IFF Research

2016 cognitive testing of the new National Student Survey (NSS)

Report to HEFCE by IFF Research

October 2016

Contents

National Student Survey (NSS) Question Statements

Section	Question statement
A: The teaching on my course	• Staff are good at explaining things. • Staff have made the subject interesting. • The course is intellectually stimulating. • My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.
B: Critical thinking *(Phase 2: Wider learning opportunities)*	• My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth. • My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics. • My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.
C: Assessment and feedback	• I have been able to contact staff when I needed to. • Feedback on my work has been timely. • I have received helpful comments on my work.
D: Organisation and management	• The course is well organised and running smoothly. • The timetable works efficiently for me. • Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.
E: Learning resources	• The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning well. *(Phase 2: The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well).* • I have been able to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to. • The university's/college's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well. *(Phase 2: The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well).*
F: Learning community	• I feel part of a community of staff and students. • I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course. • I have been encouraged to talk about academic ideas with other students.
G: Student voice	• I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course. • Staff value students' views and opinions about the course. • It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on. • Students' academic interests on my course are effectively represented by the Students' Union (Association or Guild).
H: Overall satisfaction	• Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.

1   Executive Summary

Introduction

1.1   IFF Research were commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – on behalf of all the UK higher education funding bodies – to develop and cognitively test the National Student Survey (NSS) with the ultimate aim of developing a revised and revitalised NSS in time for implementation for the 2017 wave.

1.2   This was a three-stage process. The first stage ('Phase 1') involved 99 cognitive interviews with current students, conducted towards the end of 2015. The second stage ('NSS Pilot 2016') was a large-scale quantitative survey held in spring 2016 with around 27,000 students who had completed the NSS 2016 and agreed to follow-up research. The third stage ('Phase 2') consisted of cognitive interviews with a further 70 students with interviews completed between June and July 2016. This report focusses on findings from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the cognitive research. Analysis of the findings from the Pilot survey is accessible through a separate report[1].

1.3   The key objectives of the research were to assess:

- Student comprehension of the question statements and terminologies;

- How well the current survey interface facilitates and enhances responses; and

- How well a suite of alternative survey interfaces facilitates and enhances responses.

Statement wording

1.4   This section considers students' feedback and comprehension of survey statements, looking at each survey section in turn and drawing on Phase 1 and Phase 2 analysis where relevant.

Section A: The teaching on my course

> **Question statements:**
> - **Staff are good at explaining things (S1)**
> - **Staff have made the subject interesting (S2)**
> - **The course is intellectually stimulating (S3)**
> - **My course has challenged me to achieve my best work (S4)**

1.5   Phase 1 focused in particular on the extent to which Statement 3 and Statement 4 were perceived to overlap. Encouragingly, this was only raised by a handful of students and most were comfortable in outlining the difference between the two.

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[1] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201627/

> **Key Findings**
>
> The question statements work well in their current format so there is no need for change.

Section B: Wider learning opportunities (prev. Critical thinking)

> **Question statements:**
>
> - **My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth (S1)**
> - **My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics (S2)**
> - **My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt (S3)**

1.6 The majority of Phase 1 students did not understand the original section title – 'Critical thinking' – while others felt it did not clearly communicate the subject matter covered in the statements. Consequently, the title 'Critical thinking' was replaced with 'Wider learning opportunities' ahead of the second phase of cognitive testing.

1.7 Although this title generated less upfront confusion, students' understanding around the topic covered in each statement was often at odds with their understanding of the term 'Wider learning opportunities'. Critically, most students thought the statements were about the course content and structure but around half felt the section title invited them to think about opportunities outside of the course in 'everyday' situations, or in a working environment.

1.8 Linked to this, some students pointed to ambiguity in Statement 3, specifically concerning the term 'apply what I have learnt' and – as with the term 'Wider learning opportunities' – suggested the statement could either be referring to opportunities within or beyond the course.

1.9 Correlation analysis of interim quantitative Pilot data reveals that responses to the question statements covered in 'The teaching on my course' and 'Wider learning opportunities' were highly correlated.[2] As a result, Phase 2 students were asked the extent to which they felt these two sections could, or should, be combined into one. Definitively, students tended to think the sections were right to be separate and were able to distinguish between the overarching topics covered in each.

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[2] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201627/

Key Findings

For some, the final statement 'My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt' conflicts with the section title, 'Wider learning opportunities'. Consequently, the statement wording and section title may need refining, depending on which interpretation of Statement 3 is preferable – i.e. opportunities within or outside of the course. Examples for consideration include:

- Statement 3: 'Apply what I have learnt across various areas of the course' or 'Apply what I have learnt outside of the course'

- Section title: 'Learning opportunities'

Students were generally content with being asked the questions in 'The teaching on my course' and those in 'Wider learning opportunities' in two separate sections and so there does not appear to be a need to combine the two.

Section C - Assessment and feedback

Question statements:
- **The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance (S1)**
- **Marking and assessment have been fair (S2)**
- **Feedback on my work has been timely (S3)**
- **I have received helpful comments on my work (S4)**

1.10 Feedback on this section did not identify a need for further action or development work.

Key Findings

The question statements work well in their current format so there is no need for change.

Section D - Academic support

> **Question statements:**
> - **I have been able to contact staff when I needed to (S1)**
> - **I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course (S2)**
> - **Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices (S3)**

1.11 In Phase 1, alternative wording was tested for Statement 1 – 'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to' vs. 'Teaching staff have been responsive when I needed to contact them' – and the majority of students preferred the second statement. Specifically, students felt there was more value in assessing how responsive staff were to their requests for advice or help over how easy or difficult it was for them to raise these requests.

1.12 A number of students also noted the use of the word 'staff' in the original statement and 'teaching staff' in the alternative statement. The word 'staff' was problematic as some students were unsure whether they should consider teaching staff and non-academic staff in their response.

1.13 Students were probed around their understanding of the term 'sufficient' in Statement 2, and two alternative words 'good' and 'helpful'. Generally, students felt that 'sufficient' referred to a quantifiable amount – and assessed whether they had had enough advice and guidance – whereas with 'good' and 'helpful' they assessed the quality of the advice and guidance. Although some thought 'helpful' was more relevant and allowed them to describe the impact of the advice they had received, they also thought 'helpful' and 'good' were more subjective terms and perhaps more difficult to answer as a result.

1.14 With regard to Statement 3, most were confident in their understanding of the term 'study choices'. That said, students tended to give a variety of interpretations when probed, ranging for 'where to go to study' to 'what to do after university' and around half did not consider the area of module choices at all, which is the intention behind the statement.

Key Findings

The majority of students preferred the statement 'Teaching staff have been responsive when I needed to contact them' to the current statement wording 'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to'. With this in mind we recommend changing Statement 1 to reflect this preference.

Clarification is needed around whether the term 'staff' relates to just academic staff or

broader university staff.

With regards to Statement 2, students felt 'sufficient' related to a quantifiable amount whereas 'good' and 'helpful' were more about the quality of the advice. Depending on user needs, this term could be considered for review.

The wording in Statement 3 should be reviewed to potentially incorporate the notion of module choices: many students did not consider these in their interpretation of the term 'study choices'.

Section E: Organisation and management

Question statements:

- **The course is well organised and running smoothly (S1)**
- **The timetable works efficiently for me (S2)**
- **Any changes in the course of teaching have been communicated effectively (S3)**

1.15 Feedback on this section during Phase 1 interviews was positive with no further action or development work required.

Key Findings

The question statements work well in their current format so there is no need for change.

Section F: Learning resources

Question statements:

- **The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well (S1)**
- **The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well (S2)**
- **I have been able to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to (S3)**

1.16 A few Phase 2 students felt that there was some overlap between Statement 1 and Statement 2 as they considered 'IT resources' and 'Library resources' to be one and

the same, usually because they accessed library resources through online channels or because they were in the same location at the university or college. Overlap in this section was particularly relevant to distance learners – over half of whom gave the same response to all three statements – perhaps because they tend to access such resources remotely, through the same device.

1.17 Phase 2 students were asked to consider the terms 'subject' and 'course' in the context of Statement 3. Around one third could not see a distinction or did not think the difference would alter the way in which they would respond to the statement. The majority of those who saw a clear difference focused on resources for specific modules when considering the term 'subject' and more broad, wider degree resources when considering the term 'course'. This suggests that some students may be focusing on the ability to access resources for more recent modules, as opposed to considering the resources they needed to access across their whole course.

Key Findings

A few students struggled to disentangle IT resources from Library resources. Consequently, these statements (S1 and S2) could benefit from further clarity.

If the intention is for students to consider the resources specific to their entire university course in Statement 3, we would recommend giving thought to replacing 'subject' specific resources with 'course' specific resources.

Section G: Learning community

Question statements:
- **I feel part of a community of staff and students (S1)**
- **I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course (S2)**

1.18 Most students felt Statement 1 was about the relationships that existed between staff and students, ranging from staff generally being contactable to staff and students attending social events together and acknowledging each other on a first-name basis.

1.19 Students were asked to consider the term 'as part of my course' and an alternative phrasing, 'on my course'. Broadly speaking, students did not struggle with the former – the current wording – and were able to think of specific examples. Those who drew out a distinction between the two typically explained that 'on my course' would prompt them to consider examples of more informal or sociable interaction whereas 'as part of my course' would prompt them to consider structured or compulsory interaction, for example, assessed group work. Others explained that 'on my course' would prompt

them to consider work with students on their degree programme whereas 'as part of my course' would encompass students from other courses.

Key Findings

Regarding S2, students tended to perceive 'as part of my course' as a formal, or planned opportunity for group work. In contrast, the alternative wording 'on my course' encouraged some to think more of informal or collaborative work with students from the same, or different, disciplines. There seems to be greater subjectivity in interpretation of the term 'on my course' however, therefore we would recommend retaining the use of 'as part of my course'.

Section H: Student voice

Question statements:

- **I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course (S1)**
- **Staff value students' views and opinions about the course (S2)**
- **It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on (S3)**
- **Students' academic interests on my course are effectively represented by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) (S4)**

1.20 At an overall level, students were generally comfortable with these statements.

1.21 Phase 1 students were presented with alternative phrasing for Statement 1 – 'ample opportunities' and 'good opportunities' – and asked to outline their understanding and preference. On balance, students preferred the term 'right opportunities' – which they felt encompassed an assessment of both quality and quantity – whereas 'ample' caused some confusion and 'good' was deemed descriptive and subjective and therefore harder to answer.

1.22 Phase 2 students were asked to consider whether they felt there was any overlap between Statement 1 and the last statement from the previous 'Learning Community' section: 'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course'. The vast majority agreed that these two statements were capturing different experiences of a student's course. Further prompting and articulation of these experiences confirmed this to be the case.

1.23 Problems with Statement 4 stem from a lack of engagement with the Student's Union (SU) or a lack of an SU entirely, particularly for distance learners. Specifically, there was a) a lack of understanding about the term 'students' academic interests' and b) a perception that the SU was not responsible for safeguarding and promoting students' academic interests – which were instead the responsibility of the staff and students – but was more involved with social issues such as sporting activities and support with

financial and housing issues. This is problematic as disagreement with the statement could either mean that the student did not think the SU represented students' academic interests or that it did, just not effectively.

<div style="background:#8bc34a; padding:8px;">

Key Findings

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Evidence suggests that Statement 1 can remain unchanged, with students broadly happy with the term 'right opportunities' and content that any correlation with the statement 'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course' is merely coincidental.

Statement 4 appears to cause confusion for a variety of reasons: a lack of engagement with the SU, a complete lack of an SU, issues with the term 'academic interests' and a perception that safeguarding and promoting students' academic interests are not within the remit of the SU. Consequently, this question may not collect accurate or representative data and – in this context – could benefit from further consideration or removal from the survey.

Section I: Overall satisfaction

Question statement:

- **Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course**

1.24 Students were very comfortable responding to this statement, with no issues or concerns raised.

Key Findings

The question statement works well in its current format so there is no need for change.

Response patterns and answer strategies

1.25 The online interface and the response scale could potentially impact on the response patterns and answer strategies adopted by students. The former is discussed in Chapter 5 and key points related to the scale outlined below:

- Most of the feedback about the scale focused on the use of the term 'mostly'. Students felt 'Mostly (dis)agree' was too much of a jump from 'Neither agree nor disagree' and that their true answer lay somewhere in between these options.

- A few students felt the term 'Definitely (dis)agree' was too decisive and were discouraged from using it unless they 100% agreed or disagreed with a statement, even if they felt strongly about said statement.

- A few struggled with the term 'Neither agree nor disagree' and used it interchangeably with 'Not applicable' or as a means to give a 'Don't know' response.

Key Findings

Phase 1 testing revealed that a few students struggled with the current response scale. This was mainly due to confusion over the terminology. Evidence suggests that these issues could potentially impact response patterns and behaviours. Linked to this, a very small handful of students mentioned that the order of the scale – starting from positive to negative – could encourage acquiescence bias.

Consequently, three alternative scales were tested in the quantitative Pilot survey:

- **Scale 1 – The original scale:** 'Definitely agree', 'Mostly agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Mostly disagree', 'Definitely disagree', 'Not applicable'.

- **Scale 2 – The reverse scale:** 'Definitely disagree', 'Mostly disagree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Mostly agree', 'Definitely agree', 'Not applicable'.

- **Scale 3 – The alternative scale:** 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Sometimes agree sometimes disagree', 'Disagree', 'Strongly disagree', 'Not applicable'.

The quantitative pilot survey confirmed however that the original scale was the most appropriate for the NSS, with little evidence of acquiescence bias.

1.26 Online survey theory has highlighted the importance of techniques that enhance engagement in survey questionnaires, and thereby improve quality of response. In this context, a key objective of the research was to review the online platform and to test a selection of alternative designs for desktop, laptop, tablet and smartphone users. These are presented in Figures 1.1 to 1.7 along with a description of how they work.

Interface 1

1.27 Users are presented with a section of statements in a grid format. They give their answer by selecting the relevant radio button and – once they have responded to all statements – click 'Next' to continue to the next section.

Figure 1.1 Interface 1

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your current view of your course as a whole.	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
Staff are good at explaining things	○	○	○	○	○	○
Staff have made the subject interesting	○	○	○	○	○	○
The course is intellectually stimulating	○	○	○	○	○	○
My course has challenged me to achieve my best work	○	○	○	○	○	○

Previous   Next

Interface 2

1.28 Users click on their relevant 'bar' to provide a response and scroll down to the next statement.

Figure 1.2 Interface 2

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your <u>current view of your course as a whole</u>.

Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

Staff have made the subject interesting

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Interface 3: Automated

1.29 Users select response options by clicking on the relevant 'bar'. Following this, the interface automatically moves on to a new page displaying the next statement. A 'Previous' button appears after the first statement to allow users to review their answers if desired.

Figure 1.3 Interface 3: Automated

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your <u>current view of your course as a whole</u>.

Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

Interface 3: Next Click

1.30 Users again select their responses by clicking on the relevant 'bar' and select 'Next' to move to the next statement or 'Previous' to review their last answer.

Figure 1.4 Interface 3: Next Click

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your current view of your course as a whole.

Staff are good at explaining things

- Definitely agree
- Mostly agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Mostly disagree
- Definitely disagree
- Not applicable

[Previous]   [Next]

Interface 4

1.31 Users 'drag' the statement from the centre of the screen into the relevant box at the bottom and – once they have responded to all of the statements – select 'Next' to move on to the next section. Users can review their answers by using the drop-down boxes under each response option.

Figure 1.5 Interface 4

Assessment and feedback

Please show the extent of your agreement by dragging and dropping each statement into the box that reflects your current view of your courses as a whole.

Marking and assessment has been fair

3 item(s) left

| Definitely agree | Mostly agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Mostly disagree | Definitely disagree | Not applicable |

[Next]

Interface 5 – Phase 1

1.32 Interface 5 (I5) also applies a 'drag and drop' function. Figure 1.6 outlines the initial version of I5 – tested at Phase 1 – whereby users were required to 'drag' the question statement on the left hand side into the green response option boxes on the right hand side of the screen. The question statement box would then automatically move into the grey space alongside the response options.

Figure 1.6 Interface 5 – Phase 1

The teaching on my course

Please show the extent of your agreement by dragging and dropping each statement into the green box that reflects your current view of your courses as a whole.
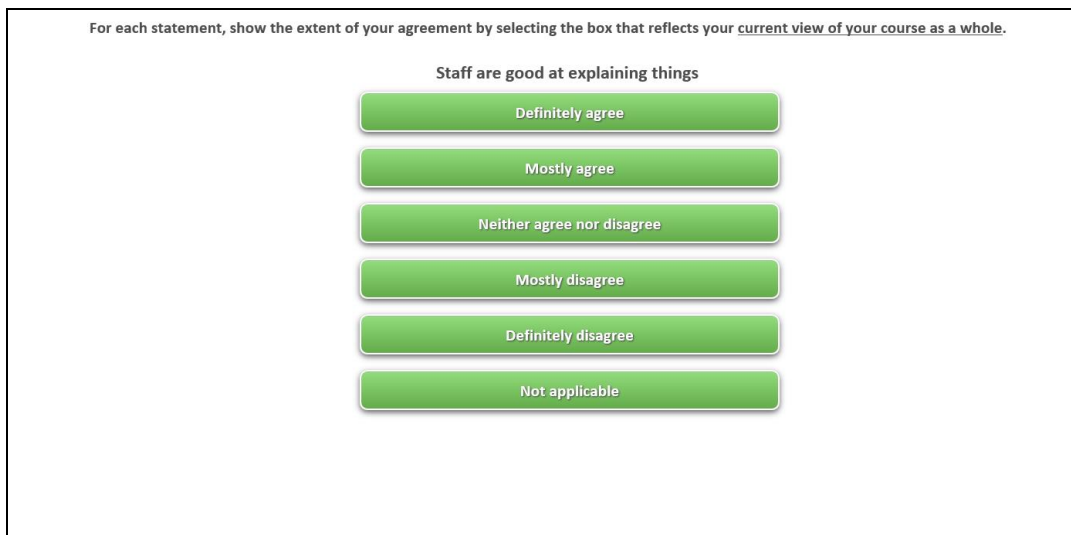
Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree
Mostly agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Mostly disagree
Definitely disagree
Not applicable

Next

Interface 5 – Phase 2

1.33 Unlike the Phase 1 version, the user drags the statement box over the relevant answer box *or* grey row.

Figure 1.7 Interface 5 – Phase 2

Please show the extent of your agreement by dragging and dropping each statement into the green box that reflects your current view of your course as a whole.

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Staff are good at explaining things / Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

Previous   Next

Outcomes of the interface testing: Phase 1

1.34 The findings from the first cognitive phase pointed to small revisions – as opposed to wholesale changes – to improve the online layout and reduce the potential for acquiescence bias.

1.35 A few small amendments – such as the use of colour, banners, layout and sizing – were implemented to improve the aesthetics and usability ahead of this stage for each interface.

1.36 Testing revealed that – due to the size of the device screen – separate online survey formats should be considered and tested for students who access the NSS via their smartphones.

1.37 While students were content with I1, it is this type of layout that has prompted concerns around acquiescence bias in previous NSS iterations. Additionally, such a format is relatively unwieldy for a mobile device. While it was used in the quantitative pilot survey, based on results across all interfaces, and the desire to test alternative interfaces, it was not selected for further testing in Phase 2.

1.38 I4 did not test well and was therefore not taken forwards to the next stages of the research. Meanwhile, a new version of I3 was created, whereby students had to click 'Next' to proceed to the next statement, while I5 was also modified.

Outcomes of the interface testing: Phase 2

1.39 Using cognitive feedback and Pilot survey data, three interfaces were taken forward to Phase 2 cognitive testing, two for the desktop/tablet – I3: Next Click and I5 – and one for a mobile device – I3: Automated.

1.40 I3: Automated tested well on the mobile device with students commenting that it was well suited to the smaller screen.

1.41 In the context of response patterns and behaviours, one of the key differences between I3 and I5 is the ability to see all of the statements for a given section at one time – as on I5 – and the 'one statement per page' format – as on I3.

1.42 Students either felt seeing all of the statements at one time allowed for more accurate responses as they were able to review, compare and reflect on their choices or that the 'one statement per page' format allowed them to focus entirely on each statement at a time, which was less distracting and therefore more accurate.

1.43 The drag-and-drop function made I5 seem more innovative and engaging than I3 – encouraging more engagement with the survey – but by virtue of this it risked being more confusing and cumbersome. By contrast, students felt I3 was clear and simple. That said, students sometimes felt I3 could become repetitive and boring and therefore would encourage less engagement with the survey.

Key Findings

Whichever interface is used for the NSS, it is imperative that it is intuitive and engaging. On balance we would recommend taking forward I3; a format that students are familiar with, and one that is easy to use. Another advantage of I3 is its usability on all devices, with the 'Automated' click through function working well on mobile devices, and 'Next Click' on desktops and laptops. This reduces the potential for mode effects to occur.

Students' Union optional bank

1.44 The SU optional bank is a completely new set of statements for the NSS survey supplied by the National Union of Students (NUS). As a result, they were included for testing in Phase 2 of cognitive interviewing. The statements tested are presented below and Appendix A summarises key findings from the cognitive interviews.

Question statements:

- **The Students' Union has had a positive impact on my sense of belonging to the university or college (S1)**
- **The Students' Union has had a positive impact on my personal development and growth (S2)**
- **The Students' Union has helped me to make friends (S3)**
- **The Students' Union has helped me to engage with the local community (S4)**
- **The Students' Union has had a positive impact on students' academic experiences (S5)**
- **The Students' Union has enabled me to have a positive impact on society (S6)**

2   Introduction and methodology

Background and objectives

2.1   IFF Research were commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) – on behalf of all the UK higher education funding bodies – to develop and cognitively test the National Student Survey (NSS) with the ultimate aim of developing a revised and revitalised NSS in time for implementation for the 2017 wave.

2.2   Earlier reviews of the NSS have focused on the relevance of the statements to students' experience of higher education (HE) and have resulted in the development of a revised set of statements. Examination of the surveys' findings over time has also highlighted that the questionnaire tends to generate responses that are characterised by a relatively high degree of 'bunching' and of 'positive acquiescence'. It has been suggested that the questionnaire's historic use of a basic, flat format for its online version – with statements grouped into sections and displayed in large grids over separate pages – contributes to these phenomena.

2.3   Following on from this earlier work, the objectives of this particular phase of research were to assess how well the current survey structure facilitates and enhances responses, and whether steps can be taken to limit future cases of 'bunching' and 'positive acquiescence'. It also looked in more depth into students' interpretation of statement wording.

2.4   There was a three-stage process to this part of the development. The first stage ('Phase 1') involved 99 cognitive interviews with current students, conducted towards the end of 2015. The second stage ('NSS Pilot 2016) was a large-scale quantitative survey held in spring 2016 with around 27,000 students who had completed the NSS 2016 and agreed to follow-up research. The third stage ('Phase 2') consisted of cognitive interviews with a further 70 students with interviews completed between June and July 2016. This report focuses on findings from both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the cognitive research. Analysis of the findings from the Pilot survey is accessible through a separate report[3].

2.5   The next subsections split out the sampling and methodological approaches for Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Phase 1: Sampling and Methodology

2.6   Cognitive interviews were conducted with 99 students from 10 Higher Education Providers (HEPs).

2.7   A list of participating HEPs was established to ensure that a range of institutions were included in the research. Selection criteria included:

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[3] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201627/

- Russell Group and non-Russell Group universities;

- At least one alternative provider (AP), one further education college (FEC) and one specialist higher education institution (HEI), all catering for various disciplines;

- At least one institution from each of the four nations; and

- Institutions who had not participated in the initial piloting stage of the NSS.

2.8   Following approval, IFF made contact with the HEPs, arranging dates for subsequent interviews. Students were recruited on-site, with care being taken to ensure that a good mix were included in the research. Students were recruited to ensure a certain level of representation across the following criteria:

- Gender;

- Ethnicity;

- Disability/accessibility issues;

- Welsh speakers;

- Subject; and

- Mode of study (including full and part-time students, as well as distance learners).

2.9   Appendix B contains more detail on the students we spoke to during the research process.

2.10 The vast majority of 99 cognitive interviews were conducted face-to-face, on-site at HEPs who had previously agreed to participate in the research. However, nine interviews were conducted over Skype. Site visits took place between 21st October and 20th November 2015.

2.11 Cognitive interviewing was conducted by members of the IFF research team; and students were offered a small financial incentive to encourage participation.

2.12 With the focus of previous development work on terminology and relevance, the predominant focus for these cognitive interviews centred on better understanding response patterns and views on the online layout. We also explored specific aspects of the questionnaire, particularly around its flow and terminologies that previous research development had outlined as being potentially confusing.

2.13 To capture students' views on the online format, we designed a suite of five 'online interfaces', with a view to selecting two or three that could be further tested in the NSS Pilot. Ultimately, it is intended that the successful interface will present less evidence of 'positive acquiescence', maintain response rates and limit 'mode effect'.

2.14 Interviews were structured in the following format:

- An initial run-through of the existing NSS questionnaire (see the NSS question statements on Page 4). 'Telephone' respondents were taken through a spoken version of the questionnaire; whereas 'online' respondents were given a laptop to complete it (online respondents were shown the first interface). Interviewers reviewed these answers, making a note of instances of 'acquiescence bias' and streamlining, and limited/widespread use of 'neither agree nor disagree', 'not applicable' and definite answers. These were followed up later on in the interview.

- This was followed by a set of questions aimed at establishing students' 'top of mind' reactions to the questionnaire and, in particular, its 'flow'. Students were also asked about whether there were any specific statements which overlapped (with the aid of a highlighting exercise where necessary).

- Students were then asked about the clarity of specific words/phrases contained within the NSS, and for some statements asked to consider alternative phrasings.

- Following this, students were then shown the proposed online interfaces which they were asked to rank in order of preference, justifying their reasons why.

- Where possible, students accessed the online interfaces from their mobile phones and were again asked to give their reactions to how well these interfaces translated to mobile devices.

- Students were asked a final set of questions aimed at understanding the types of responses that they gave and the frequency with which they gave them.

- Interviews finished with more general questions about how well the questionnaire fitted with the information that the student wanted to convey regarding their experience of HE.

Phase 2: Sampling and Methodology

2.15 The sampling approach for Phase 2 mirrored that taken in Phase 1 to an extent: around half (37) of these interviews were conducted on-site at four different HEPs. The remaining 33 interviews were conducted with students who had completed the NSS Pilot earlier in the year and agreed to participate in further qualitative research. This meant that some students came to the cognitive research relatively 'fresh', while others were already fairly familiar with the question statements contained within the NSS.

2.16 Once again, care was taken to ensure key subgroups were represented in the sample. Thus a range of students were interviewed by age, ethnicity, disability status, mode of study, type of institution, language spoken and subject. There were slight differences in the profiles of students interviewed between Phase 1 and Phase 2, but none that would have incurred a significant impact on results. As one objective for Phase 2 interviewing consisted of exploring distance learners' reactions to question statements in the

'Learning community' and 'Student voice' sections in the questionnaire, we ensured we spoke with 10 distance learners as well.

2.17 All 70 Phase 2 interviews were conducted face-to-face, between 25th May and 14th July 2016. Once again, a small financial incentive was offered to students who participated.

2.18 The focus of Phase 2 was to provide more insight into findings captured in Phase 1, and shed more light on responses given to the quantitative NSS Pilot as well. It therefore predominantly explored students' understanding of particular terminologies as well as the potential overlap between certain sections and statements.

2.19 Following the Pilot survey, three online interfaces were selected for further testing in Phase 2; two reserved for desktop computers, and the third for mobile devices. Students were taken through each in turn and asked for their views on usability, functionality etc.

2.20 The final part of the Phase 2 research explored students' reactions to a new optional bank of question statements for the NSS, based on students' experiences of their students' union (SU).

Report structure

2.21 This report details the key findings from the two phases of cognitive interviews. For the most part, findings from each phase are interwoven. However, where significant development occurred in advance of Phase 2 findings are presented in a more chronological sequence.

2.22 Where relevant each section contains a summary of findings and recommendations to take forward in questionnaire design for the 2017 NSS. The report is set out as follows:

- Chapter 1: Executive Summary

- Chapter 2: Introduction and methodology

- Chapter 3: Statement wording

- Chapter 4: Response patterns and answer strategies

- Chapter 5: Interface options

- Appendix A: Students' union optional bank

- Appendix B: Respondent profile

- Appendix C: List of abbreviations

3   Statement wording

3.1   This chapter takes each section of the survey in turn and explores student feedback from both phases of the cognitive testing. The green pull-out boxes at the start of each section show the question statements used in the testing process. These may have already been revised in earlier rounds of questionnaire development. Where relevant, quotes from students also show the response they gave to the particular statements in hand.

Section A: The teaching on my course

> **Question statements:**
>
> - **Staff are good at explaining things (S1)**
> - **Staff have made the subject interesting (S2)**
> - **The course is intellectually stimulating (S3)**
> - **My course has challenged me to achieve my best work (S4)**

3.2   Previous questionnaire development work had raised concerns that Statements 3 and 4 contain some overlap. This notion was tested during Phase 1 interviews and was only mentioned as an issue a handful of times however. Further to this, most felt comfortable distinguishing the differences.

