

Consultation

Office for  
Students

OfS

# Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey

This consultation runs from **28 July 2022**  
to **1 September 2022**.



Scottish Funding Council

Promoting further and higher education

Cyngor Cyllido Addysg  
Uwch Cymru  
Higher Education Funding  
Council for Wales

hefcw

Reference OfS 2022.34

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Department for the

**Economy**

# About this consultation

The UK higher education regulatory and funding bodies are conducting a review of the National Student Survey (NSS).

The consultation is published by the Office for Students (OfS) on behalf of all the funding and regulatory bodies.

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## Timing

Start: **28 July 2022**

End: **1 September 2022**

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## Who should respond?

We welcome responses from individuals and organisations with an interest in the National Student Survey.

We are particularly interested in the views of **students, students' unions, and staff at higher education providers**. We are keen to hear from all types and size of provider.

We also want to hear from **schools and further education colleges, employers, third sector organisations, policy bodies, higher education data and information organisations**, and others with an interest in the survey.

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## How to respond

Please respond by **1 September 2022**.

Please use the online response form at <https://survey.officeforstudents.org.uk/s/nss-consultation/>

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## How we will treat your response

We will summarise and/or publish the responses to this consultation on the OfS website (and in alternative formats on request). This may include a list of the providers and organisations that respond, but not personal data such as individuals' names, addresses or other contact details.

If you want the information you provide to be treated as confidential, please tell us but be aware that we cannot guarantee confidentiality in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not be regarded by us as a confidentiality request.

The OfS will process any personal data received in accordance with all applicable data protection laws (see our privacy policy).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/ofs-privacy/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/ofs-privacy/).

We may need to disclose or publish information that you provide in the performance of our functions, or disclose it to other organisations for the purposes of their functions. Information (including personal data) may also need to be disclosed in accordance with UK legislation (such as the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Data Protection Act 2018 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

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## Next steps

We will publish a summary of responses to this consultation in Autumn 2022.

We will explain how and why we have arrived at our decisions, and how we have addressed any points made by respondents.

We anticipate implementing any changes to the NSS following this consultation in the 2023 survey.

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## Enquiries

Email [nssreview@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:nssreview@officeforstudents.org.uk)

If you require this document in an **alternative format**, or you need assistance with the online form, contact [nssreview@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:nssreview@officeforstudents.org.uk) (**Please note:** this email address should **not** be used for submitting your consultation response.)

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For more information about our work to date on the review of the NSS, please visit the OfS website: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/)

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# Introduction

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) is an annual census of final year undergraduate students at UK universities. It has been conducted since 2005 and attracts a response rate of around 70 per cent each year – approximately 300,000 students. The survey is conducted between January and April. It currently asks 27 core questions covering various aspects of the student academic experience.
2. The NSS gathers students' views on the quality of their courses which helps to:
  - inform prospective students' choices
  - provide data that supports universities and colleges to improve the student experience
  - support public accountability.
3. This consultation sets out proposals for changes to the NSS arising from a review conducted by the UK higher education funding and regulatory bodies in 2020-2022.

## Why we are consulting

4. In 2020 the Office for Students (OfS), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), Scottish Funding Council (SFC) and Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI) began a two-stage review of the NSS. The terms of reference for both phases of the review are at Annex C.
5. In phase one of the review, we developed recommendations to address concerns about the extent to which the survey may be creating burden for providers and affecting standards, while ensuring the NSS remains an important indicator of student opinion.
6. Phase two has taken a broad view across the NSS, to consider its role, the questions the survey should pose to students, and the publication of NSS data. The overarching aim is to ensure the NSS remains fit for purpose and continues to support regulation and student information across all four countries of the UK.
7. The proposals outlined in this consultation follow recommendations from the first phase of the review, question development and testing, a large-scale pilot, and stakeholder engagement undertaken in phase two.
8. In formulating the proposals in this consultation, the OfS has had regard to our general duties under section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA), the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Regulators' Code and the Code of Practice for Statistics. This is summarised in Annex F.

## Summary of consultation proposals

The consultation proposals cover six thematic areas:

- Scope of the survey
- Changes to the questionnaire
- Response scale
- Periodic review of the survey
- Survey fieldwork timing
- Welsh language.

9. A list of the consultation questions is at Annex B.

### What is out of scope?

10. The consultation does not cover the following areas:

- Aims and purpose of the survey: Phase one of the NSS review concluded that the existing aims and purpose of the survey are still fit for purpose.<sup>2</sup> We are, however, asking for views on whether the current criteria for core NSS questions in the survey are still fit for purpose (Proposal 1, question 1).
- Sampling approaches: Phase one of the review also concluded that the current census approach is still fit for purpose.<sup>3</sup>
- Data dissemination: this will be subject to a technical consultation prior to the publication of the 2023 results.
- Extension of NSS to cover all undergraduate years: This was out of scope for the review, and does not, therefore, form part of this consultation. We expect to revisit the inclusion of courses of one year or less duration as we transition to the collection of in-year student data through the implementation of Data Futures in 2024-25.

### Consultation principles

11. We are running this consultation in accordance with the government's consultation principles.<sup>4</sup>

12. We are committed to taking equality and diversity into account in everything we do. We have a legal obligation to show due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010).<sup>5</sup> This can be found in Annex F.

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<sup>2</sup> See [NSS Review phase one report](#).

<sup>3</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/nss-review-phase-one-report/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/nss-review-phase-one-report/).

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2011/2260/contents/made>.

## Terms used in this consultation

13. We use a few technical words and phrases in this consultation. The table below lists some of these, and their meaning, to help readers unfamiliar with this terminology.

Term	Definition
Census	We use census in this context to mean the whole population for the survey (final year undergraduate students at UK universities).
Survey	The survey is the instrument or data gathering tool for research.
Questionnaire	We use questionnaire when we are referring to the questions in the survey.
Core questionnaire Core NSS	The core NSS currently comprises 27 single choice questions relating to various aspects of the student course that are asked of all students. Providers can extend the survey by adding questions from NSS optional question banks or two questions of their own choosing.
Summative question	NSS question 27 'Overall I am satisfied with the quality of the course'. See proposal 3 on changes to the summative question.
Response scale	Designed for quantitative analyses, a limited number of response options are provided for most questions. The NSS currently uses a five-point agree/disagree (Likert) scale. See proposal 3 (changes to the summative question) and proposal 2 (changes to questionnaire).
Additional questions	A question or questions asked of all recipients which does not form part of the core survey. See proposals 4 and 5.
Agree/disagree Likert scale	A set of answer options to a survey question which allows respondents to express how much they agree or disagree with a statement. The NSS Likert scale asks students to choose from five points on the scale, ranging from 'Definitely agree' to 'Definitely disagree', with a neutral middle option. Students can also choose 'Not applicable'.
Direct questions	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.

## Consultation proposals and questions

14. This part of the consultation sets out our proposals and the questions on which we are seeking views. The proposals are grouped into six thematic sections. The questions relating to the proposals are in yellow boxes at the end of each section. A full list of the consultation questions is at Annex B.



# Section one: Scope of the NSS

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

### What are we proposing?

15. In 2017, following consultation, the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG) agreed a set of principles for NSS core questions that would be used in amending or adding to the core questionnaire. It was also agreed that these criteria would be subject to periodic review, with advice from the group.<sup>6</sup> The aim is to preserve the coherence of the survey over time.

#### NSS core survey criteria<sup>7</sup>

Questions in the core NSS survey questionnaire must meet at least one of the three key purposes of the NSS:

- informing prospective student choice
- enhancing the student academic experience within providers
- ensuring public accountability.<sup>8</sup>

Questions must also meet the following criteria:

- be about something higher education providers can influence
- concern the academic experience, and especially learning and teaching
- be applicable across all modes, disciplines, types of providers and countries in the UK, as far as possible
- cover measurable and valid issues
- be meaningful and useful to students and other stakeholders
- produce results that are unambiguous in direction
- address issues of enduring importance in UK higher education rather than transient policy interests.

