



Report on consultation  
August 2016/15

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

## Summary of responses to consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions

In October 2015, the UK higher education funding bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland published a joint 'Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions'. The consultation was based on the findings of stage one of a two-stage review of information about learning, teaching and the student experience. This document summarises our analysis of the responses we received and the decisions we have taken as a result, and also sets out next steps.



## Contents

Executive summary.....	3
Background .....	7
Summary of responses to consultation.....	8
Analysis of responses.....	8
Overview of responses .....	9
Changes to information for implementation in 2017.....	10
Unistats, the Key information Set and information published by institutions .....	10
The National Student Survey.....	14
Other proposals for implementation beyond 2017 .....	28
Methods for capturing qualitative data from students for publication.....	28
Seeking feedback from students not included in the NSS .....	30
Information for taught postgraduate students .....	33
Abbreviations .....	37

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

## Summary of responses to consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions

To	Heds of higher education institutions in the UK Heds of further education colleges in England and Wales Heds of alternative providers in England Heds 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 those responsible for	Student data and information, Quality assurance, Admissions, Liaison with schools and colleges, Widening participation, Marketing
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### Executive summary

#### Purpose

1. In October 2015, the UK higher education funding bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland published a joint 'Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions' (HEFCE 2015/24). The consultation was based on the findings of stage one of a two-stage review of information about learning, teaching and the student experience. This document summarises our analysis of the responses we received and the decisions we have taken as a result, and also sets out next steps.

#### Key points

2. To inform this review, a research programme and testing of the National Student Survey (NSS) and Unistats was carried out. The research reports, published by HEFCE on behalf of the funding bodies, can be read at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/).
3. The consultation proposed changes to Unistats and the Key Information Set (KIS) for 2017; information published by institutions on courses for 2017; changes to the NSS for 2017; and further potential changes to information after 2017.

4. The consultation was published on 1 October 2015 and closed on 4 December. During this period we held consultation events in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London.

5. We received 205 responses to the consultation. Our analysis of responses indicates broad support for the following three sets of proposals, although there was not unanimous support for all specific changes within these proposals:

- To maintain and improve the Unistats site and to develop guidance on the course information to be provided through institutions' own websites from 2017.
- To update the NSS, the better to inform student decision-making, to improve learning and teaching, and to support quality assessment from 2017.
- To develop more detailed proposals on qualitative feedback, feedback from students currently excluded from the NSS, and feedback from taught postgraduate students.

6. We have adjusted our proposed implementation plans to take account of where we did not receive strong support, specifically in relation to the removal of some questions from the NSS.

7. Following an analysis of responses and endorsement by the UK-wide Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG), the decisions arising from the consultation were agreed by the Boards and Councils of the funding bodies in March 2016.

8. Implementation of these decisions may be affected by subsequent policy developments including the HE White Paper, the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England and the UK Higher Education and Research Bill. We made clear in the consultation that there could be an imperative for further changes, but both our evidence base and responses to the consultation indicate that we need to make changes now to ensure that Unistats and the NSS remain fit for purpose. The four funding bodies have agreed that the changes set out in this document are consonant with student information needs and government ambitions in this area, but will continue to work closely with the four UK governments to consider further developments beyond 2017. We are also taking steps to ensure that changes to the NSS do not hamper the availability of time-series data for its future use in the TEF and that the design of the successor to the Unistats website allows for the publication of TEF outcomes.

9. We are now preparing for the new NSS in 2017 and for changes to Unistats and KIS arising from the consultation. We have recently published a consultation on proposed changes to KIS data collection for 2017. We will announce final survey questions for the NSS 2017 in September 2016, following the completion of piloting and testing of the new NSS questions informed by responses to the consultation. A full summary of decisions and next steps is included below.

### **Action required**

10. This publication is for information.

## Summary of decisions and next steps

<p>Changes to Unistats, the Key Information Set, and information published by institutions for 2017</p>	<p>The UK HE funding bodies will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proceed with the removal of detailed information about course delivery from Unistats.</li> <li>• Redesign the Unistats site to provide greater support for students in making decisions.</li> <li>• Develop clear good practice guidance for institutions on information provision for their own websites with the involvement of CMA, NUS and sector representatives.</li> <li>• Advise institutions of requirements relating to the way information is presented in late 2016 for implementation by the end of August 2017.</li> <li>• Position the expectations of consumer law around information provision, as expressed in the CMA's guidance, within the baseline regulatory requirements monitored through the new quality assessment operating system in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The current quality assessment arrangements for information provision will continue in Scotland.</li> <li>• Transfer the responsibility for publication of tuition fee information to institutions, provide guidance on good practice in presenting it, and require institutions to provide a link to relevant fee information from the new site.</li> <li>• Develop a strategy to increase awareness of the successor to Unistats among prospective students and their advisers as part of our implementation plan for the new website.</li> </ul>
<p>Changes to the NSS for 2017</p>	<p>The UK HE funding bodies will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Apply explicit criteria to NSS survey questions from 2017 onwards, subject to periodic review and with advice from the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group.</li> <li>• Complete and assess the results of the 2016 NSS pilot and cognitive testing to inform final decisions on survey questions by the funding bodies, with advice from the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group.</li> <li>• Announce the final survey questions for NSS 2017 in September 2016.</li> <li>• Include new questions on student engagement, and complete testing to inform decisions on question wording.</li> <li>• Reword questions on learning resources for piloting and cognitive testing, and develop related optional banks using feedback from the consultation.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Test amended questions on assessment and feedback, and cognitively test the types of feedback considered by survey respondents.</li> <li>• Retain the NSS question on marking criteria (Q5) for the pilot to inform a final decision on the proposed removal of duplicative questions.</li> <li>• Remove questions on personal development for the pilot, and explore capturing this information through the optional bank and the revised DLHE survey.</li> <li>• Test a revised students' union survey question as part of the 'student voice' bank in the pilot to inform a final decision.</li> <li>• Undertake further work with institutions and NUS to formalise a joint decision-making process in relation to NSS optional banks.</li> <li>• Undertake further research and testing to develop future optional banks, and increase their uptake and usefulness.</li> </ul>
<p>Other proposals for implementation beyond 2017</p>	<p>The UK HE funding bodies will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct further work on the need for and types of qualitative information that prospective students and their advisers would use, to inform potential proposals for future consultation.</li> <li>• Develop proposals to extend coverage of the NSS, to include students studying top-up courses and courses of one full-time equivalent in length in the first instance.</li> <li>• Carry out further research to develop proposals for a national PGT survey, ensuring robustness and avoiding duplication with existing surveys, notably PTES.</li> </ul>

## Background

11. The UK higher education (HE) funding bodies work collaboratively to provide information to students and other stakeholders about learning, teaching and the student experience<sup>1</sup>. Although the policy context for our work is different in each country, we share the same overarching 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.

12. In 2013 we began a fundamental review about what information is needed to meet these purposes, how it should be provided, and the role of the HE funding bodies in this area. This was underpinned by an extensive programme of research testing and informal consultation focused on the National Student Survey (NSS) and Unistats. Our evidence base includes:

- a review of the purpose and effectiveness of the NSS, literature reviews on survey methodology, and statistical analysis of nine years of data
- cognitive testing and piloting of potential changes to the NSS
- 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 Key Information Set (KIS)
- a mapping study of information resources, together with a sample review of institutions' websites.

13. The research reports, published by HEFCE on behalf of the funding bodies, can be read at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/ra/).

14. This consultation was the first stage of a two-stage review. A further consultation may be needed in the future to reflect subsequent developments, including the HE White Paper and the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England and the UK Higher Education and Research Bill<sup>2</sup>. The consultation was published on 1 October 2015 and closed on 4 December.

15. During the consultation period we held three consultation events in Cardiff, Edinburgh and London to explain our proposals and seek early feedback on them. 265 delegates attended from institutions across the UK, as well as from student and HE sector organisations. The views of participants at the consultation events accorded with the range of opinion expressed through the consultation responses, with no notable differences by country.

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<sup>1</sup> The four UK higher education funding bodies are the Northern Ireland Department for Education (DfE, replacing the former Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland), 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> Available online at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/higher-education-and-research-bill>.

16. The key themes from the events were:

- In relation to Unistats, there was broad support for the principle of retaining the site but some differences of opinion on whether all of the proposed KIS items should be removed.
- Proposed changes to the NSS were largely welcomed. There was support for new and changed questions but a wish for further testing of alternative wording for questions on engagement and learning resources. There was cautious support for removing some questions, and useful feedback on how questions were used within institutions.
- There were mixed views about providing qualitative information to students, and strong concern that this might be done using NSS open text comments. Potential alternatives were discussed, including institutions providing more balanced qualitative information more directly.
- Attendees expressed a strong interest in a postgraduate survey but were concerned to build on and not duplicate existing approaches.
- There were some reservations about surveying students who withdraw from their studies, and agreement that we should prioritise extending the survey to short courses.

17. The UK-wide Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG), which advises the funding bodies on information policy, has considered our analysis of responses and endorsed proposed next steps<sup>3</sup>. Decisions arising from the consultation were agreed by the Boards and Councils of the funding bodies in March 2016.

## Summary of responses to consultation

### Analysis of responses

18. We received 205 responses to the consultation, although not all respondents answered every question. All responses have been included in the analysis.

19. The consultation included five-point Likert scale questions and open text questions. The pie charts in this document illustrate a quantitative analysis of responses to the five-point Likert scale questions. We also used the breakdown of respondents by provider and country to identify whether and where different respondent types provided meaningfully different views. This was supplemented by qualitative analysis of the free text responses, which was important in understanding why people did or did not agree with the proposals. Judgement was used to interpret comments, group them by theme, and determine emphasis.

20. We are publishing alongside this document all responses to the consultation, together with a quantitative analysis of responses in the form of interactive Tableau charts, at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/).

21. The consultation asked 28 questions including open text comments. Questions 1 to 18 invited views on our proposals for changes we believe we need to make in 2016, in time for

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<sup>3</sup> HEPISG membership and terms of reference are available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/sg/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/sg/).



publication in 2017. Questions 19 to 28 invited views on proposals for changes that might be made in the longer term beyond 2017.