"[Statement 3] You can be intellectually stimulated but you might not actually produce anything." "[Statement 4] is more of a personal output, can you respond to what you've been taught?"

Female, HEI, S3 'Definitely agree', S4 'Mostly agree'

"[Statement 3] Is asking whether a lecturer has your attention. [Statement 4] relates to assignments; is it making me produce my best work?"

Female, FEC, S3 'Mostly agree', S4 'Mostly agree'

3.3   That said there was a minor lack of understanding among a few students with the term 'intellectually stimulating'.

"I wasn't sure what the statement actually meant, or what the term 'intellectually stimulating' meant and how it applies to me. I gave 'neither/nor' as I wasn't sure how to answer it. If a 'don't know' option was available, I would've chosen that."

Female, HEI, S3 'Neither agree nor disagree', S4 'Definitely agree'

3.4   In fact, students were more likely to perceive there to be overlap between Statements 2 and 3, particularly with regard to the terms 'interesting' (Statement 2) and 'intellectually stimulating' (Statement 3). However, students were no more likely to provide the same

answer at these two statements compared with any other statements, suggesting their survey responses do not support this theory.

"Statements 2 and 3 appear to be asking about the same thing, this could be one question, as if it's not interesting then it won't be stimulating and vice versa."

Male, HEI, S3 'Definitely agree', S4 'Mostly agree'

Key Findings

The question statements work well in their current format so there is no need for change.

Section B: Wider learning opportunities (prev. Critical thinking)

Question statements:

- **My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth (S1)**
- **My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics (S2)**
- **My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt (S3)**

3.5 In Phase 1 of the cognitive research, this section was labelled 'Critical thinking', although as a result of the research findings it was subsequently amended to 'Wider learning opportunities' ahead of Phase 2 testing. Across both phases, attention was paid to:

- Interpretation of the section title;

- Potential overlap with 'The teaching on my course' section of the survey; and

- Statement overlap within the section and the term 'apply' in the third statement.

Interpretation of 'critical thinking'

3.6 The majority of Phase 1 students either did not understand the term 'critical thinking' or did not think that this section title was appropriate for the statements included in the section. Despite this, it did not appear to cause any issues during the survey itself.

3.7 There was a variety of views on what 'critical thinking' meant, including:

- How to be analytical and how to analyse different situations;

- How to criticise;

- How to think in a more abstract fashion and 'outside of the box'; and

- Staff thoughts on the students.

3.8 Some students had had entire modules that were titled 'Critical thinking', which generally meant they better understood the phrase.

"'Critical thinking' is a personal skill, how critically you think about a problem or a solution."

Male, HEI

3.9 If students were not happy with the phrase they were asked to think of a more appropriate title for the section. Generally, they veered away from academic terminology and towards more specific terms related to the question statements. Suggestions included:

- My course has provided me with opportunities;

- Course opportunities;

- Course specifics;

- Course learning methods;

- Course evaluation;

- Depth of course;

- Application of knowledge; and

- Opportunities and learning of the course.

Interpretation of 'wider learning opportunities'

3.10 The Phase 1 feedback led to a review of the section title, with it being amended to 'Wider learning opportunities' in Phase 2 cognitive interviewing. Although this caused less confusion at Phase 2, there was still felt to be a discrepancy between the section title and the statements within.

3.11 When asked to explain what broad topic the individual statements were covering, most students felt they covered the content and structure of the course and the opportunities it has provided them with. These opportunities were generally geared towards broadening their knowledge, understanding, and approach to their work.

3.12 A few students considered that the question statements were asking how well they had engaged and reacted to the course content.

"[I think it means] how useful the course is and how well it broadens your mind and understanding."

Female, HEI

"It's stimulation and whether you have responded and how you have responded to a course."

Female, HEI

3.13 However, when asked to explain the term 'wider learning opportunities', around half veered away from this understanding and felt that it related to opportunities outside of the course, in 'everyday' situations, or in a working environment. A third of these students who felt it related to opportunities outside of the course were on musical and

creative courses – such as BA Music Production, BSc Media Production and Performance and Live Art – perhaps because they have more opportunity to put their theoretical learning into practice outside of lectures.

"I would consider anything wider, anything outside of our normal course, so wider learning would be tutorials, master-classes, gig opportunities."

Female, AP

3.14 A few students felt the title was too vague or were unable to explain what they thought it meant.

"I think it's a bit wishy-washy personally, a bit woolly…. indicates you are stretching yourself and pushing your learning into other areas, but it could mean a lot of things."

Female, HEI

Overlap with 'The teaching on my course' section of the survey

3.15 Correlation analysis of interim quantitative Pilot data reveals that responses to the question statements covered in 'The teaching on my course' and 'Wider learning opportunities' were highly correlated.[1]

3.16 While this may be true, the majority of students felt there was a clear enough distinction between the 'Wider learning opportunities' section and 'The teaching on my course' section. Indeed, the majority felt the statements in 'The teaching on my course' were about the how the course was taught and the quality of the lecturers whereas the 'Wider learning opportunities' statements were more focused on the course content.

3.17 That said, a few students did recognise that the two were linked, explaining that the opportunities provided on the course are in some ways dependent on how well it was delivered.

3.18 A handful felt that this link between the two themes was cause to merge the sections, although this was not deemed particularly crucial.

"They stand alone. They're a similar nature but they do get at different things."

Male, HEI

"They possibly could be stuck together, but the first section is more about the staff and how interesting they've made it, whereas the second section is more about the wider course."

Female, HEI

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[1] http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201627/

"They are connected. 'Wider learning opportunities' relies on the teaching and if it was quite good it would allow you to explore ideas, but if teaching wasn't good then how would you be able to do that?"

Female, FEC

Statement specifics

3.19 When probed, Phase 1 students considered that there might be some overlap between the three statements contained within this section. However, Phase 2 students were not probed on this particular area, and it is instructive that none spontaneously raised the issue of overlap.

3.20 Perceptions of similarity among Phase 1 students were twofold. Firstly, the identical wording that appears at the start of each statement 'My course has provided me with opportunities to…' is likely to invoke an air of repetition, even before the students have reached the unique part of each statement.

3.21 Secondly, overlap was also identified in statement endings, with students often considering the same experiences when asked about the depth (Statement 1) and breadth (Statement 2) of the course. Some also reported that they felt bringing information and ideas together from different topics (Statement 2) was a means of applying what they had learnt (Statement 3).

"I think the first and second questions could be combined into a single one…I would give the same answer for the first and second…you could just say that my course has provided me with the opportunities to explore ideas and apply what I have learnt… maybe Statement 1 and 2 or Statement 2 and 3 [overlap], but there is definitely one question which is extra here. But to apply what I have learnt is really important, so the third is the important question."

Male, HEI, S1 'Definitely agree, S2 'Definitely agree', S3 'Neither agree nor disagree'

"If you are bringing ideas from different topics together then you are obviously using them and that's applying what you learnt."

Male, FEC, S1 'Mostly agree', S2 'Definitely agree', S3 'Definitely agree'

3.22 Linked to this, some felt that the term 'apply what I have learnt' in Statement 3 was ambiguous. As with the term 'wider learning opportunities', students were unsure whether the statement was referring to opportunities within the course or outside of the course.

"[I struggled with this] because I am a psychology student - I thought, 'Have I either manipulated people in conversation or secretly analysed them?' But I don't think this is what it meant, I think possibly this means for example if you have learnt to write better then you apply that either in a working environment or other course, but it wasn't clear to me, I wasn't sure."

Male, HEI, 'Mostly disagree'

3.23 As a result of this finding, understanding around the term 'apply' was explored in more depth during Phase 2 interviews.

3.24 The ambiguity in the term was again evident, with most students adhering to one of two definitions: those who considered how they might apply what they had learnt to other areas of the course (e.g. assessments, work placements, or – commonly for scientists – laboratory work), and those who considered how they might use what they had learnt outside of university, in 'everyday' situations or in a working environment.

"Everything we have learnt has translated into an assignment."

Male, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

"From the early years, it's something that you build up. You would use the things you learned in the first year in the second year, and the things you learn in the second year you would use in the third year."

Female, HEI, 'Mostly agree'

"It's a law course and I run a small business and there's a certain legal element in that. It's made me understand the legal system better."

Female, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

"It's asking about using [the skills learned] in different situations… outside the course."

Female, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.25 A few students considered both definitions in their response.

"In terms of within the course, applying it within the scenarios that are given for the assignments but equally at work because I work with young people and children so it has been hugely relevant."

Female, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.26 A handful were unsure how they might apply what they had learnt. That said, these students were clearly looking to be able to provide examples of applying their knowledge outside of their course (the second definition above). For example, their course might have taught them work-related skills but they had not yet had the opportunity to 'put them to the test' or their course was not really directly applicable to employment outside of the course.

"You can't really apply Biology outside of your course."

Female, HEI, 'Mostly agree'

<div style="background:#8dc63f">Key Findings</div>

For some, the final statement 'My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt' conflicts with the section title, 'Wider learning opportunities'. Consequently, the statement wording and section title may need refining, depending on which interpretation of Statement 3 is preferable – i.e. opportunities within or outside of the course. Examples for consideration include:

- Statement 3: 'Apply what I have learnt across various areas of the course' or 'Apply what I have learnt outside of the course'

- Section title: 'Learning opportunities'

Students were generally content with being asked the questions in 'The teaching on my course' and those in 'Wider learning opportunities' in the two separate sections and so there does not appear to be a need to combine the two.

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Section C: Assessment and feedback

Question statements:

- **The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance (S1)**
- **Marking and assessment have been fair (S2)**
- **Feedback on my work has been timely (S3)**
- **I have received helpful comments on my work (S4)**

3.27 Students were on the whole comfortable with answering this section.

3.28 The first statement has not changed throughout the course of the recent development of the NSS questionnaire. Reflecting this consistency, no student raised any issues with this statement.

3.29 Earlier rounds of questionnaire development saw the second statement change terminology from 'assessment arrangements and marking' to 'marking and assessment'. Again, students appeared content with this wording, and understood it well.

3.30 There has been some debate around the term 'timely' which appears in the third statement. In this period of cognitive interviewing, only a handful of (all English-speaking) students spontaneously expressed some confusion over the term. Mostly this confusion was derived from 'timely' not being a common part of their lexicon, although only one student interpreted it to mean something other than the speed with which feedback is returned, instead perceiving it as whether the feedback had been helpful and worthwhile. While two students suggested alternative wording here ('promptly' and 'on time'), we would suggest no tweaks are required given the vast majority of students were happy with the wording.

3.31 The vast majority of students were also happy with the final statement. There was only some hesitation among a couple of students, one who would have preferred the term 'feedback' instead of 'comments', the other who felt that the quality of feedback had been so varied they were not able to provide a precise answer (in this instance they answered 'Mostly agree').

Key Findings

The question statements work well in their current format so there is no need for change.

Section D: Academic support

Question statements:

- **I have been able to contact staff when I needed to (S1)**
- **I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course (S2)**
- **Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices (S3)**

3.32 Each statement was probed individually in Phase 1 of the cognitive research. Alternative wording was proposed for Statement 1 while Statement 2 explored the use of the term 'sufficient advice'. Finally, probes on the third statement specifically referred to the term 'study choices'.

'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to' vs. 'Teaching staff have been responsive when I needed to contact them'

3.33 The vast majority of students felt there was a difference between these two statements. Students thought the original version was an assessment of their own initiative and ability to contact members of staff, whereas the alternative assessed the responsiveness of staff.

"[The original statement] is about being able to get hold of staff, [whereas the alternative] is more about them actually replying when you have contacted them."

Female, HEI, 'Neither agree nor disagree'

3.34 A minority of students preferred the first version, finding it easier to assess. Some also preferred the original statement due to the fact that they thought it included some degree of the staff responsiveness that is directly assessed by the alternative. On balance, however, most students preferred the alternative, commenting that it was fairly simple to establish how to get in contact with staff. This was particularly apparent for those who tended to contact staff by email, with relevant addresses easily accessible. The view that contacting staff was a comparatively straightforward process was reflected by the large proportion of students who gave definitely/mostly agree answers (over three quarters of students in Phase 1).

3.35 The majority of students thought it was more valuable to assess the responsiveness of staff as, for most, getting in contact with staff was usually in order to seek advice or help. In these cases, students felt it was important to establish whether their query was answered as opposed to their ability to find the appropriate person to contact on a university email system. For some, it was easier to answer the alternative as it required them to think of the particular outcomes of instances where they had made contact with staff (as opposed to giving a generalised view across cases where they had made contact with them).

"I can't see [knowing how to email someone] being an issue these days… The second statement is easier to answer, because it'll be easier to remember whether someone answered your email or not. [The alternative statement] is more important, because it reflects the reality of trying to seek help".

Male, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.36 A handful of students felt that the wording of the alternative statement would encourage more negative responses, as the use of the word 'responsive' implied that staff should normally answer queries quickly.

3.37 A number of students also commented upon the difference between the phrasing of 'staff' in the original statement and 'teaching staff' in the second. Students felt 'staff' to be a somewhat vague term, and were unsure whether to include both teaching and non-academic staff in this. Indeed, some students took the original statement to include all staff, resulting in 'not applicable' responses because they had not had contact with their university's non-academic services. Students commented that if the specific wording of 'teaching staff' from the alternative statement had been used in original version, they might have given different (and more positive) answers, as it was easier to remember instances where they had tried to contact academic staff.

'I have received <u>sufficient</u> advice and guidance in relation to my course' vs. '<u>good</u> advice' or '<u>helpful</u> advice'

3.38 The majority of students felt that there was a clear difference between the three adjectives before 'advice', although opinions varied over the extent of this difference.

3.39 Students generally agreed that the wording of 'sufficient' in the original statement implied that they had received enough advice, i.e. that it referred to a quantifiable amount of advice that would enable them to make a decision in relation to their course. These students consequently felt that this statement did not assess the impact of the advice received. Indeed, some commented that the use of 'sufficient' felt almost dismissive, that the advice received was the bare minimum and in a standardised/generic way.

3.40 In contrast, the difference between 'good' and 'helpful' was slightly harder for students to establish, although several commented that phrasing advice in terms of whether it was 'good' felt 'more human'. Students felt that the 'good' allowed them to describe the impact of the advice they received, beyond assessing whether they received enough of it. A notable proportion of students, however, felt that 'good advice' was a vague and subjective term, and could include advice which agreed with students' own points of view but which may not necessarily be helpful to them in the long run.

