

October 2015/24

**Policy development**

**Consultation**

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Responses should be made online  
by **noon on Friday 4 December  
2015.**

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This is a joint consultation by the four UK higher education funding bodies on proposals to improve information about learning and teaching, and the student experience. This includes changes to the National Student Survey, to the Unistats website and to information provided by institutions.

# Review of information about learning and teaching, and the student experience

## Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg  
Uwch Cymru  
Higher Education Funding  
Council for Wales

**hefcw**



Scottish Funding Council  
Promoting further and higher education



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## Foreword

Since the introduction of the first National Student Survey (NSS) in 2005, much has changed in the UK higher education (HE) sector. The last 10 years have brought fundamental shifts in the funding environment and we have seen the entry of new institutions and programmes and an increased diversity in the student body.

The NSS itself is now a UK-wide survey, widely recognised as a set of information which can drive and monitor improvement in the student academic experience. Such information about HE is also of central importance to provide accountability, and help students make choices about study. Over the last decade, change has been the one constant, and we can expect more to come. It is therefore timely for us to revisit what information is available about HE to ensure it remains fit for purpose now and for the future.

Over the past two years the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group has overseen a programme of research by the HE funding bodies to review information about higher education. This consultation reflects the first stage of that work. The findings suggest that some changes are now needed to the NSS and to resources such as the Unistats website and Key Information Sets to bring them up to date and improve their effectiveness. Since Unistats was developed we have a more nuanced picture of how students make decisions, and we also have a greater understanding of the differing information needs of the diverse student body. We must reflect this understanding, rather than assuming one set of information will suit all. Some of our prospective students – with no background experience of HE – may need additional support to get the most out of the information available.

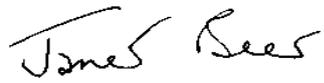
Of course, institutions already provide a range of information to students, and the Competition and Markets Authority, earlier this year, clarified what should be provided as a minimum in consumer law. So, we need as a sector to ensure that the detailed course information that students expect institutions to provide is accessible and well presented. The research that accompanies this consultation provides valuable insights into students' information priorities and I would particularly encourage providers to consider its broader implications for their work.

Alongside changes to NSS and Unistats, this consultation also considers some areas for potential development in the longer term, such as whether we should collect feedback information from a wider range of students than we do currently, as well as making suggestions about capturing qualitative information from students. This work is at an exploratory stage and your feedback will be vital in informing future proposals.

While we must move ahead with improvements, we are all watching with interest developments in England in relation to the new teaching excellence framework – which will have, inevitably, an impact on information both gathered from and communicated to students. The full implications of the framework across the UK are not yet clear, but we need to be ready to respond to these important developments, and a second stage of consultation may be needed in the near future to allow this.

Amidst all this change we must ensure that the NSS and the other types of information available for students continue to be relevant and robust. I encourage you to consider the proposals in the consultation, together with the supporting research, and to engage constructively with us in the review. In doing so you will help us to ensure these vital information resources continue to

command the confidence and trust of students, of institutions and of the wider public into the next decade.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Janet Beer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning of the first name.

Professor Janet Beer

Chair, Higher Education Public Information Steering Group

Vice-Chancellor, University of Liverpool

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# **Review of information about learning and teaching, and the student experience: Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions**

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges Heads of higher education institutions in Scotland Heads of higher education institutions in Northern Ireland Heads of higher education institutions in Wales Heads of further education colleges in Wales Heads of alternative providers in England Heads of student unions and guilds at UK institutions Student union officers and student representatives Employer bodies Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies Other bodies with an interest in information about higher education Careers advisers Schools, sixth form colleges and their representative bodies Other bodies and individuals involved in supplying advice and guidance to prospective higher education students
Of interest to staff responsible for:	Student data and information; Quality assurance; Admissions; Liaison with schools and colleges; Widening participation and marketing
Reference	2015/24
Publication date	October 2015
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## **Executive summary**

### **Purpose**

1. This document sets out for consultation the proposals of the four higher education funding bodies in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland for changes to the National Student Survey and to the Unistats website. The consultation reflects the findings of stage one of a two-stage review of information about learning and teaching, and the student experience.

### **Key points**

2. We are consulting on proposals for:
- changes to the Unistats website and the Key Information Set for 2017
  - information to be published by institutions about their courses for 2017
  - changes to the National Student Survey for 2017

- potential changes to information after 2017.

3. A summary of the proposals in this consultation is given in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of proposals**

<b>Changes for 2017</b>	
Unistats and the Key Information Set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain and develop a UK website of authoritative national data for students, their advisers and other stakeholders (currently Unistats).</li> <li>• Redesign Unistats to reflect diverse student information needs.</li> <li>• Transfer publication of learning, teaching and assessment information to institutions.</li> <li>• Provide more help for students to navigate information during their decision-making journey.</li> </ul>
Information published by institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask institutions to publish detailed course information in line with Competitions and Markets Authority guidance.</li> <li>• Provide good practice developed with sector experts to support consistent but nuanced presentation of information.</li> </ul>
National Student Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply criteria for questions in main survey.</li> <li>• Include new questions on student engagement.</li> <li>• Amend questions on Learning Resources and on Assessment and Feedback.</li> <li>• Merge duplicative questions.</li> <li>• Transfer personal development and student union questions to optional banks.</li> <li>• Bring optional questions up to date.</li> </ul>
<b>Potential Changes after 2017</b>	
Methods for capturing qualitative data from students for publication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider options for publishing qualitative information including National Student Survey comments.</li> </ul>
Feedback from undergraduate students not included in the NSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider priority groups for whom we should collect data.</li> <li>• Consider options for capturing and publishing feedback.</li> </ul>
Information for taught postgraduate students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider approaches to capturing and publishing feedback from taught postgraduates.</li> </ul>

4. The full list of consultation questions is set out in Annex B.
5. Supporting material for this consultation, including research reports, is available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/).
6. We are holding three consultation events in November 2015 in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London. Further details are available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/events/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/events/).

### **Consultation outcomes**

7. The Higher Education Public Information Steering Group will consider the responses to this consultation in February 2016 and advise the funding bodies on next steps.
8. The outcomes of the consultation and the next steps, agreed by the Boards or Councils of the funding bodies, will be published in spring 2016. This will enable preparatory work on changes to institutions' websites to begin in 2016, and changes to Unistats and the National Student Survey from 2017.
9. We will publish a summary and analysis of the consultation responses as part of the outcomes document in spring 2016. We plan to publish all responses, without names or contact details, in spring 2016.
10. Information provided in response to a request, invitation or consultation from HEFCE may be made public, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act or of an appropriate licence, or through another arrangement. Such information includes text, data and datasets. The Freedom of Information Act gives a public right of access to any information held by a public authority defined within the Act, in this case HEFCE. It applies to information provided by individuals and organisations, for example universities and colleges. HEFCE can refuse to make such information available only in exceptional circumstances. This means that data and information are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Further information about the Act is available at [www.ico.org.uk](http://www.ico.org.uk).

### **Action required**

11. Responses to this consultation should be made online by **noon on Friday 4 December 2015** using the response form which can be accessed alongside this document at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/).
12. This is an open consultation and we welcome views from anyone with an interest in information about higher education. We regret we will not be able to consider responses after the deadline.
13. As discussed in paragraph 6, respondents are advised to check [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/events/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/events/) for updates and information about the consultation events that we will hold in November 2015.

## Section 1: Introduction and background

### Purpose of this document

14. This document sets out for consultation the proposals of the four higher education (HE) funding bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales for changes to the National Student Survey (NSS) and to the Unistats website<sup>1</sup>. The consultation reflects the findings of the first stage of a two-stage review of information about learning and teaching, and the student experience.

### Action required

15. Please respond by **noon on Friday 4 December 2015** using the online response form available alongside this document at We regret we will not be able to consider responses after this deadline. We welcome responses from anyone with an interest in information about higher education.

16. We are holding three consultation events in November 2015 in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London. Further details are available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/It/roiconsult/events/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/It/roiconsult/events/).

17. Please contact Hazel Crabb-Wyke (tel 0117 931 7238, email [h.crabb-wyke@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:h.crabb-wyke@hefce.ac.uk)) should you require the documents in alternative formats, or assistance with the online form.

### About the consultation process

18. As part of this consultation, the four funding bodies have published supporting material including research reports, which is available from the HEFCE website. We have also provided summaries of our proposals tailored for students and their advisers, and also for alternative providers. See Annex A for a full list of materials available.

19. The full list of consultation questions is set out in Annex B.

20. The UK-wide Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG) will consider the responses to this consultation and advise the funding bodies on next steps<sup>2</sup>. Once agreed by the Boards or Councils of the funding bodies, the outcomes will be published in spring 2016. This will enable preparatory work on changes to institutions' websites to begin in 2016, and changes to Unistats and the National Student Survey from 2017.

21. We will publish a summary and analysis of consultation responses as part of the outcomes document in spring 2016. We plan to publish all responses, without names or contact details, in spring 2016.

22. In considering the responses, we will commit to read, record, and analyse the views of every response to this consultation in a consistent manner. For reasons of practicality, a fair and balanced summary of responses rather than the individual responses themselves will usually inform any decision made. In most cases the merit of the arguments made is likely to be given

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<sup>1</sup> The four UK higher education funding bodies are the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DEL NI), the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).

<sup>2</sup> HEPISG advises the UK funding bodies on the management and development of information on higher education. HEPISG's membership and terms of reference can be viewed at [www.hefce.ac.uk/It/review/Governance/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/It/review/Governance/).

more weight than the number of times the same point is made. Responses from organisations and representative bodies that have high relevance to or interest in the area under consultation, or the likelihood of being affected most by the proposals, are likely to carry more weight than those with little or none.

23. In our analysis of the consultation responses we will explain how they were considered in our subsequent decision. Where we have not been able to respond to a significant and material issue raised, we will usually explain the reasons for this.

## Background

### The UK higher education funding bodies' review of information

24. The UK higher education funding bodies work collaboratively to provide information to students and other stakeholders about learning and teaching, and the student experience. The policy context for our work is different in each country, but we share the same over-arching purposes and objectives in relation to information. These are to support:

- decision-making about study across the student life-cycle
- improvements in learning and teaching
- quality assessment, transparency and accountability in higher education<sup>3</sup>.

25. In 2013, we began a review of our approach. In this our aim is to consider **what information is needed** to meet these purposes, together with **how it should be provided**. We have also considered the role of the HE funding bodies in meeting these needs. The review is overseen by HEPISG, which is chaired by Professor Janet Beer, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Liverpool.

26. The review is structured as linked work strands, each informed by a programme of research, testing and informal consultation. We have focused to date on Unistats and NSS. Table 2 outlines the work strands.

**Table 2: Work strands**

Work strand	Information purpose	Progress
Review of the National Student Survey	Supports decision-making, improvement and accountability	Research recommendations endorsed by HEPISG for consultation
Review of the Unistats website	Supports decision-making and accountability	Research recommendations endorsed by HEPISG for consultation
Learning indicators: outcomes measures and predictors of high-quality learning and teaching	Supports decision-making, improvement and accountability	Early research scoping (see paragraph 35 for further information)

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<sup>3</sup> Further details about individual funding bodies' work on information are available from their websites.

## Why are we reviewing our approach?

27. Our current approach to information about HE is based on the outcomes of two consultations on changes to public information in 2010: the joint HEFCE, Universities UK and GuildHE consultation, and the Welsh consultation<sup>4</sup>. These included the development of the Key Information Set (KIS) – a standardised set of key facts for each course, to help students easily compare course-level information published on Unistats – together with minor changes to the National Student Survey.
28. In the 2010 consultations, we said we would undertake a more fundamental review of the National Student Survey 10 years after its inception, in 2015, and that we would keep the information set under regular review to ensure it remained relevant.
29. We now need to reflect important policy and context developments since 2010, which have wide reaching implications for our approach to information, including for our own roles in this sphere. These are:
- a. Changes in policy context:
    - i. **Differing funding systems** across the UK and government prioritisation of access to robust, reliable information to help students make their choices.
    - ii. Increased **diversity of provision across the UK**, particularly in England, where all providers accessing student support will need to meet the information requirements expected of publicly funded HE providers<sup>5</sup>.
    - iii. The consultation on a **new quality assessment system** in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with proposals for a stronger focus on institutions' own use of student outcomes information and a potential move away from cyclical institutional review.<sup>6</sup>
    - iv. Government proposals in England to develop a **teaching excellence framework** to recognise and reward the highest-quality learning and teaching, with potential implications for the information gathered from institutions and communicated to students.<sup>7</sup>
    - v. Development of programmes to investigate **approaches to measuring learning and outcomes**, including the 'Learning Gain' programme<sup>8</sup>, institutions' use of a wider range of survey instruments such as the UK Engagement Survey, and the

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<sup>4</sup> For the joint consultation, see 'Provision of information about higher education; Outcomes of consultation and next steps' (HEFCE 2011/18), available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2011/201118/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2011/201118/). For the Welsh consultation, see 'W11/15HE: Key Information Sets', available at [https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/circulars/circulars\\_2011.aspx](https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/circulars/circulars_2011.aspx).

