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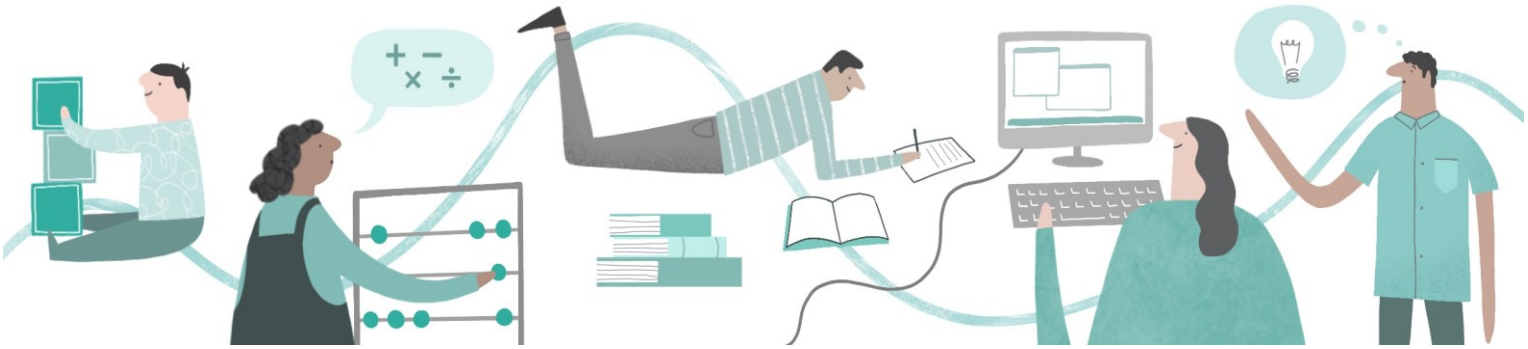

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Report on 2021 cognitive testing of the National Student Survey question revisions

Report to the OfS by Shift Learning, part of Shift Insight

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Report to the Office for Students by Shift Learning, part of Shift Insight
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1. Executive summary and recommendations

1.1 Background to the research

The NSS gathers students' opinions on the quality of their courses, with a view to informing student choice, providing data to providers to help inform improvements to the student experience, and to support public accountability. It is crucial, therefore, that the questions included are well understood by those taking the survey, that the language is clear, and that, when answering, students are considering the areas the questions are intended to measure. Since the first NSS was run in 2005 the questions have undergone cognitive testing at several stages, with findings informing changes to the question set developing over time as a result of this testing.

In 2020 the Office for Students (OfS) conducted a substantial review of the NSS, which had been requested by the universities minister to address concerns about how the survey may create burden and/or impact on standards, while ensuring the NSS remained a useful indicator of student opinion. The OfS has published details about the history of the NSS development and detailed information on the review.

In spring and summer 2021, the OfS undertook extensive stakeholder engagement activities to understand views about the content of the NSS questionnaire and wider methodological issues with the survey. This process yielded a range of new themes and potential new questions. The OfS commissioned Shift Insight to work with on the development and cognitive testing of these themes and questions prior to a wider pilot that will be run concurrently with the main NSS in 2022.

1.2 Method

Shift conducted an initial internal expert review to further refine the questions. Following this, 75 cognitive interviews were conducted with student interviewees. The cognitive interviewing technique involves student respondents reading out the questions and 'thinking aloud' as they consider the question and their answer. This approach helps ensure that survey respondents interpret NSS questions in the way they were intended, reducing the potential for measurement error. This document reports on the findings from these interviews.

1.3 Overarching findings and recommendations

The points below provide an overview of observations and high priority recommendations uncovered during the research. A full set of prioritised and bulleted recommendations can be found in the conclusion.

1.3.1 Overall observations

The use of instructional text: The use of instructional text was tested, to contextualise and clarify some questions, and to encourage consistent use of the 'neither agree nor disagree'

and 'not applicable' responses. Many were familiar with its use in surveys for this purpose, but a large proportion also admitted to not reading these sections. To encourage respondents to read all text, the findings highlighted a need to keep all questions and any instructional text short, and to use the same font for both the question and instructional text so that the latter is not 'demoted' in importance.

New themes reflecting the experiences of individual groups: New and perhaps more controversial question areas were felt to be too particular to individual groups for all students to answer from the same viewpoint. This view applied to question groups: *A sense of belonging*, *Safety* (specifically version 2 question on harassment and sexual misconduct), and *Support services* (for mental health). Students who had not had personal experience of these areas often hesitated in their response, sometimes selecting a neutral or not applicable response and potentially leading to measurement errors.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on areas considered: The COVID-19 lockdowns clearly meant some questions (particularly questions around online learning and mental health) had to be answered in the context of students' experiences during lockdown. However, this is not considered to be problematic for the long-term effectiveness of these questions because students were simply applying the questions to the context most relevant to them, with the questions still accurately measuring intended areas. Most obviously, for questions about physical versus digital forms of learning students tended to focus on digital learning as most learning time in the academic year preceding the interviews would have been online due to the pandemic.

Considering a limited number of topics depending on experience: In some question groups students tended to answer the questions thinking about topics specific to their own experiences. This was the case for question groups: *Learning resources* (where students tended to leap straight to their main type of delivery or course) and *Safety* (where they tended to think about either physical or digital learning in their answer). If the OfS wants to ensure all students consider the same areas in every question, this may be problematic. However, we did find that students spoke about topics that fell within the intended areas. In this respect we feel these questions work well in measuring individual student experiences within the defined context of each question group or question.

Difficulty averaging experiences: As in the last round of testing, some question groups were problematic for students who had difficulty in **averaging their experiences** of individual staff or across modules. This related to question groups: *Teaching on my course* and *Assessment and feedback*.

The overall satisfaction question: An additional objective of the interviews was to explore ways to replace the overall satisfaction question in the current survey. Students found it

difficult to suggest an appropriate question to evaluate their overall experience. Suggestions that OfS may want to explore further include:

- **An open question**: This was the most popular suggestion, as it would recognise how broad student experiences were. Previously this would likely have been too unwieldy to analyse, but AI tools that can code open responses are becoming increasingly sophisticated. The OfS may wish to consider how these may be leveraged in future iterations of the NSS.
- **Likelihood to recommend or study again:** Such a question would explore whether they would recommend the course to others or take it again, if they had the chance. Some students were familiar with this approach.
- **Meeting expectations**: There was a feeling that this was a good measure of how positive and worthwhile an experience had been.
- **Other suggestions:** Preparation for future goals, word association, assessment of quality.

1.3.2 Higher priority recommendations

Higher priority recommendations are focused on questions and question groups where respondents failed to understand the question, struggled to answer, or had significant issues with language used.

1.3.2.1 Question group: assessment and feedback

Respondents failed to see the difference between questions F (Feedback has improved my learning experience) and G (Feedback has enabled me to improve my work), with the latter easier to understand. We recommend keeping Question G only.

Overall, this question group was felt to focus on feedback with insufficient focus on assessment. A statement around suitability and appropriateness of assessments specifically could be considered here.

1.3.2.2 Question group: students' union

The first version of Question L, about the students' union experience, was too long to be effectively absorbed and understood. The second shorter version was preferred, but did mean that students were less likely to consider academic representation by the students' union or other bodies in their answer. This has been an issue in previous testing of this question area.

If measuring the distinct areas is important, we would suggest splitting this question so that these different areas (support, activities, academic representation) can be considered individually.

1.3.2.3 Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 1 and 2)

The first versions of these questions were changed in later interviews because they were not understood to measure providers' approaches to freedom of speech, but to students expressing views about their course content. The second version of these questions was felt to more accurately reflect this.

Nevertheless, the two statements were often felt to be too similar to elicit different answers – Question N was felt to be more clearly understood (N: My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs).

However, overall, answers often depended on students' own personal experiences – a lack of negative experiences around speaking freely led to a neutral response. Some questioned whether this was an area that should be included in the NSS because of a lack of universal experience and because they felt the survey should focus on their course and their learning experiences exclusively.

1.3.2.4 Question group: Sense of belonging

There was widespread confusion over how to answer Question O (O: I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course). Students considered many different areas and could not pinpoint which area the question related to. Comprehension could be increased by specifying intended areas more precisely in the question, e.g. referring specifically to course content, social atmosphere or other areas. The Welsh language wording also needed revisiting here to ensure comprehension.

2. Background

The NSS has been running annually since 2005, asking students in their final year of study about several aspects of their course, with the purpose of ensuring high-quality teaching in all institutions.

It was developed after a review of the HE sector in 2003 and based on the Australian student survey model.

There have been two main iterations of the survey, the first one running from 2005 to 2016 and the second from 2017 onwards, which is the current form, with 27 core questions and a bank of optional responses.

The second version of the survey was developed after a number of rounds of cognitive testing in 2015 and 2016, with findings informing changes to the question set.

In 2020 the Office for Students conducted a substantial review of the NSS, requested by the universities minister, to address concerns about how the survey may create burden and/or impact on standards, while ensuring the NSS remained a useful indicator of student opinion.

The OfS has published more detail about the history of the NSS development and detailed information on the review.

Extensive stakeholder engagement activities, conducted in spring and summer of 2021, generated a range of new themes and questions for testing, making the cognitive testing of these new questions arguably even more crucial than in previous years. New themes include:

- Hearing and contributing different views
- A sense of belonging
- Safety
- Support services

The OfS commissioned Shift Insight to work on the development and cognitive testing of these themes and questions before a wider pilot ran concurrently with the main NSS in 2022.

Alongside testing these questions within these new themes, some current NSS questions were also cognitively tested with revisions made based on previous review findings.

A full list of questions that were tested can be found in appendix 1.20 'Question set'.

This research provides cognitive testing on the NSS questions in relation to students studying level 5 or 6, BA or BSC higher education courses. The research aims to:

- Help ensure that survey respondents interpret the questions in the NSS in the way in which they were intended, reducing the potential for measurement error.
- Inform recommendations to the UK regulatory and funding bodies regarding the new questions that are in development.

3. Methodology

1.4 Research stages

The research included the following stages:

- **OfS workshops:** A series of workshops, conducted by OfS, with HE stakeholders in spring/summer 2021 to inform the development of the new questions.
- **Shift internal workshops:** Workshops carried out by Shift to devise wording for the new questions for the NSS, based on themes that emerged in the OfS internal workshops.
- **Cognitive interviews:** 75 interviews, lasting approximately 1 hour each, conducted over the phone or Microsoft Teams. The cognitive interviewing technique involves student respondents reading out the questions and 'thinking aloud' as they consider the question and their answer to the question. This approach helps ensure that survey respondents interpret NSS questions in the way they were intended, reducing the potential for measurement error.

1.5 NSS question list

This research focused on a subset of the NSS questions that were under review, as opposed to testing the whole survey.

Midway through interviews, a review of emerging findings fed into iterative changes to some questions in the set. This also led to a change in wording of the response scale, with the second half of interviews testing the use of 'this does not apply to me' in place of the original 'N/A Not applicable' code.

Full lists of the question sets tested within the first and second batch of interviews are given in appendix 1.20 'Question set'. Question list A was used for interviews 1-40 and question list B was tested within interviews 41-75.

1.6 Approach to analysis

Interviews were analysed using the following steps:

- Interviewer workshop:
  - To develop key themes in relation to each question and the survey overall
  - To inform development of a code-frame
- Coding of anonymised transcripts in Atlas.ti by:
  - Question
  - Question group
  - Top-line themes
- Secondary coding by question to specifically identify the nature of:
  - Difficulties in answering the questions
  - Difficulties with specific language used in the questions

To support and evidence future decision-making, OfS wanted to understand the frequency with which areas of difficulty or ambiguity arose during the interviews. Code frequencies relating to any difficulties are reported in brackets in the report commentary to allow the 'tracking back' of any future decisions to specific examples in the interviews.

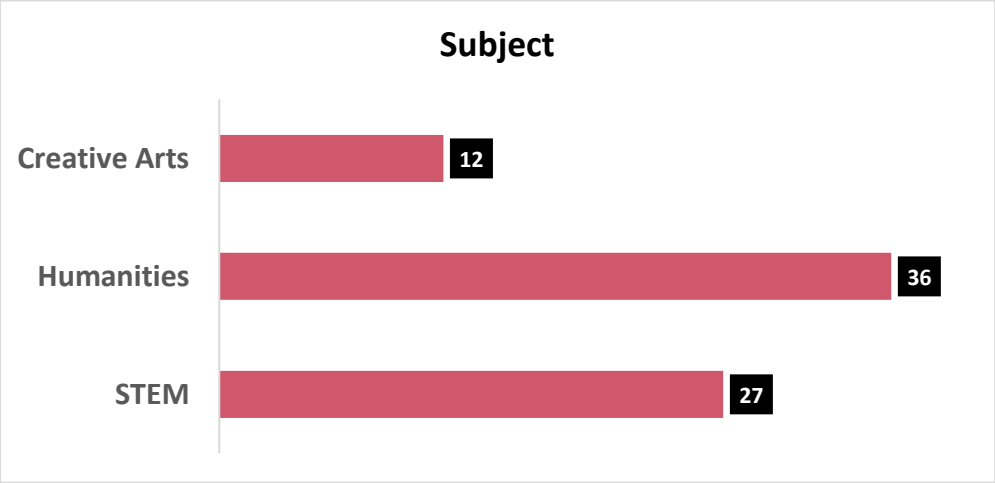
4. Respondent profiles

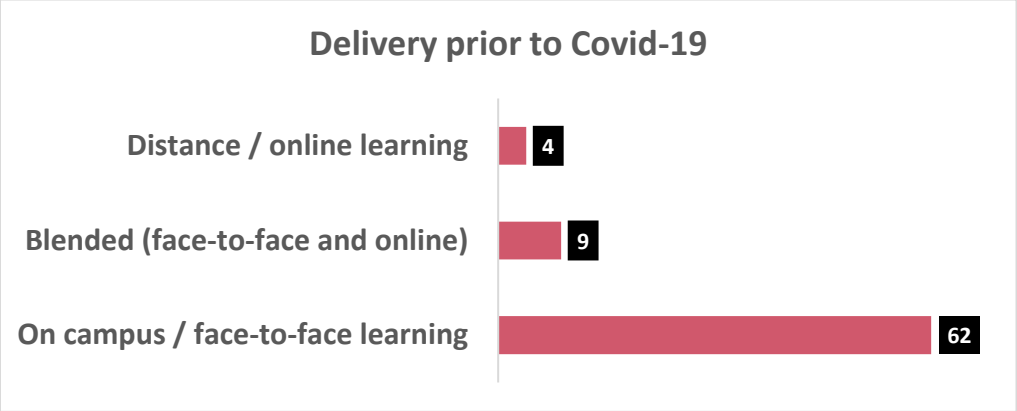
We completed 75 cognitive interviews between August and September 2021.

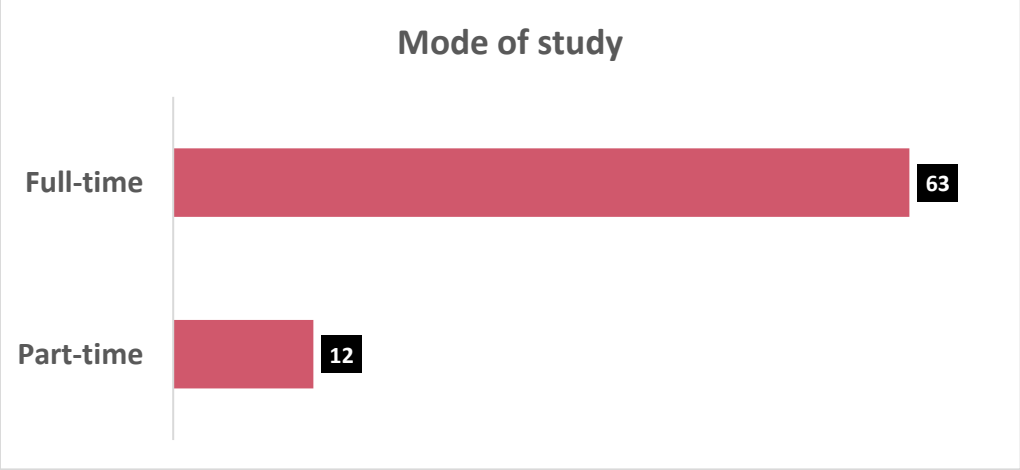
70 of these were in English, and 5 in Welsh. Respondents were recruited from Shift Learning's research panel and a sampling strategy was designed to ensure representation from student groups across the audience.

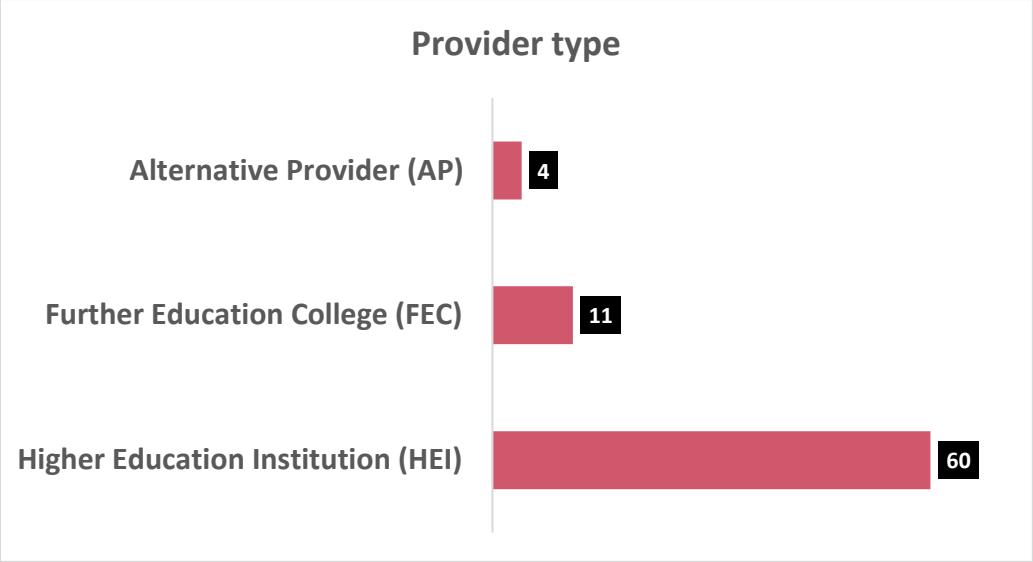
Below is a breakdown of respondents by their subject, delivery format, mode of study, provider type and location within the 4 UK nations. You can find a further breakdown of respondents in appendix 1.19 'Respondent profiles continued' (including provider size, location and respondent profiles).