"I was thinking about the word 'sufficient' and it almost sounds like it means 'satisfactory' - it doesn't sound like it was necessarily good. I think a word like 'good' or 'helpful' is probably better ... probably I'd say 'helpful' is the best out of them all ... because it could be negative advice but it's still helpful whereas 'good' can be a difficult word which might not relate to every situation, whereas 'helpful' I think does."

Female, AP, 'Definitely agree'

3.41 Most students thought 'helpful' concerned the extent to which advice or guidance pointed them in the right direction. The majority of students would have preferred for the statement to be phrased in this way as, for some, assessing whether advice was 'helpful' was also an assessment of whether it had been 'good'.

3.42 While students felt that 'helpful' was the most appropriate phrasing for the statement, many thought that it would be the most difficult version of the question statement to provide an answer for. These students thought 'helpful' was as subjective a term as 'good', particularly as it is something which is judged in hindsight.

3.43 In summary therefore, students found it easier to quantify and think of examples to answer the original version, whereas 'helpful' was felt to be potentially harder to answer, but more relevant, assessing the impact of the advice on their course.

"The alternative statements are descriptive about the type of advice you've received, whereas I'd say [the original] is the best because 'sufficient' is what you class as the right amount. If you receive 'good' advice that indicates you could have done with a bit more, and 'helpful' means it helped you but to what extent? Whereas sufficient means you've had enough advice and for me that would be the type of advice I'd want."

Female, FEC, 'Definitely agree'

'Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices'

3.44 With this statement we were explicitly exploring students' understanding of the term 'study choices'.

3.45 Few struggled with the statement and most were initially confident in their understanding of the term 'study choices'. However, when probed, there were clearly differing interpretations of this term; around half did not consider the area of module choices, the intended meaning of the question. The interpretations ranged from deciding:

- Where to go to study;

- What course to study prior to starting in HE;

- How to study;

- How to carry out a particular assignment; and

- What to do after university.

"Yes [I understood the term], when you think about study choices, you think about from high school to university, you don't think about study choices within university. You make study choices within the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) to pick a course."

Female, HEI, 'Mostly agree'

"[I was thinking about] next steps after this stage of the degree and also exam prep, how we spent time that isn't timetabled time."

Male, FEC, 'Neither agree nor disagree'

3.46 Additionally, students from a particular HEI made specific mention of the fact that they associate the term 'study choices' with a programme run by the university that encourages them to study other courses outside of their particular degree subject.

Key Findings

The majority of students preferred the statement 'Teaching staff have been responsive when I needed to contact them' to the current statement wording 'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to'. With this in mind we recommend changing Statement 1 to reflect this preference.

Clarification is needed around whether the term 'staff' relates to just academic staff or broader university staff.

With regards to Statement 2, students felt 'sufficient' related to a quantifiable amount whereas 'good' and 'helpful' were more about the quality of the advice. Depending on user needs, this term could be considered for review.

The wording in Statement 3 should be reviewed to potentially incorporate the notion of module choices: many students did not consider these in their interpretation of the term 'study choices'.

Section E: Organisation and management

Question statements:

- **The course is well organised and running smoothly (S1)**
- **The timetable works efficiently for me (S2)**
- **Any changes in the course of teaching have been communicated effectively (S3)**

3.47 Students were content with these statements, with only a couple raising concerns, around the use of the term 'efficiently' in the second statement. Both students were slightly unclear as to the meaning behind the term and therefore answered 'Neither agree nor disagree'. Given the vast majority did not raise any concerns however, there is no real need to consider changing this.

3.48 Students in Phase 1 were asked about the general flow of the survey; while in general they were happy with the structure of the survey, around half of students suggested this could be moved further up the questionnaire, broadly for two key reasons:

- Some linked this closely with 'The teaching on my course' section and the importance they accorded to both aspects; and

- Some also commented that as the nature of the statements referred to more overarching university themes, which underpin students' experience of HE, it was a suitable place to start the survey and a good foundation for subsequent statements.

"Organisation and management: it is a rounded question on whether the course is organised and whether your timetable is practical. I didn't order it based on importance, I think they are all important but it is quite overarching and it is not really specific, like some of the other ones."

Female, HEI

3.49 While there was mild consensus that this section could be transferred elsewhere in the survey, these were not strongly held views; they only emerged when students were specifically probed on the order of the survey.

Key Findings

The question statements work well in their current format so there is no need for change.

Section F: Learning resources

Question statements:

- **The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well (S1)**
- **The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well (S2)**
- **I have been able to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to (S3)**

3.50 Each statement in this section was probed individually in Phase 2 of the cognitive research. Student understanding of the term 'subject specific' – used in Statement 3 – was also explored and compared with their understanding of 'course specific'.

General understanding of the statements

3.51 Students tended to base their answer to the first statement on the availability and suitability of computers on site or the availability of software and online services (that might be accessed remotely, or on site). There was slight confusion for those students, typically doing Science degrees, who tended to use their own IT equipment rather than university resources. Thus while they were aware these facilities provided support for others – and often gave their response in relation to this – they did not think it so relevant for themselves.

"Initially I didn't really understand the question. We have the resources possibly but we don't need them; it's not an IT or business course."

Female, HEI, 'Mostly disagree'

3.52 On the whole students grasped the second statement easily enough. In their answers they typically considered the quantity of books available in the library, access to journals, online services and opening times. The latest revision of this statement was different to that which has been asked of students before, as it included the term 'learning spaces'. In response to this, students considered the amount of space available for group work, individual work or for revision.

"I've only really used the learning spaces ... I've never taken a book out of the library, partly because I find it confusing and partly because in Maths they're all self-contained courses and lecturers provide notes, so I've never needed to go and get a book out. During exams I do all my revision in the library rather than at home."

Male, HEI, 'Mostly agree'

3.53 Students at one institution – who did not have a physical library – gave a wide variety of answers, ranging from 'Mostly agree' to 'Not applicable'. They referred to an online library, of which their experience was mixed. They also considered a physical library at a nearby institution to which they had access. None of the students we spoke to had been to this library, although some answered in reference to what they thought it was like or what they had heard from others.

3.54 When Phase 1 students were asked to consider whether any statements overlapped, a handful mentioned the first two statements in this section. Specifically, they considered library resources (Statement 1) and IT resources (Statement 2) as the same entity, this was either because they access all library materials online or because the two resources are situated in the same place.

3.55 This issue of overlap also emerged among a few Phase 2 students. Unlike Phase 1 students, they were specifically asked to explain the reason behind the answers they had given to these questions, and often cited the same examples when doing so. Although some considered computers and books in response to both statements, the issue of overlap is particularly clear among those who use online resources such as journals or research papers.

3.56 A few Phase 2 students again considered library and IT resources as one and the same. All of those who did so because they access all of their library materials online were distance learners. Similarly, nearly all of those from one particular FEC were among those who explained that the library and the computer facilities were housed in the same space.

"I thought about the library and the fact that there are computers everywhere. I also thought about the library learning centres where you have access to pretty much most European published papers, which is really great. Every time I've had a problem with anything IT-related I've managed to get help or get it fixed within a day."

Male, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

"I just consider IT resources to be part of the library resources and also it does say 'books, online services' within library resources."

Female, HEI, 'Mostly agree'

3.57 Given these points about overlap it might be sensible to consider the wording of these two questions further. For example, if the intention is for students to solely consider technological resources in response to Statement 1 – such as computers, laptops and software – (and online learning resources only in response to Statement 2) then perhaps these examples can be added to the statement text.

3.58 Students were generally comfortable answering the third statement. However, a very small minority were not sure how this differed to the previous statement as they automatically assumed this referred to resources available through the library.

"It would be any books relating to the historical time period really. Books relating to a particular topic or that enable you to complete a task relating to that subject."

Female, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.59 Over half of distance learners gave the same answer to all three statements in the section, which happened to be 'Definitely agree'. This is much higher than amongst other students. This degree of correlation between answers may be a feature of the fact that all their learning resources come from the same place which they access through the same device.

"They have an online library where you can search for articles, with those articles they actually help me with my assignments, you can actually find books, you can actually read online… my classes are all online."

Female (Distance Learner), HEI, 'Definitely agree'

Understanding of 'course specific' vs. 'subject specific'

3.60 A significant minority of students could not distinguish between the two terms 'subject' and 'course' or noticed that there was a difference but did not think that this would alter the way that they understood or answered the statement.

"Course is the main title, subject is the subtitle, but I would say they're the same thing."

Male, AP, 'Mostly agree'

3.61 Of those who did draw out a distinction, the majority felt that 'subject' was a more specific term, focussing on certain modules, while course was understood within a broader context of the entire degree. This indicates that some students are focussing on the accessibility of resources for recent modules, rather than their experience of the whole course.

3.62 It is worth noting however that for a minority, the reverse was true: they regarded their subject as a broader concept, e.g. Biology, with their course more specifically relating to their degree, e.g. Molecular Biology.

Key Findings

A few students struggled to disentangle IT resources from library resources. Consequently, these statements (S1 and S2) could benefit from further clarity.

If the intention is for students to consider the resources specific to their entire university course in Statement 3, we would recommend giving thought to replacing 'subject' specific resources with 'course' specific resources.

Section G: Learning community

> **Question statements:**
>
> - **I feel part of a community of staff and students (S1)**
> - **I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course (S2)**

3.63 Both phases of the cognitive research sought to explore students' understanding of these two statements, specifically around interpretations of 'a community of staff and students' and 'as part of my course'.

'I feel part of a community of staff and students'

3.64 Students did not have any problems understanding the first statement and the majority felt that the concept of 'a community of staff and students' was a relevant one to cover in the NSS. Nevertheless, the interpretation of the statement and particularly the meaning of 'community' varied from student to student.

3.65 At a headline level most students related this statement to the relationship between staff and students. The strength of this relationship was mixed and varied depending on the student and on their university experience. At one end of the scale, students merely referred to whether staff were available and contactable or if they would be acknowledged, by staff, in passing, for example. At the other end of the spectrum students called upon social events attended with staff, whether they were on first-name terms with staff and if they were trustworthy and could be relied upon for support.

"Staff and students in the Music Department are on first-name terms ... you can just go to staff and talk to them about anything … it's like a big family … I know that sounds a bit cheesy, but it's true, we're like a big family."

Male, HEI

"Being able to approach staff – having a member of staff you felt you could go to such as academic advisors or a lecturer you get on well with."

Male, HEI

3.66 A couple of students considered 'community' as a physical entity or place where students can come together. For example, they thought about coming together with other students on their course.

"[Discussing Human Health and Sciences Building] It's where most of our lecturers reside and students have a fair amount of their lectures in those buildings so I class it as a sort of community where they mill around."

Female, HEI

"Community comes down to having somewhere, a location – and that is an important part and we don't have that – there is nowhere I could go and be guaranteed to see 'x, y and z' from that community ... the staff. All their offices are dotted around a six-storey building."

Male, HEI

3.67 A few students were somewhat confused by the term 'community', viewing the staff community and the student community as two disparate concepts, or struggling to understand whether a community included one-to-one relationships or referred to a broader sense of the collective.

3.68 A number of students, both distance learners and those studying on site, did not think that this statement was a relevant concept to explore within the NSS. They thought that this statement assumed a high level of engagement between staff and students, such as social activities outside of lectures and teaching and they had not experienced this or they did not feel that this was appropriate.

3.69 Distance learners who did feel the statement was relevant often referenced online forums, group email addresses and social media as their 'community' as well as occasional face-to-face meetings with tutors and other students. Distance learners did not expect a high level of 'feeling part of a community' and therefore these channels were perceived to be adequate. Even those that were not engaged and did not feel this was relevant did not necessarily see this as a problem or expect more, it is simply that this part of the survey did not apply to them. For distance learners the onus is more on the individual student to be proactive and reach out to the available opportunities to interact with staff and other students if they need to.

"The balance has been struck just right, if you are younger then [the community of staff and students] it is more important, but as you get older you become more independent and need it less. But it's there as an offering if you want it."

Female, HEI

'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course'

3.70 On the whole students did not struggle in their comprehension of the second statement. Most students referred to a specific module, compulsory element of their course or a piece of work, which required working in a pair or a group.

3.71 Students were asked to consider their answer if the phrase 'as part of my course' was changed to 'on my course'. Around half felt that this did not change the meaning of the statement. Of those who thought there was a distinction between the two, a slight majority of students felt that the former statement implied that 'working with other students' was a structured and compulsory part of the course, whereas the latter suggested 'working with other students' in a more informal or social fashion. One

student even related this latter statement to '*going out for food together or going into town for a pint'*.

"'As part of my course' implies that [working with other students] was more official and planned, whereas 'on my course' suggests that it wasn't a possibility throughout, it just randomly happened."

Male, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.72 A number of students interpreted this phrasing slightly differently, taking 'as part of my course' to mean that they had the opportunity to work with students across disciplines, and 'on my course' to mean that they had the opportunity to only work with students studying the exact same course.

"Looking at my field in particular, I work with other students as part of my course as in I go out and work with them collaboratively ... but the second one reads like literally just students who are on my course. It doesn't read students across my field ... a smaller cohort of people."

Female, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.73 During Phase 2, when students were not probed on this statement, a few students spontaneously commented on the term 'right opportunities'. Those who thought it was a suitable term cited having equal opportunities to with work with other students and in the right medium, that is beneficial to learning, as well as being encouraged to work with others.

"['Right opportunities' means] the right time and it's relevant to what we're doing at the moment."

Female, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.74 Those who felt the term 'right opportunities' was not suitable, thought that it was too broad and could not anticipate there being 'wrong opportunities' to working with other students, therefore rendering its use unnecessary.

"I've had opportunities to work with them yes, but I don't know what 'right' means… what would 'wrong' be?"

Female, FEC, 'Definitely agree'

Key Findings

Regarding Statement 2, students tended to perceive 'as part of my course' as a formal, or planned opportunity for group work. In contrast, the alternative wording 'on my course' encouraged some to think more of informal or collaborative work with students from the same, or different, disciplines. There seems to be greater subjectivity in interpretation of the term 'on my course' however, therefore we would recommend retaining the use of 'as part of my course'.

Section H: Student voice

Question statements:

- **I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course (S1)**
- **Staff value students' views and opinions about the course (S2)**
- **It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on (S3)**
- **Students' academic interests on my course are effectively represented by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) (S4)**

3.75 Testing of this section focused specifically on Statements 1 and 4:

- Statement 1 – in Phase 1 the use of the term 'right' was explored and compared against two alternatives words 'good' and 'ample'. In Phase 2, students were asked to consider the extent to which the statement overlapped with the second statement in the 'Learning Community' section: 'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course'.

