

Update on theme measures, benchmarking and response thresholds in the NSS

- The feedback survey closes at **1700 on Thursday 30 May 2024**.
- Please submit your response by completing the online form at <https://survey.officeforstudents.org.uk/s/NSS-theme-measures-benchmarking-response-thresholds/>.
- If you require this document in an alternative format, or need assistance with the online form, please contact nss@officeforstudents.org.uk.
- Please note: this email address should not be used for submitting your consultation response.

Executive summary

1. 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 National Student Survey (NSS). The aim was to ensure the NSS remains fit for purpose and continues to support regulation and student information across the UK. This review is now complete.
2. The 2023 NSS survey was the first one following the review and incorporated the changes that we had consulted on. Prior to its publication, we also conducted a consultation on the approach to publication of results.¹ However, our 2023 consultation response² indicated some outstanding issues. This paper will outline these issues and the ongoing work so that users can provide feedback.
3. First, we have now completed our Principal Component Analysis (PCA) of the questionnaire and propose six theme measures are used, instead of the current seven. PCA is a statistical process that tries to identify a few variables which represent the original set of data as well as possible. We have concluded that the best approach going forward is that most of the current themes remain the same, except for questions 15-16 and questions 17-18, which we propose

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-results-of-the-national-student-survey/.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-the-nss-analysis-of-responses-and-decisions/.

are merged into a single group. We believe this approach finds a balance between grouping questions statistically and also according to the policy needs of users in the higher education sector in the UK and the Teaching Excellence Framework in England (TEF).

4. Table 1 below displays a full list of the questions and six themes that we propose are used going forward.

Table 1: Proposed grouping

Teaching on my course	
1. How good are teaching staff at explaining things?	Theme 1
2. How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?	
3. How often is the course intellectually stimulating?	
4. How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?	
Learning opportunities	
5. To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?	Theme 2
6. How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?	
7. To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?	
8. To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	
9. How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?	
Assessment and feedback	
10. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	Theme 3
11. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	
12. How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	
13. How often have you received assessment feedback on time?	
14. How often does feedback help you to improve your work?	
Academic support	
15. How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	Theme 4
16. How well have teaching staff supported your learning?	
Organisation and management	
17. How well organised is your course?	Theme 4
18. How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	
Learning resources	
19. How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	Theme 5
20. How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?	

21. How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?	
Student voice	
22. To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?	Theme 6
23. To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	
24 How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?	

5. Second, we have concluded that the new theme measures will not have an effect on our benchmarking methodology and factors. They remain fit-for-purpose and we do not propose to make any changes to them.
6. Third, we have now considered if lowering response thresholds could significantly increase the data published. We have concluded that it does not and do not intend to make any changes.

Who should respond to this call for evidence?

7. We welcome responses from anyone with an interest in higher education and the NSS. However, we are most interested in views from those working directly with the NSS in providers.

Issue 1: Changes to theme measures

8. Following the NSS review,³ one of the elements changed for the 2023 survey was the response scale for some questions. That change meant that the grouping of the 24 questions into themes needed to be reviewed. This question grouping into theme measures excludes the final three questions in the survey (see annex A). This is because these questions have not been traditionally grouped and because they have a higher than average proportion of N/A responses.
9. The OfS consulted on the approach to publication of NSS results in early 2023.⁴ Within this consultation, proposal 3 related to the publication of theme measures. The proposal was to delay the publication of theme measures until we could rigorously assess their integrity by statistically testing the 2023 NSS data. This was to allow time for further consideration of the approach to be taken, including assessment of themes for subgroups of the population.
10. However, consultation responses raised concerns about the potential delayed publication of theme measures. Coupled with the lack of clarity from our analysis, for the first NSS publication we decided to publish grouped questions by themes which were in line with the previous groupings. We also said we will undertake further analysis to publish the fully tested theme measures for the 2024 survey onwards.
11. Therefore, in 2023 we presented the NSS results for the 24 questions grouped into seven themes. These seven themes followed the existing groups in which the questions are presented to respondents and were broadly in line with previous theme measures. These themes were backed by extensive cognitive testing during the initial development of the survey. Statistical analysis also showed that these themes were not misleading.
12. However, statistical testing of the 2023 results (through Principal Component Analysis) indicated that the existing seven themes no longer held, and so we published the seven theme measures only as experimental statistics. We also urged caution when using theme measures without looking at the underlying questions.
13. We made a commitment to users to continue our analysis and establish if there was a better way to group the questions statistically. We also explained that we recognised the value of consistency of theme measures for all users across the NSS and TEF publications and would seek to align these in any future approach wherever possible. Further information on this analysis and the decision was published as a response to the consultation.⁵
14. We have continued our Principal Component Analysis this year and concluded that the clearest statistical evidence points to splitting the questions into three themes. Without a predetermined number of required factors, the model indicates that three factors are sufficient to capture the themes underlying the 24 questions. The three factors are presented in Table 2 below. This means that the current themes 1 and 2 are grouped together, as are themes 3, 4, 5 and 7,

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/.

⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-results-of-the-national-student-survey/.

⁵ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-the-nss-analysis-of-responses-and-decisions/.

while theme 6 remains on its own. The full results and factor coefficients can be seen in annex B (table 1).

Table 2: Potential grouping of the main 24 question into three new theme measures

Teaching on my course	
1. How good are teaching staff at explaining things?	Theme 1
2. How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?	
3. How often is the course intellectually stimulating?	
4. How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?	
Learning opportunities	
5. To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?	Theme 1
6. How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?	
7. To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?	
8. To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	
9. How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?	
Assessment and feedback	
10. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	Theme 2
11. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	
12. How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	
13. How often have you received assessment feedback on time?	
14. How often does feedback help you to improve your work?	
Academic support	
15. How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	Theme 2
16. How well have teaching staff supported your learning?	
Organisation and management	
17. How well organised is your course?	Theme 2
18. How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	
Learning resources	
19. How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	Theme 3
20. How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?	
21. How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?	
Student voice	

22. To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?	Theme 2
23. To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	
24 How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?	

