

OfS NSS Cognitive Testing 2022 – Additional interviews summary report

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INTRODUCTION

As part of the ongoing National Student Survey (NSS) review, survey questions had been redeveloped from the previous format in which students were asked to say whether they agree with particular statements to operationalised questions with question-specific scales.

The Office for Students (OfS) commissioned Shift Insight to conduct qualitative research to test comprehension of the redeveloped survey questions and question-specific scales. The main phase of this research involved conducting 60 cognitive interviews with undergraduate students between June and August 2022. These interviews explored both the phrasing of questions on the NSS and the usability of the question-specific scales. Findings for this phase have been reported elsewhere.

In addition, the OfS commissioned 10 supplementary interviews to focus on the cognitive testing of the question-specific scales. These were aimed at testing the order, length, wording and usability of the question-specific scales.

To test the ordering of the scales, for each question, participants were presented with the question and its associated scale in a randomised order. They were then asked to rearrange the scale in the order that made most sense to them, to check whether participants would order the scales as intended. A full list of the questions tested, the intended order of the scales and the order as presented to students can be found in the Appendix.

This report presents the findings from these 10 additional interviews, conducted in September 2022 with participants who had completed at least 1 year of, or just finished, an undergraduate degree.

EXTENT SCALE

1. TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOU HAD THE CHANCE TO EXPLORE IDEAS AND CONCEPTS IN DEPTH?

[To a very large extent / to a large extent / to a moderate extent / to a small extent / to a very small extent / not at all / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

When presented with the above extent scale in a randomised order, 3/10 participants rearranged it differently to the intended order. All three participants arranged the scale from the most negative response to the most positive response. However, the position of each option in relation to the others was the same as intended.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

Many participants felt that the scale was too long, with most suggesting that the options 'to a very large extent' and 'to a very small extent' could be removed.

A few other suggestions were made by one participant each:

- One participant felt that 'not at all' and 'this does not apply to me' meant the same thing in the context of this question. Hence, one of them could be removed.
- One participant felt that 'large extent' could be rephrased to 'great extent'.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

While most participants did not have any issues responding to the question, a couple of participants struggled to respond:

- One participant felt that the scale was too complicated. This was tied to the length of the scale. They felt the question was quite straightforward, thus having such a long scale was complicating things unnecessarily.
- One participant struggled to average their experience while responding to this question. They had had different experiences with different units, making it difficult to select one response. They suggested that having a frequency scale would make it easier for them to respond to the question.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No recommended changes.

2. TO WHAT EXTENT DOES YOUR COURSE HAVE THE RIGHT BALANCE OF STAFF-LED AND INDEPENDENT STUDY?

[To a very large extent / to a large extent / to a moderate extent / to a small extent / to a very small extent / not at all / this does not apply to me]

Note, for this question, the wording of the question itself, and not the scale, was cognitively tested.

APPROACH TO THE QUESTION

When responding to this question, most participants compared the amount of staff-led and independent study they had experienced on their course, and judged whether they were satisfied with each.

A majority of students felt that 'independent study' referred to work they did on their own, while 'staff-led' was taken by most to refer to any time when they were directly interacting with staff. Their interpretations of 'staff-led study' included:

- lectures
- seminars
- tutorials
- project supervision

When comparing the findings for this question with a previous iteration of it where the term 'directed' was used instead of 'staff-led', it appears that comprehension of the term 'staff-led' was better among students. Fewer students singled out 'staff-led' as being unclear when compared with previous rounds of cognitive testing that had used 'directed'.

Additionally, when 'staff-led' was used, participants were more likely to make direct references to in-person teaching. The use of 'staff-led' prompted some students to think about instances where staff were quite literally in front of them, making them more likely to think about in-person teaching. On the other hand, the format of teaching was rarely a matter of concern when the word 'directed' was used.

However, when looking into the comparisons of these two variations of the question, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- The variation of the question with the term 'staff-led' was tested with only 10 students. This is a relatively small sample size, hence caution should be applied when trying to apply these findings to the wider population.
- This variation of the question was tested with on-campus and blended learners, but not distance learners. Thus, we cannot draw conclusions about whether distance learners would be able to apply the term 'staff-led' to their experiences or if they would find it exclusionary.
- Finally, while students were more likely to think about in-person teaching with this variation of the question, we cannot conclude from this alone that they were equating staff-led and in-person. One participant specifically mentioned that they were considering in-person teaching when reading 'staff-led', because the online components of their course were more likely to involve independent study.

