualise based on the types of students at an HEI. Different students have different experiences of HE.
 - Institutional residuals can show that even if an HEI's NSS results are improving, it may still be performing worse than expected relative to other HEIs if they are improving at a faster rate.
 - Differences between HEIs are stable, reliable, and small.
- *HE sector (pg 30)*: Findings relating to specific groups of students raise questions that must be addressed at the sector-wide level (e.g. some aspects of teaching quality for Asian students). Subject-based differences are also important, suggesting there may be lessons to be learned by looking across rather than within subject areas.

Select bibliography

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Link to full text

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/nss/NSS_three_years_on_surridge_02.06.09.pdf