16. We are proposing that these criteria should not be amended.

### Why are we proposing this?

17. Stakeholder engagement throughout the review suggested the criteria were still fit for purpose. There was a strong desire from providers to retain the academic experience scope of the survey. However, students felt the notion of an academic experience was too narrow – they felt

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<sup>6</sup> This group was superseded by the UK Student Information Group in 2018.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/).

<sup>8</sup> In England, public accountability is delivered through various mechanisms, including the use of NSS outcomes in the regulation of individual providers.

that many factors can influence their overall experience, such as accommodation or local transport issues.

18. While acknowledging this wider impact, we take the view that some of these wider factors may be partly, if not wholly, outside the control of a higher education provider. They may also be beyond the remit of one or more of the four UK higher education funding councils and regulators. We are therefore proposing to retain the current criteria.

### **Questions for proposal 1**

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

### **What would the effect of this proposal be?**

19. The effect would be to confirm support for the current arrangements, such that we would have regard to the criteria in making proposals for future changes to the core questionnaire. The criteria would continue to be subject to periodic review with advice sought from the UK Student Information Group. While retaining these criteria, additional questions could be added where necessary provided they met the wider criteria for the survey.

## Section two: Changes to the NSS questionnaire

This section covers the following proposals:

Proposal 2: Changes to the survey questions to include a move to direct questions

Proposal 3: New summative question for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and removal of the summative question for England

Proposal 4: New additional question on freedom of expression

Proposal 5: New additional question on mental wellbeing provision

### Options for changes to the questionnaire

20. The current questionnaire was last amended in 2017. Phase one of the review concluded that the core questions of the survey could be improved to better reflect the current student experience and learning and teaching practice. We are therefore proposing a series of amendments and additions while still having regard to the current core survey criteria.

#### Our preferred option (option 1)

21. The questionnaire currently uses the Likert scale, which measures student agreement or disagreement with particular statements.

22. We propose to change the questionnaire to more direct questions for 2023 – which would change how questions are asked – to offer students the opportunity to rate different aspects of their experience on a scale designed specifically for a particular question.

23. We propose to remove the summative question for English respondents.

24. We are asking if we should retain the current summative question for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales or move to the revised question with a focus on quality not satisfaction.

25. We also propose to add questions on freedom of expression and a provider's mental wellbeing provision. We also propose to make some changes to the core questions to improve their usefulness. Our stakeholder engagement showed that issues of freedom of expression and mental wellbeing provision are of significant concern to students, providers and policymakers. We consider these to be clearly within the power of universities to influence. Both issues have an impact on the academic experience of students, and can be influenced directly by providers, although they do not easily fit into the scales used for other questions. So, we are proposing these questions are added as additional questions to the core survey.

26. We have trialled the proposed new direct questions alongside the 2022 NSS, with over 25,000 students participating in the trial. We plan to do some final testing and piloting to ensure the questions we are minded to adopt following this consultation are widely and consistently understood by students.

## Summary of proposed changes

- Revised core questions with direct questions for 2023 (proposal 2)
- Removal of the summative question for England (proposal 3)
- Addition of new questions for freedom of expression and mental wellbeing provision (proposals 4 and 5).
- Retain the current summative question for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales (proposal 3)  
or
- Move to the revised question with a focus on quality not satisfaction for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales (proposal 3).

## Other options we considered and have decided not to progress

### Option 2

27. We considered changing the question topics in 2023 while retaining the existing Likert scale. This would have involved:

- Revised core questionnaire with agree/disagree Likert scale for 2023
- Removal of the summative question for England (proposal 3)
- New additional questions for freedom of expression and mental wellbeing provision (proposals 4 and 5)
- Further exploration of the adoption of a direct question option (proposal 4).

28. We rejected this option because we took the view that it is important to make any changes to the NSS all at once. This is to avoid confusion for onward users of the data including providers and prospective students and to allow comparability of responses between years. Any changes to the questionnaire would necessitate a break in the time series; phase 1 of the review found that the time series was particularly important for providers for monitoring the student experience and evaluating the impact of any improvement made as a result. This option could potentially lead to a break in 2023 and then again in 2024 if we subsequently moved to direct questions. This would limit the usefulness of the survey to providers and for exercises such as the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). Therefore, the disruption to the time series in this option would outweigh the benefits of making changes to the survey for a single year. The multiple changes could cause additional burden on providers. We also considered that the benefits of moving to direct questions – which we explain further below – should be realised as soon as possible.

### Option 3

29. We considered an option of keeping most of the current survey for 2023, while adding new questions on freedom of expression and mental wellbeing and retaining the Likert scale. This would have involved:

- Retention of the current survey for 2023
- Removal of the summative question for England (proposal 3)
- New additional questions for freedom of expression and mental wellbeing provision (proposals 4 and 5)
- Further exploration of the adoption of a direct question option (proposal 2).

30. We rejected this option because we took the view that the benefits of moving to direct questions should be realised as soon as possible. We also consider it important to make the changes all at once to avoid confusion and reduce the burden on providers of responding to successive changes. Phase 1 of the review found the current questionnaire required changes to ensure it remained fit for purpose; our testing and pilot did highlight some issues with the current questionnaire which we have sought to improve in the direct question version of the questionnaire. Furthermore, if we did subsequently decide to move to direct questions, the proposed new questions on freedom of expression and mental wellbeing provision would need changing – meaning a break in the time series after year one.

## Proposals

31. We will now set out each of our proposals, alongside key evidence listed below to support these proposals:

- Summary of question testing and pilot activity
- Pilot outcomes report
- Phase one outcomes report.

### Proposal 2: Introduction of direct questions for the NSS

#### What are we proposing?

32. Since the survey's inception, it has used a standard five-point 'agree/disagree' Likert scale. We are proposing to move to using direct questions.

33. We are seeking views on the concept and the appropriateness in principle of using direct questions, recognising that there may be some technical changes to the questions as a result of ongoing testing. Further testing and piloting work is planned in advance of the 2023 launch and the final survey will be guided by the findings of this consultation and the piloting and testing outcomes. If the questions are changed, the changes would not affect the subjects or concepts being tested but could see drafting changes to the questions to ensure a question focuses only on a single concept.

34. We are also proposing further changes to questions to improve existing questions and make sure they are still fit for purpose. These changes include:

- improved wording to aid student understanding of the question
- changes to questions which ask about two different things at once (double-barrelled questions)

- adding new questions on existing concepts or updating questions to reflect current practice and/or changes to the regulation of quality.

Some examples are illustrated below.

## Examples of proposed changes to the questionnaire

### **Change to a question where the conceptual basis has not changed but the wording has changed to improve student understanding**

#### **Q2. Staff have made the subject interesting**

Feedback from stakeholders did not suggest any issues with the 'teaching on my course' bank of questions. Therefore, we did not initially try to alter the conceptual basis for Q2. Cognitive testing revealed the following:

#### **Student understanding of the question's meaning**

When tested with students, most considered their classes, lectures and seminars, and assessed how engaging the tutors were when teaching in these settings. They did this by thinking about the range of different teaching styles staff had used, such as case studies, practical learning and lectures. Students also considered how well the tutor dealt with online learning during the coronavirus pandemic.

#### **Issues**

The testing identified some potential issues. Some students voiced concerns with the framing of the question, arguing that 'interest' was a matter of personal preference and not something that staff could control. Other students found it challenging to provide a single overall assessment of their experience when responding, pointing to significant differences in experiences across modules on their course.

#### **Proposed changes to question**

We propose to replace the term 'interesting' with 'engaging', to focus more on students' views of staff expertise and capabilities. Although students did tend to think about teaching staff when asked this question, we propose to change the wording from 'staff' to 'teaching staff' for consistency with other questions about 'teaching on my course'.

We considered proposing an 'engagement' scale to measure students' views ('How engaging did teaching staff make the subject?' with a response scale ranging from 'very engaging' to 'not at all engaging'), but we took the view that this would not deal with the variable experiences identified in the testing. It is also not clear that measures of degree in relation to this concept get to the heart of what is important here. We therefore opted to ask students about frequency of staff making the subject engaging to make it easier for respondents to offer a meaningful judgement across potentially different experiences.

