

# Much Ado about Something

## The effects of the National Student Survey on Higher Education: An exploratory study

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# **Much ado about something: The effects of the National Student Survey on higher education.**

## **Introduction**

This report describes how the National Student Survey (NSS) is currently impacting on the environment into which it was introduced a decade ago. It is based on interviews with thirty-four academics working in the humanities in the North West of England, and these data are used here to develop a narrative account of the NSS. The accounts academics gave were varied and uneven; there isn't a single story to tell in respect of the NSS. Instead, I have used these accounts to describe academics' working lives in respect of the NSS and to foreground some of the contradictions, tensions and consequences of the survey. This report concerns interpretations of the data I was given; it is not a 'mirror' that I hold up to academics' accounts. Although most of the academics I interviewed expressed concern and critique, they also expressed tacit acceptance of the survey and its implications. At the same time, these academics are actively engaged in making the NSS 'work' for their institutions, and attending closely to their professional responsibilities to students. Volunteers to be interviewed included heads of department, programme leaders, module leaders and staff with responsibility (at different levels) for overseeing the NSS. All names have been changed.

The NSS is a national initiative introduced in 2005 and administered by Ipsos MORI. The survey was commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). The survey runs across all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Additionally, Further Education Colleges in England and Wales with directly funded higher education students are eligible to participate. The survey is completed on-line by final year undergraduate students and the results are publicly available. Ipsos MORI describe "The main purpose of the NSS is to help prospective students, their families and advisors to make study choices. It is also used by participating institutions and students' unions use the data to improve the student learning experience" (ipsos-mori.com). HEFCE note: "the NSS has helped over two million students make their voices heard about the things that matter to them. These voices have helped to bring about significant and positive change in higher education. The results are used by senior management teams, academics, students' unions and others to drive improvements in curriculum, teaching and learning quality, learning resources and academic support" (hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss). The NSS has also become an important element in institutional quality assurance activities (HEFCE 2010). Approximately 330,000 students completed the survey in 2014.

The report begins with a section '**Through a glass darkly**' in which I summarise academics' perceptions of how students respond to the survey. The section describes the relative disinterest academics perceive students have in the survey and its consequences. This is followed by a section '**Through the looking glass**' in which I describe the effects of the NSS on academics' working lives. The survey – which appears relatively insignificant to students – is described as hugely significant when

viewed through the lens of academic workload and experience. **'Illuminations'** focuses on the issues that the NSS brings to the surface and that academics are responding to, as a consequence. The term 'illuminations' is employed in order to underline the sometimes distorting effects that shining a light on something can have. **'Mirror, Mirror on the wall'** describes how the NSS has encouraged the adoption of other surveys and feedback mechanisms throughout undergraduate degree programmes and the effects of this proliferation. The report ends with **'People in glass houses not throwing stones'**. This section considers how continuing use of the survey may diminish educational possibilities. The use of this series of metaphors associated with glass and mirrors is a response to the claim that the NSS increases 'transparency' in terms of the accountability of public services. This report problematises such a notion.

## Through a glass darkly

In the final semester of the academic year third year students are invited to complete the National Student Survey<sup>1</sup>. On university campuses, there are a plethora of visual reminders to complete the survey. Many of these prompts include information on prize draws, and other incentives, that students are eligible for by completing the questionnaire. Students are contacted directly by Ipsos MORI via their email and/or mobile phone, inviting and encouraging them to complete the survey.

Somewhat surprisingly, given the visibility of promotional material and the incentives<sup>2</sup> attached to completion, academics do not believe that the process is particularly significant to students. Gill: "They're kind of not that bothered. We don't know what this is. We get stuff sent to us all the time, so we just do it." Maggie: "It's a battle to get them to participate at times." Roger "they don't engage in conversations with myself about it. I don't know how much interest they actually have." Amanda underlines the contrast that seems apparent between students' and academics' responses: "Our future hangs on it but we don't hear them talking about it." Most students, it seemed from academics' accounts, fell into this category. Gill: "They don't seem to know [what it is], even though it's held up as this thing that they should have looked at in order to make the decision about coming here."

Liz: "I will sometimes ask if they know what it is (laughs). Explain that it feeds into some things that feed into league tables and it's a measure of the student experience and it will come out in the newspapers and so on. So to give them . . . because I don't think they really know, necessarily what they're filling in or what it feeds into. (. . .) Because they fill in feedback forms regularly anyway . . . and they just end up kind of feeling, I think, like it's the same kind of thing, because the questions are fairly similar."

I was also told on many occasions that students "misunderstand the questions" (Gill). Students respond in ways that "are not what the survey intended. So they talk about 'the university' did not do this and then we are marked down" (Joe). Where academics see the qualitative comments that some students make, they discern a contrast between what they think the survey is for and what the students think it is for. Academics reported that results fluctuate from year to year in ways they did not find easy to understand beyond different cohort characteristics. Dale: "It fluctuates in terms of what they view the NSS is for. It think it varies in terms of their understanding of what they're going to be asked . ." Maggie reported that a particular 'bugbear' came up year after year and then "bizarrely enough this year it hasn't" although nothing had changed as far as she was concerned.

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<sup>1</sup> Students are invited to respond to twenty-one questions in six categories via a Likert scale: The teaching on my course; assessment and feedback; academic support; organisation and management; learning resources and personal development. They are also invited to grade their "overall satisfaction" and to identify any "particularly positive or negative aspects" of their course.

<sup>2</sup> These included: Easter eggs, cakes, biscuits, book tokens, and prize draws. In one case someone had been told that an academic was "getting in boxes of wine and standing over them while they filled it in."

Academics reported that the survey is used by some students “to have a go”, “to let off steam”, “it’s used as a pressure cooker. You know, sort of take the top off.” “Have your whinge and then off you go.” Students, academics believe, tend not to focus on the idea that the survey is being used to gather data on their *three year* experience. Francis: “That’s often lost, it’s the here and now that matters and we are all quite egocentric like that, aren’t we?” This helps to explain why academics feel the survey is used to express short-term dissatisfactions. The timing of the survey also means that the results reflect a time of year when students are “feeling very, very stressed” (Fiona). Francis: “They comment that it just seems overwhelming at times [in their final year].” Typical in respect of this sort of negativity was concern over a particular assessment or a final year project, or the coming together of a series of assessments around the time of the survey. Students also report the stress of being ‘chased’ to complete the survey “there were a lot of disgruntled students [they said] they had become harassed – not by the university – but from the people who conduct the poll” (Francis). There is little research currently available on students’ views of the survey. However, Sabri (2011) quotes two students who corroborate that the survey reflects short-term pressures: “So for me it was that time I was filling it in, I had just handed in my dissertation and I was really stressed, seriously . . .” and “I did take in my first and second year into consideration but because I was so stressed in doing my project I think it’s mainly weighted by that”.

Francis: “We decided we would talk to the students about the survey and maybe embed it – pedagogically – so – we think the NSS is flawed – methodologically – well, we know it is – so we thought we might use it in our research module. But we thought we might use it that way to get the students to think about the way the data is used and the way the data is interpreted and maybe it will open a door for more constructive dialogue around it.”

The survey instrument itself is regarded as encouraging negativity and a punitive attitude amongst students “what didn’t you get, what didn’t you like” “it’s the equivalent of a market research survey isn’t it? It’s the equivalent of ‘did your meal arrive on time?’” The generality of the questions, the anonymity of the process, and the way in which the survey is constructed “what we’re delivering or not delivering . . . I think it encourages an idea of students as recipients of education and learning”. All these, it is considered, encourage ‘surface’ responses to ‘surface’ issues, and exacerbate the sense that the students don’t really engage with the questions or with the issues that are raised. This is, in turn, exacerbated by the ways in which the survey is promoted. Roger: “Do the survey because it hardly takes any time to do and that’s it. So it’s promoted on the basis of it takes no time to do. There is no invitation for students to critically reflect on what it is that they’re being asked to do.” A promotional video encouraging students to complete the survey listed “all the things you can do in four minutes . . . and then [the voice over] ended it all by saying ‘you can do the NSS’. Nothing about what the NSS actually is and what it is supposed to measure and the weight placed on it by institutions.”

