

National Student Survey

Response to the 2024 feedback exercise



Department for the
Economy

Medr

Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research



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Comhairle Maoiniachaidh na h-Alba

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Enquiries to NSS@officeforstudents.org.uk

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Summary

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) is a UK-wide survey undertaken by final year higher education students to give feedback on their courses. The survey is managed by the Office for Students (OfS) on behalf of the four UK funding and regulatory bodies: the OfS; Scottish Funding Council (SFC); Medr; and Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfENI).
2. This paper will outline matters that have arisen following responses to our recent consultations and feedback exercises on the survey, and our ongoing work.
3. The OfS, Medr, SFC and DfENI began a review of the NSS in 2020. The aim was to ensure the NSS remains fit for purpose and continues to support student information and regulation across the UK. The review is now complete.
4. Following the review, we consulted on:
 - proposals for changes to the NSS arising from the review (2022)¹
 - the general approach to publication of the NSS (2023).²
5. The 2023 NSS was the first survey following the review and incorporated the changes that we had consulted on.
6. Responses to our 2023 consultation indicated some outstanding issues. We ran a feedback exercise on proposals to changing the ‘themes’ used to group questions, the benchmarking variables used, and the publication response thresholds.³
7. Following the feedback exercise, we will – as proposed – continue without making changes to response thresholds or benchmarking factors. In response to feedback received, we will **not** change the number of themes as proposed. **In other words, we have made no changes to the NSS this year.**

Proposal	Decision
To change the themes from the seven used in NSS 2023, to six themes.	No change from NSS 2023 – we retained seven themes
To maintain the existing benchmarking methods and factors	No change (as proposed)
To maintain the existing response thresholds	No change (as proposed)

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-changes-to-the-national-student-survey/.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-results-of-the-national-student-survey/.

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-on-theme-measures-benchmarking-and-response-thresholds-in-the-nss/.

The feedback exercise

What we asked for feedback on and why

8. In April 2024, the OfS published a feedback exercise seeking views on proposals for our approach to publishing the data received from students' responses from the NSS.⁴
9. This feedback exercise included three strands:
 - a. A proposal to change the themes from the seven used in NSS 2023, to six themes.
 - b. We had concluded that the new theme measures will not have an effect on our benchmarking methodology and factors. As such they remained fit-for-purpose and we did not propose changes to these.
 - c. We had considered if lowering response thresholds could significantly increase the data published. We had concluded that it would not and therefore did not intend to make any changes.

Conducting the feedback exercise

10. Respondents were asked to share their views on the proposals by submitting written responses to an online survey containing three questions. The questions are listed in Annex B.
11. Due to pre-general election restrictions, we were unable to hold a roundtable discussion on 28 May 2024 as planned.
12. We received 75 written responses to the feedback exercise. The responses came mainly from higher education providers in the UK.

Strand 1: Changes to theme measures

13. To summarise, we conducted further principal component analysis, and this suggested three themes. However, we felt that this would be too aggregated for users and recommended a set of six themes. Feedback from the sector in this exercise suggested some concerns about the six themes not being a sufficient improvement to warrant change, and so we have reverted to the seven themes from before. The rest of this section explains this more thoroughly.
14. We continued our principal component analysis this year and concluded that the clearest statistical evidence points to splitting the questions into three themes. Without a predetermined number of required factors, the model indicates that three factors are sufficient to capture the themes underlying the 24 questions. The three factors are presented in Table 1 below. This means that the current themes 1 and 2 are grouped together, as are themes 3, 4, 5 and 7,

⁴ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-on-theme-measures-benchmarking-and-response-thresholds-in-the-nss/.

while theme 6 remains on its own. We have previously published the full results and factor coefficients.⁵

Table 1: Potential grouping of the main 24 question into three new theme measures

Teaching on my course	
1. How good are teaching staff at explaining things?	Theme 1
2. How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?	
3. How often is the course intellectually stimulating?	
4. How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?	
Learning opportunities	
5. To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?	Theme 1
6. How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?	
7. To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?	
8. To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	
9. How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?	
Assessment and feedback	
10. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	Theme 2
11. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	
12. How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	
13. How often have you received assessment feedback on time?	
14. How often does feedback help you to improve your work?	
Academic support	
15. How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	Theme 2
16. How well have teaching staff supported your learning?	
Organisation and management	
17. How well organised is your course?	Theme 2
18. How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	
Learning resources	
19. How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	Theme 3
20. How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?	

⁵ See 'Annex B: Principal component analysis for theme measures', available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-on-theme-measures-benchmarking-and-response-thresholds-in-the-nss/.

21. How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?	
Student voice	
22. To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?	Theme 2
23. To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	
24 How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?	