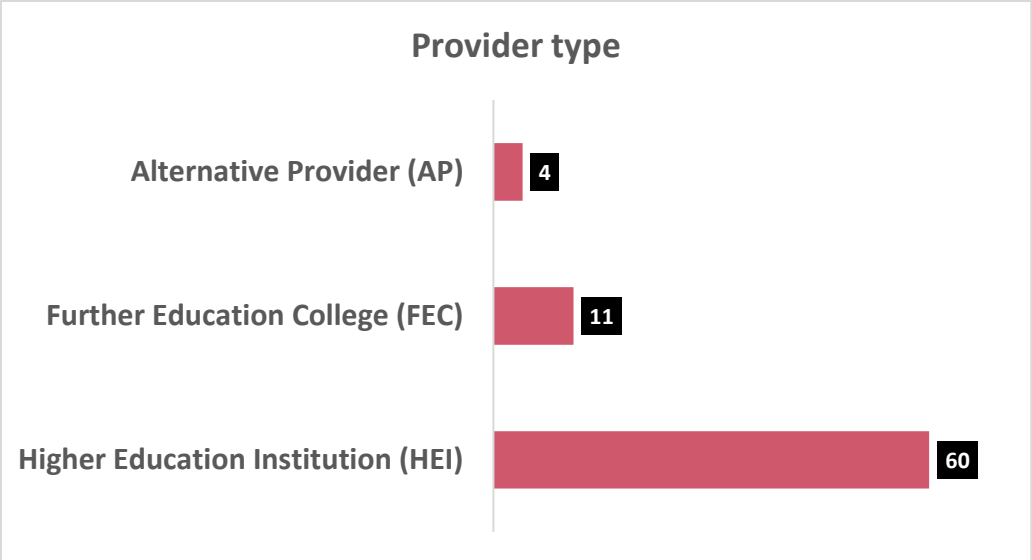
Quotes are used throughout to illustrate the findings. These are linked to abbreviated attributions, referenced with an identification number in brackets.








Provider type
Alternative Provider (AP)
4
Further Education College (FEC)
11
Higher Education Institution (HEI)
60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Further Education College (FEC)
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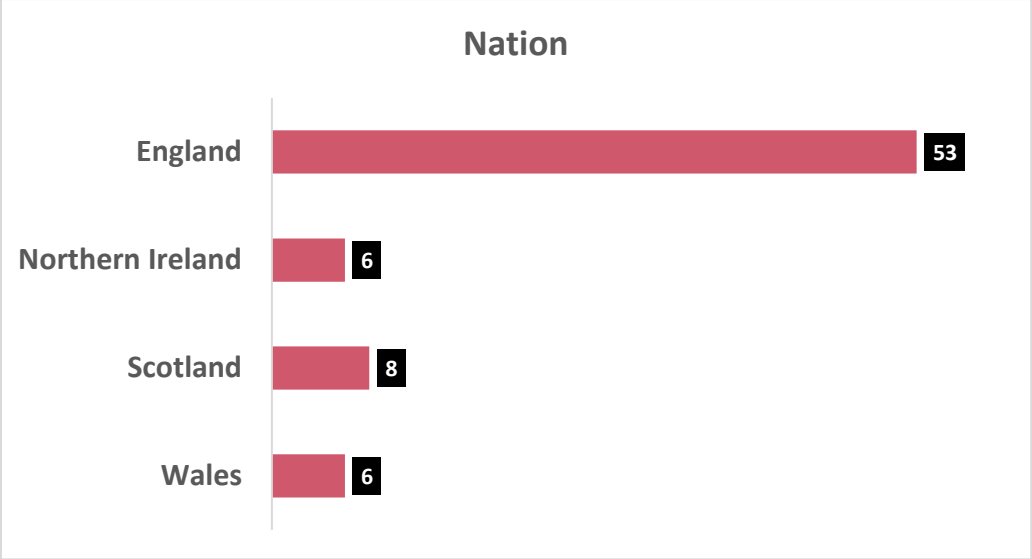

5. Key findings

1.7 Question group: The teaching on my course

- Question A: Staff are good at explaining things.
- Question B: Staff have made the subject interesting.
- Question C: The course is intellectually stimulating.
- Question D: My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

1.7.1 Question A: Staff are good at explaining things.

1.7.1.1 Previous testing

- 2015 cognitive interviews tested the statement in a negative format, but this was found to be ineffective and no changes were made.
- Cognitive testing in both 2015 and 2016 found that the statement was simple to comprehend and answering was a simple process. In 2015, probing around the term 'staff' showed students thought of teaching staff when answering the question, as intended.
- When tested in 2020, there were some challenges with averaging their teaching and learning experience and some overlap with the Assessment and feedback and Academic support sections. Distance learners sometimes only mentioned the 'chat format' interaction, limiting the areas of teaching and learning they considered.

1.7.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

The majority of respondents considered how well tutors were able to deliver the course, or how well they explained the course organisation and timetabling. Most assessed this by thinking about how well they understood the course content and expectations for

assessments based on what staff had said. Others interpreted this question as referring to how well general university staff explained things to them throughout their university experience, not limited to the classroom.

Most interpreted the word 'things' as referring to course content, with some also considering wider university information.

"Off the bat, I feel like 'staff' probably refers to lectures and 'things' probably refers to the content of the lecture, so each of the modules and things. I think it's asking if they're clear and good at explaining what's going on in the lecture."

19-21, Female, Second or other non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, W Midlands (29)

1.7.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

There were a small number (12) who misinterpreted the word 'staff'[1]. This stemmed from not reading the section heading in full and realising that their response should be narrowed down to teaching staff.

Others (14) struggled to average out their experience across different modules when answering[2]. This was a concern for respondents who had vastly different experiences depending on which module or tutor they were considering.

Others (12) struggled to average out their experience when interpreting the word 'things'[3], as they had found some aspects of staff communication to be really well explained, while others felt more lacking. This confusion often went hand in hand with respondents not understanding that the question referred to teaching staff only.

A small number (6) felt this question was slightly undefined or vague[4], either because they saw it as being too open-ended or because they felt that the terms used in the question could be more specific. This fed into confusion over the term 'explaining things'[5], which confused a small number of respondents (4) due to its breadth.

"[Were there any difficulties with answering that question in deciding what you would put down for that?] Yes, I think it was because of the vagueness of the question, I read it again as 'lecturers are good at explaining the lectures' or 'the content' and in that I would say mostly agree because I think they are good on the whole."

19-21, Female, Second or other non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, W Midlands (29)

[1] Code: A_Staff are good at explaining things_Difficulties_Definition_staff (12)
[2] Code: A_Staff are good at explaining things_Difficulties_Challenge averaging experience (14)
[3] Code: A_Staff are good at explaining things_Difficulties_Definition_staff (12)
[4] Code: A_Staff are good at explaining things_Difficulties_vague (6)
[5] Code: A_Staff are good at explaining things_Difficulties_explaining (4)

1.7.1.4 Differences by respondent group

There did not appear to be strong differences across respondent groups.

1.7.1.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

- Consider clarifying the terms used within the question to avoid confusion.
- 'Things' could be updated to 'the course content'.
- 'Staff could be updated to 'teaching staff' or 'tutors'.

1.7.2 Question B: Staff have made the subject interesting.

1.7.2.1 Previous testing

No changes were suggested or tested in 2015 or 2016.

Both previous pieces of research found the statement was easy to understand by students, and that it worked well for its purpose. 2015 research found that:

- Students considered teaching staff as 'staff'.
- Some used 'averaging' techniques to pick their response.

Students considered the enthusiasm of staff and their varying teaching techniques.

As well as the enthusiasm and teaching techniques of staff, in 2020 testing, students also sometimes considered course materials when answering this question.

1.7.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Respondents consistently considered their classes, lectures and seminars and assessed how engaging the tutors were when teaching in these settings. Many considered the range of teaching styles staff had used to achieve this, including the use of case studies, practical learning, lecturing and encouraging discussion.

Most also considered how well tutors had transitioned to online learning during the Covid-19 lockdowns, and whether this had affected how interesting they found the content of their course.

When answering this statement, respondents were less likely to consider staff other than their teaching staff and consistently interpreted it as purely related to the course content.

1.7.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

As with the first statement, some (8) found it challenging to average out their experience[6] when answering this question, considering that there was significant variation amongst tutors in terms of how interesting they had made their course content.

[6] Code: B_Staff have made the subject interesting_Difficulties_challenge averaging experience (8)

Others (7) found this statement challenging to answer because they disagreed with the question itself[7], stating that teaching staff did not have control over whether they personally found the course content interesting or not. A handful of respondents (5) expressed a preference for the term 'engaging' rather than 'interesting'[8], to combat this difficulty in interpretation.

A few respondents (6) were confused over what should be included in the term 'staff'[9], and were still unsure whether this should be narrowed down to only teaching staff.

1.7.2.4 Differences by respondent group

There did not appear to be strong differences across respondent groups.

1.7.2.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

Consider changing 'interesting' to 'engaging' to focus more on staff expertise when teaching the subject rather than the personal interest of the respondent.

1.7.3 Question C: The course is intellectually stimulating.

1.7.3.1 Previous testing

No changes were suggested or tested in 2015 or 2016.

2015 research found the statement was interpreted differently by students:

- Some answered thinking about how challenging they found their course.
- Others answered based on how interesting it was.
- Those on more practical courses tended to feel the statement was not relevant to them.

2016 research found that a few students lacked understanding on 'intellectually stimulating', but that otherwise the question worked well.

2020 testing found that although some struggled with what to consider in relation to 'intellectually stimulating' (and the areas varied between students), most had a clear personal idea of the elements to include in coming to a decision. However, the wide range of considerations may mean that this question is difficult to measure for this audience.

1.7.3.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Students were consistently at ease with this question, finding its meaning fairly clear. Considerations coalesced around two areas.

[7] Code: B_Staff have made the subject interesting_Difficulties answering (7)
[8] Code: B_Staff have made the subject interesting_Difficulties_Interesting_Alternative engaging (5)
[9] Code: B_Staff have made the subject interesting_Difficulties with language_staff (6)

- Firstly, they thought about course content, particularly where this had been thought-provoking, challenged norms and presented a diversity of views.
- Respondents often spoke about more theoretical content when considering this question, and entering into dialogue with staff and students about what they had learned.
- Furthermore, they considered how engaged their teaching staff were with the delivery of course content, taking in how classes had been brought to life and how accessible the language used to do this had been.
- Students cited examples of where staff had pushed or encouraged them to look deeper than the core content of modules.

1.7.3.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

We heard from some respondents (10) that 'intellectually stimulating' was too subjective a phrase, depending largely upon individual interpretation and experience[10].

Difficulty also arose from students making a distinction between self-directed learning and the content of classes. Sometimes (2) they had looked deeper into a subject and found this material stimulating, but this was their own work and decision, or it was because the course or the staff were thought to be lacking[11].

Being a student during the pandemic had affected answers to the question. Some (5) found it hard to judge how to answer because learning was online, and perhaps less engaging than it would have been if it were face-to-face[12].

There were specific language issues raised by one or two respondents:

- The word 'intellectually' was felt to be superfluous, making the statement longer and more confusing than it needed to be (1). It was suggested that this could be a sensitive word for people with learning difficulties[13].
- Similarly, the word 'stimulating' felt out of place (1)[14] and too complex.
- The word 'course' in the question statement was confusing for two students, who noticed this was the first instance of its use in the survey, with previous questions asking them to think about staff specifically. This was confusing and led them to consider if the statement was asking them to think if they should be considering how staff had made the course intellectually stimulating (2)[15].

[10] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Difficulties_intellectually stimulating_Too subjective (10)
[11] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Difficulties answering (2)
[12] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Covid-specific (5)
[13] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Difficulties with language_Intellectually (1)
[14] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Difficulties_Stimulating (1)
[15] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Difficulties with language_Course (2)

- Another respondent raised a wider issue with this question, and others in the survey, being phrased as statements which they found difficult to answer (1)[16].

Finally, we heard from some (5) how averaging out experiences was challenging, especially where these had been different across subjects, topics, modules and classes[17].

1.7.3.4 Differences by respondent group

Several Welsh participants had issues with this question, based on the language used. This required them to refer to the English translation.

"I found this question a little hard in terms of the language, I had to Google what 'ysgogi' meant. I understand what it asks but I think it's a bit vague, a little unclear, as it's a little bit of a vague concept. After hearing the English translation, the question makes more sense, but it's still a little vague."

22-25, Female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, Wales (17)

1.7.3.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

Consider where the statement is placed within the survey to avoid previous questions influencing thinking.

1.7.4 Question D: My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

1.7.4.1 Previous testing

- The 2015 report recommended this statement not be included in 2017 due to some confusion when answering alongside the previous question.
- 2015 research found that the statement was clear and easy to interpret by all students, but there was some overlap in students' understanding of this and the previous statement when answering. However, 2016 research found that this was only a minor issue brought up by a handful of students and the statement was recommended for use in 2017.
- 2020 research found that the meaning of 'challenged' and 'best work' could be subjective. Teaching staff were considered as the 'challenger' as well as the course itself.
- Some students thought they should be challenging themselves. 'Best work' as a concept was ambiguous for some – was this asking about their best work on the course or more widely?

[16] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Difficulties with language_Style (1)
[17] Code: C_The course is intellectually stimulating_Challenge averaging experience (5)

1.7.4.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

This statement was felt to be clear, with students considering their own work and experiences of producing it.

- In this case, 'best work' referred to their most successful assessments – usually written pieces, such as essays and coursework.
- These were considered successful where they had enhanced their skills and applied knowledge from the course and challenged themselves. Progression and feeling like they were getting to grips with content were important here.
- This led to the potential for some overlap with statements relating to assessment and feedback, with this challenge coming through feedback from teaching staff on prior assignments.
- Lectures and seminars were rarely considered, with a focus on written feedback that was more personal. There was also little discussion of the overall difficulty of the course.

1.7.4.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

The language of 'best work' generated some issues (6)[18], with these respondents unclear what it was referring to, with coursework and grades considered. It was not easy to decide where to focus when courses involved both practical and theoretical elements. One interpreted it as referring to their employment, rather than academic work, leading to confusion. These respondents thought the statement could be broken down more.

- The word 'challenged' also led to difficulty and was initially confusing for some (6)[19], who discussed various meanings that could be implied here – from not understanding content to putting in hard work.
- Others discussed how the word would often have a negative connotation, though this was not the case here, which furthered their confusion.
- One of those who disliked the word 'challenged' suggested that it be replaced by a question that focused more on improvement across the course. For them, 'challenged' put the focus on the outcome rather than the process, and implied that students had indeed managed to achieve their 'best work' (1)[20].
- Others (4) simply found the question hard to understand and answer[21], based largely on the subjective nature of their experience and how this related to their expectations.

[18] Code: D_My course has challenged me to achieve my best work_Difficulties with language_Best work (6)
[19] Code: D_My course has challenged me to achieve my best work_Difficulties with language_Challenged (6)
[20] Code: D_My course has challenged me to achieve my best work_Difficulties with language_Achieved (1)
[21] Code: D_My course has challenged me to achieve my best work_Difficulties answering (4)

1.7.4.4 Differences by respondent group

There did not appear to be strong differences across respondent groups.

1.7.4.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

Consider how to capture improvements and progress. Students commented that the language of the statement drew them to think of final pieces of work, which may be difficult to conceptualise for those on placement years or highly vocational courses.

1.7.5 Question group: The teaching on my course

1.7.5.1 Overall findings

These questions were routinely well understood by students. However, where issues arose, they made it harder for students to answer the questions in a way that would gather meaningful data.

- There was some variance in the format that students considered when answering questions initially. In some cases (18), face-to-face was considered[22].
- A smaller number (7) thought of online teaching only – this was a mix of online courses and those whose courses had switched to this mode during the pandemic[23].
- The largest proportion (33) considered both formats[24].

Difficulties answering were often based around the challenge of averaging experiences (3), with different approaches taken across modules and by different teaching staff driving this issue[25].

- There was also confusion due to a lack of understanding as to what 'course' meant in this context – the staff and the content were both considered (3)[26].
- Elsewhere, a small number (2) found the statements biased towards positive answers, which should perhaps be more neutral[27].
- Distance learners (3) reported issues based upon a feeling that questions were formulated with traditional, in-person teaching in mind[28].
- One person (1) did not read the group title, leading to confusion around the context of the question[29].

[22] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Format_F-2-F (18)
[23] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Format_Online (7)
[24] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Format_Both (33)
[25] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Difficulties answering_Challenge averaging experience (3)
[26] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Difficulties answering_Course_Staff vs content (3)
[27] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Difficulties with language_Positive statement (2)
[28] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_difficulties with answering_distance learner (3)
[29] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Difficulties_Not reading group title (1)

1.7.5.2 Overlap in question group

A small number of students (6) identified overlap between questions B and C in this section[30], explained by one Scottish online student:

"I think there's a bit of overlap between if something is interesting and intellectually stimulating, so the difference there is the course is just the materials themselves, the textbooks, the writing, and then B is the staff. If that's the only separation then I don't know why it's used different terms, you know, interesting in one and intellectually stimulating for another, so I think that could be reworded a bit."

26-35, Male, Final year, Part-time distance learner, Large HEI, Scotland (1)

A smaller number (3) raised overlaps between questions A and B[31], based on how they viewed teaching staff and their role in explaining and making the subject interesting. One (1) respondent suggested there was overlap between statements C and D[32], and another (1) between B, C and D[33], based largely around how subjective they found the language used across these questions.

1.7.5.3 Overlap outside question group

No overlaps outside the question group found.

1.7.5.4 Missing areas

Areas considered missing were:

- Staff support (7), relating to personal relationships with the staff and how they had helped them achieve[34].
- A question or piece of instructional text recognising changes in teaching relating to the pandemic was desired by five respondents (5), who were unsure if they should include these areas or not[35].
- Recognition of progression was felt to be missing by three students (3)[36].
- The level of quality was felt to be an important and missing area by a different three respondents (3)[37], with the quality of course content (3) and teaching (3) specified as

[30] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_overlaps_between B and C (6)
[31] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Overlaps_A&B (3)
[32] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Overlap_Between C and D (1)
[33] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Overlaps_B, C and D (1)
[34] Code: QG_The teaching on my course_Missing areas_Staff Support (7)
[35] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Covid (5)
[36] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Progression (3)
[37] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Quality (3)

especially important[38,39], alongside the relevance of content (2)[40] and if teaching met expectations (1)[41].

- Two (2) felt these various missing areas would be best served by an open question[42]. Work placements and work experience (1) were seen to be missing by one student[43].

1.7.5.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

Consider the inclusion of an additional question, or adaptation of an existing question, to allow respondents to comment on the consistency of teaching approaches, to clear up confusion surrounding difficulties averaging experience.

1.8 Question group: Assessment and feedback

- Question E: The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.
- Question F: Feedback has improved my learning experience.
- Question G: Feedback has enabled me to improve my work.

