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Prospects and pitfalls of extending the UK
National Student Survey to postgraduate
Students: **AN INTERNATIONAL REVIEW**

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Prospects and pitfalls of extending the UK National Student Survey to postgraduate students: AN INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract

Most large-scale student surveys including the UK's National Student Survey (NSS) only survey undergraduate students. The 2011 Higher Education White Paper 'Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System'¹ invited The Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG) to consider the possibility of extending the NSS (or a version of it) to taught postgraduate students (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2011: 29-30). Whilst a HEFCE-funded feasibility study recommended 'that a postgraduate taught pilot survey should not be commissioned at the current time' (NatCen 2013: 39), the need for the sector to better understand the needs, opinions, expectations and decision-making processes of postgraduate and potential postgraduate students remains. With reference to practice in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and other countries, this report offers an overview of the literature of surveying students in general, with particular emphasis on the implications of surveying postgraduate students.

Introduction: the purposes of student surveys

The use of surveys as a means to collect student feedback about university teaching dates back at least to the beginning of the twentieth century. Research into student evaluation took off in the 1970s and by the 1980s a substantial body of literature had emerged (Marsh 1987). Marsh identifies five main purposes of students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness:

1. Diagnostic feedback to faculty [teaching staff] that will be useful for the improvement of student learning.
2. A measure of teaching effectiveness to be used in administrative making decisions
3. Information for students to use in the selection of courses and instructors.
4. A measure of the quality for the course, to be used in course improvement and curriculum development.
5. An outcome or a process description for research on teaching (Marsh 1987: 259).

¹ To avoid confusion with previous higher education White Papers the 2011 White Paper is referred to as 'Students at the Heart of the System' throughout this review.

Prior to the 1990s most survey instruments were concerned with research rather than with accountability or engagement (Kuh 2009). Ramsden (1991) conceived Australia's Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) as an exercise in public information and accountability regarding the quality of teaching. The UK NSS was similarly set up as an external mechanism by which the higher education sector, which receives significant public funds, would publish key data on measures of quality in order to help prospective students make informed decisions about what to study and where to study as well as provide public accountability (Richardson et al 2007: 557). The NSS consists of 23 items on a Likert scale upon which students can strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree or strongly disagree. 21 questions cover:

- The Teaching on my Course
- Assessment and Feedback
- Academic Support
- Organisation and Management
- Learning Resources
- Personal Development

Question 22 is an overall question which asks 'Overall I am satisfied with the quality of this course'. A 23rd question was added to the 2012 survey about satisfaction with the services offered by the Students' Union.

This review is divided into six sections and draws on two main sources of information:

1. Published research literature on student surveys from the UK and internationally.
2. A half-day group discussion with student survey experts, university senior managers and other stakeholders.

The first section of this review outlines research on the NSS itself, including some criticisms and limitations of the survey.

The second section provides a snapshot of taught postgraduate courses in the UK and clarifies the types of postgraduate students and modes of study for whom postgraduate surveys would need to be suitable.

The third section looks at other undergraduate and postgraduate surveys, including the HEA's Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) as well as other national surveys including the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), the US-based National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), the Noel-Levitz survey and the Canadian Graduate Professional Student Survey (CGPSS).

The fourth section discusses the issues raised by disciplinary differences in attempts to design

national surveys. This section also references examples of discipline-focused surveys which address discipline-specific questions at undergraduate and postgraduate level.

The fifth section overviews methodological, logistic and ethical issues surrounding student surveys such as survey timing, response rates and publication thresholds.

The final section provides a brief conclusion to the review.

The UK National Student Survey (NSS)

The NSS has run since 2005 so there is ample data and considerable debate about its strengths and limitations. The NSS was largely based on the CEQ (see Ramsden 1991), though the NSS contains some different questions and is piloted independently in the UK (see Richardson et al 2007). Subject to minimum response rates and student numbers, results from the 23 NSS questions are made public on the unistats website www.unistats.com (Directgov 2012). Third parties use the data to inform university league tables and subject-based rankings, but none of these are sanctioned by the UK funding councils or the government departments responsible for higher education in the constituent parts of the UK.

Ramsden (1991: 129) envisions the CEQ as a performance indicator for the quality of teaching in higher education for public accountability. He concludes that the CEQ 'offers a reliable, verifiable and useful means of determining the perceived teaching quality of academic units in systems of higher education that are based on the *British* model' (emphasis added). The British model in this context appears to be one in which students can be readily identified with specific academic units. This might imply that the CEQ is less suitable for use in contexts where the overall experience is more multi-disciplinary or where funding arrangements and public accountability structures are more diverse, making cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional level comparisons more difficult to make.