15. We explored, in conjunction with our UK partners, policy reasons beyond the statistical modelling that could affect the way we choose to group the questions. We concluded that increasing the number of theme measures beyond the three identified by our analysis has the benefit of making the data easier to interpret by users. Having only three theme measures was seen as too few, with important themes aggregated together. We believe that having only three themes clusters the questions more than was helpful, and that there were benefits to users in splitting these themes further and gaining more granular insight.
16. We also considered other numbers of groups, but six seemed the best compromise between the recommendations from the analysis and likely use of the data – it split the largest groups into smaller ones, that also mostly matched the previous groupings. These groups were seen as useful to providers, aligned more closely with our previous publications, and pulled out the question themes which feature in the B conditions of registration (quality, standards and student outcomes) for providers in England.⁶
17. On balance we believed this approach was statistically sound, being based on the three main analysis groupings, while also being consistent with approaches to quality and student information and helping users make sense of the data. Our intention was to keep questions 1-14 and 19-24 in their original five groups (i.e. 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 19-21, 22-24).
18. We also proposed that questions 15-16 and 17-18 remain grouped together, as suggested by the analysis. This meant we were not giving too much emphasis on small groups with only two questions, when all the other themes are comprised of three to five questions. We also believed that it made more sense to group these four questions together as they are related to more similar concepts, than questions in the remaining five themes would have been. The six groups are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Grouping proposed in the feedback exercise

Teaching on my course	
1. How good are teaching staff at explaining things?	Theme 1
2. How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?	
3. How often is the course intellectually stimulating?	
4. How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?	

⁶ For conditions of registration, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/registering-with-the-ofs/registration-with-the-ofs-a-guide/conditions-of-registration/.

Learning opportunities	
5. To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?	Theme 2
6. How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?	
7. To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?	
8. To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	
9. How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?	
Assessment and feedback	
10. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	Theme 3
11. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	
12. How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	
13. How often have you received assessment feedback on time?	
14. How often does feedback help you to improve your work?	
Academic support	
15. How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	Theme 4
16. How well have teaching staff supported your learning?	
Organisation and management	
17. How well organised is your course?	Theme 4
18. How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	
Learning resources	
19. How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	Theme 5
20. How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?	
21. How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?	
Student voice	
22. To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?	Theme 6
23. To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	
24. How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?	

19. However, the feedback we received on this proposal was very mixed. While many responses agreed fully or partially with our proposal, a significant minority (around 31 per cent) disagreed. Respondents who disagreed with the changes, and sometimes those who agreed, expressed detailed concerns about the changes.
20. The main concern, expressed by most of the respondents who disagreed with the proposal, was the burden associated with the required changes and the inability of providers to implement the change quickly enough. The change was described as needing substantial within-provider communications, changes in internal analysis, data visualisations and reporting of NSS results internally and externally.
21. Another common response was that the proposed change would group questions 15, 16, 17 and 18 into a single theme which respondents did not think were strongly conceptually related. The questions from each of the groups were said to relate to very different elements of the student experience, have very different approaches, and are currently the responsibility of very different senior role holders and teams. It was stated that this is all reflected in the variation in scores seen at both provider and sector level and comments received from students.
22. Others were concerned about the interpretation of results if the themes were to be merged. Less emphasis would be made on the individual themes for each provider which could hide good or bad performance and dilute useful detail. Some suggested that providers would need to scrutinise individual question results, as the value of grouping will be limited, which is contradicting the purpose of having theme scores. Furthermore, prospective students could be unaware of the contents of the combined theme which would be a barrier to understanding.
23. Other respondents wondered whether the question themes should be presented to respondents in the same way that they are grouped for reporting, or not. Some respondents were worried about the name of the new theme, and wanted to be sure that the name would not be misleading, i.e. would not follow either one of the old themes.
24. Many questioned how the merging of the themes would affect the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and if this would have brought the 'Organisation and management' questions into the TEF.⁷ Some pointed out this would affect league table methodologies too.
25. While these concerns came from a minority of respondents, they were strongly articulated and suggested that for at least some providers the change would have significant negative repercussions.
26. While the principal component analysis did support the joining of the two themes, it does not preclude their separation. Similarly, although it is better to have groups of more than two questions, particularly given the size of some of the other groups, we also need to consider the policy rationale not just the statistical one. The policy rationale for combining the two categories was to assist with provider and student interpretation of the results.
27. The responses suggest that the benefit of combining these two question categories may not have the desired impact. Therefore we will change our approach and publish the seven theme measures as they appear to the students responding to the survey. This approach is still consistent with our approach to quality and the TEF, and the responses suggest this will be

⁷ Any decisions on the TEF would have been taken following a separate TEF consultation.

better for user interpretation and onward use of the data for enhancement, public accountability and student information.

Based on the feedback from respondents, and with the agreement of the other UK higher education funders and regulators, **we are recommending not to adopt the six themes but instead to adopt seven group themes. This reflects the current survey question groupings** (see Annex A).