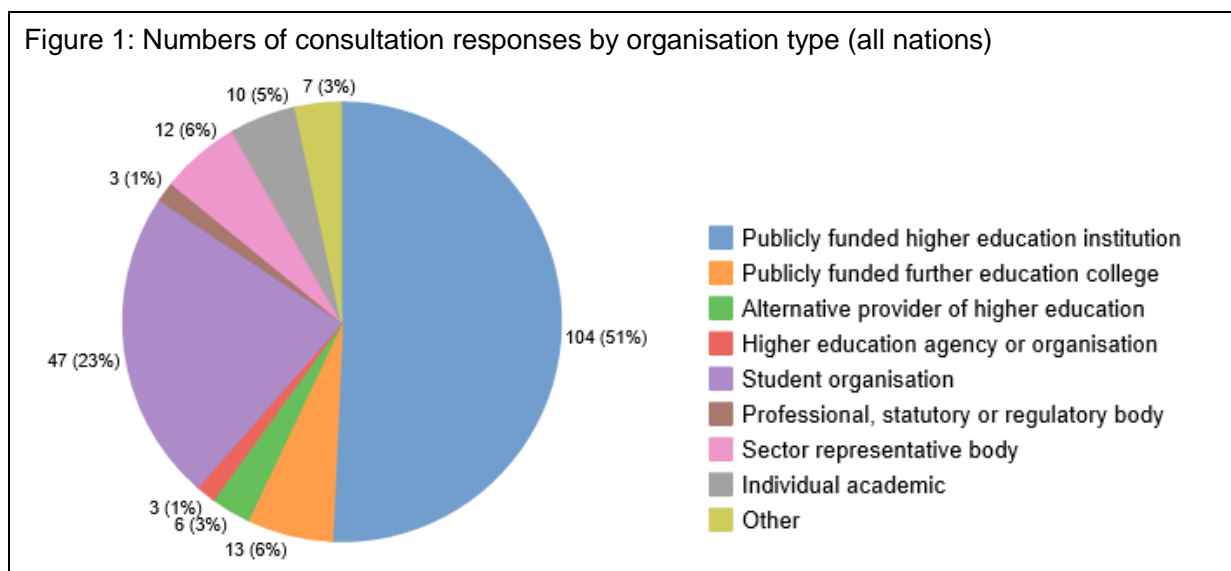
22. For Questions 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 13, 14, 19, 22, 25, and 26 respondents were asked to gauge their agreement on a five-point Likert scale ranged from ‘Strongly agree’ to ‘Strongly disagree’. Questions 9 and 21 asked for a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. Responses to all questions are summarised in the figures below.

23. For clarity, in the following analysis, ‘question’, unqualified, means a question in the consultation (HEFCE 2015/24), and these are numbered starting with ‘Question 1’. Questions in the NSS are referred to as ‘survey questions’, and are numbered starting with ‘Q1’.

### Overview of responses

24. Of the 205 responses the largest categories of respondent were higher education institutions (HEIs) and student organisations. The number and profile of respondents is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Numbers of consultation responses by organisation type (all nations)



25. The majority of stakeholders who responded to the consultation were based in England (157), with lower numbers in Scotland (16), Wales (nine) and Northern Ireland (two) reflecting the size of the HE sectors in these countries. No significant differences were identified in responses from the four nations. A number of respondents (21) were from organisations whose operations covered the whole of the UK.

26. The vast majority of responses (172) represented organisational opinion, with a small proportion (14) reflecting departmental or divisional opinion and a number (19) expressing personal opinion. No significant differences were identified between opinion types.

27. Our analysis of responses indicates broad support for the three sets of proposals, although there was not unanimous support for all specific changes within these proposals:

- a. To maintain and improve the Unistats site and to develop guidance on the course information to be provided through institutions’ own websites from 2017.
- b. To update the NSS, the better to inform student decision-making, to improve learning and teaching, and to support quality assessment from 2017.

c. To develop more detailed proposals on qualitative feedback, feedback from students currently excluded from the NSS, and feedback from taught postgraduate students.

28. We engaged with student representatives and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) in the development of these proposals and will continue to do so during the development and implementation period that follows.

29. In the subsequent sections we report our analysis and response by question.

## Changes to information for implementation in 2017

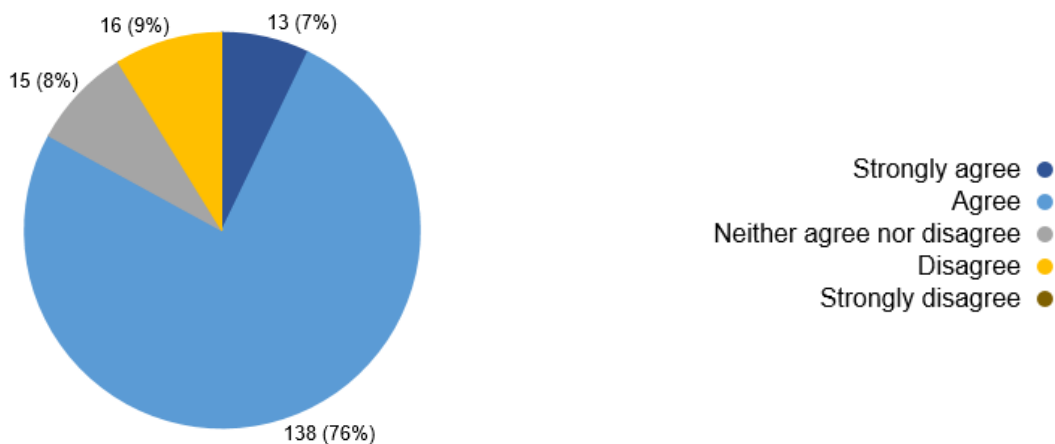
### Unistats, the Key information Set and information published by institutions

30. In Questions 1 to 3 we made proposals about the Unistats website, the KIS data collection and information provided by institutions. These were to:

- maintain and develop a UK website of authoritative national data for students, their advisers and other stakeholders (currently Unistats)
- redesign Unistats to reflect diverse student information needs
- provide more help for students to navigate information during their decision-making journey
- transfer the publication of some information, including that about learning, teaching and assessment, to institutions
- ask institutions to publish detailed course information (in accordance with Competition and Markets Authority guidance)
- provide good practice guidance (developed with sector experts) to support consistent and nuanced presentation of information.

### Question 1: Do you agree with the respective roles we have identified for the institutions and funding bodies in meeting students' information needs?

Figure 2: Respondents' views on the respective roles for institutions and funding bodies in meeting students' information needs



31. A significant majority of the 182 responses (83 per cent) either 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with the proposal in Question 1. Responses among the different types of organisations (providers of higher education and students' unions) were consistent with the overall pattern, as were those from across the different nations. Universities UK, Universities Scotland, GuildHE, the Association of Colleges, Study UK, the Russell Group, the Mixed Economy Group and the National Union of Students 'agreed', albeit with the caveats noted below.

32. Only a minority of those respondents who agreed commented on their rationale. The view stated most often (30 respondents) was that it was most appropriate for institutions to provide detailed, nuanced, contextualised information about their courses. The next most common theme concerned the need for an impartial, authoritative source of comparable information. In particular, 10 respondents supported the funding bodies' role in providing this by publishing national datasets such as the NSS and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, and in signposting other information. A number (11 respondents) welcomed the provision of guidance to institutions on presenting the information, and noted this as key to ensuring the proposals resulted in consistent and high-quality information. A number of respondents commented that the proposals were appropriate in light of the requirements arising from the CMA guidance, and would help reduce duplication of information.

33. A number of respondents welcomed the provision of guidance as key to the success of the proposals; others did not consider guidance sufficient, and expressed the view that there would need to be an enforcement measure. They also considered that the consequence of non-compliance should be explicit in the guidance. This was the view of the National Union of Students (NUS), echoed by the majority of students' unions.

34. A few respondents, including the Russell Group, cautioned against overly prescriptive guidance, preferring institutions to have flexibility in presenting learning and teaching information.

35. Several higher education providers highlighted the potential burden for institutions and the funding bodies in changing their information infrastructure in response to the proposals, acknowledging sufficient time would need to be allowed for implementation.

36. A few respondents, including GuildHE, commented that the funding bodies should consider their role in overseeing the information published by third-party providers. In particular they wanted greater control by the funding bodies to ensure information would be transparent, accurate and responsibly presented and would clearly identify its source.

37. Study UK disagreed with the removal of tuition fee data from Unistats; it took the view that prospective students at alternative providers would be better supported by centrally available information in an easily comparable format.

38. A small number of respondents commented that information provided by institutions on their websites was the only authoritative source, and that there was no role for the funding bodies. A few respondents suggested that specialist institutions should be involved in developing guidance.

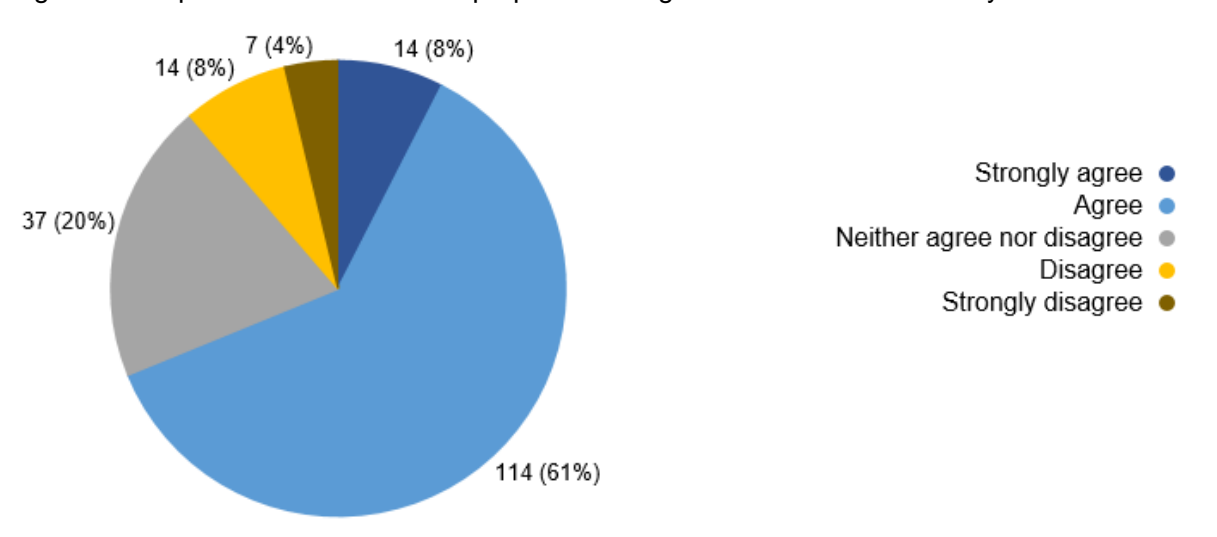
39. The minority of respondents who opposed the proposals noted the value of Unistats as an authoritative source and opposed removing any information from it. Their argument was that this might reduce the amount of comparable information available to prospective students and thereby inhibit their ability to make informed choices. Some, including the CMA, cautioned that

institutions would be selective about what they chose to publish, so the information available would become less objective and therefore less useful.

