

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHAMPTON**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL HUMAN AND MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

**The impact of the National Student Survey on institutional behaviour in relation to  
student feedback**

by

**Caroline Carpenter**

Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Education

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## **ABSTRACT**

FACULTY OF SOCIAL HUMAN AND MATHEMATICAL SCIENCES

Education

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### **THE IMPACT OF THE NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY ON INSTITUTIONAL BEHAVIOUR IN RELATION TO STUDENT FEEDBACK**

Caroline Sheila Carpenter

This thesis examines the impact of the National Student Survey (NSS) on institutional behaviour, from policy inception and stated purpose, through adoption and implementation, to its seeming predominance at sector and institutional levels.

The research is based on an in-depth longitudinal case study of a single institution, 'Greenfields University'. It comprises two elements: an extensive review of university committee documents at four points over a thirteen year period and a contrasting, qualitative analysis derived from individual interviews. The latter constitute slices through the organisational structure, from top to bottom, central to local, augmented by conversations with two recent Students' Union presidents.

This thesis identifies and explores the paradox that whilst the NSS was initially met with suspicion, scepticism and methodological critique, followed by continuing hostile expert and press commentary, it became the preferred and all pervasive means of securing and acting upon student feedback, both for government and the higher education sector that initially resisted it.

By comparing official documentary narratives with individual experience within one institution, this thesis is able to offer empirical evidence that partly confirms but also contradicts assertions made by some commentators concerning NSS implementation, notably around managerialism. It contrasts gains made in institutional overview, data consistency, profile of the student voice, coordination, resource allocation, quality enhancement and general effectiveness with a potential for risk aversion.

It notes pressures at institutional level to adopt 'gaming' tactics and in the case of Greenfields, alien management performance techniques, in order to raise scores in pursuit of league table

position. It notes that the widely held belief that NSS matters to student recruitment lacks corroborative evidence in terms of what is known about student choice.

It concludes with a discussion of the implications for higher education practice and policy as the NSS looks set to extend its sway, not least through the new Teaching Excellence Framework.

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## **DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP**

I, Caroline Sheila Carpenter declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

The impact of the National Student Survey on institutional behaviour in relation to student feedback

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

Signed: .....

Date: .....

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## Abbreviations

BIS	Department for Business Skills and Innovation.
CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire
CUC	Council of University Chairs
DfES	Department for Education and Science
DLHE	Destination of Leavers of Higher Education survey
GDS	Graduate Destination Survey
HE	Higher education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HER	Higher Education Review
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IRENI	Institutional Review in England and Northern Ireland
ISB	International Student Barometer
JACS	Joint Academic Coding System
KIS	Key Information Set
NCIHE	National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education
NSS	National Student Survey
NSSE	National Survey of Student Engagement
OIA	Office of the Independent Adjudicator
POLAR3	Participation of Local Areas (version 3, the most recent iteration)
PTES	Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency

SLC	Student Loans Company
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
THE	Times Higher Education
TQI	Teaching Quality Information
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

**Abbreviations used in relation to Greenfields**

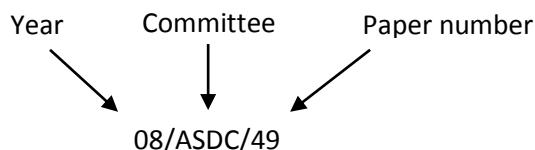
AB	Academic Board
ACM	Annual Course Monitoring
ASDC	Academic Standards and Development Committee
ASQ	Annual Student Questionnaire
DVC	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
FMT	Faculty Management Team
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LIS	Learning and Information Service
MB	Management Board
PGL	Programme Group Leader
PRC	Policy and Resources Committee
SEG	Student Experience Group
SESS	Student Experience Satisfaction Survey
SSF	Student Staff Forum
SSLC	Student Staff Liaison Committee
SU	Students' Union
VC	Vice-Chancellor

### **Abbreviations used for interviewees**

CLArt 1 and CLArt2	Course Leader, Art
CLBus 1 and CLBus2	Course Leader, Business
DeanArt	Dean, Arts Faculty
DeanBus	Dean, Business Faculty
DeanLIS	Dean, Learning and Information Service
DirAdmin	Director, Administrative Services
DVC	Deputy Vice-Chancellor
FMTArt	Member of faculty management team, Arts Faculty
FMTBus	Member of faculty management team, Business Faculty
HoSArt	Head of School, Art
HoSBus	Head of School, Business
PGLArt	Programme Group Leader, Art
PGLBus	Programme Group Leader, Business
SUPres2010	Students' Union President in office 2010-11 and 2011-12
SUPres2012	Students' Union President in office 2012-13 and 2013-14

### **Committee paper references:**

Committee papers are referenced showing the year of the committee meeting, the committee and the paper reference number, for example



## Chapter 1: Introduction – the national context

### 1.1 The development of the higher education sector: expansion and diversification

At the time of the Robbins Report, *Higher Education*, in 1963 there were 23 universities in England, Wales and Scotland teaching 118,400 full-time students while a further 97,500 full-time students studied at a range of local authority further education and teacher training colleges. In 2014-15 there were 1,697,105 full-time students (HESA, 2016) and in 2015, 127 universities<sup>1</sup>. Over the last fifty years, national policy has created an expanded university sector from a more diverse range of institutions. The institutions, courses provided, the way they are delivered and the student body are all more diverse than could have been envisaged even 25 years ago.

Recognising the importance of higher education to national competitiveness, government policy has driven the expansion of the sector and its student body while seeking to resolve how this could be funded. During this time, it has often been the case that the unit of resource per student has been at its lowest when student numbers have risen (Wyness, 2010) as governments have also sought to reduce reliance on the public purse. Over the last fifty years universities have needed to diversify income streams, often through the recruitment of full fee paying international students. Since 1998, home students have contributed through a variety of fee arrangements, firstly top-up fees, subsequently in 2006, variable fees and since 2012-13, tuition fees. Within this context, debates about the student as consumer and the marketisation of higher education have grown as institutions competed to attract students and research funding in an environment of diminishing state funding, increasing student fees and evermore intense competition at home and abroad. The 2016 White Paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (BIS 2016a) sets out the intention, mechanisms and timescales for the introduction of increasingly differentiated student fees.

It is probably not an exaggeration to describe the sector changes in terms of a transformation. There are few, if any, features that have not been affected but two aspects which have formed significant elements of national policy over the last fifty years have been the changes to the composition of the sector and its student body.

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<sup>1</sup> Figure derived from : <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/ltnss/results/2015/>  
Accessed : 12 October 2015

## Chapter 1

A key element of the 2016 White Paper for the sector was the introduction of a non-mandatory evaluation of teaching – the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The outcomes of the TEF will include both ‘reputational’ and ‘financial incentives’ (BIS 2016a:49). The rationale in the Green Paper (2015) linked its introduction to concerns regarding value for money, the availability of adequate information for prospective students and to raise the status of teaching in higher education (BIS, 2015). The White Paper, discussing the variability of information about higher education stated:

That is why this Government will introduce the TEF, and for the first time bring sector-wide rigour to the assessment of teaching excellence. While participation in TEF will be voluntary, we expect and will encourage a significant majority of providers to take part. (BIS, 2016a: 44)

It is also linked to the widening participation agenda strongly signalled in the Paper (see below).

### 1.2 The size and shape of the sector

The sector has changed substantially since Robbins, not simply the number of universities but also the range of organisations offering higher education. The latter part of the twentieth century saw the introduction and absorption of former public sector institutions into the recognised higher education sector and the merging of former specialist institutions with larger institutions (Brown with Carasso, 2013). Radical change came about as a result of *The Further and Higher Education Act and the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act* of 1992 which ended the binary line, enabling polytechnics and some colleges to become universities. As a result, 41 new universities were created.

Following recommendations by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997 (the Dearing Committee), there were two further significant steps to increase the number and type of universities and institutions providing higher education. The 2004 Higher Education Act opened university title to institutions without research degree awarding powers and subsequently there were additional changes to the criteria, making it possible for smaller institutions and private providers to apply for degree awarding powers and university title. In November 2012, BIS announced ‘... the single biggest creation of universities since 1992.’ (BIS, 2012) with a further ten institutions becoming universities.

Proposals in the White Paper (BIS, 2016a) will push this further with quicker routes to sector entry and less stringent requirements for academic and financial track records. There is a particular

emphasis on creating a ‘level playing field’ (BIS, 2015:57; BIS 2016: 8) for new providers<sup>2</sup>. It is unclear what the short term impact of such changes would be, but figures published by the Student Loans Company (SLC) give some idea of the growth of this part of the sector. In 2011 11,420 students studying with alternative providers in England were in receipt of tuition fee loans, by 2013 this had increased to 39,500 (SLC, 2015). The potential for an expanded and more diverse body of higher education providers is set within the context of a more fluid sector in which some will fail.

### 1.3 The size and diversification of the student population

Over the last 50 years, higher education has moved from an elite to mass/universal<sup>3</sup> system. At the start of the 1960s most undergraduate students were UK domiciled, entered higher education straight after leaving school and studied full-time. Today, around a third of students are 25 and over and around 600, 000 (568,930) study part-time, while nearly a quarter of full-time students are international (HESA, 2016). In 1962-3 a quarter of the student population were women (Committee on Higher Education, (The Robbins Report), 1963:171) in 2014-15 more than half (56.2%) of all higher education students were women (HESA 2016). Over the period, controls on student numbers were changed incrementally, culminating in the lifting of the cap on numbers for student recruitment to publicly funded institutions in 2015-16.

From the 1990s onwards there were additional policy drives to increase participation amongst underrepresented groups and this formed one of the key themes of the 2016 White Paper. The efficacy of these later policies in the longer term is still unclear. The Green Paper noted ‘strong progress in access for the most disadvantaged students, with record numbers being accepted this year, but there is still more to do.’ (BIS, 2015:13). The most recent HEFCE analysis, however, indicated that although participation amongst young students from disadvantaged areas increased substantially between 1998 and 2012:

.... young people in the most disadvantaged areas would need to treble their participation rate in order to match the rate of those from the most advantaged areas.  
(HEFCE, 2013:3)

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<sup>2</sup> The Green Paper refers to all those offering higher education as ‘providers’ with private organisations referred to as ‘alternative providers’.

<sup>3</sup> Trow (1970) categorised higher education systems according to Age Participation Rate: up to 15% APR indicated an elite system; 15-33.3% APR, a mass system and 33.3-40% a universal system. While this is a widely cited categorisation, Kogan and Hanney (2000) discuss the potential pitfalls of using this in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context, not least the fact that it is predicated on the proportion of school leavers, whereas current student populations comprise more diverse groups.

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The White Paper (2016) modified statements in the Green Paper, while noting that 'more students [from disadvantaged backgrounds] than ever before' (BIS 2016:7) went into higher education, it also acknowledged that access to higher education continued to be 'uneven' and the disparity between rates of students from the most disadvantaged groups and those from the most advantaged backgrounds (BIS 2016a:7).

The new TEF is positioned as one of the ways in which widening participation will be increased. All providers wishing to apply for TEF will be required to show a clear commitment to widening participation and the presentation and benchmarking of the core metrics will enable '...panels to consider a provider's performance for those from disadvantaged groups.' (BIS 2016: 49). There will also be 'specific criteria and explicit instructions' for panels to take this into account.

### Quality assurance and public information

The role of quality assurance has grown with sector changes. Dearing identified a need for national quality arrangements capable of providing assurance to the public at a time of sector expansion and diversification. The Dearing Report recommended that the responsibilities of the new Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) include, 'quality assurance and public information' (NCIHE 1997, recommendation 24).

The remit for public information was taken forward by a group chaired by Sir Ron Cooke which recommended that a national survey of feedback from recent graduates be undertaken and the results published as part of a wider set of public information (HEFCE 2002). This was announced in the 2003 White Paper *The Future of Higher Education*

Better information for students including a new annual student survey and publication of summaries of external examiners' reports to help student choice drive up quality (DfES, 2003:7)

The White Paper's vision for the sector was one in which differentiated institutional missions would foster collaboration as institutions stopped trying to do everything and focused on their strengths. Within such a system, the provision of information on which students could make decisions about what and where to study took on a new importance and was positioned as a means of 'driving up' quality as students voted with their feet:

This also means that institutions will be able to reap rewards for offering courses that serve students well. It will make student choice a much more powerful force, and help choice drive quality. (DfES, 2003:84)

The phrase students ‘driving up quality’ resonates through recent major policy documents: the 2003 Paper, the report of the Browne Review, the 2011 White Paper and the 2015 Green Paper. (Appendix A)

By 2011, the emphasis was on competition rather than collaboration. Regulation, primarily relating to student number controls and to the criteria for degree awarding powers and university title would reduce. The language and vision was that of the market:

The changes we are making to higher education funding will in turn drive a more responsive system. To be successful, institutions will have to appeal to prospective students and be respected by employers. Putting financial power into the hands of learners makes student choice meaningful. (BIS, 2011:5)

Within this changed environment, information on higher education would become more important:

We will radically improve and expand the information available to prospective students... (BIS, 2011:6)

Subsequently, Key Information Sets (KIS) were introduced in 2012 with the intention of bringing together key pieces of information identified as important to students applying to higher education, including elements of the National Student Survey (NSS or ‘the survey’).

The NSS has remained a key strand in the public information set (Teaching Quality Information) and while its usefulness in informing prospective students is questionable, its significance in national policy has increased. The Green Paper continued to emphasise the availability of information to help students make decisions, describing it as ‘...crucial to young people making life changing decisions’ (BIS 2015:11) and linking it to the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a message carried through into the White Paper (BIS 2016a).

## 1.4 Chapter conclusions

Within the seismic shifts taking place across the sector, NSS is a minor element but it has proved to be a tenacious constant. It continues to be a hotly debated issue nationally – in the run up to the 2015 general election, the Green Party pledged to ‘Scrap the National Student Survey and other forms of evaluation which perpetuate cultures of ‘customer satisfaction’ and quality control...’ (Green Party: 2015). While in the wake of the publication of both the White Paper (BIS 2016a) and the TEF Technical Consultation (BIS 2016b), an article appeared in the THE: ‘NSS manipulation claims ‘raise questions’ about data reliability. Allegations of ‘inappropriate

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influence' emerge on survey that will be key TEF metric' (Havergal, 2016). It seems unlikely, however, that the survey will either disappear or change significantly following the most recent national review. The sector, which initially opposed its introduction, has shown little inclination for radical change. Indeed, its' place as a core metric in the TEF seems likely to guarantee that it will attract more, not less, attention over the coming years.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

### 2.1 Introduction

Since the National Student Survey (NSS) is a matter of national policy and one that on occasion arouses strong emotions, there is a plethora of what Richardson refers to as 'grey' literature—i.e. writing that includes relevant information but which may lack the 'academic rigour' (2005:387) of independent peer review.

The NSS has been in place since 2005 and the nature of the literature has changed over time. Early discussion on feedback from students appears to have been the preserve of a small number of academics who were leading the field in the development of student feedback mechanisms within universities. They focused on the issues to be taken into account and methodologies for acquiring valid and reliable material.

Prior to the development and introduction of the NSS, there were a number of reviews commissioned by HEFCE and undertaken by (some of the same) academics and consultants. In the lead up to its introduction and following its implementation, there was quite frequent and almost universally negative commentary in the national education press. Following its introduction, while the debate about the robustness of the survey continued, articles by academic staff on how they used NSS data to inform their own practice were published. More recently, there has been discussion around the ways in which the survey is used institutionally, usually from an enhancement perspective. Since its introduction, the survey has been kept under review with the final outcomes of the most recent review currently awaited.

### 2.2 Origins and development of the survey

The origins of the survey as part of a wider set of public information are rooted in the Dearing Report and were developed in the Cooke Report whose recommendations included a national survey of recent graduates' feedback to be published as part of a more extensive set of public information, including the results of institutions' own student surveys. The proposal was not welcomed by the sector: 'Only a few institutions supported the introduction of a national student feedback questionnaire.' (HEFCE, 2002b, Annex B: 28). Richardson *et al* noted the 'strong opposition' (2007: 571) by heads of higher education institutions after the first pilot of the survey in 2003:

Their resistance was sufficiently strong for HEFCE to suggest to the Government that a full national survey should be postponed for a further year. (Richardson *et al*, 2007: 571)

The Cooke Report recommended that in the interests of keeping the survey 'within manageable limits' (HEFCE 2002b:15) and collecting valid data, results should be reported at institutional level and not further disaggregated. The publication of institutions' own survey results, as well as the national survey, were regarded as 'essential elements of the overall package' (HEFCE 2002b:15). The two types of survey were envisaged to have different roles: the national survey was to inform student choice, while institutional enhancement would continue to be informed by bespoke internal surveys. The report recommended, however, that 'Wherever possible, the content and format of the published information should be useful for the institution as well as for external stakeholders.' (HEFCE 2002b:11)

The following year, the report of a project looking at existing good practice and advising on the design and administration of the national survey noted that 'Virtually all higher education institutions (HEIs) possess quite elaborate mechanisms' for collecting student feedback, (Williams and Brennan, 2003:i) with commonality in the topics covered. In practice, however, much of the data generated was underused. The report suggested that one possibility was for institutions to collect less but to make better use of the data collected.

Amongst institutional concerns with the Cooke proposals was the requirement to publish summaries of internal student feedback and the authors recommended that this should not be mandatory. The report noted that applicants would find the results of a national survey providing information below institutional level helpful. The view of the authors was that the survey should focus on learning and teaching 'narrowly defined' (Williams and Brennan 2003: iii) and closely based on the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) which had addressed methodological issues. It argued that the publication of contextual data alongside the national survey results was important and should be included, even at the expense of the potential to provide directly comparable information.

The report highlighted concerns that a national survey would generate institutional averages which were of no interest to potential students but which could be used in league tables 'which are considered to be misleading' (Williams and Brennan, 2003:iv).

The findings of the NSS pilot showed that the survey instrument was able to discriminate between the views of graduates from different institutions taking the same subject. It would produce results which were useful for potential students with different priorities because an

institution might score highly in some survey scales but not in others. This also meant that the survey did not lend itself to the formation of league tables.

This led to discussion as to whether the overall satisfaction scores (which could, of course, produce a simple ordering) should be suppressed in any published presentation of the results from a full national student survey. In the event, this suggestion was not adopted. (Richardson et al 2007: 569)

A further HEFCE publication (2003a) identified changes to the original dataset, including the publication of subject level NSS results and the removal of the requirement to publish internal survey results.

Despite concerns about the usefulness and potential pitfalls of institutional averages, the 'overall satisfaction' was included in the published results. It is frequently used to sum up the results for an institution or even the whole of the sector and may contribute to the perception that the NSS is a satisfaction survey.

## 2.3 Development of the NSS survey instrument

The NSS is closely associated with the CEQ which was based on research at Lancaster University in the 1980s (Ramsden and Entwistle, 1981), and which identified a functional relationship between teaching quality and student learning.

Richardson (2005) identified three main categories of mechanisms for collecting student feedback:

- i. Student Evaluations of Teaching (SET)
- ii. Student satisfaction surveys
- iii. Student perception of academic quality

He determined that student feedback could be useful for assessing and improving quality and also for prospective students. Issues of timing and the level at which feedback was collected (modular, course, institutional) were important as was the focus of the feedback -'students' perceptions of key aspects of teaching or on key aspects of the quality of their programmes' (Richardson, 2005:409). He concluded that while it would be possible to develop a questionnaire that could be used for a wide range of higher education provision, it would be problematic for two key groups: postgraduate research students and distance learning students. He noted the lack of published research on how senior managers used student feedback and identified four key reasons 'for the apparent lack of attention to this kind of information' (Richardson, 2005:408).

The main issues are: the interpretation of feedback; institutional reward structures; the publication of feedback; and a sense of ownership of feedback on the part of both teachers and students. (Richardson, 2005:410)

The 2003 White Paper announced that the NSS would run for the first time that year but this was delayed. During this period, concerns, speculation and continuing debate were played out in the press in which the survey was linked to potential reputational damage and to league tables<sup>4</sup>. An early report in 2002 referred to it as 'a league table of how popular universities are with their graduates' (THE, 8 Feb 2002). Following changes made to response thresholds and to timing (from a survey of recent graduates to a survey of final year students) there were several high profile debates.

Perhaps the most sustained objections were by Professor Lee Harvey, elsewhere referred to by the THE as '... widely seen as the architect of the modern student satisfaction survey' (THE, 13 February 2004) who was angered by the change of timing of the survey because of its potential impact on institutional processes; about the validity of results and the cost (Harvey, 2003a).

Harvey (2001, 2003b) explored the use of student satisfaction surveys in higher education both as a tool for continuous improvement to the student experience and for external use as information for prospective students and others. The later work reflects the publication of both the Cooke Report (HEFCE, 2002b) and the White Paper (DfES, 2003).

Harvey reviewed and critiqued types of satisfaction survey (eg, institutional, programme level, module level). He noted that 'although feedback from students is collected assiduously in many institutions, it is less clear that it is used to its full potential.' (Harvey, 2003b: 3), a point also noted by Williams and Brennan (2003). Harvey identified the conditions for feedback to result in improvement: student feedback needed to be supported by clear institutional commitment and embedded in its circumstances, processes and accountabilities. Students needed to be actively involved in the formulation of survey questions and able to indicate the importance as well as their satisfaction with the areas surveyed. It was also essential that students were kept informed of responses to their feedback. Institutional surveys could also fulfil a public accountability role with core questions published externally while questions concerned with local issues were not published outside the university.

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<sup>4</sup> For example: 'Student survey plans fall apart', 21.03.03 (THE, 2003a); 'Credibility fears delay students' staff audit' 13.06.03 (THE, 2003b); 'Don't rush to satisfy' 21.11.03 (THE, 2003c); 'Survey questioned' (letter) 19.12.03 (THE, 2003d).

Harvey questioned the value of an instrument such as the CEQ, either for improvement or for public information purposes and commented that:

The standardised programme evaluation approach reached its nadir in Australia with the development of the CEQ... (Harvey, 2003b:14).

He argued that a single national survey would not provide useful information to prospective students particularly in light of the anticipated time lag in the production of results and reporting at institutional level. In addition, information on action taken as a result feedback would not be available. Harvey argued that in this context, student satisfaction surveys were more about compliance and accountability and unlikely to result in the improvement of the quality of provision for students.

## 2.4 Response to the first NSS

The NSS was introduced as a survey of final year students in 2005 for all providers of higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, directly funded by the Higher Education funding councils. 131 out of a possible 141 institutions took part. There was some initial resistance, student unions at Oxford, Cambridge and Warwick had encouraged members to boycott it. Following the publication of headline results there was a fairly upbeat leader : 'Generally sunny, but some clouds' (THE, 2005a) – in which it highlighted some differences in subjects; noted lower scores for the 'assessment and feedback' scales and cautioned against exaggerating differences in scores. By the end of the month and following publication of all institutional data, the tone was rather different. An article headed 'Males are most likely to be critical' (THE, 2005b) noted differences in responses from various populations, provided comment from the heads of two different types of institution as to why their students were likely to be more critical and identified Cardiff University Medical School as the lowest rated medical school.

The following year the THE reported that the picture arising from the NSS was distorted because of the absence of a number of institutions where response rates did not meet publication thresholds (Shepherd, 2006). A later report that year headed 'Vocal minority could ruin faculty reputations' (THE, 2006) raised concerns regarding plans to lower the response thresholds for the publication of results. 144 institutions, including some Scottish universities which chose to participate, were included in the 2007 survey. By 2011, all Scottish institutions participated which Ramsden and Callender (2014) attributed largely to the introduction of KIS. Over time, the survey population was extended to include other groups of students, such those on NHS funded provision and students on higher education courses at Welsh and English further education

colleges. In 2015 responses were received from over 300,000 students in 155 higher education institutions, 190 colleges and five private providers (HEFCE 2015b).

## 2.5 Discussion on the nature, validity and use of the NSS

The debate about the nature of the NSS – what it is intended to demonstrate- continues. Those involved in its design and development have been clear about its purpose and limitations. It is, for example, frequently referred to as a satisfaction survey which Richardson refutes. He states that the design specification for the survey instrument was to produce a measure of perceived quality at programme level enabling comparison of courses in the same discipline across different institutions. ‘It wasn’t designed to compare courses or programmes in different disciplines at the same institution, and it certainly wasn’t designed to compare different institutions as a whole.’ Nor was it designed to measure student satisfaction, the original Survey<sup>5</sup> had a single satisfaction item (‘overall satisfaction’), introduced to test the validity of the other scales ‘... in consumer theory satisfaction is defined as congruity between a customer’s expectation of a product and their experience with that product’.<sup>6</sup>

A report prepared for the 2010 review of NSS identified ways that the survey could and should not be used:

The design of the NSS means that there are limitations on its use for comparative purposes...In particular, its validity in comparing results from different subject areas is very restricted, as is its use in drawing conclusions about different aspects of the student experience. One issue to be borne in mind is that, in most cases, the differences between whole institutions are so small as to be statistically and practically insignificant.

(CHES, 2010:4)

The report recommended that clear guidance should be given on the limitations of the data and the ‘risks and issues associated with using NSS results for purposes of comparison’ (CHES 2010:64). The list indicating responsible and illegitimate use of the data is given in Appendix B. HEFCE subsequently produced institutional benchmark performance data which allowed for student intake, subject mix and other factors influencing outcomes. This is limited, however, to

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<sup>5</sup>An additional question on satisfaction with the services provided by the Students’ Union was added to the survey in 2012.

<sup>6</sup> John Richardson, private correspondence (24.03.14). Ramsden and Callender (2014:41) also note similar correspondence.

the institutional 'overall satisfaction' score. It is not referenced in either league tables or KIS data. A recommendation for its wider use was included in the 2014 review of the survey.

Cheng and Marsh (2010) judged that NSS results should be used for comparing universities only 'with appropriate caution' and that such caution applied 'especially' to their use for comparing courses. In light of 'these necessary cautions in the interpretation of NSS ratings' they questioned the usefulness of the ratings for providing the information intended. (2010:709). Commentators (eg Diamond *et al*, 2012 CHES 2010) also caution against attributing significance to the often very small differences in scores.