Catherine described being contacted by a senior member of staff in the university “who wants to come and talk to the students in the middle of this lecture where it wasn’t appropriate because it was a guest speaker. I just said I don’t really want them to have people they don’t know coming and talking about [NSS] because I’ve talked about it to them a lot and I think it’s overkill. So I said no to that. But then I got another email yesterday to say whether I’d found somewhere else [for them to visit].”

Institutional responses to students are also regarded as encouraging students to behave in a consumerist way. Paula reported being in meetings where “senior managers will say ‘What can we do to help? Yes – we can do that . . . “ Luke described how “a senior member of staff” will “go into students’ [sessions] and say ‘anything you’re not happy about, come and talk to me’ and – which – really pisses me off, because it’s like talk to your tutor first of all. But that’s all been bypassed now, it’s kind of go to managers in inverted commas and we’ll make things better.” Academics also reported that their university used a ‘You said: We did’ system, which is regarded as feeding instrumental demands for change. Kathryn: “You hear it all the time now – what do the students *like*, what don’t they *like*, not why don’t they like it, or what else might be going on here . . . “ Francis described how her university “contorts itself, I feel, bends over backwards, and changes direction that many times to try to please and satisfy the student body – our consumer – and even the language that they use is geared towards consumerism and they are buying their degree, they are our customer, they are our ‘client base’, they are – I everything has become really skewed, I think, to student satisfaction.”

Given that NSS data is intended to be used by prospective students, current third year students might be expected to have become aware of the NSS prior to going to university, and to have reviewed the scores of their particular course before entry. Most of the academics in the study reported that they have never been asked by prospective students or parents about the survey during open days. A small minority described a small number of inquiries. Of course, students and parents may be consulting league tables on-line where they also now have access to KIS data<sup>3</sup>.

Graham: “One of the things that’s awful about the NSS and the whole culture that it’s part of is that it reduces the idea of student voice to a consumer survey. So I think it’s really important that if the NSS is going to be part of our world . . . that we continue to work with students to find ways that they can give – they can be part of a constructive dialogue with us. Not treat us merely as service providers.”

There are a number of reasons then why academics might express scepticism about the outcomes of the survey (and the impact it has on recruitment). They reported very little prospective student/parental engagement with the survey results prior to joining a course; the tool itself is derided in methodological terms; there is apparent disinterest by students in the process; the fluctuations in scores are attributed as

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<sup>3</sup> KIS (Key Information Set) data contains 18 items of information including data from the NSS and information about employment status/salary six months after completing a programme.

much to cohort characteristics as to other more fundamental changes that had taken place, and they are also aware that some students use it to “let off steam”. However, as has already been implied, academics experience the survey in quite different ways.

Leah: The obvious phrases that keep getting dropped into qualitative comments: “I’ve paid £9,000 for this”, you just think, hmmm, you’ve been fed that line that you are paying £9,000, so there’s an expectation that things will be a lot better. One ex-student told me, of course, people are going to expect more because they’re paying three times as much.”



## Through the looking glass

In contrast to students' apparent disinterest in engaging closely with the survey instrument (or its implications), academics described a huge weight placed on it by institutions. Something that appears relatively insignificant becomes hugely significant when viewed through the lens of academic workload and experiences. This relates to a number of key themes which I outline below: The ways in which the data from the survey are distributed (and not distributed) and the public nature of that process; the forms in which that data are presented and the expectation of 'continuous improvement'; the combative tone of some senior managers when distributing 'problematic' scores or communicating about the NSS in general; and the ways in which a department is expected to respond to those scores, particularly if they are regarded as problematic.

Academics begin each academic year with the publication of NSS scores. The form the results take and the ways in which they are distributed, or held back, contributes to the unease academics reported. It is clear that everyone 'in the centre' of a university will know what the results are. This scrutiny of data relevant to one's practice inevitably has a judgmental feel – other people will be looking at these figures (and comments) and evaluating and comparing results. Quantitative scores, of course, lend themselves to these comparisons and the generation of hierarchies of 'achievement'. Whether you respect the origins of the hierarchy or not, it exists; you are placed in a league table. These evaluations then become a form of 'truth' about the academics who are subject to them.

The figures typically arrive in the form of a visual model of the trajectory of results, usually a graph showing the previous years' results. This visual marker of the 'direction of travel' is underlined by the expectation that scores will improve. "It's expected [that scores would improve] year on year. Yes, of course." This is quite ubiquitous across institutions. The language of 'continuous improvement' is a direct import from the business world and the invention of 'management systems', beginning in the 1920s, designed to minimize waste/maximize profits. The model assumes it is straightforward to pinpoint areas for improvement and to address concerns. In the section that follows (Illuminations), this model is problematised in relation to issues that are raised by the NSS.

Rebecca: "In part it's via the statistics. The columns are all to show you the last year, to show you this year, percentage rise. That's how it's all laid out (. . .) with this sort of statistical page at the beginning which shows you – I think it's the last three years' results. It's the way it's laid out, basically tells you – you need to be going up. Plus you're told as much by your superior in the faculty. You get, I've noticed that score has fallen, what's going on. How are you going to do something about it . . ."

In some instances, only the statistics from the survey are widely distributed. In other instances, the figures are distributed before the qualitative comments; there was a sense of a 'drip feed' of evaluations that were being 'processed' and closely scrutinised by others. Some of the academics I interviewed were party to all the

information available, some were not, and some were unsure whether they had seen all the information or not. The term 'redaction' was used in relation to some of the data that were not shared. Some middle managers reported holding information back in order to protect staff from feedback they felt was unfair or unhelpful in other ways.

To 'redact', strictly, is to 'edit', to put into a suitable literary form, to revise. In the context of the National Student Survey the word is used in a more euphemistic sense, as it refers, basically, to the removal of information. This is more akin to censorship than to 'editing or improving for publication'. The word 'redact' was also used in respect of data that was generated during the lifetime of this project. One interviewee decided to withdraw her entire transcript from the study, and others removed data from their accounts. There were a series of references to the vulnerability people felt in respect of expressing their views, or having events that had occurred in their departments in the public domain.

Anita: "Well it comes into the centre pretty much immediately so within 24 hours usually it gets cascaded out and it comes to me as Head of Department and to my Coordinator of Student Learning – Rob – and we receive it. It comes through our Faculty so our Faculty lead for teaching and learning, gets it and – but it comes to us at the same time, we all get it together. Rob and I cascade it out to the rest of the staff as quickly as possible. So it comes through . . . in phases. So we get the numbers first (. . .) then we get the numbers programme by programme and last of all we get the comments. The comments come to our Faculty lead for teaching and learning. He has the option to redact, to remove any names but he doesn't tend to. He normally sends it through to me and my Coordinator and allows us to redact as we feel appropriate if we're going to cascade it. In this school we operate on a very transparent mode of communication. So we send everything through but the comments we do tend to hold back on because they can be quite derogatory at times. They can also be highly praiseworthy but of course nobody looks at those, everybody looks at the derogatory ones."

Staff have to respond to the scores that are distributed as part of the 'Quality Assurance' procedures of an institution. This work is now a considerable burden in the first semester of the academic year. Rebecca (HoD): "We have to go through those categories – we have to say what we're going to do in order to address the various issues that emerged in the NSS. So the actions are generated by the need to show to management, here's what we're doing, here's what we're doing in each of the categories." This call encourages a performative attitude amongst staff – what can we be *seen to be doing* in response to these scores? The action plans that are produced typically pass through a series of committees before going to the 'centre' of the university. Material from these action plans is then also 'cascaded out' to students in order to communicate the actions that have been taken in relation to student feedback. In an echo from the first section of this report, academics believe that students are, typically, uninterested in this information.

Graham: "I think there is in spite of these fine words there is a way in which we – many of us still end up overly internalizing it and thinking more than we should about what's the score. How are we doing on the indicators and maybe – I sometimes think that there's a little bit in academics like when you were at school you wanted good marks. A lot of us were clever boys and girls who liked being near the top of the class."