The redesigned question now reads:

**'How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?'** combined with a frequency scale.

## Changes to a question to focus only on a single issue

### Q8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.

We received no feedback on this question from stakeholders, so no development activity was necessary to refocus the question to enable providers to use the information differently. However, when being reviewed, the question was found to be 'double-barrelled' - it asks respondents to consider two different issues at the same time, but only allows a single response. The question was therefore a candidate for redesign.

### Student understanding of the question's meaning

Testing revealed that students were most likely to consider criteria for end-of-year or formal assessments than continuous assessment during their course.

### Issues

Testing also pointed to the double-barrelling issue. Some students focused on the 'in advance' part of the statement and considered whether they had received the criteria at the start of the year. Others focused on the word 'clear', assessing how easy to understand the criteria were, the level of detail given, and the efforts made by teaching staff to ensure clarity and understanding. Some students pointed to the issue around averaging out their views across different experiences on their course. When presented with a Likert agree/disagree scale, these students sometime opted for the middle 'neither agree/nor disagree option' to resolve this issue.

### Proposed changes to wording

For the purpose of the pilot, we split the question into two, asking about both (i) clarity of marking criteria and (ii) whether or not they had been offered in advance.

- Were you given the marking criteria in advance?
  - Very often
  - Fairly often
  - Not very often
  - Rarely or never

The pilot found that nearly all students responded that marking criteria were provided in advance by selecting 'very often'. While the question appeared to work well, pilot findings suggest the question has limited value as a measure of providers' behaviour. We therefore propose to remove this question to help maintain the length of the questionnaire, while retaining the question which focuses on clarity of criteria.

- Did you understand the marking criteria used to assess your work?
  - To a great extent
  - To some extent
  - Hardly at all
  - Not at all
  - This does not apply to me

Testing of the revised question is underway.

While no issues were identified with the existing scale in this context, we propose to ask about clarity directly, and are testing a revised question with a direct scale.

**Q. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?**

- Very clear
- Fairly clear
- Not very clear
- Not at all clear
- This does not apply to me

**Changes to wording to convert an existing question into a direct question**

**Q9. Marking and assessment has been fair**

Some stakeholders argued that this question might capture students' dissatisfaction with awarded grades, rather than views about the fairness of assessment and marking. However, this opinion was not widely held. Moreover, the conceptual basis for this question was not challenged by any stakeholders. We therefore did not undertake any new development work with this question.

**Student understanding of the question's meaning**

We proposed no changes to this question. Earlier rounds of testing with students had seen the wording for this question change from 'assessment arrangements and marking' to 'marking and assessment'. Because it had been previously tested before its introduction, we did not test for understanding of concepts in this initial round of testing for the current review.

**Proposed changes to wording**

The question was reformulated to ask students directly about their perceptions of fairness, with a scale designed to measure this via perceptions of degree. The question appeared to perform well in the pilot with few students reporting that they did not understand the question. Additional cognitive testing specifically focusing on the response scale is now being undertaken.

**Q. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?**

- Very fair
- Somewhat fair
- Not very fair
- Not at all fair
- This does not apply to me



## Why are we proposing this?

35. Agree/disagree response scales continue to be widely used in both academic and non-academic research, and generally are much simpler to design and administer. However, feedback from a survey expert group to the NSS review highlighted their limitations. This view is supported by survey research, which discusses their susceptibility to issues which could diminish data quality. For example, there is evidence of a tendency for agree/disagree scales to produce acquiescence bias, where respondents become more likely to disproportionately agree with a statement in a question.<sup>9</sup> Others point to a disconnection between generic agree/disagree response options and the concept that a question seeks to measure as a potential issue for data quality.<sup>10</sup>

### Example

NSS question 22 asks students to agree or disagree with the statement 'I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course'.

A student might answer 'strongly agree' if they believe themselves to have had many good opportunities to work with others. A student who has had limited or no opportunities to work with others, but who sees this as positive because they dislike group working, could also 'strongly agree' with the statement. Another student could 'strongly agree' because they were presented with the correct number of opportunities as set out in a module guide, despite their not finding those opportunities particularly helpful.

Each respondent is agreeing with the statement, but each brings to bear a different meaning when translating their views into the available response options. The agree/disagree response format therefore risks masking differences between students who may hold significantly divergent views. Consequently, agree/disagree scales are regarded by some as being prone to producing data of a lower quality than that of alternative response option types.

36. Survey researchers suggest using an item-specific response format or direct questions, where response options are designed specifically for the question being asked. Such response scales are considered less likely to lead to divergent readings of the same questions, resulting in higher quality data. There is also some evidence that item-specific scales encourage respondents to engage more thoughtfully.<sup>11</sup> Our pilot therefore sought to test a questionnaire which translated existing NSS questions into a direct question questionnaire with a mostly item-specific scale.<sup>12</sup> The pilot suggested the direct question version of the questionnaire worked well although it required further development. Our pilot findings suggest:

- Student understanding of questions was good.

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<sup>9</sup> Krosnick, J. 1991. Response strategies for coping with the cognitive demands of attitude measures in surveys. *Applied Cognitive Psychology*. 5(3) 213-236.

<sup>10</sup> Revilla MA, Saris WE, Krosnick JA. 2014. Choosing the Number of Categories in Agree–Disagree Scales. *Sociological Methods & Research*. 43(1):73-97.

<sup>11</sup> Höhne, Jan & Lenzner, Timo. (2017). New Insights on the Cognitive Processing of Agree/Disagree and Item-Specific Questions. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology* 6(3).

<sup>12</sup> See the report on the NSS pilot at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-student-survey-2022-pilot/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-student-survey-2022-pilot/).

- Survey dropouts were low.
- Removing the neutral response (this is the ‘neither agree nor disagree’ option in the current response scale used by the NSS), and therefore using a four-point response scale, was considered viable although this did increase the proportion of positive responses.
- The direct question version of the questionnaire (including the questions on mental wellbeing provision and freedom of expression) has a strong single or strongly related set of underlying concepts.

### **What will the effect of this proposal be?**

37. A move to using direct questions would necessitate changes to the wording of all the questions in the NSS. Moving to direct questions would create a break with the current five-year time series, making comparisons between versions of the questionnaire difficult. However, this would also be the case if we make any changes to the core survey. Therefore, we believe this to be a worthwhile trade-off for higher quality data. Phase 1 of the review found that the time series was particularly valuable for providers in the monitoring and enhancement to the student experience; however the majority of providers, including our NSS review advisory group, felt the benefits of having an up-to-date questionnaire that reflects current thinking on survey design outweighed this concern.<sup>13</sup> We also consider the revised questionnaire will provide more robust information than the current questionnaire, improving its ongoing use for providers and for student information.
38. Survey literature and feedback from our stakeholders suggest direct scales will improve the quality of responses to the NSS.
39. Direct questions would affect the way the NSS results are presented. Currently, questions can be reported as a group or overarching scale, e.g. ‘teaching on my course’ – if each question has a different response scale this will not be possible. We would expect to consult on detailed options for data publication as part of a technical consultation prior to the publication of 2023 results.

### **Question for proposal 2**

2. What are the consequences – 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.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/159923d6-4e54-4801-bb5f-ebbc35634273/nss-external-advisory-group-members-july-2022.pdf>.