40. There were two suggestions for alternative approaches to aspects of the proposals:
  - a. One was identification of better ways of presenting comparable learning and teaching information on Unistats. In particular, the CMA advocated centralised publication of more of the indicators such as class size, contact hours and 'intellectual stretch'.
  - b. Another was for the type of information currently published on Unistats to be published by UCAS. The rationale was that the UCAS website and institutional websites were the information sources most frequently visited by prospective students and, it was argued, the funding bodies lacked experience of direct engagement with students.

**Question 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?**

Figure 3: Respondents' views on our proposed changes to Unistats and the Key Information Set



41. Of the 186 respondents, the majority (61 per cent) agreed that the proposed changes would improve accessibility, with the next largest category (20 per cent) neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

42. In addition, a number of respondents (19) welcomed the contextualisation of information, because it would improve comparability. Others commented that our proposed approach would improve both the accessibility and meaningfulness of the information.

**Question 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?**

43. Comments that supported the proposals generally emphasised the appropriateness of the publication of learning and teaching information by institution and alignment with the CMA guidance, and often stressed the need for consistency in the presentation of information by institutions.

44. A significant number of respondents emphasised that raising awareness of any new site would be key to the success of the proposals. Several respondents also highlighted the criticality of allowing sufficient time for implementation of the proposals.

45. Universities UK and several other respondents commented that there should be clear, navigable links between the key information sources. Universities Scotland would welcome further discussion of how guidance could achieve broad consistency while allowing flexibility of presentation, and also guidance on the proposed contextualisation of data on Unistats. The Association of Colleges supported the direction of travel.

46. Study UK suggested that Unistats should be integrated with Education UK<sup>4</sup>.

47. Only a few respondents identified gaps in the proposals: teaching qualifications, staff to student ratios, more information about employment outcomes, new indicators of learning gain, employability and Teaching Excellence Framework indicators. Others suggested further potential items for publication on the successor to Unistats and on institutions' websites: additional costs, actual entry qualifications and data on retention.

48. Comments reflecting opposition to the proposals focused on the removal of information relating to the cost of living, such as accommodation costs, and on the loss of comparability. Most of the responses that mentioned accommodation costs were from student representative bodies, who asserted that this information was particularly important for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and that at a minimum clear guidance should be provided to institutions on its presentation, if it was no longer to be published centrally.

49. GuildHE cautioned that the removal of tuition fee information might be premature as there may be greater variability in fees in the future, and this could play a more significant role in decision-making. It also flagged a potential risk in removing data that may be required in future, given government interest in publishing information on contact hours in England.

### **Funding bodies' response to Questions 1 to 3**

50. In view of the broad support for our proposals, we intend to proceed with the removal of detailed course information, such as learning and teaching data, from Unistats. We will redesign the website as set out in the consultation to provide greater support for students in making decisions.

51. We will develop clear good practice guidance for institutions on information provision for their own websites, which will address concerns of the CMA and student representatives, for example on learning and teaching and accommodation data. In particular, the guidance will be intended to ensure comparability of information and to support institutions in meeting legal requirements. We will involve CMA, NUS and sector representatives in the design of this.

52. The expectations of consumer law around information provision, as expressed in the CMA's guidance, will form part of the baseline regulatory requirements monitored through the new quality assessment operating system in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The current quality assessment arrangements for information provision will continue in Scotland.

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<sup>4</sup> Education UK is the British Council's official website for international students interested in a UK education.

53. We note the comments about the effort involved for institutions in making changes to the way information is presented and the lead-in time required, and we will advise them of requirements in late 2016 for implementation by the end of August 2017.

54. With regard to tuition fees, we have noted the arguments made by a small number of respondents. In light of our research evidence that the provision of this information on Unistats is of low utility and potentially misleading to prospective students, however, we will continue, as proposed, to transfer the responsibility for publication of this information to institutions. It is already a legal requirement for institutions to provide information on tuition fees and any additional course costs but, to ensure the quality of this information and to promote consistency, we will include it in the good practice guidance we are due to publish in late 2016. We will also require institutions to provide a link to relevant fee information from the new site.

55. We agree that increasing awareness of the successor to Unistats among prospective students and their advisers should be a priority, and will develop a strategy for this as part of our implementation plan for the new website.

## The National Student Survey

### Explicit criteria for questions in the main survey

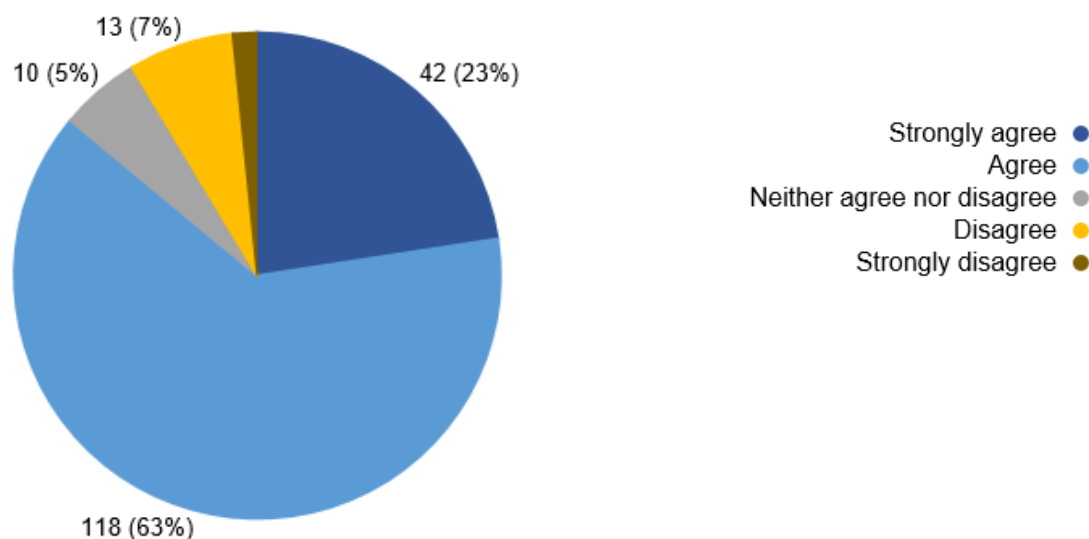
56. In Questions 4 and 5 we proposed that explicit criteria should be applied to the main NSS survey questionnaire, to preserve the coherence of the survey and limit requests to extend it for other purposes, which might dilute its effectiveness. The criteria were that questions should:

- 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.

**Question 4: Do you agree with the criteria we propose should be applied to the main NSS questionnaire?**

**Question 5: Do you have any comments on this proposal?**

Figure 4: Respondents' views on the criteria proposed for the main NSS questionnaire



57. There were 183 responses to this question. As Figure 4 shows, a significant majority of respondents (86 per cent) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the criteria proposed for the main NSS questionnaire. Higher education institution responses reflected the same pattern as the overall figures, with the majority of respondents agreeing with proposals (66 per cent agreed and 23 per cent strongly agreed). Students' unions responded in a similar manner, but a slightly larger proportion disagreed (13 per cent) or strongly disagreed (8 per cent) with the proposals). All further education colleges and alternative providers that responded supported the proposal (for further education colleges, 77 per cent agreed and 23 per cent strongly agreed; for alternative providers, 50 per cent agreed and 50 per cent strongly agreed).

58. The criteria put forward in the consultation were felt to be appropriate by respondents and to provide an important focus to the survey, which ensures resulting data does not become unwieldy. Some respondents raised concern that the particular focus of the questions on the academic experience could be of detriment to the other activity contributing to a student's overall experience on a course.

#### **Funding bodies' response to Questions 4 and 5**

59. We intend to apply the proposed criteria to the survey from 2017 onwards. The Higher Education Public Information Steering Group will be responsible for advising on their application. The criteria will be reviewed periodically, for example in respect of the HE White Paper and the development of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in England and the UK Higher Education and Research Bill.

### New questions on student engagement

60. In Questions 6 and 7, we invited responses about including new survey questions on student engagement under three themes: academic challenge and reflective and integrative learning; the learning community and collaborative learning; and the student voice. This was to strengthen the role of the survey in improving learning and teaching.

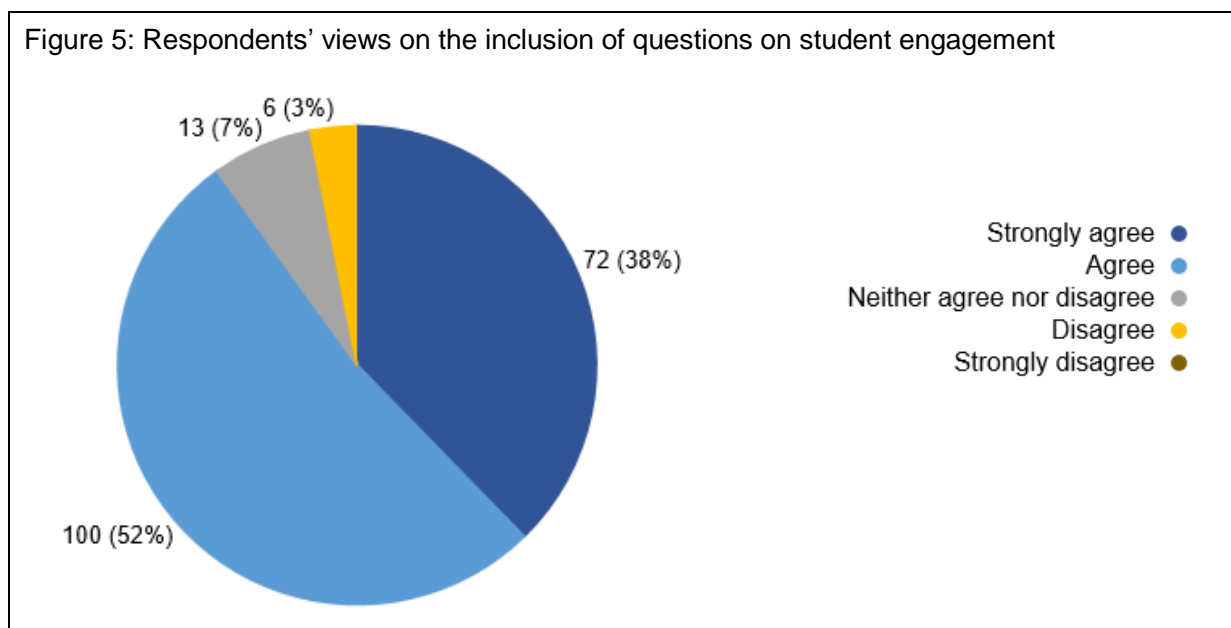
61. We proposed nine specific survey questions for inclusion

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Question</b>
Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has challenged me to achieve my best work</b>
Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth</b>
Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics</b>
Academic challenge and integrative learning	<b>My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt</b>
The student voice	<b>I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course</b>
The student voice	<b>Staff value students' views and opinions about the course</b>
The student voice	<b>It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on</b>
The learning community and collaborative learning	<b>I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course</b>
The learning community and collaborative learning	<b>I feel part of a community of staff and students</b>



**Question 6: Do you agree that we should include questions on student engagement, to strengthen the role of the survey in improving learning and teaching?**

Figure 5: Respondents' views on the inclusion of questions on student engagement



62. A total of 193 respondents answered this question. A significant majority (90 per cent or 172 organisations) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that survey questions on student engagement should be included, with a view to strengthening the role of the survey in improving learning and teaching.