Comparisons are made, within universities, in relation to the scores (some universities produce data showing comparisons with other departments, across the region, and across the 'sector', i.e. post '92/Russell Group, etc). "they were held up now to us going, look, they're a discipline much like yours . . . and . . . why can't we do it?" (Gill). Academics are keenly aware of how they sit in relation to other departments in their own and other universities. Kate: "It's quite good for us but the downside of that is it's not so good for other people." This culture encourages anxiety to develop in relation to both current and future scores. Would 'good' results stay that way? Might an old problem re-emerge? "You can't always rely on that then, so that's carried forward to next year. There's always anxiety about – we've done well this year, we might not do so well next year. It's that." (Maggie).

Phil expressed anxiety about possible future scores after he had had a difficult meeting with a group of students. "The first thing that one member of staff down there said at the time when they read this, they said well, that's going to f\*\*\* up the NSS isn't it? That was the first thing, the first comment that somebody made." He "felt really bad because first of all I wouldn't want to upset any students, but then I thought bloody hell, I've triggered something here that's going to have an impact on all of my colleagues." This incident provoked multiple meetings with staff and students over the ensuing weeks.

Kath: "It created total distress, really, that she'd done it that way. I think people felt bullied and they felt that they were put in the naughty corner. It was the beginning of the year and there wasn't really any room for conversation. So I think that was why it had such a difficult effect." Three years after this incident "the hurt of that is still very much alive within that programme."

A culture of concern in relation to NSS scores now seems to be well-established. In the run-up to scores being distributed in a department, academics reported feeling "very anxious and fearful about it", there was a "climate of fear", with rumours circulating about the implications of a poor score; there was a "high level of tension" and so on. There were concerns expressed over whether a course might be closed, and job losses. One senior academic reported "sleepless nights" in relation to the concern that their highly favourable scores were about to be jeopardized by one "disgruntled student" (James). It was a "horrible feeling" when there was an apparent problem. They were "dangling the scores over our heads." "We look with such envy at places that get high 90s" (Graham).

When academics described the ways in which a problematic score (or sometimes a comment or comments) was responded to by senior managers in the university the

origins of this anxiety perhaps become apparent. An academic (head of several undergraduate programmes) described how the Dean of the Faculty had called a meeting. Their score was “somewhere in the middle, in terms of the benchmarking group.” It was “quite a nasty meeting. It was quite firm in terms of going, you must and you will and how poor it was. It was a sharp meeting, this is serious. Actually, no, this is very serious.” Simon described how “management were caning us with the NSS scores.” A difficult period in the department showed up in the scores, in Simon’s view, in a way in which was not representative of what the real problems were. “Just because students pan you on an NSS category doesn’t actually mean you are doing anything wrong.” In Peter’s department “the university were down on us like a ton of bricks”. In this instance, a Head of Department had started the year by giving out feedback on the NSS to the whole staff group in a public meeting.

Other communications (e.g. emails) relating to the NSS were reported as combative in tone. There was a sense of a gap between those managing the process and those who work with the students: “There’s no context around them [the messages].” The source of the messages, the people “behind them” are described as “faceless pressure that comes onto us. So we have this blitz mentality.” This chimes with Peter’s view that his VC would have a “hit squad if he could . . .” This anonymity is in contrast with those seen as responsible for leading the courses that are being evaluated – each score having the name of a module leader or programme leader against it. Peter: “I think the programmes get very caught up with the NSS because the – ultimately – they are the name against the response to it. As Fiona described: “But – and it’s funny – because I don’t – it gets under the skin this stuff, in a way that other governance systems haven’t got under my skin.”

Maggie: “. . . if the results are under a certain level then we usually have to go and see the Pro-Dean of student education. She will sit there and say why have you got below this level in this and why have you got that? Thank God, we’ve got no – it’s usually marked in red. We’ve got no red boxes this year, for the first year ever. We’re happy about that, we’re not going to get called to go and see her. So there is that anticipation where you get the results and then you, gosh, thank God, there’s a sigh of relief. There’s also, you look at the Faculty results overall and you go, right, ok, well I’m glad we’ve done well but the other schools – two of the other schools haven’t done so well. Then you start empathising with the Director of Student Education there because you know that they’re going to get the call . . .”

The feedback itself, coming as it does through ‘faceless’ managers is also experienced as coming from nameless, faceless students. The NSS “ventriloquises something that I’ve never had ventriloquised. Because I’ve always had a direct talking relationship with student groups. . . So it’s weird to suddenly get this stuff coming back” (Fiona). This may add to the emotional toll of negative feedback if academics perceive an element of their role/identity is to *engage* with students; there is no-one there to ask questions of, to talk to, to argue with. This is the sort of “hollowing out of human relationships” that Collini (2013) describes in relation to an increasingly bureaucratized higher education system. Maggie: “The demands seem not to have faces any more.” When the feedback comes from a group that an

academic believes they “had a really positive relationship with” this is “very unsettling. It makes you doubt your own judgement about the work that you’ve done”. This also adds to the toll on lecturers: “it’s exhausting” (Fiona).

Where a ‘problem’ score had been identified, academics described what happened next. This typically involved a series of meetings first with staff who were implicated specifically, and then more generally, and then with the senior management team of a university. Once again, the focus would be on action plans to address the ‘problem’ and these would also be shared and developed with students. The plans would then be revisited through the year in terms of monitoring ‘progress’. Only when a course undergoes the NSS again, do people begin to feel less anxious about the issue. All of the activity surrounding a problematic score increases, of course, the public nature of the ‘problem’. It also sets up another round of performative pressures as staff are given a target for next year “so then people kind of look at the results and go ‘did we get it?’” (Anita). Such processes are described as being “very, very difficult (. . .) it really caused some major, major issues for us.” Two years on there is still ill-feeling in this department in relation to this incident partly because “it keeps coming back on to the table again and again and again. Then we have to do the school action plan which everybody has to sign up to and so you are constantly being told, well that figure was really dreadful this year” (Anita).

Academics described the speed with which they were expected to respond to concerns. Gill: “You have to come up with a plan within a month of how you’re going to address what we see as these problems. It just puts everyone into a panic.” Peter: “There’s a short term call to improve the NSS survey.” Maggie: “There’s this knee-jerk reaction to – this is a hot spot for this year. This is the idea we need to work from, whether it be personal development or confidence or whatever. We then just throw that at them going, right ‘This is about feedback’ ‘This is about . . .’”.

Anita: “But everyone takes it very, very personally because it’s been so heavily emphasized for so long in the university. So everybody – you know we get cascaded down through our annual staff review we get a series of targets. (. . .) So it’s a personal thing. We don’t particularly worry too much if it’s not – they’re not really formal performance targets or anything like that they’re kind of aims, aspirational aims. So then people kind of look at the results and go did we get it? We also get ranked within the university. So they send round a ranking and the person at the bottom of the table gets a little bit kind of . . . oh, they’re at the bottom, you know, that sort of thing. Or they’re in the bottom quarter, or what have you, so there is a sense of competition inbuilt within the university which is daft because actually subject areas behave differently.”

When describing how they were expected to respond to a problematic score, it was noticeable how these accounts were *told*. Academics reported a highly didactic tone “what are you going to do about it?”; “this must be addressed immediately”, “get your act together”; “this isn’t good enough” “we must do better”. They told stories in which they were infantilized: “put on the naughty step”; “she came in and told us off, disgusting that we can have scores this low”; “we are rated red, amber, green”.

Sometimes I checked out the language that was employed “did she really say ‘disgusting?’” “Yes”. Whether the comments were verbatim or not, the accounts communicate something of academics’ feelings about these meetings. Although subsequently, individuals sometimes described contesting the negative evaluations that were handed down, initial responses suggested shock and resignation.

The culture of university meetings militates against academics airing open disagreement in the face of bureaucratic definitions of ‘quality’ issues. At this stage in the process, it is perhaps also difficult for academics to ‘argue back’ in relation to the scores that are passed down. Fiona: “Because there’s a surface at which it’s really hard for people to reject it. Because how can you reject . . . this is student feedback.” Graham: “We’re desperately trying to give our students a better service because we want them to have a good education. Being a good professional has always been about giving a good service.” Academics then, perhaps, feel somewhat trapped in an environment where an aspect of their own identity – ‘caring about students’ comes into direct conflict with being seen to question feedback which is ostensibly about ‘caring about students’.