Prosser (2005) not only argued against the use of student evaluations such as the NSS for the formation of league tables, but warned that it could be counterproductive to regard such evaluations as a measure of satisfaction. He contended that making changes to teaching with the primary purpose of improving scores ignored the complexity of the learning experience. He argued that an awareness and understanding of the different learning experiences of students are 'the key to improving students' experiences of learning' (Prosser, 2005:1). Examination of the student open comments and further work using focus groups, for example, could help to further this understanding, he suggested.

One of the main objections voiced by academic critics to the NSS is that it oversimplifies and fails to accommodate and reflect the complexities of the learning and teaching experience or the context in which it takes place. Williams and Cappucini-Ansfield (2007) discussed the relative fitness-for-purpose of the NSS compared with a bespoke institutional survey developed using priorities identified by students. They argued that the brief, broad brush NSS was of limited use in informing institutional improvement and that the two types of survey were not interchangeable. They highlighted concerns regarding the potential for the NSS to disrupt the established cycle of student feedback in institutions (which was also a concern of Harvey's).

In an excoriating THE article Harvey dismissed all aspects of the survey: its susceptibility to manipulation and its use, primarily for rankings, with validity being a key issue:

...In this, the NSS is sadly lacking. Validity is about the questions actually providing indicators of something worthwhile, not something statistically comfortable. The NSS is at best a compromise, with a set of bland questions. That these are formed into scales and assumed to measure complex concepts is laughable.... (Harvey 2008b)

He argued that the results did not support improvement and was concerned that institutions had discontinued bespoke instruments in favour of NSS-type surveys.

Gibbs, (2010) although not specifically referring to NSS, noted the limited value of student evaluations which reported a global judgement on the teaching over a whole course and which did not allow for the learners' changing views as they became more sophisticated learners. This reductive approach made responses (often an average) difficult to interpret and act on. He concluded

....what best predicts educational gain is measures of educational process: what institutions do with their resources to make the most of whatever students they have. The process variables that best predict gains are not to do with the facilities themselves, or to do with student satisfaction with these facilities, but concern a small range of fairly well-understood pedagogical practices that engender student engagement. (Gibbs, 2010:43)

He went on to say that for the most part this data was not collected, '...nor are they (in the main) the focus of the NSS.' (Gibbs, 2010:43). He identified an exception where questions relate to specific teacher behaviour such as the promptness of their feedback. Two years later, in a paper which looked at the use of quality indicators (Gibbs, 2012), Gibbs discussed ways in which some institutions used, amongst other things, NSS data and the various positive and negative implications of these approaches. This is discussed below.

## **2.6 NSS as part of published information on higher education – national policy developments**

Public information had long been part of higher education policies, fulfilling an accountability requirement, with published reports on the scrutiny of higher education institutions by national quality bodies being a feature of the quality framework. During the period following Dearing, public information continued to grow in significance. The requirement for greater public information was regarded as a trade-off in return for the sector not being required to undergo universal subject review which was both very costly and highly criticised within the sector (Brown, 2004).

Two key functions were originally identified for NSS, the first was to inform prospective student choice about higher education. Public accountability was a second, but important element: the survey would provide evidence, through student evaluation of higher education, of the use of public funding. A third, but originally minor, purpose was the provision of information that might be useful to institutions themselves in improving provision. The original intention was that internal surveys would continue to be the source of data on which institutions could enhance

their provision, with the NSS being an outward facing source. The importance of these purposes has shifted over the time that the survey has been in operation.

Underlying the significance attributed to the publication of information is the assumption that the public, particularly prospective students, would use it. There appears to be scant evidence to support this<sup>7</sup> and more substantial evidence arguing that such information, including commercially produced league tables, appeals to a very limited readership, (Underwood, 1998, Brown *et al* 2007; Cremonini 2008, Dill and Soo, 2005; Brown, 2006). While there appear to be no arguments against the principle of providing more information about higher education to assist student choice, there is considerable debate about whether it is possible to provide useful comparative information and whether prospective students make use of the information available.

Brown (2007) argued that valid and reliable comparable information was a pre-condition for a higher education market but was not feasible within a diverse higher education sector. In the context of the USA, Kuh (2010) argued much the same case. Cremonini *et al* (2008), noting the increasing use of rankings for student choice, commented that they neglected important cultural dimensions. They argued, moreover, that the decision-making process was more complex than the provision of league table type information would suggest. They suggested that this type of information could skew university policy as institutions sought high rankings and promoted only those aspects in which they achieved high scores.

Brown with Carrasco (2013:174) argued that 'There is simply no evidential basis' for the assumption that greater availability or analysis of information 'together with other ways in which the Government is trying to give students greater leverage' results in any substantial increase in quality.

There is limited evidence that prospective students make extensive use of the NSS in its raw form. Work by Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University for HEFCE (2010) indicated that current and prospective student interest was limited and related to a relatively small range of information. Further, even amongst those who had indicated that they would find certain information 'very useful', (2010:4) '...a surprisingly high proportion (between a quarter and a

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<sup>7</sup> The number of page views within the NSS section of Unistats from launch in May 2009 – August 2012 was 865,489. Following the launch of the KIS/ UNISTATS site on 27<sup>th</sup> September 2012, the number of unique visitors to the UNISTATS site for the period 1 Sept 2012 – 15 January 2013 was 110,181. For comparison, the number of unique visits to Greenfields University website over this latter period was 284,324. (Information supplied by UNISTATS and HEFCE respectively in response to personal requests).

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half' (2010:5) had not tried to find it. The report concluded that evidence did 'not suggest there is an appetite for or likely to be much use made of any new large-scale information system.' (2010:73).

Further work commissioned by HEFCE found that NSS as a source of information for student choice was the least effective of the three original purposes of the survey and advised that this should no longer be considered the main purpose of the survey:

Data from the NSS form one of many inputs into students' decisions about programme and institutional choice. A range of studies clearly shows that the student choice process is complex and related to personal circumstances as well as to academic attainment and career goals. The NSS should continue to assist prospective HE student choice... but this should not be considered as its overriding purpose. (CHES, 2010:4)

Work undertaken with students as part of the 2014 review (Griggs (b) *et al* 2014) noted parallels with the Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University research: that while students said they would find the information provided by the NSS useful, not all of those questioned had tried to find it. Like other respondents to the review, students viewed the NSS as part of a wider set of information, including university websites and open days. Students reported that their decision making was based on many different factors. The subsequent national consultation on changes to the NSS and the wider information available to students acknowledged limited use of the official sources<sup>8</sup> and recommended changes. The 2014 review recognised the survey's 'multiple purposes' (Callender *et al* 2014:2) including student choice, enhancement of the student experience and public accountability, with the enhancement function being particularly important.

Brown (2007) noted that the notion of the 'rational consumer', a key assumption about students' use of information to make decisions about higher education, no longer carried weight amongst economists. The use of information by prospective students was explored by Diamond *et al* (2012). The paper discussed the application of behavioural economics which recognises that human '*...capacity for rationality is bounded* and that our decision-making is also characterised by *non-rational behaviour*.' (Diamond *et al* 2012:6). The report listed the five sources of information most used by prospective students which included neither Unistats nor KIS. Reflecting the earlier review findings it noted that research in the UK and elsewhere indicated that 'a surprising number

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<sup>8</sup> 'Awareness of Unistats is low, but satisfaction of users is high: only 18 per cent of 1,175 first-year students surveyed had used it. Of those surveyed, 79 per cent had said they were not aware of it.' (HEFCE 2015:19)

[of prospective students] never try to find' information even if they believe that it could be very useful. (Diamond *et al*, 2012:8)

The study outlined the difficulty that prospective students can experience in prioritising different types of information. It argued that in this situation students may 'be affected by 'a paradox of choice', in which a growing range of options has the effect of increasing the difficulty of decision-making.' (Diamond *et al*, 2012:9). It emphasised the importance of contextual information and also of guidance on the interpretation and evaluation of the information.

A later study (Diamond *et al*, 2014) highlighted the complexities around information-seeking and decision-making behaviours and the influences which shape them. It suggested the need for more reflexive, inclusive and nuanced approaches to the provision of information. The report noted, however, that while the evidence indicated that applicant decision-making would be assisted by 'a more behaviourally informed approach to information provision' (Diamond *et al*, 2014:62), this did not appear to be feasible in the current higher education environment.

## 2.7 How is it used?

### 2.7.1 As part of the national quality framework

The NSS was incorporated in to the QAA's institutional audit process from 2006-7 to 2010-11, initially as part of the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) set and increasingly as a primary source of evidence and enquiry. An analysis of audit reports published 2007-09 indicated that in 32 of 36 reports, reference was made to the NSS at least once with 'many multiple references' (QAA, ND: 1). The report cited a range of circumstances in which NSS was the starting point for action and a measure of effectiveness. It was also incorporated in quality processes such as course monitoring and student feedback surveys. It also noted the value of NSS data to QAA audit teams as an additional source of information and '... in some case helping to draw attention to areas where institutional rhetoric is not reflected by student experience.' (QAA, ND: 2)

The report gave an overview in which the survey had become 'embedded in... the institutional consciousness' (QAA, ND:2)– its data was accepted and was used to a greater or lesser extent, at least in those institutions undergoing scrutiny by the QAA.

Following on from the emphasis in the 2011 White Paper (BIS, 2011) the QAA institutional review methodology introduced in 2011-12 had a greater emphasis 'on engaging students as partners in the quality of their learning experience and its outcomes' (QAA, 2013:3). As a consequence, public information had a higher priority and became the subject of one of four (previously three)

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summative review judgements. NSS was regarded as a source of review evidence and an institution's response to the NSS was to be a 'standard feature' of the process (QAA, 2011:12). Reflecting changes to the sector, the QAA expected 'private providers' of higher education who subscribed to QAA to participate in the NSS as part of their commitment to the provision of public information (QAA, 2011:13).

An analysis (QAA, 2013) of 14 student written submissions from a range of institutions undergoing institutional review in 2011-12 showed that NSS was a significant source of evidence, particularly in relation to teaching quality and assessment and feedback on student work. An analysis of the thematic reviews, as part of the IRENI process, noted that surveys, including NSS were the most common means of gathering student feedback. It also found that most institutions had formal processes for analysing and responding to student feedback such as action planning either centrally or departmentally and that on the basis of the student written submissions, students 'regard surveys as synonymous with enhancement.' (QAA, 2014 (a):22) The current QAA Higher Education Review (HER) method uses NSS as a source of evidence and expects institutions to comment in particular if performance in NSS is below benchmark (QAA 2014b).

### **2.7.2 Use by universities**

Prior to the introduction of the NSS, there was widespread collection by universities of student feedback but apparently limited use of the data (Williams and Brennan, 2003; Harvey, 2001 and 2003). The 2010 NSS review noted

We found striking the emphasis that institutional managers placed on the way the NSS findings allowed them to identify potential problems in the student experience and to act on them quickly. (CHES, 2010:3)

#### **2.7.2.1 For enhancement**

Although originally regarded as a minor purpose of the survey, it is apparent that institutions make use of survey data. Work undertaken as part of the 2010 review of the survey noted a strong emphasis on the use of the results for enhancement: '...there is ample evidence of the increasing importance of the NSS to universities and colleges as a tool for internal QA and enhancement.' (CHES, 2010:22)

Responses are made available to universities at a finer level of granularity than are published<sup>9</sup> and universities also have access to the anonymised free text responses by students.

Published articles evidence action taken by institutions from an early stage in the survey's history in response to low scores. The following two examples hint that these responses were partly due to the increasing importance ascribed to the survey, with references to its use in league tables, acknowledged.

Flint *et al* (2009) recounted action following disappointing NSS scores in 2006. An event was held, concentrating on the teaching and academic support sections of the survey. The student voice, '...supported by evidence, not anecdote and generalisation' (Flint *et al*, 2009: 611) was central.

One of the issues surfaced was the dissonance between the student experience of the course and the modular structure, another was incomplete feedback from staff to students on actions taken in response to their feedback. The paper concluded: 'The NSS is rapidly becoming perceived as a quantitative shorthand for the quality of the student learning experience...' (Flint *et al*, 2009:617).

Brown (S.2011), described how one university set about enhancing the student experience in very challenging circumstances: 'considerable financial challenges' (2011:196); the resignation of the Vice-Chancellor; poor NSS scores, resulting in low league table positions; a limited confidence judgement from the QAA; low staff morale and a loss of focus on 'the core business' (2011:195). A collegial approach to change was taken with senior leadership, monitoring through the committee structure and with the student experience 'regarded as a high priority for scrutiny and action' (2011:199).

While NSS was not the sole prompt, it formed an important focus for action: 'A significant starting point was the establishment of an NSS steering group' (2011:199), with faculty, Students' Union (SU) and service representation. Priorities for actions appear to have been derived from NSS feedback and triangulated with internal survey material which revealed different areas of satisfaction but 'a consistent picture of dissatisfaction' (2011:199). Improvement in the subsequent NSS scores were identified as a measure of success.

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<sup>9</sup> Prior to the introduction of KIS in 2012, NSS results were published according to Joint Academic Coding (JACS) subject levels, a national system used to categorise provision under broad subject headings and used for major accountability returns by HEIs. The threshold for publication was 23 respondents and 50% of the eligible population. This changed as from 2015 when results were published where there was a minimum of 10 respondents and 50% of the eligible population.

Institutions receive their own results where there are 10 or more respondents. Institutions can also identify NSS departments and receive results for each department. A department may be a single course or a group of courses or other selection. An institution can access its results by department providing that the publication thresholds are met. They also receive the results of any additional questions they asked and the free text comments by students, neither of which are publicly available.

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Staff in different roles were involved in bringing about the identified necessary change, focusing on staff development, changes to pedagogic practice and 'customer satisfaction' (2011:200). The paper identified nine concurrent actions ranging from informing students of action taken in response to their feedback, avoiding survey fatigue, staff development, to staff recruitment practices and 'changing the culture' (2011:203). The approach taken was multilevel with a mix of actions aimed at short term impact and also long term fundamental change.

Both the Brown (S) and the Flint *et al* articles discussed the involvement of staff from across the universities, including those in key service areas. Gibbs (2012) also noted attention to hygiene factors and to student-facing administration, with senior managers more likely to take action in cases of departments with unexpectedly poor NSS scores.

Discussing work at Derby, Baranova *et al*, (2011) cited NSS and other national surveys (PTES, ISB) as prompting an interest in student experience, often through their use in league tables, but resulting in more holistic approaches to the student experience including consideration of the impact of administrative processes.

Lower scores across the sector in the assessment and feedback scales of the NSS gave rise to extensive activity. Perhaps as a result of this renewed interest, the assessment and feedback scales of the survey are those that have seen the most change, along with academic support, with a 12 percentage point increase between 2005 – 2013 (HEFCE 2014:25). Holmes and Papageorgiou (2009) explored expectations, perceptions and understanding of feedback with tourism management students, through a qualitative study using interviews and focus groups. Reid (2010) discussed an audit of academic feedback practices within a university, prompted not only by the increasing importance of the NSS, but also by a student complaint referred to the OIA. The audit revealed high levels of student satisfaction overall, but with variability in practice across and sometimes within subject areas. The outcome of the study was that the university introduced common assessment feedback criteria and practices. Williams and Kane (2009) analysed data on student feedback available from institutional student surveys, using the Student Satisfaction Approach. The research explored changes in student perceptions of assessment and feedback, their concerns and institutional action to address these. The paper noted that while action in response to student concerns may increase student satisfaction, it may take several years to do so.

The scope of the work noted above varies from the institutional to the very small scale. The HEA has promoted the enhancement potential of the NSS and the case studies it published attest to the extent of activity directly engendered by the NSS (HEA, 2007 and 2010). A subsequent publication *Making it Count*, (Buckley, 2012) based on work carried out by members of the HEA's

NSS Institutional Working Group, evaluated the usefulness and the limitations of NSS data particularly for enhancement. It also commented on the attention senior staff afforded the survey and noted instances of greater emphasis on working in partnership with students rather than responding to feedback in ways that might suggest a provider/consumer relationship. It also referred to the use of student engagement surveys as a richer source of evidence. The HEA has taken a national lead in the development of the UK Engagement Survey drawing on questions from the USA National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), (Buckley, 2013, 2014 and 2015).

In 2010, Gibbs, contended that some institutions were trying to improve NSS scores without really understanding what would be effective. Moreover, he argued that NSS was not a valid quality indicator in so far as it does not predict student learning outcomes. Two years later, he discussed work undertaken in the sector in response to quality indicators, including NSS and considered the consequences, actual or potential, of such action. He noted that many institutions used data to identify 'a previously overlooked quality problem and address it' (Gibbs, 2012:10), for example giving poor quality feedback to students on their work in timeframes that were too long to be useful. While there was evidence of improvement in NSS scores there was also the potential, for broad institution-wide changes to limit the scope of academics and in so doing affect good practice. He commented that 'While many institutions are embarking on quality enhancement initiatives with an intensity not previously seen' (Gibbs, 2012:20) this effort was not always targeted effectively to improve student learning gains, rather at improving public quality indicators. Gibbs included case studies of approaches taken in different types of institution in order to improve quality indicators. One of the most effective models recognised both the central importance of students and also local subject contexts. One university had implemented a series of large scale university-wide initiatives to address issues identified through NSS or other quality indicators. The projects were centrally funded, co-ordinated, supported and evaluated but were implemented locally with trained student facilitators playing key roles. The outcome was a 'very marked' (Gibbs, 2012:35) impact on quality indicators, including NSS scores.

Institution level action may not always be appropriate or effective in bringing about improvement. Reflecting on the use of student feedback to improve teaching, Ramsden (1998, 2003) stated that consideration at course level was most appropriate. He noted the consistency of feedback from year to year and commented: 'Quality changes very slowly in higher education.'(1998:45). Harris and James (2010) reflecting on both the availability of data and the consistency of student feedback responses to the Australian CEQ and GDS over time, questioned whether effective changes could be made on the basis of data arising from national surveys. They identified four key reasons for this related to both the nature and understanding of the data and the perceived associated managerial incursion on academic work. Gibbs (2012) identified

instances where NSS scores went up or down from year to year when no significant changes had been made to the course or to pedagogical practice but often, were associated with administrative or organisational matters outside the academic operation of the course.

A number of writers (Hazelkorn 2008, Naidoo *et al* 2011) posited that use of survey results in order to rank institutions can influence students' responses. Students at high status universities and socially advantaged students, aware of the 'symbolic' value of their degree were 'predisposed' to rate their institutions more highly in satisfaction surveys (Naidoo *et al*, 2011:1150), although the evidential basis for this in relation to NSS is unclear.<sup>10</sup> Bennett and Kane (2014) explored whether certain student characteristics affected the way in which students interpreted the NSS questions. They found no discernible differences in relation to student gender, age, degree title, family background or nationality, but reported differences between highly engaged students and those showing low engagement and also between students with different learning orientations. They argued that this called into question both the survey itself and its use by institutions, particularly in regard to staff appraisal, with a need for better management understanding of both the survey limitations and the student body responding. They commented:

It is relevant to note that efforts by university management to increase the number of students participating in the NSS and in related satisfaction surveys often have the effect of bringing in students with low engagement... (2014:150)

It is not clear, however, whether the latter point appreciates the way that the NSS survey population is compiled and the external administration of the survey.<sup>11</sup>

Douglas *et al* (2014) sought to explore 'critical drivers' (Douglas *et al*, 2014:2) of student satisfaction and dissatisfaction which may be reflected in NSS scores and thence league table position. They concluded that the 'critical determinants of quality' were access, attentiveness,

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<sup>10</sup> HEFCE does not analyse NSS results on the basis of social class because the data returned to HESA in relation to social class is not very robust. HEFCE has analysed NSS results in relation to state school and independent school attendance and also in relation to POLAR3 (Participation of Local Areas) which relates student home address to the proportion of young people going into HE, split into quintiles (information from HEFCE through private correspondence). The analysis indicates that former independent school students are less satisfied than their state school counterparts for all except four questions (HEFCE 2014) and there is 'minimal differences in satisfaction' in results split by POLAR3 code (HEFCE, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> The survey population is driven by an institution's detailed return of its student numbers to HESA. Institutions cannot determine who is included in the survey. While institutions have some choice as to when they promote the survey to students, students can complete it at any point during which it is open between January and the end of April. IPSOS Mori sends reminders to non-respondents by email and also surveys them by phone in order to reach the publication thresholds.

availability and communication (2014:9). Motivation, reward, social inclusion, usefulness, value for money and the behaviour of other students were also identified as factors which could influence student satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

There is also commentary and literature on the impact of the NSS on the academic role, particularly as one of an increasing number of institutional demands on academics, externally driven by national policy. Crawford (2009) cited an academic member of staff referring to the '...backlash from this survey with unexpected management directives about what was taught, leading to 'a real issue of quality of life' for academics...' (2009:79-80). Hagyard, (2009) stressed the importance of a supportive environment and avoiding the perception that student feedback targeted underperforming staff.

The pressure felt by academics arising from institutional responses to the NSS has attracted press attention. An article by Furedi (2012) decried the NSS, which he argued did not measure the quality of education and resulted in the issue of what students wanted being privileged over what they need. Yet the survey was accorded inappropriate importance by institutions 'The idea that you live or die by the NSS is now widely internalised...' (Furedi, 2012). This had implications for academic practice:

There is in the NSS something deeply intrusive and destructive that distinguishes it from other attempts to audit academic life.....It possesses a corrosive immediacy that encourages the subordination of education and scholarship to the arbitrary imperative of student satisfaction. (Furedi, 2012)

The assumption of the significance of the NSS was explored by Sabri (2013) who argued that the NSS has become a 'fact-totem' having 'acquired significance that far outweighs its validity or intended use' (Sabri, 2013) and elsewhere cited it as an example of policy initiatives which are 'screening out' the academic (Sabri, 2010:193).

### **2.7.2.2 Use by university management:**

Writing in 2005, Richardson indicated that 'There seems to be no published research evidence on the use that senior managers make or do not make of student feedback ....' (2005:408). Three years later, studies (CUC, 2008; Locke *et al*, 2008) indicated that senior managers were using NSS as an indicator of institutional performance. While HEFCE, in its publication of NSS results, makes it clear that it does not publish league tables, it appears that NSS is viewed alongside league table performance. Included in newspaper league tables for the first time in 2007 (Locke *et al*, 2008), the association appears to have gained ground quickly. An investigation by the Committee of

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University Chairs (CUC, 2008) on the use of key performance indicators by Boards of Governors in nine universities, noted that

In the context of league tables it would seem that the National Student Survey has established itself as an impartial and accepted measure of student satisfaction (and has, in at least some institutions at least replaced internal surveys of students). (2008:25)

Locke *et al* (2008) included the NSS in a study of university responses to league tables:

A major finding from the survey and the case studies concerns the NSS and the increasing importance attached to its outcomes ... Although not a conventional league table, the NSS has become an influential source of information for a range of stakeholders, both in its own right and through its impact on higher education league tables. (2008:46)

and presented case studies indicating the allocation of senior responsibility, close reporting and monitoring of results and strategic action and investment in areas covered by the survey. Watson (2009) similarly listed it alongside league tables of institutional performance.

### **2.7.3 Use by organisations/bodies external to universities**

The use most commonly referred to by organisations other than HEIs, and perhaps the reason for so much of the activity around the NSS, is use in league tables. Writers on NSS are unanimous that it should not be used to form simplistic league tables; HEFCE concurs and it was something that both the sector and advisers to HEFCE warned against before the survey was introduced.

The three longstanding newspaper league tables (the Times/Sunday Times, the Guardian and the Complete University Guide all give NSS measures a high weighting. Harvey (2008) referred to the ways in which institutions use favourable rankings in publicity material, giving an example of a University which in an advertisement for a senior post,

...prioritises rankings over the QAA classification and represents the National Student Survey (NSS) result to imply a high ranking. (Harvey 2008a:188)

Harvey (2008a) referred to institutional policy and strategy development aimed at ranking improvement. Locke *et al* (2008) explored the extent to which a range of institutions paid attention to and sought to optimise their positions in league tables. Hazelkorn (2008), writing on the outcomes of an international survey of university leaders on league tables and ranking systems noted their influence, not only institutional behaviour at all levels, but also that of

potential partners, sponsors, students and government policy. While many decry league tables and dispute their validity and the methodologies used, however, only a handful of universities choose not to participate in them. Their perceived value in marketing, particularly overseas, is regarded by many as an important means of ensuring visibility and attractiveness. Brown articulated a pragmatic approach to the questionable use of NSS results in league tables ‘...this is nevertheless the way that the survey has been used since its implementation, and this was why poor performance urgently needed to be addressed..’ (Brown, S. 2011:198)

Locke (2014) referred to the greater attention paid to aspects of student experience covered within the NSS as a result of the weighting given it in league tables. In turn, low rankings in league tables were used by senior managers as levers for change. This resonates with a study by Child (2011) on the perception of the NSS by academic staff and in particular, in relation to learning and teaching, in which league table performance was often perceived to be the basis for management interest in NSS scores.

