What are students ‘saying’?
The politics of surveys for enhancement

David Morris, Project Officer
Outline – Exploring dichotomies

Consumerism vs Partnership

Student voice or undermining students unions

Legitimate voice vs illegitimate voice

Political tool vs ‘scientific’ research
Conference Believes

“2. The NSS is an overly simplistic measure of students’ experiences of learning and teaching at university, measuring simply 'satisfaction'.

3. The HE sector and the media use the NSS data incorrectly. Universities that are impossible to compare are ranked alongside each other. The NSS naturalises the idea of students as ‘customers’ and staff as ‘service providers’ and further embeds a culture of ‘measuring’ and ‘ranking’ inside HE.

4. The NSS can disempower students; their experiences are based on pre defined criteria set by government, rather than the individual experiences of each student and the cares of the collective student body.

5. Teaching is a complex process, no single questionnaire or survey can produce data about teaching and learning that captures the totally of an experience.

... 

7. Having said that, NSS is an important and vital tool for students’ unions, ensuring they are placed at the heart of academic representation.

8. ... Universities regularly undermine the rights of students and the union, and fail to live up to their responsibilities. This can leave students disempowered and with a poor experience.”
The trouble of authentic ‘voice’...

- No surveying of mass opinion exists in a vacuum.
- There is no ‘independent reality’ to mass opinion.
- Were the polls wrong, or were they just influential?
Lippman’s triangle

Popular actions → Social Reality → Popular perceptions
Contested legitimacy

Method and legitimacy is much less regularly up for debate in opinion polling than it is for the NSS.

• “as scientifically useful as Trip Advisor”
• “satisfaction merely equals expectation minus experience”
• “league tables are illegitimate/improper”
• “spike in NSS yea-sayers”
Academic staff and NSS

In a recent survey of UCU members:

• **55%** didn’t believe NSS has had a positive impact on the learning experience

• **60%** didn’t believe that NSS has had a positive impact on the relationship between staff and students

• **70%** didn’t believe that NSS has had a positive impact on the relationship between staff and institutions
What counts as political legitimacy in universities and the higher education sector?

Once upon a time...

- Academic judgement
  - Legitimate university activity

Today...

- Academic judgement
  - Student voice*
  - Managerial concerns
  - Legitimate university activity

*Student voice
Who speaks for students?

Are surveys a place where students can speak for themselves...

... or where the student voice is ‘framed’ to conforming categories? (e.g. ‘timetabling’)
Voice and enhancement

Student Voice

- Questionnaires
- Students' unions
- Student reps at course level

Enhance-able educational activity/environment

- Curriculum Content
- Teaching practice
- Student learning
- Policy, structure and amenities
## Lost in translation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is said...</th>
<th>Institution response...</th>
<th>What might be meant...</th>
<th>Potential enhancement...</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“There weren’t enough contact hours!”</td>
<td>“Students are told at induction that they are expected to undertake extensive independent study.”</td>
<td>“My learning experience was not as immersive as I had hoped. I had little reason to spend much ‘time on task’. I think contact hours are the solution.”</td>
<td>Change assessment patterns to ‘nudge’ students towards greater breadth and quantity of independent study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“There aren’t enough books in the library!”</td>
<td>“We invest extensively in ensuring all core texts are available in the library”</td>
<td>“When unable to obtain a library book, I was not aware of other potential sources of information”</td>
<td>Make more clear to students the range of learning resources available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Marking was so unfair and varied so much from lecturer to lecturer!”</td>
<td>“Our standards are assured by external examiners and QAA.”</td>
<td>“I was unaware of the differing assessment criteria for varying assessments”</td>
<td>Publish assessment criteria in accessible language, and relate all feedback directly to these criteria.</td>
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Politics vs Science

Is educational enhancement a fundamentally political matter? Or is it a scientific one?

Most criticisms of surveys assume that it is a scientific project.

In so far as a scientific statement speaks about reality, it must be falsifiable; and in so far as it is not falsifiable, it does not speak about reality.

(Karl Popper)
Surveys: political instruments

Perhaps the sooner we’re ready to abandon hopes of scientific precision, the better use we can make of survey instruments (especially the NSS) and the more honest we can be in conversations about enhancement?

THIRD YEAR ECONOMICS STUDENT?
Have you completed the NSS?
Impact of last year’s NSS:
A review of the economics curriculum at Manchester, with student consultation; more staff members hired; more extracurricular events such as Lunch with the Economist.

But there is still room for improvement. The Post-Crash Economics Society asks you to stop and think:

- No new modules covering alternative perspectives, despite student calls in last year’s NSS.
- Two divided streams of economics students next year, despite student consultation not in favour.
- Still no BAEcon dissertation.

The NSS is your chance to have your say: make a difference!

PCES www.post-crash economics.com
Final thoughts

• “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.”

• “Nothing about us, without us, can be for us.”

• NSS can be appropriated in the enhancement process to restate some basic truths about effective education:
  • Collaborative
  • Student centred
  • Creative staff with good morale
  • Constructive support
  • Safe and secure environment