Francis: “And I know, as somebody who is in HE and having children of my own, that we walk a tightrope between – we know what is good for them – we know that they need to read, that they need to engage – that they need to do things and they need to come . . . but we are so frightened of poor feedback and we’re so frightened of negative module evaluations because we have to self-flagellate when we get them, if they’re bad. That’s the way, I think, the culture is, can become quite negative. And people are always accountable and have to justify rather than celebrate what’s actually good.”

## Illuminations

What is it then that students complain *about*? What sorts of issues get raised via the survey and how do academics respond? I use the term ‘illuminations’ to suggest that in drawing attention to some things, other things might be ignored; it is also the case that to illuminate something is sometimes to exaggerate it. This section also problematises the notion of ‘continuous improvement’ as a model for improving the quality of a university degree. This, it will be remembered, posits that ‘improvement’ will result as the consequence of an evaluative cycle achieved through the NSS.

### Illuminations 1: Assessment and feedback

The NSS rating that was most frequently regarded as problematic was that relating to what academics said was “feedback”. Interestingly, the questions on the survey include the word “Assessment” in that category, which may be relevant to the concerns students raise. Many academics reported changing the procedures in relation to providing marks/feedback in response to NSS scores, including setting a maximum time frame (typically three to four weeks from submission). Although this timeframe presents many academics with a massive short-term burden, this was typically understood as an important and legitimate concern of students. (It was also regarded that the questionnaire encouraged students to continue to be punitive as it asks whether feedback “is prompt”, not was it “on time”. As Kathryn described to me, “it can never be prompt enough”.)

Pete: “The sorts of things that I get – like if I introduce a module, it’s not about them kind of asking questions because they don’t understand the concept or they don’t understand the theory . . . the questions we get in the first few weeks is like, well, what do I need to do to get a really good mark? My answer to that is that they need to experiment on a whole range of things and not be so focused on the mark, and they might get the mark. (. . .) They’re kind of driven by targets and they’re not risk takers. (. . .) I don’t think it’s consistent on a kind of downward spiral in some way, but it is very much something that there is in the back of my mind that the students are, what I think are called, strategic learners in some way, yeah.”

Despite improvements in the speed and consistency of feedback, this category of questions continues to be a focus for concern and a number of academics expressed puzzlement about their poor scores. It may be these scores relate to accounts I was given in respect of a shift in students’ more general attitudes to higher education. Coursework grades and degree classifications may be acting as a sort of proxy for quality for students (much as NSS scores, in general, do for academics). Satisfaction with grades and predicted degree classifications, then, may inform students’ evaluations of the ‘quality’ of their degree and these are associated with the *assessment* and feedback they get from course tutors. It is perhaps not so much the ‘feedback’, then, that they are unhappy with but the ‘assessment’ in terms of reaching, or not reaching, a certain level. This, in turn, may well be connected to the extent to which students now expect help with their assignments/coursework.

Students are reported as being highly focused on the outcomes of their university experience, from early in the experience. Kate: “A small number come and talk to me. I’m not just buying a degree, but a good degree. They are very, very marks conscious – it gets worse year by year I think. We need a 2:1.” Maggie: “Not all, but very much it’s increasing. So they – right – okay – I need to get this so how do I get from here to there.”

Catherine: “There’s been a lot of griping about that assignment and I don’t entirely know why. Sometimes it’s hard to get a sense of why that’s been so hard . . . I think they want to be taken through every minutiae of the assignment and they expect a whole cohort lecture [on it].”

Rebecca described being asked for the sort of help students now expect at ‘A’ level – “in order to get an A, an A essay looks like this, a B essay . . . and they come to university expecting the same thing.” Students seem increasingly to look for ‘fine-grained’ help on assignments – and whole lectures on how to do them. Francis: [They were saying] “*everyone else* has written a structure on Blackboard, *everyone else* has told me how to do it . . . I’m not going to give you a blueprint.” It is quite commonplace, nevertheless, for academics to provide detailed guidance on each assignment. Academics also reported being unwilling to ‘spoonfeed’ students to the extent that they felt students sometimes wanted; at the same time they reported a sense in which concerns about scores “hold people back from that, I think, for worry about how it might affect the view that a year group has on their experience” (Katrina).

Simon: “It’s kind of driving students maybe in a certain direction. It’s driving staff in a certain direction that maybe they shouldn’t be being driven. One of the things could be that students are starting to look at these scores and say, well, you know, am I really getting the best that I can out of this place? If I’m not and it’s affecting my degree, perhaps I’m not to blame, perhaps it’s the staff who are to blame.”

It is regarded that the £9,000 fee has exacerbated the tendency of students to focus on the classification of their degrees. Peter: “You’re paying your fees and you’re reporting back [via NSS] on the value for money of that investment that you made. So that you start with the nine grand, oh my god what am I *getting* for this?” Maggie: “In student/staff forum there’s a – ‘I’m paying you’ attitude. That comes through the NSS.”

As Peter remarked, “the fee becomes the lens” in an environment which can be experienced by staff as ‘adversarial’, partly because of the anonymity of the feedback and partly because the survey encourages “sharper responses”. “The students are saying this about you, and the students’ perspective is ‘they’re not giving us this’. The students are attacking. They’re not, they’re doing what the surveys are built to do which is expose things. But that then comes back to you in a particular medium which is an attack actually from the perspective of the individual.” Catherine: “There’s something less tolerant about things like a cancelled



session because a tutor was ill or a late placement. [All cohorts feel different] but I find our third year group a lot more negative towards the university and that kind of anti-institution thing feels a lot stronger with them.”

Catherine: “I do feel really quite a heavy responsibility that it is all right and that they fill it in positively and I found myself – I was walking around – because here we see [the students] a lot and I was just speaking with one of the students. She said, oh, everybody’s really stressed and they don’t understand the assignment and I think – my heart sank and I thought this straight away. I just thought I do not want there to be a big negative attitude going around the cohort. So we had a whole cohort lecture the first week back where I did a kind of ‘Everybody – we’re going to be calm – we’re going to do this . . . ’ (. . . ) Hearing on the back of that lecture that I thought I’d tried to address everything that everybody was still feeling anxious, I kind of felt quite grotty about it and I think it’s because of this [the NSS].”

Tied to concerns about outcomes, is an increase in student complaints about coursework grades and degree classifications by both students and parents. There were three instances in the data of formal complaints being made. Other complaints or queries included students coming to tutors and saying “but I worked so hard”; “I tried so hard” as if effort and really wanting a better score might result in getting one. As academics described, students talking to them about grades is part of their role, and they are happy to discuss how students might improve their work. However, as Rebecca described, there is sometimes the sense in which: “They expect you to be able to *make it the case*.”

Academics connected an increasing instrumentality amongst students to a number of other factors in their lives: the “economic situation”, the “pressure they are under in relation to jobs”. Kate: “They all get scored at work: How did I clean your room today . . . ” Students’ use of technology was also cited as a reason why students may appear to be “more demanding”. Kate: “They expect us to be there” and they “get ratty if you don’t reply immediately.” An increasing instrumentality is also evident in other accounts. Luke: “So frequently I get students saying, well I don’t ‘get’ today’s lecture, it’s not related to the assignment. Well – laughs – a lot of my lectures won’t relate directly to an assignment. Again, it’s that culture of I’ve got to do this to get the degree you’re paying for. I believe, anyway. Your job is to get me to pass these exams, these assignments, it’s not kind of to help me critically think . . . ”

Graham: “I don’t think any student thinks I am – or very few would think I am a customer, I am a consumer, but it’s the way the culture has changed so that I’m paying for this and so I deserve something.”