The 2014 review of NSS noted its multiple purposes, including informing student choice, enhancement of provision and ensuring public accountability. Since its introduction, results have also been used in a variety of ways:

- as evidence of the health, success or otherwise of the sector in authoritative contexts, eg government White Papers and evidence to select committees.
- as a potential factor for consideration in the allocation of additional student numbers by HEFCE (HEFCE 2011, Annex B:1)

Most recently the proposed introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) has added to its uses with its inclusion as one of the ‘core’ metrics for use in the second year. The Green Paper (2015) proposed that a small number of ‘proxy’ measures be used to assess teaching excellence, including NSS along with performance indicators on retention and graduate outcomes derived from DLHE. This was confirmed in the White Paper (2016) which referred to the ‘core metrics’ (BIS 2016a:40), which together with a short submission by individual providers would form the basis on which the TEF ‘expert peer review panel’ would base its judgements (BIS 2016a:19) leading potentially to the identification of ‘excellent’ or ‘outstanding’ teaching and to differentiated fees with effect from the 2019-2020 academic year. While the balance of the weight of the information before the panel is unclear, the Teaching Excellence Framework Technical Consultation for Year Two (BIS 2016b) stated that ‘Assessors will make a holistic assessment based on both core metrics and additional evidence.’ (BIS 2016b:32). It then goes on to say

Where a provider is significantly above or below the benchmark for all or most metrics, the decision is likely to be straightforward unless contextual information and additional evidence present compelling mitigating factors. However, for most providers, the metrics will present a more complex picture. In general, the more marginal (against the metrics) or unusual in terms of delivery or circumstance a provider's situation, the more assessors will need to rely on the additional evidence presented in the provider submission. (BIS 2016b:32)

This suggests that performance in the metrics, including the NSS measures on teaching, assessment and feedback and academic support will become even more important to institutions.

## **2.8 With what consequences?**

Perhaps the main consequence is that institutions pay more attention to data arising from student feedback (CHES 2010, Gibbs 2012). Whether they do this for the 'right' reasons (improved quality of higher education provision) and with a full understanding of what the data means is, perhaps, debatable (Gibbs, 2012). There is evidence of institutional effort directed to investigating issues emerging from the NSS and introducing various policies and practices in order to address the perceived weaknesses. The potential for good practice to be lost in the drive for centralised change with a commensurate loss of scope for academics to determine approaches that best meet local contexts was noted by Gibbs (2012).

In addition, press reports highlight the pressures on academic staff to improve scores and direct increasing amounts of time and effort into addressing aspects of the provision that are included in the survey. Harris and James (2010:114), discussing the Australian context, refer to a 'creeping managerialism' associated with performativity which resonated with some accounts of how NSS is implemented. Bamber and Anderson (2012), in an article based on a study of a small post-1992 institution, discussed cultural differences between academic staff wishing to improve their teaching and managerial approaches rooted in quality assurance. Recent exploratory research by Frankham argued that the way NSS results are handled 'encourages a performative attitude' (2015 :8) with some senior managers adopting a 'combative tone' (2015: 9) at meetings which did not enable full discussion of the issues – 'The culture of university meetings militates against academics airing open disagreement in the face of bureaucratic definitions of 'quality' issues.' (2015:12)

If NSS scores are a pointer to a progressive beneficial impact on the sector, viewed from the perspective of student perception, then a positive consequence of its introduction might be seen in the rising scores since its inception (appearing to level off in 2008-09 and also 2014-15).

Surridge noted that

The vast majority of students rate their higher education experiences positively, and the vast majority of institutions are not statistically different from each other in this regard.  
(Surridge 2009: 5)

However, the reality and scale of any improvement remain difficult to assess, as might any longer term cost. A number of commentators (Harvey 2008a, CHES 2010, Diamond *et al* 2012,) caution against regarding very small differences in scores as significant. It is the use in league tables that puts this under the microscope in a way that gives very small differences unwarranted attention. If enhancement initiatives are driven by league tables alone, then the activities will be essentially disassociated from the student experience and may be potentially damaging in the long run.

## 2.9 Future development of the NSS

The most recent national review of the NSS was undertaken during the academic year 2013-14 it concluded that the NSS should continue with the primary purposes being informing prospective student choice and use by institutions to enhance the student experience. Accountability was identified as a minor aspect of the purpose of the survey. At the time of writing, the final proposals for changes to the survey, starting in 2017, are awaited.

In spite of the public debate as evidenced in the national education press since its introduction and mixed views amongst stakeholders as to the relative strengths, weaknesses and effectiveness of the survey, there was 'limited appetite.... for radical change' and 'general support' (Callender *et al*, 2014:3) for retaining most of the existing questions. 'Only a very small number of stakeholders said that the NSS was not needed at all.' (Callender *et al*, 2014:17). Indeed 'stakeholders' (institutional representatives, policy makers, student and HE representative organisations and the educational press), believed that the importance of the NSS was growing and that it should evolve to reflect contextual changes regarding the shape and nature of the sector and the diversification of the student population. Students regarded its primary purpose as providing assistance to prospective students in making decisions regarding higher education.

A key debate within the sector was in regard to the relative merits of an engagement survey. A national project was launched in 2013, involving nine institutions (32 in the following year) piloting the use of questions largely drawn from the National Survey of Student Engagement

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(NSSE) (Buckley 2013, 2014). Arising from this work, the UK Engagement Survey was open to institutions in 2015 with 24 institutions participating and involving over 24,000 students (Buckley, 2015).

While the NSS review found that there was support (73% of stakeholders surveyed) (Callender *et al*, 2014:27) for the collection of information on student engagement, there was no consensus on the meaning of student engagement or which aspects should be included within the survey. 'Many stakeholders' (Callender *et al*, 2014:27) felt that the survey should encompass all facets of engagement but three key aspects emerged:

- Academic challenge/reflective and integrative learning
- The learning community/collaborative learning
- Student voice

(Callender *et al*, 2014: 4)

Overall, there was little enthusiasm among policy and institutional stakeholders for replacing the NSS with an engagement survey... although some critics of the NSS favour the NSSE. (Callender *et al*, 2014:30)

The national review received multiple requests for the inclusion of questions on other aspects of the student experience. In order to preserve the integrity of the survey and its brevity, the review proposed criteria for the inclusion of question areas. It also recommended the removal of duplicative questions and the rewording and updating of others. The main changes proposed are shown in Appendix C.

The review touched a number of times on institutional behaviour. In addition to noting the use of the survey for enhancement, it commented on the impact of its use in league tables which '...acted as a driver within universities to internal action. In addition, the fact that the NSS results were in the public domain created peer pressure.' (Callender *et al*, 2014:15). They also recorded a tendency for institutions to focus on courses with low scores which could divert institutional effort from other activities. Conversely, consistently high scores were believed to lead to complacency in some institutions.

The review was aware of potential unintended consequences both of the survey itself and resulting from any potential changes. In particular it noted the crude use made of uncontextualised data in league tables. It also drew attention to

Alleged manipulation of results by some HE institutions (ie gaming) and concerns that the NSS created perverse incentives for HE institutions to manipulate students'

responses, on the basis that poor overall scores would devalue their degrees. (Callender *et al*, 2014:20)

## 2.10 Chapter Conclusions

The established literature and ongoing discussion about the NSS have focused largely on the methodological basis and value of the NSS as an instrument for the evaluation of student experience of higher education. Much of the criticism, present from the start, was based on limitations of the survey, misuse of the data together with mistaken categorisation, not least by official sources, that the NSS was a satisfaction survey.

In spite of a fairly hostile academic reception, the recent national consultation revealed limited inclination for fundamental change for the NSS. Its role in providing students with information, which seemed to be a lower order purpose after the review in 2010, is now restored as a key purpose following the current review. While there is no argument in the literature against the principle of providing prospective students with information about higher education, there is a longstanding question mark over both the usefulness of the information which can be produced and its intended and actual use by different audiences. It continues, nonetheless, to be a theme in government higher education policy.

National reviews concluded that it was used by institutions for enhancement purposes. This view was supported by the various publications discussing action which appears to be prompted by a growing awareness of the increasing importance of the survey, a desire to improve scores, sometimes, (Brown S 2011, Reid 2010) in combination with other indications that further investigation and action were needed. The literature review identified apparently contradictory strands of discussion: on the one hand, criticism of the survey questionnaire on the basis that it is limited instrument, incapable of capturing the complexities of higher education (for example, Harvey, 2008b; Gibbs, 2010; Sabri 2013) and on the other, growing indication of its use by both academics and university managers for a variety of purposes, although with perhaps different motivations and approaches.

The literature exploring its use tended to focus on specific instances such as in Brown, S. (2011) where poor NSS performance was one of a range of indicators that catalysed a university-wide review or usage within a certain academic discipline, or to inform a specific aspect of academic practice. There was also evidence of its use for targeting higher institutional performance by managers and governors (CUC 2008; Locke *et al*, 2008).

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There has been little on the impact of the NSS on institutional behaviour overall. The higher education press has from time to time published articles which refer to the impact of the survey on academic staff, an aspect of the survey which has been commented on by others (Sabri, 2013,) and recent exploratory research by Frankham (2015): *The effects of the National Student survey on higher education: an exploratory study* also examined the impact on staff. The voice of others in higher education is not often reported directly and there appears to be a gulf between the views of academic and managers as to the value and usefulness of the survey.

There appear to be no studies looking in depth at the impact of institutional behaviour in regard to student feedback over the time since its introduction, rather than in regard to specific instances.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Introduction – the research purpose

The purpose of the research was to explore how the introduction of the NSS has affected institutional behaviour in relation to student feedback and in particular how student feedback was considered and acted on. This led to the research question:

Has institutional behaviour towards student feedback changed since the introduction of the NSS? If so, how has it changed?

And the subsidiary questions of:

What are the drivers for this change? (ie why has NSS had this effect?)

Is change reflected and perceived in the same way throughout the institution?

Within the context of the sector and debates in literature – to what extent are those views reflected in the views of staff and students within the university and how does that affect behaviour?

In order to answer the research questions, the focus of the research needed to be:

- Longitudinal – the NSS has been in place since 2005, so the research would need to have some way of gauging institutional behaviour towards student feedback before the introduction of the survey and subsequently.
- Reflect a range of levels of activity within the institution –central/institution-wide, local/faculty and course level.

### 3.2 Research design and methodology

The research was designed as a case study – a research approach which has, arguably, particular strengths for an in-depth investigation of the detailed and complex while enabling the research to be located within ‘real-life context’ ( Bassey, 1999 : 26). Case studies explore the ‘particular’ (Simons, 2009: 167) and enable the researcher to investigate

...multiple perspectives, explore contested viewpoints, demonstrate the influence of key actors and interactions between them in telling a story of the programme or the policy in action. It can explain how and why things happened. (Simons 2009: 23).

In Runkel's terms, it is a study of a specimen, rather than the species (Runkel, 1990) and capable of uncovering not only distinct aspects of the case, but also 'universal truths' (Simons, 2009: 167), conveyed to the reader through 'thick description' (Geertz, 1993).

### **3.2.1 The case study institution**

The case study is located in Greenfields University (not its' real name) and is an 'instrumental' (Stake, 1995: 3) case study – ie the case institution provides the context for studying a particular phenomenon, not because of the intrinsic interest of the case institution itself. Greenfields, as the subject for a case study is judged to be fairly typical in many respects: it is a medium sized, post 1992 'new' university with a commitment to widening participation. It offers a range of business, social science, art, media and science degrees. The literature review indicated that Greenfields used a similar approach to other institutions in the way that it considers NSS.

Greenfields is not presented as an 'empirically demonstrated' (Bassey, 1999: 75) typical university on the basis of which scientifically infallible generalisations may be drawn, but in the knowledge that in some respects which were important to the research design, its approach to the NSS was not unusual. On that basis, it provided the potential for identifying features of the impact of NSS, which could be transferable to other institutions or from which 'fuzzy generalizations' could be made (Bassey, 1999: 51). Thomas, (2011) referred to the use of abduction in case studies which he describes as '...making a judgement concerning the best explanation for the facts you are collecting. It is what we do in case studies.' (Thomas, 2011:212)

Thomas (2011) argued that 'typicality is not a reason for studying a case' (Thomas, 2011:92) while Yin (2009: 48) identified it as a rationale for the selection of a case. Denscombe (2014) noted that '...although each case is in some respects unique, it is also a single example of a broader class of things.' (Denscombe, 2014:62) and that in a case study such as this, the issue is whether the findings may be 'transferable' (2014:62) to other contexts. He pointed to the importance of providing sufficient information to enable the reader to make a judgement as to whether the findings of the study might be transferable to other situations.

### **3.2.2 The insider researcher**

A facet of case study research is the researcher's understanding of the culture and context of the case: the signs, symbols and significance of the ways that things are enacted are potentially important elements of the interpretation of data. In this respect, I was well positioned as a senior member of staff of Greenfields, with responsibility since 2009 for the management and analysis of

the NSS and other student surveys. Like many 'insider researchers' my interest in the investigation stemmed from my professional experience (Drake and Heath, 2008:129)

The position of insider researcher presents certain additional challenges, particularly in regard to ethical issues and the potential for bias rather than subjectivity. A case study approach embraces the researcher's position, using this as a strength to deepen the understanding, which in turn is conveyed to the reader. In qualitative research, debate about the possibility or even desirability of researcher objectivity is intensified when discussion focuses on a case study and even more so when the vehicle for the investigation is the home institution of the researcher.

Concerns around researcher subjectivity may be counterbalanced to some extent by transparency, although it can be argued that the extent to which researcher judgement can be 'fully intelligible...because of the situated nature of judgement' (Hammersley, 2007:291) is limited. In such circumstances, a key issue is clarity regarding the researcher's position. Mercer (2007) argued that the position of the insider researcher, traditionally regarded as a dichotomy is, more subtly described as a continuum. This, more nuanced interpretation of the position, assists understanding of my position: as a member of Greenfields staff, I am an insider. My position on the continuum, however, changes within the research project. As a member of senior management, I am more of an insider interviewing senior managers. It is possible that my position assisted both access to and the openness of senior colleagues, although within this group there was the greatest range of responses, with some being apparently very open, while others appeared to be more careful and measured with their responses.

This position shifts when interviewing academic staff. Potential ethical issues relating to my position were addressed directly within the ethical approval for the research. I was sensitive to this in the way that I approached people to ask them if they would be interviewed, providing information in advance, an opportunity to ask questions at the start and end of the interviews and providing and explaining issues of confidentiality. Smyth and Holian ( 2008: 40) note that in the case of insider researchers 'access to information at various levels within the organisation may be limited due to the researcher's hierarchical role'. This may have been the case: some course leaders did not respond at all to the email request to interview them. Equally, those who were interviewed may have been less open with me than they would have been with a researcher in a different position. Nevertheless, the interviews with course leaders were some of the most revealing of those conducted. They provided new perspectives on the NSS, both in the way that it was conducted at Greenfields and also from the first-hand experience of those who feel they are being judged by it, leading to recommendations for professional practice.

Some (eg Simons, 2009, Cohen *et al* 2002), argued that case studies may be a helpful way to explore policy issues because they offer ‘powerful human-scale data on macro political decision-making’ (Cohen *et al* 2002:183). Simons argued the importance of this within a twenty-first century policy environment which seeks conclusive answers through large scale studies (Simons, 2009:169).

### **3.2.3 Data collection – a two stage approach**

The research design was based on a two stage data collection and analysis process of documentary review followed by interviews with staff and Students’ Union presidents. The documentary analysis of committee papers provided a longitudinal overview of institutional consideration of student feedback from a range of university committees at four points over thirteen years. The interviews, with a range of staff from course leader to Vice-Chancellor and with two Students’ Union presidents, were designed to test (triangulate) the findings of the literature review and the outcomes of the review of committee papers.

#### **3.2.3.1 Documentary analysis – committee papers**

In order to answer the primary research question, the investigation needed to be able to gauge institutional consideration of student feedback before the introduction of the NSS, on its introduction in 2005 and subsequently. It is argued that one of the reasons that the NSS has become a powerful instrument for change is that results are considered at the highest levels within institutions, and this may be primarily through consideration by committees which include membership straddling the institution vertically. Another reason why committee consideration is useful here is because it provides a relatively consistent narrative across the time period. Greenfields has had a university-wide format and style for committee papers and for detailed minutes since the late 1990s. Committee papers, therefore, represented a stable narrative framework.

It is also the case, however, that committee papers give, to some extent, the ‘official’ version of events – they represent the views as expressed and recorded in formal settings at faculty and institutional level. Wolff (2004) noted that most official documents were written with a limited audience in mind and referred to them as ‘*situationally embedded* creations of their producers’ (2004:285) but stated that they could act as

...*institutionalized traces* which means that they may legitimately be used to draw conclusions about the activities, intentions and ideas of their creators or the organizations they represented. (Wolff, 2004:284)

The importance of understanding the context within which they were written, their purpose and intended audience and also the limitations of the documents – the ‘reality’ (Hakim, 1993: 134) which they represent, is a critical factor in research which seeks to use documents as a source of evidence. Atkinson and Coffey, referred to documentary sources as ‘social facts’ which ‘...construct particular kinds of representation using their own conventions’ and which need to be approached ‘...for what they are and what they are used to accomplish.’ (2004:58)

The use of committee documents also offered a dimension of transparency with regard to my own role in the institution: committee business is determined by the chair (the Vice-Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor in the case of institution level committees and the Dean for faculty boards. The authorship of the papers is clearly identified and care was taken not to quote from my own papers, with comment on the work for which I am responsible only made where referenced by a third party.

In order to provide a different perspective and to illuminate the narrative drawn from the committee documentation, interviews were carried out with key staff including senior managers and staff with institution, faculty or course responsibility for gathering, acting on and reporting student feedback. A sample of the student perspective was sought through interviews with two Students’ Union officers in post for some of the years examined and between them, at Greenfields either as students or union presidents since the introduction of the NSS. While the data elicited through the documentary analysis of committee papers gave a broad overview of patterns of consideration and an indication of the importance attached and the response at institutional level over the period under consideration, the interviews provided a richer picture of the complexities of the situation, offering a different, more granular and arguably, more authentic picture of the unfolding developments.

### **3.2.3.1.1 Documentary analysis as a research method**

Documentary analysis can be viewed as a useful tool for certain aspects of research, Fitzgerald (2007) argued that documentary research could be used for the construction of a credible narrative, based on the identification of key elements of events or actions and interpretation of the text. It also enabled subsequent researchers to challenge or develop the research by offering ‘an audit trail’ (2007:280).

Hakim (1993), writing specifically about the use of administrative records, indicated that not only are they a key source for the policy process where they ‘....are part of the reality being studied....’ (1993:134) but also the use of documents as sources of insights on topics that might otherwise be difficult to obtain. Committee papers are a stable and verifiable source. Aimed primarily at an

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internal audience, they also periodically form a key source of evidence to external reviewers. They are therefore open to both internal and external scrutiny. In reality, committee papers are likely to be of limited interest and have a relatively small readership. However, they represent the official record of consideration of facets of the university's operation. It may be reasonable to assume that the committee papers will not present the 'unvarnished' version of events; that they will be moderate in their language and seek to present a balanced account of events. Their official status and the fact that they are open to scrutiny, should however, give assurance that they present factually accurate, reasonably unbiased and credible versions of events.

There are, however, potential pitfalls in using documentary analysis as a primary source of evidence for research and much of the writing warns of issues which could undermine or even negate research based purely on documentary evidence. Drawing on methods used in historical research, an evaluation process is recommended. It first examines the authenticity and genuineness of the documents (known as 'external criticism') and secondly an assessment of the accuracy and worth of the data contained within the documents ('internal criticism') is advised (Cohen *et al* 2002:162). Taking a slightly different approach and citing Scott, (1990), Fitzgerald (2007: 285) noted four criteria for assessing the documents selected for analysis:

- Authenticity
- Credibility
- Representativeness
- Meaning

These criteria were used as framework to assess the validity of the source documents in this study and is set out in Appendix D.

### **3.2.3.1.2 Approach to documentary analysis**

Committee documents were used as a proxy for the official record of university thinking and action in relation to student feedback on their university experience and to gauge whether there appeared to be any change in this with the introduction of the NSS. Occurrences of committee consideration of student feedback at points before, at the time of the introduction of the NSS and subsequently were considered. This involved looking at the documents for the academic years 2000-01, 2005-06, 2008-09 and 2012-13.

For each of the years reviewed Greenfields' 'Quality Manual' was the first point of reference. This document sets out quality assurance regulations, policies and committee terms of reference. It

provided a picture of the stated University position on student feedback as it linked directly to the quality assurance framework in operation.

### **3.2.3.1.3 Committee documents**

Documents were reviewed chronologically with the most senior academic and management committees first, working through to their sub-committees and finally to faculty boards. Working initially from agendas, substantive items on student feedback or items which were likely to include student feedback were noted and the detailed committee papers were examined. Commentary and actions, either taken or planned were noted. The minutes were also reviewed and relevant minutes and actions noted; if a matter had been referred to another committee for follow up, this was also traced through the committee structure. This mapped where student feedback was considered (and therefore, by whom) and to some extent, the importance it was afforded. It also gave a picture of whether there was connection between local (faculty) and university- level consideration and action.

### **3.2.3.2 Interviews**

While the committee papers afford the official, recorded, longitudinal institutional perspective they may not give the depth of views; they do not give the 'human' position: what might seem like sensible decisions and actions from a committee perspective, may be perceived differently by individuals. The interviews were used to breathe life into the documentary analysis and to give a perspective beyond the formal and documented. Kvale (1996) regarded the research interview as a form of knowledge generation whose purpose was '...to understand themes of the lived daily world from the subjects' own perspectives' (1996:27).

The committee papers can show patterns of consideration, pinpointed in time. The interviews were intended to provide a perspective on the experiences of individuals in different roles which were unlikely to be less precisely tied to particular timescales, for example, an interviewee might be able to describe how from their point of view consideration of the NSS has changed over time, but much less likely to be able to identify whether this occurred in 2008-9 or some other year. The interviews served to illuminate the patterns emerging from the documentary analysis and give depth to the study. Moreover, educational press coverage of NSS and latterly articles have referred to increasing management pressure on staff to improve scores. While this would be pertinent to this study of institutional behaviour, it would not be visible and could not be ascertained from committee papers.

### 3.2.3.2.1 Approach to interviews

The purpose of the interviews in this research process was to gain a different perspective from the top – down, officially recorded committee documentation and to triangulate both data and patterns emerging where possible. In order to do so, interviews took place with a range of staff based both centrally in the university and in the two faculties where the full range of committee papers, including faculty board papers were analysed.

Greenfields has three large faculties, each with between two and four schools based on subject areas. It also has two main student focused central services: the Learning and Information Service (LIS) covering library, IT and student support services; and Administrative Services, covering student operational administration, student records and quality. The two faculties from which interviewees were drawn were based around different academic disciplines: one including business, law, tourism, sport and language provision and the other art, design, media and social sciences. Within the faculties, subject based interviewees were drawn from schools selected for their broad discipline areas, business and art

There are a range of views regarding issues of reliability and validity in qualitative research with some arguing that the application of positivist criteria such as reliability and validity to qualitative research is inappropriate given that it is not possible to replicate the social context of the research nor the impact of the researcher. Denscombe (2014) noted Lincoln and Guba's (1985: 301) approach demonstrating 'credibility' (rather than validity), to signify the rigour of good practice in the collection, accuracy and appropriateness of the data which may be demonstrated through a clear account of the methods used.

In constructing the interview sample, the aim was for a 'balanced and thorough' approach (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 62), in order to ensure that there were no major gaps and that alternative perspectives and viewpoints were captured. They recommended that around two or three interviews should take place 'from each relative vantage point' (2012:63). Thomas, (2011) rejected the term 'sample' altogether in case study investigation:

I can't emphasise strongly enough that the point of a case study is *not* to find a portion that shows the quality of the whole. You are looking at your selection...without any expectation that it represents a wider population. So, it's not a sample; it's a choice, a selection. It is this *selection* that is vitally important for your study.' (Thomas, 2011:62)

The range of interviews included management and academic staff in a variety of roles and with institutional, faculty, subject or course perspectives. An organisational structure diagram is given in Appendix E. Commentaries in the education press and studies within the literature have tended

to focus on academic staff members and the aim of this research was to gain a broader perspective. The interview sample was, therefore, drawn up to reflect the range of positions within the faculty and central structures, taking a cross section of staff from Vice-Chancellor to course leader. The desire to incorporate this range led to a pragmatic approach to the number of interviews that could take place within the scope of the study. In some cases, interviewees had carried out a number of roles within the university and were able to draw on their wider experience; some also had experience in other institutions. The original purposive sample was drawn up based on key central roles, academic staff and academic managers identified from two different broad subject areas, located in two different faculties. Heads of school were interviewed first and asked to suggest a number of course leaders from whom the interviewees were drawn.

During an interview with a head of school the role of programme group leader (PGL) was referred to as being the interface between managers and academic staff, the 'piggy in the middle' (HoSArt). Two PGLs were therefore included in the interview sample. A total of 18 interviews were conducted with the following:

- Vice-Chancellor
- Deputy Vice-Chancellor
- Two heads of central services
- Two deans of faculty
- Two heads of school
- Two members of faculty management with cross-faculty responsibilities
- Two programme group leaders
- Four course leaders
- Two Students' Union presidents

The intention was for the interviews to take place in a certain order: following interviews with Heads of School, potential course leader interviewees were contacted in order to build a picture from local to university level, working 'up' through the faculty. In practice, however, interviewee availability meant that this was not always possible.

The difficulty of addressing the longitudinal nature of the study was particularly testing in the case of students. SU officers have experience of completing the NSS and also of working with the university on student feedback and participation in the NSS. They are also at the university for a

longer time than most undergraduate students. Within the SU, the president was involved in the preparation for NSS, discussion of results and was also a member of Academic Board and the Board of Governors. Interviews were held with the former SU president, in office 2010-2012 and the current SU president, in office 2012-14. Between them, their experience at Greenfields spanned 2005 -2014.

A semi-structured interview approach was used with topics and issues to be covered set out in an interview schedule (Appendix F) but with flexibility around the sequence and wording of questions in the course of the interview, allowing for follow up questions. The strengths of this approach were that the use of the outline made data collection more systematic with less likelihood of gaps in the data. The relative flexibility enabled the interviews to remain conversational and situational: the aim was for the interviews to be 'dynamic, interactive, social events' (Hatch, 2002: 115). The flexible structure also took account of the different perspectives of the interviewees – some interviewees had experience of use of the NSS in other universities or were conversant with national debates around developments of the survey, while others recounted more personal and direct experiences. It also meant that it was sufficiently flexible to follow through on particular issues. An interview schedule, informed by the literature review and the committee document analysis was piloted with two members of staff before finalisation.