Instructional text was given alongside Questions E and F, with the aim of explaining to students that if they do not use or receive feedback on their course, they should reply with 'N/A Not Applicable'. Interviews explored whether the instructional text was being read and the extent to which this influenced the answers given by students. Note that due to changes in the response scale, where 'N/A Not applicable' was changed to 'This does not apply to me', two versions of this instructional text were trialled.

- Instructional text A: *If you have not used, or rarely use feedback in your work, please select 'N/A Not applicable'.*
- Instructional text B: *If you have not used, or rarely use feedback in your work, please select 'This does not apply to me'.*

1.8.1 Question E: The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.

1.8.1.1 Previous testing

2016 found that the question works well, with no revisions required. No previous wording has been tested or changed.

Testing in 2015, 2016 and 2020 cognitive interviews found this question to be generally well understood by students, though responses varied depending on the assessment type – with

[38] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Quality_Content (3)
[39] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Quality_Types of teaching (3)
[40] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Relevance (2)
[41] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Expectations (1)
[42] Code: QG_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Open question (2)
[43] Code: QG2_Teaching on my course_Missing areas_Work experience and placement (1)

multiple forms of assessment, their answers were mixed, leading to 'middle ground' responses.

1.8.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

This question was generally well understood by students. When answering, they were assessing both the availability and clarity of marking criteria, with some disagreeing with this statement where they felt that criteria were vague, difficult to interpret or difficult to locate.

Some focused heavily on the 'in advance' part of the statement when answering, assessing whether they had received the criteria at the start of the year, or sufficiently in advance of their assessments. Others focused more on the word 'clear', assessing how easy to understand the criteria were, the level of detail given and the efforts made by teaching staff to ensure clarity and understanding.

"I think that's referencing like having the marking criteria given to you like before doing assignments, or I mean sometimes we've had like whole seminars dedicated to it, like the lecturer will just go through all of the points."

19-21, Female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Medium FEC, Wales (57)

When answering this question, students were most likely to be considering criteria for end-of-year or formal assessments, with a much smaller proportion also considering continuous assessment in their answers.

1.8.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

Whilst most students were happy to take into consideration both the clarity and advance availability of marking criteria in their answers, a smaller number of respondents (3) cited a particular difficulty with the dual focus of this statement[44]. These students struggled to average their experience across both concepts of being 'clear' and available 'in advance'.

Some respondents (6) found it challenging to answer this question due to a highly varied experience across modules[45], making it difficult to average their experience and often responding with 'neither agree nor disagree' as a result.

"I would say that I neither agree nor disagree with this one because this depends a lot on the teacher and the module leaders of each module, because every module has a different marking process and marking stuff."

22-25, Female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Medium FEC, Wales (58)

[44] Code 'E_The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance_Difficulties_clear + in advance' (3)
[45] Code: E_The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance_Challenge averaging experience (6)

- Four respondents found the term ‘marking’ confusing (4) as they were unsure whether this referred only to formal assessment marking criteria or ongoing marking and feedback as well[46]. They felt that the statement could more explicitly refer to ‘mark schemes’ to make this clearer.
- One Welsh respondent (1) also suggested a wording change from 'meini prawf' to 'cynllun marcio', mirroring English-speaking students’ suggestions of clarification that this refers to mark schemes[47].
- A couple of students (2) felt the statement needed to be streamlined to improve readability[48], with one suggesting a change to ‘The marking criteria have been clear in advance’.

1.8.1.4 Differences by respondent group

Comprehension of this statement was consistent across student groups.

1.8.1.5 Recommendations (None)

No recommended changes suggested to this question.

1.8.2 Question F: Feedback has improved my learning experience.

1.8.2.1 Previous testing

OfS workshops identified that there needed to be a question included to focus on the usefulness of feedback. Whether it improved their work/learning experience.

1.8.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

When answering this question, the majority of respondents were considering the written feedback they had received on assessments. They were evaluating how constructive this feedback was and the extent to which it had helped them to implement changes and improve in subsequent assessments. Many were also considering verbal feedback and discussions in lectures, both with tutors and peer-to-peer, in helping them improve their work.

The majority of students were answering this statement very similarly to Question G, with ‘improve my learning experience’ being seen as synonymous with ‘improve my work’.

[46] Code: E_The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance_Difficulties_Marking (4)
[47] Code: E_The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance_Welsh language (1)
[48] Code: E_The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance_Difficulties answering_streamline wording (2)

1.8.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

Some respondents (8)[49] found it challenging to average their experience due to varied quality and usefulness in the feedback received across different modules or from different tutors.

"I would say neither agree nor disagree, it's been a bit of a mixed bag, some of it has been excellent and some of it I've really had to fight for and some of it has been incredibly confusing... so I would have to sit on the fence a bit on that one because we've had some excellent lecturers and some really bad ones."

36-45, Female, Second or other non-final year, Full-time distance learner, Small FEC, South East (72)

- The term 'learning experience' caused confusion for some (14) who were unsure what this referred to and how this differed from Question G, which asked about how feedback had improved their work[50]. The term was felt to be quite vague and students were often unclear what else should be considered or what else could be improved within their learning experience beyond their work.
- One respondent (1) misunderstood this statement[51], assuming that it referred to feedback that students gave about the course and how this was acted upon by the institution to improve the learning experience.

1.8.2.4 Differences by respondent group

Interpretations of this question were consistent across respondent groups.

1.8.2.5 Recommendations (Higher priority)

- Clarification is needed alongside the term 'learning experience' to help students understand this question as evaluating the use of feedback beyond the impact this has on assessments/their work and to differentiate it from the subsequent question.
- Consider cutting this question, due to overlap with Question G.

1.8.3 Question G: Feedback has enabled me to improve my work.

1.8.3.1 Previous testing

OfS workshops identified the need for a question focused on the usefulness of feedback, checking whether it improved their work/learning experience.

1.8.3.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Students interpreted this question very similarly to Question F, thinking about feedback that they had received on their course that they were able to feed into future work.

[49] Code: F_Feedback has improved my learning experience_Challenge averaging experience (8)
[50] Code: F_Feedback has improved my learning experience_Difficulties_Learning experience (14)
[51] Code: F_Feedback has improved my learning experience_areas considered_feeding back about course (1)

- The similarities drawn between questions F and G meant students commonly gave the same scale response and referred to similar, if not the same, areas of the student experience in their answers.
- It was generally clearer in this question that students should focus on the ability to use feedback to improve their work than with Question F.

Respondents focused on feedback they received on assignments and assessed whether it allowed them to progress academically and improve their grades over time. They were considering both formal written feedback on end-of-year assessments, but also ongoing written and verbal feedback that they received over the duration of their course from teaching staff.

"I guess I'm thinking about if I wrote an essay or something and then I handed it in for feedback and they gave feedback and then I tried to improve it, what was the end result? Did I get a better grade than I got for the original essay? Did the professor tell me that it was better or something like that? That's what I'm thinking about."

19-21, Male, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, South East (41)

1.8.3.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

There were some similar difficulties with answering this question as with Question F, although to a lesser extent.

One respondent (1) found it challenging to average out their experience[52], having received varied feedback across modules. Another (1) struggled to understand what the word 'work' referred to in this statement[53] – being unsure whether they should relate this to formal assignments, ongoing work on the course or even if this should be applied much more broadly to their job outside of their course.

A few respondents (3) were unsure what the term 'feedback'[54] referred to, in relation to:

- **Type of feedback:** whether this included formal, informal, written, oral, pre-submission or post-submission feedback.
- **Source of feedback:** There was also some confusion over whose feedback should be considered here – whether this should be solely from teaching staff or also include peer-to-peer feedback.

[52] Code: G_Feedback has enabled me to improve my work_Difficulties answering_challenge averaging experience (1)
[53] Code: G_Feedback has enabled me to improve my work_difficulties with language_work (1)
[54] Code: G_Feedback has enabled me to improve my work_Difficulties with language_feedback (3)

Two respondents (2) felt the word 'enabled'[55] could be simplified by switching to the word 'helped'.

One respondent (1) found the word 'improve'[56] difficult to interpret and found it challenging to know how to evaluate the extent to which the feedback had helped improve their work.

One respondent (1) was unsure how to answer this question as they technically did receive feedback but often chose not to use it[57], making it difficult to assess the extent to which it would have improved their work. They were unsure whether this question should take into account their own personal responsibility in whether they chose to take on board the feedback that was available.

As with Question F, one respondent (1) misinterpreted this question as being about the feedback they gave about their course[58], as opposed to feedback they received personally.

1.8.3.4 Differences by respondent group

Interpretations of this question were consistent across respondent types.

1.8.3.5 Recommendations (Higher priority)

Consider using this statement in place of Question F, as it was more widely understood.

1.8.4 Question group: Assessment and feedback

1.8.4.1 Overall findings

Despite the question group title being 'assessment and feedback', several felt that the question group was focused on feedback rather than assessments, as evidenced by the suggested additional questions listed below.

1.8.4.2 Use of instructional text

Respondents tended to glance at the instructional text given alongside statements F and G and skimmed over it. Six respondents (6) explicitly said they skipped over this line and did not read it[59]. For most, they recognised that they do receive feedback, that the statement was relevant to them, and so skimmed over the instructional text.

When specifically asked about the instructional text, most found it unproblematic and understood the terminology used. However, five respondents (5) cited specific difficulties[60] with understanding the instructional text. Issues included:

[55] Code: G_Feedback has enabled me to improve my work_Difficulties with language_enabled (2)
[56] Code: G_Feedback has enabled me to improve my work_Difficulties with language_Improve (1)
[57] Code: G_Feedback has enabled me to improve my work_Difficulties answering_Chose not to use the feedback (1)
[58] Code: G_Feedback has enable me to improve my work_Areas considered_feedback about the course (1)
[59] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_didn't read instructional text (6)
[60] Code: QG_Assessment and feedback_Instructional text difficulties (5)

- **Wordiness:** The beginning of the sentence '*If you have not used, or rarely use feedback in your work'* was felt to be too wordy.
- **N/A:** This term was difficult to understand for a few who would prefer this to be more direct. This was fed into the second version of instructional text where 'this does not apply to me' was implemented.

"I find the 'if you have not used or rarely used…' the wordiness is not helpful, it took me a second read to process it. Some surveys have a yes/no/this doesn't apply section, if that was an option then that may make it clearer rather than having this whole sentence."

22-25, Female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, London (67)

1.8.4.3 Overlap in question group

It was often (21) felt that statements F and G overlapped considerably[61], with many unclear on the separate focus of each until they came to answer Question G.

- When answering Question F, 'learning experience' was often immediately interpreted as referring to their work.
- However, upon reading and answering Question G, this caused some to reflect on Question F. For these students, they interpreted it as being more about their broader experience (including areas such as their mental wellbeing and how enjoyable they found their course). They also saw G as about their work specifically. However, many remained unclear as to the difference.

Where this overlap was highlighted by respondents, there was generally a stronger preference (9) for Question G[62], with students feeling this statement was more direct and easier to immediately understand what it was asking – with 'my work' clearer than 'my learning experience'. Those who preferred F (2) liked that this incorporated the wider learning experience[63].

1.8.4.4 Overlap outside question group

There were no overlaps outside this question group found.

1.8.4.5 Missing areas

The most common cited missing area in the question group was around modes of assessment[64]. Eight respondents (8) felt there should be a question allowing students to evaluate the extent to which the most appropriate means of assessment were used on their course – e.g. written exams, coursework, practical assessments.

[61] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Overlap_F&G (21)
[62] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_PreferG (9)
[63] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_PreferF (2)
[64] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing Areas_Appropriate mode of assessment (8)

One respondent (1) also felt a question could be added about the mode of feedback delivery[65] and whether this was given in the most appropriate and useful way for students.

A few respondents (4) suggested a question addressing the perceived fairness of feedback and marking[66], taking into account students' perceptions of the moderating process.

"It doesn't cover how fair we think the marking is and that is a big thing, like on a course like mine where there is lots of students and more than one marker, like we're really concerned about fairness."

36-45, Male, Final year, Full-time campus, Large HEI, East of England (66)

One respondent (1) wanted to see a question added that asked generally whether students felt the feedback process could have been improved[67]. A couple of students (2) felt that there could be a more direct question added to assess the quality of feedback[68] received, with one of these students also feeling that the timing of feedback[69] was important to understand.

One student (1) felt that there should be a question asking about whether they received feedback[70]. Rather than those who didn't receive feedback being encouraged to select N/A (as part of the instructional text), they felt that the survey should capture information around when feedback was not being offered.

1.8.4.6 Recommendations (Lower priority)

- Consider using Question G instead of F, as this was more widely understood.
- If keeping Question F, more clarity will be needed to ensure students know what is to be included in the 'learning experience' beyond their work – which is already accounted for in Question G.
- Consider adding a statement around suitability/appropriateness of assessments used.

1.9 Question group: Organisation and management

- Question H: The course is well organised.
- Question I: Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.

Note – Question I was not cognitively tested, but was included to allow students to review the question group as a whole.

[65] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing Areas_Mode of feedback (1)
[66] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing Areas_fairness (4)
[67] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing Areas_improved (1)
[68] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing Areas_Quality (2)
[69] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing Areas_Timing (1)
[70] Code: QG_Assessment and Feedback_Missing areas_absence of feedback (1)

1.9.1 Question H: The course is well organised.

1.9.1.1 Previous testing

In OfS workshops, it was decided that 'running smoothly' should be removed, as previous testing suggested that this was superfluous.

1.9.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

This question was generally very well understood and respondents considered a wide array of topics in their answers, including:

- The structure of the overall course content.
- Individual module structures.
- Organisation and clarity of deadlines.
- Timetabling.
- Provision of learning materials.
- Access to online resources.
- How organised tutors were when it came to workflow.

Some also considered communication from their organisation here, although they then noted this was covered specifically in Question I.

"I would say it's referring to the structure of the material. I would say it's referring to timetable and the way the classes are organised, and the continuity in that there's some preparation been done and that they know what needs to be done."

22-25, Male, Second or other non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Medium HEI, Scotland (65)

With organisation of their course having so many facets to it, students could be thinking of any combination of the above elements, depending on what first came to mind for them. The broad context of this meant that they may not be considering every aspect – for example, not all respondents immediately considered the timetable in their answers.

1.9.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

- Students were taking into account many different aspects when evaluating whether their course was well organised.
- Some students (6) cited this as a challenge when answering the question[71], in that it was too broad a statement and difficult to know what they should include and discount in their answer.

[71] Code: H_The course is well organised_Difficulties_Too broad (6)

- A small number of students (3) felt this difficulty came with the use of the term 'organised'[72], believing that this was ambiguous, with the potential to take into account various different elements. They felt that the questioning should be more direct – for example, if the intention is to understand about timetabling, then the question should specifically mention this.

- Two respondents (2) found the term 'course' problematic when trying to answer this question[73], due to confusion over whether this should be focused on specific modules within the course or a much broader look at the staff organisation and management as a whole.

1.9.1.4 Differences by respondent group

One of the students who found the term 'course' confusing was a learner at the Open University, where modular learning is much more common. They were unsure whether 'course' referred to their whole degree or individual modules.

One Welsh-speaking respondent (1) suggested a small change in language from 'Drefniant' to 'Trefniant'[74].

1.9.1.5 Recommendations (None)

No suggested recommendations.

1.9.2 Question group: Organisation and management

1.9.2.1 Overall findings

Students were generally happy with this question group, feeling that it allowed them to relate to various aspects of course organisation and management.

1.9.2.2 Overlap in question group

With Question H being so broad, students often considered communication of changes in their answer, which is covered within Question I. Most respondents were happy with the specific reference to this in Question I, but two respondents (2) explicitly drew out this overlap as a potential issue with the survey[75].

1.9.2.3 Missing areas

While students generally understood the questions in this section and were happy to consider various elements of organisation and management in Question H, some felt questions in this section could be broken down into those that are more specifically asking about:

[72] Code: H_The course is well organised_Difficulties with language_organised (3)
[73] Code: H_The course is well organised_Difficulties with language_course (2)
[74] Code: H_The course is well organised_Welsh language (1)
[75] Code: QG_Organisation and management_Overlap (2)

- **Staff organisation** (9) – to include aspects such as teaching staff communication, punctuality, organisation within lectures, and admin staff support[76].
- **Course structure** (7) – to include aspects such as organisation and flow of module structure and assessments[77].
- **Timetabling** (10) – to consider the timetabling of lectures, modules and assessments[78].

1.9.2.4 Recommendations (Lower priority)

- Consider breaking down Question H into more specific questions to focus on:
  - Timetabling
  - Course structure
  - Staff organisation and management.
- Keep Question I as a specific question around communication.

1.10 Question group: Learning resources

- Question J: It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution when I needed to.
- Question K: Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well.

Note: 'when I needed to' was added to the end of Question J in the second wave of interviews.

1.10.1 Question J: It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution when I needed to.

1.10.1.1 Previous testing

- It was recommended that the statement 'I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to' was updated to reflect advances in technology. There was a recommended change to: 'The University's/College's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well', but the current form was tested in 2016 and found to work well enough.
- 2016 research found that students thought of the availability of software and online resources. It recommended some further clarity on what 'IT resources' were for the students who struggled to answer (such as those on courses using their own specialised equipment).
- In 2020 testing, the Teaching and learning section changed, moving from 3 questions to 2 questions. 'I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to' was adapted. Distance learners

[76] Code: QG_Organisation and management_Missing areas_staff specific (9)
[77] Code: QG_Organisation and management_Missing areas_course structure (7)
[78] Code: QG_Organisation and management_Missing areas_timetable (10)

struggled to answer this question more, particularly where they were using their own hardware.

1.10.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Even though the question was intended to include both physical and digital resources, few respondents considered both together in their answer. The majority thought of either one or the other. Key differences in interpretation with regards to this were mostly linked to the subject studied.

- Most interpreted the phrase 'easy to access' as meaning they were able to easily find and use the resources they needed for study.
- When considering what fell into the category of 'learning resources', the majority of respondents thought of either the online resources they had access to (e.g. lecture notes or reading material in the Virtual Learning Environment and online library access), or the use of physical spaces (e.g. the library, lecture halls, labs or studio spaces). This sometimes also included how much face-to-face contact they had with their tutors.

The inclusion of 'when I needed to' in the first statement did add clarity in the second half of the interviewing and helped to keep responses more streamlined in assessing whether they had been able to have easy access.

The increased prevalence of online learning because of the Covid-19 pandemic pushed many respondents to think of 'learning resources' as referring exclusively to online materials. Of these respondents, many interpreted the word 'access' as referring to digital access, making them more likely to think first about online resources when answering this question.

1.10.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

A small number (7) felt that the term 'learning resources' was too vague[79] leading some to consider either physical or digital resources, but not both.

- Those who felt this (2) were either confused by how to interpret the question within the context of their creative arts course[80] or thought that 'resources' could only refer to things you could take home and therefore were unsure whether to include the use of physical spaces (3)[81].