Academics described both knowing how to get “positive evaluations” of their teaching/modules and resisting adapting what they do. Luke: “So if you make the students laugh and you joke with them, you then immediately give them the evaluation you know you’re getting 100%.” Students in one department were reported as “loving” easy modules which one middle manager described as “not as academic as it should be.” She went on to say that “the XXX module tends to be

difficult. It tends to get a lot of negative feedback because they find it hard.” Academics described the necessity to talk to students about the sort of commitment they needed to make in order to get the most from their degree course. They also spoke about the dilemmas associated with not giving students what they want and how ‘confusion’ might be a good outcome. In some instances, they described on-going conversations with students about the necessity for challenge “it’s not a set of skills”. Maggie described how she wants to address the ‘I’m paying you’ attitude: “I’m not always sure how to manage them because part of me wants to turn round and say, yes, you’re getting an education, you need to be part of that equation.” Others described how problems become most acute in their final year when you have to work hard to encourage students to “take a risk” rather than looking for a rubric they think will guarantee success.

Carl described how the third year students who choose his courses “have gone through my Spartan approach, liked it, did feel challenged and choose to do it again. But when I’m teaching the people just making up the numbers who want to get their certificate and don’t want to do hard work, they don’t like what I do. So it’s a mixed bag of feedback.” Others talked about the dilemmas associated with what are very heterogeneous groups. Gill (and others) described responding to students who had asked for extra help and others then saying to her “it’s really boring and it’s really tedious and we feel like we’re wasting our time. So you’re caught in that bind.” Gill said that because she works with small groups she is able to differentiate work and engage with individuals about these dilemmas. Where the groups are larger, dissatisfactions may be felt in other ways – including perhaps poor attendance at lectures/seminars. This was reported by a number of academics to be quite commonplace.

Celia: “They get here and we say, we’re not going to tell you precisely what to think, we’re not. You know, I met all of our first years last week, two long days, because I thought it was really important to set out – to try to address this challenge. To set out our expectations from day one and we talked a lot about the fact that a lot of students come into the university and the first thing they say . . . is how do we get a first? (. . .) If I wrote a statement about what I wanted in every line of that person, they’d all do it, because they’re very, very capable, wonderful young people with good teachers, busy taking notes, yeah. So that’s the challenge.”

Francis reported another dilemma raised by what she saw as giving first and second years a great deal of guidance in relation to assignments and then third years “complain that they are spoonfed and they say, the trouble is we are spoonfed at levels four and five and then we are suddenly asked to be really critically reflective . . . .” Providing extra help, of course, does not necessarily address concerns, but can sometimes feed them. Aisha: “It was very interesting. I told them in a lot of detail about the assessment yesterday. It’s in four weeks’ time. I’d made this little extra booklet, because I felt the matrix hadn’t really . . . didn’t really tell them exactly what was required. (. . .) Then this student, she was really quite frustrated and she went ‘Why didn’t we get this at the beginning? Why are you giving this to us now?’”

## Illuminations 2: Employability

NSS scores on 'Personal Development' were also described as yielding 'disappointing' scores. Although the questions under 'Personal Development' do not specifically refer to 'preparation for the workplace' or 'employability'<sup>4</sup> they were elided with these issues in academics' accounts. This is probably because senior managers associate these elements and this is reinforced by a range of employment related initiatives that are tied to disappointing 'Personal Development' scores. The publication of KIS data<sup>5</sup> has also exacerbated the felt need to attend to employability as these scores are also now published.

'Employability' has had tangible effects on the curricula of university undergraduate degrees. Academics described delivering sessions focused entirely on the subject, requirements to 'embed' employability targets across all lectures/modules in a degree and contributing to conferences on the subject. Of course, some degrees have a coherent, comprehensive and critical attitude to employment at their heart, for example a degree in commercial photography, or a professional programme aimed at teachers or social workers. Typically, however, 'employability', as perceived by senior management in universities is characterized as an 'add on' to all degree programmes, regardless of their intentions to directly prepare students for employment. Some academics are also expected to promote university initiatives on employability (such as short courses) or "job shops". Sometimes hugely onerous requirements for increases in personal tutoring were described as intended to address disappointing scores in this category. Given requirements by universities to attend to 'employability', staff also described having to account for these initiatives in multiple forms during the course of the year.

Carl: "I was asked – I was invited on a first year course to give a lecture on critical theory. With the best of intentions, one of my colleagues asked me, could I make clear to the students how what I was going to teach them would add to their skills portfolio and how would it help their employability? I said, with the deepest respect, no, I won't do that. (. . .) The idea that everything – Adorno has a phrase - I think he borrows from Kant, the idea of purposiveness without purpose, the idea that everything has a utilitarian purpose and, ironically, that is its value. But in a culture where everything has to have a utilitarian value, I just don't see how you can fundamentally, like I say, some of the students are critically aware, they do see this, but when staff are asking, like I say, for a lecture entitled critical theory to justify itself according to a neo-liberal mindset, then the game is pretty much up."

In addition to changing the content of some of what they do, academics also described changing the *description* of the content of what they do, such that students were more aware of how lecturers were contributing to 'personal

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<sup>4</sup> Q19: The course has helped me to present myself with confidence;

Q20: My communication skills have improved;

Q21: As a result of my course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.

<sup>5</sup> KIS (Key Information Set) data contains 18 items of information including data from the NSS and information about employment status/salary six months after completing a programme.

development'. Maggie: "We're doing all these things, we've been doing them for a long time, and we're just phrasing them differently. Personal development – we've been doing it for forever. (. . .) So it seems to me that the parameters of these kinds of surveys is – it's not about enabling the students or enabling staff. Often it's about just showing that we're doing it, which is fair enough but we're spending more and more time showing that we're doing it instead of just doing it."

Amanda: "Employability has to be the golden thread to everything. Everything that you do has to be thinking about how does this support the employability of the students going forward? You have to represent that in end of module reports, and annual monitoring report, course leaders' reports. (. . .) and then you're trying to encourage them to think about their own employability when they don't really know what it is to be employed. It's – all we can do is our best to prepare them for the next stage in their life, isn't it? But we can't be held responsible for everything but we seem to be at the moment."

In addition to 'naming', describing and articulating current activities in different ways, academics also described being drawn into areas they felt were outside their control – and this represented a quite radical shift in respect of their responsibilities towards students. More than any other issue, this topic elicited stories from academics about how current provision differed from their own university education "It wouldn't have occurred to me that somebody would have guided me to such an extent" (Celia). It was not so much that they resented thinking about students' futures but that they were being implicated in trying to 'guarantee' students' futures in a similar way to guaranteeing they would get a certain grade. Rebecca: "You can get swept along into trying to achieve things that are outside the core of what you're doing."

Leah: "Sometimes I look back and I think did I give a monkey's when I was 18? No, I didn't. It was the last thing on my mind when I left and I didn't have a job to go to and I didn't have a further training to go to and I didn't give a monkey's, because I just thought something will come up. I want to concentrate on what I'm doing now."

Academics also described how university responses to the employability agenda were the problem, rather than employability itself. Graham described how the university where he works has set up "the employability initiative". This is a 'top-down' requirement for every department to have an "employability committee". In his analysis this doesn't result in "people on the ground who know what students need" leading the work, but in the development of other 'initiatives' generated by a group who are deemed representative of the Faculty. This perhaps helps to explain Rebecca's analysis: "I'm always astounded by how often those initiatives just run into the sand. They run into the sand. You've spent hours and hours of your time – we have this committee that I've been on – it's a monster for creating these absurd initiatives and hardly any of them actually last for more than a year. We try them, they're rubbish, we stop. We think of something else, we try that, it's rubbish, we stop. Pointless."

It is not just academics, however, who report scepticism about some of these initiatives. It was quite commonplace in academics' descriptions of employability initiatives to describe how students were lacking in enthusiasm in relation to the provision. Maggie described the students "glazing over" when she starts talking about "careers and the personal tutoring they are expected to go through and the employability and volunteering and doing stuff before they leave university in order to beef up their CV and what have you." I was told, many times, that attendance and enthusiasm for one-day courses/conferences on employability was also low.