In practice, while continuing with the same core questions the number of questions grew slightly as a result of the interviews. For example, staff asserted that the NSS was important for recruitment, so I wanted to explore with them if they knew whether prospective students were aware of the survey , so that was added to the list of questions. Similarly, up to a certain point, all interviewees described a lot of activity resulting from the NSS, until an interviewee questioned whether any real change to university policy had been made as a result of the NSS. This jarred with earlier responses and so this question was added to the schedule. As this occurred before the Deans of Faculty, Dean of LIS, DVC and VC were interviewed there was an opportunity to test out this response to see if it rang true with other interviewees with a university-wide perspective.

### **3.2.4 Recording and analysing the data**

The interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission. Two preferred not to be recorded but agreed to notes being taken which were written up immediately after the interview. Other interviewees agreed to be recorded, and in those cases very brief notes were made to serve as a prompt in the event of recorder failure (which occurred on one occasion).

The analysis was an iterative process but with a number of broad stages:

1. Transcription of the interview recordings.
2. Reading and re-reading the text and identification of potential categories.
3. Re-organising the text – according to interview schedule questions ('autocoding' in NVIVO™). Further identification of potential categories.
4. Coding text according to categories identified.
5. Re-reading and searching for any further categories.
6. Identification of whether certain categories of information appeared to arise from sub-groups of interviewees.
7. Where the coding revealed very little data in a category, the code was discarded or, if appropriate, combined as part of step 8 below.
8. Consideration of whether codes could be clustered thematically.
9. Development of themes arising from the analysis.
10. Looking for refutable propositions and considering implications of these. Repeat steps above if necessary.

In reality, some steps were repeated a number of times – reading, coding, reorganising the text, looking for themes either in terms of the content of the interview or through sub-groups and constantly testing themes and findings to establish whether there was contradictory data.

I transcribed all the interviews and then checked the transcription against the recording. This process helped me to get to know the data very well at an early stage. Transcription took place as soon as possible after each interview and before the next one, so that I had a good understanding of what came out of the interview and apparent emerging issues could be explored. As the process continued, I noted any potential categories for coding the data for analysis.

The interview analysis was approached initially through detailed and repetitive reading of the typed transcripts, with occasional reference back to the taped interviews. They were read in different orders so that I approached them anew each time and as this iterative process continued, I sought to identify potential themes and possible connections which were noted in memos. Summaries were also made of the interviews using a modified version of the framework suggested by Rubin and Rubin (2012).

### **3.2.4.1      Using software**

Once I felt that I had a reasonable knowledge of the data, I imported the transcripts to NVIVO™ Data Analysis Software. The software made it easy to cut the data in different ways and to explore possible themes and connections. I initially approached the use of software for sorting processes

in two ways – the first was simply to use it to pull together all the answers for each question so that they could be reviewed to see any emerging themes. The next step was to code data to ‘nodes’ (the term used in NVIVO™ which enabled data to be categorised and organised hierarchically) using the potential codes noted in the process. Memoing assisted consistency of data coding. This was an iterative process with categories developing throughout. Similarly, other potential categories were discarded when it became clear that there were only minor/few references to them. As the process progressed, it became possible to make connections across or within the categories and some were subsumed into wider themes. The use of the software in this very basic way assisted sorting, organising and categorising the data. It enabled me to try out different approaches to see if they elicited further insights, but its use was limited in this investigation: ‘Qualitative analysis requires attention to variation, to differences in emphasis, to shades of meaning...’ (Rubin and Rubin, 2012: 192) which involves immersion in the data and interpretation in light of the data and the context in which it was gathered. The interviews were used to triangulate against the findings of the committee document review and to build a picture of institutional behaviour as perceived from multiple standpoints.

### **3.3 Chapter conclusions**

The research question determined and limited the nature of the methodological approach: an exploration of institutional behaviour since the introduction of the NSS necessitated an approach which afforded a longitudinal view. A review of committee papers offered a consistent source of information with the ability to trace actions from the institution to faculty. The formality of the committee business, including clarity regarding the authorship of papers provided a further element of transparency important to case study research, particularly where it is the home institution of the researcher.

Interviews were used to supplement and to test the narrative derived from committee consideration. The interview sample was designed to ensure that key roles, representing both academic and management perspectives were included. A desire to obtain the views of staff at different levels and involved in different subject areas within the university balanced with pragmatic considerations about the scope of the research, meant that numbers of interviewees were limited.

The review of committee documents tracked institutional consideration of student feedback enabling an overview of the extent, timeliness and response. It was possible to trace this through both substantive items on agendas and also in cases where student feedback was used as a source of evidence or information in other contexts. From this, a picture could be built of how the

university was behaving, in its formal deliberations, in regard to student feedback and whether this was localised or across the piece. The committee documents, for the most part, did not explain why the perceived changes occurred and were limited by their nature and formality. These latter elements were provided largely through the interviews with interviewees invited to reflect on the impact of NSS from their own standpoints. Analysis enabled a thematic picture to be developed which was assisted and tested by the use of qualitative software data.



## Chapter 4: Documentary analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

Having established the research approach, this chapter sets out the findings and discusses the themes emerging from the empirical evidence gathered through documentary review which formed the first stage of the data collection.

The review of committee papers and associated material involved the consideration of more than 300 documents. Starting before the NSS it shows strong institutional interest in student feedback but limited effectiveness as a result of different perspectives at faculty level and apparently poor connections through the institution. On the introduction of the NSS, Greenfields took action similar to that described in some of the literature, but continued to focus on internal feedback mechanisms as the primary means of student feedback collection. Growing sector and media attention combined with an unexpected reduction in Greenfields' scores galvanised a concentration on NSS which then gathered momentum as the focus for feedback and progressive integration in quality processes.

The review of committee documents for four years spanning the academic years 2000-01-2012-13 identified four distinct phases in university consideration of student feedback:

- An early and continuing interest in student feedback at university level hampered by securing support for internal student feedback mechanisms and an apparent disconnect between faculty and university level consideration.
- Limited impact of the first NSS survey as far as committee consideration went. The emphasis was on the further development and use of internal feedback mechanisms, the data from which continued to be questioned. There were, however, also indications that relevant questions within the internal survey instrument would be aligned with the NSS and plans for future use of both within quality processes.
- An increased level of activity, possibly prompted by a 'sudden and unexpected fall in student satisfaction ratings' with faculties required to produce action plans for University approval; further alignment of internal student feedback mechanisms and more timely analysis to enable response for current students.
- Full integration of the NSS in quality processes, student feedback regarded as a KPI and use of NSS data for a wider range of university activity.

## 4.2 2000-01

### 4.2.1 Institutional and quality contexts

During the first year of review Greenfields was a college, yet to achieve university title. It was also the first year of a new organisational structure consisting of three faculties with some delegated responsibility for quality assurance. Greenfields collected student feedback through a wide-ranging and centrally administered Annual Student Questionnaire (ASQ). Module level feedback was expected but was voluntary and arrangements were determined by course teams. During their first year, faculties were required to establish course committees which were the main vehicle for student feedback at course level.

Student evaluation appeared to have two major functions: resolution of short term issues and the longer term development of the course through inclusion in other quality processes such as annual course monitoring, revalidation and course modification. Greenfields' regulations and quality processes were set out in a Quality Manual. The information on student feedback – 'evaluation' – was within the Guidelines on Teaching Performance Standards section which suggests that teacher performance was the main focus of any such feedback, although there is no evidence of any use of it in this way<sup>12</sup>. The results of any views collected through questionnaires were returned to the module or course leader, so while they should have fed into other quality processes, they might not necessarily have been useful in building a wider picture of the student experience across the university.

At institutional level, student feedback was discussed by two senior committees: Academic Board and Policy and Resources Committee (PRC). Both discussed the outcomes of the Annual Student Questionnaire, while the newly formed quality committee, Academic Standards and Development Committee (ASDC) considered proposals for new module and institutional feedback survey approaches.

Academic Board and PRC, the most senior deliberative and executive committees respectively, looked at survey results at the first meetings of the year. There was some overlap on discussion of follow up action of the 1998-99 survey and the outcomes of the 1999-2000 survey, suggesting that processes for producing results and following up on action were lengthy and may, therefore, have been of limited use for the timely improvement of the student experience. Elsewhere, there

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<sup>12</sup> Harvey (2011) noted that there was government pressure on UK institutions in the 1990s to collect student views on teacher performance. This context may assist in understanding this inclusion and the particular sensitivities which appear in the documents examined.

were indications that the College regarded student feedback as important: there was reference to the ‘...high priority the College places on the student experience and student feedback.’ (Academic Board xii, 4.103).

Academic Board minutes (00/182) indicated that there was considerable discussion of the outcomes of the survey. Discussion focused on areas of student dissatisfaction, most of which were later included in NSS: class cancellation, IT provision, specialist facilities and marking of coursework were all noted, as was ‘overall satisfaction’. There was reference to ‘corporate -level’ action (00/AB/60) and also to ‘detailed reports by faculties and courses’ but the committee papers reviewed did not indicate action taken in response to student feedback.

It was evident that there were reservations about the value/usefulness of the Annual Student Questionnaire. PRC referred to the need to revise it as a ‘major issue’ (01/3). It was also clear that Greenfields was finding it difficult to develop an effective means of gathering and evaluating student feedback. In spite of concerns there was also some reluctance to abandon the six year trend data arising from the longstanding survey.

The dissatisfaction with arrangements apparent in Academic Board and PRC papers was even more evident in those of ASDC. The October minutes showed that discontent with the existing module questionnaire was such that its continued use for another year was not supported. The Arts Faculty paper on annual course monitoring referred to the ‘need for radical revision’ to the questionnaire which had been ‘the subject of criticism over a number of years’ (00/34).

Meanwhile, internal and external requirements meant that action was regarded as urgent at the beginning of the academic year (00/15iib). Progress on the development of new feedback questionnaires was slow and proposals were not presented until July when some outstanding issues remained. The minutes indicated that there were sensitivities around the dissemination of module data which ‘required resolving’ (01/74iic) and the potential for any such data to be used in staff performance appraisal. It was agreed that module questionnaire outcomes would remain confidential to module leaders and that questions would not focus on course management (00/15iid). Revisions to module feedback for 2001-02 were agreed, but it was noted that the questionnaires ‘were not compulsory’ (01/74iib) and that discussions with unions were needed ‘before they become common practice’ (01/74iib).

There were also unresolved issues in relation to the development of a questionnaire to replace the Annual Student Questionnaire. The minutes record concerns on a number of fronts including the publication of results on the college website; the validity of data; the ‘ongoing need for the data obtained from the questionnaire to be properly utilised at subject level.’ (01/74iid); the need for

testing student understanding of the questions and for students to be involved in the formulation of the questions. The committee agreed to the use of the questionnaire in the 2001-2 academic year, subject to confirmation of the interpretation of the questions by students.

None of the above was evident from faculty board discussion. While faculty boards were expected to consider the 'relevant data picture' (00/AB/192) arising from the feedback in the ASQ, faculty board papers showed no evidence of this. Both faculties discussed new arrangements for course committees. The Arts Faculty Board papers also referred to course management meetings with student representatives on a regular basis (00/14), but otherwise, there was no reference to students in this discussion. The Business Faculty minutes referred to 'informal student feedback' (00/35) and also discussion of action taken to address issues raised through feedback, for example, throughout the year there were discussions on the experience of part-time students. The minutes noted that an investigation was carried out 'following adverse comments on student questionnaires' (01/13), so the faculty was following up on specific issues. It was not clear from the minutes whether this was as a result of institutional or faculty instigation, but there was no indication that the findings of this work, or related actions, were reported at university level.

#### **4.2.2 Summary of the review of 2000-01 papers**

There were three main themes arising from the 2000-01 papers:

- The questionnaires used to gather student feedback and the data arising were largely discredited;
- Work to develop new means of collecting feedback was beset by difficulties;
- There appeared to be little or no connection through committee consideration, at least, of those aspects of student feedback addressed at different levels within the institution.

Student feedback was discussed by senior deliberative and executive committees, suggesting that the institution regarded it as important. Committee minutes showed a concern to communicate with students more effectively, to gather and listen to student feedback, particularly through course committees. They also showed continuing and unresolved dissatisfaction with the mechanisms to do so.

There appeared to be some lack of clarity on where responsibility for this rested: the Annual Student Questionnaire was discussed by both Academic Board and PRC although the committee terms of reference indicated that it was formally the responsibility of the new ASDC. PRC appeared to be the main vehicle for identifying action, but it was not clear from the minutes how it addressed issues raised in the questionnaire. There was an expectation that feedback from ASQ would be addressed by faculties but there was no evidence that faculties were in fact doing so. The

involvement of PRC might be an indication of the broad-based survey of the student experience with potential for policy or resource implications. Developmental work reporting to ASDC indicated a move to establish a closer connection between student feedback and quality assurance arrangements.

The time taken to process the questionnaire meant that results were considered sometime after the completion of the survey by students and therefore, its effectiveness in improving the student experience in a timely way is questionable. In parallel to this consideration by Academic Board and PRC, ASDC oversaw work to replace existing survey instruments which were the subject of continuing dissatisfaction but it was not clear whether issues arising from the work were fully resolved by the end of the academic year.

While there was some variation in discussion at faculty board level, neither of the faculties examined discussed the Annual Student Questionnaire. There seems, therefore, to have been a disconnect between student feedback discussed at institutional and faculty levels. Areas of student dissatisfaction highlighted in the ASQ, most notably timetabling issues and academic feedback, were later to re-emerge through low ratings in the NSS when they became matters of institutional priority.

It is possible that action was taken on student feedback that is not visible through available committee papers but it would be unusual for any substantial work not to be referenced in agendas or minutes.

To some extent the papers available for 2000-01 may present a slightly skewed picture as Greenfields sought to put in place arrangements for the operation of the new faculties and prepare for a future application for degree awarding powers. Much of the discussion was about developing mechanisms for the collection of student feedback rather than the feedback itself. Given general dissatisfaction with existing arrangements and the increasing urgency with the need to resolve this, the delay on this work suggests protracted and continuing difficulties. Documents noted the College's interest in the collection of student feedback, but the ongoing tensions prevented that from happening. The only institutional view of student feedback, therefore, was through the widely disputed ASQ.

### **4.3 2005-6**

#### **4.3.1 Institutional and quality contexts**

During the intervening period, Greenfields had achieved university title and the faculties and quality arrangements were firmly established. It had also made strenuous efforts to develop effective student feedback. It funded a three year project exploring and gathering data on student feedback on their experience and attainment, drawing on both the American National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). This work informed the development of the subsequently re-designed student questionnaire, the Student Experience Satisfaction Survey (SESS) introduced in 2003-04 to replace the Annual Student Questionnaire.

Also introduced in the interim was the Institutional Overview of Quality and Standards paper which fed up from ASDC to Academic Board and thence to the Board of Governors. This substantial annual review drew together and discussed key evidence to give assurance to the university of the quality and standards of its academic awards. It was the vehicle through which the university now exercised an overview of student feedback (06/AB/02).

There was ongoing work to develop and implement mandatory online module feedback. Student feedback was drawn together and considered in annual course monitoring, the outcomes of which were considered by faculties with an overview reported to ASDC.

It appears that in the interim, PRC's oversight of student feedback had been discontinued and that ASDC, acting to its formal terms of reference had assumed responsibility.

#### **4.3.2 Committee discussion**

The development and use of internal student feedback mechanisms continued to be the focus of attention. There appears to be little committee discussion on the outcomes of the first NSS per se until the spring of 2006 by which time the second NSS was in progress.

During the year there is reference to the continuing work on compulsory online module feedback which was introduced the following year (2006-7) '...with a view to decreasing staff workload and increasing our measures of student satisfaction and approaches to learning' (06/ASDC/04). It would also increase the 'volume, complexity and quality of available information about the student experience' (06/ASDC/04), enabling the university to make necessary improvements. It is

this developmental work that tends to feature in committee business in relation to student feedback.

An overview of what student feedback was showing, as opposed to the development of ways of collecting it, was reported through the Institutional Overview of Quality and Standards. Unusually there were two similar reports in 2005-06. The NSS made a quiet entry to committee discussion in the first (December 05/AB/51), and student feedback in general had a fairly low profile. The paper referred to the development of institutional feedback mechanisms (SESS) and the Student Module Evaluation (SME) and to headline results from the previous year's SESS, noting that some of these had also occurred in the 2004 NSS pilot in which Greenfields had participated. There is no reference to the results of the first survey itself.

By March, however, when the second overview paper appeared (06/AB/02), having been previously discussed by ASDC, (06/ASDC/04), NSS headline results were noted and compared broadly with those of SESS. There was also reference to further work to 'achieve some parity in questions between the university SESS and the NSS to achieve greater triangulation' (06/ASDC/04). A report specifically on student feedback would be made to a future meeting in light of the 'increased data' and 'richer feedback' (06/AB/02) now available through SESS and NSS and 'the need to ensure that the student voice is given the appropriate level of time and attention as a priority, demonstrating the university's commitment to its students.' (06/ASDC/02). The rising profile of student feedback was noted and there was discussion about how this might be used in the evaluation of standards with a decision that at this point it would 'inform' the process with further analysis to follow, focusing on enhancement. (06/06vi, ASDC).

The further student feedback paper noted above was presented in June (06/ASDC/21). It reported high level outcomes from both SESS and NSS, noting common themes. Feedback, both timely academic feedback to students and opportunities afforded students to give feedback, was flagged for further investigation and a group was established to look at student expectations on assessment and feedback. This was the first substantive paper before a committee giving NSS results and while the minutes reflect limited comment, it resulted in university level action in direct response to student feedback. Because this was considered at the last meeting of the year, it was not clear from this review how this work was taken forward.

Separately, reports on annual course monitoring, noted 'continuing challenges' with 'securing student feedback' (06/ASDC/05) to which evaluation and response were requirements of both the university and QAA. The paper stated that student views have '...increasing profile at sector level' (06/ASDC/05). The earlier questioning of student feedback data continued with 'issues associated with the clarity of the data' (06/ASDC/05) and the feedback instrument. This was reflected in the

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faculty reports on the monitoring process: both the Technology and Arts Faculty papers reflected difficulties either with the central production of student feedback data or arising from a lack of shared understanding of how it was constructed. The Arts and Business Faculty reports drew on the SESS data but used different ways of analysing and reaching conclusions on student views. The Arts Faculty report, while questioning the validity both on the basis of response rates and the ambiguity of some questions, identified necessary faculty and university action to make both the survey instrument and the data gathered 'effective, meaningful and transparent' (06/ASDC/08). The report from the Business Faculty showed course level action planning. NSS was not referred to save for the Technology Faculty action plan, which identified an action to increase response rates.

ASDC papers show a lot of discussion about student feedback but this is largely in relation to the means through which it is collected. There were continuing issues regarding the credibility of the data collected and the need for students to provide feedback through university mechanisms. At institutional level, aspects of provision to which students gave low ratings showed some continuity with those noted in 2000-01, particularly in regard to academic feedback and to the cancellation of classes and timetabling. But there was no visibility from the papers reviewed that this was also apparent at faculty level: there was no sense of a shared understanding of student views of their experience. Faculty papers largely evidenced the collection of student feedback, not the issues themselves or their resolution. Student feedback was part of the university's quality processes and work within Greenfields was attempting to formalise this through a consistent and mandatory approach.

A paper outlining quite radical changes to the annual monitoring process for the following year (06/ASDC/28) proposed that student feedback data from NSS and SESS should be incorporated into the process as a key performance indicator, suggesting that the imperative and potential systematic use of such data was recognised.

The documents revealed that faculty board consideration now began to show greater consistency with discussion at university level, at least in the Arts Faculty where papers acknowledged university developments on the collection of student feedback, principally the requirements for module feedback and noted Academic Board's statement on the increasing importance of feedback on the student experience. There was, however, still no evidence of visibility or consideration of the NSS at faculty level.

Papers on annual course monitoring (ACM) reflect the importance of evidence of collection (and consideration) of student feedback. The Arts Faculty Board received a paper on SESS, which was not available for review. The minutes indicate that there were some apparently contradictory

results, possibly the result of misinterpretation of questions by students and that '...efforts were being made to understand the results' (06/06).

There was no evidence of any similar discussion by the Business Faculty. However, the detailed papers were not available for the January meeting which would have included annual course monitoring (a key route for the consideration of issues relating to student feedback). There was no evidence of substantive discussion of student feedback from the documents available and no reference to NSS.

#### **4.3.3 Summary of the review of 2005-06 papers**

The review of committee papers for 2005-06 revealed:

- Continuity from 2000-01 with work developing internal feedback routes together with some questioning of both the survey instruments and the resulting data;
- Emphasis continued to be given to internal feedback mechanisms with virtually no reference to NSS in the first term after the results were published;
- Some discussion of high-level results in subsequent terms when there appeared to be a growing institutional momentum associated with both the availability of more data and recognition of the growing importance of student feedback within the sector;
- Moves to align internal feedback mechanisms with NSS and the triangulation of results, alongside the intention for the future incorporation of NSS results in quality processes.

There continued to be considerable discussion on how student feedback was collected at Greenfields and it was evident, that time and resources were given to its design and collection. The intention to 'align' sections of SESS with NSS was noted and a new system of feedback at module level was agreed for implementation the following year. The emphasis remained on the internal mechanisms for the collection of feedback.

To a lesser extent, issues around the credibility and interpretation of the data continued, combined with somewhat patchy collection of student views through the module questionnaire. At university level, NSS 'overall satisfaction' scores were compared with those of other institutions and papers noted the increasing sector interest in student feedback. The additional paper on student feedback to ASDC was an initiative reflecting both this and the availability of new data. It was less clear, however, where responsibility for responding to this data lay and how matters were to be resolved. At this stage, the urgency of attending to results very early in the academic year with a view to taking action before the next survey was not apparent. NSS informed rather than drove institutional action. Some of the issues previously identified for action around assessment and feedback and organisation and management were flagged as items for

further investigation and action. Perhaps for the first time, NSS offered Greenfields an institutional perspective of student views of provision which was not highly disputed. It was not clear, however, if, or how, NSS results were used by faculties at this stage.

The NSS did not appear in faculty board discussion and annual course monitoring continued to reflect difficulties in both the collection and interpretation of student feedback. Two faculties made use of internal data but interpreted it in completely different ways to assess their own performance. There were institutional plans to incorporate both NSS and internal student feedback data within annual monitoring the following year, as part of a more general move to make better use of existing information and to reduce the burden of the process on staff.

There was limited discussion when NSS results were first brought to committee attention in June which together with the timing suggested that Greenfields was coming to terms with how to use the data. There were, however, signs that there was a growing momentum towards the end of the year with acknowledgement of both the increasing importance of student feedback within the sector together with the potential for greater use of the different sources of data available.

## **4.4 2008-09**

### **4.4.1 Institutional and quality contexts**

The Quality Manual for 2008-09 referred to student evaluations as a means through which students were engaged in quality and also as a source of evidence on which the performance of courses is monitored annually and periodically. Student feedback was collected at module and course levels. The key university mechanism for the collection of course level feedback was through SESS.

The committee structure remained stable with Management Board replacing Policy and Resources Committee.

### **4.4.2 Committee discussion**

In 2008-09 reports on the NSS were both more detailed and extended across and down the committee structure in ways not previously noted. NSS and/or student feedback appeared at the majority of meetings of Academic Board, ASDC and faculty boards, either as substantive items or as part of other discussions. NSS was referred to at every meeting of the Academic Board during the year.

Not only did Academic Board receive a summary of the quantitative analysis of NSS and SESS results at its first meeting of the year, but Management Board, which had previously dropped out of this loop, also considered the results and preparation for the next survey. The minutes noted 'the particular focus required across the university to raise awareness and understanding, with both staff and students, about the purpose of the surveys.' (09/13) and that faculty plans had been produced '...in response to a fall in satisfaction ratings measured in the NSS and SESS' (09/13).

The initial paper to Academic Board (08/AB/49) and minutes referred to 'a sudden and unexpected fall in satisfaction ratings' (08/AB/49 and minute 08/56). This phrase reverberated through university committee papers in the early part of the year. The paper (08/AB/49) referred to:

- the remodelling of SESS in 2006-7 to align with NSS and quality procedures and to reduce the 'survey burden' on students;
- the main actions planned by faculties;
- work at university level including projects, externally facilitated workshops and further research with second year students to 'unpack some of the issues underlying the results' (08/AB/49);
- analysis of qualitative comments to be undertaken.

The minutes recorded that 'close attention' (08/56) was to be paid to 'student satisfaction surveys' (08/56) in annual course monitoring. Matters relating to the assessment and feedback (quality and timeliness of academic feedback) and organisation and management (timetables and cancellation of classes) were flagged for further investigation and action. The minutes noted that at University level, '...a more holistic view of improvement not only in the quality of teaching but also in terms of the infrastructure' (08/56) should be taken and referred to a consultation with students on priorities for the university's capital improvement programme (08/56). Elsewhere on the agenda, two (usually brief) faculty reports also made reference to NSS at both the first and second meetings of the Board.

The Institutional Overview of Quality and Standards paper (09/AB/06) presented to the spring meeting, noted the 'considerable work...to address NSS/SESS outcomes' (09/AB/49) and to the ability of faculties to make more 'targeted interventions' (09/AB/49) due to the availability of more granular data. The minutes reflected the Board's view of the decline in NSS scores, noting that they were 'however slight, very unwelcome. Further investigation was underway by ASDC, which was closely monitoring the position.' (09/09).

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While the agenda for the final meeting of the year showed no NSS-related items, the survey nonetheless occurred a number of times during the Board's discussions with references to actions across the university, both centrally and by faculties.

This intensified attention to the NSS was even clearer at ASDC where detailed reports were received. There were substantive items on NSS or directly-related matters at three of its four meetings. There was a new 'student evaluation' section on the first agenda which included a report of the university NSS and SESS results (08/ASDC/77) and action plans from each faculty which needed to be approved by the committee (08/ASDC/78-81): for the first time, the university not only had direct oversight of planned faculty actions, but also, through the committee's power to approve the plans or not, took a view of the actions. These plans were revisited at the following meeting in March. Separately, the committee considered faculty enhancement plans (08/ASDC/71-74) and linkages between the two sets of plans were noted in the minutes.

