

Rage against the machine? The views of academic staff towards the National Student Survey

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Presentation Aims

- Showcase new evidence into perceptions of the NSS
- Connect this evidence with the political context of which the NSS forms a part
- Explore what this evidence tells us about the ways academic staff engage with the NSS
- Enable discussion about what this means for institutional policy and practice

Some Political Context

- Requirement for more information for prospective students (KIS)
- Several runs of the NSS already complete
- Findings of the review into the NSS led by Centre for Higher Education Studies
- Conclusion that the NSS is ‘generally accepted’ across the sector
- Reaffirmation of the roles of the NSS: public information; performance indicator AND enhancement tool

But wait...

- Not all voices are as approving
 - e.g. Academics at Brighton – “statistically risible exercise in neoliberal populism”
 - e.g. Lee Harvey – “the survey is a hopelessly inadequate improvement tool.”
 - e.g. Anecdotal stories of student manipulation to provide positive scores
- More evidence is required before making judgements about the perceived value of the NSS

Research Questions

- Is the NSS perceived by academics to be a reliable indicator of teaching quality?
- Do academics use the results of the NSS for enhancement purposes and what are their motivations for doing so?
- How do academics usually use the data (if at all)?
- Are there any differences between academics of different disciplinary backgrounds?

Research Strategy

1. Literature review
 - Student evaluations of teaching
 - Development of the NSS
 - Disciplinary differences

2. Informal discussions with academic staff
 - Mainly to inform development of questionnaire

3. Questionnaire distributed to academic staff

Student Evaluations of Teaching

- In use since the 1920s
- Tools generally correlate with quality of teaching (Marsh, 1987)
- Augmentation of student feedback important
- Easy to take issue with the survey tool itself and lose focus on the aim of improving (Gregory et al, 1995)
- Multiple measures (triangulation) takes away the need for a perfect tool.
- Context specificity important

Development of the NSS

- NSS not originally intended as an enhancement tool
- Staff originally felt that a national survey would add little to existing feedback mechanisms
- Enhancement of teaching a “positive side effect” of the CEQ (Ramsden, 1991)
- Correlation of good CEQ scores with “deep learning”
- Concern about prospect of de-contextualised ranking i.e. league tables
- Statistical robustness of the NSS

Disciplinary Differences

- Enhancement through the disciplines – creation of subject centres
- Hard/soft – Pure/applied (Biglan, 1973)
- Lack of acceptance of generic interventions (Becher, 1994)
- Teaching styles and “affinity disciplines”
- Role of individual departments to develop learning styles to suit their students