Multivariate analysis enables researchers with access to the whole NSS dataset to analyse the data at both institution and discipline level. Marsh and Cheng (2008) found that there is more variation between disciplines than there is between institutions — students studying French at Institution A tend to give more similar answers to students studying French at Institutions B, C and D than they do to students studying engineering, art and geography at Institution A. Like the CEQ, the NSS was designed as a performance indicator for departments and programmes and not for individual teachers. SurrIDGE (2009: 4) notes that the differences between institutions at subject level are small (and often not statistically significant), which makes it difficult for potential students to discriminate; however she also advances a more positive interpretation that students can be confident about the quality of their experience whatever choice they make.

Since September 2012, prospective undergraduate students have been able to view a Key Information Set (KIS) for each programme, which will include a course's scores on eight existing NSS items:

- Staff are good at explaining things (Question 1)
- Staff have made the subject interesting (Question 2)
- Feedback on my work has been prompt (Question 7)
- Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand (Question 9)
- I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies (Question 10)
- The library resources are good enough for my needs (Question 16)
- I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to (Question 17)
- Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my course (Question 22)
- Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am satisfied with the Students' Union at my institution (Question 23) (HEFCE 2012).

The NSS has come in for a degree of criticism. It is not always seen as being relevant to all disciplines. Blair et al (2012) suggest that it is not very useful for programmes which are not strongly timetabled. Yorke (2009) has expressed concern about the lack of negative questions (where disagreement would be considered a good thing), and press stories have emerged of the NSS being used as a performance tool for individual teachers (Grove 2012a) or lecturers, encouraging students to rate their course positively on the grounds that it is not within the interest of students to rate their courses poorly for the sake of their own reputation and employability (Dobrik 2011). Although the latter cases are indicative of abuses of the NSS rather than reflecting a problem with the design of the survey itself, the public nature of the NSS can give rise to practices which would probably not occur in a survey internal to the institution. Prosser warns about the perils of using measures of student satisfaction to gauge learning and teaching quality, arguing that responding to student feedback in such a way to improve satisfaction, may not improve the actual learning experiences of the students:

'So interpreting the results of student evaluation questionnaires as ratings of satisfaction are unlikely to result in major improvements of the students. Instead we should use the results to help us better understand how our students are experiencing what we teach, and follow up particularly problematic aspects of their experience with focus groups and other forms of investigations. That is likely to be much more productive in improving those experiences – as well as students' overall satisfaction rating' (Prosser 2005).

Yorke (2009: 724-725) raises concerns about the lack of negative questions and the availability of an indifferent mid-point on the five point Likert scale which may encourage 'laziness' on the part of the respondent. However, Yorke's own experiments of administering negative and positive questions to a small sample of students '... offer some comfort for the designers and

users of student experience surveys such as the NSS and the CEQ, since they have shown no evidence, other than vestigial, of ordering effects and acquiescence bias' (p 734).

Another issue concerns the usefulness of the NSS for distance learning surveys. Although Ashby et al (2011: 21) found the NSS to be generally reliable and robust for surveying students at The Open University; more than 60 per cent responded 'not applicable' to at least one of the 22 questions. Fewer than 40 per cent of respondents gave valid answers to questions about learning resources, and they often selected 'neither agree nor disagree'. A neutral answer is regarded as negative by most league table compilers.

In their review of the NSS Ramsden et al (2010: 33-35) briefly address the question about whether the Survey might be extended to taught postgraduates. In principle they see no particular reason for not extending the survey to postgraduates: '...it is worth noting that the Australian CEQ is administered to all taught higher education students and there is no reason to believe that the items it contains, nor those in the NSS, are not relevant to taught postgraduates' (p 34). However the authors outline a number of cautions including cost, timing of the survey, a lack of questions on the NSS concerning dissertation supervision and the need for any such survey to be piloted. The idea of adapting the HEA's Postgraduate Taught Experience Questionnaire (PTES) into a national survey is also discussed, though the authors point out the PTES has more items than the NSS and the questions are not exactly the same. They also cite the survey's low response rate (just 17 per cent in 2009) as a reason not to simply turn the PTES into a national survey (although the response rate increased to 24.7 per cent in 2012). However, Ramsden et al do not discuss this question in any significant detail.

Postgraduate study in the UK

The number of taught masters students in the UK increased by 27 per cent between 2003 and 2008 (House 2010: 28), itself building on a large increase in the late 1990s (Taylor 2002). Despite this large increase, there is presently no standard information of this kind about taught postgraduate courses in the UK. In 2008-9 taught postgraduate programmes brought £1.5bn into UK universities (Smith et al 2010: 5), though, as university leaders have recently noted, taught postgraduate study remains neglected in discussions of recent higher education reforms (Boffy 2013).