- Statement 4 – This statement had not been cognitively tested prior to the second phase of cognitive testing. Consequently, specific probes were developed and explored with students.

'I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course' – 'Right opportunities'

3.76 The majority related the idea of having the 'right opportunities', to having enough opportunities provided in the right format and at the right time. A few students also stated that feedback being anonymous was also important. End of module evaluations or feedback forms as well as face-to-face meetings with lecturers or student representatives were the most common examples given.

3.77 When students were offered the alternatives of 'good' and 'ample' to 'right' within the statement, there was a mixed response. Some students misunderstood the meaning of 'ample', equating it to various things: from having a limited/just enough opportunity to provide feedback, to the quality of these opportunities. Moreover, even those who understood the meaning of 'ample' commented that it may be a problematic term, especially for those for whom English is not their first language. Students found that the use of 'ample' implied that the statement was assessing the quantity of opportunities, not whether they were good or effective ones.

"I don't know what ample is … so I won't go for 'ample' because I don't understand that word. I think it is quite unusual to see that vocabulary for the attention of students."

Male, HEI, 'Definitely agree'

3.78 In contrast, a handful of students preferred the use of 'good', finding that it captured both the quality and the quantity of opportunities to provide feedback on their course. Indeed, a notable proportion of students answered the original statement without noticing the wording of 'right', instead giving their answers on the basis of whether they felt they had enough opportunities to provide feedback, and whether they were able to communicate it in an effective way. Students commented that the use of 'good' made the statement feel clearer and less weighted. For some the use of 'good' suggested that a variety of formal and informal opportunities could be considered when answering this statement, unlike the original wording, which implied there was a definitive right way to provide feedback.

3.79 Ultimately, however, a larger number of students found 'good' to be descriptive and subjective term; meaning students' views would be based on different criteria and that subsequent comparison would be unfair.

"The 'good' [option] is more descriptive and could be interpreted either way dependent on who you ask and what they think is 'good'."

Female, FEC, 'Definitely agree'

3.80 On balance, students preferred the wording of this statement using 'right'. Students felt that the use of 'right' was a subtle move away from simply having a large number of opportunities to provide feedback. It instead asked whether there were sufficient opportunities, and if these were offered in an appropriate way. Although a small number of students felt that 'right' was a politically loaded term, implying that students enter onto their course with the expectation that they would be given meaningful opportunities to provide feedback on their course, the majority of students felt that this original wording was the most effective way of assessing opportunities to feedback. Students felt that (unlike using 'good') the statement had a narrower focus, enabling them to give a clearer and more targeted answer.

"'Right' seems better… 'ample' seems like you've been provided with time in which you could give your feedback, but this doesn't say if this was the best way in which this could be done. 'Good' achieves some of this; it implies whether you were provided with the opportunities, and that the way you were provided with them was positive… [but] 'right' is the best, as it's about whether the opportunities were appropriate for the situation."

Male, HEI, 'Mostly agree'

'I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course' – Overlap

3.81 The second key area of exploration for this statement looked at perceived overlap between this first statement and the last statement from the previous 'Learning Community' section: 'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course'.

3.82 Although a number of students agreed that there could be some confusion because of the identical start of the two statements, the vast majority agreed that these two statements were capturing different experiences of a student's course. Further prompting and articulation of these experiences confirmed this to be the case.

"They don't overlap at all. They're completely different. The use of 'right opportunities' is about as close as it gets."

Male, AP, 'Definitely agree'

3.83 As such, any correlation of answers is likely to be a coincidental, true reflection of experiences, or potentially linked to the survey layout encouraging similar responses.

'Students' academic interests on my course are effectively represented by the Students' Union (Association or Guild)'

3.84 A lack of involvement with the students' union (SU) or a lack of knowledge around the role of the SU caused some uncertainty with the fourth statement. It was also the case that some institutions did not have an SU, particularly APs and FECs, therefore students were more likely to answer 'Not applicable' or 'Neither agree nor disagree'. Unsurprisingly, distance learners were also more likely to be unaware or have had no interaction with the SU.

3.85 The term 'students' academic interests' raised questions among some students. Firstly, there was uncertainty about what was actually meant by the term. Secondly, a small number of students did not feel the SU was responsible for student's educational interests instead referring to their role in providing sports clubs, social events and even financial and housing support. Rather, they would consider their lecturers, the entire university, the head of their particular school or themselves as those who are responsible for representing students' academic interests.

"It would go in a ladder. Your first port of call would be to speak to your lecturer. If your lecturer is not really giving you the feedback you wanted, you might involve the student union or go to the university itself – the heads of course if you're still getting nowhere. Then you would go to head of university or school and work your way up the ladder depending on how big the problem was and what you needed to discuss."

Male, FEC, 'Neither agree nor disagree'

3.86 This raises an issue with the statement in its current guise, as it includes two distinct concepts: whether students feel their academic interests are represented by the SU

and whether that representation is effective. For those disagreeing with this statement we would not be able to unpick whether this is because they do not think the SU represents their academic interests or that they were represented, just not in a particularly effective manner.

3.87 The uncertainty around this statement was reflected in the mixture of responses given: nearly half answered neutrally ('Neither agree nor disagree' or 'Not applicable'), with the remaining responses roughly split between positive ('Definitely' or 'Mostly' agree) and negative ('Definitely' or 'Mostly' disagree). This was a noticeably different pattern of responses when compared to other statements in this section, which were largely positive.

Key Findings

Evidence suggests that Statement 1 can remain unchanged, with students broadly happy with the term 'right opportunities' and content that any correlation with the statement 'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course' is merely coincidental.

Statement 3 appears to cause confusion for a variety of reasons: a lack of engagement with the SU, a complete lack of an SU, issues with the term 'academic interests' and a perception that safeguarding and promoting students' academic interests is not within the remit of the SU. Consequently, this question may not collect accurate or representative data and – in this context – could benefit from further consideration or removal from the survey.

Section I: Overall satisfaction

Question statement:

- **Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course**

3.88 Students were very comfortable responding to this statement, with no issues or concerns raised.

Key Findings

The question statement works well in the current format so there is no need for change.

4   Response patterns and answer strategies

4.1   The first cognitive phase looked at response patterns and answer strategies in the context of concerns over acquiescence bias and flat-lining.

4.2   This chapter outlines the key findings from this analysis. Specifically, the chapter focuses on student understanding and thoughts on the response scale and how students approached the question statements in terms of the experiences they drew on and the timeframes they considered.

Response patterns and behaviours

4.3   A student is said to yea-say when they give the same positive answer to all question statements in the survey. Recent analysis of the NSS data has shown that the issue of yea-saying (i.e. acquiescence bias) has become increasingly prevalent over time, particularly on the online survey where 6% of students were deemed as yea-saying in the 2015 NSS. The majority of students who do yea-say when responding to the NSS do so using the 'Definitely agree' option.

Acquiescence bias

4.4   Phase 1 students who exhibited potential signs of acquiescence bias – by giving the same positive response to around half or more of the statements – are represented in Table 4.1. For example, 23% gave a 'Definitely agree' response to between 13 and 16 of a possible 26 question statements. As shown, the over use of 'Definitely agree' was slightly more common than the use of 'Mostly agree'.

Table 4.1 Degrees of acquiescence bias

Number of same answers	Proportion using the same answer	
	Definitely agree	Mostly agree
Over 24 out of 26	0%	0%
Between 21 and 24 out of 26	3%	0%
Between 17 and 20 out of 26	11%	12%
Between 13 and 16 out of 26	23%	13%

4.5   It should be borne in mind that although measures were put in place at Phase 1 to ensure the survey experience was as close to real life as possible, the artificial environment under which students answered the survey – whereby they were observed and evaluated – likely discouraged flat-lining or acquiescence behaviours. Indeed, no students responded to the survey fully through 'yea-saying' during the cognitive testing phase by providing the same answer to all question statements, although 3% came close by saying 'Definitely agree' to between 21 and 24 responses.

4.6   Given the environment, students were also unlikely to admit to yea-saying behaviours when probed. Indeed, nearly all explained that they gave the answers at the frequency with which they did purely because it was how they felt and the vast majority were able to explain the rationale behind their answers. Nevertheless a few students did reconsider their answers when they were prompted to explain how they had arrived at them, for example when they were reflecting on what the terms 'Mostly agree' and 'Definitely agree' meant to them.

4.7   The remainder of the chapter focuses on student understanding of the response scale and their approach to the survey.

Understanding the scale: 'Mostly (dis)agree'

4.8   Students were asked whether they experienced any difficulties with the response scale. Although most were happy, around one half mentioned some difficulties or suggested some alternatives. A number of the points raised could tie in with reasons for response bias or flat-lining behaviours and are discussed in the following section.

4.9   The main difficulty with the response scale related to the term 'mostly' with around half of those providing feedback on the scale raising an issue related to this.

4.10   Nearly all of those who had difficulty with the term 'Mostly' struggled because they felt the jump from 'Neither agree nor disagree' to 'Mostly (dis)agree' was too big, with a few indicating that they would land on 'Neither agree nor disagree' as a compromise. This group tended to see 'Mostly' as around 80% agreement or disagreement and 'Neither agree nor disagree' as 50% agreement or disagreement. A handful – in a similar vein – felt that the 'Definitely' and 'Mostly' options were too similar or that the term 'Mostly' was ambiguous.

"Mostly agree' is quite ambiguous, for each person the scale could mean something different."

Female, HEI

"It is quite a big jump to go from 'Definitely agree' to 'Mostly agree' … maybe there should just be an 'Agree' because it's not necessarily true that you neither agree nor disagree."

Female, AP

4.11   A handful felt it would be better to substitute 'Neither agree nor disagree' with 'Agree sometimes' or 'Disagree sometimes' and a few suggested that either removing the 'Mostly' before '(dis)agree' or adding an 'Agree' and 'Disagree' option would overcome the problem.

4.12   There has long been a debate within the research industry about the relative merits of a seven-point scale. On balance it was felt that, for the NSS, a five-point scale would be preferable and less unwieldy for the user. In fact, one student who suggested the

addition of the '(dis)agree' options explained that it could become a slightly more complicated scale if expanded in this way.

"If there was a 'some of the time but not all of the time' option I would have used 'neither/nor' less."

Female, FEC

4.13 An issue with the term 'definitely' also began to emerge with a few who struggled with the term explaining that they saw 'definitely' as indicative of 100% agreement or disagreement. Those who did make frequent use of the term also often described it as 100% agreement or disagreement. Linked to this, a handful mentioned that they felt more familiar and comfortable with the term 'strongly'. Indeed, 'strongly agree' does not imply 100% agreement and may encourage students to use the outlying ends of the scale more often.

Understanding the scale: 'Neither agree nor disagree' and 'Not applicable'

4.14 Students tended to have a good grasp of the terms 'Neither agree nor disagree' and 'Not applicable' and were able to draw out the distinction between the two. The former was described by most as a neutral perspective on an issue that a person has at least some experience of and 'Not applicable' was described as a response a person would give if they had no experience of an issue at all.

"I used 'Neither agree nor disagree' because I've had both good and bad experiences. If I'd had neither I would have put 'Not applicable'."

Male, FEC

4.15 Having said this, there was a handful who felt that the 'Neither agree nor disagree' option and the 'Not applicable' option were similar. For example, one student explained that they had used the two interchangeably after they had forgotten that the 'Not applicable' option was available. Linked to this, a few others explained that they did not notice or read the 'Not applicable' option properly.

"['Neither agree nor disagree' means] you're not sure if you like it or you don't like it. I feel this and 'Not applicable' are very similar terms."

Male, FEC

4.16 There was also some variation in comprehension of the term 'Neither agree nor disagree', with three key definitions emerging:

1. **An assured '50/50' view**

   Most understood the term as intended, seeing it as a means of expressing an assured '50/50' view whereby they have had both positive and negative experiences but are confident that they agreed or disagreed in equal proportions as a result of these conflicting experiences.

"[I chose 'Neither agree nor disagree' because] some tutors do things well whereas other not so much so I chose the middle option."

Male, FEC

2. A 'Don't know' response

A few – all of whom rarely or never used the 'Neither agree nor disagree' option – said that 'Neither agree nor disagree' was similar to 'Don't know'. Most of these explained they would use the term if they had had both positive and negative experiences and therefore did not know whether they agreed or disagreed. This relates back to the point – raised by a few – that the scale would benefit from an option that better encapsulates '(Dis)agree sometimes'.

A few others felt a 'Neither agree nor disagree' response would be useful for statements for which they had a neutral opinion because they did not have enough experience to comment – which could also be construed as 'Don't know' – or because they did not feel strongly either way.

Although a handful felt a 'Don't know' option would have been a useful addition to the scale, others felt it was too similar to the 'Neither agree nor disagree' and the 'Bot applicable' option.

"[I take 'Neither agree nor disagree' to mean having a] neutral stance – there is room for improvement. It's a bit like 'Don't know'."

Male, HEI

"I've not had many experiences to be able to say whether I agree or disagree but it still feels relevant."

Male, HEI

3. A negative rating

A handful felt that 'Neither agree nor disagree' held more negative than neutral connotations. One or two explained this was because it shows they did not agree strongly enough to choose one of the overtly 'Agree' options and another explained that it was simply because it was further down the scale than the two 'Agree' options.

4.17 Looking specifically at 'Not applicable', nearly all understood the term to mean that the statement was not relevant to the experience that they had had on their course. However, a handful found the term unfamiliar or confusing. Others explained that they would:

- Use it if they refused to respond to a statement;

- Use it if they felt the other options on the scale did not allow them to accurately reflect their view;

- Not use it because they forgot it was there; or

- Not use it because they wanted to give a 'proper' answer.

4.18 It seems therefore, that although students were able to explain what the terms 'Neither agree nor disagree' and 'Not applicable' meant, in practice, they can sometimes be used in a variety of ways. They can also be used interchangeably with each other and a 'Don't know' response.

Alternative response scales

4.19 A few students compared the scale to others that they were familiar with[2]. For example, as already noted, a handful felt that 'Strongly' is more common than 'Definitely'. Another handful mentioned that starting with the negative option felt more familiar and logical. This could also mitigate the risk – pointed out by one student – of encouraging positive responses by presenting them first.

4.20 A few also suggested making use of a numerical scale. This would assist students in recalling the response options and perhaps overcome the terminology issues previously discussed. However, this was not seen as an option to take forward because it does not necessarily overcome the issue of recall. For example, students could as easily forget which end of the scale is positive and which end is negative. Students could also still struggle to decide which number would accurately reflect their view the best.

"I would prefer a 1-10 scale because it's not so much of a jump from Mostly disagree to Definitely disagree."