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

### What are we proposing?

40. Since its inception, the NSS has asked, across all four nations, an overall 'summative question' at the end of the questionnaire which invites students to reflect on their overall satisfaction with their course.
41. The current question 27 asks respondents the extent to which they agree with the following statement:  
  
'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.'
42. We are proposing to remove the summative question for England. A version of the summative question would remain for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

### Why are we proposing this?

43. Phase one of the review looked at the summative question and considered whether it remained fit for purpose. There were significant concerns about the wording of the current question. In particular, the term 'satisfaction' was regarded as unhelpful as it detracted from the wider findings of the survey and was seen as too consumerist in nature. There were also concerns about the use of the summative question by the media in England when reporting on the outcomes of the NSS each year. The current question 27 on overall satisfaction is the most commonly used metric in league tables, and its removal might make the results less susceptible to ranking. Phase one of the review found that the question was unhelpful for the survey as a whole. Most questions ask students to rate their experience of different aspects of their academic experience, and no other question asks about satisfaction. Yet critics often derogatively dub the NSS as a 'satisfaction survey'. There was no consensus on what should replace it.<sup>14</sup>
44. In England, the OfS takes the view that continued use of the summative question detracts from the importance of understanding individual aspects of the quality of students' academic experience reflected in individual questions and question banks.
45. However, the regulator and funding bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland wish to retain a summative measure of some description for their regulatory purposes. The review concluded that the word 'satisfaction' should be removed from any replacement questions; however, we have included this as an option as this would avoid a loss of continuity in the question time series given its use within the quality arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### Role of the NSS in UK higher education quality assessment

46. The NSS currently forms part of the monitoring or assessment of quality in all four nations of the UK.

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6ad8f44-f532-4b55-aa32-7193497ddf92/nss-review-phase-1-report.pdf>.

47. In England the OfS expects to use NSS data to construct indicators for the TEF. We also use NSS indicators to inform our monitoring of providers' compliance with our revised ongoing conditions of registration relating to quality:
- Condition B1: Academic experience
  - Condition B2: Resources, support and student engagement
  - Condition B4: Assessment and awards
48. The NSS indicators are used with other regulatory intelligence to identify cases where further consideration of risk may be necessary. For each of these regulatory purposes, the OfS uses individual questions and/or question banks and does not use the summative question.
49. The NSS also has a clearly defined role in the regulation of quality in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with the student voice forming a key part of their higher education strategies.
50. In Scotland, participation in the NSS is a condition of SFC funding, and NSS outcomes inform all five elements of the Scottish Quality Enhancement Framework. They form a key dataset for discussion at the Quality Assurance Agency's Enhancement Led Institutional Reviews with providers. The NSS overall satisfaction question is used as a key performance indicator (variance from NSS benchmark) in the SFC's Outcome and Impact Framework, with providers required to commit to improvement against this measure in their annual Outcome and Impact Framework agreements. The SFC also uses analysis of NSS outcomes at provider and subject level to inform its Outcome Agreement Managers' discussion with providers on enhancing their performance, in its assessment of their risk and university engagement levels, and to inform its policy developments and interventions.
51. The SFC also uses NSS outcomes, alongside a range of other quantitative and qualitative evidence, to account to the Scottish Government for the effective use of public funding for undergraduate fees for Scottish-domiciled students, and in discharging its statutory responsibility to ensure the quality of higher education provision in Scotland.
52. In Wales, HEFCW considers a range of data, including NSS outcomes, in relation to its regulatory responsibilities. Analysis includes the identification of trends in data (at both provider and subject levels) and comparison with benchmarks together with providers' track records. This analysis includes the current summative question. This analysis informs HEFCW's institutional risk review process and other decision making.
53. In Northern Ireland, DfENI currently assesses the quality and standards of the higher education providers it funds through the annual provider review (APR) process. One of the key elements of the APR is the scrutiny of key pieces of data, which includes the results from the NSS, including the summative question. The process draws together a variety of data and other information about each provider and presents this in an 'APR dashboard', which then informs the overall judgement process.
54. Both providers and students across all nations see value in the NSS remaining a UK-wide survey despite the increasing divergence in the higher education policy landscape. It is seen as particularly beneficial for the purposes of student information because users do not always recognise the devolved nature of higher education in the UK. Our stakeholder engagement

suggested providers and funding councils in the devolved nations also see a significant benefit in a UK-wide survey including the summative question for benchmarking performance, particularly for specialist providers.<sup>15</sup>

55. However, the OfS takes the view that the benefits that some have identified in maintaining the same summative question across the UK is outweighed in England by the need to ensure clear links between the information provided by the NSS and the aspects of quality that are subject to regulation. Proposing a different approach to the summative question in different UK nations is designed to ensure that the proposed changes to questions reflect the different approaches to quality across the UK. At the same time, retaining the same questions for the rest of the questionnaire will continue to offer substantial opportunities for benchmarking.

### **What would the effect of this proposal be?**

56. The proposal, if implemented, would mean that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland retain a summative question in the NSS (see the example of what this could look like below).

#### **Example of what a summative direct question could look like (Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland only)**

Overall, how would you rate the quality of your course?

- Very good
- Fairly good
- Not very good
- Not at all good
- I don't know/This does not apply to me

57. For Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the summative question would continue to be used for the monitoring of quality in addition to student information, enhancement and public accountability. Providers in the devolved nations and students would no longer be able to make comparisons with providers in England based on the summative question, and vice versa. The revised summative question tested well for comprehension with students and in our pilot and removed the controversial term satisfaction; the revised question format is also in line with proposals for the rest of the questionnaire. However, given its role in quality within Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we also heard that consistency was important. Therefore, we are seeking views on which version we should adopt in any final questionnaire.

58. The removal of the summative question for England would mean that there would be no equivalent summative measure or score for England.

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<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/b6ad8f44-f532-4b55-aa32-7193497ddf92/nss-review-phase-1-report.pdf>.

### Questions for proposal 3

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

### Proposal 4: New question on freedom of expression

#### What are we proposing?

59. During our stakeholder engagement work for phases one and two of the review, participants were asked about current and potential new themes for the survey. As a result, we are proposing to include a new question on freedom of expression as an additional question to the core questionnaire.

#### Why are we proposing this?

60. Freedom of expression was a theme consistently raised by stakeholders. This includes issues of self-censorship and the confidence of students to express themselves. Many stakeholders, and students in particular, saw freedom of expression as key to a sense of inclusion and belonging. Those working in providers regarded it as an important element of academic freedom. In England, ensuring freedom of speech within the law is a strategic priority for the OfS.

61. The terms ‘freedom of expression’ and ‘freedom of speech’ are often used interchangeably, and our stakeholder feedback and cognitive testing outcomes also found this. However, freedom of speech as a term caused some confusion with respondents in early testing. We found that the term freedom of expression was better understood as a way of measuring the extent to which students feel able to express their views. Therefore, we propose to adopt this term.

62. Freedom of expression is an essential element of students’ higher education experience. They are entitled to be taught by staff holding a wide range of views, even where these may be unpopular or controversial, and to similarly express their own views. The OfS receives notifications from staff and students who identify a ‘chilling effect’ on their ability to express their cultural, religious or political views without fear of repercussions. Our proposed NSS question seeks to measure the extent to which students find it difficult to express themselves freely.

#### What would the effect of this proposal be?

63. The adoption of a freedom of expression question would mean that all respondents to the survey (both online and telephone) would be asked the question after the completion of the core NSS and prior to the optional banks. An example of what this might look like can be found below (further versions of the question can be found in Annex D, although precise wording and scale is still subject to further testing and piloting and therefore may change).

## New question theme: freedom of expression

### Example of a direct question on freedom of expression

During your studies, how free did you feel to express your ideas, opinions and beliefs?

- Very free
- Fairly free
- Not very free
- Not at all free
- This does not apply to me

## Question for proposal 4

5. Should a question on freedom of expression be asked as an additional question after the core questionnaire?

## Proposal 5: New question on awareness of mental wellbeing provision should be included as an additional to the main survey.

### What are we proposing?

64. During our stakeholder engagement for phases one and two of the review, participants were asked about current and potential new themes for the survey. As a result, we are proposing to include a new question on students' awareness of mental wellbeing provision at their provider as an additional question to the core questionnaire.