<sup>5</sup> See [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/alternative-providers-of-higher-education-improving-quality-and-value-for-money](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/alternative-providers-of-higher-education-improving-quality-and-value-for-money).

<sup>6</sup> Information about the Review of Quality Assessment is available to download from [www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/review/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/review/).

<sup>7</sup> This may also impact on the devolved nations, which are considering their responses to this development.

<sup>8</sup> Details of the Learning Gain programme are available from [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/lq/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/lq/).

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) review of outcomes and destinations data<sup>9</sup>.

- b. The role of other organisations in information:
  - i. The increased importance of information provided by institutions, together with the **Competition and Markets Authority (CMA)**'s UK-wide guidance about the information that should be provided to students to meet consumer legislation<sup>10</sup>.
  - ii. **UCAS's corporate strategy 2015-2020**<sup>11</sup>.
  - iii. Emergence of a range of **third party providers of information**, some of which collect and publish their own data.
- c. Changes to data collection and its oversight:
  - i. **Increased technological capabilities** of institutions, which are making use of learning analytics to support improvements<sup>12</sup>.
  - ii. HESA's major review of its data collection processes following the **Higher Education Data and Information Improvement Programme** report 'Blueprint for a new data landscape', which is likely to allow for more in-year data collection<sup>13</sup>.
  - iii. Introduction of the **UK-wide Code of Practice on data** for institutions<sup>14</sup>.

### **Our approach to the review and consultation**

30. Since 2013, we have undertaken an extensive programme of research, testing and informal consultation. This has focused on the NSS and Unistats.

31. Our evidence base so far includes:

- a. Review of the purpose and effectiveness of the NSS, together with literature reviews on survey methodology, and statistical analysis of nine years of data<sup>15</sup>.
- b. Cognitive testing and piloting of potential changes to the NSS<sup>16</sup>.
- c. Primary research with current and prospective students and their advisers on information for decision-making, a literature review of decision-making, and research with institutions on their experience of Unistats and the KIS.

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/pr/3686-review-of-data-on-destinations-and-outcomes-for-leavers-from-he](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/pr/3686-review-of-data-on-destinations-and-outcomes-for-leavers-from-he).

<sup>10</sup> See [www.gov.uk/cma-cases/consumer-protection-review-of-higher-education](http://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/consumer-protection-review-of-higher-education). HEFCW provides additional guidance on costs under 'W10/07HE: Provision of information for students on cost of study' at [https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/circulars/circulars\\_2010.aspx](https://www.hefcw.ac.uk/publications/circulars/circulars_2010.aspx).

<sup>11</sup> UCAS' mission, detailed in its 2015-20 strategy, is to inspire and facilitate progression in education through information and admissions services, and retain its position as a trusted choice for high-quality information and advice about progression options.

<sup>12</sup> Learning analytics refers to the use of data about students and their activities to help institutions support learners.

<sup>13</sup> See [www.hediip.ac.uk/](http://www.hediip.ac.uk/).

<sup>14</sup> Available at [www.hesa.ac.uk/code-of-practice-for-higher-education-data-collections](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/code-of-practice-for-higher-education-data-collections).

<sup>15</sup> Analysis including a 10th year of data will be published in early 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Cognitive testing examines how students understand and respond to question wording, by asking them to 'think aloud' the process of responding to a question.

d. A mapping study of information resources, together with a sample review of institutions' websites.

32. The research reports have been published by HEFCE on behalf of all the funding bodies and are available to download alongside this consultation at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/). See Annex A for a list of supporting materials.

33. Given the findings of the research we have carried out to date, we need to make some changes, for implementation by 2017, to ensure that the NSS and Unistats remain robust and effective. These require consultation in 2015, to feed into piloting and testing in early 2016<sup>17</sup>. We also wish at this stage to seek views on exploratory ideas about information on students not currently in the NSS, to inform future proposals.

34. However, further changes to NSS and Unistats may also be needed after 2017 to reflect the changing policy context. For example, our work on learning indicators may need to align with the development of the proposed Teaching Excellence Framework.

35. We propose, therefore, to adopt a **two-stage approach** to the review and consultation process, to ensure we can respond in a timely way to emerging developments.

#### **Stage One: Consultation in 2015**

##### **Changes to information for implementation in 2017**

- Review of Unistats and the Key information Set to inform changes to information published on Unistats in 2017.
- Information published by institutions.
- Review of the National Student Survey to inform a new survey in 2017.

##### **Changes to information for implementation after 2017**

- Methods for capturing qualitative data from students for publication.
- Seeking feedback from students not included in the NSS.
- Information for taught postgraduate students.

#### **Stage Two: For future consultation if needed (not included in this document)**

##### **Learning indicators – developing:**

- effective measures of the factors that contribute to high-quality learning
- fit-for-purpose measures of outcomes from HE.

This will include (but not be confined to) changes that may be needed arising from:

- The outcomes of the Review of Quality Assessment in England,

<sup>17</sup> Further details of this testing are provided in Section 2.3.

Wales and Northern Ireland, and the Teaching Excellence Framework in England.

- The review of destinations and outcomes managed by HESA, which will be extended to consider broader types of outcomes information, including salary data available through HM Revenue and Customs records<sup>18</sup>.
- The Learning Gain pilot programme in England.

**Other changes which may be needed after 2017**, building on feedback from the 2015 consultation.

36. This consultation represents stage one of the review. It is a joint consultation by all four funding bodies and the outcomes will apply across the UK.

### **The role of the HE funding bodies**

37. As noted in paragraph 29, there is now a wide range of **information resources** and of **providers of information** on learning and teaching, and the student experience. These resources are **regulated through different routes** (see Annex C). This yields benefits but also some challenges. We note the potential for information overload, as well as the risks of student survey fatigue and disengagement. We need to ensure information reflects the distinctive needs of students as well as the diversity of HE provision and providers. It will be important to ensure the robustness of information, which increasingly has an impact for institutions on recruitment and income, but we also have particular concern about the administrative burden and costs to institutions if they are subject to multiple sets of guidance on information.

38. Overall, we aim to streamline our approach to providing information, while ensuring it still meets the needs of students and other stakeholders. We will rely as far as possible on existing guidance and resources, and aim to minimise our requests to institutions. We aim to **work in partnership** with other bodies such as CMA, the National Union of Students (NUS) and UCAS to reduce duplication of activity and help information meet its purposes. As funding bodies, we work collaboratively to harmonise efforts across the UK, and to balance the interests of students, institutions, government and wider public interests. The proposals in this consultation reflect our view of how we should be positioned with regard to information on learning and teaching and the student experience. This is to:

- act as a collective, independent and authoritative source of information
- create an environment for information to be provided effectively by:
  - supporting infrastructure that encourages sector efficiency
  - promoting co-ordination and collaboration
  - supporting and facilitating dissemination of good practice
- identify and address the information needs of students and stakeholders that may not be met elsewhere.

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<sup>18</sup> Further information about HESA's review is available at [www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3041/209/](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3041/209/).

39. In our review, we have received input from a large number of groups, organisations and individuals across the HE sector and beyond (see Annex D). We thank all those who have contributed to the work of the review so far.

### Structure of consultation proposals

40. Our consultation proposals are set out in the two remaining sections of this document. Section 2 covers changes in time for implementation in 2017, while Section 3 considers potential changes after 2017. Section 2 questions are our priority area.

41. It should be noted that **Section 2** asks specific, detailed questions relating to the NSS, Unistats and information published by institutions. This is because we have already undertaken extensive research and testing as well as informal consultation on these. We also provide an opportunity to provide an open comment on each question. **Section 3** asks more exploratory consultation questions about obtaining feedback from students not currently covered by the NSS, and publishing qualitative information from students. Responses to this section will inform further research and development.

42. Table 3 summarises the proposals in this document.

**Table 3: Summary of proposals**

<b>Section 2: changes for 2017</b>	
2.1 Unistats and the Key Information Set	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain and develop a UK website of authoritative national data for students, their advisers and other stakeholders (currently Unistats).</li> <li>• Redesign Unistats to reflect diverse student information needs.</li> <li>• Transfer publication of learning, teaching and assessment information to institutions.</li> <li>• Provide more help for students to navigate information during their decision-making journey.</li> </ul>
2.2 Information published by institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask institutions to publish detailed course information in line with CMA guidance.</li> <li>• Provide good practice developed with sector experts to support consistent but nuanced presentation of information.</li> </ul>
2.3 National Student Survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply criteria for questions in main survey.</li> <li>• Include new questions on student engagement.</li> <li>• Amend questions on Learning</li> </ul>

	<p>Resources and Assessment and Feedback.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Merge duplicative questions.</li> <li>• Transfer personal development and student union questions to optional banks.</li> <li>• Bring optional questions up to date.</li> </ul>
<b>Section 3: potential changes after 2017</b>	
3.1 Methods for capturing qualitative data from students for publication.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider options for publishing qualitative information including NSS comments.</li> </ul>
3.2 Feedback survey from undergraduate students not covered by the NSS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider priority groups for whom we should collect data.</li> <li>• Consider options to capturing and publishing feedback.</li> </ul>
3.3 Information for taught postgraduate students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider approaches to capturing and publishing feedback from taught postgraduates.</li> </ul>

### **A note on scope**

43. In this consultation we focus on '**information about learning and teaching, and the student experience**'. While earlier publications have adopted the term 'public information about higher education', we now wish to focus our attention on our work as funding bodies to provide information resources for the specific purpose of informing students' decisions, and improving learning and teaching, and the student experience. Our approach includes the information needs of students and stakeholders across the student lifecycle. This includes taught postgraduate study, but does not cover information about research degree programmes.

44. This review is not intended to cover all information about higher education. Further information about the wider range of work undertaken by the funding bodies on information on HE and its national contexts is available from our websites.

45. There will be clear connections with work of the Higher Education Data and Information Improvement Programme, but we do not intend to duplicate its activities, which are wider in scope than learning and teaching.

## Section 2: Proposed changes for 2017

### 2.1 Changes to Unistats: improving information for prospective undergraduate students and their advisers

#### Our current approach

46. The UK HE funding bodies currently collect course-level information centrally for publication on the Unistats website. The site is intended to help students make decisions about future study, by enabling them to make comparisons of data for courses. Unistats includes data from all UK higher education institutions and some further education colleges in the UK, together with some alternative providers<sup>19</sup>.

47. The website houses a range of course-level information, including the KIS – a standardised list of 17 pieces of information including employment and NSS data<sup>20</sup>. The list was based on the types of data that students reported finding ‘very useful’ in 2010 research; fee levels were added in response to the increasing diversity of HE fees and funding across the different countries of the UK from 2012-13<sup>21</sup>. Some of the KIS data is sourced from existing datasets; the rest is collected specifically for the KIS. Unistats includes such additional information as proportions of students continuing on their courses (continuation rates) and the UCAS tariff points held by students on entry to the course.

48. Our consultation in 2010 acknowledged that students only seek out a small set of data even when they rate a broader range of data as useful. The intention of the KIS was to bring this broader information to their attention by collating it in one place. Originally, we intended that the KIS would be published on institutions’ websites, to place the data in a broader context. However, as ensuring comparable presentation was identified as burdensome for institutions, the KIS is published on Unistats. Institutions are required to display a subset of this information on their course pages by embedding a ‘widget’, which draws data from the Unistats website and acts as a direct link to the course page on Unistats. There is also a link from UCAS course pages to the relevant Unistats course page. Further information about Unistats and KIS is available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/it/unikis/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/it/unikis/).

#### Research to inform the review

49. To inform our review of Unistats, we commissioned a wide-ranging programme of research to understand student information needs and the impact of the data collection on institutions. This covered the whole UK, and included Welsh language testing. The programme included:

- Advisory study and literature review on decision making (2014)<sup>22</sup>
- Mapping study of information resources for students (2015)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> In 2015 Government announced all English alternative providers with designated courses will need to provide the same information as HEFCE-funded providers. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/alternative-providers-of-higher-education-improving-quality-and-value-for-money>.

<sup>20</sup> The ‘KIS’ is therefore a specific set of Unistats data, and has its own branding. It includes some but not all NSS data and some employment data as well as information on accommodation and fees.

<sup>21</sup> See HEFCE 2011/18.

<sup>22</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/infoadvisory/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/infoadvisory/).

<sup>23</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/it/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/it/roiconsult/ra/).