The level of activity appeared to have increased significantly with a particular focus on NSS and with explicit links made to quality processes. Student evaluation, and NSS in particular, appear to have gained in importance in annual course monitoring. There was evidence of the increasing profile of NSS, and through it, student feedback. The results of student feedback were considered alongside the quality processes but there were signs that this was moving towards integration. Earlier moves to align internal survey instruments with the NSS took a further step later in the year, when a review identified that very limited use was made of the broad based SESS data other than the questions which related to NSS. A decision was made to introduce a questionnaire ('Yourcourse') based almost entirely on NSS for all undergraduates not eligible for NSS. The intention was not only to be able to use the results for enhancement at an earlier stage in the students' time at university, but also as a possible predictor of NSS scores.

The amount of Committee time given to the consideration of action relating to student feedback and to NSS in particular increased substantially: in addition to its consideration as part of ACM (both faculty and university reports referred explicitly to NSS) and as a performance indicator in the overview of quality and standards, there were detailed analyses of student comments made through NSS and SESS.

The university monitored faculty action closely in relation to NSS. It also required more timely consideration of the material with analyses of both quantitative and qualitative material from NSS presented to the first meeting of the year. The new Yourcourse survey was agreed, implemented and the results reported (09/ASDC/43) to the following meeting where actions were referred to a sub-committee to take forward.

The increased activity at University level was also reflected in faculty discussion. It was less visible initially in the Business Faculty, appearing explicitly on the agenda of one meeting. However, closer inspection revealed that it occurred, in one form, or another, at each of the meetings of the faculty board. Papers such as reports on 'The Student Voice' (08/FBSE/39) discussed issues raised in regard to the NSS categories of 'assessment and feedback' and 'organisation and management' both areas of priority for the faculty and the university. The paper on annual course monitoring reported on faculty key performance indicators, with 'student perceptions' included alongside indicators such as student recruitment, retention, progression and attainment. The paper analysed faculty performance in each of the NSS survey areas and also commented on feedback through SME and SESS. It noted that the annual monitoring action plan (in which three of the ten actions related to NSS) should be read in conjunction with the NSS plan, indicating integration of the two processes.

In contrast, the Arts Faculty Board agendas showed clearly that there was discussion of NSS and/or other forms of student feedback at all of the meetings. Papers suggested that there was a degree of integration of NSS and other forms of student feedback at faculty level. The papers made explicit the extent of work taking place and indicated a level of analysis and action not previously evident. The faculty analysis of the NSS results included qualitative as well as quantitative data and identified short and medium term actions to address issues raised: '...taken together, the actions...represent a considerable and concerted commitment on the part of the Faculty...' (08/FMAS/40).

There was reference to university initiatives, for example, on assessment but there was no linkage with feedback received through NSS/SESS and an earlier agenda item on the effectiveness of student-staff fora and programme committees. This had changed by the end of the year when clear links were made (see below). Elsewhere, however, connections were made: a review of student complaints (08/FMAS/41) noted the small number of complaints on academic feedback in relation to low NSS scores, while the minutes of the meeting noted the high concentration of complaints in a particular subject area coincided with low NSS scores (08/50).

NSS and SESS were referred to explicitly in the 'student perception' section of the annual course monitoring paper: 'Student perceptions as shown in the SESS and NSS surveys has been a major subject of attention in the faculty this year.' (09/FMAS/05). The paper identified the main points of the NSS action plan and stated: 'Student responses in the NSS survey have demonstrated significant issues for the faculty and stimulated considerable discussion and initiatives...' (09/FMAS/05).

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This latter point was subsequently linked to work on the promotion of student-staff fora (SSF) and the potential impact on student perceptions of communication. It was also reflected in an item on the 'Student Voice' meeting (09/FMAS/09) where the Dean made explicit reference to NSS, referring to the high priority that Greenfields placed on 'student satisfaction' and also to some of the 'surprises' emerging from the survey particularly in relation to assessment and feedback (9FMAS/09) and course organisation and management which had not arisen through other student feedback channels.

There was a sense in which NSS had become the main focus for action on student feedback, although this might also be linked to the continuing challenges of getting students to give feedback through internal measures – a theme noted in the report to student-staff fora and programme committees [08/FMAS/39]. There were also references to improving NSS ratings which might suggest that the survey had become something of an end in itself. There were explicit references to the growing importance of NSS; to NSS as a key focus for faculty management discussion and finally, the unwelcome but useful messages from the survey:

The Faculty was concerned at certain aspects of its NSS results and has made strenuous efforts to address those areas which were rated poorly by students. It recognises the increasing importance of NSS and is determined to improve its ratings. (09/FMAS/10)

The shock of the results was evident:

There is a real sense in which the NSS results, unwelcome as some of them undoubtedly were, provided the Faculty with an unvarnished and unexpurgated understanding of student sentiment and expectations. The process of gaining this understanding has not always been comfortable, but it has been salutary. (09/FMAS/10)

There were no substantive items on NSS at the final meeting of the year, but there continued to be updates on the biannual 'Student Voice' meetings (09/FMAS/19) and also the student- staff fora and programme group committee process (09/FMAS/23). Connections with NSS were made in both reports: the Student Voice paper referred to the potential impact on NSS (09/FMAS/19). The paper on student-staff fora and programme group committees (09/FMAS/23) connected the work of the student feedback mechanisms and proposed that they should not be regarded in isolation, but together determine faculty priorities for the coming year. It recommended that analysis of issues raised through these mechanisms should take place biannually and reported to the faculty management team (09/FMAS/23). The minutes of the meeting recorded that these should be fed through annual course monitoring (09/28). The paper on student-staff fora and programme group committees noted:

The primary concerns of students can be seen to correlate to issues raised elsewhere, such as the Student Experience and Satisfaction Survey and National Student Survey. This session the SSF has proved to be a valuable and effective mechanism for gathering student concerns in a timely manner allowing for immediate and targeted responses and therefore the SSF can serve a useful purpose in acknowledging and addressing issues raised and, where appropriate, reinforce the management of student expectations. (09/FMAS/23)

#### **4.4.3 Summary of the review of 2008-09 papers**

Emerging from the 2008-09 committee papers was

- A sense of shock at the results of the previous year's NSS results;
- An increase in the amount of committee business given to the consideration of student feedback and action taken in response;
- A very clear sense of what final year students were saying across the university and arising from that, work commissioned by both the university and faculties with a level of energy and intensity not visible previously.
- A university requirement for faculties to produce action plans detailing how they were going to address issues raised in feedback. Authority to approve the plans rested with the university through its quality committee;
- Full adoption of the NSS questions for course level questionnaires with a view, not only to gaining insights earlier in the student lifecycle but also anticipating NSS results;
- Signs that other forms of feedback were also being used as a means of identifying issues that might arise through NSS subsequently if not addressed. NSS data started to be used to supplement or possibly elucidate other aspects of the student experience.

The activity in relation to NSS became much more apparent in the committee papers. It was not clear whether this was as a result of the scores received in the previous year's survey – the phrase 'sudden and unexpected fall' in the previous year's NSS - increased external attention to the survey or possibly the greater usefulness of the data, now available at a more granular level. Within the constraints of this study, this was the first year that there was a clear institutional view of what students were saying through feedback mechanisms that were not disputed and for some, there was a sense of revelation.

The university was more directive and explicit in its requirements of faculties – action was taken by the university through its committees in addition to quality processes and there was a greater level of transparent accountability by faculties. There were some indications that as student

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feedback became a mainstream concern beyond a quality requirement, that it was also becoming more of a management issue.

There was heightened activity with faculty action plans reported to two of the four meetings of ASDC; more timely central reporting of the results ( qualitative as well as quantitative) to enable the university to consider the feedback and to respond ; closer alignment of the university survey of first and second year students ( a move away from SESS to Yourcourse); central and faculty follow up action with students to find out more about their views; a report on the outcomes of the NSS and SESS directly to Academic Board and an expression by Academic Board, that it wanted to maintain an overview of the results. In addition, while it was now clear that ASDC was the committee with responsibility for considering and taking action in response to student feedback, reports were made to both Academic Board and Management Board.

For the first time in the years reviewed, close attention was paid by committees at all levels to the messages arising from student feedback, rather than the mechanisms themselves. Analysis tended to be internally focused, with faculties comparing their results against those of other faculties, suggesting that understanding of the data and how it might be interpreted, was not fully developed.

It was clear, however, particularly through the Arts Faculty papers, that connections were being made with other forms of feedback and data elsewhere and this appeared to have developed further even within the year.

There remained the recurring theme of encouraging students to engage with feedback, even though work from SESS had suggested that students did not feel they had sufficient opportunity to do so. There was still some residual questioning of the data, but this was not pervasive as it had been in earlier years.

The volume of work generated was considerable which appeared somewhat ironic given Greenfields' stated intention of reducing the burden on both students and staff.

### **4.5 2012-13**

#### **4.5.1 Institutional and quality contexts**

The Quality Manual outlined the requirements for giving students the opportunity to evaluate their learning experience. There was continuity with student module and course evaluation survey instruments substantially aligned with the NSS. Student involvement in course approval and review

processes had been a longstanding feature of the quality processes. NSS, in particular, but other student feedback data, were included in the evidence base and integrated in the processes.

Student feedback was part of university course monitoring. It was one of eight aspects reviewed in the periodic review of courses with students involved in the process. Evaluation of feedback from students alongside that of external examiners and the course team (Quality Manual, 2012-13), section 2E.2, 5iv) was one of the objectives of annual course monitoring and NSS results were part of the evidence base of the review.

A wider examination of the quality assurance processes showed that the first stage of new course approval, for example, included a 'preliminary assessment to indicate the level of risk in the development and delivery of the new/revalidated undergraduate course'. NSS (overall satisfaction) was one of three factors considered under the 'external markets' section of the risk assessment – ie it was used as an indicator of how the quality of the course might be perceived externally. This assessment was considered at a high level by the Academic Planning Committee which gave initial approval for the development of new courses and re-approval of existing ones.

The committee structure remained stable with the addition of two sub-committees to take forward significant areas of the work of the Academic Standards and Development Committee (ASDC): the Teaching and Learning Sub-committee and the Student Experience Sub-committee, with a particular remit for enhancement activities (13/AB/19)

#### **4.5.2 Committee discussion**

By this time there was a well-established hierarchical pattern with consideration of reports by faculties and the university through ASDC and Academic Board. This meant that there was some repetition as similar reports progressed through committees and also, in the case of Academic Board, its sub-committees reported their business.

By 2012-13, the pattern of NSS consideration at the first meetings of both Academic Board and ASDC was firmly established. An addition to this pattern was an extra meeting of ASDC in January so that it could receive updated reports on action before the next survey including a report from the Students' Union. There was also further integration of both the work and the reports – previously faculties produced action plans based in response to student feedback surveys and separately, enhancement action plans; these were now integrated into a single report

The pattern of NSS becoming embedded in other processes continued and its importance within this had risen. Because of this integration, while concentration on the results of NSS appeared in the first committee meetings of the year, the survey itself and student feedback more widely,

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cropped up, in one form or another throughout the year. For example, Academic Board met three times. There was a single item on NSS at one meeting, but closer inspection revealed that it was referred to at all three meetings.

The continuing importance accorded the results of the survey was summarised in the Academic Board minutes:

The Board noted the report and welcomed the improvements in the results for 'Overall satisfaction'. It was aware of the concerted and continuing effort across the university and by the SU to improve NSS results and bring the university in line with the sector. NSS scores were one of the information sources available to prospective students when deciding where to apply, and it was key to the university's competitiveness that NSS results continued to improve. Irrespective of recruitment considerations, NSS scores mattered because of a professional commitment to provide the best experience possible for our students. It was noted that the university and the SU were working in partnership to develop the strong sense of community that was important for retention and enhancing students' experiences. (12/44vii)

There were indications of a transition to a more directive approach by Arts Faculty managers. The annual course monitoring paper stated that '...a number of specific actions should be put in place on a mandatory basis on certain plans' (13/ASDC/20) in regard to four matters, two of which were in relation to NSS and a third to student module feedback. Elsewhere, the report identified extensive action to ensure that the faculty heard and understood student views through 'a large range of consultations with students' and to 'extremely proactive enhancement strategies, particularly those related to NSS...' (13/ASDC/20). Similarly, the Business Faculty annual monitoring report (FBSE, 13/ASDC/21) reflected the centrality of the NSS as a key performance indicator.

The NSS also continued to be an important element of the institutional overview paper of quality and academic standards which referred to it 26 times. References to it were peppered throughout the paper both as a source of evidence and a measure of health of course provision. It was mentioned in a number of key roles:

- 'Student feedback' was one of the five indicators/sources of data relating to 'the arrangements for maintaining and enhancing the quality of the student experience' (13/AB/09).
- References to course periodic academic review, showed that three reviews each made a recommendation relating to student feedback; to NSS and to the impact of teaching on 'student satisfaction' (13/AB/09).

- There were references to NSS in the section on annual course monitoring and to a course deemed to be 'at risk' on the basis of three indicators, including low response rates for student module feedback and poor NSS scores.
- The section on 'Investment in staff development' identified NSS as a key driver in the Business and Arts faculties (13/AB/09).

There was a separate section on student feedback which discussed NSS in detail and other mechanisms for collecting student feedback. The paper's conclusion made explicit the central importance of student feedback:

On the basis of the evidence provided, ASDC recommends to Academic Board that the university can have confidence in the standards of its awards and that the student experience continues to be enhanced. The university, at both institutional and faculty levels, continues to review and take action on the basis of key performance data, including feedback from students and from external examiners, and to take appropriate action. (13/AB/09)

This attention was also evident at faculty level for example, in the Business Faculty, in addition to the standard NSS updates and associated actions, the minutes showed that the NSS was discussed in some depth in two items at the second meeting where it received an 'Update on NSS' (13/FBSE/11) which included the action plan approved by ASDC. The minutes noted several areas of action including staff development; an 'office hours' policy to facilitate better communication between staff and students and a review of timetabling practice. The NSS also occurred in the minutes relating to several items across the agenda:

Annual monitoring report: (13/FBSE/2, 13/6)

Meeting assessment deadlines paper (13/FBSE/7, 13/11)

Student retention and support (13/FBSE/9), 13/13)

KIS data review (13/FBSE/14, 13/19)

The NSS was mentioned in minutes of the final meeting, in regard to the periodic academic review of a course (13/28).

NSS data was used for external as well as internal processes. It was referred to frequently in both the university's and the Students' Union briefing papers in preparation for a QAA review where it was used as an important source of evidence and a touchstone for student concerns and feedback (13/AB/02, 13/AB/03). It was the basis on which one faculty decided to suspend recruitment to a

course that had particularly poor results over a number of years (12/72 xiii) Through the quality processes, it was also used as a factor taken into account for courses undergoing special monitoring (a part of the quality assurance processes of the university for courses where there were concerns about an aspect of the provision) (12/ASDC/66, 12/FCIS/49, 13/FCIS/04).

The way in which the NSS and the other feedback surveys were being drawn into various processes and ways of working was flagged in ASDC: one faculty referred to the development of an 'integrated action plan' (minute 12/72ix), including recommendations from external examiners and from annual course monitoring with data from these sources also feeding into course revalidation so that it would inform course design and re-approval. Another faculty plan referred to staff and student focus groups and planned student development workshops (12/72 xiv).

The extent of the work was clearly visible in the substantial analyses and action plans presented to ASDC which together totalled over 70 pages. Approval by the committee was not a rubber stamping exercise. An action plan which replicated 'a significant portion' (12/72xxi) of the previous year's plan was not approved and a revised plan was required as the university exercised its oversight of faculty actions. Revisions were required to another plan which concentrated on actions that would be made when the course was revalidated but which would not address the needs of current students (12/72ix).

The documents reflected extensive and intensive action, particularly at faculty level. The Arts Faculty Board papers referred to work on 'student perceptions' noting that in the previous year this had involved 25 focus groups with 700 students (13/FCIS/04) and, in 2012-13, 19 focus groups with 456 students to date (13/FCIS/29). The Technology Faculty reported undertaking a '...strategic review process based around the NSS...' (12/46 iii). While the Business Faculty report to ASDC noted actions which included:

- staff development;
- a dedicated timetabling event and review of timetabling practices;
- ongoing review of assessment practice and feedback;
- externally facilitated focus groups with students to find out more about their views;
- meetings between the Dean, Associate Dean and each programme group leader to review NSS outcomes and disseminate good practice. (13/05ix )

While the faculties did most of the work, there were also indications of the ways in which the work of other parts of the university were affected by the survey, notably a report to ASDC from the Learning and Information Service (LIS), the service responsible for learning resources. The 'learning resources' section of the survey was cited as 'the closest direct indicator of LIS activities'

(13/ASDC/27). Work to address issues raised in the NSS included updating PCs and other student IT resources; library opening hours and library resources. (13/ASDC/27). Structural and administrative process issues, beyond the scope of academic staff were now firmly within the ambit of NSS-driven change.

There were also indications of the direct involvement of senior faculty and institutional staff. Meetings between Faculty Deans and course leaders and regular meetings between the ASDC Chair and faculty associate deans were referred to (12/72xxiv). It was acknowledged that much of the work needed to be undertaken by the faculties with central support. An example of this was that work on the university priority areas of 'organisation and management' and 'assessment and feedback' – 'already embedded in to faculty action plans...., in addition, would be reviewed by the Teaching and Learning Sub-committee and Student Experience Sub-committee respectively.' (12/72 xxii). The report (to ASDC) from the Teaching and Learning Sub-committee did not refer to NSS specifically, but noted the joint SU/university feedback project – which was rooted in the priority given to the NSS 'assessment and feedback'. (13/ASDC/29) Similarly, the Student Experience Sub- committee (13/ASDC/30) report reflected issues raised through the NSS such as the joint SU/university group looking at organisation and management.

ASDC also received papers from the Students' Union, not seen in the earlier phases of this study. There were papers on NSS and a separate paper, based on work with university staff, proposing changes to the course representative system, with 'poor student engagement scores' (13/ASDC/07) in NSS and other surveys identified as a potential risk if existing arrangements were not revised.

Paradoxically, the greater concentration on NSS appeared to be linked to the greater attention paid to other forms of student feedback .This was particularly noticeable at faculty level. The Arts Faculty reported:

...other student voice data, for example, NSS qualitative comments, pre-NSS, Yourcourse and SEG [Student Experience Group] committee notes. FMT [Faculty Management Team] and Heads of School received an individual School and Faculty-level dossier which was our first key attempt to triangulate the many rich sources of student opinion in a given cycle, and we shall continue this triangulation this year. (13/FCIS/04)

The effort that was put into NSS, in particular, was evident. The planned action was significant and there was no indication that this level of effort and scrutiny was likely to abate: rather there were signs that action was increasing and extending. As with the Business Faculty, two meetings

discussed student feedback from other mechanisms: the ‘Student Voice’ meetings (13/FCIS/13, 13/FCIS/37) and ‘Student and staff focus groups update 2013’:

As last year, we will be dovetailing the key evidence from NSS, focus groups, student-staff fora, Student Voice meetings and Student Experience Group, and present the more detailed findings to FMT and faculty board in due course. Meanwhile, this paper will also be sent to key academic staff for action within course teams. (13/FCIS/29)

#### **4.5.3 Summary of the review of 2012-13 papers**

In 2012-13

- NSS had become the focus for student feedback, but paradoxically seems to have widened rather than narrowed the routes for students to give feedback;
- NSS was embedded in systems and processes and faculties had gone beyond narrowly conceived quality requirements to find out as much as they could about student views;
- while primary responsibility for response to feedback often rested with the faculties, central services were involved in the consideration and response to feedback.

By this stage, the NSS was not only firmly established within the quality processes, it had become the key focus for student feedback and this influence extended beyond student surveys. Interest in the survey had increased the attention paid to other forms of feedback, not least in terms of what they might surface that would otherwise be raised in the NSS: the university had moved from early consideration of results identified in the previous year, to seeking to anticipate and act to resolve issues in a timely way. In addition, there were efforts to report back to students through a ‘you said...we listened’ campaign. There was evidence, that whilst internal mechanisms continued to elicit uneven response rates, the focus on the NSS took the heat off them, in an important sense, reducing the level of mechanism contestation noted earlier.

The 2012-13 committee papers also appear to identify not only an embedding of the survey and with it, student feedback, but also an extended use of the data. It was used more widely within the university and appeared to have moved from being of interest to senior managers in a general way to being of intense interest at all levels. There was evidence of increasing interest and involvement of a wider range of people and in particular, managers and faculty management teams .

The extent of the committee consideration and the fact that NSS and student feedback more generally featured in most meetings of the year, in one form or another, was marked. NSS and

feedback papers were not only the subject of single focused papers but featured extensively in the work of the committees.

## 4.6 Chapter conclusions

The review of committee documents spanning thirteen years indicated that Greenfields had a longstanding interest in the views of its students but that arrangements in the early years of the review period were insufficiently connected, were not necessarily consistently applied and did not allow for a clear institutional-level perspective that enabled concerted action. The survey instruments and the resulting data lacked credibility within faculties, while local level collection and use of feedback were variable. Over the period, NSS enabled a university, faculty and course level perspective of student feedback to develop with connectivity and prioritisation at all levels. Simultaneously, the internal instruments, although drawing increasingly on NSS, continued to struggle to achieve strong response rates across the university. Fig 1 shows the development of university consideration over the period. There is increasing connectivity, information flows to and from the various levels of committees from a growing variety of sources. There is also an increase in the number of committees with an explicit interest in student feedback.

The committee papers did not indicate whether the survey itself was disputed in the same way that internal surveys had been in the past. There were early moves to make use of data and to incorporate it in quality systems. In practice, the granularity of available data meant that initially there was limited ownership and ability to locate areas for action with any certainty, so the use of the data was at first restricted to 'informing' quality processes. In 2005-06 the focus continued to be on internal feedback mechanisms, with the NSS supplementing this information. At this stage, Greenfields was making use of the data in the way originally envisaged nationally.

2008-09 seems to have been a turning point for Greenfields. Whether this was because the decline in results was not anticipated or because of other factors, is not clear but this was the point at which Greenfields started interrogating and acting on the data more intensively at university and faculty levels. The impact on university behaviour was marked and while internal developments were aimed at reducing the 'survey burden' (eg 06/ASDC/28, 08/AB/49) on students and staff, an increased concentration on NSS appeared to have the opposite effect.

There was a clear focus on NSS and internal survey instruments were increasingly 'aligned' to NSS. At the same time, the interest that NSS garnered in student feedback, also appeared to be connected to increased activity in gathering feedback through other means with various different types of meetings between staff and student representatives. There were continuing indications of difficulties in securing student engagement in this, a factor which may have served to sharpen

the focus on NSS. Feedback from different sources was collected, analysed and acted on in ways that were not evident from the earlier documents. It is not possible to distinguish other external drivers such as the expectations or requirements of QAA. The committee papers included a benchmarking exercise of practice at Greenfields with the chapter on student engagement in the QAA Quality Code. The paper concluded: ‘...the university is committed to listening to students and addressing the issues raised and feeding back the outcomes.’ (13/ASDC/25, 21). But this exercise came at the end of this review period, so it is unlikely that it was a key driver.

In the same way that NSS appeared to have narrowed the focus for student feedback and yet given a higher profile to other routes for feedback, so it appeared to have contributed to a wider perspective of what the feedback indicated. In the earlier days of faculty reporting on NSS, results were internally focused – this faculty did better than that faculty. Gradually, this moved to a sector-wide perspective and enabled the university to assess its ‘performance’ informed by some level of comparison with institutions it would regard as similar.

The narrative of the documents suggested that it was the increasing directive intervention of the institution that drove policy and action. At the same time, the university level view of student opinion that the survey afforded, enabled institution and faculty resources to be allocated to resolving issues.

While the committee interest in NSS forced greater connections vertically within the institution from course to university level, via faculties, a by-product of the interest in NSS and possibly the availability of the data, was the way that its influence permeated other aspects of university provision. NSS data was used by central services, for estates development and in analyses of student complaints. It had also worked its way into institutional language: ‘organisation and management’ had become, in committee reports, shorthand for matters relating to timetabling and cancelled classes.