**Question 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?**

63. A large proportion (86 respondents) suggested that further detailed consideration should be given to the terminology and phrasing used in many of the survey questions that collectively measure student engagement. This would help address the potential for misinterpretation, and thus enhance the quality of the NSS information. Some respondents suggested improved wording for specific survey questions. There were also comments on the style of survey questions. For example, one English HEI suggested that they place the students in a passive role and encouraged the testing of some more active phrasing, citing the Higher Education Academy's (HEA's) United Kingdom Engagement Survey as an appropriate model. A Scottish HEI commented that the survey questions have a 'customer focus rather than highlighting the responsibility of students in engaging in their own learning, which would be a better way of encouraging collaboration between student and institutions.'

64. A number of respondents (20 per cent) considered that student engagement was too narrowly defined; others stated the proposed questions measured opportunity to engage rather than actual engagement. They advocated the use of a more comprehensive definition of student engagement, to be reflected in the survey questions.

65. A number of respondents considered that some survey questions would not be universally relevant, as the proposed new criteria require.

66. A number of respondents considered that further cognitive testing of student engagement survey questions would be necessary in view of the suggested changes in terminology. Other respondents identified particular banks – ‘academic challenge’ and ‘learning community’ – for further testing.

**Funding bodies’ response to Questions 6 and 7**

67. We propose to include questions on the three themes in the new survey and will undertake further testing to refine the nine proposed questions. All nine student engagement questions as currently worded were included in the 2016 pilot and we will complete further cognitive testing after the pilot in order to finalise the wording.

**Amendment of questions on learning resources**

68. Questions 8 and 9 invited responses on proposals for the rewording of survey questions on learning resources to reflect technological advances since 2005 and changes in students’ expectations of the support they will receive in this area. The proposed revised survey questions were:

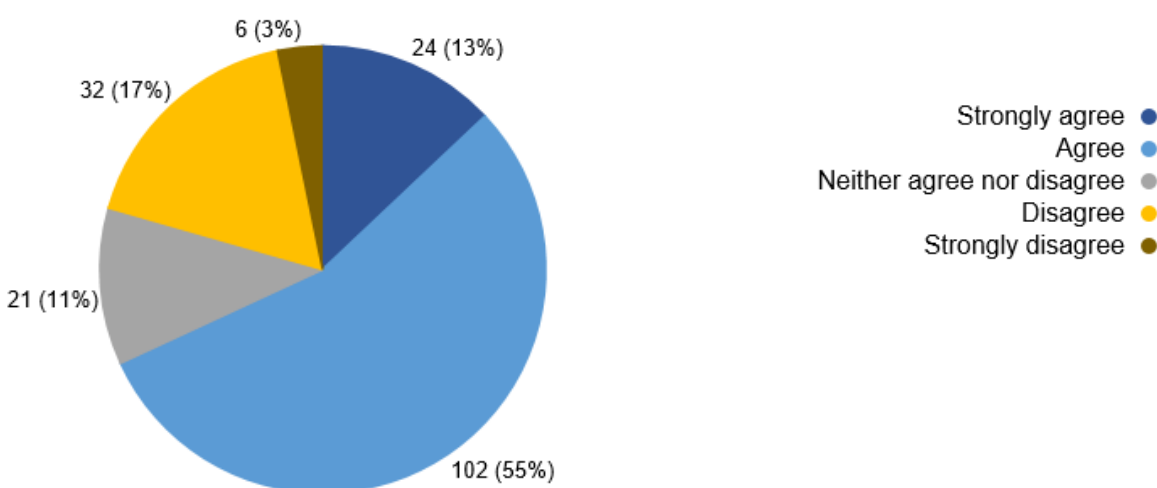
The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning well

The University/College’s IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well

I have been able to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when I needed to

**Question 8: Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on learning resources?**

Figure 6: Respondents’ views on the proposed rewording of questions on learning resources



69. A total of 185 respondents answered this question. A majority of respondents (68 per cent or 126 organisations, including 22 students’ unions) ‘strongly agreed or ‘agreed’ with the proposed rewording of survey questions on learning and teaching. A minority of respondents (20 per cent or 38 organisations, including four students’ unions) ‘disagreed’ or ‘strongly disagreed’.

70. Respondents from both these groups suggested alternative wording for the proposed survey questions about library and IT resources.
71. With respect to the proposed survey question on library resources, a number of respondents (30, including GuildHE) wanted more examples included, specifically 'services' and 'physical space'. A number (10, including GuildHE) wanted the survey question to acknowledge librarians.
72. A few respondents (five, including GuildHE) proposed alternative wording: 'learning resources' in place of 'library resources'. This was because not all higher education providers use the word 'library'. One HEI suggested there should be the facility to customise the terminology to suit the particular institution.
73. With respect to the proposed survey question on the university or college's 'IT resources and facilities', a few respondents (five) commented that the term 'IT' ('information technology') was dated and that 'digital resources' would be more appropriate. Several respondents (including GuildHE and Study UK) noted that the use of 'University/College' was not representative of the higher education landscape.
74. A number of respondents (10, including GuildHE) wanted the explicit inclusion of the term 'virtual learning environment' or 'VLE', as these are recognised as important facilities. A number of respondents (10) commented on the lack of distinction in students' minds between learning resources and IT in general, while Universities UK suggested that the survey questions on library resources and IT should be merged.
75. A few respondents (six, including three students' unions) considered that the expression 'supported my learning well' was not the kind of term that students would relate to; one student union suggested 'enhanced my learning'.
76. A few respondents (three, including one students' union) suggested survey questions along the lines of those used in the HEA's Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), which make reference to 'physical and online' resources, for example:
- 'The library resources and services are good enough for my needs (including physical and online)'
  - 'I have been able to access general IT resources (including physical and online) when I need to'.
77. Two respondents (including GuildHE) suggested the order of the library resource survey questions (Q16 and Q17 in the current NSS) should be reversed, because they considered this a more logical progression.
78. With respect to the survey question (Q18 in the current NSS) about access to 'subject specific resources', in the light of joint honours programmes a number of respondents (nine) preferred 'course-specific'. A number of respondents (nine, including four students' unions) considered that more examples should be provided, for example 'rooms' and 'studios'. A number of respondents (nine) preferred 'if needed' to the term 'when I needed to'. GuildHE suggested making students active participants by changing the phrase 'I have been able to' to 'I had the opportunity to'.

**Question 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?**

79. A total of 179 respondents answered this question. A majority (58 per cent or 104 organisations) disagreed and a minority (42 per cent or 75 organisations) agreed. Comments were made by 117 respondents, with no difference in the themes covered by the two groups.

80. A number of respondents (42) were concerned at the omission of references to technology enhanced learning and VLEs from the wording of the survey questions, as these had the potential to impact on the scope of students' studies and access to resources.

81. A number of respondents (18) wanted the survey question to be specific about the quality of the learning environment, for example in relation to laboratory and other specialised spaces. Specific reference was made to the needs of students with disabilities, as they reported less satisfaction, particularly with resourcing.

**Funding bodies' response to Questions 8 and 9**

82. We will test rewording of two of the three questions in this bank for the pilot to reflect suggestions relating to learning spaces and alternative terminology. We will undertake further cognitive testing of all three questions after the pilot to inform final decisions on these questions by the funding bodies. We will also feed in suggestions into considerations for development of the optional bank questions.

**Amendment of questions on assessment and feedback**

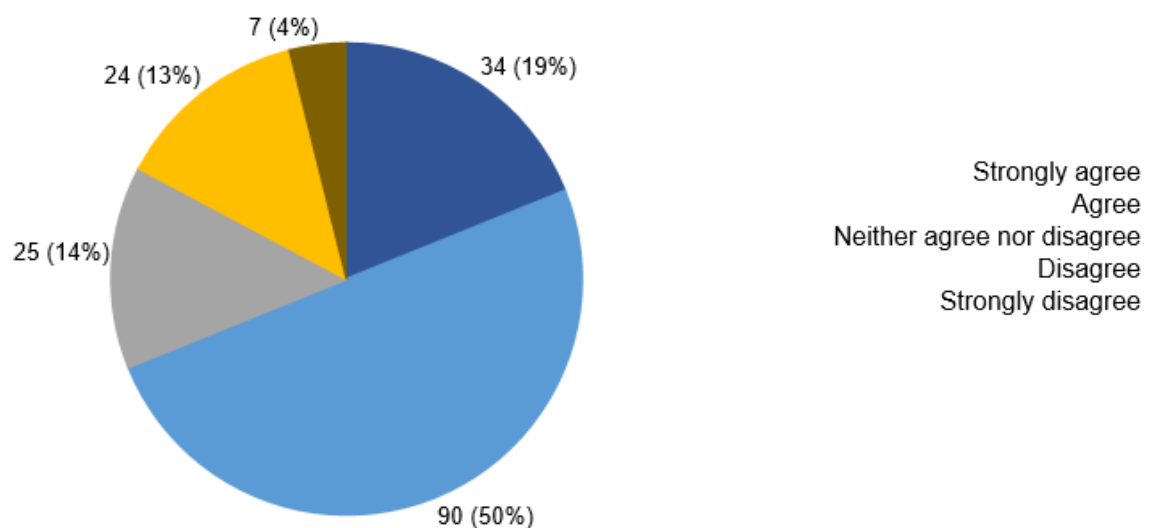
83. Questions 10 and 11 invited responses on our proposals for the rewording of current questions on assessment and feedback. This was because current questions may inadvertently encourage institutional approaches that do not enhance students' academic experiences. The proposed revised questions were:

Feedback on my work has been timely
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I have received helpful comments on my work
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**Question 10: Do you agree with the proposed rewording of questions on assessment and feedback?**

Figure 7: Respondents' views on the proposed rewording of questions on assessment and feedback



84. A total of 180 respondents answered this question. A majority (69 per cent or 124 organisations) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the proposed rewording of survey questions on assessment and feedback. A minority of respondents (17 per cent or 31 organisations) 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. There were no discernible differences in responses from type of institution.