- Report of the Review of Unistats and Key information Set (2015) – covering:
  - survey of first-year students and online focus groups
  - survey and interviews with prospective students and careers advisers
  - survey of institutions on producing the KIS
  - investigation of data reuse by institutions and other providers of data
  - Unistats user research and user surveys<sup>24</sup>.

## **Main findings**

### How do students use data and information in decision-making?

- The process of decision-making is complex and highly personal, and students have different preferences for using data (ranging from extensive use to minimal pragmatic use). Experiential influences such as open days have an important role alongside information.
- More data does not lead to better choices, and too much data can be overwhelming and impair decision-making.
- There is no single solution for the provision of the ‘right’ information; information providers should help students be empowered, and support them to reflect on their own circumstances and needs, and what factors are important to them.

### What types of information are useful?

- Prospective students are most focused on their potential academic experience, but also want a sense of what their wider HE experience will be like.
- Detailed course information, such as how the course will be taught, available modules and assessment methods, is frequently cited as the most important information. Students are interested in what will be expected of them, often so they can understand whether they would be able to balance studying with other commitments.
- While there is a common core of information that is important to most prospective students, student groups have differing needs and priorities. Part-time students, mature students and students with no parental experience of HE are more likely to prioritise practical factors like travel and accommodation. For all students the types of jobs that graduates go on to do are viewed as more important than salaries.
- Students have significant interest in being able to access balanced first-hand perspectives from current and former students.

### Which sources do students use?

- Institutions’ websites and UCAS are the most commonly accessed sources of information. However, institutions’ websites are viewed as potentially biased, as their marketing role is widely recognised. Impartial sources of information are therefore viewed as valuable supplementary resources.

<sup>24</sup> See [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/).

- Awareness of Unistats is low, but satisfaction of users is high: only 18 per cent of 1,175 first-year students surveyed had used it<sup>25</sup>. Of those surveyed, 79 per cent had said they were not aware of it. However, almost all who used it found it useful. Recent user surveys found that 94 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied. The widget, while the highest driver of traffic to Unistats, is frequently viewed by students as ‘advertising’, so ignored.

#### How accessible and useful is current information?

- The information resources landscape is cluttered. There are many online sources of information for students, in addition to that provided by institutions, but it is not clear which data is authoritative. Students cannot easily find information at the right point in the decision-making journey. The quality and coverage of information on institutions’ websites is inconsistent. While there are differences across the nations, there are key gaps in critical areas such as additional costs.
- Prospective students often do not know what questions to ask about HE. Careers advisers suggest that less confident and well informed students, particularly those who are the first in their family to apply to HE, require support to understand and make best use of the information on sites like Unistats.
- The way data is currently presented on Unistats may be too complex and overwhelming for some students: in some cases, data they want is available on the site but is not easily found.
- Data itself is often challenging to understand and interpret, and users of the site often do not consider the data in detail. Current approaches to explaining data are also not easily absorbed. For example, ‘pop up’ explanations that data has been aggregated (because course numbers are too small) are overlooked.
- Institutions, particularly those with very flexible provision, find learning and teaching data for the KIS (the proportion of time spent in lectures, personal study, coursework, exams and placement) the most challenging to provide. Audits also note this as the most problematic aspect of KIS returns, and one where data may frequently not fully represent the type of experience students will have.

#### **What does this mean for Unistats?**

50. A strong message from both students and careers advisers is that there is a need for an impartial, authoritative source of high-level comparable information that can be considered alongside detailed information on institutions’ websites. However, the evidence from our research suggests that we need to revise **what** is provided and **how** it is presented. The site is not suitable for the detailed course information students want. Where the data is of interest, students may still overlook it on the site or have difficulties in interpreting it.

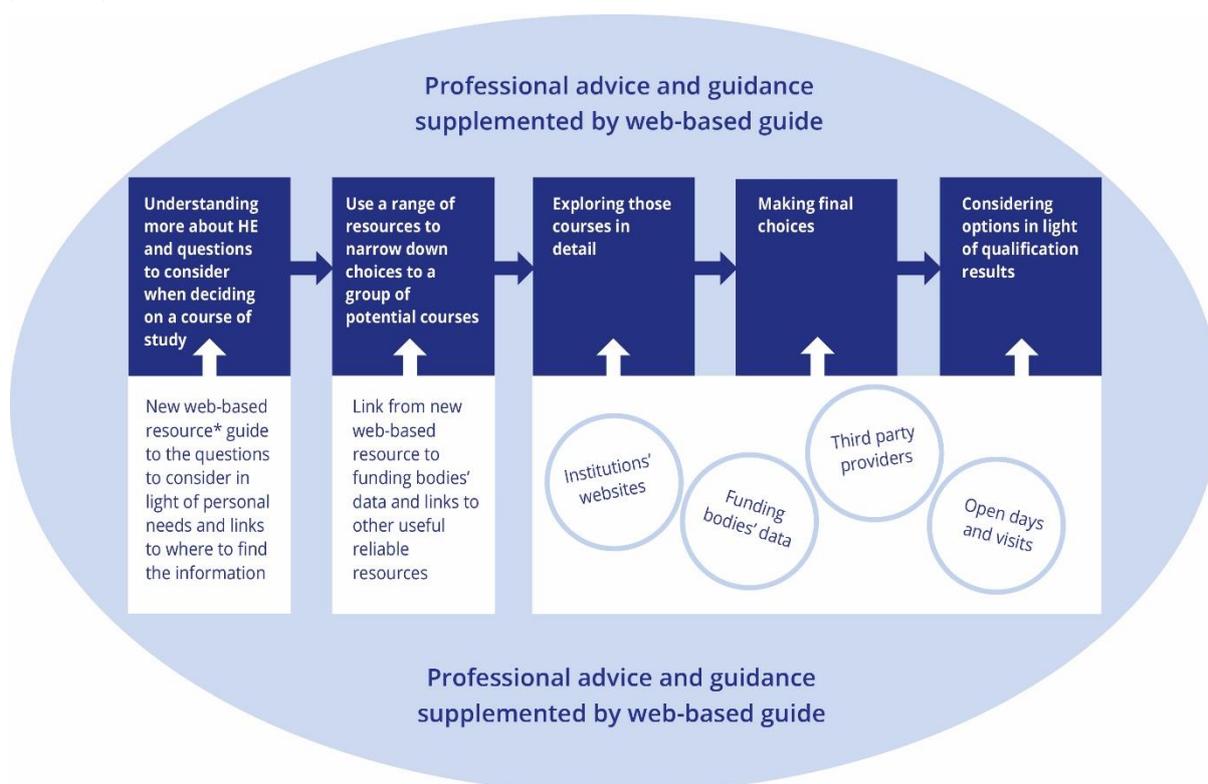
51. Our priority is to improve the site to make the data and information more accessible and useful to students with differing information preferences and levels of confidence with HE data. This applies in terms of what information is available, how easy it is to find, understand and

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<sup>25</sup> This research was undertaken shortly after links were established between UCAS and Unistats in May 2015. We are undertaking activities to raise students’ awareness of the site.

interpret, and how students navigate it. We also need to consider the role that Unistats plays in the decision-making journey, complementing other resources such as UCAS and institutions themselves (through their websites). UCAS and institutions' own websites are the two primary resources used by students, and we need to work with both to ensure that students can navigate and access the information and resources at the right time throughout their decision-making journey. Figure 1 provides an example of how our revised approach to information sources can support the student decision journey. It is one example, recognising there is no typical student journey.

**Figure 1: How information resources can support the student decision-making journey<sup>26</sup>**



\* [This guide is yet to be developed and will be considered as part of the redesign of Unistats]

52. We also need an approach that will provide information in a way that allows students – more effectively than at present – to find information relating to their own information needs, rather than assuming the same set of data will be important to all students. This includes part-time and mature students and students without an HE background, who all have distinctive needs. We are also keen to respond to feedback from institutions, which notes that some elements of the KIS are particularly challenging to produce, and highlight that the standardised approach does not fit well their more flexible programmes.

53. We therefore propose to:

- a. **Maintain and develop an authoritative data website** aimed at students and advisers – which provides a neutral, authoritative source for important data which is best

<sup>26</sup> The process is portrayed as linear purely for diagrammatic purposes. We are aware that an individual's decision-making processes are rarely linear.

collected and presented centrally. This will have a single strong brand for promotion (rather than multiple brands of Unistats and KIS). The primary role of the site will remain to support student decision-making about study. We will consider whether we should retain the Unistats and KIS brands.

b. **Make it easier to understand and interpret** data comparisons on the site – our aim should be to provide information, rather than just data, and we should provide greater contextualisation and explanation about the data we publish. By ‘contextualisation’ we mean ensuring that prospective students understand how to interpret the data we publish and what it may tell them (as well as what it cannot tell them). We also need to make it easier to understand the effect of survey response rates and sample sizes in comparing data. We need to do this in a straightforward, easy-to-understand way.

c. **Help students navigate information at different stages of the decision-making journey** – in particular working with partners such as UCAS to revisit how data is presented, so that students have more help to understand what information to consider at each point, and better signposting to help them navigate information based on their priorities and stage of decision-making. This will consider the needs of a diverse range of students, including part-time and mature students, and those without an HE background.

d. **Transfer to institutions the publication of detailed course information** – this approach will replace data currently published in the Key Information Set, specifically the learning, teaching, assessment, fees and accommodation elements. Research and institutional and user experience suggest these items do not effectively provide the detailed, nuanced course information that students want. We take the view that such information is better presented on institutions’ websites, with help for students to navigate it from a central source, and advice for institutions to provide the level of consistency and detail that would be helpful (see Section 2.2 for more detail).

54. We recognise that outcomes of quality assessment and the proposed teaching excellence framework will be of interest to prospective students. We will ensure that any Unistats successor website can be readily updated to incorporate new measures where appropriate.

## **2.2 Information provided by institutions**

55. We propose that the resources we provide on a revised website should be complemented by, and linked to, information provided by institutions. We wish to ensure that information gives prospective students a good idea of what their academic experience is likely to involve. Collecting information in a standardised, comparable format is not always the best way of conveying this, particularly given the diversity of HE provision. Institutions are best placed to provide the rich, nuanced and contextualised information that students seek.

56. CMA has already set out the information to which it believes students should have access; institutions are increasingly providing this information as it supports the recruitment and retention of students, and the statement of CMA’s expectations adds weight to this<sup>27</sup>. We know that institutions have found providing learning, teaching and assessment data difficult and

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<sup>27</sup> CMA has published two documents of relevance to information that institutions should provide. Its report on consumer law outlines the ‘material information’ required to comply with consumer law. Its report on regulation outlines information addition to this which it deems to be good practice. See <https://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/competition-and-regulation-in-higher-education-in-england>.

burdensome, and we want to minimise this and ensure that the information provided is accurate and helpful to students. This can be achieved by simplifying the widget on course pages (so it simply provides a link to funding bodies' centralised data rather than presenting data itself), and by streamlining the multiple guidance about information from different organisations by ensuring our approach aligns with the CMA guidance. (We set out how we will achieve this in Annex E.)

57. As part of our research, we reviewed a sample of institutions' websites. This shows that some already provide information for students, but that this is variable in terms of accessibility and how well it reflects the type of information students need and prioritise.

58. To support institutions in meeting the CMA guidance, and increase their awareness of the information that students are looking for, we will ask institutions to act on the findings of our research, and we will work with experts from institutions, NUS, CMA, and elsewhere to consider advice and case studies on good practice. This could include information such as:

- information about available modules (core and likely optional modules)
- the assessment methods used for the course (for instance exams, coursework and practical assessments) and the proportion of assessment attributable to each one
- teaching methods
- expectations of time commitments from students
- information on the amount and form of support from staff (for example small groups versus lectures, who contact is with, and class size).

(This is an indicative list only.)

59. The advice on good practice will help to provide some consistency in presenting the information, but will reflect that it is appropriate to present information in different ways for different types of provision (for example for conservatoires or programmes with highly flexible learning methods). This information on institutions' websites will replace the high-level summary information on percentages of scheduled learning and teaching, and independent study currently provided in the KIS. The improvements we will make to Unistats will also help students to understand what information on the site they should consider, and to navigate the information institutions provide.

60. In addition to this, we propose to ask institutions to consider other types of information not currently included on Unistats, but which students are interested in, for example additional costs associated with the course (such as for field trips, equipment, materials, bench fees or studio hire). Again, we will work with sector experts and students to provide supporting guidance on the level of detail and consistency that would be helpful<sup>28</sup>.

61. As currently, we will ask institutions to include links to the web pages containing this information as part of their data submissions for the redeveloped Unistats, so that prospective students can easily access it from the course pages on the redeveloped site.

62. Beyond this, we anticipate that the quality and robustness of institutions' information will be supported as follows:

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<sup>28</sup> This type of costs information has been available in Wales from 2010.