In his foreword to Boorman and Ramsden's 2008 report Trainor (2008: 5) notes:

'Most of our international students are enrolled on these programmes. Yet within institutions and across the sector as a whole we do not consider this provision as a distinctive higher education market in its own right. The overall focus is still on the traditional undergraduate market or on research postgraduate students'.

Boorman and Ramsden report that 94 per cent of students recruited to UK universities from outside the EU are on taught masters courses, and as Ryan (2010: 55), notes these overseas masters' students need to 'hit the ground running' as there is no 'settling in' period for a nine

-12 month course. Over 80 per cent of students on MBA and taught postgraduate programmes in Engineering are from outside the UK. Jepson and Varhegyi (2011) note the paucity of research into postgraduate experiences, including the reasons why people choose to become postgraduates, and there has been even less research on how the widening participation agenda impacts on postgraduate students (Stuart et al 2008, Frostick and Gault 2013). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reveals that postgraduate numbers from outside the EU increased by 39 per cent between 2002-03 and 2007-08 whereas the increase from UK students was just 3 per cent (House 2010: 57).

Students at the Heart of the System (Department of Business Innovation and Skills 2011), refers to 'taught postgraduate degrees *such as* master's degrees' (emphasis added). It is important to note as a point of fact, that not all taught postgraduate courses are necessarily at masters level. Some postgraduate courses are at an undergraduate honours level, most notably some, but not all, Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses for graduates wishing to enter the teaching profession (see QAA 2006) and other (partly) taught postgraduate degrees lead to doctoral level qualifications, eg Doctor of Education (EdD) and Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). Numbers of these partly taught professional doctorate programmes are increasing (House 2010: 5).

- Taught postgraduate courses include the following:
- Academic Master degrees (MA, MSc etc)
- Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE)
- Law/ Psychology conversion courses
- Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes
- Professionally accredited programmes in specialist fields with 'fitness to practice' elements eg BPS accredited Psychology programmes, some health sciences programmes
- Professional doctorates, eg Doctor of Education (EdD)

Students on integrated masters degrees such as MEng programmes which have a master's level final (fourth) year are currently surveyed by the NSS. In these cases 'master's level study is integrated with study at the level of a bachelor's with honours degree within a single programme' (Quality Assurance Agency 2010a), so prospective postgraduates will not be considering these courses '... as they are not designed to be a fourth an 'add-on' year to a BEng (Hons)' (Quality Assurance Agency 2010b).

In their HEFCE-commissioned study of the 'information needs' of prospective students, advisors and employers Renfrew et al (2010) found that all types of prospective students wished to know how satisfied current students have been with their learning experience. For undergraduates, this was valued more than information about employment rates, accommodation costs, bursaries, coursework-exam balance and staff-student contact time. Whilst postgradu-

ate students expressed quite similar preferences overall, they were even more likely to see comparison/ranking websites as useful (Renfrew et al 2010: 8).

Surveys aimed at postgraduate students also need to account for the increasing numbers of students undertaking postgraduate study part-time and by distance learning. Over half of postgraduates are now studying part-time (Smith et al 2010: 7). Humphrey and McCarthy (1999: 374) note that there are many types of postgraduate students, some of whom are doing postgraduate studies after their undergraduate degree and others who are older, perhaps undertaking a postgraduate degree as part of professional development. Some students are taking one or two modules at postgraduate level for their Continuing Professional Development, sometimes with a view to complete a full postgraduate qualification if the course goes well, but not always.

Postgraduates over 30 years of age were also more likely to come from outside the UK which may be another significant dimension. Humphrey and McCarthy also found that postgraduate students felt 'that they had earned the right to separate facilities and more favourable treatment than the rest of the student population' (p 371). Similarly 85 per cent of Stuart et al's (2008) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'my expectations in terms of quality of delivery and service at postgraduate level will be higher than at undergraduate level', and 73 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they expected better 'value for money' (Stuart et al 2008: 48) These different expectations suggest postgraduate surveys might usefully relate students' experiences as a postgraduate to their experience as an undergraduate.

UK and international experiences of student surveys

Most large scale student surveys have tended to focus on the undergraduate population. Different course structures, policy environments and educational cultures require different kinds of survey, noted by Hanbury 2007 in her methodological comparison of surveys run in UK, Australia and USA. The UK's NSS is not the only such survey in existence and alternative surveys in the UK and beyond, offer alternative models which can inform the design of postgraduate (or undergraduate) student surveys. The Universities UK report (Boorman and Ramsden 2008) noted a lack of larger studies of taught postgraduate students and this remains the case.