### Why are we proposing this?

65. The theme of student mental wellbeing was raised consistently by a wide range of stakeholders, including students. It is a current policy priority for all four countries in the UK.
66. Adding a question on mental wellbeing recognises that students who are not able to access appropriate support may have a sub-optimal academic experience. Nevertheless, there was some concern about whether a question on the theme of mental wellbeing would meet our core survey criterion that questions concern the student academic experience, and on matters or issues that providers can directly influence.
67. As part of the pilot, we tested two questions: the first on awareness of the mental wellbeing provision provided by a provider, the second on the adequacy of that service. Our analysis of the pilot outcomes suggests both questions were measuring the same thing. Response patterns demonstrate higher levels of 'I don't know/does not apply' to the adequacy question, suggesting it did not apply to large numbers of respondents. This is supported by our stakeholder feedback that suggests a minority of student access mental wellbeing services. We considered routing these questions to those respondents who had tried to access or had accessed support. We took the view that this would not be appropriate because the relatively low numbers of students accessing such support would mean that the data would likely only be able to be reported at provider level or even sector level, reducing its efficacy in relation to the

aims of the survey. We were also mindful of possible ethical and safeguarding considerations as we would not be in a position to offer support to any respondents signalling concerns about their mental wellbeing.

68. In response to these issues, we have designed the proposed mental wellbeing question to focus on students' awareness of the mental wellbeing support services their provider makes available.

### **What would the effect of this proposal be?**

69. The adoption of a mental wellbeing question would mean that all respondents to the survey (both online and telephone) would be asked the question after the completion of the core NSS and prior to the optional banks. An example of what this might look like can be found below (further versions of the question can be found in Annex D), although precise wording and scale is still subject to further testing and piloting and therefore may change.

#### **Example of a direct question on mental wellbeing provision**

How well communicated was information about your university or college's mental wellbeing support services?

- Extremely well
- Very well
- Fairly well
- Fairly badly
- Very badly
- Extremely badly
- This does not apply to me

70. Further detail on the outcomes of testing the pilot for both questions is in the NSS pilot outcomes report.<sup>16</sup>

### **Questions for proposal 5**

#### **New question theme: mental wellbeing**

6. Should a question on mental wellbeing provision be asked as an additional question after the core questionnaire?
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?

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<sup>16</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-student-survey-2022-pilot/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-student-survey-2022-pilot/).



## Section three: Periodic review of the NSS

### Proposal 6: A four-year review cycle should be established to ensure the NSS continues to meet demands

#### What are we proposing?

71. We propose establishing a four-year review cycle for the NSS to ensure the survey can reflect changes in practice and continue to meet the needs of the UK funders and regulators, students and providers. To date, the survey has been reviewed on an ad hoc basis with the last major review conducted in 2015. This would mean that there would normally be a review every four years, although we would wish to retain flexibility to allow us to respond appropriately to any changes in the policy environment.

#### Why are we proposing this?

72. A core aim of the review of the NSS is to ensure that the survey remains fit for purpose, now and in the future. The NSS asks questions about students' academic experience at their provider. Because the nature of learning and teaching design and delivery – and the context within which the survey operates – will change, it is sensible to build in a mechanism to allow the questions and the way that the survey is delivered to change too if that is appropriate.

73. The benefit of undertaking a regular view of the NSS needs to be balanced against the usefulness that is accrued from developing and then maintaining a consistent measure of concepts relating to the academic experience over time, to allow providers, students, the UK funding bodies and regulators, and the public, to identify trends in data, and to track differences in the way students respond to survey questions between years.

#### What would the effect of this proposal be?

##### 74. Benefits

- The questions asked are reviewed every few years to ensure that they remain relevant and meaningful, and that they reflect the most important aspects of students' academic experience.
- New insight in survey design or new technology could be employed.
- The proposed timescale is four years. This is long enough to establish trends over time, but regular enough to build in a degree of flexibility into the survey. We have chosen four years to align with the proposed cycle of TEF.
- A regular review process ensures that changes could be properly planned and managed and resources used effectively.
- The potential for questions to change could help to prevent 'coaching' students to respond to the survey.
- A four-year review would help to ensure that the survey 'stands the test of time'.

## 75. Drawbacks

- The time series of results would be potentially limited to four years if questions change following a review.
- There would be a potential for 'mission creep' or the survey content to move beyond the academic experience over time, and challenges associated with retaining the core 'student academic experience' element of the survey.
- Additional cost for review activity.

## Question for proposal 6

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?

## Section four: Survey fieldwork timing

### Proposal 7: Shortening the main survey period

#### What are we proposing?

76. The NSS currently opens in January and runs until the end of April. We are proposing to shorten the survey window by delaying the launch of the survey to mid-February. We propose to retain the end of April deadline.

#### Why are we proposing this?

77. Earlier this year, the OfS consulted on aspects of the Data Futures programme being delivered by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In particular we consulted on the nature, frequency and timing of in-year data collections by HESA to enable us to better achieve OfS regulatory objectives. Respondents to the consultation on the Data Futures programme indicated a strong preference for a 1 December census date for the in-year student data collection.<sup>17</sup> We agreed with respondents that a 1 December census date was likely to reduce burden by aligning with dates already used by providers and improve data quality by allowing providers more time to complete autumn registration and assessment activities. To make this possible, the start date of the NSS would have to move, because the collection with the 1 December census date generates the list of students to be targeted during the NSS survey.

78. We propose retaining the current survey end date of 30 April: stakeholder feedback suggests this would avoid surveying students during end-of-year examinations, assessments and final shows for most students. It would also mean we could continue to publish the NSS results in July, enabling providers to make any changes to their courses they consider appropriate arising from the survey results in time for the start of the new academic year.

#### What would the effect of this proposal be?

79. This proposal would shorten the survey window for individual providers by up to six weeks, depending on a provider's current chosen start date.

80. We anticipate some efficiencies in data quality processes, including the discontinuation of the additions and removals process, can be achieved through the move to in-year data collection. This means we should be able to reduce the time from the data collection closing to starting the NSS survey. We would therefore anticipate a survey start date of mid-February for all providers. There would no longer be scope for a provider to choose its own start date.

81. If we were to shorten the survey window, we anticipate some impact on response rates. However, in recent years, an increasing number of providers have chosen to start the survey in week five of the data collection window (in mid-February), which is in line with the new proposed timings. This has not had a general impact on response rates. If we did proceed with the proposed new dates, we would expect to adjust the fieldwork activity – such as the timings of email and SMS contact with students, and the telephone phase – to mitigate any potential negative impact on response rates.

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<sup>17</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-futures-and-data-collection-analysis-of-responses-to-part-one-of-consultation-and-decisions/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/data-futures-and-data-collection-analysis-of-responses-to-part-one-of-consultation-and-decisions/).

## Questions for proposal 7

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?

## Section five: Welsh language

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.

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?

# Annex A: Summary of NSS review activities

Table 1: Summary of NSS review activities (phases 1 and 2)

Phase one of the NSS review looked at:	Milestones
The purpose of the NSS in the current higher education landscape	Poll of over 1,000 current, prospective and recent students Stakeholder engagement work (summer 2020)
The level of bureaucratic burden the NSS placed on providers and how this could be reduced	An open consultation page on the OfS website. This had 1,185 responses from academics (40 per cent), other staff of universities and colleges, and other stakeholders such as those with roles in information, advice and guidance
Whether there were unintended and unanticipated consequences of the NSS for provider behaviour, and how these could be prevented, including whether the NSS drives the lowering of academic standards and grade inflation	Provider survey (autumn 2020)
The appropriate level at which the NSS could continue to provide reliable data on the student perspective on their subjects, their providers and the wider system, and what could be done without depending on a universal annual sample	NSS Review phase one report published in 30 March 2021, with recommendations for phase two
The extent to which data from the NSS should be made public, including the implications of Freedom of Information legislation	
How to ensure the OfS has the data it needs to regulate quality effectively	
How to ensure the NSS will stand the test of time and can be adapted and refined periodically to prevent gaming	
How to ensure the UK-wide role of the survey is considered in any recommendations	

