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# The National Student Survey: pain or gain?

Tracey Stanley  
Email: [tss502@googlemail.com](mailto:tss502@googlemail.com)

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The National Student Survey (NSS) is an initiative of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) that is aimed at providing students with an opportunity to make their views on their higher education experience count at a national level. The survey is targeted at final-year undergraduates in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and participating higher education institutions in Scotland. The NSS is now in its fourth year, with over 200,000 students having completed the survey, and access to the data is available through the Unistats website.<sup>1</sup>

The NSS asks students to rate services at their university across the following areas:

- Overall satisfaction with the quality of the course
- The teaching on my course
- Assessment and feedback
- Academic support
- Organisation and management
- Learning resources
- Personal development
- Practice placements.

There is one question about library services in the survey; this appears in the 'Learning resources' section, and is phrased as follows:

'The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.'

In May 2008, the SCONUL working groups on performance improvement and quality assurance decided to jointly seek feedback from members on the value and impact of the survey in their institutions via the [lis-sconul](mailto:lis-sconul) mailing list.<sup>2</sup> We were particularly interested in the following issues:

- What has been the impact on the library service of the NSS in institutions?
- How does the NSS fit into the overall assessment and performance framework within

institutions, and within the library service in particular?

- Do libraries actively compare their NSS results with results from their own library surveys and, if so, can any conclusions be drawn from this?
- Do librarians have any views on the wording of the library question, in terms of validity or relevance?
- Should SCONUL take a formal position on the NSS, or seek to influence the wording of the library question?

A total of 33 institutions responded to the request for feedback.

## IMPACT

Of the institutions who responded to this question 22 indicated that the NSS has had a positive impact on the library in their institution.

There is evidence from the responses that the NSS is taken very seriously by many institutions, with close involvement at the highest levels in reviewing the results and leading on the formulation of action plans. Institution-wide action plans appear to be common, with these often being monitored and reviewed at the senior executive level. The library is often seen as a critical player in this activity. For example:

*'It prompted a whole series of investigations based on the quality of the student experience. Past and present students were surveyed to analyse their perceptions of being a student at this institution, what they liked, what could be improved (the library was high on the list!) and prompted a number of discussions and action plans to ensure that the university retains its high ranking.'*

Where the library has scored well in the NSS, this has generally been acknowledged in the wider institution, leading to improvements in the internal profile and reputation of the library:

*'We have been able to use the scores in our service development plan, presentations to users etc to demonstrate good performance, particularly in relation to other areas and thus to justify funding levels internally.'*

Some institutions responded that the library scores were seen as 'pulling up' the overall scores within the institution, as the library had tended to perform relatively better than other aspects such as teaching and assessment. This has been seen as

being beneficial to the institution as a whole, and the library has been commended as a result:

*'The university does review the outcomes very carefully but from a library perspective they have been happy to note that the library scores very well and used this in some publicity.'*

*'The results of the NSS for the library were good; we publicised the results internally to staff (good for morale); the institution has used the results more generally in marketing.'*

Where the library has scored poorly, librarians seem to have been able to turn this to their advantage. Libraries have been able to use poor scores to make successful bids for additional resources and facilities:

*'Significant financial investment: virtually all one-off project budget bids have been successful to the tune of over £500k in 2 years.'*

*'The NSS results led to a significant increase in core resources budget.'*

Libraries have also used the results to drive forward improvements in communication and liaison with academic departments:

*'We have used it to target areas and priorities for development and in particular to focus the activities of subject librarians and liaison staff. It is a helpful tool to work on enhancement at subject level and has helped to maintain our input into academic quality assurance within the university after the disappearance of external academic/subject review. It also ensures that library enhancement is included in subject enhancement plans – an internal study of good practice from the NSS showed that successful subjects tended to have strong links with subject librarians.'*

Of the institutions who reported no significant impact from the NSS, a number of reasons were given for this:

*'Within the university the focus of the results tends to be on the faculties and how they are affected rather than on support areas.'*

*'The library has come out reasonably well each year so we aren't considered a "problem".'*

*'[It is] not very easy to assess the effect on the library itself as distinct from the impact of the NSS on the whole university.'*

## RELATIONSHIP WITH OVERALL ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

Of the institutions that responded 27 indicated that the NSS does now form part of the overall assessment and performance framework of the institution and/or the library.

Within the library, the NSS is used as part of annual satisfaction monitoring at the course and discipline level, as part of annual quality reviews and strategic planning and as a key performance indicator. Some libraries have also undertaken benchmarking to rank their scores against those of other institutions in order to produce their own internal league tables. Where libraries reported having developed an assessment framework, the NSS was seen as a key element of this, alongside user surveys, focus groups, module questionnaires, suggestions schemes and other service-review measures. In most cases, libraries have been able to maintain their own, more detailed, user surveys alongside the NSS, although a few institutions did report difficulties with this:

*'The biggest impact in real terms has been the dominance of the NSS, and our internal version of it for first and second year [students], which now mean that we have had to virtually abandon any surveys of our own. [There is] no chance of LibQual etc so we now use Focus Groups etc.'*

At the institutional level, the NSS is generally being used as one of several means to assess overall performance, alongside other tools such as Quality Assurance Agency audits, internal student satisfaction surveys and university-level KPIs (Key Performance Indicators).