- a. The **robustness** of institutions' data, including for publication, will be supported by the Code of Practice for HE data collections, with assurance provided through institutions' own governing bodies and where appropriate through periodic data audit by funders.
- b. **Information for students** to support decision-making will be underpinned by consumer legislation, supported by guidance from the CMA.
- c. **Information to support learning and teaching** will be underpinned by institutions' own processes (and tested through arrangements for quality assessment on which the funding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are currently consulting).

63. Table 4 provides a summary of the information we will continue to collect and publish and that we will advise institutions to provide on their websites, in line with CMA guidance. The first column indicates whether the information is available on Unistats; the second column indicates if it is also presented as part of the KIS<sup>29</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> The KIS is a subset of data available on the Unistats website.

**Table 4: A comparison of information currently published on Unistats and our proposed new approach.**

Data or information item currently on Unistats	Also published as part of the KIS?	Proposed approach
<p>Results from the following NSS questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff are good at explaining things.</li> <li>• Staff have made the subject interesting.</li> <li>• Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my course.</li> <li>• I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.</li> <li>• Feedback on my work has been prompt.</li> <li>• Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.</li> <li>• The library resources are good enough for my needs.</li> <li>• I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.</li> <li>• I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild).</li> </ul>	Yes	Retain and contextualise mandatory questions from the NSS. (Note that the wording of these will differ from those listed to reflect the outcomes of the NSS review.)
Results from other NSS questions	No	Retain and contextualise mandatory questions from the NSS.

<b>Data or information item currently on Unistats</b>	<b>Also published as part of the KIS?</b>	<b>Proposed approach</b>
Proportion of time spent in various learning and teaching activities	Yes	Transfer to publication by institutions. Provide good practice guidance on provision of detailed information on institutional websites that appropriately reflects diversity of provision. Ask institutions to provide a link to this information in the central data collection.
Proportion of summative assessment by method	Yes	Transfer to publication by institutions. Provide good practice guidance on provision of detailed information on institutional websites that appropriately reflects diversity of provision. Ask institutions to link to this information in the central data collection.
Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies that recognise this course, with details of the type of recognition and a link to further detail	Yes	Retain, as a key determining factor for some students. Review our current approach to ensure robustness of this data.
Costs of institutional and private accommodation	Yes	We propose to remove this. Some evidence suggests that it is helpful to have an impartial source of this information, but information is found more easily elsewhere at a more detailed and accurate level.
Financial support available from the institution: whether it offers a fee waiver; means-tested support; non-means-tested support; and a link to more detailed information	Yes	We propose to remove this. Detailed information is most effectively provided by the institution on its website.

<b>Data or information item currently on Unistats</b>	<b>Also published as part of the KIS?</b>	<b>Proposed approach</b>
Average fees (excluding fee waivers) per year by country of UK domicile	Yes	We propose to remove this. Average fee information is not helpful, can be found elsewhere and users do not look for it on Unistats. Ask institutions to provide information together with a link to course fee and additional cost information as part of the central data collection return.
The destinations of graduates six months after completing their course – divided between working, studying, working and studying, unemployed, and not available for work	Yes	Retain and contextualise. Adapt information on destinations and salary to reflect any new information and changes introduced by the review of outcomes data collection.
Of those in employment, the proportion in managerial or professional jobs six months after graduation.	Yes	Retain and contextualise. Adapt information on destinations and salary to reflect any new information and changes introduced by the review of outcomes data collection including job categories.

<b>Data or information item currently on Unistats</b>	<b>Also published as part of the KIS?</b>	<b>Proposed approach</b>
<p>Salary data for those in full-time employment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• upper quartile, median and lower quartile six months after graduation from the course at the institution</li> <li>• regionally adjusted upper quartile, median and lower quartile for the subject across all institutions six months after graduation</li> <li>• regionally adjusted upper quartile, median and lower quartile for the subject across all institutions 40 months after graduation</li> </ul>	Yes	Retain and contextualise. Adapt information on destinations and salary to reflect any new information and changes introduced by the review of outcomes data collection.
Continuation information (the proportion of students continuing on the course after one year)	No	Retain, but ensure that this can be easily found and understood as a way of identifying rates of withdrawal from the course.
Class of degree	No	Retain and contextualise.
Entry information: qualifications held by those entering the course	No	Recommend discontinuing publication. Not found to be informative during user experience testing. Interest is in results and not type of qualification.
Entry information: tariff points held by those entering the course	No	Retain. Explain where students can find information on likely offers or grades required for the course (but make it clear that institutions accept students with grades lower than the published offer).

### Consultation questions

1. Do you agree with the respective roles we have identified for institutions and funding bodies in meeting students' information needs?
2. Do you agree that our proposed changes to Unistats and the Key Information Set will improve the accessibility of information and ensure that the data we provide is meaningful for students?
3. Do you have any comments on our proposals for Unistats, and the areas we propose to ask institutions to provide on websites? Are there any gaps?

## 2.3 Changes to the National Student Survey

### Our current approach

64. The National Student Survey is a UK-wide survey of mainly final year undergraduate students about their experiences on their courses. We ran the first full survey in 2005 as part of a new Quality Assurance Framework in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NSS currently includes a compulsory main survey of 23 closed and two open questions. Institutions may also add a question of their own devising, and draw on a series of optional banks of questions for institutions' own use. The results of the closed questions in the main survey are published annually, including through the Unistats website for use by students. The survey is widely used by institutions to improve the student experience. More information on the background of the survey is given in Annex F, with the current questionnaire at Annex G.

65. In the review we have **considered the purpose and effectiveness of the survey now and for the future**. Making changes from 2017 would mean losing trend data, but we believe that the benefits of updating the survey to ensure it remains effective for students and for institutions outweigh this consideration.

### Research to inform the review

66. The review is underpinned by an extensive research and testing programme over two years. Annex F lists our research to date, and Table 4 provides a summary of the completed and projected programme. As part of this, we commissioned an external review of the purpose and effectiveness of the NSS (hereafter the 'NSS Review report'), and consulted informally on its recommendations during summer 2014. This enabled us to begin early practical testing of new questions in 2015, with advice from an expert panel, and thereby to develop robust proposals for this consultation<sup>30</sup>. This included cognitive testing of questions and wider testing of pilot questions with 16,000 students. The individual research reports are available to download from the HEFCE website.

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<sup>30</sup> Membership of the expert panel can be found at Annex D.

**Table 4: NSS research programme**

	<b>Phase</b>	<b>Timing</b>	<b>Status</b>	<b>Accompanying reports</b>
1	<b>Research</b> on the purpose and effectiveness of the NSS to inform recommendation for changes, and <b>informal consultation</b> with stakeholders about findings	September 2013 to August 2014	Complete	'Review of the National Student Survey', NatCen Social Research, the Institute for Education, University of London and the Institute for Employment Studies (2014) <sup>31</sup>  'National Student Survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013' (HEFCE 2014/13) <sup>32</sup>
2	Pre-consultation <b>cognitive testing and piloting</b> of recommendations for changes to the questionnaire from phase 1	October 2014 to June 2015	Complete	Cognitive testing report TNS BRMB (2015)  HEFCE Report on NSS 2015 pilot (2015)  Literature reviews on survey effects and 'response bias' HEFCE (2015) <sup>33</sup>
3	<b>Consultation</b> alongside further <b>cognitive testing and piloting</b> of full questionnaire and survey methods based on phase 2	October 2015 to July 2016	In progress	Outcomes to be published in 2016
4	<b>Running new survey</b> and 'health check' analysis of results based on phase 3	September 2016 to summer 2017	In progress	Outcomes to be published in 2017
5	<b>Further development</b> programme	2015 to 2020	To be started	Outcomes published from 2017 onwards

67. We have completed phases 1 and 2 of the NSS review. In phase 3, alongside this consultation, we are undertaking more cognitive testing. This work will continue to test thoroughly the proposals in this document so that we can draw information from cognitive testing and

<sup>31</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/).

<sup>32</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/).

<sup>33</sup> Available alongside this document at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/).

consultation to inform the design of a pilot of a final questionnaire in 2016. We will continue to engage with the sector after the 2016 pilot to ensure that the 2017 survey is robust, fully tested and endorsed by the sector and stakeholders.

68. The following section summarises the research findings, our proposed changes and consultation questions. These relate to:

- explicit criteria for the main survey
- new questions on student engagement
- revision of questions on assessment and feedback and learning resources
- discontinuation in the main survey of:
  - questions on the students union (to be transferred to the optional banks)
  - questions on personal development (to be transferred to the optional banks)
  - questions that duplicate content
- updating the optional banks.

### NSS Review report

69. Overall, the NSS Review report found that the NSS is a robust and valued tool that plays a role in the three purposes of information, supporting learning and teaching development, as well as informing student decision-making and securing accountability. The researchers did not recommend radical changes, but suggested some alterations to preserve the strengths of the survey and address identified weaknesses. They made suggestions in relation to the specific questionnaire content and the methodology and presentation of results.

70. We published an initial response to these recommendations in November 2014<sup>34</sup>. In light of our testing programme, we have refined our approach to changes suggested in the NSS Review report. A complete list of all the suggestions from the NSS Review is available to download alongside this document<sup>35</sup>. It covers relevant findings from our research, informal consultation and testing, and our planned actions, including areas on which we are consulting.

### **Considerations in designing a new survey**

71. In refining our approach, we have reflected the following considerations relating to survey design, arising from our literature reviews on survey effects and response bias. In summary:

- a. We should continue to use a five-point Likert scale for responses<sup>36</sup>.
- b. To maximise response rates, the survey should remain short and straightforward (both the questions and the interface through which students interact with it).

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<sup>34</sup> 'NSS Review research: summary of recommendations and proposed UK higher education funding body response', available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/future/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/future/).

<sup>35</sup> 'NSS Review research: summary of recommendations and proposed UK higher education funding body response', available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/future/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/future/).

<sup>36</sup> A Likert scale response scale seeks each respondent's level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetrical agree-disagree scale for a series of statements.

c. We should be careful to avoid questions that are taxing, as these result in unhelpful behaviours (such as ‘yea-saying’ – answering the same response to all questions – or dropping out altogether)<sup>37</sup>.

d. Ideally questions should be presented in banks, each of which contains a minimum of three questions. This is advised to ensure that statistical tests to confirm survey robustness (such as of response correlation and validity) are reliable.

72. We discuss our proposals and rationale in detail below.

### **Proposed changes**

#### Explicit criteria for questions in the main survey

73. The NSS Review report recommended we establish explicit criteria for the main questionnaire, to preserve the coherence of the survey and limit requests to extend it for other purposes which might dilute its effectiveness. Stakeholders have been broadly supportive of these criteria. In addition, and taking into account discussion with HEPISG, we propose that the NSS should reflect the whole, rather than part, of students’ academic experiences of their courses.

74. The full criteria we propose should be applied are that questions should:

- meet at least **one** of the three key purposes of the NSS:
  - informing prospective student choice
  - enhancing the student academic experience within HE institutions
  - ensuring public accountability.
- be something HE providers can influence
- concern the academic experience, and especially learning and teaching
- be applicable across all modes, disciplines, types of providers and countries in the UK, as far as possible
- cover measurable and valid issues
- be meaningful and useful to students and other stakeholders
- produce results that are unambiguous in direction
- address issues of enduring importance in UK HE rather than transient policy interests.

#### **Consultation questions**

4. Do you agree with the criteria we propose should be applied to the main NSS questionnaire?
5. Do you have any comments on this proposal?

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<sup>37</sup> We discuss ‘yea-saying’ in more detail in paragraphs 92 to 94. It is also known as ‘acquiescence bias or ‘response bias’.

### New questions: student engagement

75. The NSS Review notes that the survey plays a stronger role in the development of learning and teaching than originally expected in its design. However, research participants believed its role could be further strengthened through including questions on student engagement. Student engagement has multiple meanings, and we have taken it to encapsulate students' experience of interest and belonging, their involvement in shaping their learning and how they approach their studies such that it promotes a 'deep approach to learning'<sup>38</sup>. The NSS Review notes that student engagement is now central to most contemporary debates about improving learning and teaching, and is associated in research literature with learning gain and high-quality learning.

76. In our research, we tested questions proposed by the NSS Review, which relate to three themes:

- academic challenge, and reflective and integrative learning
- the learning community and collaborative learning
- the student voice.

77. We trialled questions on these themes in cognitive testing and piloting, and made minor changes to wording with advice from an expert panel and HEPSIG for clarity of understanding. Our proposed wording reflected HEPSIG's advice that the questions throughout the NSS should ask students to respond to their learning environment and not to evaluate their learning. Not all the NSS Review report's suggested questions were successful in testing. Full details of testing and subsequent changes made to the original suggestions may be found in the report on cognitive testing<sup>39</sup>.