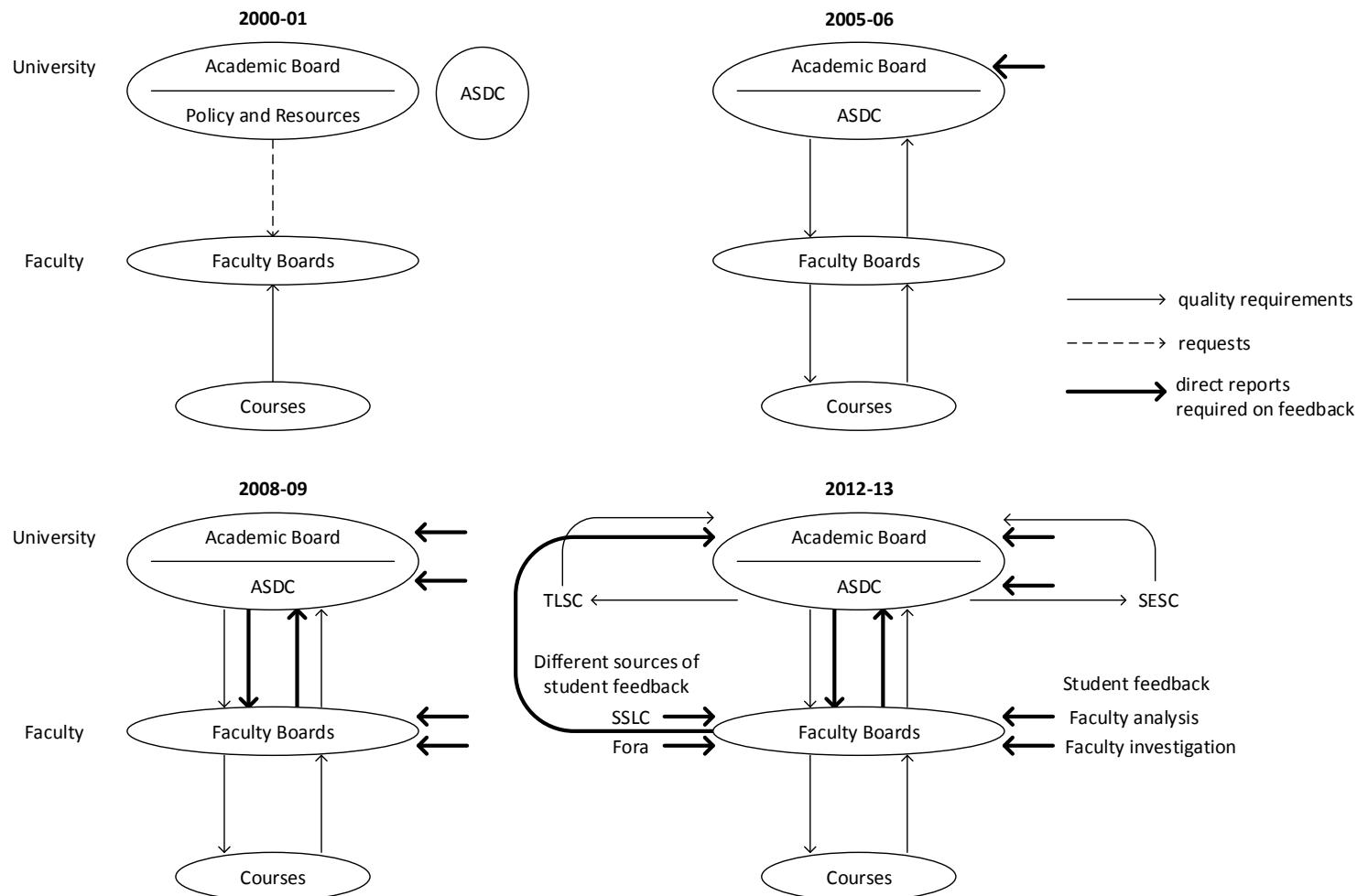
Not all of these developments can be attributed to NSS alone. It was itself a part of a raft of national expectations of the sector, but it was clearly pivotal and did much to push the debate at Greenfields beyond questioning the survey instruments and the data. Arguably it led to an enriched view because of increased attention to other forms of student feedback, at least at university level.

The review of committee documents suggested increasing attentiveness by Greenfields to the views of its students. NSS appeared to have had a profound impact on the way that Greenfields was able to understand and respond to student feedback. The contrast between the messages from the Arts Faculty over the period was sharp: from a position of questioning the value of the

data to the ‘salutary’ messages delivered through NSS in 2008. The papers conveyed a sense that feedback through NSS and through subsequent investigation provided messages on how students felt about their experience that had never been heard before.

While NSS became embedded and gained in importance within quality processes, it also assumed a life influentially, beyond the formal quality systems. On this evidence, it moved student feedback to being both highly visible and a strategic priority and with this, came greater management interest.

**Figure 1: The development of university consideration of student feedback 2000-13**



## Chapter 5: Interviews

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses themes emerging from the interviews which were informed by both the literature review and the documentary analysis. Interviews showed a similar arc of interest from the perspective of staff in different roles and Students' Union presidents. The interviews also explored aspects of commentary both in the media and the literature reviewed which were not evident from committee papers, such as the more detailed use and approach to the data by management. While opinion was varied on both the effectiveness of the survey itself and institutional response, its importance in shaping the external perception of the university was commented on by staff in all of the roles interviewed.

Analysis revealed the following themes:

- The perceived growth in importance of the NSS within the institution, particularly in the 'last three to four years';
- The increased attention paid to student feedback and the ways in which it was being addressed;
- The ways in which NSS data was used within the institution;
- The impact on staff, students and university behaviour.

The following analysis draws out differences and similarities in the perspectives of students and staff.

### 5.2 The growing importance of the NSS

An overarching theme within the interviews was the importance accorded the NSS and the perception that this had grown particularly within the last three to four years (from approximately 2010-11 onwards). Interviewees talked about 'a growing importance or growing realisation of the importance of the NSS' (FMTArt); 'I think now, it is taken very seriously' (DirAdmin), a view echoed by other managers (VC, PGLArt, DeanBus, FMTArt, DeanLIS); while others (CLBus1, DVC HOSArt) referred to the 'focus' on NSS. The Vice-Chancellor and the Dean of Business described a very similar narrative where, in the earlier years of the survey, it was dismissed to a certain extent, on methodological grounds and so, therefore, were the results:

I think to begin with people didn't take it that seriously and they felt it wasn't that great a survey and then you moved through a period where people realised whether it's a good survey or not, it's how we are being measured ... (DeanBus,)

Interviewees referred to its internal and external uses as a measure. DeanArt referred to it as a 'dominant indicator' that was 'increasingly seen as a proxy for course quality' (DeanArt). Its 'growing use and dominance' (DeanArt) within the university was attributed to a mix of its external visibility and the availability of useable data for internal purposes.

### **5.3 Impact within the university: internal reasons for the importance of the NSS – improving the student experience**

#### **5.3.1 Making the views of students at course level visible**

Several interviewees (HoSBus, PGLArt, HoSArt, DeanArt, DeanBus, VC) referred to NSS making course level student feedback available in a way that had not previously been the case. HoSBus referred to previous arrangements whereby feedback was collected at module level and locally at course level, largely through 'free comment' (HoSBus) at student representative meetings. HoSArt referred to arrangements that were 'more ad hoc' and required more confidence by students to raise matters directly with staff. It may also have meant that the university was not fully aware of issues. While the university had its own module and course level student surveys, response rates across the university remained low (FMTArt, DeanBus) and were therefore of limited use. Describing the impact of NSS: '...all of a sudden there was this call each year, this return that in black and white told them what was functioning and what wasn't functioning.' (HoSArt)

Occasionally, NSS results produced views of courses that ran counter to staff perceptions. PGLArt referring to the first time a course team received disaggregated results: '....it was a proper shock. I think, you know, they thought everything was going fine and yet, the NSS kind of proved, slightly the opposite.' (PGLArt)

The availability of data based on robust response rates which could largely be drilled down to course level and with some capability for external comparison, made an impact across the university.

#### **5.3.2 Internal use of the data**

The interviews explored how data from the NSS was used: DeanLIS, described its use in a 'very balanced way' and 'triangulate[d]... with other information' to drive resources to support learning

and to inform university development. Similarly, other managers, particularly those based in faculties discussed its use strategically and operationally. FMTBus referred to the 'huge amount of interest [in the NSS]. It is used to set the policy agenda to a high degree'.

### 5.3.2.1 Enhancement or just more work?

Literature (Eg Flint *et al* 2009; CHES, 2010; Brown, S 2011; QAA ND) indicated that institutions used NSS data to enhance the student experience. The term 'enhancement' hardly arose in the interviews but there was, largely within the management responses, a strong feeling that all the work at Greenfields on NSS was focused on a genuine desire to improve things for students. HoSBus referred to improvements which included better quality of academic feedback to students and reduced turnaround time for the assessment of work; better communications and improved use of the VLE. DeanBus used it to determine priorities for support for courses. Respondents from the art area, in particular, made references to the provision of specialist facilities. (HoSArt, CLArt2).

DeanLIS illustrated the way that clear and consistent messages from the NSS meant that Greenfields had to find ways to address issues which might otherwise have been deferred on the basis of cost. Using the example of 24 hour library opening,

... what it did was make us focus on how we could ensure that the library could open for 24 hours without it costing a lot of money, but also, being absolutely clear about the fact that not doing it was not an option, because if every year, there were significant numbers of students who were saying 'we want the library to be open longer', then that is a very powerful case... (DeanLIS)

PGLArt talked about how the importance given the NSS meant that complex issues which crossed organisational boundaries were addressed and resolved.

Two interviewees (DirAdmin, SUPres2012), however, whilst acknowledging the extent of activity at course level questioned changes at institutional level:

... If you said to me 'What major university policy has changed? What...way...is there something that we now do that we didn't used to do as a result of NSS?' I would actually be hard pushed to say a particular thing. (DirAdmin).

The view that the NSS had driven little, if any change at university level, was expressed quite late on in the interview process, and because it jarred with views expressed earlier, it was pursued in subsequent interviews with staff with a university wide remit – DeanLIS and VC, both disagreed with this assessment:

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...well, if you say that, then you are saying nothing has changed across the university, because I would say that where things have changed, somewhere in that whole argument and evidence, I would be very surprised if there wasn't any impact from NSS at all... it's all about how can we support students, we help them to succeed... (DeanLIS)

And the VC

I'd fundamentally disagree ... take the xxxx subject area which had the lowest, the lowest rating of any of our courses. What? Four years ago? There has been a whole set of actions taken there, including relocating the subject group into a different faculty; different management structure. Lots of support and interventions in there. Changes in personnel, bringing new people into that, strengthening its resource base and that has shown a considerable improvement. Now it would be a hell of a cynic who would argue 'that would have happened anyway', because I just don't believe it. ...and I am afraid I, I do see that as making a difference. (VC)

While NSS was referred to as an 'instigator' (HoSArt) or a 'lever' (VC) for change, two interviewees (DVC and DeanLIS), also raised the potential for it to result in 'a risk averse and cautious approach' (DVC). DeanLIS spoke of it as '... a code for doing things and it's a, it's sometimes used as a code for not doing things.' (DeanLIS)

Overall, the perspective from managers was that while there had been increasing attention to the NSS, the data was used in a balanced and supportive/developmental way. From the management perspective, it provided consistent and externally comparable data (HoSArt, HoSBus) not previously accessible. The work that resulted from the analysis and action planning based on NSS data had been largely positive (HoSArt, DeanBus), enabling a more joined-up approach to addressing issues. As the university approach developed there was the perception by some of '...a deeper and more long-term approach to improvement in the majority of cases' (DVC). While most managers were clear about the potential benefits of using the data, the perspectives of course leaders were more complex. They recognised its usefulness within the university and its external profile, but they also commented more than others interviewed on the additional work involved in encouraging students to respond to the survey and then seeking to address low scoring areas or student comments (CLBus1). One course leader talked about the duplication of work involved in writing specific action plans that were already incorporated as part of existing quality processes:

... there's a lot of extra administrative pressure there where...my time could be more productively used actually implementing positive changes rather than necessarily having to rewrite, what I kind have already written... (CLArt2)

CLArt1 referred to initiatives that were introduced and subsequently dropped:

...people come up with plans that are maybe too generic– so at university level we are asked to do a wee thing to see what will happen and if it does not work, it is kind of forgotten about and we don't see the results of it. But that's quite rare, I think... (CLArt1)

The extent of activity on gathering and responding to the views of students was clear:

... you can certainly make an argument that it has become a very time consuming thing, I mean most of my time is spent talking to course leaders now about the National Student Survey, so most of the time that we are getting together it is going through these questions and finding ways that we can...we can resolve them or can improve them and that can, you know be quite difficult on art and design courses. (PGLArt)

When asked, however, if superficial improvements were made with a view to improving NSS scores or real changes to improve the student experience, course leaders were among those who felt most strongly that the changes they made were to improve the student experience with any rise in NSS scores 'an added bonus' (CLBus1), but by no means guaranteed:

Teaching is about giving something that you think is of value and if you change that to make the value more about, you know, the outcome of the NSS, then I think you are in sticky territory because you devalue everything. (CLArt1)

The majority of interviewees felt that while the university aimed to make real changes to improve the student experience but there were also some superficial activities, largely around the timing and promotion of the survey itself. CLBus2 and SUPres2012 felt, however, that success in the NSS was the immediate priority:

Well, I think we as an institution just focus on the NSS and getting the magical goal. However, I think there's value in the NSS in that it does force institutions to at least have some focus on the student experience so the way we're interpreting it may not be in line with the overall ethos with what was originally planned - I don't know. (CLBus2)

While the corporate reasons and approaches for addressing issues raised through the NSS, were questioned to some extent, at a personal level, course leaders in particular were very clear that their own actions were aimed at improving things for students. DeanArt summed things up thus:

‘There are no superficial actions. If action is taken it is something that we ought to be doing anyway.’

On balance the interviews suggested that Greenfields was not using the NSS for short term gains and several interviewees (DVC, FMTBus) commented that issues raised were not always capable of being resolved quickly or easily:

The NSS results can give the impression that problems can be resolved simply and quickly when, in fact, the underlying issues may be of widely differing complexity or not easily understood or explained. (DVC)

### **5.3.3 Externally available data**

The importance attached to the NSS was also driven by its external availability and potential for it to influence the public perception of the university and most importantly, student recruitment. VC articulated the context, referring to

...use [of the NSS] for external ranking purposes and the extent to which they came to be seen as a factor that might affect student recruitment and as a recruiting university, virtually all of our income is dependent on the fees regime... on student numbers and student applications. Then NSS is very important. I think we saw it as a potential indicator for parents and would-be students of the institution... (VC)

Staff at all levels referred to the NSS in relation to student recruitment, as did the SUPres2012. In this sense the survey was perceived to be important for its original purpose of providing publicly available information to inform student choice.

...It’s a recruiting device apart from anything else. (PGLArt)

...we have got to attract students, If the NSS is not good, then that is not great. (CLArt1)

When interviewees identified the importance of the NSS for student recruitment, they were asked if they thought that students looked at NSS results when considering where to go to university. Their answers indicated that there was little to suggest that they did. Some respondents (DeanBus, HoSBus, CLBus1) referred to the fact that only very rarely were questions asked about NSS at open days: ‘... they are asking more about graduate employment and league tables...they have never said, ‘what are your NSS scores?’ (HoSBus)

Others cited the fact that when students were asked to complete the NSS they were largely unaware of it. CLArt2 referred to most final year students being ‘absolutely clueless’ about it.

SUPres2010 said he was broadly aware of the survey whilst a student, but he attributed this to his particular circumstances (a change of course meant that he completed it while he was in the second year of the degree in which he graduated). SUPres2012 was more emphatic about the lack of awareness:

I don't think they really know much about it to be honest. I think they know about it when it's told to them 'fill this out' and that's it. I don't think they realise what impact it has on the university as a whole, they've left by the time anything is done about it anyway, so they can't see the changes, because they've gone. (SUPres2012)

There appeared, therefore, to be a tension between interviewees' perception of the importance of NSS for student recruitment with students' apparent lack of awareness of the survey. There was a strong feeling, however, that the survey results were important for the university's reputation. The nub of the matter seemed to be its public availability (and so to this extent as public information) and particularly its use within league tables.

Its' importance for recruitment is through its importance to university league tables and at university level they have an impact on recruitment. Whether prospective students look at course level positions is unclear. (DeanArt)

### 5.3.3.1 League tables

The interview questions did not mention league tables, but they were raised by 16 of the 18 interviewees (HoSArt and DeanBus being the exceptions). In contrast, 'official' vehicles for making the data available to applicants and the wider public were mentioned much less frequently : KIS (which includes some of the survey areas) was mentioned by five interviewees (DlAdmin, HoSBus, DeanBus, DeanLIS, PGLBus) – and only one interviewee – DeanBus referred to it as an important source of information. None of the interviewees referred to Unistats - so while interviewees felt that the NSS was important because it shaped public perception of the university, there were few references to the official channels established to inform student choice.

League tables were believed to affect institutional reputation and student recruitment:

It [the NSS] is frequently referred to by politicians and external observers and has a significant impact on institutional performance in league tables – which means that it carries more weight than it can bear – league tables, in particular playing a significant role in shaping the way in which institutions are perceived. (DVC)

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The perception was that prospective students, (CLBus1, CLBus2, HoSBus) particularly international students (PGLArt) took note of league table position.

Greenfields does not do well in league tables, being usually placed at the lower end of the three main newspaper tables. While it monitored and aimed to improve its position, it had not taken the kind of approach observed elsewhere (Locke *et al*, 2008) where league table position drives policy (VC). Several universities which were previously placed towards the bottom of the league tables, had risen markedly in recent years and there was some sense in which Greenfields needed to 'run faster to catch up' (HoSBus, DeanArt)).

Leagues tables were not well regarded: they were considered 'methodologically dubious' (VC), distorting small differences in institutional performance (DVC, SUPres2010, DeanArt) and largely disregard institutional context. Nonetheless they were a key point at which the NSS was brought to the attention of the public, and the 'profile' (VC) this gave it was a possible reason for the interest shown by university governors.

The Students' Union presidents appeared to have diametrically opposed views on the university attention to league tables in relation to NSS. SUPres2010, referred to NSS feeding into league tables but being a vehicle for changing the student experience, while the SUPres2012 felt that its presence in league tables meant that emphasis was placed on improving NSS scores rather than addressing the issues raised.

### **5.3.4 The course leaders' perspective**

It became apparent that course leaders experienced the NSS very differently from other interviewees. Interviewees reported that course leaders might regard NSS outcomes as a reflection on themselves and their actions (CLBus1, CLArt1, CLArt2, DeanArt). Four common themes emerged from interviews with course leaders:

- i. Issues raised through the NSS were beyond their control;
- ii. 'Magical numbers';
- iii. The exposure they felt to the anonymous feedback of students;
- iv. Violent terminology.

#### **5.3.4.1 Issues beyond their control**

Three (CLArt2, CLBus1, CLBus2) course leaders referred to not being able to effect change in at least some of the issues raised through the NSS. CLBus2 was the most vocal on this point: '... teaching professionals don't necessarily know or feel empowered to be able to do anything to change an NSS score... (CLBus2)

Asked to expand on this, she referred to her inability to manage the performance of teaching staff that did not report to her; to changes to course regulations and to problems with centrally managed timetabling systems.

...I don't think I know **any** staff, apart from...senior management...so my level and below, I don't think I know anyone who'll look at the NSS as something they can do anything about... I can bring it up at course meetings and I will consistently get 'well, what's the point, we can't do anything'. So, I kind of get the view 'don't bother the course team about the NSS actually. Let's just do what we think is the right thing for the student and then hopefully, you'll get fall out that way'. But if you mention it to the staff, to the course team, they don't want to know. (CLBus2)

CLBus1 referred to similar issues remarking that she found it 'frustrating' and that she 'personally... felt a little bit powerless' because she was unable to control things that she and the team were 'assessed in'. CLArt2 referred to '...there are things beyond my control, beyond the head of school's control which impact on it hugely.'

While managers viewed NSS as leveraging improvement, at course level there was a degree of frustration felt by course leaders who felt judged according to metrics which they were unable to influence. FMTBus referred to a growing willingness by course teams to identify aspects of the NSS which were related to provision by the wider university, most commonly a central service, and that this had resulted in some better working practices between faculties and services. PGLArt and DeanBus similarly felt that non-teaching staff had been drawn in more and increasingly recognised their responsibility and contribution to the student experience.

#### **5.3.4.2      'Magical numbers'**

The way in which staff believed that NSS outcomes were disassociated from the reality of the operation of the course was expressed by all course leaders. CLBus2 referred to the requirement to achieve a certain level of results as 'magical numbers' (CLBus2).

I think there's been a negative impact on teaching professionals...in that there...it's a bit like...it's a stick that's sort of waved over them...so you have to achieve the magical four...or...you get hauled up to the Dean. (CLBus2)

Another interviewee referred to a lack of clarity around the results of the survey and in particular, the relationship between the scores for individual scales and for 'overall satisfaction' (PGLBus).

CLArt1, spoke about the 'concentration on the stats' which he felt could be 'misleading', seemed to be dislocated from his work and rather missed the point about what higher education, certainly in the field of art, was all about

... there is a slight concern that is there too much emphasis on stats. In the world of creative arts, it's about putting pencil to paper – it's about what you make, rather than the mark you get for them. (CLArt1).

When asked what staff thought of the NSS, PGLBus articulated it:

Some staff view it with derision because it is a number in a box on the university's website which isn't wholly reflective of this particular institution's strengths and weaknesses...so getting them [students] into talk about that experience on a one-to-one basis is as important to us as a number in a box, when we as academics are not particularly clear how those numbers all add up.

#### **5.3.4.3 Student comments**

Course leaders felt exposed and vulnerable to the open comments section of the survey. They mentioned the useful and positive comments but it was the negative comments which they talked about most:

...We had as many good comments as we did bad, but you know, as always, it's the bad ones you remember....You are thinking 'God, are we really that bad?' so, it makes you think, it makes you really re-evaluate. ...So you find yourself questioning, over questioning, what you are doing. (CLArt1)

CLBus1 spoke about students using it as an opportunity 'to have a beef at the university' and CLArt2 referred to some of the comments as 'malicious'. CLArt2 talked about an objective approach to the comments but she was also protective of her team: exposure to some of the comments would be 'demoralising', particularly when it was possible to identify individuals even though the comments were anonymised. There was a strong sense of injustice when student comments appeared to be vindictive. What became apparent was the very personal and wounding impact that the NSS could have on individuals.

#### **5.3.4.4 Violent language**

The sense in which course leaders felt vulnerable was illustrated by some of the language used, particularly in relation to student comments: CLArt1 referred to some students using the open comments section to 'vent spleen', a term echoed by the SUPres2010. References were also made

to 'getting a kicking' (CLArt1); being 'hammered' and 'being hit round the head' (CLBus1) and 'bash[ing]' (SUPres2010). DeanLIS commented on the singularity of this experience within education:

...it's a very bitter pill to have to swallow, and in most areas, if you are getting that sort of feedback it will be delivered very carefully ...and we don't do that with NSS, it doesn't allow us to do that. (DeanLIS)

To a lesser extent, this type of language was also applied to management approaches – CLArt2 referred to feeling 'a little bashed' by the pressure to respond to NSS outcomes and CLBus2 to being 'hauled up' to meet with the Dean.

### 5.3.5 A management tool?

For the most part, managers saw the NSS as a useful, if limited, tool for change – a frequently referenced source of evidence, often used as a starting point for a discussion on the need for improvement to some aspect of academic provision but also taken into account for wider university action, such as estates development (VC). Sometimes it was used as a single source of evidence, but often it would be used as part of a range of evidence,

...it's reasonably good at seeing where the problems are and then of course you can cross reference those things with things you are getting from course teams; from staff student forums, and all those sort of things... (PGLArt)

The production of trend data, the required response rates and the ability to make external comparisons were perceived as particular strengths. Consistent messages from large numbers of students over a number of years provided strong cases: 'we can't argue with that' (HoSBus).

The survey has been characterised as a 'stick to beat staff' (Buckley, 2010). FMTArt stressed the importance of the management approach to the NSS being determined by the 'ethos' (FMTArt) of the institution – in this case 'the Greenfields way' was described as 'supportive' (DeanBus) and 'developmental' (FMTArt). The VC talked about how he had '... consciously sought to resist' (VC) a highly managerialist approach.

Some interviewees (VC, FMTArt, HoSArt) indicated, however, that the developmental approach that had been used hitherto had not secured improvements in line with the sector. At the time of the interviews there was evidence of a move towards greater intervention by faculty management teams with courses that had performed poorly in the NSS. Such action was still

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framed in supportive terms, one manager describing the approach as 'touchy feely' and 'nurtur[ing]' (HoSArt) This had been established for several years within the Business Faculty, but was introduced for the first time in the Arts Faculty.

... we've always worked really hard to make it ...to make it as supportive as we can ...and we have tried to ask teams how they want to engage, so we're going to put some more resources in, so we have tried to do it with them to say 'how is it most effective to put more resources in? (DeanBus)

Managers were also aware that however supportive the intention, it might be perceived differently for the course teams involved (VC, HoSBus, DeanBus):

... we have stressed that it is supportive, but I think in some cases the team has seen it as, actually as ...they are being asked to account, unnecessarily ...so in a supportive vein. They actually think they are being told off, even though the actual meeting has been very positive and constructive, they have viewed it as 'I am being pulled in to be told off'. (HoSBus)

The views of the course leaders as to whether the NSS was used as a management tool were split: CLArt1 talked about the supportive management approach:

... No, I don't think so...management wise we are really well looked after...I think maybe from management there is a slight overemphasis that if the stats are low, we want them pulled up, which I think is fair enough...We listen to them, they listen to us.... We're very well looked after... (CLArt1)

While CLArt2:

Yeah. I would have said so, yeah.

*In any particular ways, or ...*

[sighs]. We have quite top down management here and I think it can...it can be sort of ... yeah, I think I mentioned quite early on, the pressure that we feel that comes from management, from the NSS... I mean I can see...I mean I am not critical because I can understand completely why, because you know, it's answering all those questions and it is, in a way, a measure but it does feel very much like 'right, we've got this and now you've got to...', you know, you're going to feel a little bashed by it, I think. (CLArt2)

While CLBus1 talked about being 'praised' for good performance

...and then we will reflect in years it didn't go so well 'why didn't it go so well? ...Usually we can put a reason for it going badly but I don't feel personally, you know, chastised for that. (CLBus1)

And just as the two art course leaders had different views, so did the business course leaders. CLBus2 had a much stronger view: 'Oh I think it is being used as a management tool. Definitely. You don't get the certain level, you're hauled up to the Dean's office. Definitely.' (CLBus2) But having made a strong statement, she appeared to modify her answer when probed a little more

*and what happens then?*

You go armed with information [laughs].

In my case, it was just my little, toe-in- the- water pilot study [laughs] ... Well they want to know what you are doing about it but it's quite a difficult thing because you can't do anything about it for a lot of it.

*And was that acknowledged, that it's difficult for you to do anything?*

...[shrugs]

*Sort of?*

Yeah. (CLBus2)

### **5.3.5.1      Not 'the Greenfields way'**

While the attention paid to the NSS was regarded as 'Typical and increasingly well-established across the sector.' (DVC) Discussions about the management approach were littered with references to practices by other universities known to interviewees, suggesting that the management approach at Greenfields might not be typical.

There were references to other institutions and to 'very, very draconian approach[es]' (FMTArt); to poor performance in NSS resulting in course closure (FMTBUS, PGLArt, FMTArt) sometimes on the basis of a single year's results, to staff not receiving incremental pay rises (HoSBus) – such approaches were 'not the Greenfields way' (FMTArt).