## COMPARISON WITH OTHER SURVEY RESULTS

Of the institutions that responded 14 had actively compared their NSS results with the results from other library or institutional surveys. Many found that the results were broadly similar, although internal surveys provide the opportunity to ask more detailed and wide-ranging questions, and so give more detail and insight into concerns. The general nature of the NSS question tends not to permit much in the way of granularity of analysis:

*'The question can only serve as a verification of satisfaction arising from other customer feedback mechanisms as it is so generic.'*

*'I have looked at some of the survey results and they appear to reflect the outcomes locally but it is difficult to draw firm comparisons because of differing*

scoring methods and different levels of disaggregation.'

Internal surveys also tend to cover the entire user population, not just final-year undergraduates. One library noted an interesting finding in relation to this:

*'The results more or less back up our findings but [we] note that NSS is final year students only – this does impact on responses as generally surveys show reducing satisfaction as time at University goes on!'*

A number of other libraries noted that their NSS scores tended to be lower than the scores received from other feedback mechanisms:

*'We conduct our own detailed surveys of library IT and media services, with questions relating to all aspects of our services. This provides us with a much more meaningful response that helps us to identify the areas of our services that we need to change and improve. The scores are always more positive.'*

*'NSS scores are generally lower than our surveys on services quality.'*

*'We have compared the NSS results with those of the other institutional surveys (which are carried out for first and second year students) and our own library survey in 2007. The issues reported in the open responses are very similar, but the rating scores from NSS are consistently lower than some of our other surveys which use satisfaction scales. I think this results from the poor form of the NSS question, which invites people to think of adequacy rather than degrees of quality.'*

*'We haven't done surveys of user satisfaction for a year or so, but the latest available NSS results, and the university's own mock [surveys] more recently, are markedly worse than previous surveys. It could be that the lowish response rates to the NSS indicate that respondents only respond if they have a complaint and that satisfied students are not motivated to report satisfaction. But earlier surveys were not well responded to either, and library etc came out reasonably well.'*

#### **VIEWS ON THE LIBRARY QUESTION**

Views on the question used in the NSS were quite mixed, with no clear consensus emerging from the institutions that responded.

Libraries flagged the following concerns about the question:

- It does not focus on the electronic aspects of the library service, which play an increasing part in overall service provision.
- The phrase 'good enough for my needs' appears to encourage a negative response.
- The question does not allow respondents to focus their response on satisfaction with either stock or services.

The question is linked with others also • included under 'Learning resources' – most significantly, a question about access to specialised IT resources – which may skew the overall result for the 'Learning resources' section as specialised facilities may not, by their nature, be widely available to all.

- It does not focus on the level of support for learning provided by the library service.

*'It seems to me that the wording of the library question plays into strong student feelings about what they're worth and what they're entitled to as paying customers – it's aspirational, requires no discrimination of what is needed from what is wanted, and in particular stumbles over multiple competitive access to printed content and an array of academic approaches to required reading. The IT question is more focused on need – and in general (beyond specialist IT kit), wireless networking and desktop PC supply are well established on campuses. It's what's on them however that's critical.'*

The overall feeling was that the library question is too general, but respondents felt that it would be difficult to come up with a more specific wording that could contain sufficient detail in a single question. There were also concerns that if attempts were made to widen the survey by introducing more questions, this would reduce response rates because students would be put off by a longer questionnaire. The importance of being able to map trends across a number of years was also flagged.

Respondents suggested that SCONUL might be able to usefully provide input to the NSS in the following ways:

- in influencing the positioning of the library question, so that it is not bundled with questions on access to specialised equipment and facilities
- proposing an improved wording which would separate out views on resources and services (it was suggested that the following

rewording might be appropriate: 'The library print and electronic resources supported my studies' and 'The library services supported my studies')

- proposing a set of supplementary questions which could be sent to a smaller sample of institutions.

However, other respondents expressed concerns about potential SCONUL input to the NSS, flagging concerns about recent media controversy about the survey<sup>3</sup> and the potential difficulty in coming up with anything that would provide more than a fairly crude measure of satisfaction.

Overall, the responses appear to indicate that most respondents see the NSS as generally useful in providing an impetus for change within institutions. However, as a tool for gathering evidence for improvement, it still has to prove itself completely as a stable and reliable measure. The results need to be supplemented by more detailed survey tools such as the SCONUL survey or LibQUAL+ or other valid and reliable survey instruments in order to obtain a complex and detailed picture of satisfaction and an agenda for improvement. The SCONUL working groups would like to thank those who responded to the survey. The SCONUL position on the NSS is under active consideration by the working group on performance improvement and the working group on quality assurance. If members have further views please could these be sent to the chair of either working group.<sup>4</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- 1 Unistats website, available at <http://www.unistats.com> [accessed 26 September 2008]
- 2 S. Town, 'National Student Survey', lis-sconul mailing list, available at <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A2=ind0805&L=lis-sconul&T=0&F=&S=&X=425A5F5454646CBE47&Y=tss502%40york.ac.uk&P=2838> [accessed 26 September 2008]
- 3 'Student survey is bland and worthless, claims academic', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2008, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/jun/12/highereducation.uk2> [accessed 26 September 2008]
- 4 SCONUL working group on quality assurance, available at [http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/quality\\_assurance/](http://www.sconul.ac.uk/groups/quality_assurance/) [accessed 7 October 2008]; SCONUL working group

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