

## **Office for Students' NSS Phase 2 consultation – University Alliance response. August 2022**

Section one: Scope of the NSS

### **Proposal 1: The criteria for the core NSS should remain as agreed in 2017**

#### **1. Do you agree we should retain the current criteria for NSS core questions?**

UA response. Yes. We agree all NSS questions should meet at least one of the three key purposes of the NSS and relate to aspects of the academic experience which higher education providers can influence across all types of provision. The areas covered by the survey should be meaningful and useful to assess issues of enduring importance, with unambiguous results.

Section two: Changes to the NSS questionnaire

### **Proposal 2: Introduction of direct questions**

#### **2. What are the consequences - both positive and negative - of changing to the use of direct questions for the NSS? By 'direct questions' we mean questions which elicit respondents' views on an issue of interest by asking about it directly. The questionnaire response options are tailored specifically to match the question**

UA response. While the interruption to a time series of comparative data and loss of the overarching scale results is unfortunate and will impact on evaluation of enhancement initiatives, bringing the questions up to date and ensuring they are relevant is important to our members. The use of direct questions would seem to aid student understanding of the concept being explored and is potentially more likely to collect useful data. However, we are concerned that the final question set is still under development and may not be adequately tested, validated and consulted on prior to the 2023 survey (and use in TEF for regulation). Additionally, the use of varied responses will add complexity for respondents as well as to presentation and analysis of results, which could reduce the usefulness of the data. We would also like to understand how this will affect the optional question banks.

### **Proposal 3: Removal of the summative question for England**

#### **3. What are the consequences – both positive and negative – of removing the summative question for England only?**

UA response. Moving to use of different questions in different parts of the UK will mean prospective students are unable to adequately compare universities across the four nations. Not using a summative question in England will reduce the value of the question for the devolved nations.

**4. Should we retain the current summative question for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales or move to the revised question with a focus on quality not satisfaction?**

Proposed UA response. Use of a summative question only in the devolved nations is much less useful than a UK-wide question. Regarding the topic of the question, we believe the current question on satisfaction should be retained to preserve the timeseries for comparison. We feel that 'quality' is equally as subjective as 'satisfaction', and equally at risk of being misinterpreted by students and misrepresented by the media.

**Proposal 4: New additional question on freedom of expression****5. Should a question on freedom of expression be offered as an additional question after the core questionnaire?**

Proposed UA response. No. We do not believe this is a significant area of concern, or relevant to the key criteria of NSS as an issue of enduring importance in UK HE. We would prefer to see retention of questions regarding the learning community.

**Proposal 5: New additional question on mental wellbeing provision****6. Should a question on mental wellbeing provision be offered as an additional question after the core questionnaire?**

Proposed UA response. No. This relates to awareness of a single service rather than the learning and teaching experience. We would prefer to see retention of questions regarding the learning community.

**7. What are the unintended consequences of asking a question about students' awareness of mental wellbeing services where no support to respondents can be offered?**

Proposed UA response. Without signposting respondents to support at this stage, and by focusing on awareness, the question could risk students feeling that the issue has only been given lip service, rather than commitment. Our members are doing significant work to support students with their mental health, in multiple ways which may not be immediately recognisable as 'support' in a narrow sense. We also work with or refer students to external organisations. A simplistic question about awareness also risks only collecting a score on how effective a communications campaign is, rather than monitoring if students are able to access support when needed (which may be beyond the influence of higher education providers for e.g. NHS services).

Section three: Periodic review of the NSS

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**Proposal 6: A four year cyclical review process should be established to allow for flexibility in ensuring the NSS continues to meet demands**

**8. Do you agree that the NSS should normally be reviewed every four years? Is the proposed timing between reviews a sensible balance between developing insight and maintaining capacity to change?**

Proposed UA response. Yes. While it is desirable to build long term comparisons of results to identify trends, keeping the survey relevant is important. Any change should be carefully considered, consulted on, and in accordance with the survey key criteria. Alignment with the TEF cycle is welcomed.

Section four: Survey fieldwork timing

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**Proposal 7: Shortening the main survey period**

**9. What would be the impact on students and providers of the fieldwork period running from mid-February to the end of April for all providers?**

Proposed UA response. No comment. [Lack of consensus from members.]

Section five: Welsh language

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**10. In relation to the design and use of the NSS in Wales, what effect (if any), positive or negative, will the proposals outlined in this document have on:**

- opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?
- treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language

Proposed UA response. No comment.

**11. In relation to the use of the design and use of the NSS in Wales, how could the proposals be changed so that the policy decision would have positive effects, or increased positive effects, on:**

- opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?
- treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?

Proposed UA response. No comment.

Other comments

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**12. Did you find any aspects of the proposals unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.**

Proposed UA response. The wording of the questions to be used remains unclear as the testing is still underway. This reduces the value of this consultation. Will there be adequate consultation on the final questions?

The removal of questions about Learning Community is not well explained. This is an element which informs ideas around wellbeing and belonging, both of which seem to be less well targeted by the proposed new questions.

The optional question banks are not mentioned in the consultation and our members are keen to understand how these will be affected by the proposals to move to direct questions.

It is also unclear if there will be any thematic analysis of free text responses.

**13. In your view, are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation (as set out in paragraph 7) could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than what is proposed here?**

Proposed UA response. This consultation was only open for a short period, at a time when many staff and students are on holiday, so the responses received may be limited. It would have been more effective to consult on the fully tested questions rather than proposals for what the questions might be.

Combining this consultation with the technical consultation on data presentation could also have been valuable for respondents to have a greater understanding of the impact of potential changes.