I have seen it in some universities absolutely used as a stick. And when I visit them, I just think 'Thank God, I don't work here'. And you can see a clear disconnect between management and staff. (HoSArt)

Faculties determined how they managed the NSS and the Business Faculty had adopted a more targeted approach for the last few years which involved rewarding very good performance and the agreement of specific actions for low scoring courses. The Dean indicated that pressure to address low scoring courses came strongly from high scoring course teams whose published results were lower as a result of aggregation. NSS was also included in appraisal discussion for PGLs but did not result in the type of personal or professional consequences noted elsewhere in the sector. Based on this model, the Arts Faculty, introduced an approach which similarly identified low scoring courses for action. In both cases, the action was agreed between course team and management in a consultative way, 'it's not one boot fits all' (HoSArt).

Two interviewees, however, SUPres12 and CLBus2 thought that the management processes were either insufficient or not followed through. Asked, how she thought improvements could be made, CLBus2 said that the university would need to adopt commercial business practice with greater individual accountability

...unless you start putting in things like work task analysis and stuff to see what people are **actually** doing and making them truly accountable for what they do, I think it will be very hard to affect some of these other categories really. (CLBus2)

### 5.3.6 The student perspective

The Students' Union presidents' views on the impact of the NSS might also reflect different stages of maturity of student representation within the university. When asked what impact they thought the NSS had within the university, SUPres2010, talked about a change of 'ethos' with existing policies on student feedback brought into practice more effectively, leading to work between the university and the Students' Union to embed and further develop student feedback and representation:

...once the NSS started embedding itself more and more... the union and the university went directly to students and actually asked for the feedback; involved them on as many boards as they possibly can and that also strengthened the course committees as well. So even down at a local course level, the information was feeding back up, and we changed quite a significant number of courses as well, which benefitted the students, the academics and the university as a whole... (SUPres2010)

This resonated with a point made by the VC who talked about greater engagement with the Students' Union with the NSS being a point of 'convergence' of university and Students' Union interests particularly within the context of higher fees.

SUPres2012, on the other hand, referred to the annual response to survey results and actions to 'rectify certain areas which have performed poorly' but also action taken to address broader areas:

...for example, I co-chaired the organisation and management working group last year which focused on that area of NSS but also in general, so it highlighted it as an issue through NSS. But then that group looked at it in a broader perspective so not just third years, it looked at it as a whole across the university, not just at a particular, you know, course that had performed not very well. That is one of the really good things that comes out of it that those kind of groups are formed and they take a whole look at what is going on. (SUPres2012)

At this point, the interview appeared to reflect the views of senior management (DVC and also VC to a certain extent) which referred to increased working in partnership with the Students' Union and also the greater engagement which had grown across the university. But SUPres2012 subsequently said that she was not clear what had happened to the work of the group she had co-chaired and later in the interview appeared to be frustrated by what she perceived to be a reactive and short term approach, dependent on local action which, in her view, had proved to be ineffective.

...one of the problems is that it is very course focused and its very faculty focused after that and there isn't this university-wide approach. It's: 'OK we need to improve NSS, but you just do it in your faculties as you want to', well I don't think that works, because it's not working. (SUPres2012)

Both interviewees reflected on a university approach which concentrated on low performing areas which SUPres2010 saw as breaking new ground:

...we tried to use the information from there in order to change a number of things as it seriously affects students and the student lifecycle which then [went] down to all the local level committee meetings and course decisions...(SUPres2010)

Whereas SUPres2012 felt that the concentration on low scoring areas was not necessarily helpful and that some of the very good practice within the university went unknown. She felt that the university tried to address issues in order to improve NSS scores rather than address the fundamental issues behind them:

... I think people get hung up on the NSS as the NSS, not actually what it is that it is finding out about things...that probably the university should look at learning and teaching etc. sort it out, so that they are perfectly happy with how that is and then the NSS will follow, not the other way round, not trying to make it better to improve the NSS. I think it should be - make it better to make it better and then the NSS will follow. (SUPres2012)

The SU presidents, again, made very different points with SUPres2010 referring to changes made to the student experience at all stages in the student lifecycle,

...then we also helped them [students] along the way, showing them all the different ways of giving feedback, and actually gaining student feedback that we could actually contribute and show them how we changed things... (SUPres2010)

SUPres2012 referred to the change in university behaviour in listening to student feedback, driven by the publication of the NSS outcomes and by league tables in particular:

I think it has probably made them think they need to [listen to students] for a start [laughs]. ...Whereas now, I think the method of collecting feedback and the fact that it is highlighted every year as an important thing 'get this from your third years' has made the university think 'we should probably ask them before they get to their third year' and 'we should probably get to the point that we know what they think before they fill this [NSS] out. And actually, some of the feedback that comes from it is really useful, so we should listen to other feedback' and they realise the importance of it, because... it influences league tables, it influences the way people look at the university which suddenly makes student feedback much more important than it would be if it didn't have any impact on any of those other external factors. (SUPres2012)

Both Students' Union presidents referred to higher fees in their responses to the question on whether NSS encouraged consumer-like behaviour by students. SUPres12 echoed the views of several other respondents:

Well, I kind of think, well if you are paying £9000 a year for a service and you're not getting it, then yes, there should be a means of saying you are not happy with it ...So I don't think it drives it...It's at the end, it's just too late... (SUPres12)

The SUPres2010 had a similar point of view, stressing the importance of universities listening to students in the earlier stages of their courses and taking action to improve things then.

When asked how the survey could be improved both felt that the questions needed to be explained clearly by course teams. SUPres2010 referred to the importance of students feeling it was relevant to them. Like some of the course leaders, he felt that it could be improved by making it more course specific but acknowledged the associated complications. SUPres2012 felt that the questions might no longer reflect the issues important to students or needed updating in light of developments such as online feedback on student assessments and different types of IT requirements..

### **5.3.7 Collecting and using student feedback**

It was evident that Greenfields put a lot of effort into the collection and response to student feedback and had developed the ways it listened to and acted on it, providing different mechanisms through which students could give feedback and working more closely with the Students' Union

...there have been significant changes which, taken as a whole, represent a cultural shift in terms of greater effort to understand the perceptions of students. (DVC)

While a variety of mechanisms existed for oral feedback for example in student fora and student-staff liaison meetings, it was the quantitative results of student surveys that were most frequently reported and discussed at university level. Greenfields' internal student module and course level surveys drew heavily on NSS but response rates were low across the university (FMTArt, DeanLIS). There was a tendency, therefore, for a relatively narrow view of student opinion to be routinely visible at university level (DVC, DeanLIS). An assumption might be that this concentration led to a reduced view of student feedback across the university, but the situation appeared to be more complex.

At faculty level, interviewees (HoSArt, CLArt1, CLArt2, PGLBus) commented that there was greater connectivity between the various discussions with NSS often the 'catalyst' (HoSArt). While NSS was the 'focal point' there were various feedback mechanisms in place to raise things at an earlier stage:

Student feedback had always existed as part of the university's quality procedure and students would bring things up, but it is NSS that has pulled it into focus and now I like staff to use those student-staff forums to pick up on those early signs of things that could be nipped in the bud before we reach NSS. (HoSArt)

DeanBus described the greater priority given to student feedback at faculty level; to increased use of support staff to advise on regulatory matters and to the reduction in student complaints. She

referred to a 'more professional' (DeanBus) approach to gathering student feedback and to the critical importance of informal, local level feedback enabling course teams to address issues at an early stage.

Managers referred to shared responsibility for responding to the views expressed by students. There was greater involvement of support staff (PGLArt, DeanLIS, FMTBus, DeanBus) either as a result of a deliberate strategy such as that identified by DeanBus or because the issues raised, particularly in the NSS, related to their areas of responsibility: PGLArt commented that previously it was difficult to involve support staff in responding to student feedback, their reaction being

... 'well, what's that got to do with me?' but I think now, slowly the fact everyone in the university has put it such a high priority it means that it is slowly drilling down. (PGLArt)

He also talked about the way that the direct involvement of the Dean meant that longstanding difficulties 'written in stone, have got very quickly overturned'.

Elsewhere there was a sense of change in the way that staff responded to student feedback:

From a faculty perspective, I think we are more proactive than we were, it was more of a passive response initially 'oh, those are the results, perhaps we ought to think about what we are doing' ... (CLBus1)

The course perspective was not routinely visible at institutional level except through NSS, but interviewees suggested that there was a wide range of practice. FMTArt commented that a 'small' but 'not an insignificant number' of staff were reluctant to seek any feedback from students at all

... Of course, the views of those staff are increasingly marginalised and remain largely hidden, because they are wise enough to accept that isn't the ethos in a modern university. (FMTArt)

Greenfields required courses to collect student feedback, but as noted, response rates to internal surveys were low and individual practice might not be clear. There were some references to variable practice (VC, FMTArt) and in those circumstances the opportunity for students to give anonymous feedback through NSS was regarded as important (VC).

Elsewhere there was evidence of 'greater staff engagement' with student feedback (FMTBus), some staff taking 'a more holistic approach to student feedback...' (FMTBus). Two course leaders talked about the ways they preferred to gather feedback, making it an integral part of the course. CLArt2 described encouraging active engagement by students in the development of the course:

... trying to make it much more community focused. Rather than something that they come to and leave, without actually getting involved and actually contribute to much more. So I'm working closely with the student reps to get them involved a lot more in kind of decision-making on the course... (CLArt2)

This approach contributed to students' 'greater independence, their employability essentially' (CLArt2,). CLBus2 talked about recruiting far more student representatives than university regulations required in order to achieve an authentic dialogue with students

... because what I find is when you're sitting them down and getting that feedback...and all of a sudden you get a really good dialogue and debate and it, it's no longer the individual filling this in depending on what they are on the day, it's the dialogue that goes on with it, and I have to say because I have so many course reps, I get a pretty good, I feel I have a pretty good handle on what's going on...(CLBus2)

As well as increased effort to collect feedback, there was also better understanding of the data arising from NSS:

I think to start with when we got the data... it was interesting but we did not really know very much what to do about it and we didn't know how to compare ...you know...were the scores good or bad compared to other universities? So the fact that we have now got benchmarks, has made a difference, it means that we can say 'yeah, actually we do need to focus attention on a certain area' because it means that we, the university, is performing less well than others. (HoSBus)

The sense of a growing professionalism in the collection and analysis of student feedback was evident in several of the interviews. VC commented on the way in which the university had become more sophisticated in its interpretation of student feedback data and this was also evident at faculty level. FMTBus noted the increasing level of 'detailed attention' by course teams, going beyond the headline statistics, exploring the qualitative comments and triangulating with other sources of student feedback.

### 5.3.8 The NSS as a means of collecting student feedback

Most interviewees felt that the NSS questionnaire was a limited instrument, at least insofar as the questions were very general. CLArt2, referred to its usefulness as a starting point for action plans, for looking at trends and for determining areas for development, but felt that it offered a rather restricted perspective

... In a way, I honestly feel that the NSS often doesn't actually very effectively measure the students' experience... (CLArt2)

The VC referred to results as 'management headlines' which required unpacking. Most respondents agreed that the survey results provided useful information, if at a high level. Both DeanArt and DeanBus agreed that it was 'blunt' but that there was nothing better available. DeanArt stressed the importance of awareness that small changes to scores could 'be triggered by all kinds of things' (DeanArt) and action should be on the basis of significant changes of around 20-30%.

The aspect of the survey raised most frequently was that the questions (statements) were open to wide interpretation by students (FMTArt, CLBus1, CLBus2, HoSBus, HoSArt, SUPres2010, SUPres2012, DeanArt,). CLArt2 and SUPres2012 used the same example:

I mean things like this 'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to'. A student will see that as 'I emailed them on a Saturday at 2:00 in the afternoon and they didn't get back until Monday afternoon' [feigns shock]... some of the questions, the way a student would see that and the way we would see that is probably quite a different thing.  
(CLArt2)

Two interviewees chose the question on 'prompt' feedback as an example both of how questions was either unequivocal (PGLArt) or open to interpretation (CLBus1). CLBus2 referred to some work she had done exploring, with staff and students their understanding of the four teaching statements – 'and it was very easy to come up with 50 questions just around those four' (CLBus2). CLArt1 felt that without the discipline context, the NSS statements were not meaningful to art-based students. A number of interviewees felt that, whatever criticisms might be levelled at the survey, it asked some basic questions that were useful:

Yeah...I mean there are certain aspects of the questions that whichever way we want to spin it, as academics or managers, the question is blindingly obvious, 'was the teaching any good?' 'Are you assessed in the way that you should be?' so there is value in asking those very straightforward questions... (FMTArt)

While several interviewees talked about the general nature of the information generated, some of the examples that were given of issues that had been addressed were quite specific such as high quality digital printing (HoSArt) and sound deadening (PGLArt), online learning material, online assignment submission and 24 hour library opening (DeanLIS)

The SUPres2010 felt that students completing the survey needed to feel more involved in it, and this, to some extent, could be achieved by more discussion between staff and students about the survey itself and the questions. The issue of what was permissible for staff to say to students taking the survey was raised by all course leaders: CLArt2 talked about staff 'anxiety'

I think because ... we are all very cautious about how we ... position it to students. How we communicate the NSS to students. (CLArt2)

Some interviewees referred to the way that others, either individuals within Greenfields (CLBus2) or at other institutions (CLBus1, DeanArt) adopted practices which 'sailed closer to the limits of the NSS guidance' (DeanArt). Overall, the interviews suggested that Greenfields was not 'gaming' (Callender *et al* 2014) the NSS in a way that was causing concern elsewhere in the sector.

While some interviewees expressed strong views about the survey's limitations, some found it difficult to identify how it might be improved, (CLArt1; CLBus1, HoSArt. PGLArt, VC).

The strongest views were expressed by SUPres2012:

Yeah, I think they should revise all of them, review and revise them to see if they are the things students want to be telling the university and are they important anymore (SUPres2012)

And DirAdmin – 'scrap it!'

Views expressed covered much the same ground as that in response to earlier interview questions concerning the way in which questions were open to interpretation by students and to phrasing of the questions (FMTArt; CLBus1; CLBus2; HoSBus; SUPres2010; SUPres2012).

Several interviewees referred to the national debate about the value of surveys which considered the level of student engagement. Most interviewees (and all course leaders) supported the inclusion of questions which involved students reflecting on their own contributions to the learning experience. However, this was qualified in some cases:

... Absolutely. I think so, that would make a lot more sense... I don't know how they would answer things like that though. [laughs] Because again, their perception of what being engaged on a course is very different to what ours is to be honest [laughs]. 'I've worked really hard' [student]. 'Have you?' 'I spent five whole hours' [student]. Do you see? So this is a very difficult thing to measure objectively is 'what is your engagement on the course?' ... (CLArt2)

Others, (DirAdmin, FMTBus, SUPres2012) expressed similar views.

While others questioned the practicality of this under current survey arrangements—CLBus1 and DVC commenting that views like this would be better collected part way through a degree rather than at the end, so that students would benefit from the process of reflection. CLBus2 reflected that while she found feedback which stimulated students to think about their own behaviour, very useful at course level, this might not be practical in a national survey. While the VC C was sceptical about any moves towards a more engagement style survey and particularly how results might be used:

... I suppose my scepticism is connected with a cynicism about the way the system, or various systems will actually then use that data... (VC)

Several interviewees (FMTBus; PGLBus) felt that more qualitative comments would improve the survey but the practicalities around the analysis were an issue

...could reduce the number of tick boxes but have an additional expectation that students would explain scoring in written comments. This would make the survey more useful to staff rather than league tables. (FMTBus).

A couple of the interviewees (DeanLIS, SUPres2012) felt that the survey did not fully reflect the interests/concerns of current/prospective students or the wider benefits of higher education, such as employability development (SUPres2012, DeanLIS).

VC and PGLArt felt that a very strong case needed to be made for changing a longstanding survey. The VC referred to the ‘grinding of gears’ that would occur if fundamental changes were made to the survey and the consequent loss of institutional learning. Reservations which were also expressed by DeanBus.

### **5.3.9 Increasing consumer-like behaviour by students?**

The recent national review of the survey, reported that stakeholders identified one of its weaknesses as ‘NSS results were feeding a growing consumerism within the UK HE sector’ (Griggs (a) *et al* 2014: Appendix B, 12).

There was a range of responses across all the different categories of interviewees: from those who felt that the survey encouraged a consumerist approach to education and were concerned about it (CLArt1, PGLBus) to those who felt that the NSS was unlikely to have an influence on student behaviour, particularly in light of the timing of the survey at the end of their time at university (DeanLIS, SUPres2012):

I don't think the NSS really, will have much impact on that, because it's probably the last thing they are going to fill out about the university (SUPres2012)

Several people (CLArt1; CLBus2; DeanLIS, VC, PGLArt, SUPres12) referred to higher level fees in this context.

Some interviewees (CLBus2, VC, PGLArt, HoSaArt, DeanLIS) likened the NSS to commercial companies seeking feedback on their services but felt that this was part of modern life and a reflection of a context in which students were paying high fees. The VC added

If they are incurring considerable debts...it seems quite legitimate to me to ask a very simple question: 'Is this, is this experience I am getting here, do I think it's a good one or not?' 'What do I think is not right about it?' I think, that seems to me that is perfectly legitimate and universities and academics, perhaps particularly academics, need to, to listen to that... (VC)

A point echoed by CLBus2:

I think it's a valid point, but I don't see the problem with it, I have to say [laughs]...At the end of the day we should be providing a good service and we should, you know, we should be able to stand up and be counted for that service. You know, it's a lot of money...and, there are a lot of old school teaching professionals that do their little bit and don't do anymore and actually I think that's wrong for ...the society we're in today. Especially with the way the economy is, students, I think, have every right...to expect a level of service ... (CLBus2)

In common with others in the sector, Greenfields used NSS questions with first and second year students which, DeanLIS pointed out, might be deemed to be treating students as consumers.

#### **5.4 Experience vs the committee papers – a reflection of reality?**

Interviewees were told about the narrative emerging from the documentary analysis of the committee papers but not all of the interviewees had experience of committees or were in a position to take a university perspective. It was evident, however, that all interviewees were aware of a greater interest on addressing student feedback which emanated from a management perspective within either the school, faculty or university, depending on their point of reference. Both DirAdmin and DeanArt noted the recognition of the importance of the NSS within the committee business.

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Both SU presidents were somewhat sceptical about the reality behind the committee paper narrative. SUPres2010 felt that the committee perspective was limited and did not reflect the reality of what was happening at course level, while SUPres2012 stated that:

... There are discussions about NSS perhaps at all levels, but it doesn't really go anywhere (SUPres2012)

CLBus2 referred to the potential for documents considered by committees (or, in this case annual course monitoring papers) to be superficially impressive, possibly suggesting more action than was actually the case.

Interviewees cited greater connection of feedback mechanisms within faculties, joining up all the 'little networks' (HoSArt) and bringing discussions on student feedback closer together (CLArt1, CLArt2). PGLBus summarised the difference in approaches over time—

I think there is greater connection and understanding across the university... beforehand we would have probably taken the feedback but we now respond to it at module level. I don't know whether that is across the university but in this portfolio that I lead, we get the feedback in and we respond to it, to say 'thank you for your feedback, glad the strengths of this particular module and the teacher is this, here's what you outlined as potential areas of concern. This is what we are already doing, did you know?' Sort of 'you said, we did', type stuff and the majority of the modules are sort of tweaked in line with student feedback every year in this particular portfolio, so there is, I think there is a more joined-upness, if you like, if that is a real word, between the NSS data and what actually happens on the ground. (PGLBus)

The VC agreed that the committee narrative resonated but was quite surprised that this greater connectivity through committee discussion was not visible until 2008-09:

...But I do think, as I say it was introduced and then there was a period of, not quite realising how important it was, what its impact was. Then a period of denial...including a kind of, either defensiveness or a complacency or a misunderstanding, That is, 'this is as bad as the league tables, it's like everything else and, really we shouldn't be bothered with it, because its intellectually ill-founded' and then I think,... the institution takes it more and more seriously... it suggests the problems, if you like, or the issue of requiring enhancement...requiring action. They are being identified at an institutional level and then the institution is being more directive about what faculties do and it is asking them 'What have you done?' rather than leaving it, drawing it to the attention of the faculties, letting the faculties get on with it, believing that, that was the end of it, that 'that's it,

we've sorted that'... So for me a managed organisation, a managed institution, is absolutely essential, particularly one like this, but it's how you do it. (VC)

## 5.5 Chapter conclusions

In so far as those interviewed were in a position to take a view on the findings of the documentary review, the analysis was confirmed. It was acknowledged that Greenfields took some time to pay detailed attention to the survey and this was attributed in part to questioning on methodological grounds – an issue not visible in committee papers. The interviews suggested that there were parallels with the reception of internal surveys and data.

The Vice-Chancellor also believed that an initial inability to attribute results to courses meant that it was difficult to secure ownership and action and this added to the delay in the university being able to use the data and respond to the survey. This had clearly changed with course leaders, not only being very aware of their course results but also feeling personally judged to a certain extent by the survey outcomes. All course leaders felt additional pressure resulting from the work around the survey, but there were different experiences of how this was handled by managers. Two of the course leaders interviewed (CLArt1, CLBus2) had courses which had scored poorly the previous year and had, therefore, met with senior faculty managers to agree actions. They reported very different views of the experience, with CLArt1 referring to being 'very well looked after' and CLBus2 'being hauled up to the Dean', although it was CLBus2 of all interviewees, and perhaps reflecting a business background, who asserted that the only way to achieve change was to introduce measures that would secure personal accountability, including the possibility of performance-related pay.

Where the interviews produced a different perspective from that characterised in the national press, was that there was no evidence of actions such as course closures on the basis of NSS outcomes alone or of serious professional consequences for staff members arising from NSS results. While it was clear that Greenfields was feeling left behind in the face of improving scores by other institutions and that a more managed approach was being used more widely, managers were explicit that they were trying to do so in a consultative and supportive way.

There were also indications that Greenfields was trying to make genuine improvements rather than short-term gains in NSS, although this point was not unanimously agreed. There were references to triangulation of results with other data; to use of focus groups to investigate matters further and to recognition that there should not be an overreaction to small changes in results. At course level, however, the annual cycle involving the preparation of action plans

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created additional work and also 'the need for speed' (FMTBus) which might suggest that issues could be quickly resolved.

It was also clear that the NSS provided managers with student feedback from course level up, to which they had not previously had access. It was recognised that these were 'headlines' only, but there was a real sense that that was the first time this had been available in Greenfields and it was only then, through a consistent view of student opinion, that the university could take it into account in informing institutional action. While NSS overlaid a lot of activity within faculties, at course level, course leaders continued to gather richer feedback in ways that they found most beneficial to the course and to their students.

# Chapter 6: Discussion

## 6.1 Introduction

There is a contradiction implicit in the body of work published on the NSS – it is vilified and discredited by some researchers and commentators and yet there are substantial indications that it is used widely within the sector, government agencies and the media. Its' main original purpose as a means of informing prospective student choice has had limited success judged by the use made of official information channels, and yet it has continued and become more prominent as an element of national policy.

This study set out to explore how the NSS has affected institutional behaviour, particularly in relation to student feedback on their experience of higher education. It shows the sheer scale of the institutional effort poured into addressing issues raised through national policy aimed primarily at external consumption. It suggests that government and media attention combined with selective (mis)use of the data has meant that the results of the survey have become linked to institutional standing and reputation.

The literature falls broadly into five categories:

- Discussions of the development of the NSS from proposal to the current ongoing national review;
- Critiques of the survey on methodological grounds;
- Commentary and analysis of NSS as a national policy development;
- Articles and case studies on the ways that the NSS has been used either from an institutional or individual practitioner perspective;
- Commentary, including media reporting.

Opinion is divided on methodological grounds concerning primarily whether the survey is a suitable tool for gathering student opinion, particularly whether it elicits meaningful information about teaching and learning. National reviews (2010 and 2014) have reflected the developing purposes of the survey. In 2010, its role in informing student choice was felt to be limited and no longer deemed to be a key purpose. Its' potential for use by institutions to enhance provision, originally a minor purpose, had grown in significance. In the later review, informing student choice and enhancement were identified as its' two main purposes, with public accountability noted as a key function. The picture of student use of NSS as an information source is complex and use of official data sources through Unistats has been limited and is under review. Recent debate has focused on whether any future version of the NSS should incorporate or be replaced

by some form of evaluation of student engagement. Parallel debate has been around the use of the survey within institutions with commentary often citing reference to the survey's use as a management 'stick' with which to beat academic staff (eg Crawford, 2009:79-80; Child, 2011:62; Buckley 2012:28; Sabri 2013).

The research design for this thesis was aimed at considering whether there was evidence of a change to institutional behaviour in responding to student feedback mapped over four points since 2000-01 academic year, up to and including 2012-13. The study looked initially at the consideration of feedback from students through the formal deliberative structures, including both academic and management committees. It then explored these findings and also perceptions of the survey and its use within the university, with a cross section of staff ranging from course leaders in two subject disciplines; faculty and central service managers, a Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor. The student view was represented by two Students' Union presidents in office over the period 2008-2014.

The documentary analysis showed that Greenfields' longstanding interest in student feedback developed and gathered momentum over the review period. At the start of the period there was a single institutional survey which was considered by the senior executive committee, generating identified departmental actions. A review of institutional and faculty papers, however, showed that there was limited linkage between different levels within the institution: the university and faculties were discussing completely different issues. It was unclear how the university, as a whole, was able to respond effectively to student feedback either in terms of agreed responses or the allocation of resource. This suggested that leverage to make changes was limited to local spheres (faculty, school, course), both in terms of resources (including staff effort) and the range of students it was likely to affect. Institutional data available offered a limited overview of feedback on students' experience. Interviews indicated that the collection of student feedback at faculty level was, in practice, often inconsistent and patchy. Moreover, it did not offer students an anonymous route through which to articulate their views. Neither did it enable a cumulative picture of student opinion to be compiled. There was widespread dissatisfaction with internal feedback arrangements.