**Question 11: Do you have any comments on our proposal to amend these questions?**

85. Respondents supporting the proposals in Question 10 welcomed the way the proposed new wording encourages students to think about how they have used feedback rather than focusing on whether they received grades and comments on time. The shift from quantity to quality of feedback students receive was also seen as positive. Some respondents felt the proposed new wording did not capture the full range of feedback used by staff and students, and that more consideration should be given to how to capture verbal and formative feedback.

**Funding bodies' response to Questions 10 and 11**

86. We will use the amended questions on assessment and feedback in the 2016 pilot, which will inform the decision on wording of this bank for questions for the NSS 2017 to be agreed by the funding bodies. We will explore the range of feedback considered by survey respondents through further cognitive testing.

**Questions to be discontinued**

87. A primary recommendation of the NSS review, supported by the literature review on survey design, was that the main survey should remain short (under 30 questions) to ensure maximum engagement and maintain a high response rate. In order to include new survey questions on

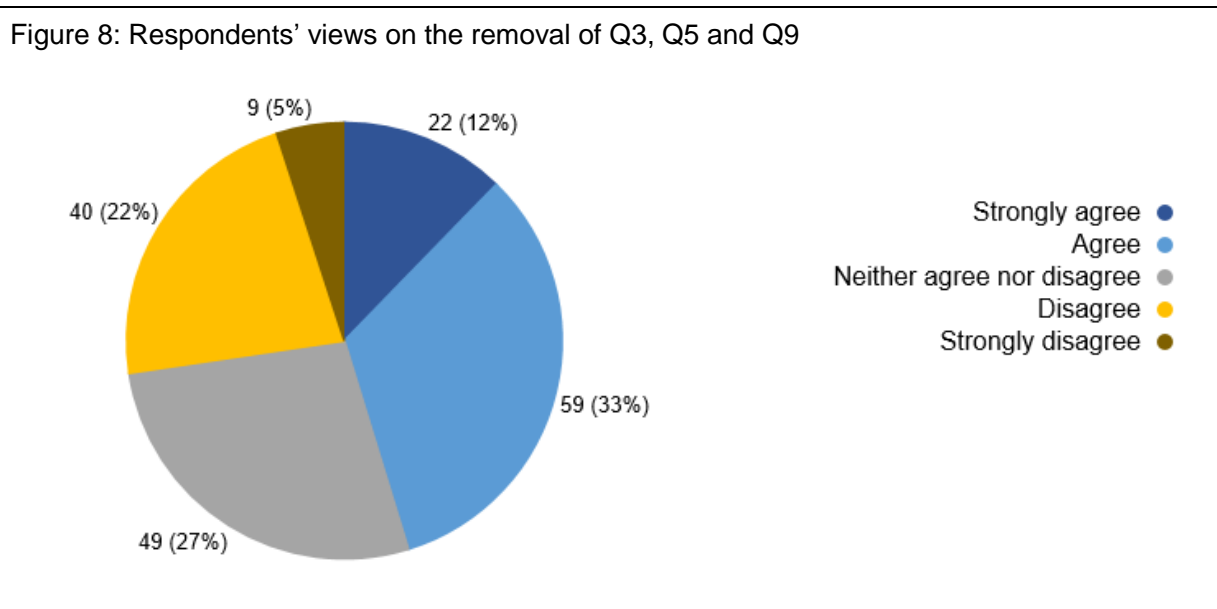
student engagement, we proposed removing survey questions which duplicate content. The proposed changes were:

- Q3: 'Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching' (remove)
- Q5: 'The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance' (remove)
- Q9: 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand' (remove)

We also proposed to discontinue the following questions from the main survey as they were not found to be robust in testing:

- Personal development questions (transfer to the optional questions)
- Students' union question (transfer to the optional questions).

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



88. A total of 179 respondents answered this question. 45 per cent of respondents (81 organisations) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the removal of these three survey questions. 27 per cent 49 organisations 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' and the same number of respondents 27 per cent or 49 organisations 'neither agreed nor disagreed'.

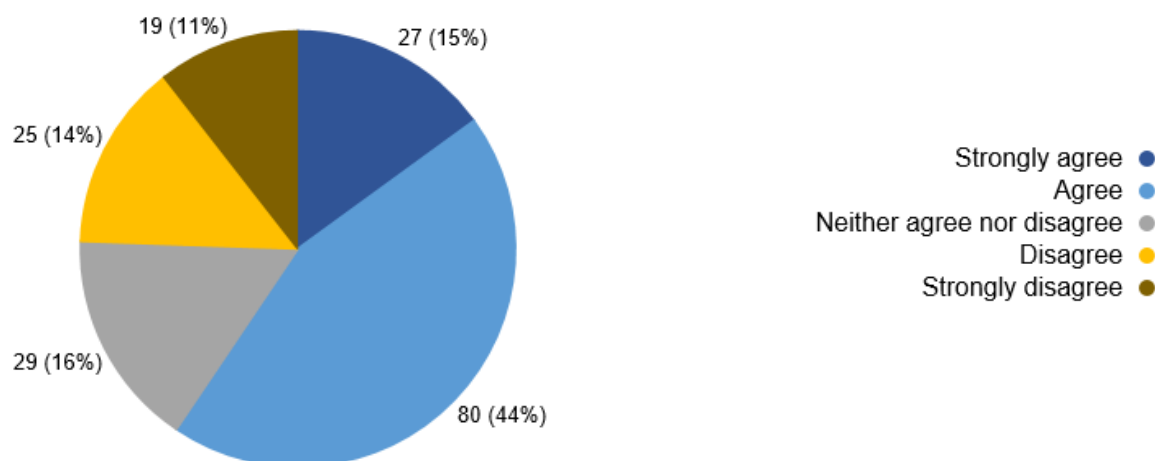
89. In view of these differences of opinion, we have carefully considered comments about removing individual questions. A majority of comments (including from students' unions) supported the removal of Q3 and Q9, but a majority (66 per cent) disagreed with the removal of Q5. The most commonly reported reason for retaining Q5 was that respondents thought Q5 and Q6 were addressing different issues.

**Funding bodies' response to Question 12**

90. Question 5 has been retained within the 'Assessment and feedback' bank of survey questions for the 2016 pilot. A final decision on the removal of Q3 and Q9 but retention of Q5 for NSS 2017 will be made by the funding bodies in September 2016.

**Question 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?**

Figure 9: Respondents' views on the removal of some or all of the personal development questions



91. A total of 180 respondents answered this question. A majority (59 per cent or 107 organisations) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the removal of some or all of the personal development questions. There is strong support for these proposals from students' unions, higher education providers including those in the further education sector, alternative providers and professional, statutory and regulatory bodies.

**Funding bodies' response to Question 13**

92. We have removed questions on personal development from the main survey within the 2016 pilot, prior to a final decision on survey questions for the NSS in 2017 by the funding bodies in September 2016. In recognition that there is a link between these questions and employability we will do further work to develop a wider set of questions on personal development as part of a more extensive bank of questions to be included within the optional banks. We will also explore how information can be captured through the revised Destination of Leavers from HE survey<sup>5</sup>.

**Questions on satisfaction with students' unions**

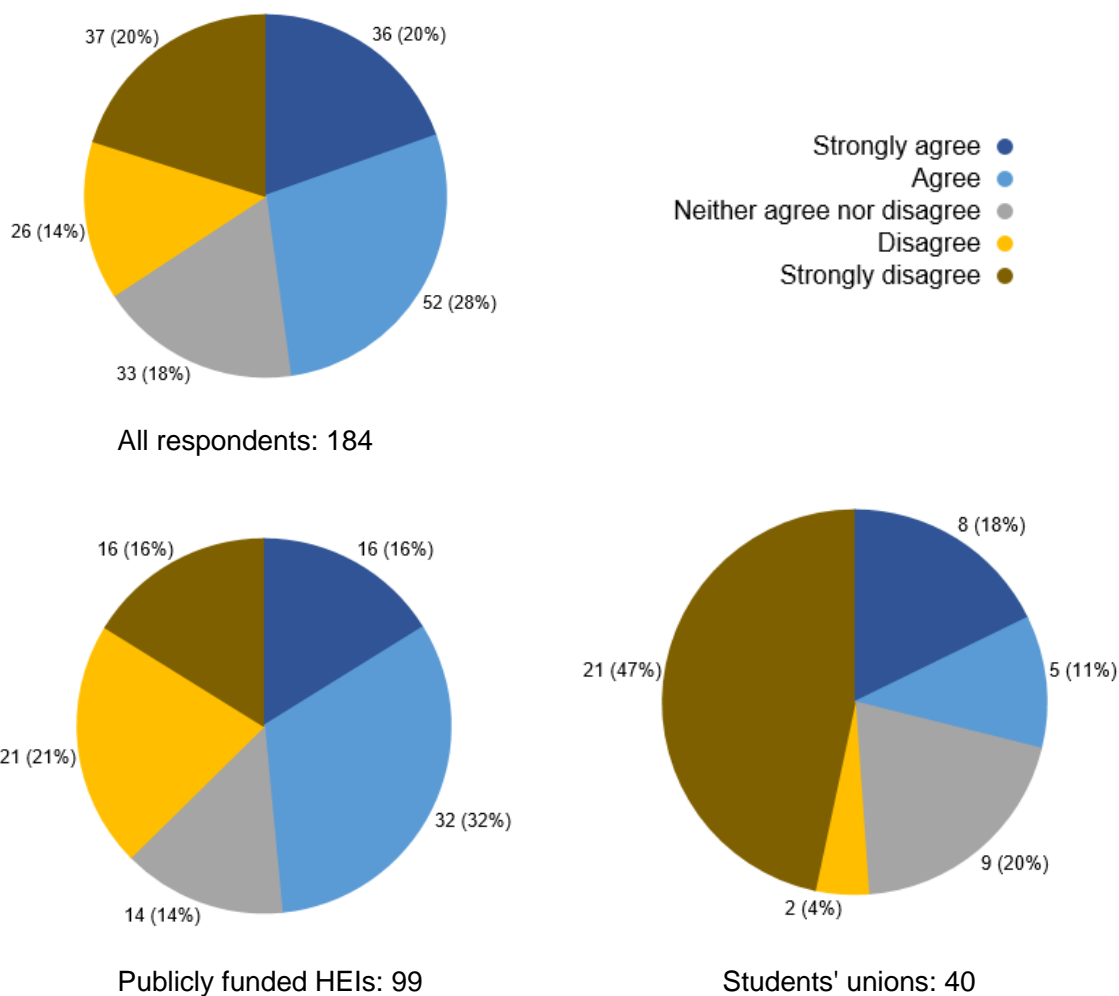
93. The 2014 'Review of the National Student Survey' noted that the student union question (currently Q23) does not align with the proposed criterion that questions should focus on the learning and teaching experience<sup>6</sup>. After due consideration, including further work and discussion with NUS, we proposed to remove Q23 and to create an optional bank of questions related to students' unions.