[79] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (when I needed to)_Difficulties_learning resources (7)
[80] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (when I needed to)_Difficulties_learning resources (2)
[81] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (when I needed to)_Difficulties_learning resources (3)

- Others (3) felt that the term was too broad and struggled to narrow down what it could refer to[82].

A few others (6) were unsure how to interpret 'easy to access'[83], either because they were unsure whether to consider online resources, physical resources, or both (1)[84], or because Covid-19 had had a significant impact on their ability to access the resources they needed (5)[85]. This was often because their course required face-to-face elements, or because their institution had not communicated changes to their teaching well as a result of the pandemic. A couple of respondents (2) found this difficult because they were unsure what would constitute a challenge to access[86].

1.10.1.4 Differences by respondent group

Differences in interpretation centred around the subjects that respondents were studying. Those studying on a humanities course were more likely to only consider things like reading materials or lecture notes (33), meaning they were far more likely to focus on online resources[87]. By contrast, those studying on a more practical-based course, such as creative subjects or STEM subjects, were more likely to think of physical spaces (28), such as studio spaces, the use of labs and other physical resources they may need to use within those spaces[88].

1.10.1.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

Consider adding 'digital and physical' in brackets after 'learning resources' to clarify that respondents should be thinking about both in their answer.

[82] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (when I needed to)_Difficulties_learning resources (3)
[83] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (part when I needed to)_Difficulties with language _easy to access (8)
[84] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (part when I needed to)_Difficulties with language _easy to access (1)
[85] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (part when I needed to)_Difficulties with language _easy to access (5)
[86] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (part when I needed to)_Difficulties with language _easy to access (2)
[87] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (part when I needed to)_Areas considered_online (33) Filtered by subject type
[88] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution (part when I needed to)_Areas considered_face to face (28)

1.10.2 Question K: Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well.

1.10.2.1 Previous testing

- Before 2015, it was recommended to update the statement 'I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to' to reflect advances in technology. The question moved from the end to the start of the section. There was some confusion over what constituted 'general IT resources', with some thinking only of PCs and printers, and others of online portals and sites.
- It was also recommended to change 'The University's/College's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well', but the current form was tested in 2016 and found to work well enough. 2015 recommended changes in line with advances in technology. Previous testing also looked at 'the library, including its digital services, is good enough for my needs' but 'digital services' was found to be the focus of the question. It therefore recommended amending the wording to: 'The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning well', which was tested in the pilot. Recommendation for further clarity in 2016 refined the statement to its current form.
- 2016 research found that students thought of the availability of software and online resources. It recommended some further clarity on what 'IT resources' were for the students who struggled to answer (such as those on courses using their own specialised equipment). 2015 found the original statement to be problematic for distance learners who do not use the library; the second iteration of the statement was much clearer and easier to answer for all students. 2016 students felt there was overlap between this statement and the previous one and so a bit harder to answer but otherwise easy enough to answer.
- 2020 testing split this question into two separate statements: 'The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well' and 'The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well'.

1.10.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

The majority of respondents considered a similar range of resources to when answering the previous question, whether physical spaces or online resources. However, with this statement, responses were more likely to focus on the range or quality of resources available. Many were prompted to assess quality by the phrase 'supported my learning well'. Others focused on how well they learnt and the extent to which they were able to use resources to support that learning when answering this question. Few felt the language was confusing.

"I was thinking of the physical books in the library and how useful they've been, and not just the number of resources available, but also the quality of them. My answer is mostly agree."

22-25, Female, Second year, Full-time campus learner, Medium HEI, Wales (18)

1.10.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

- A few respondents (10) had trouble interpreting the word 'learning'[89], mainly around how to consider whether the resources had supported their learning well – two respondents felt that 'well' caused confusion and suggested that the question should just ask them about how the resources had supported their learning.
- A small number (4) were unsure how to answer this because the Covid-19 lockdown had prevented them from accessing vital learning resources, such as studio space or the library, and therefore struggled with averaging their experience[90].
- A couple of respondents (2) expressed a preference for rewording the term 'learning resources'[91]. Their suggestions included 'academic resources' or 'learning materials'.

Not all respondents thought to assess both physical and online materials, and there was variation in which resources they thought of here, as with the previous question. Since this is the case for both questions, we recommend clarifying that 'learning resources' refers to both digital and physical resources for the question group as a whole, as opposed to changes to individual questions.

1.10.2.4 Differences by respondent group

A small number (3) expressed a preference for the term 'supplemented' or 'helped me to develop' rather than 'supported'[92]. These respondents had courses that were more focused on research, and therefore felt these terms more accurately represented how they used the resources available to them.

1.10.2.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

No suggested changes to individual question but consider adding 'digital and physical' in brackets after 'learning resources' to clarify that respondents should be thinking about both in their answer.

[89] Code: K_Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well_Difficulties _Learning (10)
[90] Code: K_Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well_Difficulties _Learning (4)
[91] Code: K_Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well_Difficulties (2)
[92] Code: K_Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well_Difficulties (3)

1.10.3 Question group: Learning resources

1.10.3.1 Overall findings

Respondents thought of a variety of resources when answering both questions within this group. This included:

- Access to online and physical library materials
- Lecture notes
- Reading materials
- Physical spaces, such as studios or labs, and the equipment needed to complete work in those spaces
- Support or feedback from lecturers in a minority of cases.

There was a lack of consistency across respondents regarding which of these resources they considered in their response, but respondents generally interpreted the question through personal experience of what resources they had made use of. Some did broaden their interpretation of the question to consider resources that others on different courses might need, but they mostly did not include this in their answer when assessing whether they had been able to access what they needed.

1.10.3.2 Overlap in question group

A few respondents (3) did feel that the two questions required a similar response[93], but most understood that they were asking them to assess different aspects of the learning resources available to them.

1.10.3.3 Overlap outside question group

There was some overlap with the 'assessment and feedback' question group. Some respondents thought that feedback and support from lecturers via email (e.g. answering queries about work) was a learning resource when answering these questions. However, this did not significantly affect respondents' interpretation of the question.

1.10.3.4 Missing areas

A handful of respondents (3) wanted the opportunity to provide feedback on the number of resources they had available, as well as the quality or ease of access[94]. They felt that their course had had good resources, but there needed to be more of them, and they felt this was separate from whether they were able to access what was available.

[93] Code: QG_Learning resources_Overlap (3)

[94] Code: J_It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution_Difficulties_learning resources (2); Code: K_Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well_Difficulties (1)

1.10.3.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the move towards online learning, online resources were at the front of respondents minds when thinking of what was available. For many, the physical spaces they would normally have expected to use to support their learning were not available during lockdown.

- OfS could consider adding examples in brackets to the title of the question group to help clarify what resources respondents should consider, to encourage consistency in approach, as opposed to within individual questions. However, previous testing suggests this may lead to difficulties in answering, because the question becomes long and cumbersome to read and the specific resources listed affects the way students respond.
- Consider instead adding 'digital and physical' in brackets after 'learning resources' to clarify that respondents should be thinking about both in their answer.

1.11 Question group: Students' union

- Question L (Version 1): Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution. *If your institution does not have a Students Union, Association or Guild please select 'this does not apply to me'.*
- Question L (Version 2): I am content with services provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution. *If your institution does not have a Students' Union, Association or Guild please select 'this does not apply to me'.*

1.11.1 Question L (Version 1): Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am satisfied with the Students Union (Association or Guild) at my institution. If your institution does not have a Students' Union, Association or Guild please select 'n/a not applicable'.

1.11.1.1 Previous testing

2020 testing found a question regarding respondents' interaction with the students' union was asked within the question group Student voice: 'The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.'

1.11.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Many respondents had trouble averaging out their experience across the different services listed, leading most to answer according to whichever services they had personally used and ignore the ones they had not.

The instructional text in italics prompted some to consider whether this question applied to them and informed how they approached it, but the length of the text put some off from reading it all.

"The question is very wordy. So, it is talking about too many things in here. Yes. Maybe there would be one on support, one on activities and one on academic representation. Once again, there are three different things, and someone might agree to one and not to the other. By splitting them out, they could have the statement with agree or disagree, and that would give them a clear indication of if they agree or not. [If this question was split, would you have put different things for each one?] Yes, definitely."

22-25, Female, Final year, Full-time online learner, Large HEI, W Midlands (21)

1.11.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

- Many (13) felt that the instructional text before the statement was too long and added confusion by asking them to consider too many different elements[95], making them more likely to skim-read the question and not answer it as thoughtfully as others.
- A few (4) suggested a preference for splitting this question into three separate statements to allow them to assess the support services, activities and academic representation individually[96], which led them to be more likely to select 'not applicable'.
- A small number (6) were confused by the concept of 'academic representation'[97], with some unsure what this referred to and therefore not knowing how to include it in their response. Others were unaware they had had any academic representation because they had not interacted with what was available.
- Due to the length of the overall question, some respondents (7) failed to read the instructional text regarding answering with 'not applicable' and were therefore more likely to answer with 'neither agree nor disagree' or 'disagree'[98].

1.11.1.4 Differences by respondent group

Here, the key differences by respondent group centred around delivery mode. Respondents studying at a remote learning institution were far less likely to have interacted with their

[95] Code: L_Students Union Q Version 1_Challenge averaging experience (13)
[96] Code: L_Students Union Q Version 1_Challenge averaging experience (4)
[97] Code: L_Students Union Q Version 1_Areas considered (6)
[98] Code: Instructional text_failure to read (2); Code: L_Students Union Q Version 1_Instructional text re NA (7)

students' union than respondents studying at an institution that would normally hold classes in person.

Several respondents (9) who were studying only via distance learning were more likely to see this question as not applicable to them[99], either because they had never thought to look at the services provided by their students' union, or because they were aware of them but did not want to use them. Equally, mature students (9) answered in this way.[100]

1.11.1.5 Recommendations (Higher priority)

- Consider shortening the question to not include the list of services, or consider splitting the question into three to ask respondents about each service separately.
- Shortening the question was tested in the second wave of interviewing.

1.11.2 Question L (Version 2): I am content with services provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution. *If your institution does not have a Students' Union, Association or Guild please select 'this does not apply to me'.*

1.11.2.1 Previous testing

In 2020 testing, a question regarding respondents' interaction with the students' union was asked within the question group Student voice: 'The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.'

1.11.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

In this second iteration, the shortening of the question and removal of some instructional text cleared up confusion sparked by including multiple options for services that they should consider.

- This meant that respondents were more likely to consider only the services they had personally interacted with and answer based on assessing them.
- Respondents most often considered their students' union's offering of clubs, societies or cultural groups, sports facilities and their use of the student bar when answering this question. Few thought of academic representation. Some did also consider the support services available.
- The majority of respondents interpreted the phrase 'I am content' as asking them to assess satisfaction.

The phrasing 'this does not apply to me' worked better for this question, as there was likely to be more variation across whether respondents had interacted with their students' union or not than other questions.

[99] Code: L_Students Union Q Version 1_Areas considered (9)
[100] Code: L_Students Union Q Version 1_Areas considered (9) Filtered by age 25+

"They did a lot of good things, and all the societies ran with their support, or like monitoring. So, that was good, but also since Covid hit, like all the societies stopped running and stuff, I feel like the presence of [the] students' union just declined a lot. So, this one is like, to me it doesn't affect me, like students' union, I don't really think about them anymore, especially during Covid time."

19-21, Male, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, London (59)

1.11.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

- Despite the phrase 'this does not apply to me' clearing up some confusion around how to answer if they had not interacted with their students' union at all, a few respondents (10) still answered with 'neither agree nor disagree' in this instance[101].
- This was most often due to a failure to read the instructional text (4)[102] or a misinterpretation of the meaning of the instructional text (6)[103].
- However, the removal of the instructional text before the statement in this iteration meant that not many respondents thought to assess how content they were with their academic representation.
- A handful of respondents (3) were confused by the change in phrasing to 'I am content', since the majority of questions asked them to assess how satisfied they were with each service at their institution[104].

1.11.2.4 Differences by respondent group

- A small number of respondents (2) studying on distance learning courses felt they were unaware of or had not interacted with their students' union, meaning they selected 'this does not apply to me' or 'neither agree nor disagree'[105].
- Several mature students who had little interaction with the students' union (6) selected 'neither agree nor disagree' (4)[106] or 'this does not apply to me' (2)[107]. Some also had trouble with understanding how to interpret the question because their awareness of the services offered by the students' union was low.
- There was some inconsistency around whether these groups would select this option or the 'neither agree nor disagree' option, but this had improved from the previous iteration, suggesting that the shortening of the text had encouraged more respondents to read the full question.

[101] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (10)
[102] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (4)
[103] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (6)
[104] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (3)
[105] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (2)
[106] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (4)
[107] Code: L_Students union Q Version 2_Areas considered (2)

Other inconsistencies in interpretation, particularly in answering with 'this does not apply to me', were less likely to be related to respondent group – they were more based on specific individuals' experiences.

1.11.2.5 Recommendations (Higher priority)

- Consider including a shorter prompt in brackets to encourage respondents to think about academic representation specifically, if needed.
- Alternatively, consider splitting this question into separate questions to ask about different elements of the students' union.

1.11.3 Question group: Students' union

1.11.3.1 Overall findings

The initial wording of the question, with the inclusion of instructional text that detailed several different services respondents should consider when answering the question, led to some confusion around how to average their experience across the different services and resulted in an inconsistent approach. This was cleared up with the shortening of the question in the second iteration.

The length of the instructional text in the first iteration also led to some confusion and inconsistency in approach – often resulting in respondents failing to read the instructional text in full, therefore making them more likely to select 'neither agree nor disagree' instead of 'not applicable' when the question did not apply to them. The shortening of the text around the statement in the second iteration meant respondents were more likely to read the question in full and answer more faithfully to their experience.

The more streamlined second version of the question helped respondents to focus on the services they had personally interacted with as part of the students' union.

1.11.3.2 Overlap in question group

No opportunity for overlap, as this question group only asked one question.

1.11.3.3 Overlap outside question group

There were no overlaps outside the question group found.

1.11.3.4 Missing areas

Respondents answering the first version of the question were often confused by 'academic representation', while very few respondents considered academic representation for their answer in the second version of the question.

1.11.3.5 Recommendations (Higher priority)

- Consider adapting the wording to 'I am satisfied' to match other question phrasing.

- Consider including some instructional text in brackets to prompt respondents to consider academic representation specifically, or splitting the question to ask about the different aspects of the students' union separately.
- If assessing academic representation is crucial, consider adding the phrase 'please consider academic representation in your answer' in brackets and italics as a shorter form of the instructional text, so as not to distract from the overall question and cause respondents to skim-read.

1.12 Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 1)

- Question M (Version 1): I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course.
- Question N (Version 1): On my course, I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics.

In the first 40 interviews, the above questions were tested as part of the 'hearing and contributing different views' section.

1.12.1 Question M (Version 1): I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course.

1.12.1.1 Previous testing

Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.

1.12.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Most interpreted this question as asking them about either:

- **Their ability to share views about how their course is run.** Many considered answering student surveys or speaking to their student representative when answering this question – assessing their ability to express any feedback they had about their course. A few made specific reference to experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic and how open communication channels were and/or how accessible student reps were.
- **Their ability to share their own views and opinions within class debates.** They were considering how safe or open an environment there was on their course to share their views within lectures/seminars and the extent to which this was encouraged and facilitated by lecturers, e.g. through setting up debates and discussions in class.

A smaller proportion interpreted this question as asking about broader freedom of speech within their course environment or institution as a whole.

1.12.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

A handful of respondents (4) were confused by 'views and opinions'[108] – feeling this led to uncertainty over whether this question referred to their views and opinions about:

- How their course is run
- The course content they are learning about
- Broader personal views, beliefs and politics, etc.

"It's not clear which it's referring to, but I would assume that it's asking about the political views rather than your views and opinions on your lecturers or on the course as a whole."

19-21, Female, Second or other non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, West Midlands (29)

- The phrase 'on my course' potentially also prompted students to interpret this question as asking about whether they had been able to give feedback about their course, rather than answering based on an ability to share their views within their course. Three students (3) specifically pulled this out as a confusing term[109].
- The term 'feel free'[110] was problematic for a few respondents (4), as they felt that they may technically be able to express their views if they wanted to, but that the question should be focusing more on the actual opportunities for this. Some of these students therefore suggested changing the start of the question to either 'I am able to…' or 'I have the opportunity to'.
- One respondent (1), who was considering this question in terms of the opportunity for debate and discussion on their course, found it difficult to average their experience[111], as not all modules were structured the same or had the same discursive elements.

1.12.1.4 Differences by respondent group

International students or those from ethnic minorities were likely (16) to consider this question in relation to how confident they felt expressing their personal views within their academic environment without repercussion[112].

Answers given to this statement appeared to be very much influenced by personal experience. Those who had experienced exclusion, either while studying or at other points in their lives, were far more likely to interpret this question as referring to how free they felt to contribute different opinions.

[108] Code: M1_I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course_Difficulties with language_views and opinions (4)
[109] Code: M1_I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course_Difficulties with language_my course (3)
[110] Code: M1_I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course_Difficulties with language_feel free (4)
[111] Code: M1_I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course_Difficulties answering_challenge averaging experience (1)
[112] Code: M1_I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course_areas considered_comfort (16)

"I feel it's asking if you feel comfortable with doing that and are you okay with doing that and you don't feel judged or anything, so I would feel I agree that I am free to express them. How often you were asked for them or how often you actually do express them would be a different question."

19-21, Female, Second or other non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, West Midlands (29)

1.12.1.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- Consider changing 'feel free' to 'I have the opportunity to' – to focus more on what the institution is doing to facilitate this environment.
- Consider changing the phrase 'on my course' to 'within my course' to remove confusion over this question being about feedback about their course.
- If looking to focus on wider freedom of speech, then consider replacing with Version 2 of the 'hearing and contributing different views' section, detailed below.

1.12.2 Question N (Version 1): On my course, I have had the opportunity hear a range of views on different topics.

1.12.2.1 Previous testing

2020 testing found that beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.

1.12.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

- When answering this question, respondents were mostly considering academic views and opinions and interpreting 'a range of views' as referring to internal academic debate within a given subject.
- Many were considering the diversity of student backgrounds and opinions on their course, with some respondents answering the question by assessing whether different viewpoints were presented or the extent to which they felt students on their course were a homogenous group.
- The move to online learning because of Covid-19 had a significant impact for some, since it was felt that face-to-face lectures and seminars gave more opportunities for people to express their views than online.
- The inclusion of guest speakers as well as the range of authors referenced on their course were also considered by some as bringing a diversity of views.

1.12.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

There was some general confusion from respondents over what should be considered within this question. Some were unclear about whether to focus on views about topics within their course or much broader social issues.