The HEA's PTES and PRES summary reports are the main insight we have into the experiences of UK postgraduate students overall (see Park 2008, Wells 2011). However, the PTES does not report publically on individual institutions or courses, indeed it is not the intention of the survey. The PTES and PRES are used for internal quality enhancement purposes. The provision of postgraduate studies is different to that of undergraduate courses. 26 per cent of respondents to the PTES pilot study reported that their choice of institution was strongly impacted by the availability of courses in their chosen field of study (Park 2008). This suggests that the opportunity to compare courses via public data would be of little benefit to prospective postgraduates in certain fields.

The Australian CEQ is possibly globally unique in being the only national (in the sense that

results are publically available) survey, which uses the same survey instrument for both undergraduates and taught postgraduate students from all universities and all disciplines, *and* obligates institutions to publish their results (subject to a minimum 50 per cent response rate). Graduate Careers Australia only publishes national level data in its own reports (see Carroll 2010a), though institutions publish their own data at institutional level and sometimes at department level as well (see University of Sydney 2012). Sometimes, in my search to find out the scores for individual departments, I was faced with password protected websites. In this sense the UK's NSS may be more transparent than the CEQ (in both its postgraduate and undergraduate versions) in that scores are available for particular disciplines for particular universities, but the password protected screen I faced may have been because that department did not meet the threshold response 50 per cent rate and therefore did not have to make its results public.

Unlike the NSS where all public results are published on a centralised website (www.unistats.com), there does not appear to be an Australian equivalent. The CEQ however, has suffered from low response rates. In fact the overall response rate to the CEQ had fallen below 50 per cent until strong efforts were made to follow up non-responders, which brought the response rate up to 52 per cent (Carroll 2010b). As well as serving as the starting point for the UK's NSS, a Chinese language version has been piloted in Hong Kong (Law and Meyer 2011). The Australian experience illustrates the tension between using surveys for enhancement (as is the intention of the HEA's PTES and PRES) and surveys primarily designed for public accountability and student information (as is the case with the NSS).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)² based at Indiana University surveys first year and 'senior' undergraduates at over 500 universities and colleges, mainly in the USA, Canada and South Africa though nine UK institutions were involved in a pilot in 2012-13 (Buckley 2013). Participating institutions pay a fee to have their students surveyed. The data is not made public, but institutions are able to compare their own scores with averages of six or more institutions of their choosing (they are not able to find out the exact scores of any institution apart from their own). Although there is no obligation to share or publish data externally, many institutions do, and the NSSE organisers provide a guide for institutions about how this might be done (NSSE 2010). The Guide also suggests ways in which the survey might be used internally, and even explains some statistical concepts in a degree of detail. It is also possible for any visitor to freely create a customised report of averages and some percentiles from different institution or student types – again this enables institutions to compare their own data with similar (or different) institutions as they see fit. Institutions participating in NSSE can opt to share their results with USA Today (see Marklein 2009).

An alternative to the NSSE is the survey run by Noel-Levitz Higher Education consultants. Noel-Levitz asks respondents not only to rate their experiences, but also to indicate how important each factor is to them personally. Areas in which institutions have high levels of satisfaction *and* which are high priorities for students are identified as 'strengths'. Similarly, Noel-Levitz

² Usually pronounced 'Nessie'.

identify areas of low satisfaction *and* high priorities as ‘challenges’ (eg Noel-Levitz 2011). Only a short national overview report is publically available, but detailed reports are made available to participating institutions. A template for institutional reports is available from their website.³ Asking students to rank the importance of factors helps to overcome the possibility that not all factors are necessarily of equal importance to students – a possible shortcoming of the NSS (Marsh and Cheng 2008: 6, see also Harvey et al 1997).