78. We are still testing the appropriate question sequence and minor variants on phrasing of questions to reflect good survey design. See the literature review on survey effects for details: 'National Student Survey: A literature review of survey forms and effects'.

79. We are seeking views on the inclusion of the following nine questions. Cognitive testing showed that some of these questions are more complex for students to answer than the other questions in the survey. However, piloting has found all of these to be robust in terms of students' clear understanding and their applicability across course and student groups. (Further information is available in HEFCE's report on the NSS 2015 pilot<sup>40</sup>.)

**Table 4: Proposed questions on student engagement**

Topic	Question	Section in the survey
Academic challenge, and integrative learning	<b>My course has challenged me to achieve my best work</b>	Could be included in the 'Teaching on my course' section

<sup>38</sup> See 'Review of the National Student Survey' at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/).

<sup>39</sup> See 'Cognitively testing questions for the National Student Survey' (TNS BRMB, 2015), available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/).

<sup>40</sup> See 'Results and analysis for the 2015 pilot of the National Student Survey', available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/).

Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth</b>	Potentially a new separate section
Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics</b>	Potentially a new separate section
Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt</b>	Potentially a new separate section
The student voice	<b>I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course</b>	Separate section on student voice, or combine with collaborative learning section
The student voice	<b>Staff value students' views and opinions about the course</b>	Separate section on student voice, or combine with collaborative learning section
The student voice	<b>It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on</b>	Separate section on student voice, or combine with collaborative learning section
The learning community and collaborative learning	<b>I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course</b>	Further testing to identify placement in survey under way
The learning community and collaborative learning	<b>I feel part of a community of staff and students</b>	Further testing to identify placement in survey under way

### Consultation questions

6. Do you agree that we should include questions on student engagement, to strengthen the role of the survey in improving learning and teaching?
7. Do you have any comments on the proposed themes, terminology or sequencing of our proposed student engagement questions, or any wider comments about this proposal?

### Updating questions: learning resources and assessment and feedback

80. The NSS Review suggested that two sets of questions should be reworded. The section on learning resources should be amended to reflect technological advances since the survey was established in 2005, and changes in students' expectations of the support they will receive in this

area. Our proposed questions are based on further refinements of the questions through cognitive testing for clarity and coverage. The expert panel advised that the questions should focus on quality of support rather than access to resources, which most students would assume to be a basic requirement. Testing and piloting suggested that the questions were clear and applicable across all subject groups, although in cognitive testing it was notable that students did not fully consider the breadth of resources available. We are therefore seeking views on whether the questions sufficiently cover all the areas related to learning resources which are of interest to institutions and to students.

81. The second area relates to questions in the assessment and feedback section, which may inadvertently encourage institutional approaches that do not enhance students' academic experiences. The proposed revised wording tested well in cognitive testing and piloting.

**Table 5: Questions on learning resources**

Existing question	Proposed question
The library resources and services are good enough for my needs	The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning well
I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to	The University/College's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well.
I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to	I have been able to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when I needed to

**Table 6: Questions on assessment and feedback**

Existing question	Revised question
Feedback on my work has been prompt	Feedback on my work has been timely
I have received detailed comments on my work	I have received helpful comments on my work

**Consultation questions**

8. Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on learning resources?
9. Do these questions include all the areas relating to learning resources which are of importance to institutions and students? If not, which aspects are missing?
10. Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on assessment and feedback?
11. Do you have any comments on our proposal to amend these questions?

Questions to be discontinued in the main survey

82. A primary recommendation of the NSS review, supported by the literature review on survey design, is that the main survey should remain short to ensure maximum engagement (and thus

good responses) and maintain high response rates. We propose that the main survey should remain under 30 questions. To accommodate new questions on student engagement, we have identified three types of questions which we propose to discontinue in the main current survey:

- questions which duplicate content
- personal development questions (to be transferred to the optional questions)
- the students' union question (to be transferred to the optional questions).

#### Duplicate questions

83. Analysis of both past NSS data (the nine-year analysis) and the NSS pilot suggests there is a high correlation between responses in each of the following pairs of questions whose themes overlap. The NSS review suggested we consider deleting one of each pair from the survey. Stakeholders also broadly supported this approach. We propose, therefore, to remove one question in each of the following three pairs. In each case, the question to be removed asks about an example of the question we propose to retain. For example Q5 – that marking criteria is clear in advance - is a specific instance of when marking and assessment has been fair.

- Q2: Staff have made the subject interesting (**retain**)
  - Q3: Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching (**remove**)
- Q6: Marking and assessment have been fair (**retain**)
  - Q5: The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance (**remove**)
- Q8: I have received helpful comments on my work (**retain**, replacing 'detailed' with 'helpful')
  - Q9 Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand. (**remove**)

#### Personal development questions

84. The NSS Review research noted that currently the three survey questions in this area (Q19 to Q21) are problematic. The questions were considered to be ambiguous in meaning, and were viewed by student participants in the research as of limited value in informing their study choices. The review thus recommended we should test alternatively worded questions.

85. Our cognitive testing of both the existing questions and alternative personal development questions from other surveys did not produce valid responses. Students were unsure of the intent behind the questions and their response strategies did not match the intention behind the questions, producing negative answers without a negative experience. Notably, some participants in the NSS review research suggested that the personal development questions should be revised to reflect employability attributes.

86. In view of the responses in testing, and the need to ensure the survey remains short, we are proposing to move some or all of these questions into a redeveloped optional bank of questions, ensuring coverage of employability, careers support and personal development (see paragraph 91). However, we note that there is a relationship between personal development and social agency and empowerment, which we consider needs to be captured, although not

necessarily through the NSS <sup>41</sup>. We therefore propose to consider alternative routes to capture this information through our wider work on learning indicators.

#### Question on satisfaction with student unions

87. The NSS Review report noted that the current student union question (Q23) does not align with the new proposed criterion that questions should focus on the learning and teaching experience. During the past year we have worked with NUS to test potential alternative questions relating to the contribution of student unions to the academic experience, specifically academic representation. Through our Unistats research we have also considered the information students say they want about student unions, as Q23 was originally included to reflect the findings of the report 'Understanding the information needs of users of public information about higher education' linked to the 2010 consultation, which noted students' interest in this<sup>42</sup>.

88. These revised questions tested poorly, as students in the research did not associate student unions with academic life, and therefore responses do not match the intention of the question. In piloting, the revised questions resulted in a markedly higher number of 'neither agree nor disagree' and 'not applicable' responses than other questions. Research for Unistats similarly highlights that some groups of students do not view the student union as a priority for their decisions about study; when this is of interest, they are likely to be considering the wider social aspects of the student union role. In light of this, we have agreed with NUS to propose removing Q23 from the main survey, and to develop an optional bank of questions relating to student unions, including on partnership and academic engagement. We propose that institutions should be asked to agree their choice of optional banks with their student union, which is stronger than the current requirement to consult with their student unions.

#### **Consultation questions**

12. Do you agree that we should remove Q3, Q5 and Q9 from the survey to ensure that it remains short?

13. Do you agree that we should remove some or all of the personal development questions and consider how we can gather this information through an alternative route?

14. Do you agree that we should remove Q23 and instead include an optional bank of questions related to student unions?

15. Do you have any comments on our proposals for changes to the optional banks, including that the choice should be made jointly with the student union or student guild?

16. Do you have any comments on our proposals relating to discontinued questions?

#### Institutional own questions

89. We are not proposing to make any changes to the option for institutions to devise two of their own questions.

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<sup>41</sup> By 'social agency' we broadly mean the capacity of students for independent action and free choices. We are undertaking further work to investigate this and related concepts.

<sup>42</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2010/hepublicinfouserneeds/).

### Banks of optional questions

90. Institutions are currently able to select up to six banks of additional questions from a series of 12 (see Annex G). The results of these questions are shared with the HE provider only. They are not currently used by the funding bodies. In 2014 51 per cent of providers used the optional banks, including the majority of higher education institutions. The NSS Review report noted that the banks were viewed as one of the survey’s strengths and should be maintained.

91. As some of the optional banks include topics on student engagement to be included in the main survey, we believe it is timely to update the banks to ensure they reflect the current interests and priorities of institutions and their stakeholders. Notably, some participants in the NSS Review research wished to extend the main survey to include the student experience. As we propose to focus the main survey on the learning and teaching experience, we are keen to explore whether we can make more effective use of the optional banks to gather this wider information. Building on discussions with a specially convened focus group and our analysis of themes arising from institutions’ own questions, we have identified potential additional themes. Subject to the outcomes of the consultation we will work with experts to develop and where appropriate test questions within these themes. These questions will be available alongside the 2017 survey, and will remain limited to six. We propose to term them ‘institutions’ own question banks’.

**Table 7 Topics for optional banks of questions**

<b>Current banks</b>	<b>Potential additional banks</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assessment</li> <li>• Course content and structure</li> <li>• Course delivery</li> <li>• Careers provision and support</li> <li>• Feedback from students</li> <li>• Work placements</li> <li>• Practice placement</li> <li>• Learning community</li> <li>• Intellectual motivation</li> <li>• The physical environment</li> <li>• Welfare, resources and facilities</li> <li>• Workload</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills and employability</li> <li>• Enterprise and entrepreneurship</li> <li>• Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities</li> <li>• Academic support</li> <li>• Equality</li> <li>• Technology</li> <li>• Student union</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Personal development and social agency</li> <li>• Well-being and mental health</li> <li>• Support for disabled students</li> </ul>

### **Consultation questions**

17. How do you or your institution use the optional banks?

18. How could we improve the usefulness of the optional banks? Have we identified the right additional themes for new banks?

## **Methodologies and publication**

### Negatively worded questions

92. The NSS Review – drawing on HEFCE 2014/13 – noted an increase in the numbers of students who provide the same response for every question, from 1 per cent in 2005 to just over 6 per cent in 2014. This is a common survey phenomenon known as ‘acquiescence bias’ or ‘yea-saying’. The 2014 figure is a much higher proportion than would be expected statistically, which suggests we need to test whether students are fully considering their responses. To do this, the researchers suggested that one set of questions on student engagement should be negatively worded.

93. This proposal drew little support during our informal consultation, as stakeholders were concerned that such questions would confuse students and impair the responses. Our research supports this view. The literature review on response bias notes that acquiescence bias is a common phenomenon in surveys like the NSS where questions are not neutral. However, it is also commonly a response to questions that are taxing and so it would be counterproductive to increase the complexity further through negative questions. In the cognitive testing, negatively worded questions were confusing for students, and the negatively worded question we trialled in the pilot (which focused on overall teaching) did not correlate as well with the overall responses on ‘teaching on my course’ as expected. There is a risk, therefore, that in trying to test whether students are providing a considered response, we impair the quality of responses more extensively across the survey.

94. We therefore do not propose to include negatively worded questions in the revised survey. Instead, we will explore alternative methods to minimise the likelihood that students are not fully considering their response, specifically the design of the survey interface (‘drag and drop’ responses for example, and visual online ‘warnings’ if students tick the same response for a series of questions). These will be tested through stage 3 cognitive testing and piloting before use in the revised 2017 survey.

95. Beyond this, since the publication of the NSS Review report we have made changes relating to the suggestions on methodologies and data publication:

- a. The funding bodies with HESA have published a Code of Practice on HE data collection. We will develop a short statement to accompany data publication, to promote understanding of the results and the use of benchmarks to promote appropriate data comparisons.
- b. The funding bodies have reviewed and lowered the data publication threshold for Unistats and NSS in 2014. This has already taken effect from 2015.
- c. In our cognitive testing and piloting we have determined that, when students are unsure of their answer, they haphazardly select either the middle category (‘Neither agree nor disagree’) or the ‘Not Applicable’ category without a consistent strategy. In line with the NSS Review report’s suggestion that we should provide greater clarity for students on the use of these options, we are testing the use of ‘pop up’ guidance as part of cognitive testing and piloting in 2015-16 alongside the consultation.

96. Reflecting the feedback from informal consultation, we are considering how we may continue to make the results of the survey more useful to stakeholders through:

- developing benchmarks for questions other than the overall satisfaction question (Q22 being currently the only benchmarked question).
- developing web-based statistical analysis tools to enable the sector to undertake more bespoke analysis.

97. In addition, we are testing changes to the combination of collection methods (postal, online, phone) to secure maximum value for providers by continuing to reduce costs.

### Section 3: Changes for after 2017

98. In Section 2 we outlined the changes we believe we need to make now, in time for 2017, to ensure the NSS and Unistats remain robust and effective to meet their purposes. However, in this consultation we also wish to seek views on longer-term changes beyond 2017. These are more fundamental in nature, relating to:

- **providing balanced first-hand accounts** from students to aid student decision-making
- **extending the coverage of the NSS** so that we can ensure it fully reflects the breadth and diversity of the sector
- meeting the **information needs of taught postgraduate students**.