The term 'different topics'[113] was found to be the source of this confusion for some (5):

"I'm not quite sure what it means by 'different topics', so like what kind of topics? So when it says 'Views on different topics' does it mean different topics related to what we learn on the course or things like social movements, social issues?"

19-22, Female, Second or non-final year, Part-time campus learner, Large HEI, North East (13)

Similarly, two respondents (2) picked out the word 'views'[114] as being the source of ambiguity:

"It is talking about contributing different views. After the previous question about feedback, it is not super clear what 'a range of views and topics' it is asking. Is that about the course or the university or random people that come in and talk about their life? So, it is not clear what these different views and topics are. Specifically, within that category of hearing and contributing different views, it is very ambiguous."

26-35, Female, final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, Scotland (38)

As with the previous question, the term 'on my course'[115] was problematic for a couple of respondents (2). This made them feel that the question was asking whether they were able to hear other students' feedback about the course itself and how it was run.

1.12.2.4 Differences by respondent group

Two respondents (2) felt this question was not applicable to their subject area[116]. One of these was studying medicine and the other accounting – both felt the nature of their course was not focused on facilitating student discussion.

1.12.2.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

Consider adding clarification to this statement:

- If intending to ask about sharing of views within the bounds of the course content, consider something like 'I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics on my course'.
- If intending to incorporate wider freedom of speech, consider replacing with Version 2 of the hearing and contributing different views question bank (detailed below).

[113] Code: N1_On my course I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics_Difficulties_Different topics (5)
[114] Code: N1_On my course I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics_Difficulties_Views (2)
[115] Code: N1_On my course I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics_Difficulties with language_On my course (2)
[116] Code: N1_On my course I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics_Difficulties answering_not applicable to subject (2)

1.12.3 Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 1)

1.12.3.1 Overall findings

- Respondents were more likely to give views and opinions about their course content, rather than review wider freedom of speech at their institution.
- When answering questions in this section, there was sometimes confusion over what was meant by 'views' and 'opinions' in each question, but a few respondents (4) also flagged this as an issue with the wider section[117]. A couple of respondents (2) felt that this needed clarification[118].

1.12.3.2 Overlap in question group

- A small number of respondents (3) felt that these two questions were very similar in nature and hard to differentiate[119].
- Both were seen to be asking about the ability to express and hear other viewpoints. One of these respondents (1) felt that it may have been easier to answer if the questions were in reverse order[120], asking first about the ability to hear other viewpoints and then about their own ability to share their views.
- Interestingly, one respondent (1) felt that these questions were unrelated[121] and did not fit together under the section focus of hearing and contributing different views. This stemmed from a misinterpretation of Question M as asking about their ability to give feedback about their course, whilst N was seen as asking about free expression of views from their peers.

1.12.3.3 Overlap outside question group

There were no overlaps outside question group found.

1.12.3.4 Missing areas

One respondent (1) felt this section should specifically draw out the place of social media in the free expression of views and how this was regulated by the institution[122].

1.12.3.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- More clarity is needed that this is intended to cover freedom of speech.
- As discussed later, new versions of these questions made this intention much clearer to students.

[117] Code: QG1_Hearing and contributing different views_Difficulties with language_different views (4)
[118] Code: QG1_Hearing and contributing different views_clarity needed (2)
[119] Code: QG1_Hearing and contributing different views_Overlaps (3)
[120] Code: QG1_Hearing and contributing different views_order of questions (1)
[121] Code: QG1_Hearing and contributing different views_questions not related (1)
[122] Code: QG1_Hearing and contributing different views_missing areas_Social media (1)

1.13 Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 2)

- Question M (Version 2): My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students, staff, and visiting speakers.
- Question N (Version 2): My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs.

In the second 35 interviews, the above questions were tested as part of the 'hearing and contributing different views' section.

1.13.1 Question M (Version 2): My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students, staff, and visiting speakers.

1.13.1.1 Previous testing

2020 testing found that beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.

1.13.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

It was much clearer to respondents that this question related to freedom of speech in a broad sense, beyond just what is discussed within their teaching sessions. When answering it, students were thinking about how topics such as political issues, race and sexuality are discussed and mediated within their institution.

They were often considering how this freedom of speech was facilitated within lectures and seminars, but also more broadly across the institution.

1.13.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

While the focus on freedom of speech and what fell into this category was clearer, there were quite a few difficulties in interpreting and answering this statement.

- Students' responses were heavily reliant on their own personal experiences and some (12) struggled to answer because they had little experience of infringed freedom of speech[123].
- If they felt they were not overtly aware of any issues regarding freedom of speech, they often assumed that their institution must be doing something to ensure this was upheld, although they were not actually aware of what the institution was doing in this realm.
- This lack of awareness or personal experience led to inconsistent use of the response scale – with students either agreeing, as they weren't aware of issues, or choosing

[123] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_Difficulties answering_no personal experience (12)

'neither agree nor disagree', as they had no concrete knowledge to base their answer on.

A small number (2) were confused by 'freedom of speech'[124] and a few (8) by 'within the law'[125]. Respondents felt the question relied on students knowing what the law was, which they suspected most would not know in great or enough detail. One of these respondents further questioned how useful it was to ask students to judge the lawfulness of the institution within the survey.

Others (4) also disputed the relevance of freedom of speech[126] within the survey and how valuable it was to ask students to evaluate this. Two of these respondents (2) further commented that they considered the purpose of the NSS to be about evaluating their course and learning outcomes, so this question felt irrelevant and difficult to answer[127].

One respondent (1) commented on freedom of speech being a wider societal issue[128] and found it difficult to separate what their institution was doing to uphold freedom of speech specifically.

1.13.1.4 Differences by respondent group

One respondent who attended a university with individual colleges (1) found this difficult to answer due to the variation across colleges[129].

1.13.1.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

Consider removing 'within the law' to avoid this relying on students' in-depth knowledge of the law.

[124] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_Difficulties with language_freedom of speech (2)
[125] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_Difficulties_Within the law (8)
[126] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_Difficulties answering_relevance of freedom of speech (4)
[127] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_Difficulties answering_not course specific (2)
[128] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_difficulties answering_wider societal issue (1)
[129] Code: M2_My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students ,staff, and visiting speakers_Difficulties answering_variation across colleges (1)

1.13.2 Question N (Version 2): My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs.

1.13.2.1 Previous testing

2020 testing found that beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.

1.13.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

- Students typically understood this question to be asking about the environment and culture of sharing views that was facilitated by their institution.
- Again, answers to this question were heavily based on their own personal experiences, with students reflecting on whether they had ever felt unable to share their views if they wanted to. The focus of this question was felt to be more reflective of their personal experience and so easier to answer than the previous question, which appeared to be asking them to legally evaluate the institution.
- Most tended to relate this to the ability to share views and opinions in relation to course content. However, many also related this to broader personal beliefs, such as their ability to freely express their politics, sexuality or religious beliefs without judgement or repercussion.
- The word 'environment' in this statement also caused some to reflect on the physical spaces and how this facilitated freedom of expression, such as spaces within the students' union to go for support. However, most interpreted this more as a cultural environment.

1.13.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

- As with the previous question, some respondents (3) struggled to answer, as they felt they had no personal experience to base this on[130]. They felt that answers would heavily rely on an individual's personality or how involved they chose to get in debates.

"I mean it depends a lot, unless one has a personal experience with it, in which case it depends on the students, whether or not they have a temperament to express things that are controversial enough to bring the free expression of ideas into question, if you're getting by not being particularly loud or controversial then you're probably not going to have that much of an experience with it."

19-21, Male, Second or non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, Wales (64)

[130] Code: N2_My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs_Difficulties answering_No personal experience (3)

- Two respondents (2) felt that this question was not course-specific enough[131], with the rest of the survey focusing on evaluating their course, but this question taking a wider look at the institution.
- One respondent (1) did not like the inclusion of the word 'beliefs' in this question, as they felt this was too strong a word that encouraged sharing of personal beliefs that were not relevant to the course[132]. They felt strongly that they were at university to learn and not to hear other people's personal beliefs and so did not see the relevance of 'beliefs' being shared.
- Two respondents (2) felt that this question was difficult to answer because the institution may technically provide this environment, but they as an individual may still not feel comfortable in expressing their views without repercussion, and the question does not currently account for this[133].
- One respondent (1) felt that this question needed to list the beneficiaries of this free speech[134], as is done in Question M (for students, staff, and visiting speakers), as they felt it was unclear who they should be relating this question to.
- The word 'environment'[135] caused some confusion for three respondents (3) who were initially unsure whether this referred to physical spaces or a broader cultural environment.

1.13.2.4 Differences by respondent group

There were no significant differences in interpretation by respondent group.

1.13.2.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

Consider rephrasing to 'safe environment' to incorporate how comfortable students feel about sharing their views within this environment.

1.13.3 Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 2)

1.13.3.1 Overall findings

Students were clear about the intention of this question group to assess the extent to which freedom of speech is upheld at their institution and related this to a broader experience beyond just their course content/delivery. This appeared to be much clearer than with the previous iteration of the question group.

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[131] Code: N2_My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs_difficulties answering_not course specific (2)

[132] Code: N2_My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs_difficulties with language_belief (1)

[133] Code: N2_My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs_Difficulties answering_not comfortable within this environment (2)

[134] Code: N2_My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs_difficulties with answering_for who (1)

[135] Code: N2_My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs_Environment (3)

However, answers were often very heavily tied into their own personal experiences and some therefore found these questions hard to answer if they had never encountered any issues with freedom of expression.

Students recognised the importance of freedom of speech and were aware of societal debates around this and the place of HE providers to facilitate it. However, some were less clear on the value and place of this within the NSS, where other questioning was much more heavily focused on their learning experience.

1.13.3.2 Overlap in question group

Many students (14) felt that the two questions overlapped with each other in this group[136] and their answers therefore considered very similar things.

"I am finding it hard to distinguish between the two. Surely, if you are ensuring that freedom of speech is upheld, then that means that you have automatically created an environment for freedom of speech and ideas. I am wondering where this needs to be separated."

22-25, Female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, London (67)

When asked which of the statements they preferred, most (14) selected Question N[137], as they felt this was more relatable to their own experience as opposed to evaluating the lawfulness of the institution, which was challenging to do, and that N gave a clearer breakdown of what should be considered.

Very few (3) preferred Question M[138] due to a sense that the phrase 'freedom of speech' was more widely understood.

1.13.3.3 Overlap outside question group

One student (1) felt that there was overlap with these questions and those within the section on 'a sense of belonging'[139]. They felt that the idea of being able to hear and share different views and being part of an inclusive culture should not be separated out.

1.13.3.4 Missing areas

A number of missing areas or suggested changes were raised by respondents for this question group, all pointing towards a need for greater clarity within it:

[136] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_overlaps (14)
[137] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_prefer N (14)
[138] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Prefer M (3)
[139] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Overlaps_with other section (1)

- **Visiting speakers (1)**[140] – separating out visiting speakers from students' ability to hear and share views and opinions.
- **Institution reaction (1)**[141] – a question on how students felt the institution acted upon any breaches of freedom of speech.
- **Social media (1)**[142] – how views are expressed on social media and how the institution responds to this.
- **Student involvement (1)**[143] – a question to capture how involved students were in debates and discussions to give context to later answers.
- **Platforms for expression (1)**[144] – not just about assessing a broad 'environment', which often made them think about a wider culture, but specifically asking about provision of platforms for them to express views and opinions.
- **Hearing different views (2)**[145] – the section currently focused more on the ability to share different views as opposed to hearing them from others.
- **Encouragement (1)**[146] – a question on the extent to which the institution encourages sharing of views, beyond simply providing the space for it.
- **Respectful environment (1)**[147] – a question that focused on having a respectful environment for free speech as opposed to suggesting that anything and everything is appropriate to be shared.

One respondent (1) noted that the questions were weighted towards hearing negative viewpoints or only gathering extreme responses from those who have had negative experiences[148]. They felt that those who are unaware or unaffected by freedom of speech are likely to be apathetic and less likely to strongly agree.

1.13.3.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

Consider having just one question, likely Question N, which looks at students' own experiences of freedom of speech – as students found it difficult to evaluate the lawfulness of the institution.

OfS may want to reconsider the place of freedom of speech more widely within the NSS, which students felt should be focused on evaluating their course and learning experiences.

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[140] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_missing areas_visiting speakers (1)
[141] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Missing areas_insitution reaction (1)
[142] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Missing areas_Social media (1)
[143] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_missing areas_their involvement (1)
[144] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Missing areas_platforms (1)
[145] Code: QG2_hearing and contributing different views_Missing areas_hearing views (2)
[146] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_missing areas_encouraging (1)
[147] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Missing areas_respectful (1)
[148] Code: QG2_Hearing and contributing different views_Difficulties with language_weighted toward negative responses (1)

1.14 Question group: Sense of belonging

- Question O: I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course.
- Question P: Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course.

1.14.1 Question O: I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course.

1.14.1.1 Previous testing

This was a new question for 2021.

1.14.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

This question led students to consider a wide range of areas of their student experience. These were largely related to their cohort, with a minority connecting the question to course materials, their subject/discipline or teaching staff. Those thinking about the social make-up of cohorts tended to concentrate on one key factor, with race/ethnicity being a common reading.

Considerations relating to social background, international student experiences and mental health were also raised, but less prevalent. Others thought in more general terms of how close knit or collaborative their relationships with classmates were.

1.14.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

There was widespread difficulty (38) with the phrase 'inclusive culture'[149], reflecting the wide variety of reference points associated with this question. This raised general issues (7) over clear language[150], leading respondents to try to second guess what they were being asked to think about before answering.

"[Is the language unclear at all, or do *you think it could be improved in any way?] Inclusive culture, so maybe have that elaborated a bit more. Are you talking about the values and views and strengths of the course or are you talking about in terms of inclusive of gender and religion or skin. I don't know."*

19-21, Male, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, London (3)

Others (6) thought the phrase was too personal or potentially traumatic to consider during the survey[151]. A lack of clarity on whether the phrase was referring to course content or cohorts and classes[152] also caused confusion (4). A couple (2) were unsure if the question referred to their own personal experiences, or those of others[153]. One student (1) felt that, as

[149] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties_inclusive culture (38)
[150] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties with language (7)
[151] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties answering_too personal (6)
[152] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties_course content or cohorts? (4)
[153] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties_not clear if personal or about others' experiences (2)

a white male, this question was irrelevant for them, only holding relevance for unspecified minority groups[154]. The number of possible interpretations led to difficulties for a small number of students (2), who found the question too broad and subjective[155] to give a clear answer.

There was some potential crossover with Question P, where they were also considering feeling welcomed, valued or listened to by staff[156].

1.14.1.4 Differences by respondent group

A handful of distance learners (4) found it difficult to conceptualise what 'culture' would mean in their case[157]. There also appear to be particular Welsh language issues (2) with this question[158].

"The wording in Welsh sounds more if you felt part of a group, and although I felt included in the course, I don't know if I would call it a culture."

22-25, female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, Wales (23)

"I would think about how much I engaged with the course, and I think that my answer would be different if I hadn't decided to engage as much as I did. My answer is definitely agree. I wasn't totally comfortable with the wording of the Welsh originally, but after hearing the English translation, I felt more confident with what the question was asking from me."

22-25, Male, Second or non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, North East (25)

1.14.1.5 Recommendations (Higher priority)

- Consider making the question more specific, e.g. referring specifically to course content, social atmosphere or other areas.
- Refine the Welsh language wording to ensure comprehension.

1.14.2 Question P: Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course.

1.14.2.1 Previous testing

This was a new question for 2021.

[154] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties_white male so felt not relevant (1)
[155] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties_too broad/too many meanings (2)
[156] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Areas considered_feeling welcomed, valued, listened to (2)
[157] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties answering_Distance (4)
[158] Code: O_I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course_Difficulties_inclusive culture_Welsh language (2)

1.14.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

This question led respondents to consider a range of levels of interaction between themselves and university staff.

- A majority thought about teaching staff here, and particularly when they had made them feel included in seminars and other classes – for example, by remembering their name or bringing them into discussions.
- Some thought about closer interaction with teaching staff, such as personal meetings, emails or where close connections had been forged over their course.
- A smaller number considered general, day-to-day interaction with a wider range of staff, including those not in teaching roles.
- There was also a strand who interpreted the question as referring to the ability of teaching staff to bring students together, e.g. through group work, to make them feel included by their peers.

1.14.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

Despite the range of experiences called upon to answer the question, there was relatively little difficulty in doing so. However, this confidence may mean that results are not straightforward to analyse, with the statement potentially measuring a range of factors.

- The language of the question led many (15) to conclude that it only referred to teaching staff[159], though this was not always the case.
- Given the potentially large number of academics they had encountered on their course, each with their own teaching styles and level of personal connection, some (6) found it challenging to provide an answer summing up these diverse experiences[160].

Further difficulties were found from those who considered they did not have any relevant experience – for a diverse range of reasons these individuals (3) did not feel particularly included or excluded[161].

- Two respondents (2) thought that it was not the teaching staff's duty to make them feel included on the course – they felt they were simply there to impart information[162].

[159] Code: P_Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course_Difficulties_only think of teaching staff (15)
[160] Code: P_Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course_Difficulties answering_challenge averaging experience (6)
[161] Code: P_Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course_Difficulties answering_no experience (3)
[162] Code: P_Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course_Difficulties_not teaching staff's duty to make feel included (2)

1.14.2.4 Differences by respondent group

Distance learning, either where this was expected or that had come about as a result of the pandemic, posed an issue for a couple of students (2)[163].

1.14.2.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

Consider specifying staff types, or utilising instructional text to provide details of those in scope (e.g. support and administrative as well as teaching) and/or the means of inclusion.

1.14.3 Question group: Sense of belonging

1.14.3.1 Overall findings

Overall, this question group was thought to have worked well by students. They generally understood that questions had a different and clearly defined focus on students, followed by staff. However, some (7) found that, overall, the questions were too subjective, with answers varying based upon the socio-demographic make-up of cohorts, individual conceptions and experiences and personal background and characteristics[164]. This, and a variety of experiences across their time as a student, also led to some (4) having issues with averaging experiences[165].

1.14.3.2 Overlap in question group

There were several instances (10) in which respondents thought that the questions were too similar[166]. This was almost entirely because they included staff within Question O. Question order was important here – where students had read both questions before answering the first, it felt clear to them that they were asking about different things. However, this was not the case where they had worked through them one-by-one.

1.14.3.3 Overlap outside question group

There were no overlaps outside the question group found.

1.14.3.4 Missing areas

A handful of respondents (3) suggested a question that explicitly asked about students[167]. However, OfS may wish to consider if a measure of how included students made each other feel represents a valuable metric. Other areas thought to be missing were questions or

[163] Code: P_Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course_Difficulties answering_distance learning (2)
[164] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_too subjective (7)
[165] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_difficulty averaging experience (4)
[166] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_questions too similar (10)
[167] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_gaps_question on if students made you feel included (3)

wording on course content[168], societies[169], and cultures and nationalities[170], with each suggested by one student only.