The Princeton Review (not affiliated to Princeton University) surveys 122,000 students at 376 US institutions (Princeton Review 2012a). The survey contains 80 questions with just one section devoted to academic matters. Students are asked how they rate their professors, their classroom and lab facilities and the amount of in-class time devoted to discussions in class. Students are asked whether their teachers are good instructors, how accessible the teachers are outside class time, their workload, library resources and the quality of class discussion. The survey also asks about quality of life on and off campus, sports and safety issues. Controversially the survey asks students about levels of alcohol consumption, marijuana use and how religious the students are. Whilst the Princeton Review claims that these sorts of rankings can help students find a good fit, institutions have not always celebrated being top of the rankings. Senior managers at Ohio University have been concerned about the institution’s reputation for being a top ‘party school’, and efforts have been made to curb student drinking on and off campus (Reddon 2011). It must be said that the Princeton Review is probably less methodologically robust than NSSE and Noel-Levitz, but the motivation for this survey is very different. The Princeton Review publishes *The Best 376 Colleges: 2012 Edition*. Its choice of the 376 colleges is ‘primarily based on our high opinion of their academics. We monitor colleges continuously and annually collect data on more than 2,000 schools’ (Princeton Review 2012b). It is important to note that there are almost 10,000 accredited higher education institutions recognised by the US Department of Education so 376 represents a very small proportion of institutions (US Department of Education 2012). Their website states that they visit colleges and meet with administrators. The Princeton Review offers an alternative approach to the more learning and teaching based surveys in asking about LGBT acceptance, religious observance and fire safety as well as the student learning experience. It resists ranking all institutions on the grounds that different students will be seeking a different kind of experience. Instead it ranks the top 20 in each of its categories (Princeton Review 2012c).

The Canadian Graduate Professional Student Survey (CGPSS) is run by the U15 group of mainly research intensive universities, but in 2010 37 universities participated (Simon 2011). There is very little information available publically about the survey itself and the GE13 Data Exchange (2010), which runs the survey, has no public aspects to its website. However an internet search for CGPSS will bring up the results on individual university websites and the results are presented at institutional level and sometimes at subject level (for example see University of Calgary 2008). It is important to note that public higher education is administered at the provincial level in Canada, so organised publication of the data varies by province. The

³ www.noellelitz.com/student-retention-solutions/satisfaction-priorities-assessments/student-satisfaction-inventory/samples

Council of Ontario Universities has set up Common University Data Ontario (CUDO),⁴ which enables interested parties to compare universities in Ontario using data from the CGPSS and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is carried out with undergraduates (Council of Ontario Universities 2011) in a similar way to unistats in the UK.

Golde and Dore's (2001a) detailed, though one-off, study of the experiences and aspirations of doctoral students in the USA addresses the taught elements which occur in US doctorates. They found that postgraduate students were not well-informed about the nature of doctoral study, and that there was a disconnect between doctoral training and the sort of careers doctoral students aspired to and actually ended up in. Doctoral students at 27 universities in 11 disciplinary areas were asked about the (taught) coursework elements of the degree by responding to the following statements:

- Coursework has given a broad foundation of knowledge in the field
- Coursework has given a broad foundation of knowledge for doing independent research
- Exams and other hurdles seem arbitrary and unhelpful (Golde and Dore 2001b: 16)

Most information available to prospective students, whether in the UK or beyond focuses on what Gibbs calls (2010: 5) 'Presage variables' and 'Product variables'. Presage variables are measures such as funding levels, research performance and student grades on entry, evidenced by websites such as www.findamasters.com aimed at prospective postgraduates. Another website www.masterscompare.co.uk, compares on the basis of descriptions provided by universities themselves and does not use any metrics. Product variables are factors such as student grades and employment. What are missing are process variables – in essence any direct examination of the student learning experience:

'What best predicts educational gain is measures of educational process... a small range of fairly well-understood pedagogical practices that engender student engagement. In the UK we have few data about the prevalence of these educational practices because they are not systematically documented through quality assurance systems, nor are they (in the main) the focus of the National Student Survey' (Gibbs 2010: 5).

In their survey of overseas students at Australian universities Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found that the significant variables influencing student choice of institution related largely to reputation:

- An institution's reputation for quality.
- An institution's links or alliances with other institutions familiar to the student.
- An institution's reputation for having high-quality staff.
- An institution's alumni base and word-of-mouth referral process.

⁴ www.cou.on.ca/statistics/cudo.aspx

- The number of students enrolled at the institution.
- Whether an institution is willing to recognise students' qualifications.

However, an institution's responsiveness to student needs was found to be not significant in this research.

The PTES, NSS and CEQ all focus on the student learning experience though many surveys of student satisfaction have found accommodation, food and personal safety to be major factors in overall student satisfaction (see Harvey 2001). Arambewela and Hall (2008) caution against ignoring these 'non-educational' factors. The Noel-Levitz surveys include factors such as the ease of paying tuition fees and campus services. The neglect of the other considerations can have a negative impact on the student learning experience:

'Satisfied students are more likely to be successful students. Research indicates that institutions with more satisfied students have higher graduation rates, lower loan default rates, and higher alumni giving. Satisfaction with an institution includes a combination of academic factors as well as areas related to campus services. An institution needs to identify all of the issues that are relevant to students. These include their interaction with faculty, as well as the service they receive from staff and administrators; the resources provided to students; policies that are in place; and students' overall feelings about the value of the experience' (Noel-Levitz 2011: 2).