Phase two of the NSS review looked at:	Milestones
Potential changes to NSS survey questions to ensure they remain relevant and fit for purpose now and in the future	Question design and testing (autumn 2021) – see Annex D for further detail Pilot (January-February 2022) Outcomes of pilot published (July 2022) Consultation on changes to survey (July 2022)
Potential changes to the publication of NSS data, including the reporting thresholds, to ensure it meets the needs of users and is easy to understand	Analysis work (summer 2022) Technical consultation (autumn 2022 – once changes to survey have been finalised) Changes launched for 2023 survey
Providing improved guidance to assist universities, colleges and students' unions, associations or guilds on responsible statistical use of the NSS	Pending outcomes of consultation, stakeholder work underway
Improving the data visualisation and functionality of the NSS dissemination site used by universities, colleges and students' unions, associations and guilds to access their data	Stakeholder engagement work (summer 2022) New website launch for 2024 results* *to accommodate procurement timelines
Increasing provider and student awareness of what constitutes inappropriate influence in the promotion of the NSS and how to report it	Completed for 2022 survey

## Annex B: List of consultation questions

1. Do you agree we should retain the current criteria for NSS core questions?
2. What are the consequences – both positive and negative – of changing to the use of direct questions for the NSS?
3. What are the consequences – both positive and negative – of removing the summative question for England only?
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?
5. Should a question on freedom of expression be offered as an additional question after the core questionnaire?
6. Should a question on mental wellbeing provision be offered as an additional question after the core questionnaire?
7. What are the unintended consequences of asking questions to students on the awareness of mental wellbeing services where no support to respondents can be offered?
8. Do you agree that we develop a process where the NSS is reviewed on a four-year cycle? Is the proposed timing between reviews a sensible balance between developing insight and maintaining capacity to change?
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?
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:
  - a. opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?
  - b. treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?
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:
  - a. opportunities for persons to use the Welsh language?
  - b. treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language?
12. Did you find any aspects of the proposals unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.
13. In your view, are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation (see paragraph 7) could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than is proposed here?



## Annex C: NSS review 2020-22: Terms of reference

The terms of reference for the first phase of the review were:

1. Assess the bureaucratic burden the NSS places on providers and how this could be reduced.
2. Explore the unintended consequences of the NSS for provider behaviour and how these could be prevented, including whether the NSS drives the lowering of academic standards and grade inflation.
3. Examine the appropriate level at which the NSS could continue to provide reliable data on the student perspective on their subject, provider and the wider system, and what could be done without depending on a universal annual sample.
4. Examine the extent to which data from the NSS should be made public, including the implications of Freedom of Information (FoI) legislation.
5. Ensure the OfS has the data it needs to regulate quality effectively.
6. Ensure the NSS will stand the test of time, and can be adapted and refined periodically to prevent 'gaming'.
7. Ensure the UK-wide role of the survey is considered in any recommendations.

# Annex D: Summary of proposed changes to the existing core questions

1. Two questionnaires were tested as part of the 2022 pilot: one with direct questions (option 1) and one using the existing Likert scale (option 2). We have set out in this annex the questionnaire for our proposed option (option 1). We will consider consultation responses as we refine individual questions and undertake further testing and piloting. This means that the detailed wording of questions in this annex may change.

## Option 1

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<b>Teaching on my course</b>	
<p><b>How often are teaching staff good at explaining course content/things?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely or never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Some evidence from student testing that we needed to focus question wording on teaching staff.</p> <p>Work on this question is ongoing. We are testing the term ‘course content’, but remain open to reverting back to ‘things’.</p> <p>We continue to work on the most appropriate scale for this question. We are currently testing using a ‘good’ scale (i.e. How good are teaching staff at explaining course content? – Very good – Not at all good). Our decision here will be driven by findings from this ongoing testing work.</p>
<p><b>How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely or never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Evidence from testing suggests that ‘engaging’ would require respondents to evaluate the teaching instead of a making a judgement based on personal interest.</p> <p>A frequency scale is used to facilitate averaging out views over the student’s experience.</p>
<p><b>How often is the course intellectually stimulating?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely or never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same. The use of a frequency scale allows for averaging out views over the student’s experience</p>

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<p><b>How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely/never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same. The use of a frequency scale in this version allows averaging out over the student's experience.</p>
<p><b>Learning opportunities</b></p>	
<p><b>To what extent have you had the chance to apply theories and concepts that you have learnt?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>The learning opportunities bank is now overly long. We are therefore considering overlap between questions as part of our ongoing work.</p> <p>Question remains the same but we propose the use of an extent scale.</p>
<p><b>To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas or concepts in depth?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	
<p><b>To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same but an extent scale is used here.</p>
<p><b>When working with other students as part of your course, how helpful was this for your learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very helpful</li> <li>• Fairly helpful</li> <li>• Not very helpful</li> <li>• Not at all helpful</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>This question does not sit well in this bank. It is also possible that it will create incentives to do away with unpopular, but pedagogically useful, group work activities.</p> <p>We continue to work on developing a question about good quality opportunities for working in groups.</p>

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<p><b>To what extent does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you've already learnt?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>This new question replaces the breadth and depth question from the pilot, which tested poorly.</p> <p>The question links to the OfS quality and standards B conditions on the coherence of the academic experience.</p>
<p><b>To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• To a very small extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>This new question measures students' views about the delivery of the course. This links to the OfS quality and standards conditions of the effective delivery of the academic experience.</p>
<p><b>How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you'll need for your future?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very well</li> <li>• Fairly well</li> <li>• Not very well</li> <li>• Not at all well</li> </ul> <p>This does not apply to me</p>	<p>New question. This links to the OfS quality and standards conditions for the development of relevant skills. Exact position in questionnaire subject to further testing.</p>
<p><b>Assessment and feedback</b></p>	
<p><b>How often have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learnt?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely or never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>This is a new question linked to the OfS quality and standards conditions. The question makes use of a frequency scale here to allow students to average out their experience over their whole course.</p>
<p><b>How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very clear</li> <li>• Fairly clear</li> <li>• Not very clear</li> <li>• Not at all clear</li> </ul>	<p>Corrects issue with the old question which asked about two things at once. This new question is about the clarity of marking criteria, and uses a 'clear' scale to measure perceptions of clarity.</p>

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	
<p><b>How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very fair</li> <li>Somewhat fair</li> <li>Not very fair</li> <li>Not at all fair</li> <li>This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same, but the scale has been altered to ask directly about fairness.</p>
<p><b>How timely was your feedback?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very timely</li> <li>Fairly timely</li> <li>Not very timely</li> <li>Not at all timely</li> <li>This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same, but the scale has been altered to ask about timeliness.</p>
<p><b>How often has feedback helped you to improve your learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very often</li> <li>Fairly often</li> <li>Not very often</li> <li>Rarely or never</li> <li>This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Corrects issues with vagueness of the original. The question has been changed to focus on an evaluation of the usefulness of feedback for supporting learning.</p>
<p><b>Academic support</b></p>	
<p><b>How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very easy</li> <li>Fairly easy</li> <li>Not very easy</li> <li>Not at all easy</li> <li>This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Corrects issue with the original question which implied rather than asked directly about the availability of staff. The new question makes use of an 'easy' scale to allow students to offer their views.</p>
<p><b>How well have teaching staff supported your learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Very well</li> <li>Fairly well</li> <li>Not very well</li> <li>Not at all well</li> <li>This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Replaces: 'I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course.'</p> <p>This is an effort to be more specific than the original question about advice and guidance. It is still under development. Cognitive testing is taking place to see if this is measuring appropriately.</p>