<sup>5</sup> A consultation as part of HESA's review of destinations and outcomes data is available online at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/3797>.

<sup>6</sup> The report is available online at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2014/nssreview/).

**Question 14: Do you agree that we should remove Q23 and instead include an optional bank of questions related to students' unions?**

Figure 10: Respondents' view on the removal of Q23 and the inclusion of an optional bank of questions related to students' unions



94. Of the 184 responses to the consultation on moving the students' union question from the main survey, there was a split of 48 per cent 'agree' or 'strongly agree' and 34 per cent 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree'. As Figure 10 shows, over half of students' unions disagreed with the proposal, but there was no clear split between the views of HEIs and student organisations.

95. Comments from respondents reflected this pattern, in many cases recognising that the current question does not work but that student representation is an important issue for the NSS to cover. The main issues raised by respondents include: how to capture the wide variety of students' union activity in relation to students' learning experience, benchmarking, survey length and completion rates, impact of Green Paper proposals on transparency and accountability for students' unions, and the value of the question in supporting collaborative partnership between institutions and students' unions.



96. Whilst a higher proportion of students' unions disagreed with the proposal (51 per cent) compared to overall responses (34 per cent), a large number neither agreed nor disagreed (20 per cent), acknowledging that there was opportunity to develop the existing question and/or the optional bank. Some enthusiasm was expressed to link the question with the new 'Student Voice' bank of questions in the main survey.

#### **Funding bodies' response to Question 14**

97. Without a clear mandate for our proposal, we believe it is premature to make a decision on removing the survey question. Instead, we have responded to concerns about the student interest by developing a revised students' union survey question, focused on the role of the students' union in representing students' academic experience. This has been agreed with NUS and was included in the 2016 pilot as part of the 'student voice' bank, rather than placed at the end of the survey as it is currently.

98. Following the pilot we will undertake further cognitive testing of this survey question, alongside a potential associated optional bank of questions. The funding bodies will make a final decision on the future of Q23 for NSS 2017 following this testing.

99. Question 16 invited respondents to provide additional overall comments on our proposals relating to discontinued questions.

#### **Question 16: Do you have any comments on our proposals relating to discontinued questions?**

#### **Funding bodies' response to Question 16**

100. We have not made a specific response to this question, as respondents' comments reflected those made in relation to Questions 12, 13 and 14.

#### **Banks of optional questions**

101. Questions 15 to 18 invited responses about changes to banks of optional survey questions. We proposed that institutions should be asked to agree their choice of optional banks with their students' union, which is stronger than the current requirement to consult with their students' union. We identified potential extra themes, and explored whether we could make more effective use of optional banks to gather wider information.

#### **Question 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?**

102. A total of 131 respondents answered this question. Views about the role of students' unions were predominant in response to this question. A majority (98) thought the choice of optional banks for inclusion in the NSS should be made jointly with the students' union or guild, and 33 were opposed to this. A comparison of publicly funded HEIs with students' unions showed that a majority of publicly funded HEIs (54) gave support (with 26 opposed), while all of

the students' unions (36) that commented wanted the choice of optional banks to be made with them (with none opposed).

103. Reasons given in comments opposing joint decision-making included a concern that institutions might have to forgo using particular optional banks for the important purpose of monitoring change over time (for example by using the same optional bank for a three-year period). This concern was also mentioned in response to Question 17. Another concern was that students' union representatives change from one year to the next, with the implication that they might not have the necessary knowledge about university strategy to make an informed decision.

104. The next most frequent comment (from 19 respondents) was that students' unions should be involved jointly in the decision when the topic for the optional bank concerned the students' union. A number of comments (11) favoured students' unions being consulted, but not that the decision should be a joint one.

105. Five respondents, consisting of HE providers and students' unions, expressed concern about the situation where the student's union and university managers were unable to reach agreement on the choice of optional banks.

106. A number of respondents mentioned other issues relating to optional banks, which also came up in responses to Question 18 and are covered in paragraphs 113-118.

#### **Question 17: How do you or your institution use the optional banks?**

107. Respondents identified a range of uses for optional banks of survey questions:

- enhancing the student experience and services (mentioned most frequently, in 43 comments, including students' unions)
- assessing change over time (22 comments, including students' unions)
- comparing results from optional banks with an internal survey (three comments, including the Mixed Economy Group of colleges)
- gathering information about work and practice placements relating to nursing provision (three comments)
- sharing results with the student union (three comments from higher education providers).

108. A number of respondents compared the optional bank questions with the main survey questions, noting the lower value accorded to the optional bank questions. They attributed this to either the lower response rate or the lack of benchmarking.

109. A number of respondents (45) commented on the limited use of optional banks. Reasons given for either no or very limited use included:

- minimising the number of survey questions so as not to deter students from responding to the main survey
- the lower response rate to optional bank questions
- use of an internal survey for the optional bank themes.

110. Study UK communicated its members' concern about the likely take-up of optional banks by students who might struggle to take the survey in its current length, and the potential loss of information relating to skills and employment.

111. NUS and NUS-USI (National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland, representing students in Northern Ireland) commented on the value to institutions of investigating specific areas that might be relevant to them and their students, while keeping the main survey questions to a minimum.

112. Individual students' unions comments presented a mix of opinions:

- a number (13) indicated they were given access to the results of the optional banks
- a number (nine) indicated that they used the data from optional banks in their campaigns
- a number (eight) stated they were not consulted about their institutions' choice of optional banks
- a few (five) commented that they were consulted
- one commented that it would like to have made use of the optional bank but that its HEI did not wish it to do so.

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

113. A number of respondents commented (21 under Question 18 and three each under Questions 17 and 15) on the requirement to use the whole bank of optional questions, when their preference would have been to select individual survey questions from several banks. The reasons cited included a concern about the effect on response rate from a longer overall survey, and a hope to enable a better fit with important issues. One further suggestion was to have a bank, instead of the two questions currently allowed, specifically for an institution's own survey questions.

114. A number of respondents (21, including students' unions) stated a preference for benchmarking the optional bank questions. They felt this would reflect a more helpful ranking by institution or mission group mean score, as produced in other surveys such as the International Student Barometer, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.

115. A number of respondents (16) considered that there was scope to reduce the number of optional banks by consolidating the themes. Similarly, a few respondents to Question 15 (four) questioned the overlap between questions in the optional banks.

116. A few respondents (six) considered it appropriate to continue to review the optional bank themes and questions regularly, to maintain their relevance in response to shifts in policy priorities. More specifically, GuildHE advised that it would be worth revisiting the purpose of the optional bank questions in regard to the emergent changes to quality assessment. In particular they wondered whether, with significant repurposing, optional bank questions might fill any gaps in information arising from the change in approach.

117. A number of respondents (55 comments on Question 18 and 16 on Question 15) welcomed the themes identified for potential additional banks. Some stated their support or

opposition to particular themes. Notable in this regard were the views of students' unions in favour of two themes: 'well-being and mental health' and 'support for disabled students'. The themes favoured most by institutions were 'skills and employability' and 'enterprise and entrepreneurship'. Other suggested themes, with just a few advocates each, were 'support for mature students' and 'support for part-time students'.

118. A number of respondents (14) wanted to see the actual questions for inclusion in the banks before judging the efficacy of the theme.

#### **Funding bodies' response to Questions 15, 17 and 18**

119. We will undertake further work with institutions and NUS to formalise a joint decision-making process in relation to optional banks for NSS 2018 onwards, alongside the development of new optional banks.

120. We will undertake further research and development to inform the development of future optional banks. This will include further cognitive testing and consideration of options suggested in the consultation to improve their uptake and usefulness.

### **Other proposals for implementation beyond 2017**

#### **Methods for capturing qualitative data from students for publication**

121. We proposed to explore ways to give prospective students access to first-hand accounts from other students about their academic experience. This reflected findings in the Unistats review that this would be of interest to students, but that research participants found the accounts from students that institutions sometimes published on their websites to be overwhelmingly positive, and considered that they would have been more useful if tempered by less favourable views, helping to create a balanced view of the course.

122. Questions 19 and 20 sought to explore whether and how we might facilitate access to such information, with a view to possibly introducing changes beyond 2017.

#### **Question 19: Do you agree with the principle of making balanced first-hand accounts from students available?**

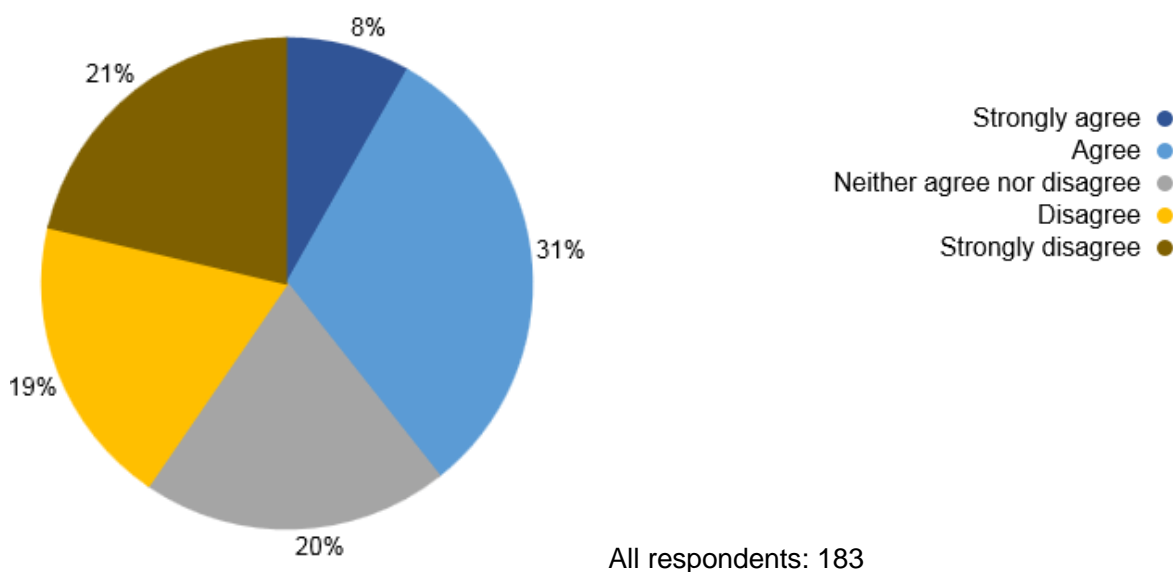
123. We sought to test the principle of making balanced first-hand accounts about students' academic experience, former and current, available. Opinion was evenly split between those who agreed (39 per cent) and those who disagreed (40 per cent). A small percentage (20 per cent) neither agreed nor disagreed. This was from a total of 183 respondents.