Although the UK's NSS has a higher response rate than any of these surveys, it also has the fewest questions. The first pilot of the NSS had 45 items and the second 35, but this was reduced to just 22 questions by the time the survey had been rolled out nationally (Richardson et al 2007: 557). Studies of the correlations between response rates and survey length have had mixed results (Sheehan 2001) so it should not be presumed that the NSS's better response rate is due to the lower number of questions. Non-respondents are followed up by mail and telephone, and universities promote the NSS vigorously as the stakes are so high.

Discipline-level issues in surveys

The guiding principle in the design of public surveys has been that the core questions should be relevant to all students irrespective of their subject or mode of study. Although the NSS is undoubtedly internally and methodologically robust (Richardson et al 2007), the questions have been found to be open to wide interpretation by students and teaching staff alike (for example see Canning et al 2011 on languages and linguistics, Blair et al 2012 on Art and Design). Vaughan and Yorke (2009) report a 'widely held view' that the questions are designed with highly timetabled lecture-based subjects in mind and do not necessarily resonate with Art and Design students; this could also be an issue for some postgraduate courses, especially those on distance learning programmes (see Ashby et al 2011). Some disciplines, for example Historical and Philosophical Studies, record higher ratings than other disciplines rendering cross-disciplinary comparisons within an institution problematic (Marsh and Cheng 2008: 7).

This also has a confounding effect for joint honours students, whose answers are allocated 50 per cent to each subject; in contrast the CEQ allows respondents to give different answers to the questions for two different subjects. Canning et al (2011) found evidence that some students were interpreting the questions in a discipline-specific way, for example 'The course has helped me to present myself with confidence' was sometimes interpreted as being concerned with confidence in using a second language. Students at the Open University used the open-ended comments section of the NSS to critique this question (Ashby et al 2011: 20).

Smithers and Robinson's *Good Teacher Training Guide* (2011) does not consider any process variables. Similarly the Financial Times rankings of MBA programmes do not include information from student surveys (Financial Times 2012). The website www.findamasters.com (Science Registry 2012) enables browsing by discipline. If one chooses 'History' a variety of programmes in everything from Modern International History, to Celtic Studies to Renaissance Studies to Heritage Management emerges. On this particular website the results of the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) are the only data given in order to help inform student choice, one of Gibbs' presage variables. The broad RAE disciplinary categories may not be so relevant for postgraduate courses which are often more specialist and/or interdisciplinary.

Whilst there is widespread ranking of postgraduate programmes in business, law and medicine (the latter two being exclusively graduate programmes in North America), there is very little data collected directly from students. One exception is the Canadian National Physician Survey which contains 35 items relating to student background and the student experience of medical school. The response rates are highly variable. Whereas 54 per cent of first year medical students at the University of Calgary responded to the survey, the response rate from Memorial University Newfoundland was just 13 per cent (National Physician Survey 2012). In order to increase response rate the survey is being reduced in length (National Physician Survey 2010). The survey focuses on specifics of curriculum such as the specialisms students have been exposed to and their motivations for wanting to be doctor.

Some postgraduate courses are very specialist and the notion that students wishing to enter certain professional fields have a 'choice' of the kind that a postgraduate Key Information Set (KIS) might inform could be problematic. For example, a student who wanted to study a masters degree in Interpreting recommended by the International Association of Conference Interpreters, would only have a choice of two UK courses (International Association of Conference Interpreters 2004).

Smaller-scale surveys of the postgraduate learning experience at specific UK institutions include Morgan and Jones (2012) on Science and Engineering Postgraduate students at Kingston University, Kearn's et al (2009) on interprofessional programmes in health sciences at one institution in south-east England, and Humphrey and McCarthey's survey at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Bean (2006) surveyed postgraduate students at the University of St Andrews about the ways in which postgraduates are integrated into the wider life of the university. These local and small scale surveys enable institutions to interpret and present

the findings of their student engagement activities in a way which is appropriate for its own context. Discipline-based surveys, whether local or national, offer the possibility of asking curriculum- or disciplinary specific questions. Katsarska and Keskinova's (2011) study of English language BA and MA students at three Bulgarian universities asks questions about linguistic competence as well as questions about course satisfaction. The Economics Network carries out an annual survey of UK Economics students which asks students for their experiences of learning mathematics for economics, economics software and experiments, games and role-play (Pomorina 2010).