Maggie: "If – the kind of middle managers in the centre of the university and they go – you academics. I go (a) I'm not a child and (b) yes, I'm an academic but for eight years before I was an academic I worked in [the private sector]. Do not patronize. It's 'you academics – I know what you're like – you're not in touch with the real world' – kind of thing. Well, actually I am. There's a certain idea that we are resistant to these things, which we are to a certain degree I think, and rightly so. We have to look and say what is this asking us to do, how is it going to benefit the students? How is it going to benefit our own practices and ideas, like curriculum and what have you. Then at the same time there has to be a certain resistance where we go actually, why are we spending all of this time doing this? It feels like that. I think the students are the same. They're just going 'we just want to, we just want to . . .'"

There is a clear irony, then, in respect of academics responding to students' disappointment in relation to preparation for employment as – apparently – evident in poor scores on 'personal development'. Students may not be expressing disappointment about this issue in those scores and yet those scores are being used to drive employability initiatives which, in turn, the students seem relatively uninterested in. In respect of future employment, it seems clear that students are acutely aware that their degree classification may have an effect, but in respect of attempts at direct preparation for that employment they seem less convinced of its value. Given that a large proportion of undergraduate students are also already engaged in paid work, it may be they feel these initiatives are somewhat redundant. This is one of a number of areas of interest I hope to pursue with students in the next phase of this work.

Whether students welcome employability initiatives or not, this focus is clearly having effects on academics, how they work, and what a university degree is. The work has taken academics into new spheres, adding considerably to their workload, and it has legitimated the discourse of 'skills', associated more with training than with education; this is a vision of a university degree which is valued for what it can *do next* for you. And the instrumentality evident in students' concerns about assessment and feedback and how to get a "good degree" is reinforced via the privileging of a discourse of utilitarianism in respect of employability.

### **Illuminations 3: 'Oversufficient' evaluations**

The third issue outlined here in respect of 'illuminations' on disappointing scores, relates to the ways in which the NSS amplifies concerns. This results in a small

number of students having a disproportionate effect on academics and their practice. This is also evident in the sort of concerned vigilance academics describe in terms of anxiety over poor scores/negative qualitative comments. There were also examples of universities choosing to use NSS results to exercise their intentions and goals through the amplification of student responses.

There were a number of accounts of an individual who felt very unhappy about a particular issue that was then channeled through the survey. Luke: "He had just gone down the zeroes with absolutely everything . . . Still getting really good results from all the other students but this one student, without even thinking, presumably. I think that's the way of expressing . . . I'm not even going to read this . . ." Where cohorts are small, a small number of people can have a considerable effect. And where a department's overall result is the amalgamation of a number of scores this can, as one Head of Department described: "hit the league tables". Students were also regarded as using the survey to express disgruntlement in respect of perhaps one thing that had gone wrong during the programme, sometimes encouraging other students to use the survey to channel their dissatisfaction. Gill: "We had a really bad lecture room . . . the equipment kept breaking down, so on a regular basis on his Tuesday afternoon lecture he would lose 15, 20 minutes . . ."

Sometimes the survey was used by students to express dissatisfaction about something individual academics had no control over – being moved from one campus to another, course amalgamation, or a course being closed. As academics come to learn the effects of such changes they realize the importance of trying to "manage" students' responses. Academics in one department became very concerned that a cohort of students joining from another institution half way through a programme "could seriously affect our NSS scores . . . we had much less control and a lot of worry about this cohort coming in. It was always an issue about trying to support those students coming in . . . we need to get them on board really quickly and do a lot of work with them . . . they're the ones that could scupper the scores really" (Katrina).

Francis: So a lot of the time, I know, I listen to lecturers and I know they are doing a good job but the students are learning to – how to – complain – and whilst I think it's really, really important that they have a voice – that voice is often manipulated to support agendas."

Catherine had gathered interim feedback from students and one of them had said she "doesn't understand the feedback because she said I never really know what it means." Catherine had spent a great deal of time with her, one-to-one, in order to try to understand more about the 'problem' she had raised and address concerns before the NSS went 'live'. However, she was left feeling "that I'm not entirely sure she's read it." In another case, there was a "nosedive" in the score for a particular category and this was tied to a "very vocal" group of students with a particular "ringleader" who basically had a "vendetta and so they could hit us, they could damage us really badly."

In another department, issues raised in class had resulted in “quite nervous responses. It’s obviously quite a touchy subject, it’s a sensitive subject” (Fiona). The lecturers concerned saw the issues as an essential part of the programme, regarding the contention as *part of* the curriculum. The pressure, in such circumstances, is to adopt an approach which “won’t get critique. If you’re going to make people feel quite uncomfortable as a result of your pedagogies you can’t avoid that discomfort.” This academic expressed relief that the suggestion by students that such issues “should not be discussed” was interpreted by their Head of Department with “sympathy”. “If I had not got a good relationship with the person above me who reads that, God knows really.” Once again, such issues were raised only by one student in two consecutive years. The comments, nevertheless, had provided the focus for considerable anxiety, and workload, over how to respond.

Gill works in a department that had received a poor score in the ‘general satisfaction’ category and there had been considerable concern about why. Senior managers had a particular theory, which they said was corroborated by the students. A significant reorganization resulted. Gill, who had not been given the qualitative feedback made a request to see it. When she “finally got the comments, the qualitative comments that they’ve seen, it’s one student.” “He really used one comment. I think there’s a university agenda, so they look at NSS and go, that chimes with what we want to do – we’ll use that.” This lecturer regarded the process as “bringing us back under the thumb.”

Luke leads a programme that is no longer recruiting: “They were the group that were brought in the year that the closure was announced. So on their induction they were told this is the last year of the course . . . so for them they’ve started a course that is of no value because the university is closing it.” The course was closed despite previous students expressing high satisfaction “last year we were 100%, this year we were 95% . . . so there’s an email there . . . saying how we were higher than anybody else.” A few years prior to this, however, their overall satisfaction score was lower and “the VC of the university, in my opinion, misleading people by quoting that one year of the NSS.” This was regarded as another case of a university “manipulating the NSS.” “They bring it out when they want to, they ignore it when they want to.”

#### **Illuminations 4: Insufficient evaluations**

Under ‘Illuminations’ I now want to raise the subject of what happens when a poor score is connected in academics’ minds to a *real* problem within a department. Ironically, it seemed that these issues (as far as academics were concerned) did not actually ‘reach the table’ in terms of being addressed. In two cases it was regarded that students used the NSS to signal a serious problem in relation to the quality of teaching; academics agreed with their analysis and thought they understood the origins of the complaints. Of course, many academics have worked alongside one another for years and are fully aware (NSS aside) of problems that exist. However, when the results were discussed, and individuals were asked to respond to them, it was not regarded as appropriate in either instance to acknowledge problems with an

individual member of staff. In addition, any qualitative comments that might have identified a member of staff were not included in the feedback to the departments concerned. Although senior managers, then, might have had some specific information about the problem, and the academics in a department might have theories about that same source, this was *not* discussed in the multiple meetings that took place. Ironically, then, the real problem remained unaddressed as far as these academics were concerned. In another example, when staff were asked to produce an action plan in relation to the problem that had been raised, they also had a very good sense (they believed) of the origin of the problem, but “you can’t dump people in it, it’s not the done thing and you certainly can’t blame it on the students.”

In respect of these unspoken problems it is worth re-viewing some elements of this part of this account. The NSS – problematic scores or not – requires the development of an action plan that is, in large part, a plan for the sake of a plan – it is a requirement to put something under each category. This then is one sort of *inaction* plan. Then there is another sort of *inaction* plan – the sort of plan that is put into place in respect of a real problem that cannot be spoken of – because staff should not be named, or students ‘blamed’. This is a form of inaction plan, then, because it is not about the action that should be taken or should have been taken, in relation to a problem that really does or did exist. This suggests that the NSS can actually encourage displacement in respect of opening up and addressing problems in higher education.

Anita: “Then we have to do the school action plan which everybody has to sign up to and so you are constantly being told, well that category was really dreadful this year. (. . .) So everybody feels that sense of judgement coming back on them all the time even if – we beat ourselves up to a certain extent. The fact that you have to just keep going back through the . . . because you have to understand it and you have to be able to respond to it. What you can’t do is say in the student/staff forum, in school committees, you can’t say, we know it was these students who . . . So actually going through the motion was doubly difficult that year because we knew what the problem was but we couldn’t say it.”