DIFFICULTIES WITH INTERPRETATION

There were a few issues with the interpretation of this question, raised by one participant each:

- One participant was confused by the term 'staff-led'. It initially made them think of seminars because staff lead seminars. However, they felt it could also be referring to lectures. This caused some confusion about which of these areas they should be considering when responding to the question.
- 'Right balance' was also felt to be confusing by one participant. They were unsure what it meant and commented that each student would have a different interpretation of what the right balance should be, making the question too subjective.
- Finally, one student did not like the use of 'extent' in this question. They felt judging the extent in this case would require a lot of effort on the students' part and it made the question too subjective.

Regarding the scale of the question, one participant felt the scale was too long and one felt the question would be easier to respond to if a frequency scale was used instead.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider adding examples of what 'staff-led' refers to within the question.

GOOD SCALE

3. OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE QUALITY OF YOUR COURSE?

[Excellent / very good / good / not very good / not at all good / poor / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

When presented with the above scale in a random order, 4/10 participants rearranged it differently to the intended order.

- Two participants ordered it from the most negative response to the most positive response, keeping the order of options in relation to each other the same as above.
- The other two participants misplaced the most negative option 'poor'.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

While most participants felt the scale of this question was fine, a few felt it was too long.

Some participants commented that the negative options of the scale were too similar. Of these, most felt 'not at all good' and 'poor' were too similar, and 'not very good' and 'not at all good' were too similar.

Other comments about the scale, mentioned by a small number of participants each, included:

- The scale would benefit from having a mid-point.
- The option 'this does not apply to me' can be removed.
- 'Excellent' and 'very good' are too similar.
- Both options with the word 'very' in it could be removed.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

While there were few issues when responding to this question, two participants felt that it would be easier to respond to if the scale had a mid-point. This was connected to their personal experience and not the phrasing of the question or scale options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider rephrasing the negative options on the scale or removing one of them.

FREQUENCY SCALE

4. HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU BEEN ABLE TO ACCESS THE LEARNING RESOURCES (EITHER DIGITAL OR PHYSICAL) THAT YOU NEED?

[Always / very often / fairly often / not very often / rarely / never / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

2/10 participants rearranged this scale differently to the order presented above:

- One participant ordered it from the most negative response to the most positive response, keeping the order of options in relation to each other the same as above.
- The other used 'this does not apply to me' as the mid-point of the scale.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

Half the participants felt that the options 'not very often' and 'rarely' were too similar. They felt the scale should include only one of them.

Other comments about the scale, mentioned by one participant each, included:

- The scale is too long.
- The scale would benefit from having a mid-point.
- The word 'often' is repeated too much within the scale.
- 'Very often' and 'fairly often' are too similar.
- The option 'always' can be removed.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

One participant struggled to answer this question. However, this was because they had issues with understanding the question and not with the scale.

A few other participants also struggled to respond to the question, but this was because of their personal experiences and not issues with the scale.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider rephrasing the negative options on the scale or removing one of them.

HELPFUL SCALE

5. WHEN WORKING WITH OTHER STUDENTS AS PART OF YOUR COURSE, HOW HELPFUL WAS THIS FOR YOUR LEARNING?

[Extremely helpful / very helpful / helpful / not very helpful / not at all helpful / unhelpful / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

4/10 participants rearranged the scale differently to the order presented above.

- Three participants placed 'unhelpful' in a different position.
- One participant switched the positions of 'not very helpful' and 'not at all helpful'.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

Some participants felt that the negative options within this scale were too similar. They specifically mentioned 'not at all helpful' and 'unhelpful' being too similar. A few of these participants suggested that 'unhelpful' should be removed. They felt that it was too emotive within the context of the survey and too harsh. A couple of other participants suggested removing 'not at all helpful'.

Other comments about the scale, mentioned by one participant each, included:

- The scale is too long.
- Both options including the word 'very' could be removed.
- The word 'helpful' is repeated too much.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

One participant struggled to answer this question. However, this was because they had issues with understanding the question and not with the scale.

Another participant felt that the question would be easier to respond to if the scale had a mid-point. This was connected to their personal experience and not the phrasing of the question or scale options.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider rephrasing the negative options on the scale or removing one of them.

CLEAR SCALE

6. HOW CLEAR WERE THE MARKING CRITERIA USED TO ASSESS YOUR WORK?

[Extremely clear / very clear / clear / not very clear / not at all clear / unclear / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

4/10 participants rearranged the scale differently to the order presented above:

- Two participants placed 'unclear' in a different position.
- One participant switched the positions of 'not very clear' and 'not at all clear'.
- One used 'this does not apply to me' as the mid-point of the scale.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

Some participants felt that the negative options on the scale were too similar. Most of these participants commented that 'not at all clear' and 'unclear' were too similar. One participant felt that 'not very clear' and 'not at all clear' were too similar.