Male, FEC

"I forgot the scale. A numerical scale would give you more to go on as it's easier and more choice."

Female, FEC

4.21 One student who had completed the survey on the original grid format, pointed out that the statement is positioned closest to the positive end of the scale. This student felt that she was therefore being encouraged to make use of these responses. Linked to this is the idea that positive responses are perhaps given more freely than negative responses as – if starting from a positive as opposed to neutral perspective, as most students explained they were – then moving from positive to negative would need to be a result of more negative examples or stronger feelings than those needed to reinforce a positive response. Indeed, one student claimed that they felt 'Definitely disagree' was stronger than 'Definitely agree' and another explained that they felt they should not be

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[2] For more information on the impact of the scale on responses with regards to the NSS, see HEFCE's 'UK review of information about higher education: National Student Survey – A literature review of response bias', available here:
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Learning,and,teaching/ra/2015_nsslitrev1.pdf

too pessimistic about their course. This was borne in mind in reviewing the design of the online format with steps taken – where possible – to ensure that the question statements were equidistant from each other and the response options.

"I would wonder whether putting the Definitely and Mostly agree at the start, the survey wants you to click the positive answer. You'd wonder whether they want you to just click on the easy button that 'I definitely agree to this.' It's as if the layout is trying to control your response."

Female, FEC

Key Findings

Phase 1 testing revealed that a few students struggled with the current response scale. This was mainly due to confusion over the terminology. Evidence suggests that these issues could potentially impact response patterns and behaviours. Linked to this, a very small handful of students mentioned that the order of the scale – starting from positive to negative – could encourage acquiescence bias.

Consequently, three alternative scales were tested in the quantitative Pilot survey:

- **Scale 1 – The original scale:** 'Definitely agree', 'Mostly agree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Mostly disagree', 'Definitely disagree', 'Not applicable'.

- **Scale 2 – The reverse scale:** 'Definitely disagree', 'Mostly disagree', 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Mostly agree', 'Definitely agree', 'Not applicable'.

- **Scale 3 – The alternative scale:** 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Sometimes agree sometimes disagree', 'Disagree', 'Strongly disagree', 'Not applicable'.

The quantitative pilot survey confirmed however that the 'original scale' was the most appropriate for the NSS, with little evidence of acquiescence bias.

Experiences and timeframes considered

Drawing on personal vs. others' experiences

4.22 This section focuses on the extent to which students drew on their personal experiences and/or the experiences of others[3]. This ties in with the discussion in the previous chapter around a few students sometimes drawing on the experiences of others if they had not directly experienced something themselves or if the statement

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[3] More information regarding students' response to 'individualist' and 'collectivist' questions, see HEFCE's 'UK review of information about higher education: National Student Survey – A literature review of survey form and effects', available here: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Learning,and,teaching/ra/2015_nsslitrev2.pdf

wording was broad or collectively phrased and therefore invited them to think about the experiences of others.

4.23 The vast majority of students explained that they had drawn solely on their own experiences when providing their answer during the survey. Most did this because they felt the question statements were directed at them and that the survey was specifically seeking feedback on their personal experience. A few naturally answered about their own experience but could not explain why; a few explained that they would not know the views of their friends and peers, and a handful felt it was important that they expressed their own opinions. Indeed, a handful of students explained that their answers may have been different had they factored in the views of others.

"It's just the way I did it."

Female, HEI

"It's my experience that matters."

Male, FEC

"Had I been asked to think about others, my answers may have differed."

Female, HEI

4.24 The few that did base their answers on the experiences of others only did so in response to certain statements or sections. In particular, experiences of others tended to be factored in for the 'Assessment and feedback' section and to a lesser extent the 'Learning community' section. The former is perhaps a result of students naturally comparing themselves to other students and the latter is perhaps because the section is talking about interaction with other students.

4.25 Those that did draw on the experiences of others explained that they did so when they had no personal experience of the issue, when they felt the statement was more relevant to others or when the opinions of others just naturally occurred to them. A handful explained that experiences of others only influenced their answer when they shared a common view. This perhaps helped these students to be more confident or definite in their response.

"You might think, 'Oh yeah, I've heard that before so it must be true."

Female, HEI

"If I'd had a good experience and someone else hadn't then I'd include their opinion so that something would be done about it."

Male, FEC

4.26 A few students took a different approach to those just outlined. A handful explained that they responded to the statements by comparing themselves to others – for example one student thought about how challenged he felt compared to friends on other courses – and a handful were influenced by the statement wording itself; the use

of the first person narrative invited them to think solely about their own experiences whereas the statements that did not include this first person narrative encouraged them to think about the experiences of the student body as a whole.

"Where statements used 'my' or 'I' then I drew on personal experience but for broader statements I also considered statements of friends and peers."

Male, AP

4.27 There is nothing particularly unique – in terms of student type – about those who did factor the experience of friends and peers into their answers. However, a few part-time students and one distance learner were among those who factored in the experiences of others when they had no direct experience themselves.

4.28 Whether a student factors in the views of others into their answers or not clearly has the potential to impact on the response they give. In light of this, it was suggested that the funding bodies could consider rewording the statements to be more explicit about the experiences and views that they would like students to take into consideration when giving their answer. For example, this could be done by examining the use of the term 'students' versus terms such as 'I' or 'my'.

4.29 However, it was also highlighted that the existence of different approaches to answering the survey – and the affect this has on students' answers – is not necessarily problematic but instead purely reflective of the way in which different students think and form opinions about their course or HEP. Therefore, stipulating that students must solely think about their own experiences or factor in the experiences of the student body as a whole might not actually result in findings that are truly reflective of their views.

Timeframe considered

4.30 The majority of students considered their time on the course as a whole – from their first year to the point at which they were answering the survey. For example, if a student had had a particularly positive experience in their first year but a negative experience in their final year, they would consider both when providing their answer. Those who outlined why they did this tended to explain that it was important for building an accurate picture.

4.31 A few focused on a particular year or timeframe when responding to the statements. Reasons for this varied, each mentioned by a few students:

- Recent examples seen as the most important or fairest points to consider as they are the most 'current';

- Second or final year seen as key to the degree and therefore more important to feedback on;

- The timeframe chosen was a time during which students had more experience of the relevant issues or particularly strong feelings pertaining to said issues; and

- There was a particular event or example that students could recall or had stuck in their mind.

"Maybe they improve and if we judge them for the previous years then it's not fair."

Female, HEI

"I think going too far back in time isn't relevant to what is going on now."

Female, HEI

"I based a lot of the answers on this year because it has been very negative."

Female, HEI

4.32 These students may have more varied responses because they will have answered certain question statements whilst thinking about examples they feel the most strongly about and therefore likely used the furthest end of the scale.

4.33 The tendency to adopt either of these strategies does not appear to be driven by a particular type of student or course

5 .Interface options

5.1   Online survey theory has highlighted the importance of techniques which enhance engagement in survey questionnaires, and thereby improve quality of response. In this context, a key objective of the research was to review the online platform and to test a selection of alternative designs. Although the design is simple and intuitive it was felt more could be done to make it more engaging and thereby encourage considered responses. Given the rise in smartphone usage, attention was also paid to the extent to which the design was mobile compatible.

5.2   This chapter outlines:

- The three stages of interface testing;

- Overall feedback on the telephone and online formats, collected in Phase 1; and

- Specific feedback on each interface from both Phase 1 and Phase 2.

Interface testing – Methodology

Phase 1

5.3   During Phase 1 interviews, students were asked for feedback on the telephone survey and on five different online interfaces in total, the original format and four possible alternatives.

5.4   Students were asked to complete the whole survey, either using the original NSS format – Interface 1 – or 'over the phone', whereby they were taken through a spoken version of the questionnaire. Students were then shown the first part of the survey on all of the online formats and asked for their feedback on each.

Quantitative Pilot survey

5.5   After Phase 1 testing, four of the five interfaces were tested through the quantitative Pilot.

5.6   The quantitative Pilot tested the online interfaces by looking at if/how they impacted on response patterns, drop-out rates and the time taken to complete the survey.

Phase 2

5.7   Three interfaces were taken forward to Phase 2 cognitive testing, two for the desktop/tablet – Interface 3 Next Click and Interface 5 – and one for a smartphone – Interface 3 Automated. These interfaces were selected both because students had been receptive towards them during Phase 1 cognitive testing and because the Pilot

survey had revealed lower dropout rates and reduced acquiescence bias across these interfaces[4].

5.8   Students were shown each interface in turn and asked to run through the first few statements as though they were attempting the survey proper. To ensure interfaces were treated fairly, we rotated the order that students went through each interface.

Views on the telephone format – Phase 1

5.9   While few students experienced difficulties with the telephone format, when probed they identified certain downsides. These views can be grouped into three broad themes:

Theme 1: Quality of response

5.10 A few students had difficulties recalling some of the longer statements or response options, and asked for these to be repeated. In these cases, the quality of student's response was potentially impacted, because they were focusing on recalling the statement instead of their response.

"It's always going to be an issue on the phone that you're going to forget what you've been asked."

Male, FEC

"A couple of times when I needed it repeated … it was a case of still processing the last question and not seeing it written down."

Female, AP

5.11 Having said this, it is worth noting that students felt comfortable seeking clarification or asking for statements to be repeated.

5.12 A few students also mentioned that a telephone interviewer could incorrectly record responses or that statements could be misinterpreted, and that this was less of a risk with an online survey format.

5.13 Another downside expressed by a significant minority of students was not being able to see the statements written down. Students felt that this interfered with their ability to recall and understand the question statements, and to reassess answers – which they would have liked to be able to do.

"It would be a lot better online because you'd be able to see the options every time yourself and digest the question. Sometimes as well you can listen to how someone says the question and misinterpret it."

Female, FEC

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[4] Pilot survey findings are available here: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201627/

Theme 2: Time

5.14 Overall, students felt that the telephone survey took longer than completing the online survey, and would be reluctant to complete a survey via telephone if it was much longer than 10 minutes.

"If I were to do it, I'd definitely do it online because with a telephone it would seem to take a really long time and be a bit harder…"

Male, FEC

5.15 Conversely, students mentioned feeling rushed or pressured to respond quickly in the presence of another person – albeit 'over the phone' – giving them less of a chance to fully consider their responses.

"…there were times when I sort of felt like I needed to think really quickly, and maybe say how many questions there are so you can anticipate how much you need to think about and let it process ... just a little thing at the beginning."

Female, AP

5.16 It was also felt that the telephone survey would be less convenient than the online survey, which could be completed in a student's own time, and at their own pace.

Theme 3: Comfort and familiarity

5.17 A significant minority of students expressed that they generally felt uncomfortable speaking to people on the phone – this was the case for students across a variety of different course types (i.e. courses with a strong relationship-forming and social-skill element and those where these skills are perhaps less emphasised).

5.18 Students who had completed the survey via telephone did not always feel that their responses were anonymous, but said that it felt too much like 'telling somebody' their answers. On the other hand, most students who had done the online survey felt that their responses would be kept anonymous and confidential.

5.19 Finally, a handful of students highlighted that a telephone survey gave them the sense that they were being 'cold-called' and that this would reduce their likelihood of completing the survey via telephone.

Overall views on the online format – Phase 1

5.20 Most students said they would prefer to complete the NSS online rather than via telephone – this was largely linked to the downsides associated with a telephone interview (perceived longer length, discomfort speaking on the phone, a sense that online surveys are 'safer' in terms of anonymity and confidentiality).

5.21 Almost all students were familiar with completing surveys online and their familiarity with completing surveys online meant that they did so quickly and easily. The sense of convenience associated with online surveys, also meant students felt comfortable with

online surveys – this was regardless of course or education provider type (e.g. students studying Music or Song-writing were as likely as Computer Science students to feel comfortable completing surveys online).

5.22 However, it is also worth noting that a few students mentioned possible downsides of an online format, such as not being able to seek clarification, and wanting to have comment boxes or the option to elaborate on their responses.

5.23 A handful also mentioned that the introductory text at the start of the survey was too long or not welcoming enough, due to the amount of text and also the colours used on the intro screen (mostly grey, black and white) which were thought to be quite dull. One student mentioned that the language used in the introduction was quite formal and academic, which was off-putting.

5.24 Across all the online interfaces there were some common areas of agreement among students – such as views on how the online NSS should work and what it should look like. These are outlined below and were taken into consideration when developing selected interfaces for the quantitative Pilot and should be borne in mind for any future development work.

Use of colour

5.25 Most students agreed that it was important for the NSS to be visually appealing and engaging by using a mixture of colours, and to avoid any colours that might be considered too bold, or 'gaudy', or to have negative connotations i.e. red being seen as aggressive. 'Calm' or 'soothing' colours such as blue or green were favoured.

5.26 A few students felt the colours to be dull or bland, particularly the use of grey. A handful of students suggested that it might be difficult for students with learning difficulties such as dyslexia, to clearly read green text on a white background, or vice versa.

Laptop/desktop vs. mobile device

5.27 Overall it was considered easier to complete the survey on a laptop or desktop than on a mobile device due to the size of the screen, which meant the text could be seen clearly, without having to zoom in. As will be discussed, certain interfaces simply did not lend themselves to a smaller screen, but others could be – and were – adapted for this specific purpose.

Scrolling

5.28 Most students disliked having to scroll down the screen when using a laptop. Students found it confusing and often did not immediately grasp that they needed to scroll to get to the next statement. Scrolling also made the survey seem longer than it is and students found it distracting because it required more effort than selecting the 'Next' button. In contrast, scrolling on a mobile device was not considered an issue for the majority of students – it was deemed a familiar or 'natural' way of using mobile devices.

"Almost straightaway … it seems like it's more time consuming."

Male, HEI

"I don't really like scrolling ... it's much nicer when all the information is on one page in front of you, it seems like more work than it actually is."

Male, HEI

"On your phone you can scroll it up or down very quickly just using your finger..."

Male, HEI

Progress bar

5.29 Around half of students commented that a progress bar would be useful to help indicate the survey length to students when going through. This might also help discourage students from skipping statements or rushing through the survey, because they will be informed about the survey length as they go through it.

"…without seeing everything you don't know how long the survey will take (so having a progress bar at the bottom is a good idea); I don't like feeling like I'm stuck in something with no ending."

Male, HEI

Familiarity vs. innovation

5.30 Overall, students preferred using an online format that they were already familiar with, either from doing previous surveys or because of standardised elements such as clicking to select. Familiarity was also associated with speed – being able to quickly grasp how the survey worked and complete it – which was seen as a positive feature by most students.

Differentiation between response options

5.31 As mentioned earlier in the report, students sometimes found it difficult when using the online interfaces to differentiate clearly between the response options 'Neither agree nor disagree' and 'Not applicable'. This occasionally led to inconsistent or inaccurate use of these response options.