124. The majority of responses (77 per cent or 140 organisations) were made by HEIs and students' unions. Twice as many students' unions as HEIs favoured making balanced first-hand accounts from students available, (63 per cent and 30 per cent respectively strongly agreeing or agreeing). A minority of HEIs (21 per cent) and students' unions (15 per cent) neither agreed nor disagreed. These figures might suggest that on balance HEIs and students' unions disagreed about the principle, with the former opposed and the latter supportive. However, it is worth noting that in their comments HEIs and students' unions drew attention to the same range of difficulties with the use of information derived from open text comments.

125. Of the sector representative bodies, the Russell Group strongly disagreed and Universities UK disagreed. GuildHE, Study UK and Universities Scotland neither agreed nor disagreed, and the Mixed Economy Group agreed.

126. While Question 19 was about the principle of using students' first-hand accounts, many respondents commented specifically on the use of NSS open text comments for this purpose. As this was the focus of Question 20, the points made in this context by respondents to Question 19 appear in paragraphs 127-132.

Figure 11: Respondents' views on the principle of making balanced first-hand accounts from students available (all, HEIs and students' unions)



**Question 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?**

127. Question 20 received 168 responses. The majority of respondents (113) opposed the use of NSS open text comments to make balanced first-hand accounts available, while a minority (30) gave endorsements, in most cases with caveats.

128. The majority of responses were made by publicly funded HEIs (95) with a significant number (34) from students' unions. Both drew attention to similar issues. Responses from further education colleges and alternative providers were in line with other types of HE provider.

129. The most frequently expressed view against the use of open text comments noted potential tensions between use of NSS open text comments to inform learning and teaching enhancement (recognised and valued by institutions and students' unions alike) and as a source for students' first-hand accounts. A number of respondents (40) considered that publication would alter the nature of students' responses, making them inappropriate for the purpose of informing enhancement.

130. Many respondents (47) commented on the difficulty of identifying balanced first-hand accounts, taking the view that this may not be feasible conceptually or practically. It was felt that

the NSS was an inappropriate source for first-hand accounts, as it had the potential to reflect a misleading view. Other comments noted the difficulty of ensuring anonymity of staff and students.

131. One sector body noted the potential value of information provided through the NSS as a more representative and fair range of opinions than those reflected in online sites such as the Student Room<sup>7</sup>. Some comments (29) suggested the inclusion of an additional survey question or questions specifically for providing information for students' first-hand accounts, but that this should be clearly distinguished from any survey questions providing enhancement-focused information for institutions. Some respondents suggested additional open text survey questions specifically soliciting useful information for students to know before starting a course.

132. A number of respondents (11) suggested that further analysis of the NSS open text comments by the funding bodies would be useful, distinct from internal use for enhancement or quality assurance.

### **Funding bodies' response to Questions 19 and 20**

133. In view of the research evidence and inconclusive response to the consultation, we will conduct further work to gain a better understanding of the need for information and the type prospective students and their advisers would use. This would necessarily take account of the diversity of student groups, the range of information sources and the complexity of the decision-making processes.

134. We may then decide to explore the ways in which we might facilitate access to such information, taking account of the consultation responses. Any proposals we consider taking forward will be consulted on in the next stage of the review as appropriate.

### **Seeking feedback from students not included in the NSS**

135. We have sought advice through this consultation on how we might gather for publication the views of groups of students who are not currently included in the NSS, to ensure that the NSS reflects the diversity of the HE sector. We need to achieve this in a cost-effective and robust way. Questions 21 to 24 covered priorities and the practicalities collecting feedback from students on short or flexible courses and students who withdraw from their studies.

#### **Question 21: Have we identified the correct priorities for extending the coverage of the NSS?**

136. A total of 170 respondents answered this question. A majority of respondents (71 per cent or 120 organisations) agreed that we had identified the correct priorities for extending coverage of the NSS. There were no notable differences between the categories of respondent.

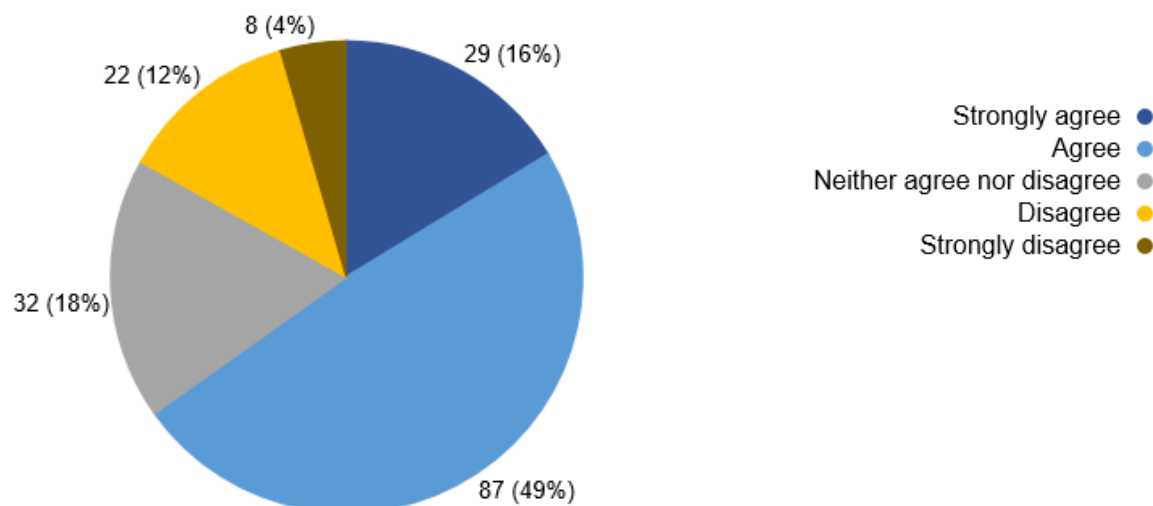
137. Strong support was shown for including students on top-up courses and courses of one full-time equivalent in length, alongside information about experiences at alternative providers. Additionally there appeared to be broad support for improving information about taught postgraduate experiences.

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<sup>7</sup> See [www.thestudentroom.co.uk/](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/).

**Question 22: Do you agree that we should develop a flexible online survey to include all students who are on short or flexible courses?**

Figure 12: Respondents' views on developing a flexible online survey to include all students on short or flexible courses



138. There were 178 responses to this question. A majority of respondents (65 per cent or 116 organisations) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that we should develop a flexible online survey to include all students on short or flexible courses. A minority (16 per cent or 30 organisations) 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed'. A number of comments (58) showed that although respondents were in support of the idea, they had some reservations due to the complexity and diversity of the target population.

139. The two broad themes that emerged from the comments were concerns about how the data would be collected, and that it would not be appropriate for all short and flexible courses.

140. A number of respondents (19) were concerned about the data collection given the diversity of the cohort; for example, there were methodological concerns, such as whether it would require multiple data collection time-points. Some comments suggested that achieving an acceptable response rate would be resource-intensive. In addition there was a concern about whether analysis could compare like with like.

141. A number of respondents (29) noted concern about including all short and flexible courses. Some suggested that it would be imperative to define the term 'short'. Others suggested conducting a cost-benefit analysis of course inclusion, and that in some cases the cost would outweigh the benefits. Some respondents suggested that only flexible courses should be included, and others suggested examples of inclusion criteria, for example a minimum credit threshold or top-up courses.

142. A small proportion of respondents (22) disagreed with the proposal. Some considered that it would be too burdensome because of the diversity of the target student population. Others considered that the NSS should not be used with this student population and that alternative approaches should be developed.

143. A number of respondents (25) who had 'neither agreed nor disagreed' with the proposal made similar comments to those who had disagreed, mainly focusing on the diversity of the student population and the associated methodological and analytical issues. One respondent considered that there were too many areas of uncertainty and that further consideration would be preferable.

144. Students who withdraw from their studies are among the hardest to reach of the groups not included in the NSS. Therefore we wanted to investigate how institutions currently solicit the views of these students, and thus how feedback from non-completers might be collected and their views shared. Questions 23 and 24 invited respondents to share their experience and views.

**Question 23: Do you have examples of how data and feedback from non-completers are currently collected by institutions?**

145. There were 125 responses to this question. The practices reported in respondents' comments ranged from minimal to extensive.

146. Many respondents had no means of collecting this information or did not do so in a systematic way. Many identified exit interviews and withdrawal surveys as the means for gaining feedback, although they also commented that response rates were often very low. Others identified a range of methods for capturing information on non-completers including internal surveys and face-to-face interviews

**Question 24: How should we give students who withdraw from their studies an opportunity to provide feedback, and how could their views be shared?**

147. There were 162 responses to this question.

148. Many respondents considered that the NSS would not be an appropriate vehicle for this purpose. It was generally considered that this kind of information, while important, could be sensitive, and might therefore be more appropriately collected, and acted upon where appropriate, at an institutional level. It was recognised that withdrawal was often due to personal issues related to social and care responsibilities, and that an internal feedback process would be more able to address vulnerabilities.

149. Other respondents considered that it might be more appropriate to explore linking to data points supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency; for example, the return that logs reasons for withdrawal. The data for these could be published on Unistats, as well as being considered in the agency's graduate destinations and outcomes review. It was felt that those surveying withdrawing students should be aware of sensitivities when making contact to ask for information.

**Funding bodies' response to Questions 21 to 24**

150. We intend to develop proposals to extend coverage of the NSS to include students studying top-up courses and courses of one full-time equivalent in length in the first instance. We will consider whether further support or guidance should be provided for collection of feedback from students who withdraw from their studies.