## Mirror, Mirror on the wall

A further effect of the NSS is the proliferation of additional surveys, and other ways of gathering feedback from students. These are now ongoing during the course of an undergraduate degree. In some institutions these surveys are administered twice in the first year of a degree, twice in the second year of a degree and once in the third year, prior to the administration of the NSS in the students' final term. In some universities a 'mirror survey' is employed ('mirror' because it uses the same format as the NSS). In other institutions an adapted version of NSS or a bespoke survey instrument is in use. In addition, there are many formal and informal meetings devoted to student/staff engagement and to gathering feedback (and to giving feedback on that feedback). Some universities also hold university-wide 'Student Voice' events, during which time departments are expected to host a meeting to gather information from students. Just as the expectation for continuous improvement seems increasingly to be embedded in the discourse around the NSS for academics, the cycles of feedback generation and response seem almost to be continuous in an undergraduate's degree experience.

Dale: "We just keep asking the students again the same thing over and over again. We'd already got this information from them in the departmental meeting three weeks before. So our response was, so can we go back to what they've already told us and bring those points up? (. . .) So to have those forums, to have that dialogue I think has really helped but I do think if you're going to ask – get students to evaluate then you need those windows to go back and say – well what have we done from the things that you've brought up? I think that helps with the NSS as well."

There are a number of justifications for these additional surveys and meetings. Firstly, there was what one academic called the "redundant logic" that if students become familiar with survey instruments this will be good for final year NSS scores. Other reasons were interconnected: the surveys aimed to give first and second year students a formal opportunity to raise issues of concern, and then those issues could be addressed sooner rather than later, and prior to the NSS. Joe: "You don't want them looking to solve a problem and you can get on with it and help them right away". In addition, the surveys are used to 'flag up' what might be an issue of concern in the NSS so that this could be addressed before the 'real' survey is administered. Katrina: "We'd better deal with this because it could affect . . ." The multiple meetings are also used in these ways. I was told many times by academics that they would tell students not to leave a problem unexpressed: "report *before* it gets serious".

Gill: "To just go, tick, just what do you think across these? To give us starting points to go whether or not that was a real blip or there were more fundamental problems and also to think what we needed to address . . . We look at what each of the tutorial groups has highlighted as where they think there are issues . . . and unpick a little bit more about how or why they perceive things in the way they do and how we could, or should, in their ideas, address them."

Sometimes the feedback academics elicited from students related to a low score in a mirror survey or to an NSS score staff didn't know how to interpret. "And you can look through but sometimes [the qualitative comments] they're so contradictory." This 'Student Experience Coordinator' responded by trying to get students to help her "understand exactly what these items mean. That's quite hard sometimes to get people to actually come in and do that. I've tried a couple of times to organize them" (Leah). In another department, a survey distributed during the second year of a course showed that they were "really happy about the quality of their learning and they were really unhappy about the quality of their learning. When you looked at the data that's what it told you" (Peter). Again, this contradictory evidence was taken as the spur to a "little research project about what that means." These sorts of instances help to explain the vast amount of work that is now put into describing and explaining what the survey "does mean and what it's for".

A further, commonplace, shift in how academics work in relation to the NSS is the adoption of NSS language and categories in their own discourse; this is a further 'mirroring' of the survey. Students' lack of engagement with the survey and academics' perceptions that they misunderstand the questions, has resulted in academics talking to students in ways which set out to mitigate against these problems. In a high stakes environment, academics want to ensure that if the survey is completed, it is completed in such a way as to reflect the experiences that students are having. The academics I interviewed were acutely aware that it would be inappropriate to influence students, directly, in respect of completing the survey favourably, while suspecting that this was commonplace in some institutions. However, there were a number of ways in which people spoke to students in order to encourage *accurate* reporting of their experiences.

Simon: One of the things that I know we've done is we've started using the same terminology that the NSS questions use. So we've tried to make a link for the students, between what we actually do and what the NSS score is actually asking us. In the past we've actually been giving them the information but because it hasn't used the same wording, we don't feel as though they'd actually made the link. So we're starting to talk NSS if you like. (. . .) Preparing for the workplace, for example. the type of skills that we think we're giving them for the workplace and they don't necessarily understand so we kind of help them make the link. (. . .) I can remember staff meetings where we've talked about a strategy of making sure that we tell students exactly what we're doing for them in terms of the NSS wording. There was a feeling that maybe we should put up signs saying 95% of our feedback was on time. To kind of link with the type of questions that they were being asked."

In some respects, the proliferation of opportunities for student/staff interaction could be seen as the benign side of the NSS – in some institutions it has encouraged more student/staff contact and this has had positive outcomes. Gill spoke about how a disappointing score had made them think about how to help students understand the complexities of grading creative work. Joe described how much he had learnt from spending time with small groups after the university had highlighted a particular issue through the survey. Fiona described how the survey has made

them “rethink the voice stuff, so we do much more listening and talking face to face.” And the multiple meetings that staff described have the potential, of course, for dialogue.

Of course many academics were already engaged in meeting with students on a regular basis, and in evaluating their learning in a variety of ways. It is also interesting to consider the content – as reported by academics – of the feedback that is gained via these mechanisms. While important issues are raised in these meetings, a series of examples, described below, suggest a reiteration of surface issues. Peter described how the additional surveys also result in “soundbite ways of responding to things they’re asking in the internal surveys.”

Dale described how the department had had disappointing scores in relation to ‘Organisation and Management’. “What’s really interesting is that the things that – we were saying – look be honest. Give us some examples of the things that have really niggled you. So it would be like timetable changes, having so many variants. It’s things like when they come for open day there’s suggestions of what they might get but actually when they arrive things are gone, they’re not here. So it shifts. The other thing was like, suddenly groups that have to be put together occasionally and we have to move rooms and we arrive and you move us.” Peter described how it is typical for students to say: “look at where they’ve put all the assignments, look they’re all coming at this point. You say, ok, here’s a list of assignments. You design the year. Where do you want – do you want them before Christmas? No, because we wouldn’t have done the set. No, ok. So you don’t want them then. Do you want them here when you’re on placement? NO!”

Paul: “Yes, we had a meeting. [They say] the final project feels rushed. Yes, you have to make a presentation before Easter about the final project because we want you to develop the idea in time for the assessment point, two weeks after Easter. If we left it until after Easter, you’d be saying that’s a bit late. I can’t do anything about it now. So really, really strong pedagogic reasons for doing all this stuff and I would defend every single one of them.”

The public nature of the NSS, the generation of league tables, and the multiple ways in which academics are drawn into concerns about scores, is also reflected in a series of accounts of a particular dilemma in relation to encouraging students to be both fair and wherever possible, positive, about the department they were studying in. The ambivalence academics feel about this was clear in the accounts they gave – acknowledging that ‘poor scores’ might reflect badly on the *students* who have been responsible for them, but not wanting to say that directly to them: Francis: “[The NSS is] also there to give some kind of legitimacy – in my opinion – to the degree that the students hold because if you are really low down in the survey – I wouldn’t want my degree from this university – I would want it from a university that appears to have done better. So – but we can’t say to the students – it will devalue your degree . . .” This was also tied to encouraging students to highlight problems *before* they complete the NSS: “Then I say because, for example, if you leave it till the NSS, give us a really poor score, without really giving us a chance to deal with that issue

beforehand, that then ripples out into the wider world. What you don't want is for someone to look at the degree that you've just got a 2:1 in and say, actually, it's a really bad degree. What you're doing is not necessarily letting us down but you're in some respects letting yourself down" (Maggie).

Liz: "But I think that sense of, if we can try and – I think there's a sense in which we want to explain to them what the NSS actually is and what its role is without then saying you should vote nicely for us. It presents an ethical problem in terms of how you talk to students about completion. Because one message, of course, is that well if you all vote really badly for us it devalues your degree. I don't – I think the ethical – the university and our department are very cautious about that kind of approach which is seen as, I think, speaking the rhetoric that's problematic in terms of instrumentalising student experience which is something I think we'd all feel was – is problematic about the NSS."