McEwen et al (2008) examine the student experience of interdisciplinary masters degrees in which there has been a substantial growth in the provision, for example in Sustainable Development programmes. They examined a programme in Environmental Policy and Management, and one called 'Women, Culture and Society'; these courses are possibly unique or at least more difficult to compare with other programmes on a like for like basis. Whether or not the experiences of students who take these courses are different to those who take more 'traditional' masters degrees is beyond the scope of this review, but the uniqueness and interdisciplinarity of many masters degrees makes cross-institution comparisons more challenging. Many of these interdisciplinary postgraduate degrees emerge from 'unique' interdisciplinary research groups in the institution (Thew 2007: 3).

There is also the issue of whether there should be questions on the broader student experience (accommodation, student services, quality of life), though these have not been found to be strong predictors of the overall student perception of the quality of teaching and learning (Yorke 1995 cited by Richardson 2005: 403). Issues of the role of individual advisors, whilst possibly more a significant factor for postgraduate research students are not irrelevant to taught postgraduates either, especially when writing dissertations (see Zhao et al 2007, Miller and Newman 1996). The PTES asks students if they have to write a dissertation and asks them about the support they receive from their lecturers.

Methodological, logistical and ethical considerations in student surveys

Survey timing

A key difference between the CEQ and the NSS is that Australian students are surveyed after they have graduated, whereas UK students are surveyed in their final year. Data about student destinations is collected alongside graduate destination data in Australia, but in the UK there was concern that collecting the NSS data and the First Destination Survey (FDS) data together, would suppress the response rate to the FDS which was established long before the NSS (Richardson 2005: 404). There is also the question of whether students are in the best position to evaluate the benefits of their programme during the final year, after graduation or some time later, though if students' feedback comes too long after graduation then the institution will be trying to respond to feedback which is two or more years old. The NSS, PTES and PRES, give a long survey 'window' in the final year of the course, but in the case of 12 month

(sometimes shorter) postgraduate courses it seems problematic for students to be commenting on their overall experience when they are only half-way through their course. The issue of whether or not students who have taken just one or two modules of a postgraduate course should be surveyed and when, is also relevant here.

Responding to feedback from students

Large scale surveys are not the only mechanism by which universities collect feedback from students. They also collect feedback through module evaluation, staff-student liaison committees, students' unions, in-course feedback and increasingly through social networking. Without a strategy or plan for making use of the feedback, it has little value to the institution. To benefit from any survey of their students, Harvey (2001: 2) notes that institutions must have mechanisms for the following:

- identifying and delegating responsibility for action;
- encouraging ownership of plans of action;
- accountability for action taken or not taken;
- feedback to generators of the data;
- committing appropriate resources (Harvey 2001: 2).

The organisers of NSSE have produced a guide to help institutions use their data (NSSE 2010). It would be helpful if a guide for lecturers, students and university administrators were also published alongside any postgraduate national survey. Institutions in the UK have held internal staff workshops to address issues raised in the NSS, including the free-text comments which are not publically available (for example, see Flint et al 2009). The HEA holds an annual 'Surveys for Enhancement' conference at which researchers, discipline-based academics, academic developers, funding council staff and university administrators come together to share practice and discuss issues. It also convenes a UK-wide NSS Institutional Working Group. Focusing on student assessment and feedback, Williams et al (2008) triangulate NSS data with internal surveys from 11 institutions carried out annually since the 1990s. This report is a poignant reminder that the NSS is not a panacea for listening to and responding to the student voice.

Response rates

A key characteristic of the NSS, the CEQ, NSSE and other 'national' surveys is that they are intended to be a census of the entire graduating student population rather than a sample. The NSS enjoys much higher response rates than other surveys in or outside the UK. In 2011 no subject area had a response rate of lower than 52 per cent and the highest was 82 per cent, an overall response rate of around 60 per cent. In contrast the response rate for the PTES was just 17.8 per cent (Wells 2011: 12) though the PRES got a much better response rate of

36 per cent (Hodsdon and Buckley 2011: 3). The NSSE overall response rate was 33 per cent (NSSE 2011) and the CEQ was 52.6 per cent (Carroll 2011b: 2). The CEQ response rate was actually an improvement on previous years due to allowing data to be collected by telephone. Response rates were in the high 40s for a number of years—a problem as Graduate Careers Australia required a 50 per cent response rate before data could be published (Carroll 2011b: 1). In the UK, institution senior managers have placed a lot of importance on upping response rates to the NSS to ensure that thresholds for data publication for each programme are met (50 per cent response rate and at least 23 students). Eligible students are followed up by letter if they fail to respond online in the first week of the survey, and contact is made by telephone between the fourth and eighth week of the survey window (SurrIDGE 2009: 9). However, SurrIDGE also found that scores given by late responders are not significantly different to those of early responders (pp 11-12). Additionally, it should not be taken for granted that a longer questionnaire will lead to a lower response rate (Sheenan 2001).