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<p><b>How often were you able to get good advice about study choices?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely or never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same but makes use of a frequency scale rather than asking for an absolute assessment of the availability or otherwise of 'good advice'.</p>
<b>Organisation and management</b>	
<p><b>How well organised is your course?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very well organised</li> <li>• Fairly well organised</li> <li>• Not very well organised</li> <li>• Not at all well organised</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Corrects issue with the original question which asked about two things at once. Makes use of an 'organised' scale.</p>
<p><b>How clearly were any changes to the course communicated?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very clearly</li> <li>• Fairly clearly</li> <li>• Not very clearly</li> <li>• Not at all clearly</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Questions remains broadly similar, but now makes use of a 'clearly' scale.</p>
<b>Learning resources</b>	
<p><b>How often have you been able to access the learning resources (either digital or physical) that you need?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very often</li> <li>• Fairly often</li> <li>• Not very often</li> <li>• Rarely or never</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Follows feedback from stakeholders that students are less likely now to distinguish between resources based on which part of the provider offers them.</p> <p>Testing with students suggests that both digital and physical resources are being considered simultaneously.</p> <p>Question asks about access to resources.</p>
<p><b>How well have the physical and/or digital resources supported your learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very well</li> <li>• Fairly well</li> <li>• Not very well</li> <li>• Not at all well</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Follows feedback from stakeholders that students do not distinguish between resources based on their location within a provider.</p> <p>Testing with students suggests that both digital and physical resources are being considered simultaneously.</p> <p>Question asks about usefulness of resources.</p>

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<p><b>How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very well</li> <li>• Fairly well</li> <li>• Not very well</li> <li>• Not at all well</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Original question reformulated with a 'well' scale.</p>
<p><b>How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very well</li> <li>• Fairly well</li> <li>• Not very well</li> <li>• Not at all well</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Original question reformulated with a 'well' scale.</p>
<p><b>Student voice</b></p>	
<p><b>To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same but uses an 'extent' scale.</p>
<p><b>To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To a great extent</li> <li>• To some extent</li> <li>• Hardly at all</li> <li>• Not at all</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same but uses an 'extent' scale.</p>
<p><b>How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very clear</li> <li>• Fairly clear</li> <li>• Not very clear</li> <li>• Not at all clear</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question remains the same but uses a 'clear' scale.</p>

Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<p><b>How effectively does the students' union (association or guild) represent students' academic interests?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very effectively</li> <li>• Fairly effectively</li> <li>• Not very effectively</li> <li>• Not at all effectively</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>Question stays the same but uses an 'effectively' scale.</p>
<p><b>Summative questions (Scotland, N. Ireland, Wales)</b></p>	
<p><b>Overall, how would you rate the quality of your course?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very good</li> <li>• Fairly good</li> <li>• Not very good</li> <li>• Not at all good</li> <li>• I don't know/This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>New question proposed to replace the overall satisfaction question by asking students to offer their judgement on the quality of their course.</p>
<p><b>Open Text question</b></p>	
<p><b>Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight?</b></p>	<p>Open text</p>
<p><b>Mental wellbeing services at your university/college</b></p>	
<p><b>How well communicated was information about your university or college's mental wellbeing support services?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extremely well</li> <li>• Very well</li> <li>• Fairly well</li> <li>• Fairly badly</li> <li>• Very badly</li> <li>• Extremely badly</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>New question on the quality of a provider's communication about available services.</p>



Proposed questions	Changes and rationale
<b>Freedom of expression</b>	
<p><b>During your studies, how free did you feel to express your ideas, opinions and beliefs?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very free</li> <li>• Fairly free</li> <li>• Not very free</li> <li>• Not at all free</li> <li>• This does not apply to me</li> </ul>	<p>New question on freedom of expression.</p>

# Annex E: Summary of question development process and pilot outcomes from phase two of the review

1. In spring and summer 2021, the OfS undertook extensive stakeholder engagement activity with the purpose of understanding views about the content of the NSS questionnaire. The engagement process included running 14 stakeholder roundtables and workshops with a range of individuals and organisations in the sector, including both provider and student representative groups, as well as the OfS student panel. Participants were asked to share their views about the appropriateness of the existing questionnaire, and to suggest any potential new themes for the survey.
2. In parallel with this work, the OfS held a roundtable discussion with a group of survey professionals and academics with expertise in survey design. Rather than focus on the content of the questionnaire, the purpose of this discussion was to consider the wider methodological issues associated with the NSS. The group unanimously agreed that the existing agree/disagree five-point Likert response scale was potentially problematic. Current thinking is that Likert response scales are likely to create a high degree of mismatch between the concept being measured (e.g. views about the teaching on my course) and the available options for a reply. This issue could potentially create issues which undermine the robustness of the survey data. The group also pointed to specific questions which could be improved through minor or moderate changes to wording to remove ambiguity in meaning.
3. Insight from these engagement activities became the basis for development work on the questionnaire. Shift Insight Ltd was contracted to provide support with question development and a programme of cognitive testing. Shift was tasked with undertaking an initial internal expert review of the questionnaire, to examine its design and coherence. This review was followed by a series of 75 cognitive interviews. These were conducted with a diverse range of students from across the UK who had completed at least two years of their degree course or who had recently graduated. The aim of these interviews was to test the wording for the existing, revised, and new NSS questions with the survey's intended audience. The cognitive interviewing technique involves student respondents reading out the questions and 'thinking aloud' as they consider the question and their answer to the question. This approach helps assess whether survey respondents interpret NSS questions in the way they were intended, reducing the potential for measurement error.
4. Findings from the cognitive testing were used to inform the development of different versions of an NSS questionnaire. The pilots were UK-wide, conducted with a sample of final year undergraduate students who completed the NSS 2022 from January to March 2022. The pilot was administered in English and in Welsh, and online and via telephone.
5. The pilot tested two versions of the questionnaire<sup>18</sup>:
  - i. Existing, revised and new questions with the existing response scale.

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<sup>18</sup> See [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/0c1595b3-1c8c-4a70-8e79-926af6b9a1a4/nss-2022\\_pilot-questionnaire.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/0c1595b3-1c8c-4a70-8e79-926af6b9a1a4/nss-2022_pilot-questionnaire.pdf).

- ii. Existing, revised and new questions with a new direct questions response scale.

The pilot aimed to understand the similarities and differences in patterns of response, and to evaluate the new questions and response scale.

6. Questionnaire 1 made several changes to the original (post-2017) questionnaire. These ranged from minor changes to clarify meaning, to more significant changes which altered the focus of a question. The questionnaire also included entirely new questions. Because the pilot questionnaire followed on directly from the main survey, the pilot excluded questions which had not been amended and were in banks of questions where no other changes had been made. This is because the student had just answered these questions. Questions about 'student voice', for example, were omitted from this questionnaire.
7. Questionnaire 2 sought to test an alternative response format. Rather than asking students whether they agreed or not to a statement, questions were posed directly – with the middle option removed. Because all questions were rephrased, all were offered to respondents in this version of the pilot questionnaire. However, efforts were made to retain the same conceptual basis for each question where possible. Where existing questions contained more than a single concept, or the conceptual basis was unclear, these were separated into two or more questions. This version of the questionnaire also included entirely new questions.
8. The survey sample for the pilot was drawn from those who had completed NSS 2022. Eligibility was determined by our sampling criteria. These were designed to ensure that we are able to draw conclusions about similarities and differences in patterns of response between key student groups. The data from the pilot was analysed and used in the development of the proposals within this consultation. We have published a full report on the results from the pilot on the OfS website.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-student-survey-2022-pilot/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-student-survey-2022-pilot/).