## Living in a glass house and not throwing stones

It is clear from this account that the National Student Survey has had considerable effects on the higher education environment into which it was introduced over ten years ago. These effects go well beyond giving students an opportunity to evaluate their programme in order that universities can “improve the student learning experience” (ipsos-mori.com) in obvious ways. This narrative account of the effects of the NSS on the working lives of academics suggests that the NSS may actually be diminishing the ‘student experience’ in respect of the educational endeavour of higher education. Clearly, this preliminary analysis would ideally be followed by more comprehensive research, to include both current and prospective students, their parents and a larger sample of staff across all disciplines.

The data presented here would suggest that the NSS is encouraging a more instrumental attitude to education amongst the student body. The questionnaire itself, institutional responses to concerns, and shifts in the curricula of higher education are all contributing to this move. An economic register has been reinforced by the introduction of the £9,000 fee where students increasingly consider whether they are getting ‘value for money’. In such a context, higher education may increasingly be regarded as a transaction where students pay for something that academics ‘deliver’. This may suggest a growing passivity on the part of students in respect of their own learning. Some academics reported that they are also working hard to contextualise the survey to students and address their concerns in ways that do not reinforce the instrumentalism that is being promoted. One of the questions raised in this research relates to the contexts in which it is possible to challenge students in respect of their expectations, and where this is more difficult. Once again, further work in this area will set out to explore this question. In respect of the survey itself and its outcomes, academics reported a lack of interest amongst students.

Academics reported that the NSS has also encouraged a punitive attitude amongst senior managers who oversee the survey. This is evident in the ways in which the results are distributed, the public nature of the comparisons that are made, the requirements to respond to issues raised and the combative tone of much of the discussion around the survey results. Academics are required to respond – and quickly - to concerns that are raised, although it is clear that these concerns may not actually represent a significant problem. This research suggests a series of mediations and approximations are represented in survey results resulting in a distinctly ‘muddy’ picture in respect of how improvements might be made. Low scores may originate in a very small number of students, and sometimes the survey is used to express disgruntlement about something quite outside the remit of the survey. Judging the nature of something qualitative via a survey is notoriously problematic, partly because the context of the evaluations is not evident. Where academics explored a problematic score, and tried to address it, it was noticeable that some students who had been ‘satisfied’ then became ‘dissatisfied’ (and vice versa); the NSS is, as many people described it, a “blunt instrument” and it cannot differentiate between a real problem and a superficial problem. In addition, it

highlights only what has 'gone wrong' (or appears to have 'gone wrong'); at the same time, if nothing has 'gone wrong' it does not necessarily mean everything has 'gone right'. On some occasions, an apparent problem was identified as being closer to a university agenda than it was to a student agenda. It is also ironic, in this context, that real problems seem not to be addressed via the survey in order that individual staff and students are not 'exposed' or vilified. This response, which may be appropriate in the short-term, does nothing to address the much more deep-seated problems that may continue unaddressed.

Elements of this research suggested a diminishment of professional autonomy amongst academics. Driven by managers and league tables, questions of 'improvement' to programmes were initiated from outside those programmes. The notion of 'continuous improvement' disregards thinking about the complexity of educational issues that might be expressed through student feedback. For example, in educational terms, intellectual struggle would typically be regarded as essential to work at this level. In NSS terms, however, intellectual struggle may manifest itself in dissatisfaction. The responses that are required to 'problematic' scores are also impoverished in educational terms, given the sometimes dubious and uncertain validity of the data and the speed with which people are expected to respond. This focus on immediate 'solutions' to apparent problems, could be seen as a further diminishment of professional values and practices, inasmuch as this contradicts (and perhaps militates against) considered development of programmes, by those leading them.

The NSS is part of a wider culture of the audit of higher education in the UK (and internationally) where measurement of what academics do is taking precedence over professional expertise and evaluations. This metric sits alongside a range of other metrics (citation indices, workload models, research assessments and so on) that "increasingly function as an overarching data assemblage oriented to myriad forms of quantified control" (Burrows, 2012). The particular form of accountability expressed in these mechanisms is an extension of a financial usage of the term (Lorenz, 2012). Where a 'bottom-line' or profit margin is not available to those who deploy this form of accountability, a proxy for that activity (e.g the six categories of questions in the NSS) and a way of measuring that activity has to be developed. In this way, work that is qualitative in nature is reduced to a score, and other forms of accountability are both ignored and diminished in the process.

The circularity of positivistic data in the form of numbers leads to increasingly closed systems in respect of professional dialogue and debate. Once a programme evaluation has been reduced to a number it has huge power. Numbers are both 'transportable and transposable' and give things "an air of utter certainty" (Graeber, 2015): ". . . from inside the system, the algorithms and mathematical formulae by which the world comes to be assessed become, ultimately, not just measures of value, but the source of value itself." This is the power of the league table, of course, and helps to explain how academics become implicated in these mechanisms.

Academics need, and want, to do well in these league tables; this is partly a consequence of their public nature and partly about the ways in which they are used by managers. And, as this report has illustrated, 'problematic' scores come back onto the table "again and again and again" funneling the impact of those scores on the people concerned (Hey, 2011), and increasing their visibility. Shore (2008): "league tables simultaneously produce winners and losers, and the 'policy of naming and shaming failing institutions has become an annual ritual in humiliation". In these, and other ways, neoliberalism comes to 'inhabit' us – it is 'out there' and 'in here' in Peck and Tickell's (2002) terms. In contrast to students' attitudes to the survey, academics reported a keen awareness and preoccupation with the survey and its effects. This echoes other work in this area: "In the immediate aftermath of the publication of results one manager saw his role as nothing to do with 'the actual results' which 'comes later' but rather in dealing with the 'terrible weight' and emotion that comes with receiving the NSS results" (Sabri, 2013: 5).

It is uncertain that the NSS contributes to the professional development of academics, however. The 'feedback' that academics get in the form of qualitative comments are unhelpful in this respect as names are typically 'redacted'. It is also unclear who has contributed the feedback from the student body so it is not possible to engage in a conversation with those individuals. The responses that academics are required to make are also 'monological', as Sabri (2011) describes; there is no debate about responses to NSS outcomes as the cohort will have left by the time changes are implemented. Although the NSS has encouraged the proliferation of other surveys and opportunities for academic/student exchange, it appeared that these mechanisms also tended towards the provision of 'solutions' to immediate and short-term problems/dissatisfactions rather than to dialogue about the purpose, meaning or content of education. This represents a very impoverished view of the complexity and potential of student 'voice'.

The NSS has clearly changed both what academics do, and how they describe what they do. It has also contributed to a considerable increase in workload in respect of preparing for and responding to the NSS. Requirements to focus on employability, in particular, have encouraged the proliferation of a discourse associated with skills which is more akin to training than to education. Course material that is challenging, and assignments which present students with a challenge, are clear foci for student expressions of dissatisfaction and concern. Given the public nature of NSS scores, the institutional emphasis on them, and academics' desires to respond to student feedback, these provide the focus for much extra help being given to students in order that they feel less uncomfortable with these elements of their courses. This may help to explain the massive increase in students achieving first class and upper-second class degrees (Bachan, 2015).

The academics who were interviewed for this study seemed, on the whole, to have become accustomed to this climate while also expressing concern and critique of elements of the survey and its implications. This echoes work in the field of academics' responses to other metrics (e.g. research assessments) (Leathwood and Read, 2012). After a recent HEFCE review (Callender et al, 2014) it has been decided to modify, in minor ways, the NSS survey from 2017. The review concluded that the NSS is still largely "fit for purpose". A new 'Teaching Excellence Framework' is also likely to be introduced in the near future (Owen, 2015). A danger of this climate is that academics will become ever more accustomed to giving students what (they think) they want, and what senior managers require, in order to satisfy the short-term demands of audit mechanisms. It is hoped that this report will contribute to engagements by academics and others with the implications of the proliferation of externally-imposed, externally-run, forms of audit which drive such performative responses, sometimes at the expense of educational intentions.

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