99. Responses in these areas will inform further development work we need to conduct before we can develop firm proposals for potential future consultation.

100. As noted earlier, we will also consider further work on learning indicators as part of Stage 2, and may need to consult again in the future on this. Some work has already begun. In England and Wales, for example, we are working towards improving information on the teaching qualifications of staff, and have recently provided institutions with summary figures, including benchmark data, to support improvement of the coverage of this data.

#### 3.1 Proving better information on students' first-hand accounts

101. In Section 2, on research with prospective students about their information needs, we noted their interest in balanced first-hand accounts or perspectives from previous students ('qualitative data'). We are interested to explore ways in which we could facilitate access to such information, and welcome ideas on this.

102. One straightforward and relatively low-burden way to provide this would be through the NSS. As part of the main survey, students currently have the option to provide open text comments – one positive and one negative. It would be possible to give students the option for their comments to be published, strictly anonymously, to inform prospective students. This would not be compulsory for those who wished to continue to provide information solely for their institution. Comments would be checked for anonymity, as now. We would also need to consider how to ensure that comments were suitable for publication and easy to digest in their presentation (for example, by providing a search facility).

### Consultation questions

19. Do you agree with the principle of making balanced first-hand accounts from students available?
20. Do you have any comments about the possible use of NSS open text comments, or suggested alternative approaches to gathering and presenting such information?

### 3.2 Coverage of the sector: reflecting the diversity of provision

103. The current NSS was designed to survey all final year undergraduate students studying on courses leading to qualifications (such as bachelor's degrees, foundation degrees or HE diplomas) which are longer than one year of full-time study or its part-time equivalent. As a result, some students studying HE courses do not currently qualify to participate in the survey. There are also some students who **qualify to participate**, but their study patterns mean they are **in practice not included**, because of limitations on the timing of the survey. We are aware that the current approach is a particular concern in many colleges and alternative providers, because of their high level of non-traditional delivery patterns, and for courses of one full-time equivalent (FTE) or less (for example foundation degree top-up years).

104. Students currently excluded by design include:

- students on courses that are one FTE or less in length, including students on foundation degree top-up years
- postgraduate students
- students who withdraw from their course prior to the final year
- incoming exchange students
- students studying at overseas campuses of UK institutions
- students at the majority of alternative providers with designated courses (although a small number of such providers undertake the survey voluntarily).

The funding bodies do not currently have responsibility for alternative providers' data, although in England the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills has recently outlined its expectation that all providers of designated courses will need to undertake the survey)<sup>43</sup>.

105. Other groups of students who would ordinarily qualify, but are not included in practice, are:

- dormant students (not currently studying but expected to return)
- students who have experienced an unforeseen change to their study pattern
- students excluded by an institution's data error, which cannot be rectified before the survey.

106. Calculating total numbers of current non-participants is complex, but in our most recent analysis we note that, of a starting cohort in 2007-08 of 414,785 students, 68 per cent (282,420)

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<sup>43</sup> See 'Alternative providers of higher education: improving quality and value for money', available at [www.gov.uk/government/consultations/alternative-providers-of-higher-education-improving-quality-and-value-for-money](http://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/alternative-providers-of-higher-education-improving-quality-and-value-for-money).

were surveyed<sup>44</sup>. The remaining 132,365 were either excluded or have yet to be surveyed. Of the 91,460 students who analysis shows were excluded without error, 61,780 did not complete their course. A further 17,340 were classed as having a 'short instance' of study, often due to a top-up course or joining the course in its final year. It is notable that students not currently included are much more likely to be mature students or to be from minority ethnic backgrounds (see Annex H for further detail).

107. The NSS Review report suggested we consider the obstacles to including shorter courses. We have also considered options for routes for other groups to provide feedback on their experiences. We believe that planned changes by HESA for more in-year data will help to address some types of exclusion, where the timing of data prevents students being included, although this is likely to be a small proportion of the current annual total who are not included.

108. In relation to students not currently included in the NSS, our initial discussions with institutions and other stakeholders indicate our priorities should be:

- a. Students on courses that are short or flexibly paced. This will ensure we reflect the diversity of provision, including at alternative providers that will now be required to complete the NSS.
- b. Students who withdraw from their course. This will address criticisms that the NSS is not robust because it does not capture the views of all students, and especially those who may be less likely to be satisfied with their experience.

109. We therefore seek further advice through this consultation on how we can gather the views of these groups of students for publication, to ensure that the NSS reflects the diversity of the HE sector, in a way that is cost effective.

110. Our preferred option is to develop an online survey facility which would allow more flexible and appropriate census points (for instance at the end of the year for students on one-year courses).

111. An online survey mechanism could potentially offer a platform to enable institutions who wish to run the survey with students in earlier years to do so more efficiently at little extra cost. It is possible that in the future governments across the UK may wish to see such an approach extended across the sector. Such an approach could also facilitate measures of 'distance travelled' by students in their learning, which is increasingly important in developing more robust outcomes measures in HE.

112. We recognise that considerable further work would be required to determine how results would be reported for any new groups of students.

### **Students on courses of one FTE or less and flexible courses**

113. Students studying short or flexible courses could technically be brought into the main NSS, but under the current fixed timing of the survey this would mean that many would be surveyed a very short time after starting the course. A more flexible online mechanism alongside the routine

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<sup>44</sup> We have chosen this cohort for analysis as it is the most recent year which allows students up to six years to have completed their courses, and can therefore include final-year medical and architecture students. The cohort has been tracked up to the most recent year of available data, and checked to see whether its students are targeted be surveyed up to the NSS 2015. Data from cohorts in later years is provided in Annex H.

NSS could allow a wide range of short courses to be included at census points throughout the year. Alternatively, we could choose to include only courses of one FTE in length.

114. There are distinctive issues for top-up programmes, as their students will already have been given an opportunity to comment when they completed the programme they are topping up. As it is not possible to identify which students will go on to complete a top-up year, they may complete the survey twice for the same course. Nevertheless, we believe that the benefits of allowing all top-up programme students to complete the survey outweigh the anomaly of some completing the survey more than once.

### **Students who withdraw from their courses**

115. Non-continuers are among the hardest to reach of the groups not included in the survey. Even if contact details are available, they may be less willing to participate after they have left than current students. For this reason, we are investigating how institutions currently solicit the views of these students.

#### **Consultation questions**

21. Have we identified the correct priorities for extending the coverage of the NSS?
22. Do you agree that we should develop a flexible online survey to include all students who are on short or flexible courses?
23. Do you have examples of how data and feedback from non-completers are currently collected by institutions?
24. How should we give students who withdraw from their studies an opportunity to provide feedback, and how could their views be shared?

### **3.3 Information for taught postgraduate students**

116. Our view is that it is now timely to revisit the information needs of postgraduate students, and specifically whether they should have an opportunity to provide feedback on their study through a national survey, for which results might be published to inform future students. In our research in 2013, we noted that we should not develop an NSS for postgraduate students as the small sizes of course cohorts would likely inhibit data publication; additionally, students did not express strong interest in quantitative data, but noted that they found information difficult to find<sup>45</sup>. As a result, we focused on improvements to institutions' course information and developed a website, 'Steps to postgraduate study' (<http://postgradsteps.hefce.ac.uk/>), to help students navigate information more effectively.

117. However, in view of changes to fees and funding across the UK, including the proposals in England to introduce a loan scheme for postgraduate taught students, we believe that it will be appropriate to review further the information needs of these students. Applying the new lower data publication thresholds to a postgraduate taught survey would address some of the earlier restrictions on publishing data.

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<sup>45</sup> 'Understanding the information needs of postgraduate taught students and how these can be met', available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2013/pginfoneeds/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2013/pginfoneeds/).

118. At this stage, we would be interested in views about the factors we should consider with regard to collecting and publishing national feedback data and how we could do this, particularly in view of existing surveys such as the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and the International Student Barometer. Any survey would need to be based on solid research, testing and development, including cognitive testing and piloting.

**Consultation questions**

25. Do you agree that we should consider collecting feedback for publication from taught postgraduate students about their experiences?

26. In light of changes to higher education fees and funding, do you agree that all three purposes of information (paragraph 24 of the consultation) are relevant to a summative taught postgraduate feedback survey?

27. Which themes would it be important to gather and provide information on?

28. Do you have any other comments on this proposal?

## Abbreviations

<b>CMA</b>	Competition and Markets Authority
<b>DELNI</b>	Department of Employment and Learning Northern Ireland
<b>FTE</b>	Full-time equivalent
<b>HE</b>	Higher education
<b>HEFCE</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for England
<b>HEFCW</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
<b>HEPISG</b>	Higher Education Public Information Steering Group
<b>HESA</b>	Higher Education Statistics Agency
<b>KIS</b>	Key Information Set
<b>NSS</b>	National Student Survey
<b>NUS</b>	National Union of Students
<b>QAA</b>	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
<b>SFC</b>	Scottish Funding Council
<b>UCAS</b>	Formerly the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

## Glossary

Acquiescence bias	<p>This is a type of response bias found in some surveys as a result of which respondents have a tendency to agree with all the questions</p> <p>This is also known as 'yea-saying'.</p>
Benchmarks	<p>These are sector-adjusted averages.</p>
Cognitive testing	<p>A form of preparatory testing used in developing surveys to check that respondents are able to understand the questions being asked, that questions are understood in the same way by all respondents, and that respondents are willing and able to answer the questions.</p>
Learning analytics	<p>The use of data about students and their activities to help institutions support learners.</p>
Likert scale	<p>This is a type of response scale in which respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric agree-disagree scale.</p>
Social agency	<p>The capacity of students for independent action and free choices.</p>
Yea-saying	<p>This is a type of response bias found in surveys as a result of which respondents have a tendency to agree with all the questions</p> <p>This is also known as 'acquiescence bias'.</p>

## **Annex A: List of annexes and additional material available alongside this consultation**

### **Annexes**

Annex A: List of annexes and additional material available alongside this consultation

Annex B: Consultation questions

Annex C: Information resources – their purpose and regulation

Annex D: Organisations and groups involved in developing our proposals

Annex E: Competitions and Markets Authority guidance and funding bodies' proposed future approach

Annex F: The National Student Survey:

- Background to the survey
- Summary of NSS Review research

Annex G: The current NSS questionnaire

Annex H: Data on students not currently included in the National Student Survey

### **Available to download alongside the consultation document**

Summary of our proposals for students and their advisers, 'What do our proposals mean for you?'

Summary for alternative providers of higher education, 'What do our proposals mean for you?'

### **Research reports**

The following reports outline research and development we have undertaken to support the UK review of information about higher education. (Available to download alongside this report at [www.hefce.ac.uk/It/roiconsult/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/It/roiconsult/)).

### **Unistats**

1. Advisory study and literature review (CFE Research, 2014)
2. Information mapping study (CFE, 2015)
3. Review of institutions' websites (HEFCE, 2015)
4. Report on the review of the Key Information Set and Unistats (HEFCE 2015)

### **NSS**

5. Review of the National Student Survey (Institute of Education, University College London, Institute of Employment Studies, NatCen Social Research, 2014)
6. UK review of the provision of information about higher education: National Student Survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013 (HEFCE, 2014)
7. Further analysis into 'yea-saying' in the National Student Survey (Ipsos Mori, 2015)
8. Cognitively testing questions for the National Student Survey (TNS BRMB, 2015)

9. The UK higher education funding bodies' response to 'The Review of the National Student Survey' (HEFCE, October 2015)
10. Results and analysis for the 2015 pilot of the National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2015)
11. National Student Survey – a literature review of response bias (HEFCE, 2015)
12. National Student Survey – a literature review of survey forms and effects (HEFCE, 2015)

## **Annex B: Consultation questions**

### **Changes for 2017**

#### **Unistats**

1. Do you agree with the respective roles we have identified for institutions and funding bodies in meeting students' information needs?
2. Do you agree that our proposed changes to Unistats and the Key Information Set will improve the accessibility of information and ensure that the data we provide is meaningful for students?
3. Do you have any comments on our proposals for Unistats and the areas we propose to ask institutions to provide on websites? Are there any gaps?

#### **The National Student Survey**

4. Do you agree with the criteria we propose should be applied to the main National Student Survey questionnaire?
5. Do you have any comments on this proposal?
6. Do you agree that we should include questions on student engagement, to strengthen the role of the survey in improving learning and teaching?
7. Do you have any comments on the proposed themes and concepts, terminology or sequencing of our proposed student engagement questions, or any wider comments about this proposal?
8. Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on learning resources?
9. Do these questions include all the areas relating to learning resources which are of importance to institutions and students? If not, which aspects are missing?
10. Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on assessment and feedback?
11. Do you have any comments on our proposal to amend these questions?
12. Do you agree that we should remove Q3, Q5 and Q9 from the survey to ensure that it remains short?
13. Do you agree that we should remove some or all of the personal development questions and consider how we can gather this information through an alternative route?
14. Do you agree that we should remove Q23 and instead include an optional bank of questions related to student unions?
15. Do you have any comments on our proposals for changes to the optional banks including that the choice should be made jointly with the student union or student guild?
16. Do you have any comments on our proposals relating to discontinued questions?
17. How do you or your institution use the optional banks?
18. How could we improve the usefulness of the optional banks? Have we identified the right additional themes for new banks?