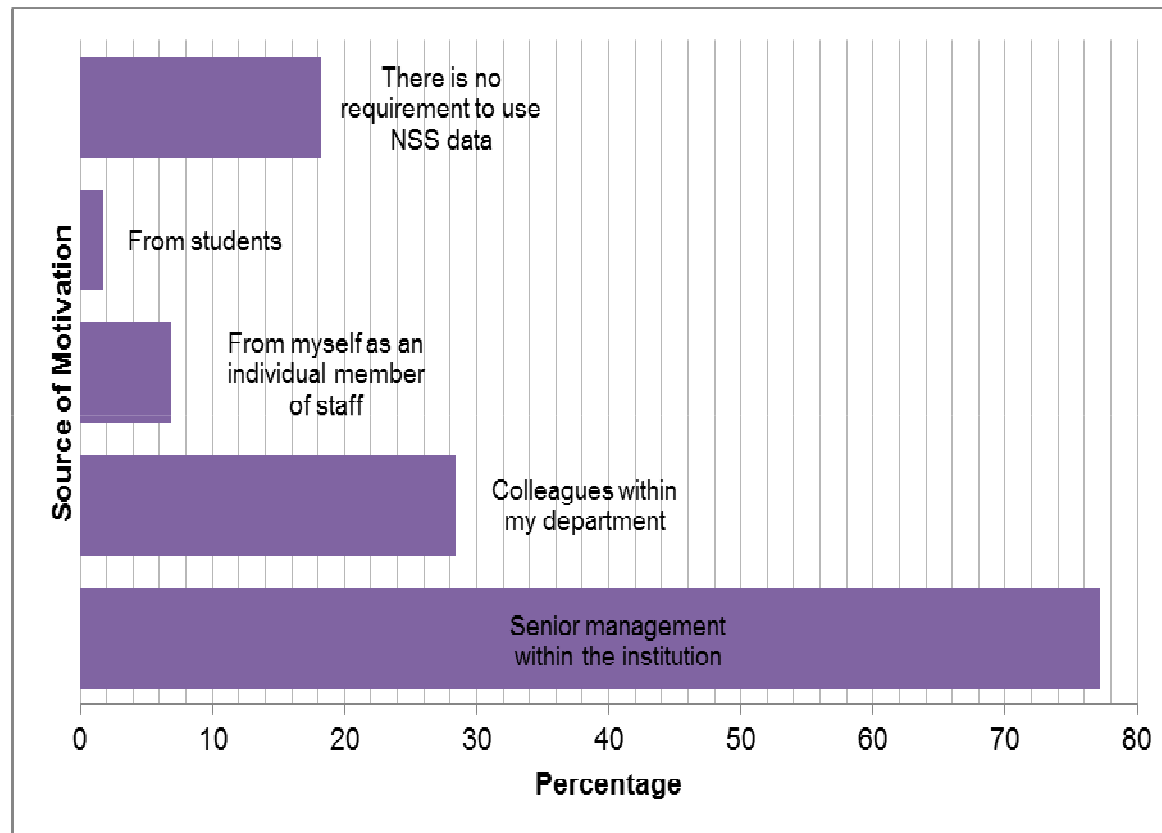
Questionnaire

- Sample developed of 1250 academic staff in 12 Pre-1992 universities
- Three subjects – Education, History and Physics
- Likert scale items; open questions and demographic questions
- Pilot in one department, 26 responses (28%)
- Questionnaire distributed in October 2010 via email
- 324 responses (25.9%) - respondents broadly representative of the sample

Findings One (Overall Results)

- Little correlation between knowledge about the NSS and overall assessment of the NSS's value
- Staff believe students should be given chance to offer views on teaching quality
- Staff prefer other methods of student feedback to the NSS
- Generally negative perceptions of the NSS's role as an enhancement tool
- NSS seen as a concern for senior management
- Small numbers of staff see the NSS as having made a positive impact on their teaching

Impulse to use the NSS



Findings Two (Use of the NSS)



- A number of people unaware of the survey
- Impulse to respond largely comes from senior management - 'them and us'
- League tables seen as a negative development
- NSS well established in departmental procedures e.g. development of action plans
- Willingness of staff to support change
- Other tools – NSS either help or a hinderance
- Reaffirming the previous literature

Some quotations...

“Generally, the NSS results are used for another bout of "could do better"-type analysis and navel gazing on the part of the head of school and some faculty. Emails come round from the head of school noting what our score is and how it has changed, and these results are also discussed at school meetings and meetings of teaching committees”

“I use it [the NSS] to review, with colleagues on the teaching programme concerned, areas in the survey where it is clear the results could be stronger.”

“We may change practice, e.g. introducing additional contact hours in response to management's perceptions and analysis of students' complaints (even when we think their comments unjustified and/or ignorant).”

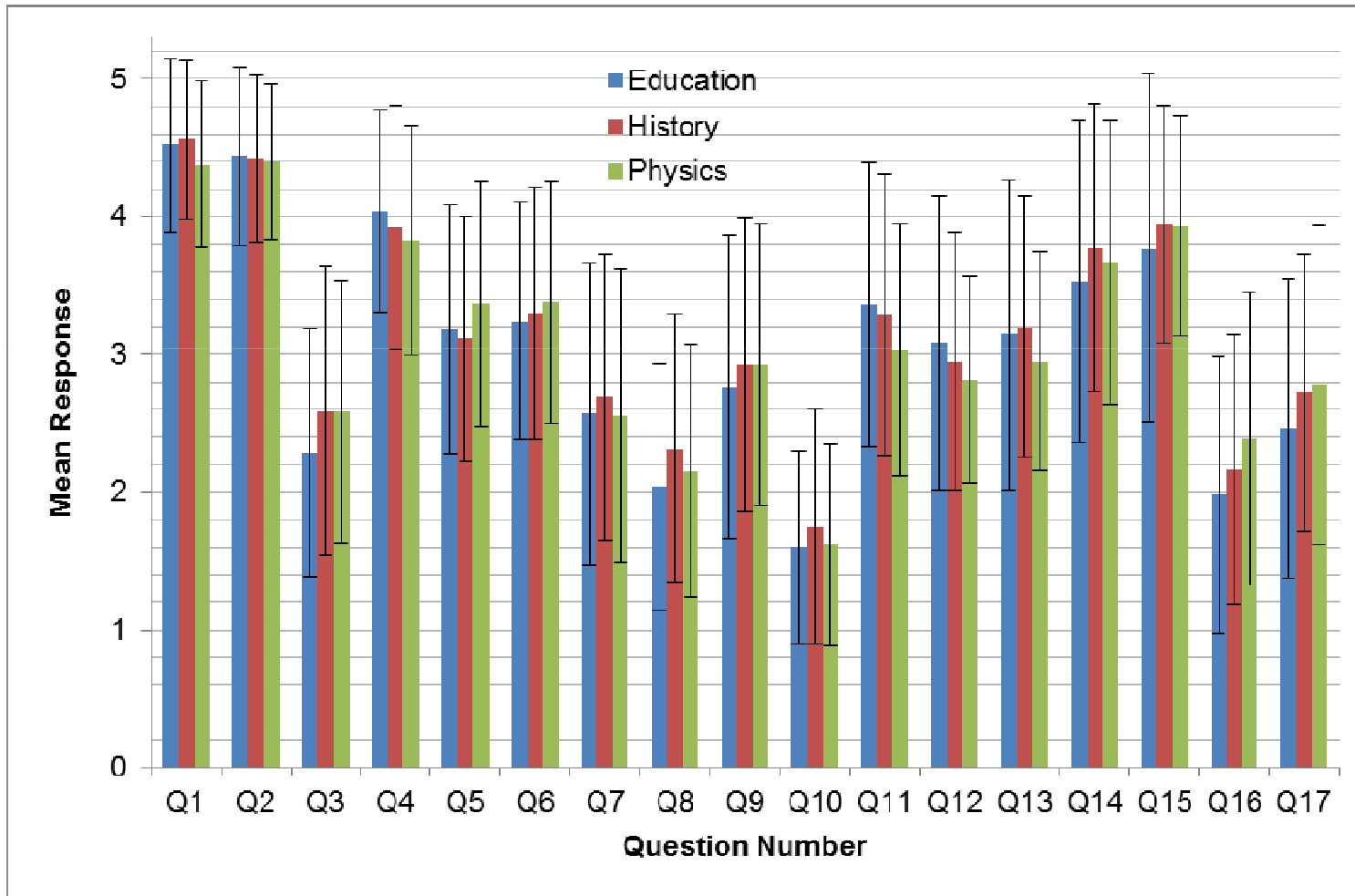
“I can say that feedback on individual modules or individual teachers carried out within the institution is far more useful and is much more likely to influence teaching.”