Thresholds for publication

If the results of surveys are to be useful for public accountability and preserve respondent anonymity, then minimum response levels need to be set. If these minimum levels are not met (as has been an issue with the CEQ) then the data cannot be published and therefore cannot be used by potential students and other stakeholders.

The NSS has reached a level of importance where a failure to reach threshold appears to be a worse outcome than poor scores (Canning et al 2011; Child 2011: 59-71; Grove 2012a). With postgraduate surveys the threshold issue is complex as many taught postgraduate courses have small numbers, not due to low demand, but by design. Possible work-arounds include merging two or three years of data (as happens with the NSS) or merging courses or departments together for the data purposes. However, there is a very real danger that these work-arounds could render any public data meaningless. For example, if a History department with separate, masters courses in Museum Management, Eighteenth Century Europe and Modern American History were to have the survey data for these three courses merged into 'History', the results would have little value to any potential student of any of those very different courses, especially if the ratings were very different. If in the future there was to be postgraduate national survey, there may be a case for a lower publication threshold.

Masters degrees delivered in two or more universities across international boundaries are increasing in number (Bertrand 2006: 8-9). This raises the question about the applicability of one nation's survey to teaching which takes place at a partner institution outside the UK, and of any economic or reputational risk that a public survey might pose to a non-UK university in partnership with a UK university. There has also been a growth in the number of institutions offering UK qualifications taught wholly outside the UK (House 2010: 22) and whether these overseas campuses should be presented as distinct institutions (if they are included at all) is a question that ought to be considered.

Conclusions

The use of the UK's NSS in league tables, and now in the KIS has made the stakes very high, hence the stories about attempted 'manipulation' of the survey by academics. It is clear from my investigations that the NSS is unrivalled internationally in terms of data availability at the disciplinary as well as institutional level, as well as its response rate, despite its weaknesses discussed in this review. Whilst Canada and Australia have similar 'national' surveys the results are not collected together in one place in order to compare universities. Other 'national' instruments such as NSSE and Noel-Levitiz offer alternative possibilities in terms of survey instruments though like the UK's PTES and PRES, institutions opt-in and are not obliged to share their results. The consumer magazine *Which?* has recently launched a university comparison website (Grove 2012b).⁵ This is timely, a reminder that surveying existing students and providing information for prospective students is a competitive market in and of itself (as evidenced through the various US-based surveys), and there is no guarantee that a UK government-backed survey will be the most influential or well-regarded survey in the future.

Abbreviations and glossary

CEQ: Course Experience Questionnaire. Survey of recent graduates from Australian universities carried out annually. Surveys postgraduate and undergraduates. Results published at institution and discipline levels subject to 50 per cent response rate. Was first developed by Ramsden (1991) and was used as the starting point in the development of the UK NSS.

CGPSS: Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (*French: Enquête auprès des étudiants à la maîtrise et au doctorat*). Survey of postgraduate students administered by G13 Data Exchange (G13DE) and carried out every three years. The next survey will be in 2013. Results are published on institutional websites. The central G13DE is password protected. www.data-exchange.ca/public.

Noel-Levitiz: US consultancy firm based in Iowa City and Denver. Noel-Levitiz offer a variety of opt-in survey and consultancy services include student satisfaction surveys. www.noellevitiz.com.

NSS: National Student Survey. UK survey of final year undergraduate survey undergraduates conducted annually since 2005. Results are published at institutional and disciplinary level within institutions is minimum threshold of 23 students and 50 per cent response rate is met. www.thestudentsurvey.com.

NSSE: National Survey of Student Engagement. Opt in subscription-based survey administered by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University. Widely used by institutions in Canada and South Africa as well as USA. <http://nsse.iub.edu>.

⁵ <http://university.which.co.uk>.

PTES: (Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey) and PRES: (Postgraduate Research Experience Survey). Annual surveys of finishing taught and research postgraduate students run by the Higher Education Academy, though not every institution participates every year. Findings are confidential to the individual institutions though overall reports are published. www.heacademy.ac.uk/student-experience-surveys.

Princeton Review. Company providing information and test preparation services based in Massachusetts. Surveys students from over 2,000 institutions and publishes annually the handbook *The best 376 colleges*. www.princetonreview.com.

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