Other comments about the scale, mentioned by one participant each, included:

- Both options with 'very' in it can be removed.
- 'Extremely clear' can be removed.
- 'Very clear' can be removed.
- 'Unclear' can be changed to 'extremely unclear'.
- The word 'clear' is repeated too much within the options.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

Two participants struggled to respond to this question, in both cases the issues were caused by their personal preferences:

- One participant felt that having a mid-point on the scale would help them respond to the question better.
- One participant felt that they would be able to respond to the question better if a frequency scale was used.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider rephrasing the negative options on the scale or removing one of them.

FAIR SCALE

7. HOW FAIR HAS THE MARKING AND ASSESSMENT BEEN ON YOUR COURSE?

[Extremely fair / very fair / fair / not very fair / not at all fair / unfair / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

3/10 participants rearranged the scale differently to the order presented above:

- One participant placed 'unfair' in a different position.
- One participant switched the positions of 'not very fair' and 'not at all fair'.

- One participant ordered it from the most negative response to the most positive response, keeping the order of options in relation to each other the same as above.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

Some participants felt that the negative options of the scale were too similar. Most of these participants commented that 'not at all fair' and 'unfair' were too similar. One participant felt that 'not very fair' and 'not at all fair' were too similar.

Other comments about the scale, mentioned by a small number of participants each, included:

- The scale is too long.
- 'Extremely fair' and 'very fair' are too similar.
- 'Extremely fair' can be removed.
- 'Very fair' can be removed.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

One participant struggled to respond to this question. They had a personal preference for using a frequency scale, and so suggested the question would work better with a frequency scale.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider rephrasing the negative options on the scale or removing one of them.

EASY SCALE

8. HOW EASY WAS IT TO CONTACT TEACHING STAFF WHEN YOU NEEDED TO?

[Extremely easy / very easy / easy / not very easy / not at all easy / difficult / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

2/10 participants rearranged the scale differently to the order presented above:

- One participant ordered it from the most negative response to the most positive response, keeping the order of options in relation to each other the same as above.
- The other used 'this does not apply to me' as the mid-point of the scale.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

A few comments made about the scale, mentioned by a small number of participants each, included:

- The scale is too long.
- 'Not very easy' and 'not at all easy' are too similar.
- 'Not at all easy' and 'difficult' are too similar.
- 'Extremely easy' and 'very easy' are too similar.
- 'Extremely easy' can be removed.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

Three participants struggled to respond to this question, in all cases the issues came from their personal preferences or experiences:

- One participant felt that having a mid-point on the scale would help them respond to the question better.

- One participant felt that they would be able to respond to the question better if a frequency scale was used.
- One participant struggled to respond to this question as they had had different experiences across different units and struggled to average their experience across units.

RECOMMENDATIONS

No recommended changes.

FREE SCALE

9. DURING YOUR STUDIES, HOW FREE DID YOU FEEL TO EXPRESS YOUR IDEAS, OPINIONS AND BELIEFS?

[Extremely free / very free / free / not very free / not at all free / restricted / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

One participant rearranged the scale differently to the order presented above. They ordered it from the most negative response to the most positive response, keeping the order of options in relation to each other the same as above.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

A few comments made about the scale, mentioned by a small number of participants each, included:

- The scale is too long.
- The negative options are too similar.
- 'Not very free' and 'not at all free' are too similar.
- 'Not at all free' and 'restricted' are too similar.
- 'Restricted' can be removed.
- 'Very free' and 'free' are too similar.
- 'Very free' can be removed.
- 'Extremely free' can be removed.

For this question, participants were also prompted to check if they would prefer the option 'completely restricted' over 'restricted'. Half the participants felt that the scale would work better if it included the option 'completely restricted'. This would distinguish it better from 'not at all free'. One participant felt the scale could include both options.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

One participant struggled to respond to this question. This was because they could not decide between 'extremely free' and 'very free', based on their personal experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider changing 'restricted' to 'completely restricted'.

WELLNESS SCALE

10. HOW WELL HAVE ASSESSMENTS ALLOWED YOU TO DEMONSTRATE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED?

[Extremely well / very well / well / not very well / not at all well / badly / this does not apply to me]

SCALE ORDERING

2/10 participants rearranged the scale differently to the order presented above.

- One participant ordered it from the most negative response to the most positive response, keeping the order of options in relation to each other the same as above.
- The other participant switched the positions of 'not very well' and 'not at all well'.