Instructions

5.32 Reading instructions was considered to be a burden, and most students did not read the instructions for each interface tested, even where they felt that they should. This highlighted a need for the interfaces to be as intuitive as possible, without the need for further explanation.

Views on Interface 1 (I1)

A screen-shot of I1 is shown in Figure 5.1. Users are presented with a section of statements in a grid format. They give their answer by selecting the relevant radio button and – once all statements are answered – click 'Next' to continue to the next section. This functionality bears parallels with that used in the existing NSS, which is also laid out in a grid format.

Figure 5.1 Interface 1

5.33

e was tested in Phase 1 cognitive interviewing, and in the quantitative Pilot survey.

Aesthetics and usability

5.34 Overwhelmingly, students found I1 professional, clear, simple and easy to use and often described it as 'self-explanatory', 'intuitive' and 'familiar'.

"Quite a clear and easy option… I like it … the colour makes it quite easy to read."

Male, HEI

"Once you see the format and what you're supposed to do it's a piece of cake … it's a common layout."

Male, FEC

5.35 Students also liked seeing the statements grouped together by section as it allowed them to reassess and compare their responses if desired.

"I didn't dislike anything really - I like that there were only three or four questions in each block because a wall of text can be deterring."

Male, FEC

"I liked the layout, there weren't too many questions all in bulk, they were segregated off nicely, they weren't all on one page in sections. They showed you three or four at one given time until you pressed 'Next'."

Female, FEC

Impact on response

5.36 Key to I1 is the ability to see all of the statements for a given section on screen in one go. Overall, students felt that this would encourage them to review and consider their answers before going on to the next set of statements. Students were also positive about the fact that the 'grid' layout would allow them to easily compare answers to different question statements within a section, which would help them to give measured and accurate responses.

5.37 Although this was seen as conducive to accurate and considered responses it could also – particularly coupled with the grid format – have some drawbacks in this regard. Both the positives and potential drawbacks are outlined in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1 : Positives and potential drawbacks of the grid and seeing all question statements on screen

Feature	Positive	Potential drawback
Students are able to see how many statements there are in the section straightaway giving them an indication of how much will be required of them.	Students are not left feeling as though the survey is 'never-ending'. This perhaps mitigates students becoming bored and spending less time considering their answers with a view to getting to the end as quickly as possible.	The grid format – although welcomed as straightforward, familiar and user-friendly – is perhaps less engaging. Indeed, a handful candidly mentioned the risk of students becoming bored and clicking down the column just to get to the end quickly. One student raised the point that the 'Definitely agree' option was most susceptible to this as it was closest to the statement and required less effort to tick as a result. *"With surveys you don't really want to spend lots of time or put too much thought into them … you're just ticking as fast as you can … you just don't want to be there."* **Male, FEC**
Students can easily see the question statements are related to an overarching topic.	This prepares students for the section and helps them to keep the overarching topic in mind.	A handful felt that gut reaction is more accurate. Indeed, others reflected that there was a risk that they would start to go back and change their answers if they felt they were not varied enough or they had been too positive or negative at an overall level. A few students also mentioned that they would not necessarily keep referring back to the scale at the top of the grid and would therefore start to base their answers on the point at which they had placed their answer to the previous statement.
Students are able to compare the answers they gave to similar issues and topics. They can do this as they are going through the section or once they have completed the section before they move on.	This encourages students to think about the answers they have given and – once given – consider whether they accurately reflect their view about the overall topic. Students can also feel happy that they have reviewed their answers and 'left them behind', encouraging an undivided focus in the next section.	

Use on a mobile device

5.38 Traditionally, grid formats do not work well on a small screen. As expected, students were unable to see the entire grid on one page and disliked having to zoom in/out as a result.

"A bit of a pain, maybe not as easy as on a computer".

Female, HEI

"You're trying to cram too much information onto a small screen."

Male, FEC

Key Findings
While students were content with I1, it is this type of layout that has prompted concerns around acquiescence bias in previous NSS iterations. Additionally, such a format is relatively unwieldy for a mobile device. While it was used in the quantitative Pilot survey, based on results across all interfaces, and the desire to test alternative interfaces, it was not selected for further testing in Phase 2.

A screen-shot of I2 is shown in Figure 5.2. Users click on their relevant 'bar' to provide a response and scroll down to the next statement.

Figure 5.2 Interface 2

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your <u>current view of your course as a whole</u>.

Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

Staff have made the subject interesting

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

5.39 This interface was tested in Phase 1 cognitive interviewing, and in the quantitative Pilot survey.

Aesthetics and usability

5.40 A majority of students had a relatively negative view of I2 when viewed on a laptop.

"I don't like this; it makes me unhappy… it seems like one of those online quizzes that gives your computer viruses."

Female, HEI

"I don't really like it. It's difficult to make your choice … you have to scroll down and select."

Male, HEI

5.41 Students did not immediately grasp the need to scroll down. Once they did, they felt it made the survey feel lengthy and onerous.

"There was not much indication there were questions below, I tried to click next straight away."

Male, FEC

"Almost straightaway… it seems like it's more time consuming."

Male, HEI

Impact on response

5.42 Students suggested that the need to scroll might encourage rushed or inaccurate responses because the perceived effort would cause them to become disengaged, or because they might accidentally miss a statement completely. Students also felt that they might give up partway after feeling frustrated with the length and 'wordiness' of the survey[5].

Use on a mobile device

5.43 Perceptions of I2 when tested on a mobile device were reversed: most felt the scrolling functionality was a natural technique on a phone and were thus content with I2 on such a device.

"It looks good and it's easy to do."

Female, HEI

"Easy enough to scroll with your thumb on a mobile."

Male, FEC

Key Findings

Students found the need to scroll down the page on a desktop or laptop onerous, although those using a mobile device did not regard this as an issue.
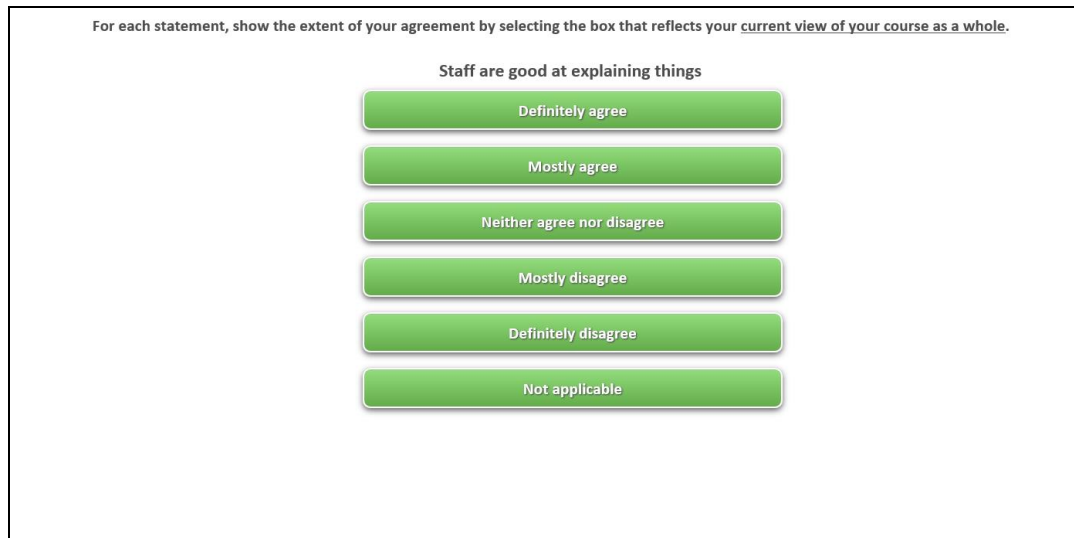
While I2 was taken forward to the quantitative Pilot survey for testing solely on mobile devices, analysis on acquiescence bias and drop-out rates, combined with findings from Phase 1 interviewing meant it was not deemed suitable to test further, in Phase 2 cognitive interviewing.

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[5] For more information regarding the advantages and disadvantages to 'scrolling' and 'paging', see HEFCE's 'UK review of information about higher education: National Student Survey – A literature review of survey form and effects', available here:
http://www.hefce.ac.uk/media/HEFCE,2014/Content/Learning,and,teaching/ra/2015_nsslitrev2.pdf

Views on Interface 3 Automated (I3: Automated)

A screen-shot of I3: Automated is shown in Figure 5.3. Users select response options by clicking on the relevant 'bar'. The interface automatically moves on to a new page displaying the next statement. A 'Previous' button appears after the first statement to allow users to review their answers if desired.

Figure 5.3 Interface 3: Automated

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your <u>current view of your course as a whole</u>.

Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

5.44   This interface was tested during all stages of the research, Phase 1 cognitive interviews, the quantitative Pilot survey, and Phase 2 cognitive interviews.

Aesthetics and usability

5.45   Student's feedback on I3: Automated often focused on the lack of the need to scroll, for which I2 was so frequently criticised. In this context, a few students welcomed the fact that I3: Automated would only display one statement on the screen at a time and – along with others – described it as clear and easy to use. Having said this, a few felt this 'one statement per screen' format made the interface quite cumbersome and time-consuming. Further to this – although the number of clicks required is the same as the other interfaces – there was a perception for some that the need to keep clicking was 'never-ending'.

Impact on response

5.46   Opinion was split in terms of the effect the 'one statement per screen' format had on the way they would approach and respond to the survey. A few felt it was positive as it allowed them to clearly differentiate between each statement and give each one their undivided attention. Conversely, a few felt that this made it harder to review and compare responses, a feature they had often welcomed in I1. A handful also mentioned that it might encourage students to simply click through quickly without

giving much thought to their answer, due to boredom, a sense of repetitiveness, or frustration at the length of the survey.

5.47 The automatic function also received mixed feedback. Students either liked it because they felt it made the survey quick and easy – and would therefore encourage them to complete – or disliked it because they felt rushed or were concerned about making mistakes. For example, a few mentioned they had not realised the statements had moved on and may have accidentally given an incorrect answer as a result. This therefore suggested a modification to the interface might be required, whereby students have to click 'Next' before proceeding to the next screen.

"[I] might answer a question I didn't even read."

Female, FEC

"I missed an answer because I didn't realise, it flicked so quickly to the next one, I didn't realise it had changed."

Female, HEI

Use on a mobile device

5.48 I3: Automated tested well on a mobile device. Students often stated that it was quick and easy and the most suited to a small screen. The monotony associated with automatically moving from one statement to the next came through less strongly. Having said this, a few others – who did not welcome having one statement at a time – had a slight preference for I2 and a handful reiterated concerns around not being about to review responses as easily and not realising the question statement had changed.

Key Findings

I3: Automated was generally well received, although the automatic function for proceeding directly to the next screen caused some confusion, particularly among those answering on a desktop or laptop.

As a result, I3: Automated was taken forwards for further testing in the quantitative Pilot survey and Phase 2 cognitive interviews, but only among students using a mobile device. Meanwhile a new version of the interface was developed, solely for those using a laptop or desktop, which included a 'Next' button that respondents had to click before proceeding to the next screen: this was tested in both the Pilot survey and Phase 2 cognitive interviews, the findings of which we report in the next section.

Views on Interface 3: Next Click (I3: Next Click)

A screen-shot of I3: Next Click is shown in Figure 5.4. Users again select their responses by clicking on the relevant 'bar' but then select 'Next' to move to the next statement or 'Previous' to review their last answer.

Figure 5.4 Interface 3: Next Click

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement by selecting the box that reflects your <u>current view of your course as a whole</u>.

Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree

Mostly agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Mostly disagree

Definitely disagree

Not applicable

Previous   Next

5.49 This interface was developed following Phase 1 cognitive testing on I3: Automated and tested in both the quantitative Pilot survey and during Phase 2 cognitive testing. It was only tested on students using a desktop or laptop.

Aesthetics and usability

5.50 The majority of Phase 2 students drew out something positive regarding the aesthetic and usability. Typically, students felt that I3: Next Click was familiar, intuitive and user-friendly because it was simple and quick. A few students commented that the bars were easy to use and were more accurate than the grid and radio buttons they recalled using for the main NSS.

"Nice, easy, simple, easy to recognise."

Male, AP

"This is easier to use than the grid where you might struggle to line up the row of radio buttons with the correct statement."

Female, FEC

5.51 A few felt the interface was quite onerous and would take a long time to complete. Some students perceived there to be an excessive need to keep clicking to reach the

end of the survey because of the 'one statement per page' format. This was exacerbated by the additional requirement to click 'Next'.

5.52 A handful also mentioned that the statement text needed to be more pronounced or risked getting lost on the screen, due to the size of the bars below.

Impact on response

5.53 Phase 2 students were divided on the use of the 'Next' button, mirroring views on I3: Automated. Some welcomed the control this gave them and made them consider their answers more carefully, while others re-iterated their frustration with having to click 'Next' each time.

"It makes you feel a bit more in control of what you're doing. You want to be ready for answering the next question."

Female, HEI

"You are forced to think about your answers, you make the choice and click next, rather than going through automatically."

Male, HEI

"The 'Previous' buttons allow you to go back but I don't like having to click 'Next' as it makes it long and tedious and could put people off doing the survey or make people click any answer."

Male, FEC

5.54 Students also remained divided on the merits and drawbacks of showing one statement per screen. This approach was either criticised for making it harder – although not impossible – to review and compare responses or welcomed for focusing students' attention on each statement.

"With each question I feel the ability to forget about the last one which helps me to focus on one question and one question only, but it's not as if I can't change my answer if I really want to."

Female, HEI

"With the question disappearing after you've answered it I don't suppose you'd consider it after this ... I don't think that's a good thing."

Male, HEI

5.55 A handful of students felt that by virtue of its simplicity, I3: Next Click risked being tedious and uninspiring, which could have a negative impact on response as students may progress through the survey without giving much thought to their responses, simply to get to the end as quickly as possible.

"It is quite standard and familiar which is good, but it would be easy just to click through."

Male, AP

"This is a familiar concept but a bit bland and you are not as engaged in the questions so don't think about the questions so much."

Male, HEI

5.56 A handful mentioned that progress was less obvious, even after seeing the progress bar. Again, this has the potential to impact response by making the survey feel like it is 'never-ending'. One student suggested using a 'Question statement X/26' format as a means of overcoming this.

"Less obvious how many questions you have left, even though there is a progress bar it's less obvious."

Male, HEI

"You can't see what you have done or how far you have to keep going until you finish so you just want it to finish. You possibly therefore lose attention span."

Male, HEI

Key Findings
Students were familiar with the format of I3: Next Click, and while some found it slightly onerous, most were content with its simplicity and intuitiveness. It represents a strong option to consider for future surveys carried out on a desktop or laptop.