“I feel that as a teacher and an academic we have to practice what we preach [sic]. If we're telling students to reflect on experiences and feedback, we have to do the same. It enhances the whole teaching and learning experience - for both tutor and student.”

Findings Three (Disciplinary)

- Very small differences in mean responses between subject areas (see next slide)
- When compared with the rest, Education showed a couple of small differences
 - Departmental use of NSS data
 - More disagreement with idea of senior management interest
- Overarching perspective on NSS, reaffirming Becher (1994)
- Paradox of disciplinary similarity actually suggesting disciplinary differences

Comparison between disciplines



Education compared with others

Question	Education Disagree %	Education Neither agree nor disagree %	Education Agree %	Others Disagree %	Others Neither agree nor disagree %	Others Agree %	Sig
Q1	2.1	1.0	96.9	0.9	3.1	96.1	0.382
Q2	1.1	5.3	93.7	1.3	3.9	94.7	0.855
Q3	57.7	34.6	7.7	47.5	34.3	18.2	0.074
Q4	0.0	24.7	75.3	5.5	24.5	70.0	0.096
Q5	20.0	37.6	42.4	18.4	40.8	40.8	0.878
Q6	17.9	35.7	46.4	17.3	35.1	47.5	0.985
Q7	49.4	27.7	22.9	45.9	29.5	24.6	0.864
Q8	70.7	23.2	6.1	62.7	28.2	9.1	0.409
Q9	39.0	31.7	29.3	34.3	33.3	32.4	0.745
Q10	87.8	12.2	0.0	85.9	11.2	2.9	0.291
Q11	23.1	35.9	41.0	22.1	41.2	36.7	0.705
Q12	26.0	36.4	37.7	31.4	46.4	22.2	0.033
Q13	25.0	34.7	40.3	23.4	44.1	32.4	0.351
Q14	27.1	10.6	62.4	13.3	20.7	66.0	0.006
Q15	19.2	6.8	74.0	5.0	15.6	79.3	0.001
Q16	71.1	18.9	10.0	60.0	24.2	15.8	0.170
Q17	50.0	29.3	20.7	42.2	28.4	29.4	0.292

Academic views on the NSS

Institutional Reputation

- League tables not seen as a positive development (13.3%)
- Staff from higher placed universities more positive about league tables
- Staff from Russell Group Universities less willing to accept that low scores represent issues that require addressing
- Do staff choose to [relatively] ignore the quantitative data that doesn't reaffirm traditional viewpoints?

Q16 – “League tables are a positive development in higher education”

Response	Data type	High	Middle	Low	Total
Disagree	Count	48	52	71	171
	% within section of league table position	52.2	62.7	72.4	62.6
Neither agree nor disagree	Count	21	21	20	62
	% within section of league table position	22.8	25.3	20.4	22.7
Agree	Count	23	10	7	40
	% within section of league table position	25.0	12.0	7.1	14.7
Totals	Count	92	83	98	273
	% within section of league table position	100	100	100	100

“To see what we need to improve upon to raise the position in the league table. However evidence of use of league tables elsewhere e.g. league tables in schools shows that they promote abnormal behaviour and generate unintended consequences.”

Conclusions

- Rejection of the top-down nature of the initiative
root cause of negative perceptions of the NSS
- NSS is used widely as part of institutional and
departmental process
- NSS accepted most readily when combined with
other forms of data
- Two original purposes of the NSS (performance
indicator; student choice) often incompatible with
the third (enhancement)
- Disciplinary differences are small

Implications

- Understanding of the NSS needs to be developed across the academic cohort
 - What can the NSS tell us?
 - Use as a comparative/diagnostic/longitudinal tool
 - Use in combination with other data
- Senior management need to show nuanced understanding of the NSS and departmental contexts
- Discussion about raw scores and league tables reduces enhancement potential of the NSS
- The argument about the value of the NSS is unconvincing to many, it is far from 'generally accepted'
- Surveys used exclusively for enhancement best not made public

Any Questions?

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