SCALE LENGTH AND LANGUAGE

Some participants felt that the negative options on the scale were too similar. A few suggested that 'not at all well' and 'badly' were too similar and 'badly' could be removed. Others felt 'not very well' and 'not at all well' were too similar.

Other comments about the scale, mentioned by a small number of participants each, included:

- The scale is too long.
- 'Extremely well' can be removed.
- 'Very well' can be removed.
- The positive extreme, 'extremely well', should be changed to a word that is more of an antonym of 'badly'.

DIFFICULTIES ANSWERING

Several participants had issues answering this question, all based on personal experiences or preferences:

- Two participants would have preferred a frequency scale with this question.
- Two participants struggled to choose between two options based on their personal experiences.
- One participant would have preferred a numerical scale.
- One participant felt they needed a mid-point to accurately respond to this question.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider rephrasing the negative options on the scale or removing one of them.

CONCLUSION

Overall, there were mixed reactions to the appropriateness of the scales tested. When rearranging the scales, participants consistently placed the positive options in the intended order. However, the ordering of the negative options was more frequently inconsistent. Across various scales, participants also felt that there was a lack of distinction between the negative options. While it appears that these issues with the negative options did not stop participants from responding to the questions, it must be noted that participants were rarely choosing from the negative options. Taken together, the

findings from these interviews suggest that the scales tested could benefit from further research. This is particularly pertinent to the following scales:

- Good scale
- Frequency scale
- Helpful scale
- Clear scale
- Fair scale
- Well scale.

APPENDIX

No.	Question	Intended scale order	Scale shown to participants
Q1	To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas or concepts in depth?	a) To a very large extent b) To a large extent c) To a moderate extent d) To a small extent e) To a very small extent f) Not at all g) This does not apply to me	a) This does not apply to me b) To a very small extent c) To a large extent d) To a moderate extent e) Not at all f) To a very large extent g) To a small extent
Q2	To what extent does your course have the right balance of staff-led and independent study? (Note, the wording of this question, and not the scale, was cognitively tested)	a) To a very large extent b) To a large extent c) To a moderate extent d) To a small extent e) To a very small extent f) Not at all g) This does not apply to me	a) To a very large extent b) To a large extent c) To a moderate extent d) To a small extent e) To a very small extent f) Not at all g) This does not apply to me
Q3	Overall, how would you rate the quality of your course?	a) Excellent b) Very good c) Good d) Not very good e) Not at all good f) Poor g) This does not apply to me	a) Very good b) Not very good c) Not at all good d) This does not apply to me e) Good f) Poor g) Excellent

No.	Question	Intended scale order	Scale shown to participants
Q4	How often have you been able to access the learning resources (either digital or physical) that you need?	a) Always b) Very often c) Fairly often d) Not very often e) Rarely f) Never g) This does not apply to me	a) Fairly often b) Always c) Never d) Very often e) Rarely f) Not very often g) This does not apply to me
Q5	When working with other students as part of your course, how helpful was this for your learning?	a) Extremely helpful b) Very helpful c) Helpful d) Not very helpful e) Not at all helpful f) Unhelpful g) This does not apply to me	a) Extremely helpful b) Helpful c) Not very helpful d) This does not apply to me e) Not at all helpful f) Unhelpful g) Very helpful
Q6	How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	a) Extremely clear b) Very clear c) Clear d) Not very clear e) Not at all clear f) Unclear g) This does not apply to me	a) Not very clear b) Unclear c) Extremely clear d) Very clear e) This does not apply to me f) Clear g) Not at all clear
Q7	How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	a) Extremely fair b) Very fair c) Fair d) Not very fair e) Not at all fair f) Unfair g) This does not apply to me	a) Fair b) Unfair c) Extremely fair d) Not at all fair e) Very fair f) This does not apply to me g) Not very fair
Q8	How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	a) Extremely easy b) Very easy c) Easy d) Not very easy e) Not at all easy f) Difficult	a) Very easy b) Extremely easy c) Difficult d) Not very easy e) Not at all easy

No.	Question	Intended scale order	Scale shown to participants
		g) This does not apply to me	f) This does not apply to me g) Easy
Q9	During your studies, how free did you feel to express your ideas, opinions and beliefs?	a) Extremely free b) Very free c) Free d) Not very free e) Not at all free f) Restricted g) This does not apply to me	a) Extremely free b) Restricted c) Not at all free d) Very free e) Free f) Not very free g) This does not apply to me
Q10	How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	a) Extremely well b) Very well c) Well d) Not very well e) Not at all well f) Badly g) This does not apply to me	a) Extremely well b) Not at all well c) Very well d) Well e) Badly f) Not very well g) This does not apply to me