1.14.3.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

Further outlining where staff and students are intended to be considered in questions may lead to more useful data here.

1.15 Question group: Safety (Version 1)

- Question Q (Version 1): The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn. *If your course did not involve going into the physical environment of the university, please select 'Not applicable'.*
- Question R: The digital environment my institution provides is a safe one in which to learn

1.15.1 Question Q (Version 1): The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn. If your course did not involve going into the physical environment of the university, please select 'Not applicable'.

1.15.1.1 Previous testing

This was a new question in 2021.

1.15.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Respondents were predominantly considering physical spaces, security on campus overall, feeling safe from harassment and crime, and health and safety concerns, such as unsound buildings.

- Cleanliness of teaching spaces was also mentioned. When appraising these areas, students considered the physical environment of their campus, both inside and outside, and how welcoming classrooms and other teaching spaces were.
- Some courses dictated the answer more than others, with those who spent time in physical labs thinking about staff giving talks on health and safety and PPE.
- Others also considered the more general safety of their belongings and equipment, such as laptops.
- Travel to and from campus was also considered. Some spoke about walking home and feeling safe in the city, particularly relating to walking home late at night. One negative experience of harassment came up here.

[168] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_gaps_course content (1)
[169] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_gaps_societies (1)
[170] Code: QG_A sense of belonging_gaps_cultures and nationalities (1)

1.15.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

This question did not present any significant issues. However, there was confusion from a handful of students regarding the wording. For some (6), the term 'physical environment' was felt to be unspecified – they felt it could relate to mental health, and feeling safe and secure from emotional harm[171]. For others (5), the term 'safe' proved troublesome[172], where it was not clear what this was in relation to – the social, psychological or physical were all considered.

Nevertheless, others (4) praised the way the question separated the physical and digital realms[173].

1.15.1.4 Differences by respondent group

One respondent (1) considered their own ethnicity and fear of racism[174], in a conceptualisation that was somewhat different from others.

1.15.1.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- This question was generally well received and the instructional text worked well. We suggest retaining this.
- Analysis may need to account for the fact that students considered a wide range of situations. We feel that this is not problematic, and simply reflects provider diversity in the sector.

1.15.2 Question R: The digital environment my institution provides is a safe one in which to learn.

1.15.2.1 Previous testing

This was a new question for 2021.

1.15.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Respondents discussed a wide range of online harms that they felt their institution was protecting them against. This ranged from general protection from viruses and exposure to inappropriate material via secure servers, to more active moderation on forums and VLEs by teaching staff.

[171] Code: Q Version 1_The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn_Physical + Environment (6)
[172] Code: Q Version 1_The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn_Difficulties with language_safe (5)
[173] Code: Q Version 1_The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn _Support use of language _Physical_ (4)
[174] Code: Q Version 1_The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn _Ethnicity specific__ (1)

"No online abuse, there are no viruses on the programme, all links secure, the log in is secure, and they change the password through the year. So, all great."

36-45, Female, Final year, Full-time distance learner, Large HEI, Scotland (10)

Privacy and security were major concerns, with hacking also raised, both in general terms but also in relation to copyright issues and stopping people from stealing work. Perhaps surprisingly, very few brought up harassment. Many conceptions were driven by the shift to online teaching during the pandemic, which meant people immediately thought about MS Teams, Zoom meetings and live online learning where they may have been unlikely to do so before. The extent to which university curricula will continue to operate a hybrid model may therefore affect question outcomes here.

1.15.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

There was some confusion (8) around exactly what was meant by digital environment[175], particularly how this interacted with physical spaces. For some this meant any place where they were using a computer, i.e. a specific computer room or library. They would consider if this was a safe place or not, based on the term 'environment'. This produced further difficulties, because it could refer to home environment while working online at some points. One respondent (1) raised the point that this could encompass student-led social media discussion outside the control of institutions[176], which may have presented a problem for those trying to answer based on all the digital environments that were used as a part of their course. This variety of meanings led to confusion:

"But what does the digital environment mean? Do they mean the resources? Or is there a social media thing? I don't understand what the digital environment is. Does it mean the Teams chat? What does it mean? [What would you have put for this question?] I would have put not applicable because I don't know if I have got a digital environment. [What would you do to make that clearer?]

"With online teaching, I felt safe" I'm assuming that it is talking about teaching, but I'm not sure what it means. Does it mean social media?"

22-25, Female, Final year, Full-time distance learner, Large HEI, West Midlands (21)

Similarly, the term 'safe' was felt by a couple (2) to lack clarity when not fully contextualised[177].

[175] Code: R_The digital environments of institution is a safe place..._Difficulties_Digital environment (8)
[176] Code: R_the digital envronments of institution is a safe place..._Difficulties_inncludes social media spaces outside provider control (1)
[177] Code: R_The digital environments of institution is a safe place..._Difficulties with language_safe (2)

1.15.2.4 Differences by respondent group

While difficulties did not arise exclusively from any one group, the varied experiences of teaching and learning between face-to-face and online-only students are likely to mean that this question will be interpreted very differently.

1.15.2.5 Recommendations (Lower priority)

- The question may require further testing to ensure that it continues to work for all students in the long term. The near-universal online learning over the pandemic was potentially responsible for the largely positive reaction.

1.15.3 Question group: Safety (Version 1)

1.15.3.1 Overall findings

Safety was generally found to refer to comfortable and relaxed environments for learning, both online and in person. However, there were a small number (6) of difficulties with language[178], which should be considered in future question development. Clarification and specificity were sought to ensure all respondents agreed on what 'type' of safety they were being asked to consider, with both the wider environment (city, social media) and educational (teaching rooms, campus, VLE) raised. Protecting student mental health and wellbeing was also considered across both these areas. Lastly, there was also discussion that it was unrealistic for providers to fully protect their students. One respondent reframed the question when answering:

"I don't think a university can protect somebody from that… what they can do, is create a culture where it's not acceptable, and the people are punished if it happens."

36-45, Female, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, South West (68)

1.15.3.2 Overlap in question group

Analysis did not suggest that there were any significant overlaps between questions.

1.15.3.3 Overlap outside question group

There appears to be potential overlap with questions in the 'support services' section, where students considered the various services which, among other things, protected their safety, although this was not explicitly noted by students themselves.

1.15.3.4 Missing areas

Suggested gaps (5) largely referred to making it clear that the question was not just referring to safety in relation to teaching and learning, but the full student experience[179]. Female students in particular mentioned transport to and from the campus, and the environment

[178] Code: QG_QG Safety _Difficulties with language _Safety (6)
[179] Code: QG_Safety_Gaps (5)

after social and students' union events, and how the responsibilities of their provider crossed over with those of the police.

1.15.3.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- Consideration should be given to clarifying the context and limits of safety in the group title, perhaps with some explanatory text.
- Making clear the extent of the question's reach, and ensuring that all students are considering the same areas may be valuable. This might be achieved with explanatory text framing the question 'in terms of your entire student experience'.
- Alternatively, a routed question for fully online students only may help to ensure that disparities in experience between these groups do not affect the quality of data produced.

1.16 Question group: Safety (Version 2)

- Question Q (Version 2): My institution protects me from harassment and sexual misconduct from students, staff and visitors.

1.16.1 Question Q (Version 2): My institution protects me from harassment and sexual misconduct from students, staff and visitors.

1.16.1.1 Previous testing

This was a new question for 2021.

1.16.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Respondents largely thought of harassment guidelines, and how quickly their provider had acted following any incidents that had occurred. This involved helplines, staff to talk to, or other places to go for help. They also considered whole-year lectures and communications that let students know about how seriously they took these matters, alongside any associated written policies. They also considered if providers had acted appropriately when allegations or incidents had occurred. There were varying levels of awareness of the services that providers were offering, though many assumed that they existed, even if they were not fully familiar with them.

Related to this were preventative measures and physical safety, covering security staff, checking of ID cards and general institution-wide approaches to keeping learners safe. This covered teaching and learning spaces, the campus generally and student accommodation. To a lesser extent, there was discussion of more general university campaigns against sexual harassment.

1.16.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

- Difficulties mostly (6) related to a lack of personal experience with any kind of harassment[180]. Providing an answer was especially challenging for those who had never been affected by harassment, but knew that their provider had policies in place.
- This led to some difficulty in knowing whether to choose 'this does not apply to me' or simply skipping the question. Some of these respondents felt they would skip over the question as soon as they perceived it was not relevant to them.
- Some other language difficulties (5) related to the phrase 'protects me'[181]. It was not clear to these respondents what this meant or entailed in practice.
- Elsewhere, respondents (3) thought that it was not up to their provider to protect them, seeing this more in terms of individual responsibility, but rather to react where issues had taken place[182].

- Related to this were difficulties for those (2) who made a distinction between protection and action[183]. Here it was thought that it may be better to ask both if providers try to prevent harassment, and if they have adequate procedures in place if it does occur. However, this would not resolve the difficulty in knowing whether to choose 'This does not apply to me'.
- Two respondents (2) discussed the limits of provider responsibility[184]. They suggested that there may be situations in which it would be difficult or impossible for a provider to have full control over incidents of harassment, making this question difficult to answer.

1.16.1.4 Differences by respondent group

A couple of dance students (2) thought the question was too general for them[185], and spoke of the particularly difficult environment of their provider and industry. For them, two questions investigating whether policies were in place, and if they were adhered to, would be helpful.

[180] Code: Q Version 2_My institution protects me from harassment... _Difficulties answering_Can't answer if never experienced (6)
[181] Code: Q Version 2_My institution protects me from harassment ..._Difficulties_Protects me (5)
[182] Code: Q Version 2_My institution protects me from harassment..._Difficulties_Limits of provider responsibility
[183] Code: Q Version 2_My institution protects me from harassment ... _Difficulties answering_asks about prevention and protection (2)
[184] Code: Q Version 2_My institution protects me from harassment..._Difficulties_Limits of provider responsibility (2)
[185] Q Version 2_My institution protects me from harassment... _Difficulties answering_Too general for dance students (2)

"This line of questioning for a dance school is really vital. There needs to be a lot more… if it turns out that sexual misconduct is common knowledge within the school, then it means the policy isn't working. So we could tick a box and be like, yes, we know there's policy so I guess we're protected, but I know three or four stories about members of staff who have had relationships with students in the last 10 years. So if everyone is aware it's happening and it's a thing, then it means the policy hasn't worked. So this question isn't enough."

22-25, Male, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Small FEC, London (62)

It may be valuable to provide a routing question before this question, asking if individuals feel they have been affected.

1.16.1.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- The question appeared to be well received by students, who understood it as an important area. There may be value in collecting this data in future. However, disparities in experiences mean that currently its value is more patchy. One option may be to prefix the question with 'To the best of my knowledge'.
- Otherwise, having separate questions on prevention and procedures/responses to cases of harassment may also help to provide more reliable data.

1.17 Question group: Support services

- Question S: The institution has made me aware of how to access services to support my mental wellbeing.
- Question T: Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs. *If you did not require these services please select 'Not applicable'.*

1.17.1 Question S: The institution has made me aware of how to access services to support my mental wellbeing.

1.17.1.1 Previous testing

This was a new question for 2021.

1.17.1.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

Respondents were predominantly considering how and what their provider communicated to them. Communications were mostly via emails, which provided links out to sections of the provider website.

We also heard about more personal interactions, particularly around staff signposting students to the right places. Again, this often occurred via email, though this may simply reflect the norms of remote study during the pandemic.

A number reported how their providers were clearly taking mental health seriously, and that this had become more evident over the past year or so. Topics included in communications

relating to mental wellbeing and considerations here covered both academic-related stresses and those that might occur in their personal lives.

1.17.1.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

Difficulties with answering centred on two areas.

- Firstly, those who had not accessed services sometimes struggled to answer the question (6), with confusion over whether 'not applicable' or neutral was a more appropriate response[186].
- Secondly, some (8) recognised they were being asked for an aggregated answer to a question that asked about both awareness and accessibility[187].
- While students may have been made fully aware of the services available to them, their answer would be influenced by how available the resources were and whether they were actually useful. Again, this may depend on personal experience.

A few respondents (4) mentioned mental health becoming recognised as more of an issue during the pandemic, by both providers and students, leading to a heightened level of awareness[188]. This may influence responses to this question, with a corresponding dip in awareness possible in future years.

1.17.1.4 Differences by respondent group

There were no significant differences between respondent groups, with mental health and wellbeing considered important across the board.

1.17.1.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- Again, the provision of instructional text may be beneficial, dependent on what OfS deem to be the core focus of this question.
- Otherwise, splitting the statement into two questions that measure awareness and accessibility or satisfaction may help to provide a more accurate measure of this area.

1.17.2 Question T: Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs. If you did not require these services please select 'Not applicable'.

1.17.2.1 Previous testing

This was a new question for 2021.

[186] Code: S_The institution...access services to support my mental wellbeing_Difficulties (6)
[187] Code: S_The institution...access services to support my mental wellbeing_difficulties answering_double barrelled awareness and accessibility (8)
[188] Code: S__The institution...access services to support my mental wellbeing_Covid-specific comment (4)

1.17.2.2 Respondent approach to answering the question and areas of the student experience considered

In-person services, counsellors, reps, welfare officers and the events they ran came to mind when answering this question. This included drop-in clinics, formal meetings and informal social events. Consideration of in-person services directly related to the use of the word 'appropriate' in the question:

"So 'appropriate for my needs', if I could interpret it in a bit more detail, is for example, if I may not feel comfortable emailing a staff member about my mental wellbeing, then that's obviously not my need. My need will possibly be an in-person sort of service, and I would say that, yes, the services are provided. Yes, the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs because if I do not want to talk via email, I know that I could actually go and talk in person and, you know, I'll receive the privacy and confidentiality that I would seek."

19-21, Male, Second or non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, London (7)

Respondents were thinking about information and direction they had received, as well as referrals, either to in-house or NHS services. A smaller number thought about digital services, perhaps suggesting that these are less prevalent or thought to be less appropriate.

1.17.2.3 Reasons for any difficulty answering and issues with language used

The most significant difficulty (9) related to having no experience of services[189]. This led to a range of answers, across all options. Respondents called on the experiences of peers or made assumptions based on emails they had received but not read in depth.

A number of students (6) found the general language of the question confusing[190], based around its length, construction and instructional text. For some (5), this led to a failure to read the instructional text[191], while others (4) did not understand it[192]. This was linked to confusion around how to answer when lacking experience with the support services.

"[Did you notice this when you were answering the question?] I did notice it, but I just wasn't sure. I haven't used these services, but at the same time, like they were appropriate for my needs if I did require them, so I was unsure whether to answer it or not."

19-21, Female, Second or non-final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, West Midlands (28)

[189] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties_no experience (9)
[190] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties (6)
[191] Codes: Instructional text_failure to read and S_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties (5)
[192] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulty_instructional text (4)

A small number (3) failed to grasp what the question was referring to[193]. For a couple of others (2), the scope, as they understood it, was too narrow[194]. One student (1) found the word 'services' too clinical for the subject matter[195], while another (1) felt the same about 'appropriate'[196]. One student also felt that it was not the role of the university to provide these services (1), and that the question should not be included in the survey[197].

Finally, there may be Welsh language issues, with one student (1) commenting that they didn't know the word 'priodol' meant 'appropriate', thinking this meant 'mainly'[198].

1.17.2.4 Differences by respondent group

There did not appear to be significant differences by respondent group.

1.17.2.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- A more direct version of the question could be used, e.g. 'Services to support my mental wellbeing were available when I needed them', using the same instructional text.
- Reconsider how the question works in the Welsh language.

1.17.3 Question group: Support services

1.17.3.1 Overall findings

Students found these questions important, with mental health clearly a key topic for them. However, there was some criticism (5) that the questions here were too focused on mental health[199] at the expense of other issues that might require support – as discussed under 'missing areas'

1.17.3.2 Overlap in question group

Responses from students suggest that they were thinking of similar elements of the student experience when answering these questions, especially where they were relatively unfamiliar with services.

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[193] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties with language_unclear what refering to (3)
[194] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties_too narrow (2)
[195] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties_'services' feels too clinical (1)
[196] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties_appropriate not appropriate ?(1)
[197] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties_not the role of the uni (1)
[198] Code: T_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties_Welsh language (1)
[199] Code: QG_Support services_Gaps_too focused on mental health (5)

1.17.3.3 Overlap outside question group

These questions appeared to be largely discrete from other groups and questions. One student suggested that an inclusive environment generated by their peers was an important factor (1), hinting at potential crossover with Question O[200].

1.17.3.4 Missing areas

In line with references to a focus on mental health that was too narrow, respondents suggested that there was room to discuss other, related areas.

- Two respondents (2) mentioned accessibility as missing from Question S[201], with physical and learning disabilities making up the majority of identified gaps within the question group (15), alongside more general student services[202].
- These came from students of all kinds, not just those with, for example, physical disabilities.
- One student (1) thought that providing a list of services or examples would be useful[203], with another (1) suggesting that learning assistants be included in the question[204].
- For one respondent (1), it was important to clarify whether the question was addressing the entire provider or the culture of individual departments[205].

Additionally, there was a suggestion (1) that pandemic-related issues should be addressed separately[206].

1.17.3.5 Recommendations (Medium priority)

- The provision of instructional text giving information on the kinds of services students should consider may be useful, as responses here showed a strong bias towards those associated with mental health.
- These important areas should continue to be included in the survey.
- Consider additional questions or instructional text that ensure the inclusion of support relating to areas other than mental health. Accessibility more generally might be a focus here.

[200] Code: QG_Support services_staff student split (1)
[201] Code: S_Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs_Difficulties answering_accesibility not included (2)
[202] Code: QG_Support services_Gaps (15)
[203] Code: QG_Support services_Gaps_instructional text/examples (1)
[204] Code: QG_Support services_Gaps_learning assistants (1)
[205] Code: QG_Support services_Gaps_mental health culture in departments (1)
[206] Code: QG_Support services_Gaps_covid/pandemic (1)

6. Overall satisfaction

Respondents were asked to suggest an overarching question that would provide an indication of their overall satisfaction with their course. This yielded a number of interesting ideas. While not all may be viable for various reasons, they indicate what might be acceptable and engaging for this audience.

Open question

The most popular suggestion (9) was for an open question[207], recognising how broad student experiences were. Students appeared well aware of how closed questions made them concentrate on particular incidents, which may not have been representative of their time at university, rather than averaging these out when formulating a response. An open question would give them the space to provide nuance and row back from more extreme positions coloured by isolated incidents. One student (1) flagged how averaging out this dense experience was challenging[208], while another (1) suggested that responses may be based on an emotional rather than rational reaction[209].