## **Changes after 2017**

### **First-hand accounts**

19. Do you agree with the principle of making balanced first-hand accounts from students available?
20. Do you have any comments about the possible use of NSS open text comments, or suggested alternative approaches to gathering and presenting such information?

### **Extending the coverage of the NSS**

21. Have we identified the correct priorities for extending the coverage of the NSS?
22. Do you agree that we should develop a flexible online survey to include all students who are on short or flexible courses?
23. Do you have examples of how data and feedback from non-completers are currently collected by institutions?
24. How should we give students who withdraw from their studies an opportunity to provide feedback, and how could their views be shared?

### **Information for taught postgraduate students**

25. Do you agree that we should consider collecting feedback for publication from taught postgraduate students about their experiences?
26. In light of changes to higher education fees and funding, do you agree that all three purposes of information (paragraph 24 of the consultation) are relevant to a summative taught PG feedback survey?
27. Which themes would it be important to gather and provide information on?
28. Do you have any other comments on this proposal?

## Annex C: Information resources – their purpose and how assurance is provided

Type of data or information resource	Examples	Who provides it and for who?	For what purpose?	How is it regulated or is assurance provided?
Institutions' own data	Learner analytics Student feedback data	Provided by institutions for internal use to improve learning and teaching and as part of quality assurance processes, and to provide information to students	Student decision-making Learning and teaching improvement Quality assessment and accountability	Institutions' own governance and quality assurance processes
Information published by institutions for students and public	Detailed course information Additional costs Data on income and expenditure Corporate information	Provided by institutions for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• students</li> <li>• the wider public</li> </ul>	Student decision-making Quality assessment and accountability	Consumer legislation Covered by Competition and Markets Authority guidance on consumer legislation and advertising standards authority Institutions' own governance and quality assurance processes
Information provided by third parties	Information about institutions and courses	Third-party organisations providing information to support students' decision-making	Student decision-making	Not specifically regulated

Type of data or information resource	Examples	Who provides it and for who?	For what purpose?	How is it regulated or is assurance provided?
<p>Institutions' data centrally collected and published by the funding bodies and the Higher Education Statistics Agency</p>	<p>National Student Survey</p> <p>Outcomes data (currently the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey)</p> <p>Continuation data</p> <p>Other Unistats data</p>	<p>Provided by the funding bodies to a range of organisations for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• institutions</li> <li>• students</li> <li>• the wider public</li> <li>• Government.</li> </ul>	<p>Student decision-making</p> <p>Learning and teaching improvement</p> <p>Quality assessment and accountability</p>	<p>Funding bodies' audits of data</p> <p>Covered by new Code of Practice on data</p>

## **Annex D: Organisations and groups involved in developing our proposals**

In developing our proposals we have been advised by a range of organisations, through their participation in our research or convened working and advisory groups. A number of organisations and groups have also allowed us to speak to their members, enabling us to consult informally on our proposals. We have not listed those who have participated in an individual capacity.

- Association of Colleges
- Association of Colleges (South-West region)
- Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE)
- Association of School and College Leaders
- Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
- Association of Graduate Recruiters
- BestCourse4Me
- Brightside Trust
- Careers Development Institute
- Competition and Markets Authority
- Complete University Guide
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
- GuildHE (quality managers)
- Health Education England
- HEFCE Teaching Quality and Student Opportunity Strategic Committee
- High Fliers
- Higher Education Statistics Agency
- Higher Education Strategic Planners Association
- Higher Education Academy (Surveys Working Group)
- Inspiring Futures Foundation
- Millionplus
- Mixed Economy Group
- National College of Teaching and Leadership
- National Union of Students (NUS) (student officers)
- Institutions in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- Office for National Statistics
- Pearson Think Tank

- Push
- The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and its Student Advisory Board
- Russell Group (Pro Vice-Chancellors for Learning and Teaching)
- SACU
- Study UK
- Times Good University Guide
- Universities Scotland
- University Alliance
- UCAS
- UK Higher Education Public Information Steering Group
- Unifrog
- Universities UK
- Which?

## **Working groups**

### **Provision of Information Strategy Overview Group (2013)**

#### **Members:**

Ellie Clewlow	Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
Nick Davy	Association of Colleges (AoC)
Anthony Fitzgerald	Career Development Institute
Nick Johnstone	GuildHE
Philip Lomas	Department for Business, innovation and Skills (BIS)
Gus Macleod	Scottish Funding Council (SFC)
Debbie McVitty	National Union of Students (NUS)
Haf Merrifield	Bishop Grosseteste University
Cliona O'Neill	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)
Johnny Rich	Push
Mary Stuart	University of Lincoln (Chair)
Greg Wade	Universities UK (UUK)
Michael Weatherup	Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DELNI)
Charlie Leyland	HEFCE (Secretariat)

**Observers:**

Davina Benton	HEFCE
Janet Ilieva	HEFCE
Richard Puttock	HEFCE
Beth Steiner	HEFCE

**National Student Survey and Unistats Review Steering Group 2013**

Janet Beer (Chair)	Oxford Brookes University
Catherine Benfield	HESA
Paul Bennett	HE Academy
Davina Benton	HEFCE
Helen Bowles	Guild HE
Anna Chowcat	NUS
Nick Davy	AoC
Louisa Darien	Which? Magazine
Anthony Forster	University of Essex
Martin Fumer	TDA
Debra Humphris	Imperial College London
Sarah Jackson	Bangor University
Sue Kershaw	University of Bradford
Gus Macleod	SFC
Cliona O'Neill	HEFCW
Sue Rigby	University of Edinburgh
Chris Taylor	QAA
Bev Thomas	BIS
Emily Thorn	HEFCE
Gwen Van Der Velden	University of Bath
Joe Vinson	NUS
Greg Wade	Universities UK
Jonathan Waller	HESA
Michael Weatherup	DELNI
Kate Wicklow	NUS

Sky Yarlett	NUS
Davina Madden	HEFCE
Julia Moss	HEFCE
Marie-Helene Nienaltowski	HEFCE
Richard Puttock	HEFCE
Beth Steiner	HEFCE
Emily Thorn	HEFCE

#### **NSS expert panel membership (2014-present)**

Paul Bennett	Durham University
Alex Buckley	Higher Education Academy
Camille Kandiko-Howson	King's College London
Ben Lewis	Cardiff University, AMOSSHE
Kate Little	NUS
Melanie Mullin	Royal Academy of Music
Jayne Olney	Office for National Statistics
Samantha Parrett	Bromley College
Charles Ritchie	BIS
John Richardson	Open University
Kirsty Scanlan	University of Glasgow
Chris Taylor	QAA
Gwen Van Der Velden	University of Bath
Paul White	University of Sheffield
Ellie Clewlow	HEFCE
Gus MacLeod	SFC
Cliona O'Neill	HEFCW
Michael Weatherup	DELNI

#### **Optional Banks Focus Group membership**

Janet Alleyne	Ulster University
Paul Bennett	University of Durham
Dee Bunker	University of Buckingham
Bethan Dudas	NUS

Anthony Fitzgerald	Newstead Wood and Bromley School
Shelagh Green	Careers Group
Jane Grenville	University of York
Jon Howden-Evans	Swansea University
Ben Lewis	Cardiff University and AMOSSHE
Chris Maguire	BPP University
Patricia McNally	Queens University Belfast
Melanie Mullin	Royal Academy of Music
Elena Rodriguez-Falcon	Enterprise Educators
Kirsty Scanlon	University of Glasgow
Clare Taylor	St Mary's Twickenham
John Widdowson	New College Durham

## Annex E: Competitions and Markets Authority guidance and funding bodies' proposed future approach

This annex does not outline the Competitions and Markets Authority's (CMA's) guidance in full, but focuses on information to be provided to help students make an informed choice as outlined in CMA's document UK Higher Education Providers – advice on consumer law ([www.gov.uk/cma-cases/consumer-protection-review-of-higher-education](http://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/consumer-protection-review-of-higher-education)) and the CMA's report on regulation in higher education ([www.gov.uk/cma-cases/competition-and-regulation-in-higher-education-in-england](http://www.gov.uk/cma-cases/competition-and-regulation-in-higher-education-in-england)). The CMA makes a distinction between information that should be made available ('material information') to comply with law and 'good practice'.

Type of information	Deemed legal requirement or good practice by CMA	Funding bodies' current approach	Funding bodies' proposed future approach
Assessment and feedback	<p>How the course is assessed, for example by exams, coursework or practical assessments.</p> <p>Deemed to be 'material information' and a legal requirement.</p>	<p>Available as percentages (rather than absolute) on Unistats as part of the Key Information Set (KIS).</p> <p>Also covered by Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) guidance on workload<sup>46</sup>.</p>	<p>Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.</p>

<sup>46</sup> 'Explaining student workload' (QAA 2013), available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Explaining-student-workload.pdf](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Explaining-student-workload.pdf).

Contact hours	Information about the course and how it will be delivered, such as the number and type of contact hours (for example, lectures, seminars, work placements, feedback on assignments).  Deemed material information and a legal requirement.	QAA guidance (workload).  KIS includes information on proportions of time spent in learning, teaching and assessment.	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.
Employability and salary prospects	Deemed to be good practice.	Destination of graduates six and 30 months after graduation, type of job and average salary at course level available through Unistats, based on census Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey data.	Destination information will continue to be provided on the successor site to Unistats, but will be adapted to respond to new data streams and the review of outcomes data.
Extra costs	Extra costs students are likely to incur, such as for field trips, equipment, materials, bench fees or studio hire.  Deemed to be material information and a legal requirement.	In Wales HEFCW requires providers to publish this information. No current requirement in KIS or QAA guidance.	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.

Information about financial support available to students	Deemed good practice.	Partly covered by the KIS.	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.
Link between the UCAS and Unistats websites	Recommended.	Links in place from May 2015.	Retain course-level links from UCAS.
Staff-to-student ratio	Deemed to be good practice.	QAA guidance (class size). Not in KIS.	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.
Student performance and degree classification	Deemed to be good practice.	Degree classification included on Unistats.	Continue to publish this information on the successor site to Unistats.
Student retention	Deemed to be good practice.	Continuation rates published on Unistats.	Continue to publish this information on the successor site to Unistats.
Teaching methods (for instance seminar, tutorial)	Deemed a legal requirement.	Covered by QAA guidance (workload) and some info on KIS (learning, teaching and assessment).	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.
Who will teach the students?	Level of experience or qualification of staff teaching a course.  Deemed material information and a legal requirement.	QAA guidance (staff teaching qualifications).  Not in KIS.	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.

Workload and intellectual challenge	Expected workload. Deemed material information and a legal requirement.	Partly covered by KIS and QAA guidance (workload). NSS may include intellectual challenge in future.	Institutions to be asked to provide this, supported by good practice guidance. Institutions to be asked to facilitate a link to this information from the successor site to Unistats.
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## Annex F: The National Student Survey

### Background to the survey

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) is a UK-wide census of final year undergraduates run annually by HEFCE since 2005. It is currently run by HEFCE on behalf of its joint funders which includes the UK higher education funding Councils, DELNI, institutions in Wales and Scotland, Health Education England and the National College for Teaching and Leadership.

#### Aims, coverage and management

2. The NSS was first commissioned in 2004, to form one component of information on the quality and standards of teaching, as part of the revised quality assurance method for higher education in England published in 2001<sup>47</sup>. Its original primary purpose, as defined by the Student Feedback Project Steering Group, which oversaw the development of the survey, was 'to help inform the decisions of prospective students, and the judgements of other stakeholders about the quality and standards of teaching.' The group envisaged as secondary purposes its role in contributing to public accountability and providing useful supplementary information for quality assurance and enhancement<sup>48</sup>.

3. The survey is currently run as a census of final year undergraduate students (home, European Union and international) who are studying a course which is longer than one year of full-time study or its part-time equivalent. All publicly funded higher education institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland participate, together with directly funded further education colleges in England and Wales. In 2015 a small number of alternative providers of higher education funded their own participation. The survey is currently funded in England and Northern Ireland by the higher education funding bodies; in Scotland and Wales higher education institutions pay directly for their participation. Health Education England and the National College for Teaching and Leadership also fund participation of students in the survey.