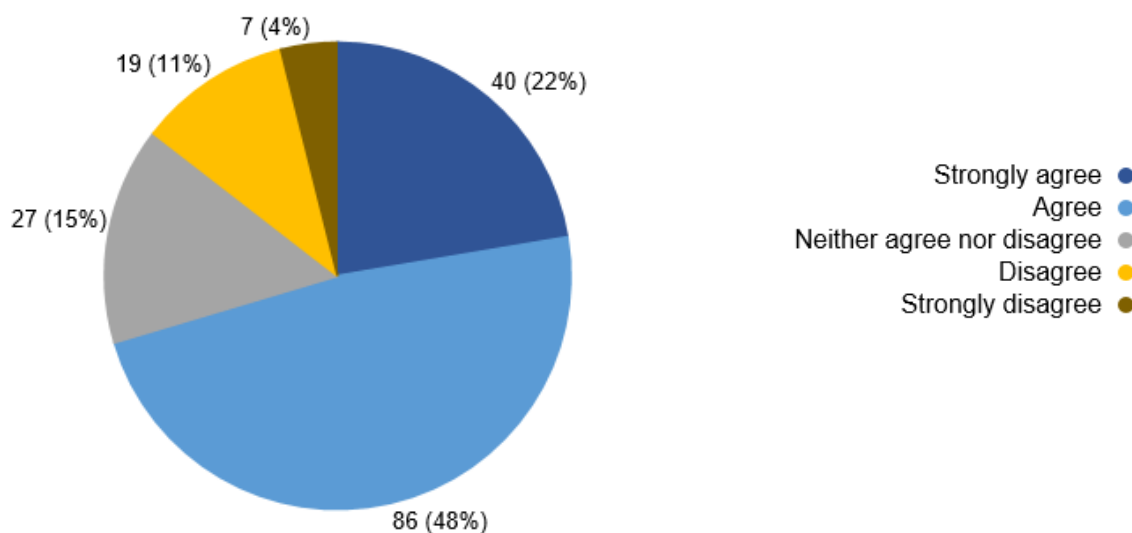


## Information for taught postgraduate students

151. Since the changes to fees and funding across the UK include proposals to introduce a loan scheme in England for masters students, it was timely to reconsider the information needs of these students. In the consultation we considered whether we should collect and publish feedback from taught postgraduate students at a national level, and if so, what its purposes might be, and also which themes would be most important. Questions 25 to 28 invited views on the principle of collecting feedback, its purpose and the themes it should focus on.

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

Figure 13: Respondents' views on the collection of feedback for publication from taught postgraduate students about their experiences



152. A total of 179 respondents answered this question. The majority of respondents (70 per cent) strongly agreed or agreed that we should collect feedback for publication from postgraduate taught students about their experiences. Those respondents who also made comments supporting their agreement cited the need for the taught postgraduate student voice to be on an equal footing with the undergraduate student voice, noting the relative lack of information for this group compared with prospective undergraduates. Some also said the survey would be useful for enhancement.

153. A number of respondents, even those in agreement, qualified their comments with concerns about robustness of the data, practical challenges of implementation including timing, and the difficulty of securing a high response rate.

154. A proportion of respondents (40, including NUS, Universities UK and Universities Scotland) recognised the value of the annual PTES administered by the HEA. They considered it either would be fit for purpose or at least should be taken as the starting point for the development of a survey to meet the needs of prospective postgraduate students. A number (30) cautioned against duplicating the function of the PTES and the International Student Barometer. This might have an

adverse effect on response rates, leading to less meaningful data, for instance for the purpose of course comparison.

155. Some respondents (29, including NUS, the National Union of Students-Union of Students in Ireland and Universities UK) raised issues about data from small cohorts falling below the publication threshold being subject to volatility and thus inappropriate for comparison.

156. A small proportion (12) referred to the report 'The feasibility of conducting a national survey of postgraduate taught students' by NatCen Social Research<sup>8</sup>. This identified the limitations of data from an NSS-style survey in providing information for prospective postgraduate taught (PGT) students, whose needs centre more on qualitative information at course level.

157. A number (10, including NUS) favoured using such a survey for enhancing learning and teaching only, and would be uncomfortable with its use for institutional league tables.

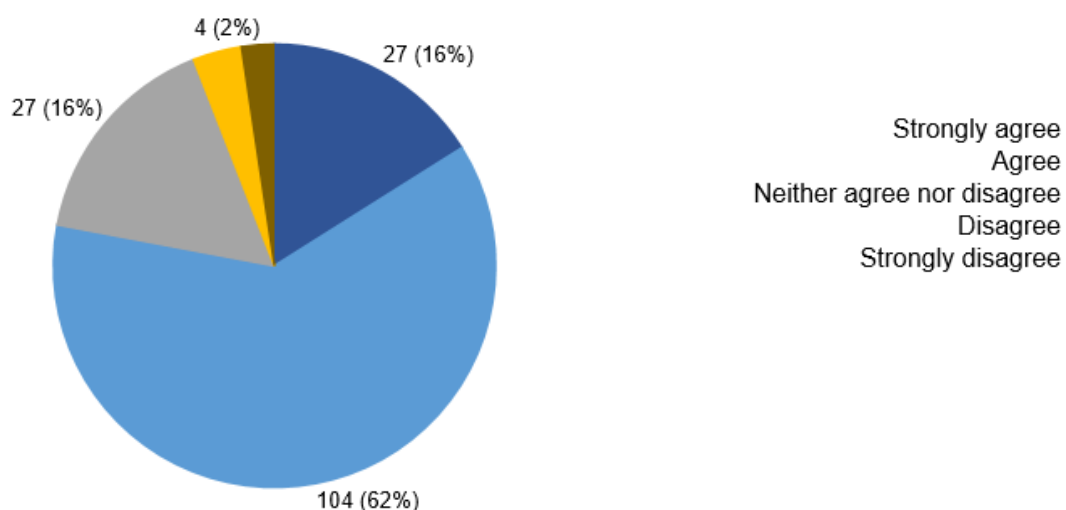
158. A number (11) were concerned about the timing of the survey putting an additional burden on institutions, pointing out that PGT courses had different start and finish dates from a typical undergraduate qualification. Concerns were raised about the effectiveness of a survey of distance and part-time students.

**Question 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 the summative taught PG feedback survey?**

159. The overarching purposes of information 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.

Figure 14: Respondents' views on the relevance of all three purposes of information to the summative taught postgraduate feedback survey



<sup>8</sup> Available at [www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2013/pginfosurvey/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2013/pginfosurvey/).

160. The majority of respondents (78 per cent) 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' with the relevance of all three purposes of information to the taught postgraduate feedback survey. This was from a total of 168 respondents.

161. Of those who 'agreed' and who 'neither agreed nor disagreed', many expressed concern about the first purpose, decision-making. In their comments they drew attention to the limited potential for survey data to inform prospective taught postgraduate students' choice of course.

162. A number (18) commented that motivations for PGT course selection were usually different from those for undergraduate course selection, and that the survey should therefore be designed to focus more on course structure and outcomes.

163. Respondents' comments on this question echoed those in response to the previous question, about the decision-making needs of prospective PGT students centring more on qualitative information at course level, rather than the data produced by an NSS-style survey.

164. A number of respondents (22) echoed the comments made in response to the previous question about publication of data from small cohorts.

165. A number of respondents (11) agreed, without any caveat, that all three purposes of information were relevant to underpin a PGT survey. A number (11) considered that the PTES could either meet all three purposes or be modified to do so. The PTES is valued by participating institutions for enhancing teaching and learning.

**Question 27: Which themes would it be important to gather and provide information on?**

166. Opinion was evenly split (24 comments each way) between those respondents who considered that the PTES contained pertinent questions for collecting information about the PGT student experience, and those who favoured an NSS-style survey. This reflected a difference of view between those favouring commonality between undergraduate and postgraduate information and those who emphasised the diversity of PGT courses and student motivation. However, half of those who favoured an NSS-style survey considered that one or more elements should be added to increase its relevance for prospective PGT students.

167. Respondents proposed a range of themes for inclusion in a survey of PGT students:

- employability (22)
- learning and teaching (14)
- flexibility of delivery, including part-time provision and workload (13)
- accessibility of learning resources, including libraries (12)
- development of skills (nine)
- motivation for course choice (nine)
- student engagement in learning (seven)
- sense of community (seven)
- value for money (six)
- assessment, including feedback and support (five)
- student support (five)
- research skills (five)
- fees and funding (five).

**Question 28: Do you have any other comments on this proposal?**

168. Respondents' other comments echoed the points about a PGT student survey in comments on Questions 25 to 27. These concerned:

- the difficulty of identifying an appropriate time to run a survey
- the need to avoid survey duplication, and the suitability of the PTES
- the diversity of the population and courses, with small cohort sizes inhibiting meaningful comparison of data
- the benefits to students of access to information, for decision-making or for enhancement purposes, at institutional course or subject level
- the practical and resource implications of recognising the variety and differing objectives of study programmes
- the need to recognise any particular information needs of international students
- the information needs of part-time students to choose between the breadth of new study options available
- the potential use of the Teaching Excellence Framework to provide quality assessment information on postgraduate courses.

**Funding bodies' response to Questions 25 to 28**

169. We note the support for a national PGT survey, but also the concerns raised about its appropriateness for informing decision-making, the potential data quality issues and the need to avoid duplication with other surveys, notably the PTES. Therefore we intend to carry out further research in this area and develop proposals for a national survey, with one of the underpinning principles being that we would seek to avoid duplication.

## Abbreviations

<b>CMA</b>	Competition and Markets Authority
<b>DfE</b>	Department for Education (in Northern Ireland)
<b>DLHE</b>	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey
<b>FTE</b>	Full-time equivalent
<b>HE</b>	Higher education
<b>HEA</b>	Higher Education Academy
<b>HEFCE</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for England
<b>HEFCW</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
<b>HEI</b>	Higher education institution
<b>HEPISG</b>	Higher Education Public Information Steering Group
<b>HESA</b>	Higher Education Statistics Agency
<b>IT</b>	Information technology
<b>KIS</b>	Key Information Set
<b>NSS</b>	National Student Survey
<b>NUS</b>	National Union of Students
<b>PGT</b>	Postgraduate taught
<b>PTES</b>	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
<b>SFC</b>	Scottish Funding Council
<b>UCAS</b>	Formerly the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
<b>VLE</b>	Virtual learning environment