While previously this would likely have been too unwieldy to analyse, AI tools that can code open responses are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and OfS may wish to consider how these may be leveraged in future iterations of the NSS.

Meeting expectations

Another, related, suggestion (3) was to ask if the course had met their expectations[210].

"I would say, 'Has it met with your expectations?' I think, there is a very good saying, 'Unhappiness lies in the gap between expectation and reality.' I think whether or not something has met with your expectations is quite a good insight into how people are feeling about the experience."

26-45, Female, Second or non-final year, Full-time distance learner, Small FEC, South East (72)

[207] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_open question (9)
[208] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_challenge averaging experiences (1)
[209] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_emotional reaction (1)
[210] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_met expectations (3)

Likelihood to recommend or study again

An alternative here (3) was to ask if students would recommend the course to others[211], or similarly (2) would they take the course again, knowing what they know now[212]. It was interesting that one student compared their student experience with consumer products (1), leading them to make this suggestion:

"I don't know if this can apply but something that is really helpful to me when making choices about where to go for food or different reviews of what to buy, I think that is really helpful to us, like, 'Would you have studied again at [provider]?' or something like that, 'Would you have studied at [provider] if you were given the choice again?'"

19-21, Male, Final year, Full-time campus learner, Large HEI, London (61)

Other suggestions – preparation for future goals, word association, quality.

Other suggestions were framed in a similar way. For example, a couple (2) would ask if the course had sufficiently prepared them to move forward in their chosen direction, be this a career or their life more generally[213]. There were also two suggestions (2) for a question that asked for three words that summed up their student experience[214]. Other more concise approaches, each from a single respondent, were to ask if the experience was up to a high standard[215], if there was one thing which could be improved[216], summing up in one sentence[217] and a rating on a scale of 1 to 10[218].

A problem identified here (1) focused on cases where academic experiences were very different from personal ones[219], suggesting that wording may need to be precise, or that multiple questions may be required to isolate measurements for these different areas. One suggested a simple question 'were you happy at university?' (1), foregrounding wellbeing[220]. Similarly, another (1) felt there should be different appreciations of the physical and online realms[221].

[211] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_would you recommend the course to others? (3)
[212] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_would you take your course again (2)
[213] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_feel set up to move forward? (2)
[214] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_say three words (2)
[215] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_high standard (1)
[216] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_one thing you feel could be improved (1)
[217] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_sum up your experience in one sentence (1)
[218] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_rate overall experience (1)
[219] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_split experiences and course (1)
[220] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_were you happy (1)
[221] Code: Overarching_Experience at university_Suggestions for final question_split out physical and online (1)

7. Conclusion

Respondents largely felt confident in their ability to answer the survey questions, and found it relevant to their study experiences.

Most of the new questions tested in this research were unproblematic. Interviews did, however, uncover questions which produced disparate answers, or which contained problematic language.

Feedback appeared to be largely consistent across respondent groups, suggesting that changes in wording or approach to these statements would be beneficial to the NSS audience as whole.

1.18 Recommendations

This research has generated a number of suggested adaptations to the survey to improve comprehension among students.

1.18.1 Higher-priority recommendations

1.18.1.1 Question group: assessment and feedback

- Questions F and G were not distinct enough in respondents' minds, with both covering very similar areas of the student experience.
- Question G was much easier for students to interpret and relate to the usefulness of feedback in improving their work.
- We recommend using only question G and removing F.
- If question F is kept, more clarity will be needed to ensure students know what is to be included in the 'learning experience' beyond their work – which is already accounted for in question G.
- This question group was currently felt to focus on feedback, with not enough about assessment.
- Consider adding a statement around the suitability/appropriateness of assessments used.

1.18.1.2 Question group: students' union

- Initial phrasing and testing of Question L caused confusion due to the length of the question and instructional text, which led to a failure to fully read the question in some cases.
- We recommend focusing on the second version of the question wording and moving away from Version 1, as there was less confusion in the second iteration.
- However, the shortened second iteration did result in fewer respondents mentioning academic representation, which is likely because most respondents did not interact

with their academic representative and were therefore unlikely to consider it in their answer regardless of the prompt.
- If wanting to ensure students respond in relation to all students' union services, not just those they have accessed, consider splitting the question out to ask about the different aspects of the students' union as separate questions. Listing all services within the one statement leads respondents to not fully read the statement.

1.18.1.3 Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 1)

- Questions in this section were most likely to be answered in relation to students' ability to hear and contribute a range of views in relation to their course content, as opposed to wider freedom of speech.
- More clarity is needed that this covers freedom of speech.
- New versions of these questions made this intention much clearer to students and so we recommend using these instead.

1.18.1.4 Question group Hearing and contributing different views (Version 2)

- Students were clear in the intention of these questions to address freedom of speech within their institution, more so than with the previous version of the question set.
- However, their ability to answer these statements was largely dependent on their personal experience. Those who had never experienced any issues, or who didn't actively involve themselves in debate, found it difficult to give a firm answer – often using a neutral response.
- Students often felt the two statements were very similar and answered in a similar vein.
- Consider having just one question, likely question N, which looks at the student's own experience of freedom of speech – as students found it difficult to evaluate the lawfulness of the institution.
- OfS may want to reconsider the place of freedom of speech within the NSS more widely, which students felt should be focused on evaluating their course and learning experiences.

1.18.1.5 Question O: I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course

- There was widespread confusion over how to approach this question, with a broad range of areas considered.
- Consider making the question more specific, e.g. referring specifically to course content, social atmosphere or other areas.
- Refine the Welsh language wording to ensure comprehension.

1.18.2 Medium-priority recommendations

Below are areas in which to consider further testing, but they are not top priority.

1.18.2.1 Question group: The teaching on my course

- Difficulties with averaging experiences led to confusion for a handful of students.

- Consider including an additional question, or adapting an existing one, to allow respondents to comment on the consistency of teaching approaches – in order to clear up confusion surrounding difficulties averaging experiences.

1.18.2.2 Question J: It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution when I needed to

- Most respondents thought of either online or physical resources when answering this question.
- Consider adding 'digital and physical' in brackets after 'learning resources' to clarify that respondents should be thinking about both in their answer.

1.18.2.3 Question group: learning resources

- There was a lack of consistency around which resources respondents considered when answering both questions.
- Consider changing the group title to 'Digital and physical learning resources'. This should help clarify what resources respondents should consider and encourage consistency in approach, as opposed to within individual questions.

1.18.2.4 Question M (Version 1): I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course

- Consider changing 'feel free' to 'I have the opportunity to' to focus more on what the institution is doing to facilitate this environment.
- Consider changing the phrase 'on my course' to 'within my course' to remove confusion over this question being about feedback about their course.
- If looking to focus on wider freedom of speech, consider replacing with Version 2 of the 'hearing and contributing different views' section – see below.

1.18.2.5 Question N (Version 1): On my course, I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics

- Consider adding clarification to this statement. If intending to ask about sharing of views within the bounds of the course content, consider something like 'I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics on my course'.
- If intending to incorporate wider freedom of speech, consider replacing with Version 2 of the 'hearing and contributing different views' section – see below.

1.18.2.6 Question M (Version 2): my university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students, staff, and visiting speakers

- This question relied on students' understanding of the law.
- Consider removing 'within the law' to avoid relying on students' in-depth legal knowledge.

1.18.2.7 Question N (Version 2): My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs

- Consider rephrasing to 'a safe environment' to incorporate how comfortable students feel with sharing their views within this environment.

1.18.2.8 Question group: Safety

- Making clear the extent of the question's reach, and ensuring that all students are considering the same areas, may be valuable. This might be achieved with explanatory text framing the question 'in terms of your entire student experience'.
- Alternatively, a routed question for fully online students only may help to ensure that disparities in experience between these groups do not affect the quality of data produced.

1.18.2.9 Question Q (Version 2): My institution protects me from harassment and sexual misconduct from students, staff and visitors

- Responses were highly coloured by personal and peer experience. Many respondents had little to call upon when attempting to answer the question. This led to a potentially unacceptable reliance on half-remembered emails or assumptions that procedures were in place. These students selected a range of responses.
- The question appeared to be well received by students, who understood it as an important area. There may be value in collecting this data in future. However, disparities in experiences mean that currently the value of the question is patchy. One option may be to prefix the question with 'To the best of my knowledge'.
- Otherwise, separate questions on prevention and procedures for, and responses to, cases of harassment may be needed.

1.18.2.10 Question S (Version 2): The institution has made me aware of how to access services to support my mental wellbeing

- As in a number of other questions, those without direct personal experience did sometimes struggle to answer the question, choosing various answers based on their gut feeling.
- Others struggled with the duality of the question, suggesting that it was asking about both awareness and accessibility, and that they would like to provide different responses for each.
- Again, the provision of instructional text may be beneficial here, dependent on what OfS deem to be the core focus of this question.
- Otherwise, splitting the statement into two questions that measure awareness and accessibility or satisfaction may help to provide a more accurate measure of this area.

1.18.2.11 Question T (Version 2): Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs.

- Difficulties stemmed from a lack of experience, with the instructional text doing little to help here. Some found the somewhat abstract nature of the question and its length confusing or daunting, putting them off reading it in any depth.
- A more direct version of the question could be used, e.g. 'Services to support my mental wellbeing were available when I needed them', using the same instructional text.
- Reconsider how the question works in the Welsh language.

1.18.2.12 Question group: Support services

- Mental health and wellbeing were considered extremely important topics by students. However, there was some feeling that mental health was over-emphasised, at the expense of physical and learning disabilities.
- Consider additional questions or instructional text ensuring the inclusion of support relating to areas other than mental health. Accessibility more generally might be a focus here.

1.18.2.13 Overall satisfaction

Students found it difficult to suggest an appropriate question to evaluate their overall experience. Suggestions that OfS may want to explore further include:

- **An open question**: This was the most popular suggestion, as it would recognise how broad student experiences were. While previously this would likely have been too unwieldy to analyse, AI tools that can code open responses are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and OfS may wish to consider how these may be leveraged in future iterations of the NSS.
- **Likelihood to recommend or study again:** Whether they would recommend to others or take the course again if they had the chance. Some students cited familiarity with this approach.
- **Meeting expectations**: There was a feeling that this was a good measure of how positive and worthwhile an experience had been.
- **Other suggestions:** Preparation for future goals, word association, assessment of quality.

1.18.3 Lower-priority recommendations

1.18.3.1 Question A: Staff are good at explaining things

- Where confusion existed with this question, it stemmed from not reading the question group title asking respondents to focus on teaching, and the lack of definition around terms used in the question.
- 'Things' could be updated to 'the course content'.
- 'Staff' could be updated to 'teaching staff' or 'tutors'.

1.18.3.2 Question B: Staff have made the subject interesting

- Consider changing 'interesting' to 'engaging' to focus more on staff expertise when teaching the subject, rather than the personal interest of the respondent.

1.18.3.3 Question C: the course is intellectually stimulating

- The subjective nature of the question appears to have become a more significant issue than in previous research.
- The influence of online learning during the pandemic looks to have affected considerations for students who would normally have been on face-to-face courses.
- Consider where the statement is placed within the survey to avoid previous questions influencing thinking.

1.18.3.4 Question D: My course has challenged me to achieve my best work

- Consider how to capture improvements and progress. The language of the statement prompting them to think of final pieces of work may make this difficult to conceptualise for those on placement years or highly vocational courses.

1.18.3.5 Question group: assessment and feedback

- Some felt that this section could do with more specificity over which areas of organisation and management are to be considered, as well as potentially splitting this into separate questions for clarity and consistency.
- While keeping Question I focused on communication, consider breaking down Question H into more specific questions around:
  - Timetabling
  - Course structure
  - Staff organisation and management.

1.18.3.6 Question P: Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course

- Consider specifying staff types, or using instructional text to provide details of those in scope (e.g. support and administrative as well as teaching) and/or means of inclusion.

1.18.3.7 Question group: Sense of belonging

- Students felt they understood the questions, though their subjective nature and the wide range of personal experiences and conceptions meant they were not always united in the areas of the student experience they called upon to answer them.
- Further outlining where staff and students are intended to be considered in questions may lead to more useful data here.

1.18.3.8 Question R: The digital environment my institution provides is a safe one in which to learn

- The question may require further testing to ensure it continues to work for all students in the long term. Near-universal online learning over the pandemic was potentially responsible for the largely positive reaction.

8. Appendix

1.19 Respondent profiles continued

Learner type	
Home (UK)	64
EU	5
International	6

English region of domicile	
North East	2
East	5
London	23
South East	5
South West	3
West Midlands	6
North West	8
Yorkshire and the Humber	1

Provider size	
Small	5
Medium	13
Large	57

Age – learner	
19 – 21	31
22 – 25	23
26 – 35	9
36 – 45	8
46 – 60	4

Ethnicity	
White – English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish	32
White – Irish	2
Other white background	9
Black or Black British – Caribbean	6
Black or Black British – African	4
Asian or Asian British – Indian	4
Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi	4
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	3
Asian or Asian British – Chinese	4
Other Asian background	6
Mixed – White and Asian	1

Continent of origin (International respondents)	
Europe	5
Africa	2
Asia	3

A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or AD(H)D	2
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	2

Disability	
No known disability	60
A long-standing illness or health condition such as cancer, HIV, diabetes, chronic heart disease, or epilepsy	1
A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder	9
A physical impairment or mobility issues, such as difficulty using arms or using a wheelchair or crutches	2
A social/ communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome/other autistic spectrum disorder	1

Gender	
Female (including trans female)	52
Male (including trans male)	21
Non-binary	2

Graduation date	
Summer 2020	1
Summer 2021	34
Winter 2021	6
Summer 2022	24
Summer 2023	6
Winter 2023	1
Summer 2024	3

Year of study completed	
Final year	50
Second or other non-final year	25

1.20 Question set

	Question set A	Question set B	Change between Round A and B
The Teaching on my course			
A.	Staff are good at explaining things	Staff are good at explaining things	No change
B.	Staff have made the subject interesting	Staff have made the subject interesting	No change
C.	The course is intellectually stimulating	The course is intellectually stimulating	No change
D.	My course has challenged me to achieve my best work	My course has challenged me to achieve my best work	No change
Assessment and feedback			
E.	The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance	The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance	No change
F.	Feedback has improved my learning experience. *If you have not used, or rarely use feedback in your work, please select 'N/A Not applicable'*	Feedback has improved my learning experience. If you have not used, or rarely use feedback in your work, please select 'this does not apply to me)	Y (Instruction text changed)
G.	Feedback has enabled me to improve my work.	Feedback has enabled me to improve my work. If you have not used, or rarely use feedback in your work, please select 'this does not apply to me)	Y (Instruction text changed)
Organisation and management			
H.	The course is well organised	The course is well organised	No change

I.	Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively	Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively	No change
Learning resources			
J.	It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution	It has been easy to access learning resources provided by my institution	No change
K.	Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well.	Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well.	No change
Students' union			
L.	Version 1 Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am satisfied with the Students Union (Association or Guild) at my institution. *If your institution does not have a Students Union, Association or Guild please select 'n/a not applicable'*	Version 2 I am content with services provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution If your institution does not have a Students Union, Association or Guild please select 'This does not apply to me'	Y – statement reworked.
Hearing and contributing different views			
M.	Version 1 I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course.	Version 2 My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students, staff, and visiting speakers	Y – question group reworked in round B
N.	Version 1 On my course, I have had the opportunity to hear a range of views on different topics.	Version 2 My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs	
A sense of belonging			

O.	I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course.	I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course.	No change
P.	Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course.	Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course.	No change
Safety			
Q.	Version 1 The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn. *If your course did not involve going into the physical environment of the university, please select 'Not applicable'*	Version 2 My institution protects me from harassment and sexual misconduct from students, staff and visitors.	Changed to a single Safety question in Round B
R.	The digital environment my institution provides is a safe one in which to learn.	No Question R in round B	
Support services			
S.	Version 1 The institution has made me aware of how to access services to support my mental wellbeing	Version 2 The institution has made me aware of how to access services to support my mental wellbeing	Question group reworked in Round B
T.	Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs *If you did not require these services please select 'Not applicable'*	Version 2 Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs If you did not require these services please select 'This does not apply to me	

1.21 Summary tables for each question

1.21.1 Summary chart Question A: Staff are good at explaining things

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous testing: 2015 cognitive interviews tested the statement in a negative format, but this was found to be	• Overall understanding of the question centred around assessing whether they understood course information and	• Consider clarifying the terms used within the question to avoid confusion.

ineffective and no changes were made. **Wider audience understanding:** Cognitive testing in both 2015 and 2016 found that the statement was simple to comprehend and answering was a simple process. In 2015, probing around the term 'staff' showed students thought of teaching staff when answering the question, as intended. **Key 2020 findings** There were some challenges with averaging their teaching and learning experience and some overlap with the Assessment and feedback and Academic support sections. Distance learners sometimes only mentioned the 'chat format' interaction, limiting the areas of teaching and learning they considered.	content based on what their tutors had explained to them. • Confusion stemmed from not reading the question group title that asked respondents to focus on teaching staff only, and the lack of definition around terms used within the question.	• 'Things' could be updated to 'the course content'. • 'Staff could be updated to 'teaching staff' or 'tutors'.

1.21.2 Summary chart Question B: Staff have made the subject interesting

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous testing: No changes were suggested or tested in 2015 or 2016.	• Fewer respondents felt confused by the term 'staff' than in the previous statement. • Consideration of lectures, seminars and	• Consider changing 'interesting' to 'engaging' to focus more on staff expertise when teaching the subject rather than the

Wider audience understanding: Both previous pieces of research found the statement was easy to understand by students, and that it worked well for its purpose. 2015 research found that: • Students considered teaching staff as 'staff'. • Some used 'averaging' techniques to pick their response. Students considered the enthusiasm of staff and their varying teaching techniques. **Key 2020 findings:** As well as the enthusiasm and teaching techniques of staff, students also sometimes considered course materials when answering this question.	class content and an assessment of how interesting respondents found it was consistent across different respondent groups.	personal interest of the respondent.

1.21.3 Summary chart Question C: The course is intellectually stimulating

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous testing: No changes were suggested or tested in 2015 or 2016. **Wider audience understanding:** 2015 research found the statement was interpreted differently by students:	• Findings largely tallied with previous research here, with course content and its delivery important. However, the subjective nature of the question appears to have become a more significant issue.	• Consider where the statement is placed within the survey to avoid previous questions influencing thinking.

• Some answered thinking about how challenging they found their course. • Others answered based on how interesting it was. • Those on more practical courses tended to feel the statement was not relevant to them. 2016 research found that a few students lacked understanding on 'intellectually stimulating', but that otherwise the question worked well. **Key 2020 findings** • Although some struggled with what to consider in relation to 'intellectually stimulating' (and the areas varied between students), most had a clear personal idea of the elements to include in coming to a decision. However, the wide range of considerations may mean that this question is difficult to measure for this audience.	• The influence of online learning during the pandemic looks to have affected considerations for students who would normally have been on face-to-face courses, but online-only students did not report any particular difficulties.	