4. The survey itself currently consists of 23 closed questions about the teaching and learning experience. From 2007 institutions have also had the opportunity to add up to six banks of questions to the online survey from 12 banks available, plus two open or closed questions of their own devising. Students are also given the opportunity to comment in open text boxes on any particularly positive or negative aspects of their experience. There are additional questions for students who have undertaken NHS-funded provision. Of the core questions, 22 have remained the same since 2005; question 23 on students' unions was added in 2010. Although the survey was reviewed in 2008 and enhancement was considered in 2010, only minor changes were proposed.

5. The NSS is intended to allow comparisons between students' perceptions of their experiences of courses in the same subject area at different institutions.

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<sup>47</sup> 'Information on quality and standards of teaching and learning', HEFCE, 2001 available at [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120118171947/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2001/01\\_66.htm](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120118171947/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2001/01_66.htm).

<sup>48</sup> 'Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE', HEFCE, 2003, available at [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20081202012456/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2003/rd08\\_03/](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20081202012456/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2003/rd08_03/).

6. The administration of the survey is undertaken on behalf of the funding bodies by a separate survey agency, which compiles the data and co-ordinates the promotional campaign to encourage students to respond. Institutions provide contact details to the agency and promote the survey to their students. A separate organisation delivers a dissemination website for institutions through which they can access their own data at a detailed level.

7. HEFCE publishes summary data annually, together with institutional benchmarks. We have commissioned periodic national analysis of the results (for instance 'The National Student Survey 2005-07: Findings and trends' by Paula Surridge), to provide a 'health check' on the survey and explore trends<sup>49</sup>. Since 2012 the survey results have also been published as part of the Key Information Set on the Unistats website ([www.unistats.direct.gov.uk](http://www.unistats.direct.gov.uk)), enabling students to make comparisons between survey results at course level. The survey is also widely used by other organisations in compiling league tables and providing information to students on websites (such as Which? University).

### Summary of NSS Review research

8. This following research was undertaken as part of the NSS Review.

9. '**National Student Survey results and trends analysis 2005-2013**' (HEFCE 2014/13), by HEFCE analytical services (published July 2014)<sup>50</sup>: An analysis of nine years of data with statistical tests to check the validity and robustness of the survey, for instance analysis of the correlation of responses to questions.

10. '**Review of the National Student Survey**' by NatCen Social Research, the Institute of Education, University of London, and the Institute for Employment Studies (published July 2014)<sup>51</sup>: This considered the purpose and effectiveness of the survey and included primary research with students and stakeholders. It also drew upon HEFCE 2014/13. Key recommendations on survey content were:

- a. **Explicit criteria** to be adopted for all questions in the main survey, which should be **focused on academic learning and teaching experience**.
- b. **Questions on student engagement** in learning to be piloted to strengthen the survey's role in improving learning and teaching as high levels of student engagement are understood to lead to high-quality learning. Question on **three themes** are suggested:
  - i. Student voice and feedback.
  - ii. Academic challenge and reflective and integrative learning.
  - iii. The learning community and collaborative learning
- c. **Amendments** to be made to questions which are out of date or incentivise unhelpful institutional behaviour. Questions with responses that are closely correlated (and may thus be taken to measure the same topic) might be deleted to allow for new questions.
- d. **Negatively worded questions** to be included, to test whether students' responses are considered in light of acquiescence bias.

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<sup>49</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2008/nss05-07findingsandtrends/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2008/nss05-07findingsandtrends/).

<sup>50</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/).

<sup>51</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/).

- e. **Q23 on student satisfaction with students unions** to be reviewed, as it does not meet the proposed criteria.
- f. **Alternative personal development** questions to be tested, as the current intention of the questions was unclear.
- g. **Optional banks** of questions to be reviewed.

Its key suggestions on methodology and data presentation were:

- a. Practical barriers to including short courses to be explored.
  - b. NSS publication thresholds on Unistats to be reviewed.
  - c. Pop-up guidance to be added, to help students understand the response scales and test whether their responses are considered.
  - d. Exit questionnaires for students who do not complete to be developed by providers.
11. **Informal consultation about the NSS Review report recommendations** with key stakeholders including higher education representative bodies, student union representatives, the Higher Education Academy and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (July to September 2014)<sup>52</sup>.
  12. **Literature reviews by HEFCE on survey effects and on ‘acquiescence bias’ (response bias)**, This phenomenon was identified in HEFCE 2014/13 which highlighted that approximately one in 20 students ticked the same response for every question – a much higher proportion than would be expected statistically, suggesting we needed to test whether students fully consider their responses.
  13. **Cognitive (qualitative) testing of both the current survey questions and possible new/amended questions** (in two rounds) by consultants TNS BRMB: involving 105 students from a range of backgrounds from institutions across the UK. This was commissioned to check whether questions were understood.
  14. **Quantitative testing of an extended questionnaire (2015 pilot)** by Ipsos Mori based on questions refined through cognitive testing: The pilot secured responses from 16,000 students by January to April 2015 – about one in 200 of the full NSS cohort<sup>53</sup>. This was intended to check the validity of the questions across student groups and subjects (but was not intended to test the coherence of the overall instrument or different methodologies.) Both cognitive testing and the quantitative testing were supported by advice from an expert panel with expertise in survey design.

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<sup>52</sup> See [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/future/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/future/).

<sup>53</sup> To avoid impact on the routine, NSS 2015 students were only invited to complete the pilot questionnaire once they had completed the main survey, and undertook the pilot two weeks after the main survey.

## Annex G: The current NSS survey questionnaire

This annex presents the main survey, excluding questions for students studying NHS subjects.

### Main Questions (Page 1 of 2)

	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
<b>The teaching on my course</b>						
1. Staff are good at explaining things.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The course is intellectually stimulating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Assessment and feedback</b>						
5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I have received detailed comments on my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Academic support</b>						
10. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Organisation and management</b>						
13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## National Student Survey

### Main Questions (Page 2 of 2)

	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
<b>Learning resources</b>						
16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Personal development</b>						
19. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. My communication skills have improved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight? (Please use the boxes below.)

Positive :

Negative :

### Students' Union

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

	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Annex H: Data on students not currently included in the National Student Survey

This breakdown follows cohorts of first degree students from higher education institutions up to the 2015 National Student Survey (NSS) to determine whether they were invited to complete the NSS. Students from Scottish institutions are excluded from the analysis as their participation in the NSS has changed across the reporting period. Students are excluded from the survey by design (if they do not qualify to participate), or qualify but are excluded as a result of practical factors. (This is discussed in section 3.2.) Tables 1.1 and 1.2 provide high-level breakdowns of proportions surveyed and not surveyed. We have also provided a breakdown for students who were not surveyed because they did not complete their course, as these students are of particular interest from a policy perspective. It should be noted that the figures from 2007-08 are most likely to be robust as it is the most recent year which allows six years for students to complete their course, therefore including medical and architecture students.

**Table 1.1: Overall cohort numbers**

	Number of students				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Total Cohort	414,785	445,020	466,805	470,615	504,580

**Table 1.2: Numbers of students surveyed**

Outcome	Number of students					Proportions				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Surveyed	282,420	304,120	322,700	330,610	349,480	68.1%	68.3%	69.1%	70.3%	69.3%
Not surveyed	132,365	140,900	144,105	140,005	155,100	31.9%	31.7%	30.9%	29.7%	30.7%

**Breakdown of excluded students by reason for exclusion (both correctly and incorrectly excluded)**

Students are excluded from the survey both by design and as a result of practical factors. The following tables provide breakdowns of the reasons why students were excluded, including those who were excluded in error.

**Table 2.1: Detailed breakdown of qualifying students who were neither surveyed nor given an exclusion reason**

	Number of students					Proportions				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
<b>Incorrectly not surveyed</b>										
Decreased course length	5,175	5,155	3,880	2,955	1,720	32.5%	34.7%	29.8%	26.9%	21.9%
Repeated year	4,410	4,205	3,660	3,315	2,580	27.7%	28.3%	28.1%	30.2%	32.7%
Qualified early	2,100	1,955	1,575	1,485	1,075	13.2%	13.2%	12.1%	13.5%	13.7%
Changed course – shorter	1,755	1,325	1,395	1,440	1,370	11.0%	8.9%	10.7%	13.1%	17.4%
Unknown	790	480	485	420	280	5.0%	3.2%	3.7%	3.8%	3.6%
Data error	595	495	390	260	220	3.7%	3.3%	3.0%	2.4%	2.8%
Poor reporting of foundation or non-standard year	430	530	590	375	175	2.7%	3.6%	4.5%	3.4%	2.2%
Increased course length	430	495	715	400	165	2.7%	3.3%	5.5%	3.7%	2.1%
Qualified later than expected	205	170	310	305	260	1.3%	1.1%	2.4%	2.8%	3.3%
Changed course – longer	25	50	10	25	25	0.2%	0.3%	0.1%	0.2%	0.3%

**Table 2.2: Broad breakdown of students correctly excluded from the survey**

<b>Correctly not surveyed</b>	<b>Number of students</b>					<b>Proportions</b>				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Did not complete	61,780	64,660	64,995	59,480	69,435	67.5%	65.3%	63.3%	58.0%	55.6%
Short instance of study	17,340	21,390	24,010	26,205	26,405	19.0%	21.6%	23.4%	25.6%	21.1%
Completed a different qualification	8,330	9,665	9,455	9,275	8,455	9.1%	9.8%	9.2%	9.0%	6.8%
Low intensity	2,835	2,810	2,915	2,700	2,630	3.1%	2.8%	2.8%	2.6%	2.1%
Closed course	910	175	315	425	390	1.0%	0.2%	0.3%	0.4%	0.3%
Death	180	185	165	170	135	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.1%
Still studying	85	205	810	4,280	17,465	0.1%	0.2%	0.8%	4.2%	14.0%

**Table 2.3: Split of students who did not complete their course**

<b>Did not complete</b>	<b>Number of students</b>					<b>Proportions</b>				
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Academic failure or exclusion	16,930	19,030	22,485	21,125	19,600	21.4%	22.1%	25.3%	24.7%	20.5%
Other reason <sup>54</sup>	44,850	45,630	42,510	38,360	49,835	72.6%	70.6%	65.4%	64.5%	71.8%

<sup>54</sup> Other reasons for not completing include transferring to another institution, entering employment or leaving the course due to health, financial or other personal reasons.

## Characteristics of students who are not included in the survey

### 2007-08 cohort characteristic breakdowns

These breakdowns show students from the 2007-08 cohort, split by different characteristics and showing the proportions of students not surveyed within each group. Additional restraints on the populations include qualifying, studying full time and not being on a short instance of study. Totals may not add up, as where students are classed as 'unknown' for a given characteristic, they are excluded from that analysis. All numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of five. These figures examine whether some students are more likely to be excluded from the survey. The data shows that excluded students are more likely to be from non-white ethnic heritage groups and to be mature students.

**Table 3.1: Total 2007-08 cohort, proportion not surveyed**

	Total		Qualified		Qualified, full-time		Qualified, full-time, not short instance	
	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed
Total cohort	414,785	31.9%	290,800	12.7%	273,190	9.7%	257,825	4.5%

**Table 3.2: Split by gender**

Gender	Total		Qualified		Qualified, full-time		Qualified, full-time, not short instance	
	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed
Female	250,490	31.5%	179,375	13.1%	167,430	9.5%	158,150	4.4%
Male	203,705	34.2%	137,465	14.1%	130,280	11.9%	122,355	6.4%

**Table 3.3: Split by disability status**

<b>Disability</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Qualified</b>		<b>Qualified, full-time</b>		<b>Qualified, full-time, not short instance</b>	
	Number of Students	% Not Surveyed	Number of Students	% Not Surveyed	Number of Students	% Not Surveyed	Number of Students	% Not Surveyed
Declared	33,230	32.2%	22,265	11.7%	21,105	9.2%	20,205	5.3%
Not declared	390,545	29.6%	290,765	13.5%	275,295	10.6%	259,165	5.2%

**Table 3.4: Split by age group**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Qualified</b>		<b>Qualified, full-time</b>		<b>Qualified, full-time, not short instance</b>	
	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed
Young	276,090	20.2%	217,300	5.4%	215,875	5.1%	212,905	3.9%
Mature	138,630	55.3%	73,465	34.4%	57,300	27.1%	44,910	7.8%

**Table 3.5: Split by broad ethnic heritage group**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Total</b>		<b>Qualified</b>		<b>Qualified, full-time</b>		<b>Qualified, full-time, not short instance</b>	
	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed	Number of students	% Not surveyed
Asian	50,945	34.7%	36,275	18.7%	34,795	16.1%	31,460	7.6%
Black	25,110	41.0%	14,430	17.6%	13,250	13.2%	12,250	6.6%
White	289,725	29.6%	207,385	10.5%	194,195	7.4%	186,305	3.7%
Other	21,665	35.7%	15,380	19.7%	14,520	16.3%	12,935	6.2%