# Annex F: Matters to which we have had regard in reaching our proposals

## The OfS's general duties

1. In formulating these proposals, the OfS has had regard to its general duties as set out in section 2(1) of HERA; these are reproduced in Annex G. We consider that the proposals in this consultation are particularly relevant to general duties (b), (c), and (e), which relate to quality, choice and opportunities for students; competition where this is in the interests of students; equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education.
2. In formulating these proposals, we have given weight to (b), and (e): promoting quality, choice and opportunities for students; and equality of opportunity.
3. The OfS's regulatory objectives reflect the things that are important to all students: high quality courses, positive outcomes, and the ongoing value of their qualifications. In formulating these proposals, we have sought to align development of the NSS with the recent changes we have made to our regulation of quality through the B conditions of registration. Our proposals would ensure that we could use NSS outcomes in our general risk-based monitoring of providers in relation to those conditions in a way that continues to promote quality.
4. A key aim of the survey is to provide information to individual providers to support their quality improvement or enhancement activities. We have therefore sought to ensure that our proposals reinforce the incentives for providers to continue to do so, for example by focusing questions on aspects of quality that should be subject to improvement activity where the results suggest this is appropriate.
5. Subject to appropriate decision-making, we would normally expect NSS outcomes to be published, at sector level and in relation to individual providers. We see this as an important set of information that students and their advisers can use to decide what and where to study. Our use of the survey as a tool to support informed student choice means that it should therefore ask questions about the aspects of higher education courses that are likely to be of interest to future students. We take the view that our proposals achieve this by focusing on 'teaching on my course', assessment and feedback, and learning resources in particular.
6. Our proposed changes to the survey are designed to ensure that students from all backgrounds can provide meaningful answers to the questionnaire and can benefit from the responses provided by previous cohorts of students. For example, when testing and piloting our proposals we have sought to test where interpretation and comprehension of questions may need adjustment to improve the robustness of the survey instrument. This is important to ensure the NSS continues to support equality of opportunity for different groups of students.

## Public Sector Equality Duty

7. We have had regard to Schedule 1, paragraph 21 of HERA, which extends the Equality Act 2010, and therefore the Public Sector Equality Duty, to the OfS. This requires the OfS to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, foster good relations between different groups and take steps to advance equality of opportunity.

8. Our proposed new questions about freedom of expression and mental wellbeing provision are designed in part to elicit views on matters that may affect people who share a particular protected characteristic. We wish to ensure, for example, that people who share protected beliefs are able to provide feedback on the extent to which they have felt able to express their ideas, views, opinions and beliefs during their course. Providers may wish to understand how well they are communicating information about their mental wellbeing support services because that will allow them to ensure that students, including those who share the protected characteristic of disability, understand the support that is available to them. We have framed the two new questions in this context.
9. More generally, we have considered whether there may be any tension between our consultation proposals in relation to the NSS and equality matters. Our view is that we are seeking to understand the perspectives of different student groups through a refreshed NSS and this is likely to have a positive impact on equality. If a subset of students, particularly those who share protected characteristics, is not provided with sufficient opportunity to provide feedback through the NSS, their views will not be available to providers seeking to improve, or to future cohorts of students, who may also share particular protected characteristics, to inform their study choices. When testing and piloting our proposals we have sought to test where interpretation and comprehension of questions may vary between different groups of students and have considered and addressed where a particular group might respond in a way that may lead to negative provider behaviour through recruitment.
10. Through this consultation we are seeking views on any unintended consequences of our proposals, for example for particular types of provider or groups of students. We are also seeking views about the potential impact of our proposals on individuals on the basis of their protected characteristics. Responses to this consultation will inform our assessment of the impact of our proposals on different groups.
11. We will continue to have due regard for our obligations under the Equality Act 2010, as we consider responses to this consultation.

## **The Regulators' Code**

12. We have had regard to the Regulators' Code. Section 1 of the code is particularly relevant: Section 1: Regulators should carry out their activities in a way that supports those they regulate to comply and grow.
13. An updated NSS would provide providers with extensive reliable information about the views of their students which they can use to identify areas for improvement. Our proposals also ensure that the NSS is aligned with the requirements we impose through our conditions of registration for quality. This means that a provider's NSS results provide it with insights into areas in which the OfS may identify compliance concerns in future. Through its key aim of supporting informed student choice, the NSS provides a mechanism through which providers can improve and potentially grow through increased student recruitment.

## **Guidance issued by the Secretary of State**

14. We have had regard to the matters set out in the Secretary of State's guidance dated March 2022. We consider that the points relating to quality and freedom of speech are particularly

relevant to our proposals, for example in relation to our proposed new question on freedom of expression.

## Code of Practice for Statistics

15. We have had regard to the Code of Practice for Statistics in preparing our proposals for design of the methods and processes for collecting data on students' perspectives of their higher education experience.
16. The following pillars are particularly relevant for the proposed changes to the NSS:
  - Quality. Principle Q2.1 requires that the methods and processes should be based on national and international practice, scientific principle or established professional consensus. We have reflected this principle in how we have developed the new questionnaire through a robust process of cognitive testing and piloting to ensure the questions are well understood and interpreted consistently. Our proposals to use direct questions draws on current good practice in survey design.
  - Value. V1.1 Statistics producers should maintain and refresh their understanding of the use and potential use of the statistics and data. They should consider the ways in which the statistics might be used and the nature of the decisions that are or could be informed by them. Our proposals seek to update the survey to address current issues including through reflecting aspects of quality within the OfS's revised B conditions.
  - Value. V4.1 Statistics producers should keep up to date with developments that can improve statistics and data. They should be transparent in conducting their development activities and be open about the outcomes and longer-term development plans. We have reflected this principle in how we have developed the new questionnaire through a robust process of cognitive testing and piloting to ensure the questions are well understood and interpreted consistently. Our proposals to use direct questions draws on current good practice in survey design.
17. We have also had regard to the following pillars:
  - Trustworthiness. T4.1 Organisations should be transparent about their approach to public engagement with users, potential users, and other stakeholders with an interest in the public good served by the statistics.
  - Trustworthiness. T4.2 A work programme should be established and regularly reviewed. Statistics producers should be open about progress towards meeting priorities and objectives. Users and other stakeholders should be involved to help prioritise statistical plans.
18. We have had regard to these principles through robust piloting and cognitive testing of our proposals and through our comprehensive stakeholder engagement and this consultation process. Our NSS review group included a mix of staff from providers, students and other onward users of the data. We also heard from a group of survey experts in the formulation of our proposals. We are also proposing introducing periodic review process for the survey.

# Annex G: Section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017

## 2. General duties

1. In performing its functions, the OfS must have regard to—
  - a. the need to protect the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers,
  - b. the need to promote quality, and greater choice and opportunities for students, in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers,
  - c. the need to encourage competition between English higher education providers in connection with the provision of higher education where that competition is in the interests of students and employers, while also having regard to the benefits for students and employers resulting from collaboration between such providers,
  - d. the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers,
  - e. the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers,
  - f. the need to use the OfS's resources in an efficient, effective and economic way, and
  - g. so far as relevant, the principles of best regulatory practice, including the principles that regulatory activities should be—
    - i. transparent, accountable, proportionate and consistent, and
    - ii. targeted only at cases in which action is needed.
2. The reference in subsection (1)(b) to choice in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers includes choice amongst a diverse range of—
  - a. types of provider,
  - b. higher education courses, and
  - c. means by which they are provided (for example, full-time or part-time study, distance learning or accelerated courses).
3. In performing its functions, including its duties under subsection (1), the OfS must have regard to guidance given to it by the Secretary of State.
4. In giving such guidance, the Secretary of State must have regard to the need to protect the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers.
5. The guidance may, in particular, be framed by reference to particular courses of study but, whether or not the guidance is framed in that way, it must not relate to—

- a. particular parts of courses of study,
  - b. the content of such courses,
  - c. the manner in which they are taught, supervised or assessed,
  - d. the criteria for the selection, appointment or dismissal of academic staff, or how they are applied, or
  - e. the criteria for the admission of students, or how they are applied.
6. Guidance framed by reference to a particular course of study must not guide the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study.
7. Guidance given by the Secretary of State to the OfS which relates to English higher education providers must apply to such providers generally or to a description of such providers.
8. In this Part, “the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers” means—
- a. the freedom of English higher education providers within the law to conduct their day to day management in an effective and competent way,
  - b. the freedom of English higher education providers—
    - i. to determine the content of particular courses and the manner in which they are taught, supervised and assessed,
    - ii. to determine the criteria for the selection, appointment and dismissal of academic staff and apply those criteria in particular cases, and
    - iii. to determine the criteria for the admission of students and apply those criteria in particular cases, and
  - c. the freedom within the law of academic staff at English higher education providers—
    - i. to question and test received wisdom, and
    - ii. to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at the providers.





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