Strand 2: Benchmarking

28. We use benchmarking to make meaningful comparisons between higher education providers, different student groups and other groups of interest. We do this to take account of the mix of courses and students at a provider, and to indicate how well that provider has performed compared with performance for similar types of students on similar types of courses in the higher education sector.
29. We make these comparisons for each of the survey's theme measures. The new theme measures mean, therefore, that we need to produce new benchmarks. We do not, however, think that we need to change our benchmarking methodology for the 2024 NSS publication.
30. After a review of benchmarking factors using the new questionnaire and themes, the core guiding principles remain the same. In this review we considered the results of statistical modelling, as well as our policy objectives for benchmarking.
31. As a result, before the exercise we concluded that our underlying factors for the NSS benchmark remain fit-for-purpose and the change of theme measures would not affect the benchmarking process.
32. Most respondents to our feedback exercise raised no issues with our proposed approach and welcomed the continuity and consistency of retaining the current methodology. A small number of respondents would like the benchmarking methodology to be more transparent and for the OfS to consider providing training to providers on the benchmarking approach. Three responses asked for greater granularity in the level of the benchmarks (CAH and module level). However, benchmarking at a very granular level creates a risk that results are benchmarked only against a provider's own results rather than the sector. The current granularity is currently the lowest level which provides robust information and is significantly more than was provided pre-2023. As such, we are not proposing to change the level at which we provide benchmarking.

We recommend that our underlying factors for the NSS benchmark remain fit for-purpose and therefore we propose to retain the current approach to benchmarking.

Strand 3: Minimum response thresholds

33. We set publication thresholds to address possible response bias and to protect the anonymity of respondents. Our policy intent is to maximise the availability of published data. Responses to the previous consultation had found that providers with larger cohorts would welcome lower response rate thresholds (lower than the current 50 per cent). Smaller providers often comment that the respondent threshold of ten meant smaller cohorts were often not published. However, some felt these publication thresholds were already too low.
34. We previously said we may consider making changes in this area. See paragraphs 51-70 in our 2023 consultation response for previous discussions on this strand.⁸
35. Within the feedback exercise, we had proposed not to make any changes. Our most recent analysis suggests that the current thresholds provide the best balance between availability of published data and data quality.
36. Most respondents were supportive of the continuation of our approach. Ten respondents would welcome the OfS keeping publication thresholds under review.
37. A small number of respondents were not supportive of our approach. One respondent detailed the high costs incurred by the provider of trying to get responses over the 50 per cent threshold and that for some courses, that may have over 1,000 responses, they would not have publishable data. Another indicated that, while they were supportive of our proposed approach, greater transparency about aggregation on Discover Uni would be welcome. One respondent commented that the current approach meant their smaller courses, which were more likely to be specialised courses, often had little publishable data. While we recognise that the minimum level of respondents (ten) means that smaller cohorts are less likely to have publishable data, the benefits on the validity of the data by protecting student anonymity outweighs this. It should also be noted that, often, the results from the smaller cohort contribute to the results at higher levels of aggregation (subject level, provider level, etc.)
38. We have considered whether lower response rate thresholds would significantly increase the data published. In 2023, there were 356 providers with ten or more responses to NSS. Of those providers, 353 hit the 50 per cent response rate target for at least some courses, with 11,605 courses having publishable data. By lowering the response rate to 45 per cent, based on the 2023 results we would include only 179 more courses. However, there is a risk that by lowering the response rate threshold (50 per cent), it may detrimentally impact response rates more broadly and therefore the quality of data. The majority of providers do currently reach the 50 per cent threshold. Our most recent analysis suggests that the current thresholds provide the best balance between availability of published data and data quality.
39. We consider the 50 per cent response threshold to be easily understood by users and a reasonable quality threshold, and these factors are more important than the likely benefits of changing the threshold. In line with the recommendations from phase one of the 2020 NSS review, we will continue to keep response rate thresholds under review.

⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-the-nss-analysis-of-responses-and-decisions/.

We will retain our current response thresholds for publication of ten respondents and 50 per cent response rate.

Annex A: Existing grouping of themes (to be maintained)

Teaching on my course	
1. How good are teaching staff at explaining things?	Theme 1
2. How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?	
3. How often is the course intellectually stimulating?	
4. How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?	
Learning opportunities	
5. To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?	Theme 2
6. How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?	
7. To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?	
8. To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	
9. How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?	
Assessment and feedback	
10. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	Theme 3
11. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	
12. How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	
13. How often have you received assessment feedback on time?	
14. How often does feedback help you to improve your work?	
Academic support	
15. How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	Theme 4
16. How well have teaching staff supported your learning?	
Organisation and management	
17. How well organised is your course?	Theme 5
18. How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	

Learning resources	
19. How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	Theme 6
20. How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?	
21. How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?	
Student voice	
22. To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?	Theme 7
23. To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	
24. How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?	

Annex B: List of questions in the feedback exercise

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 themes from seven to six (see paragraphs 8-22 in background document⁹). Do you agree with our proposed approach? Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed changes.
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.
3. 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?

⁹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-on-theme-measures-benchmarking-and-response-thresholds-in-the-nss/.



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