NSS Consultation on Proposed Changes to Methodology – Response

Survey question 1

The first issue in this feedback gathering exercise relates to changes in the number of theme measures. We propose to change the number of groupings from 7 to 6 (see paragraphs 8-22 in background document).

Do you agree with our proposed approach? Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed changes.

- Yes, fully
- Yes, partially
- <u>No</u>

Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed changes.

Response 1

We disagree with the proposed approach for the following reasons:

It's our contention that the separation of 'Academic Support' and 'Organisation and Management' is useful for users of the data to interpret differences in student experience. This includes students who may use NSS results or Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics to compare different aspects of provider performance to make decisions about courses or providers they wish to apply to, or Higher Education evaluation professionals tracking performance at their institution over time. We believe that for these users, given that these themes are easy to understand and differentiate between for both lay persons and data professionals alike, separate themes would be more useful in assessing a provider's relative performance than a broader, combined theme and is a more transparent representation of the underlying questions. We are also concerned that for prospective students, full comprehension of the contents of the combined theme would require the knowledge and time to interrogate the underlying questions of the theme, which may act as a barrier to understanding. This is a particular concern for those without additional support from parents or schools/ colleges and may disproportionately impact those with less familiarity with Higher Education.

As well as this, we note that there is reference made in the proposal to future consultation work around TEF indicators and how the NSS themes will contribute to these. While we welcome this, there remains a concern that the proposed change would potentially bring the questions currently within the 'Organisation and Management' theme

into the TEF under the combined indicators. As the primary focus of the TEF is about teaching quality enhancement, we are concerned that introducing questions from the 'Organisation and Management' theme, which has a greater focus on course organisation and communication, would obscure the clarity of these very different experience measures.

We also note that the proposal document does not propose a new name for this combined theme. Any new theme name would need to accurately describe the broad range of topics being discussed, and not just be subsumed into the 'Academic Support' theme for example, as this would obscure the overall understanding of the theme.

The separation of these themes is also intuitive given the different areas of provision covered by their questions. We believe that 'Academic Support' and 'Organisation and Management' are not thematically similar enough to be combined, and that putting these themes together may obscure an accurate portrayal of a provider's performance (e.g. where a lower score in one is masked by a higher score in the other). Furthermore, we observe that the services falling under these themes within providers are covered by different (though often overlapping) parts of the institution. For example, responsibilities for 'Academic support' sit primarily with academic colleagues, whereas the activities under 'Organisation and Management' are primarily conducted by professional and operational staff members. Different institutions may also have varied levels of devolution in terms of how course organisation is managed either centrally or within departments and faculties, meaning that where a combined theme may make sense for some institutions, it makes much less sense for others. The current separation of these themes allows providers to clearly identify areas of best practice and room for improvement within these distinct parts of the institution; combining the two themes could hinder this process.

The NSS is used to understand student satisfaction in the context of the sector and the ability to compare several years of consistent data allows us to meaningfully interpret the survey findings and understand the impact of institutional changes on student satisfaction which cannot be done with an inconsistent time series. We therefore believe there should be a presumption against changing the survey unless the benefit is compelling, or for collating changes into more substantial but less frequent interventions. For the reasons given above, we don't believe the benefit of the proposal to be compelling enough to warrant the change.

Survey question 2

Paragraphs 23-26 in the background document outline that our approach to benchmarking will not change following the changes in the theme measures.

Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed approach.

Response 2

N/A

Survey question 3

8. We are not going to consider making changes to the minimum response threshold for the NSS at this stage (please see paragraphs 27-29 in background document).

Do you have any reasons why you believe we should prioritise this work?

Response 3

We agree that the response threshold should not be changed, and would like to stress the importance of maintaining the threshold at the current level in order to ensure NSS data remains robust given the significance of onward use of the data for students and in the Teaching Excellence Framework.