15. We also considered models with a predetermined number of factors – 4, 5, 6 and 7 factors. The full results can be seen in annex B (tables 2 to 5). These extra factors did not add significant value to the model, nor did they suggest consistent groups. Further, they did not seem likely to add value useful for users.
16. While no policy analysis has taken place across the UK nations to inform the proposed groupings, the OfS also explored policy reasons beyond the statistical modelling that could affect the way we choose to group the questions. We concluded that increasing the number of theme measures has the benefit of making the data easier to interpret by users. Having only three theme measures was seen as too few with important themes aggregated together. We believe that having only three themes clusters the questions more than is helpful, and that there are benefits to users in splitting these themes further and gaining more granular insight.
17. We also considered other numbers of groups, but six seemed the best compromise between the analysis and likely use of the data – it split the largest groups into smaller ones, which also neatly matched most of the previous groups. These groups were seen as useful to providers, aligned more closely with our previous publications, and pulled out the question themes which feature in the B conditions.⁶ They were also seen as useful to TEF and student information displayed on websites such as Discover Uni and in league tables.
18. It was also thought to be useful to keep the Student Voice theme (questions 22-24) separate as this aligns with the policy priority of student engagement. Publishing these groupings separately will give greater prominence to those question groupings and more than the statistical analysis might suggest.
19. On balance we believe this approach is statistically sound being based on the three main analysis grouping while also being consistent with approaches to quality and student information and helping users make sense of the data, as agreed across the four nations of the UK. This approach therefore is consistent with the aims of the NSS.
20. Therefore, we are proposing to split some of these three themes back into their original form. Our intention is to keep questions 1-14 and 19-24 in their original five groups (i.e. 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, 19-21, 22-24).
21. We also propose that questions 15-16 and 17-18 remain grouped together, as suggested by the analysis. This means we are not giving too much emphasis on small groups with only two questions, when all the other themes are comprised of three to five questions. We also believe that it makes more sense to group these four questions together as they are related to more

⁶ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/quality-and-standards/how-we-regulate-quality-and-standards/.

similar concepts, than questions in the remaining five themes would have been. The six groups were presented in table 1 above.

22. The newly proposed theme measures will also be included in the TEF indicators for England in July 2024. The indicators being used in TEF 2027 assessments will be confirmed following a separate consultation.

Issue 2: Benchmarking

23. We use benchmarking to make meaningful comparisons between higher education providers, different student groups and other groups of interest. We do this to take account of the mix of courses and students at a provider and indicate how well that provider has performed compared with performance for similar types of students on similar types of courses in the higher education sector as a whole.
24. We make these comparisons for each of the survey's theme measures. The new theme measures mean, therefore, that we need to produce new benchmarks. We do not, however, think that we need to change our benchmarking methodology for the 2024 NSS publication.
25. After a review of benchmarking factors using the new questionnaire and themes, the core guiding principles⁷ remain the same. In this review we took into account the results of statistical modelling, as well as our policy objectives for benchmarking.
26. This means, we have concluded that our underlying factors⁸ for the NSS benchmark remain fit-for-purpose and the change of theme measures will not affect the benchmarking process.

Issue 3: Minimum response thresholds

27. We had previously said we may consider making changes in this area. See paragraphs 51-70 in our 2023 consultation response⁹ for previous discussions on the issue.
28. Our policy intent was to maximise the availability of published data. Responses to the previous consultation had found that particularly providers with smaller cohorts would welcome lower response thresholds. However, some felt these were already too low.
29. We have now considered whether lower response thresholds would significantly increase the data published, and do not intend to make any changes. Our most recent analysis suggests that the current thresholds provide the best balance between availability of published data and data quality. We consider the 50 per cent response threshold to be easily understood by users and a reasonable quality threshold, and these factors are more important than the likely benefits of changing the threshold. In line with the recommendations from phase one of the 2020 NSS review, we will continue to keep response rate thresholds under review.

⁷ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/benchmarking/guiding-principles-for-benchmarking-factors/.

⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/benchmarking/the-factors-used-to-construct-benchmarks/.

⁹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-the-nss-analysis-of-responses-and-decisions/.

Annex A: NSS 2023 questionnaire

Teaching on my course
1. How good are teaching staff at explaining things?
2. How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?
3. How often is the course intellectually stimulating?
4. How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?
Learning opportunities
5. To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?
6. How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?
7. To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?
8. To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?
9. How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?
Assessment and feedback
10. How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?
11. How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?
12. How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?
13. How often have you received assessment feedback on time?
14. How often does feedback help you to improve your work?
Academic support
15. How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?
16. How well have teaching staff supported your learning?
Organisation and management
17. How well organised is your course?
18. How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?
Learning resources
19. How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?
20. How well have the library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?
21. How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?
Student voice
22. To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?
23. To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?
24. How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?
Other questions

25. How well does the students' union (association or guild) represent students' academic interests?

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

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

28. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.

Annex C: List of questions in the feedback exercise

1. The first issue in this feedback gathering exercise relates to changes in the number of theme measures. We propose to change the number of themes from 7 to 6 (see paragraphs 8-22 in background document). Do you agree with our proposed approach? Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed changes.
2. Paragraphs 23-26 in the background document outline that our approach to benchmarking will not change following the changes in the theme measures. Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed approach.
3. We are not going to consider making changes to the minimum response threshold for the NSS at this stage (please see paragraphs 27-29 in background document). Do you have any reasons why you believe we should prioritise this work?