A screen-shot of I4 is shown in Figure 5.5. Users 'drag' the statement from the centre of the screen into the relevant box at the bottom and – once they have responded to all statements in the section – select 'Next' to move on to the next section. Users can review their answers by using the drop-down boxes under each response option.

Figure 5.5 Interface 4

5.57 This interface was tested in Phase 1 cognitive interviewing only.

Aesthetics and usability

5.58 Most students expressed a strong dislike for I4. This was due to:

- A lack of familiarity with the format - it was not immediately clear how all of the different aspects worked (having to drag-and-drop and also use the drop-down menus);

- A sense that it was unnecessarily complicated and confusing; and

- Uncertainty around whether answers could be changed and how.

"This is not clear what you have to do at all!"

Female, HEI

"I don't like this one - it's too complicated! I don't understand how you use it."

Male, HEI

"[It looks] weird and it just seems to be making it more complicated than it needs to be."

5.59 In the majority of cases, students initially overlooked the drop-down menus. Once they had noticed them, students did not understand how they worked or why they were there.

5.60 Students were initially confused about the drag-and-drop function and found it quite fiddly to use. In a few cases, they felt that it was onerous and made the survey take longer.

5.61 After overcoming the initial confusion, students felt the drag-and-drop function was fairly simple to use (if still fiddly), particularly students studying courses associated with STEM subjects and/or web design, creative design etc. A handful also thought that students might consider their responses more than the click-and-select function.

5.62 In a handful of cases, students thought I4 – and particularly the drag-and-drop function - made the survey 'more fun' or 'game-like'. However, this was not considered particularly beneficial or important, and in fact these students did not think I4 was an appropriate format for a survey aimed at final year graduates.

"It feels like it's trying way too hard. It makes it feel like it's a game… you want to do a survey because you want to get it done."

Male, HEI

"I'm happy just doing a boring survey. This seems like something that's a bit over the top for a simple set of questions."

Male, HEI

Impact on response

5.63 A number of students – when prompted – said that they would be likely to quit or give up on the survey partway through, because they felt I4 was difficult and time consuming.

5.64 It was also noted that I4 might lead students to initially put each question statement box into a different response option, because it was not immediately clear that response option boxes could be used multiple times (linking back to the confusion around the use of the drop-down boxes).

Key Findings

A number of students responded negatively to I4 due to its complexity and thus it was not taken beyond the initial cognitive testing phase.

Views on Interface 5 (I5) – Phase 1

A screen-shot of I5 (Phase 1) is shown in Figure 5.6. I5 also applies a 'drag-and-drop' function. Users 'drag' the question statement on the left hand side into the green response option boxes on the right hand side of the screen. The question statement box then automatically moves into the grey space alongside the response options.

Figure 5.6 Interface 5 (Phase 1)

The teaching on my course

Please show the extent of your agreement by dragging and dropping each statement into the green box that reflects your <u>current view of your courses as a whole.</u>

Staff are good at explaining things

Definitely agree
Mostly agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Mostly disagree
Definitely disagree
Not applicable

Next

5.65 This interface was tested during all stages of the research. After Phase 1 cognitive interviews it was refined to reflect feedback from students. This section looks solely at Phase 1 feedback before progressing to Phase 2 feedback.

Aesthetics and usability

5.66 Students generally felt that I5 was easy to use. That said, most experienced initial confusion as they had immediately tried to drag-and-drop the question statements into the grey rows. Students often attempted this a number of times before accepting that it would not work.

"First thought was to drag it onto the bars, but that didn't work."

Male, FEC

5.67 On-screen sizing was also an issue, with a number of students having to zoom in/out to see all of the response options. Similarly, the statement boxes were designed to decrease in size once they had been dropped over the relevant response – so that they would fit on the rows neatly – which made it difficult for students to read and review their answers.

"I tried to drag it straight away into the grey box rather than the green box. Once you click on it, it becomes very difficult to read because it shrinks. Even when you're dragging and dropping you should be able to read it. I really don't like having to drag it into the green thing."

Male, FEC

5.68 A few students felt the animation in I5 made the survey 'slightly more fun' or 'exciting'. Although a few students were enthusiastic about this, most did not think it was vital to the design of the NSS survey.

"I don't think people want to have fun when they do a survey… you just want to do it."

Male, HEI

"It's a bit childish, gimmicky with the dragging and dropping."

Male, FEC

Impact on response

5.69 As with the grid, students felt both positively and negatively about being able to see all of the question statements and their answers on one page. A few felt this would enhance the accuracy of their response – as they could easily review, change and compare their answers – and slightly fewer felt it would have a negative impact as they might consider changing their answers purely because an obvious (but natural) pattern had emerged.

5.70 Students commented that unlike I4, it was clear than more than one statement could be placed in each row.

Use on a mobile device

5.71 Students did not think I5 worked well on a small screen as it was difficult to read and operate.

Key Findings

I5 (Phase 1) did not work well on a mobile device. However, it was deemed a suitable and engaging layout for students responding to the survey on a laptop or desktop, with the potential for reducing acquiescence. Reflecting feedback from Phase 1 interviews, a modified version of I5 was tested further in the Pilot survey, as well as Phase 2 cognitive interviewing, as the next section explores.

A screen-shot of I5 (Phase 2) is shown in Figure 5.7. In contrast with Phase 1, for I5 in Phase 2 the user drags the statement box over the relevant answer box or grey row.

Figure 5.7 Interface 5 (Phase 2)

5.72 This interface was tested both in the quantitative Pilot survey and Phase 2 cognitive interviews.

Aesthetics and usability

5.73 Phase 2 students found the amended version of I5 much easier to read and much less confusing. Only a handful commented on the size of the font and just a few found it confusing. Most of these simply commented that it would take a bit of time to work out what to do.

"I've never come across a layout like that before. It took me a few minutes to work out what I was supposed to do."

Female, FEC

5.74 Initial reactions to the drag-and-drop were again divided: students either saw it as innovative and fun or unnecessary and 'gimmicky'.

5.75 Around half of Phase 2 students thought the requirement to drag-and-drop each statement was quite onerous. This idea did not take shape during Phase 1 testing, perhaps because these students were unable to see past the issues with on-size screening and intuitiveness.

Impact on response

5.76 A few students felt that the requirement to drag-and-drop made the survey more engaging and would encourage students to consider their answers more.

"Drag-and-drop will make you think about your answers more instead of getting bored and clicking the middle answer, which is what people do when they rush."

Female, FEC

"You'd consider, is it 'Definitely agree'? It gives people the chance to think a bit longer and consider their answer."

Male, HEI

5.77 Conversely, a few students were concerned that the requirement to drag-and-drop would have a negative impact on the accuracy as they would become bored and take less care over their answers and therefore make mistakes or drop out due to frustration.

"If taking it seriously it won't have an effect but if people are rushing/not taking it seriously they wouldn't use it properly."

Male, HEI

5.78 The ability to see all statements on screen generated the same feedback. Despite the concerns, the overall impression – as with the grid format – was that the ability to see all the answers on page was positive. The interactive format of I5 – in contrast to the I1 grid format – was thought in some ways to reduce the risk of inaccurate responses, because students would be less bored and more engaged in completing the survey and therefore less inclined to 'just place the answer anywhere'.

"When you see things en masse rather than independently you maybe have a slightly different viewpoint of what you said. When you say something and move on you don't look back but seeing it all together you think 'Oh, maybe that's not quite right.'"

Female, HEI

"I might put answers into different boxes just for the sake of it."

Female, HEI

"You're not getting that accurate, 'how I feel about it' first response."

Female, FEC

Key Findings

I5 (Phase 2) received mixed reactions. While some found it engaging and easy to use, others found the element of dragging fairly onerous. There are also potential gains and drawbacks to being able to see a number of responses on screen at the same time, with students able to 'anchor' answers relative to others they have given.

Interface 3 vs. Interface 5

5.79 Variations of I3 and I5 were tested during the Phase 2 cognitive interviews, both because students had been fairly receptive to them and because the Pilot survey revealed relatively low drop-out rates and acquiescence bias. It is helpful to consider them alongside each other to determine which might be most suitable to take forwards into the future design of the online NSS.

5.80 Phase 1 and Phase 2 students tended to feel quite strongly about I5. Although the majority were generally content with I5, over half of those who were positive shared the same concerns about clarity and usability as the few who were exclusively negative.

5.81 The majority of those who reacted positively felt that I5 would encourage considered and accurate responses, owing to the layout and the drag-and-drop function. A few also commented that the interface was innovative and fun. More negative views focused on the 'gimmicky' nature of the interface, and the fact that dragging could be a fairly onerous task. The fact that I5 would not be suitable on a mobile device also detracts from the appeal of rolling it out for the NSS.

5.82 Two versions of I3 developed over time, one with an automatic function and one with a requirement to click 'Next'. Feedback on this aspect of the design was both positive and negative with the 'Next' click option being preferred among laptop and desktop users, and the automated approach more preferred among mobile device users.

5.83 The majority welcomed the simplicity and familiarity of both versions of I3 although some students did reflect that they were not as engaging as I5, and required respondents to progress through a number of pages.

5.84 Clearly both interfaces have benefits and drawbacks. When asked to choose one or the other Phase 2 students were almost exactly split.

Key Findings

Whichever interface is used for the NSS, it is imperative that it is intuitive and engaging. On balance we would recommend taking forward I3, a format that students are familiar with, and one that is easy to use. Another advantage of I3 is its usability on all devices, with the 'Automated' click through function working well on mobile devices, and 'Next Click' on desktops and laptops. This reduces the potential for mode effects to occur.

Appendix A: Students' Union optional bank

5.85 The Students' Union (SU) optional bank is a completely new set of statements for the NSS survey supplied by the National Union of Students (NUS). As a result, they were included for testing in Phase 2 of cognitive interviewing. The statements tested are presented below and this appendix summarises key findings from the cognitive interviews.

Question statements:

- **The Students' Union has had a positive impact on my sense of belonging to the university or college (S1)**
- **The Students' Union has had a positive impact on my personal development and growth (S2)**
- **The Students' Union has helped me to make friends (S3)**
- **The Students' Union has helped me to engage with the local community (S4)**
- **The Students' Union has had a positive impact on students' academic experiences (S5)**
- **The Students' Union has enabled me to have a positive impact on society (S6)**

5.86 Students typically respond to most statements on the NSS positively, with a high level of agreement throughout. This pattern did not emerge in the responses to this optional bank however, with a high proportion of students answering 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'Not applicable' or not even being able to provide an answer. To an extent this is to be expected given that the cognitive interviewing encompassed a range of institutions, among whom the SU plays only a minor role in student life. This was particularly the case for distance learners and those from FECs.

5.87 However, among institutions where the SU does play a more active role, there was some tension over how students answer if they felt that they have had little engagement themselves: some chose a neutral response ('Neither agree nor disagree' or 'Not applicable'), while others simply disagreed. Depending on the phrasing of the statement others also considered the experiences of their peers when formulating an answer.

5.88 Two sets of statements were also perceived to overlap:

- Statement 1 and Statement 3: Some felt there were similarities between 'sense of belonging' (S1) and 'making friends' (S3) whilst others commented that the two are dependent on each other and explained that it would be difficult to feel a sense of

belonging without having made friends. A few also struggled with the concept of 'making friends' if they had done so through other means.

- Statement 4 and Statement 6: A few considered the 'local community' (S4) and 'society' (S6) as the same concept, although others picked out a subtle difference, such as regarding 'local community' as geographically close by – perhaps within the university community itself – and 'society' as broader and all-encompassing. Linked to this, some felt 'society' was too broad and others were unsure what 'local community' actually meant.

5.89 Students were also probed on the difference between 'helped me' vs. 'positive impact' and 'helped me' vs. 'helped students'.

- **'Helped me' vs. 'positive impact':** Students who observed a difference – the vast majority of Phase 2 interviewees – tended to see 'helped me' as a more direct concept triggering more tangible outcomes and 'positive impact' as more passive and general. A few students felt that this difference in meaning would cause them to give a different answer. The term 'helped me' was also seen as more personal and therefore more closely aligned with the survey.

- **'Helped me' vs. 'helped students':** A large majority of students were quick to pick up the difference between the two terms although they were divided regarding their preference. 'Helped me' is more in keeping with the tone of the survey, which tends to focus on students' personal experiences, but the latter allows those who have no direct experience to draw on the experiences of others and provide an answer.

Key Findings

Questions about the SU were irrelevant for a number of students, particularly distance learners and FE students. As it is an optional bank of statements, this is not necessarily problematic, however it does raise questions as to how a student at an institution with a particularly active SU but little engagement with it might respond to the statements, i.e. whether they choose 'Disagree', 'Neither/nor', 'Not applicable', or consider others' experiences in their answer.

Students noted overlap between Statement 1 and Statement 3. As they generally considered Statement 1 to hold more importance, Statement 3 has the potential to be removed, particularly since students noted that a sense of belonging (S1) was often a result of making friends (S3) and were sometimes confused about how to respond if they had made friends through other means. In addition, 'a sense of belonging' is more broad than 'making friends' and therefore might encourage or assist more students in responding.

As students felt Statement 4 and Statement 6 were the least important, overlapped, or were unclear in meaning – specifically around the terms 'local community' and 'society' – it is worth giving consideration to their inclusion in the survey, or to combining the two under the term 'wider community'.

The use of 'helped me' is perhaps more appropriate for the NSS, due to the more personal focus that runs throughout the survey.

Appendix B: Respondent Profile

5.90 This appendix outlines the demographic profile of the respondents from each phase of the interviewing process.

	Phase 1	Phase 2
TOTAL	**99**	**70**
GENDER		
Male	47	27
Female	52	43
Other	0	0
ETHNICITY		
Asian or Asian British	9	7
Black or Black British	3	7
Chinese	6	3
Mixed	4	5
White	74	46
Other	3	1
Unknown	0	1
DISABILITY		
Physical disability or learning difficulty	16	18
No known disability	83	41
Prefer not to say	0	11
MODE		
Full-time	83	60
Part-time	16	10
INSTITUTION TYPE		
HEI	64	47
FEC	28	13
AP	7	10
DISTANCE LEARNER		
Yes	10	10
No	89	60

Appendix C: List of abbreviations

- AP – Alternative Provider

- FEC – Further Education College

- FE – Further Education

- HE – Higher education

- HEFCE – Higher Education Funding Council for England

- HEI – Higher Education Institution

- HEP – Higher Education Provider

- NSS – National Student Survey

- NUS – National Union of Students

- SU – Students' Union

- UCAS – Universities and Colleges Admissions Services

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