1.21.4 Summary chart Question D: My course has challenged me to achieve my best work

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations

Previous testing: The 2015 report recommended this statement not be included in 2017 due to some confusion when answering alongside the previous question. **Wider audience understanding:** 2015 research found that the statement was clear and easy to interpret by all students, but there was some overlap in students' understanding of this and the previous statement when answering. However, 2016 research found that this was only a minor issue brought up by a handful of students and the statement was recommended for use in 2017. **Key 2020 findings:** The meaning of 'challenged' and 'best work' could be subjective. Teaching staff were considered as the 'challenger' as well as the course itself. Some students thought they should be challenging themselves. 'Best work' as a concept was ambiguous for some – was this asking about their best work on the course or more widely?	• Again, 2020 findings were largely confirmed and corroborated, though there appeared to be more doubt and variety of different kinds of 'work' considered this time around. • There may be particular issues with those on highly practical courses, with respondents tending to consider written work in regards to the question.	• Consider how to capture improvements and progress. Students commented that the language of the statement drew them to think of final pieces of work which may be difficult to conceptualise for those on placement years or highly vocational courses.

1.21.5 Summary chart question group: The teaching on my course

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
'Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' removed from survey in 2017. **2020 findings:** • Demand for a question about the level of individual support offered to students with different needs. • Some feeling of overemphasis on course over teaching. • Distance learners sometimes restricted the areas they considered to direct interaction with teachers online, and not with written materials. • Demand by distance learners for a question on effective delivery and delivery methods.	• Difficulties averaging experiences led to confusion for a handful of students here. • There are indications that students on courses where online teaching is the norm did not always find these questions relevant to them.	• Consider the inclusion of an additional question, or adaptation of an existing question, to allow respondents to comment on the consistency of teaching approaches, to clear up confusion surrounding difficulties averaging experience.

1.21.6 Summary chart Question E: The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance & Question F: Feedback has improved my learning experience

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous testing: 2016 found that the question works well, with no revisions required. No previous wording has been tested or changed. Testing in 2015, 2016 and 2020 cognitive	• The question was largely well understood across all audiences.	• No recommended changes suggested to this question.

interviews found this question to be generally well understood by students, though responses varied depending on the assessment type – with multiple forms of assessment, their answers were mixed, leading to 'middle ground' responses.		

1.21.7 Summary chart Question G: Feedback has enabled me to improve my work

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
OfS workshops identified that there needed to be a question included to focus on the usefulness of feedback. Whether it improved their work/learning experience.	• This question was largely well understood as referring to how well feedback allowed them to improve their work. • There were some small challenges with students knowing exactly what feedback and work this related to, but this was among a small minority and Question G was generally better understood than Question F.	• No recommended changes to question wording. • Consider using this statement in place of Question F as it was more widely understood.

1.21.8 Summary chart question group: Assessment and feedback

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Within OfS workshops, it was felt that the 'assessment and feedback' bank should be updated, with the inclusion of a new question to focus on the usefulness of feedback. Whether it improved their work/learning experience.	• Question F and G were not distinct enough in respondents' minds, with both covering very similar areas of the student experience. • Question G was much easier for students to interpret and relate to the usefulness of feedback in improving their work.	• Consider using Question G instead of F as this was more widely understood. • If keeping Question F, more clarity will be needed to ensure students know what is to be included in the 'learning experience' beyond their work – which is already accounted for in Question G. • Consider adding a statement around suitability/appropriateness of assessments used.

1.21.9 Summary chart Question H: The course is well organised

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
In OfS workshops, it was decided that 'running smoothly' should be removed, as previous testing suggested that this was superfluous.	• Students considered a range of factors when answering Question H – not all thought of their timetabling, but many did take this into account when answering	• No suggested recommendations.

1.21.10 Summary chart Question group: Organisation and management

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous versions of this question group included the following: 1. The course is well organised and running smoothly. 2. The timetable works efficiently for me. 3. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively. In 2020 testing, the words 'running smoothly' were removed from Q1. The timetable question was also removed in 2021 testing, as previous reviews suggested that students often considered the timetable within answers to Q1.	• Respondents largely understood questions in this section, although Question H was felt to be very broad and so students often considered issues around communication in their answer – even though this is covered within Question I. • Some felt that this section could do with more specificity over which areas of organisation and management are to be considered and potentially splitting this into separate questions for clarity and consistency.	• Consider breaking down Question H into more specific questions to focus on: – Timetabling – Course structure – Staff organisation and management. • Keep Question I as a specific question around communication.

1.21.11 Summary chart question J: Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous testing: The statement 'I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to' was recommended for update to reflect technology advancements. There was a recommended change to: 'The University's/College's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well', but the current form was tested in 2016 and found to work well enough. **Wider audience understanding:** 2016 research found that students thought of the availability of software and online resources. It recommended some further clarity on what 'IT resources' were for the students who struggled to answer (such as those on courses using their own specialised equipment). **Key 2020 findings – one-year final year audience** The Teaching and learning section has changed from previous testing, moving from 3 questions to 2 questions. '**I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to'** has been adapted.	• Most respondents thought of either online or physical resources, such as access to buildings or equipment, when answering this question. • The subject studied was the factor most likely to cause a difference in interpretation.	• Consider adding 'digital and physical' in brackets after 'learning resources' to clarify that respondents should be thinking about both in their answer.

Distance learners struggled to answer this question more, particularly where they were using their own hardware.		

1.21.12 Summary chart Question K: Learning resources provided by my institution have supported my learning well

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Previous testing: The statement 'I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to' was recommended for update to reflect technology advancements. The question moved from the end to the start of the section. There was some confusion over what constituted 'general IT resources', with some thinking only of PCs and printers, and others of online portals and sites. Recommended change to: 'The University's/College's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well', but the current form was tested in 2016 and found to work well enough. 2015 recommended changes in line with technological advancement. The phrase 'the library, including its digital services, is good enough for my needs' was tested but 'digital services' was found to be the focus of the question so it was recommended that this is amended to: 'The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning well', which was tested	• Respondents naturally thought of both online and physical resources when answering this question, despite the fact that the question did not specify which resources to consider. This was largely based on what they had considered in the previous question. • The phrasing of this question prompted respondents to consider quality where they had considered access in the previous question.	• No suggested changes to the individual question but we recommend clarifying that 'learning resources' refers to both digital and physical resources for the question group as a whole, as opposed to changes to individual questions.

in the pilot. Recommendation for further clarity in 2016 refined the statement to its current form. **Wider audience understanding:** 2016 research found that students thought of the availability of software and online resources. It recommended some further clarity on what 'IT resources' were for the students who struggled to answer (such as those on courses using their own specialised equipment). 2015 found the original statement to be problematic for distance learners who do not use the library; the second iteration of the statement was much clearer and easier to answer for all students. 2016 students felt there was overlap between this statement and the previous and so a bit harder to answer but otherwise easy enough to answer. **Key 2020 findings – one-year final year audience** Previous testing split this question into two separate statements: '**The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well**' and '**The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well**'.		

1.21.13 Summary chart question group: Learning resources

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Key 2020 findings Questions were updated to eliminate overlap when asking separate questions about the online and physical learning resources.	• The majority of respondents understood the first question to be assessing ease of access and the second question to be assessing quality of resources available. • There were few difficulties in interpretation overall. • Some felt the questions were slightly too similar, but in general this did not affect their ability to interpret the questions. • There was a lack of consistency over which resources respondents considered when answering both questions.	• OfS could consider adding examples in brackets to the title of the question group to help clarify what resources respondents should consider, to encourage consistency in approach, as opposed to within individual questions. However, previous testing suggests this may lead to difficulties in answering due to the question becoming long and cumbersome to read as well as being affected by students' awareness of specific resources listed. • Consider instead adding 'digital and physical' in brackets after 'learning resources' to clarify that respondents should be thinking about both in their answer.

1.21.14 Summary chart Question L (Version 1): Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am satisfied with the Students Union (Association or Guild) at my institution

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Key 2020 findings A question regarding respondents' interaction with the students' union was asked within the question group Student voice: **'The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.'**	• Rather than adding clarity, the inclusion of the instructional text added confusion for respondents and led to many struggling to average out their experience across the different services. • The length of the question also encouraged respondents to ignore the instructional text regarding answering with 'not applicable'.	• Consider shortening the question to not include the list of services, or consider splitting into three to ask respondents about each service separately. • Shortening the question was tested in the second wave of interviewing.

1.21.15 Summary chart question L (Version 2): I am content with services provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Key 2020 findings A question regarding respondents' interaction with the students' union was asked within the question group Student voice: **'The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.'**	• The shortening of the instructional text cleared up inconsistencies in interpretation by encouraging respondents to read the question more fully. • Distance learners and mature students were still more likely not to have interacted with their students' union and to therefore select 'this does not apply to me' and there	• Consider including a shorter prompt in brackets to encourage respondents to think about academic representation specifically, if needed. • Alternatively, consider splitting this question into separate questions to ask about different elements of the students' union.

	was still some inconsistency around selecting this option or 'neither agree nor disagree'. • Academic representation did not spring to mind for the majority of respondents, largely because few interacted with their academic representation in a meaningful way.	

1.21.16 Summary chart question group: Student's union

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Key 2020 findings: The question asking respondents to assess their satisfaction with their students' union has been moved in the 2021 testing to feature as its own question group and broadened to ask about all services offered by their students' union, not just academic representation.	• Initial phrasing and testing of the question caused confusion due to the length of the instructional text and the inclusion of multiple services for respondents to assess when considering how satisfied they were with their students' union. • This confusion led to a failure to fully read the question in some cases. • This confusion was largely cleared up in the second version of the question. • Although, the removal of instructional text prompting respondents specifically to consider academic representation in their answer did result in fewer respondents mentioning academic representation, this is likely because most respondents did not interact with their academic representative and were	• Consider adapting wording to 'I am satisfied' to match other question phrasing. • Consider including some instructional text in brackets to prompt respondents to consider academic representation specifically, or splitting the question to ask about the different aspects of the students' union separately. • If assessing academic representation is crucial, consider adding the phrase 'please consider academic representation in your answer' in brackets and italics as a shorter form of the instructional text,

	therefore unlikely to consider it in their answer, regardless of the prompt.	so as not to distract from the overall question and cause respondents to skim-read.

1.21.17 Summary chart Question M (Version 1): I feel free to express my views and opinions on my course

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.	This question was being interpreted in one of 2 ways: • Either giving feedback *about* their course. • Or the ability to share their thoughts *within* their course via class discussions. Very few considered this in terms of broader freedom of speech.	• Consider changing 'feel free' to 'I have the opportunity to' – to focus more on what the institution is doing to facilitate this environment. • Consider changing the phrase 'on my course' to 'within my course' to remove confusion over this question being about feedback about their course. • If looking to focus on wider freedom of speech, then consider replacing with Version 2 of the 'hearing and contributing different views' section, detailed below.

1.21.18 Summary chart Question N (Version 1): On my course, I have had the opportunity hear a range of views on different topics

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.	• A majority of students interpreted this question as asking about their ability to hear other students' views about the course content, through class discussions. • However, there was some confusion over whether this was also meant to include	• Consider adding clarification to this statement. • If intending to ask about sharing of views within the bounds of the course content, consider something like 'I have had the opportunity to hear a

	wider freedom of speech and discussion of broader personal beliefs and opinions.	range of views on different topics on my course'. • If intending to incorporate wider freedom of speech, consider replacing with Version 2 of the hearing and contributing different views question bank (detailed below).

1.21.19 Summary chart Question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 1)

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.	Questions in this section were most likely to be answered in relation to students' ability to hear and contribute a range of views in relation to their course content, as opposed to wider freedom of speech.	More clarity is needed that this is intended to cover freedom of speech. New versions of these questions made this intention much clearer to students.

1.21.20 Summary chart Question M (Version 2): My university/college ensures that freedom of speech within the law is upheld for students, staff, and visiting speakers

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression	• It was much clearer to students that this question asked them to evaluate broader freedom of speech within their institution than previous iterations. • However, answers greatly relied on personal experiences and a lack of experience led to inconsistent use of the response scale.	• Consider removing 'within the law' to avoid this relying on students' in-depth knowledge of the law.

	• This question also relied on students' understanding of the law.	

1.21.21 Summary chart Question N (Version 2): My university/college provides an environment for the free expression of ideas, opinions and beliefs

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.	• This question was easier for some respondents to answer than Question M, as it focused on their own experiences as opposed to evaluating the lawfulness of their institution. • However, answers still relied on personal experiences and a lack of experience again led to inconsistent use of the response scale or difficulty in answering – although to a lesser extent than with the preceding question.	• Consider rephrasing to 'safe environment' to incorporate how comfortable students feel with sharing their views within this environment.

1.21.22 Summary chart question group: Hearing and contributing different views (Version 2)

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
Beyond the existing 'student voice' section, it was felt that additional questions needed adding to assess freedom of expression.	• Students were clear about the intention of these questions to address freedom of speech within their institution, more so than with the previous question set. • However, their ability to answer these statements	• Consider having just one question, likely Question N, which looks at students' own experiences of freedom of speech – as students found it difficult to evaluate the lawfulness of the institution. • OfS may want to reconsider the place of freedom of speech

	was largely dependent on their personal experience, with those who had never experienced any issues or that didn't actively involve themselves in debate finding it difficult to give a firm answer – often using a neutral response. • Students often felt the two statements were very similar and answered in a similar vein.	within the NSS more widely, which students felt should be focused on evaluating their course and learning experiences.

1.21.23 Summary chart Question O: I felt part of an inclusive culture on my course

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• There was widespread confusion over how to approach this question, with a wide range of areas considered.	• Consider making the question more specific, e.g. referring specifically to course content, social atmosphere or other areas. • Refine the Welsh language wording to ensure comprehension.

1.21.24 Summary chart Question P: Staff have enabled me to feel included on my course

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• While respondents generally found this question straightforward to answer, they considered a wide variety of areas in doing so. • This subjectivity may be problematic. This was heightened for distance learners, where the process of being made to feel included is likely to be conceived of in very different ways to those	• Consider specifying staff types, or using instructional text to provide details of those in scope (e.g. support and administrative as well as teaching) and/or the means of inclusion.

	considering in-person teaching.	

1.21.25 Summary chart question group: Sense of belonging

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question group for 2021	• Students felt they understood the questions, though the subjective nature of the subject matter and wide range of personal experiences and conceptions meant that they were not always united in the areas of the student experience they called upon to answer them.	• Further outlining where staff and students are intended to be considered in questions may lead to more useful data here.

1.21.26 Summary chart Question Q (Version 1): The physical environment of my institution is a safe place in which to learn. If your course did not involve going into the physical environment of the university, please select 'Not applicable'

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• Students thought about university estates and how safe and clean these were, as well as off-campus sites, such as their route to and from classes. • There were a handful of issues with language here, particularly the phrase 'physical environment'.	• This question was generally well received and the instructional text worked well. We suggest retaining this. • Analysis may need to account for the fact that students considered a wide range of situations. We feel that this is not problematic, and simply reflects provider diversity in the sector.

1.21.27 Summary chart Question R (Version 1): The digital environment my institution provides is a safe one in which to learn

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations

New question for 2021	• The question appeared generally well understood, taking in the wide range of digital resources, tools and platforms used by providers, and the harms that might be associated with them. • Confusion largely stemmed from students considering the physical environments in which they accessed these, e.g. the library or home. There do look to be potential issues with the consideration of social media groups, outside the purview of providers.	• The question may require further testing to ensure that it continues to work for all students in the long term. The near-universal online learning over the pandemic was potentially responsible for the largely positive reaction.

1.21.28 Summary chart Question group: Safety

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• Safety referred to environments, both physical and online, where students felt relaxed and comfortable, and able to fully engage with their learning. • To a lesser extent, they also thought about the wider student experience and social events, especially those which took place in-person on the campus.	• Making clear the extent of the question's reach, and ensuring that all students are considering the same areas may be valuable. This might be achieved with explanatory text framing the question 'in terms of your entire student experience'. • Alternatively, a routed question for fully online students only may help to ensure that disparities in experience between these groups do not affect the quality of data produced.

1.21.29 Summary chart Question Q (Version 2): My institution protects me from harassment and sexual misconduct from students, staff and visitors

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• Students considered both preventative measures taken by their provider, as well as what their reactions had been like when incidents of harassment had unfortunately occurred. • While some responses were highly coloured by personal and peer experience, many respondents had little to call upon when attempting to answer the question here. This led to a potentially unacceptable reliance on half-remembered emails or assumptions that procedures were in place. These students selected a range of responses.	• The question appeared to be well received by students, who understood it as an important area. There may be value in collecting this data in future. However, disparities in experiences mean that its value is currently patchy. One option may be to prefix the question with 'To the best of my knowledge'. • Otherwise, having separate questions on prevention and procedures/responses to cases of harassment may also help to provide more reliable data.

1.21.30 Summary chart Question S: The institution has made me aware of how to access services to support my mental wellbeing

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• Email communications were the most commonly considered component of the student experience considered, covering both generic and personal communications.	• Again, the provision of instructional text may be beneficial, dependent on what the OfS deems to be the core focus of this question.

	• As in a number of other questions, those without direct personal experience sometimes struggled to answer the question, choosing various answers based on their gut feeling. • Others struggled with the question, discussing how it asked about both awareness and accessibility, and that they would like to provide different responses for each of these elements.	• Otherwise, splitting the statement into two questions that measure awareness and accessibility or satisfaction may help to provide a more accurate measure of this area.

1.21.31 Summary chart Question T: Services to support the mental wellbeing of students are appropriate for my needs If you did not require these services please select 'Not applicable'

Question history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• Students predominantly considered face-to-face services, with some stating that the word 'appropriate' had put these in mind. • Difficulties again stemmed from a lack of experience, with the instructional text doing little to help. Some found the somewhat abstract nature of the question and its length confusing or daunting, putting them off reading it in any depth. • There appear to be Welsh language difficulties.	• A more direct version of the question could be used, e.g. 'Services to support my mental wellbeing were available when I needed them', using the same instructional text. • Reconsider how the question works in the Welsh language.

1.21.32 Summary chart Question group: Support services

Question group history	Key 2021 findings	Recommendations
New question for 2021	• Mental health and wellbeing were considered to be extremely important topics by students. However, there was some feeling that mental health was over-emphasised, at the expense of physical and learning disabilities.	• These important areas should continue to be included in the survey. • Consider additional questions or instructional text that ensure the inclusion of support relating to areas other than mental health. Accessibility more generally might be a focus here.