University discussion was, therefore, largely focused on the development of effective internal student feedback mechanisms. Aware of shortcomings in existing feedback arrangements, considerable effort was put into the development of more effective feedback mechanisms. This work was, however, dogged by delays caused by difficulty gaining credibility with staff and new surveys proved difficult to implement. In this context, it appeared that initially, the NSS made little impact on committee discussion until early in 2006 when university consideration was

focused internally and in accordance with the national vision on how the NSS would be used. Internal feedback was regarded as the main source of data on which enhancement to provision could be based with NSS providing triangulating data where relevant. As with other institutions, assessment and feedback, with lower scores institutionally and across the sector, proved a focus for early action taken following the introduction of the NSS.

By 2008-09 NSS had made its mark – partly because of results which did not match the university's perception of provision and which had fallen for no immediately apparent reason, but also within the context of a new university in an increasingly marketised sector. Formal mechanisms were introduced to ensure clear university oversight. Reporting and action requirements were ratcheted up. Available literature showed a similar pattern with some institutional action triggered by a combination of perceived increasing importance of the survey coinciding with internal or external factors also suggesting a need for action. By 2012-13, the final year reviewed, there was an established reporting system in place that was fully integrated in quality processes with efforts made to avoid duplication of work. NSS had established itself as the dominant student survey. Extensive use was made of the data across the university, centrally and locally and it was referenced in a wide range of issues and discussion.

The interviews, in part, confirmed the findings of the official account given in the committee papers. They also illuminated and gave depth to the evidence, shedding light on views which ranged from the personal to the strategic. They revealed some very different perspectives, sometimes along subject discipline lines, sometimes from a functional position in the university structure. The reach of the NSS had extended beyond its original purpose to many areas of university policy, decision-making and practice.

This chapter discusses the overall findings and evaluates the research project, including its connections to previous research.

The longitudinal study combined with interviews revealed how the NSS was introduced to Greenfields, how it was received and how it evolved. The interviews explained and occasionally, called into question the high-level activity reported in committee papers. In particular, they revealed some of the ways that NSS affected not only institutional behaviour, but also to a certain extent, the professional and personal activities and behaviours of individuals. This study fills in gaps between the constituencies of the existing literature relating to national policy, the published work on how the survey has been used in specific instances, academic critique and media coverage.

For the case study institution, the research identified that:

- The introduction of the NSS overcame longstanding difficulties with the collection, use and response to student feedback. Prior to the NSS, there was not a clear and shared view of student opinion through which concerted action could be effected.
- The NSS identified some issues of which the university was unaware and which jarred with the view the university had of itself or of its provision. The combination of this, increasing competition within the sector and the rising profile of the NSS spurred a great deal of activity. In the earlier stages it was not always clear what the outcomes of this were or whether action was informed by a sound understanding of the data. There were indications of layer upon layer of activity as staff endeavoured to explore results and take action that would improve low scores.
- There was concern about the perceived way in which results contributed to the external view of Greenfields and how this might affect student recruitment.
- In keeping with the ethos of the university, Greenfields sought to address low performing courses in a supportive and developmental way - bucking the apparent emergent tendency to a highly managerialist and sometimes punitive approach. The experience of course leaders did not always acknowledge this and even within a small number of interviewees, responses were varied and complex. There was some evidence of internal peer pressure: staff with high scoring courses whose public scores suffered as a result of aggregation with courses with low scores, were vocal in pressing for improvements.
- There was a feeling amongst some managers that the developmental approach adopted was not proving effective and that, in light of the improvement in results by some comparator institutions, Greenfields would have little option but to reconsider its approach.
- While individuals described their desire for improved scores in terms of doing the best for students, not all ascribed the same reasons to corporate motivations.
- Greenfields conformed to HEFCE guidance on the conduct of the survey and also to the 'legitimate' use of the data. In particular, NSS was regarded as headline data to be taken into account with other indicators and to be acted on in a measured way. Nonetheless, the seemingly relentless schedule of annual surveys and response to results, meant that some staff felt under pressure to come up with solutions which would have an instant impact – 'the need for speed' (FMTBus).

- It is argued that aside from methodological critique, much of the criticism of NSS has elided with criticism of institutional, sector or media behaviour in their use and response to the survey. For example, while the NSS is commonly associated with supporting consumer-like behaviour by students, the study suggested that institutional behaviour may encourage this with use of the survey for first and second year students, often combined with additional layers of requests for student feedback.

## 6.2 Originality of the research

The contribution to knowledge of the thesis lies in the longitudinal examination of the use of NSS data and the impact this has had on student feedback, triangulated with official narratives and interviews cutting across various constituencies, at different levels, whether Vice-Chancellor, course leader or Students' Union presidents. It discusses the different perceptions, understandings and approaches co-existing within a single institution; identifies very different perspectives from staff in various roles and to some extent, in different disciplines and those of the Students' Union.

It explores, through interviews, the drivers behind the adoption and implementation of NSS as a key influence on institutional behaviour regarding student feedback. It identifies an individual and corporate desire to improve things for students. This co-exists with an imperative to improve institutional reputation in a marketised, competitive sector where rankings are important and inform strategic action. In doing so, it reveals the growing importance and reach of the NSS and the impact that this has had on the visibility of student feedback at all levels.

It traces through a close reading of university documentation, an institutional path from complacency combined with scepticism about the survey to a shock when results failed to match the university view of its provision. Unable to secure sustained and significant improvement in a rising sector and against competitor institutions making big jumps, there were indications in the interviews that Greenfields would move to greater management intervention, a move that would run counter to the prevailing institutional culture. The interest in the investigation of results and response to them continue unabated and is likely to intensify further.

It shows that perversely, the public information aspect has been served, not through official dissemination channels but through league tables – a concern of the sector at the outset when the survey was first introduced, but one in which institutions choose to participate for the most part. It further suggests that while the survey supports and drives enhancement it can also lead to

risk aversion and a certain paralysis, particularly in the run up and the time of the survey when there is a heightened concern about upsetting students.

It argues that much of the criticism accruing to the NSS has elided with the way that results have been used, most notably in league tables, but also the way that the sector has responded to the survey itself and to its use by third parties. There are longstanding critiques regarding the capacity and limitations of the survey and there is also guidance on the responsible use of the data. Yet it is used in ways that do not recognise either critique or advice and with which the sector colludes.

Furthermore, this study demonstrates some of the unintended consequences of government policy:

- The amount of work (and therefore time) and attention to the results of the NSS and preparation for the next survey could not have been anticipated. In effect, it has become a year round preoccupation.
- The concentration of effort on areas evaluated by the survey, (Locke 2014; Naidoo *et al* 2011). While blanket institutional measures introduced to address low scoring survey areas may have the effect of stifling effective, locally attuned, individual practice (Gibbs 2012).
- The way in which it has become embedded not only in quality assurance but also more pervasively, as a common, trusted and reliable source of data, bringing together central services and academic faculties. Interviews evidenced decisions that included faculty structures, subject location, infrastructure and other significant resourcing decisions. There were indications that student views, through NSS, informed many facets of university life and that its' supposed impact on the external perception of a newly established university meant that its use was stretched to the limits and possibly beyond its legitimate usefulness. The significance attributed to it is reflected across the sector, its agencies and government department. There came through some of the interviews, a sense of reification - 'a code' (DeanLis) and 'a thing' (SUPres12) with the possibility that its results are given undue significance and it has become a 'fact-totem' (Sabri 2013).
- The way that NSS terminology has entered the higher education lexicon, with areas of the survey becoming short hand for referring to a range of issues – eg 'organisation and management' is understood to refer largely to timetables and class cancellation.

### 6.3 Links to existing research

The research calls into question the characterisation of institutional response to NSS as highly managerialist and punitive. By giving voice to a wide range of staff from course leader to Vice-

Chancellor, the research was able to capture views and experiences not previously brought together within the context of a single case study. This study provides a longitudinal overview of institutional behaviour, offering both breadth and depth and exploring actions at various levels within the institution. Institutional activities and reporting around the NSS were not significantly different from those reported in other studies (for example, Buckley 2012; CHES 2010). The growing interest in the survey followed a similar pattern to other institutions identified through the literature review. As noted above, a different management approach had been taken from that appearing in some of the literature and published commentaries. The small sample of academic staff members were largely well informed but there were some residual misconceptions about the survey. Actions to address issues raised in the survey were largely locally (course) determined, although the extent to which academic staff felt able to control aspects of provision on which students commented was limited and therefore, a source of frustration and some stress.

The impact on academic staff at an individual personal and professional level resonates to some extent with work by Sabri (2013) and also exploratory research by Frankham (2015) which reported interviews with staff. There were common elements such as concern about results and permitted communication around the survey, about being held accountable for issues beyond their control. This study does, however, suggest better connections between managers and academics and understanding of the survey than revealed in Child's (2011) study of academic perceptions of the NSS. As noted above, while the significance attributed to the use of survey data within league tables echoes earlier work by Locke *et al* (2008), the frequency with which they were raised during the course of the interviews within the Greenfields context, was unexpected.

The extent to which managers embraced data previously unavailable to them may reflect a particular history of local difficulty with gathering student feedback through internal mechanisms. Earlier Vice-Chancellors/senior managers would not have been able to obtain a view of student feedback at course level prior to the NSS. In the case of Greenfields, it is also argued that without management interest driven by institutional concerns, it would be far more difficult for course and subject discipline areas to secure additional resources on the basis of student feedback. The extent to which perceptions coloured responses was an important factor. Staff perceived that the NSS affected student recruitment but this was not borne out by student familiarity with the survey.

The views occasionally reported in the media and more recently in other reports about manipulation of the survey and misuse of the data were not reflected in the research within Greenfields. Interviewees reported individually that they made changes to improve the student experience, although a small number were more sceptical about corporate interest or the

practices of other individuals. While there was some reference to slightly superficial activities around the survey period and to use of good scores for course marketing, the overall view was of practice that was careful to act within official guidelines. The need not to overstep the mark was an additional source of stress to some staff (CLArt2). Some interviewees felt that Greenfields' approach was out of step with that taken elsewhere which conveyed far stronger messages about the potential implications of the survey and encouraged students to give high scores. Consequently, it was believed that Greenfields' results suffered in comparison.

#### **6.4 Limitations of the research**

Like all case studies, the focus on a single institution may be deemed a limitation. It is argued however, that this study has identified elements of behaviour and trends that may well be present in other institutions and to a certain extent the wider policy landscape. The literature discussing particular activities or projects in response to the NSS indicates a similar trajectory of rising interest and use of the survey, both at institutional and national levels. The approach used at Greenfields may be at a different point in the spectrum but bears many of the same characteristics.

The committee papers built a longitudinal picture of increasingly focused attention on student feedback. Committee papers, however, present a certain view of university discussion and they cannot provide a comprehensive record of institutional consideration. Interviewees (DeanBus, VC) confirmed that from early on, NSS results were discussed outside formal committees at both faculty and institutional levels. Inclusion in senior committee business, does however, signal a certain weight that is given a particular matter, it may also indicate greater central oversight and control of local action.

A further limitation is that initiatives occurring in the years in between those examined may not be visible. This may suggest that they were either of limited lifespan or became deeply embedded in the way of doing things so that they did not require additional continued reporting. The interviews were a way of supplementing and mitigating the official and formal view through the committee paper lens. A pragmatic approach was taken to the number of interviews it was possible to include within the scope of the study whilst incorporating a wide range of staff roles and the views of student representatives.

# Chapter 7: Conclusions

## 7.1 Introduction

The focus on a single institution over several years in this research enabled a depth of perspective not afforded either by studies of individual projects within institutions or by the national overview papers on the use of NSS. The contribution to knowledge of this study is that it offers new insights in respect of the impact on institutional behaviour and an alternative narrative to accounts largely reported in the media and to published articles focusing on enhancement activities. It explores not only institutional changes in the collection, response to and use of student feedback but also the reasons and approaches behind such changes, tracing them through different stages and triangulating official accounts with the perspectives of a variety of staff and student representatives. It moves beyond the institutional perspective and identifies the implications for the future development of higher education practice and policy. It argues the need for co-ordinated, proportionate and supportive responses to the survey data within institutions and at sector level highlights some of the unintended consequences of national policy originally intended to provide public information for applicants: an agenda which continues to be pursued through current policy development.

The aim of the research was to examine whether the introduction of the NSS had affected institutional behaviour in regard to student feedback. The findings show that there was a considerable effect with a growing centralised overview and stipulation of requirements; the embedding of the survey firmly within the quality processes and the gradual encroachment and subsequent appropriation of other student feedback surveys accompanied by greater weight afforded to other forms of feedback. There was also a shift in the nature of feedback collection and response. It changed from being an activity primarily of local interest where individual judgment determined response to a high priority, mandatory and public undertaking which could ultimately affect institutional reputation. In particular, the research identified the extent of the NSS's reach within the university and the ways in which it was able to effect change and prompt action with the potential even to drive institutional behaviour in ways that ran counter to the prevailing culture. These are discussed below under the following headings:

- Institutional behaviour
- Internal and external drivers
- Carrot or stick?
- Students as drivers of quality

- A shift in relations
- Implications for higher education practice and policy

## 7.2 Institutional behaviour

Within the institution, the impact of NSS on the way that feedback from students was considered and responded to was profound. It marshalled and drove institutional action, shaking the university's view of itself and increasing the profile and strength of the student voice. The introduction of a national survey overrode institutional obstacles and debates which hampered the development and implementation of internal instruments. Concentration on the NSS, appeared initially to have narrowed the focus of student feedback, but interviews with course leaders, evidenced continuing collection of what was felt to be more meaningful feedback. It was also apparent from the committee discussion that increasing attention paid to other forms of gathering student feedback, both in response specifically to NSS and also through, for example, student representative feedback fora meant that greater attention was also paid to other forms of student feedback.

A consequence of this tiered approach, however is the potential for there to be multiple layers and requests for feedback from which students can tire

... students are surveyed a lot and they are asked for their feedback all the time, they just want it to be better. (SUPres2012)

Consideration of NSS results by committees meant that for the first time throughout the university everyone from course leader to the Vice-Chancellor and Students' Union was looking at the same data. This in turn meant that action was taken in response to strong or consistent messages at institutional level. Senior management interest gave rise to increased activity from course to university level. All those interviewed reported the considerable effort that went into considering and responding to results annually while the impact on individuals was somewhat differentiated according to role. As the survey continued, consistency of messages, familiarity of staff with the survey and the data and its incorporation in the quality processes internally combined with a rising student profile, mainstreamed it in the university's consciousness.

The literature review indicated that prior to the NSS, student feedback data was often underused. The study suggests that NSS data is well used and there is greater understanding of the data although a few misconceptions persist. Within the first five years or so, there was an increase in initiatives to collect student feedback in order to improve NSS but these were not always well understood or co-ordinated. In the latter years, student feedback gained a higher profile, largely

as a result of NSS but was also drawn from a wider variety of sources and linkages were made back to NSS: it acted as a conduit for producing local and institutional understanding of student views. There continued to be, however, some evidence of reactive initiatives particularly in low scoring areas which proved to be uninformative and short-lived.

The narrative derived from the committee documents indicated that the approach taken at Greenfields was standard sector practice— reports were produced by central analysts identifying year-on- year changes and sector and institutional trends. Over the period reviewed, analysis increased both in speed and in sophistication. Increasingly granular results were produced and disseminated to faculties and directly to course leaders, including student open text comments. Following up on the outcomes became a more or less, year-round activity at institutional, faculty and course levels.

During the review period the university consideration of student feedback moved from the executive senior management committee to becoming firmly embedded in the business of the quality committee and also Academic Board, both in its own right and as part of other reports. NSS and enhancement plans were integrated, with NSS being a central element. Enhancement plans from faculties included other student surveys, but the main thrust was on NSS. A regular cycle of reporting results and action taken in response became standardised and an established coherence can be traced through faculties, to institutional committees. High-level reports were also made to the Board of Governors which was particularly interested in NSS results. Thus student feedback moved to become a focus for senior management consideration. This embedding of the results and actions within the formal deliberative structure not only ensured that they were directly considered by senior managers it also signalled the seriousness with which they were considered. Internal surveys, while not openly challenged, continued to struggle to achieve credible response rates across the university.

Early on in the review period, it appeared that the university was experiencing difficulties finalising internal surveys with an inability to secure credibility and staff support. In subsequent years institutional student surveys moved steadily closer to the NSS until the survey questions were fully adopted, a practice fairly common across the sector (Locke *et al* 2008; Buckley 2012; QAA ND cite examples of this). There is a sense in which the external requirement for NSS combined with its rising profile, resolved some previously intractable issues around student feedback and made it visible to the university. Conversely, the question of the credibility of the NSS survey instrument was not apparent from committee papers. It did surface in some interviews, although not consistently.

### **7.2.1 The impact on management behaviour**

There is a dichotomy in the literature and media accounts between the use of NSS for enhancement and as a driver of an increasingly managerialist approach, with survey results being used as an accountability mechanism. Both the literature and this study indicated that some institutions were taking an instrumental approach to NSS characterised by intensifying management intervention. Managers interviewed were very familiar with the data, regarded it as useful if somewhat limited and acted on it. It offered a perspective not previously available within the university and it drove action throughout the institution. The Greenfields case study, however, identified an approach rooted in developmental support rather different from that often highlighted in media reporting. As noted, however, there were signs that this was unlikely to remain tenable in a sector in which some 'competitor' institutions had seen substantial rises in scores. Individual and sector-wide reports on institutional responses to NSS, on the other hand, emphasise its use for enhancement. This raises questions about whether greater management intervention has led to improved scores and if it has, whether this signals improved provision and student experience or whether other factors, unrelated to the quality of provision, have come into play.

### **7.2.2 Risk aversion?**

The study indicated that there was the potential for NSS to exercise a constraining influence on institutional behaviour. This was apparent both directly in relation to the operation of the survey itself and also more fundamentally to approaches to course and institutional development. There was some reported concern by staff anxious not to upset students, particularly in the run up to the survey. There were also indications that a certain risk aversion could have wider implications, resulting in a degree of reluctance to try new ways of doing things. Linked to this, one interviewee referred to a specious form of risk aversion – with NSS used as '...a code for doing things and it's a, it's sometimes used as a code for not doing things.' (DeanLIS). The implication was that the threat of low NSS scores was being wielded tactically as a reason not to go ahead with new developments. This would suggest an alternative narrative to the accounts of use of NSS for enhancement to which much of the literature refers. In this alternative, NSS is an inhibitor rather than a conduit for enhancement.

## **7.3 Internal and external drivers**

Interviews identified separate and parallel internal and external drivers for the attention given to NSS. Individuals took action on student feedback because, 'Those involved in higher education

want students to have a profoundly good experience...' (DVC). It was also clear from the interviews, that there was a strong sense that the public view of Greenfields, was informed by NSS scores, just as Greenfields increasingly measured its own performance and that of its competitors in terms of NSS.

One of the strongest messages arising from the interviews was the extent to which NSS was believed to have an impact on student recruitment. There was a dissonance between the view that interviewees often gave initially for the importance of NSS results for recruitment and their perceptions of the extent to which applying students knew or took notice of the survey, a view also reflected in national reviews. A linked perception was the importance of league tables about which prospective students showed greater awareness and interest suggesting that, in effect, league tables fulfilled the role of public information about universities in this respect.

Following the introduction of the NSS and with the demise of subject review, newspaper league tables have used NSS scores as a proxy for some aspects of the quality of provision. This varies from paper to paper and has changed over time, for example the most recent Sunday Times Good University Guide (September 2015) gave a greater weighting to the teaching and learning sections than in previous years. In all tables, measures derived from NSS are the mostly highly weighted along with research performance in the case of some. The weighting given to selected NSS data by league tables thus means that student feedback is perceived as being strongly linked with the public perception of institutional reputation.

The literature suggested that league tables can form a particularly strong driver of institutional behaviour. The tables are regarded as performance indicators by some institutions and may determine strategic decision-making. In the context of Greenfields, however, league tables were not the subject of committee discussion and were not included in university KPIs, nor were they heavily promoted or widely discussed elsewhere in the university. Greenfields does not do well in league tables and while it wanted to improve, this did not drive a strategic or instrumental approach as appears to have been the case at some other institutions (Locke *et al* 2008). The most illuminating insight into the reason for this was provided by the VC who explained the limited scope, in an increasingly competitive environment, for an institution such as Greenfields, 'a new university struggling to establish itself', to make significant inroads into league table measures which focused on research and aspects of expenditure. The NSS, however, was both a highly weighted league table measure and also one in which the university believed it should perform better.

This study argues, therefore, that in a rather perverse way, league tables contribute to the public information objective of the NSS, albeit in a reductive and selective way. It is this aspect of public

information that is one of the most powerful drivers of institutional attention to NSS. It is also the facet of the survey about which there has always been concern. Technically regarded as a non-legitimate use of the data (CHES, 2010), it appears to be one of the most influential ways in which the data is used and disseminated.

### **7.3.1 Impact on academic provision**

This study has uncovered the extent of NSS as an influencing factor within an institution and the ways in which this has grown over the past decade. Evidence both from the investigation itself and the literature suggests that NSS is being used as a basis for decisions around the closure of courses. Within Greenfields itself there was reference to a single course being closed with consistently poor NSS scores cited as one of the factors taken into account in this decision. A number of interviewees, however, referred to more peremptory action elsewhere. Research into the extent and cumulative effect of course closures with evidence from NSS as the main driver would assist understanding of the overall impact of the survey on the shape and nature of the sector. Further investigation might explore whether NSS was the only material taken into account for such decisions as some interviewees believed. This could indicate how a poor NSS score weighed against other factors such as good external examiner feedback, the ability of a course to attract high numbers of applications or achieve good degree outcomes. Exploration of whether particular subject areas had been affected by course closure on the basis of poor NSS scores and how such decisions relate to the more commonly reported use of NSS as a driver for enhancement.

Conversely, since institutions state that they use NSS for enhancement, further investigation into the nature, impact and cumulative effect of this activity on academic provision within the sector would add to the understanding of how the survey is used. In particular, whether there is evidence of modules and courses being re-developed in light of poor scores or whether course development is effectively stifled in low scoring areas.

### **7.4 A carrot or a stick?**

There was a clear distinction in the perception of those in management positions and some, but not all, of the course leaders about how NSS was handled. The two faculties examined were moving towards an element of more direct accountability. This was more developed in the Business Faculty with outcomes included in PGL appraisal objectives where it was a point for discussion but did not carry any professional consequences. In both faculties the emphasis was on a supportive and developmental approach which matched the stated intention of senior

management. Yet, on a limited scale, some interviewees perceived the NSS as a management 'stick'. Business Faculty managers recognised that what they saw as a consultative, supportive and developmental approach was not necessarily regarded in the same way by some academic staff.

All the faculty based staff referred to the amount of work that went into the NSS – to attention paid to results, the responses required, the use of results and to activities such as encouraging students to participate during the survey. But the view expounded in some of the literature concerning a punitive management approach, often dissociated from other factors relating to the course, was not supported by the evidence of the interviews at Greenfields. Having failed to secure a step change in improvement across the university, however, one or two interviewees raised the possibility that the approach taken by Greenfields so far might not be sustainable. It was a course leader, with previous experience in the commercial sector, who suggested the most radical change: linking NSS outcomes to performance related pay. If indeed, NSS was perceived as a driver of institutional behaviour in a way that was felt to conflict with the ethos of the institution, this is a very powerful signal of the unintended consequences of government policy which goes far beyond listening to student feedback.

While individuals all attributed their own interests in improving NSS scores to a wish to improve the experience of students, a small number thought that corporate motives were rather different. Child (2011) posited the view that a clear management signal that NSS was important largely because of its impact on league tables may have contributed to the survey's lack of credibility with the academics in his study. Institutions are open about their use of NSS to enhance provision but commentary suggests that this could be driven by motives other than the good of the student. While this was not borne out by the Greenfields study, it does perhaps suggest that 'enhancement' is used as an acceptable term to denote change as a result of student feedback through the NSS, irrespective of motivations or the basis on which the change is implemented. There is also some concern within the sector that institutions are taking action deemed to be gaming (Harvey 2008b; Callender *et al* 2014). Again, Greenfields did not conform to this characterisation.

## 7.5 Students as drivers of quality – demand side drivers

It is perhaps too soon to judge whether students will drive quality and shape the sector in the way envisaged in The Browne Report (*Independent review of higher education funding and student finance*, 2010) and subsequently the 2011 White Paper (BIS 2011). In recent years the sector has

expanded (particularly with the inclusion of 'alternative providers'<sup>13</sup>) and numbers of full time undergraduates have continued to grow, although with some indications that this growth may be slowing (HEFCE 2016). The recent lifting of student number controls appears to have resulted in greater numbers of students applying to higher tariff institutions than those in other parts of the sector (UCAS, 2016).

NSS scores have also increased although there may be considerable variability within an institution. The continued use of a single measure 'overall satisfaction' in official documents and in the education press to sum up an institution or even the whole sector can be unhelpful and uninformative. HEFCE, in an attempt to contextualise this data, provides a benchmark score which factors in inputs such as the subjects offered and student intake, but this is not widely reported in publications, nor is it used in KIS data or league tables.

Evidence of students using the data to make decisions on where and what to study is scant: both locally, as in the results of this investigation and nationally (Oakleigh Consulting and Staffordshire University 2010; Diamond *et al* 2012). The Greenfields study showed that over the period reviewed, one course was closed as a result of several years of low NSS scores in combination with other factors. Evidence from interviews suggested that some other institutions might be taking more peremptory and wide-ranging action. Given the institutional interest in NSS and the largely anecdotal evidence of institutions closing low scoring courses it is not clear whether institutions are effectively self-regulating in response to student views and if this is the case, whether it is NSS alone or if other factors were taken into account.

## **7.6 A shift in relations? - The academic professional, the institution and student feedback**

Sabri (2010) cited the NSS as an example of the way that academics have become increasingly distanced from policy. Child's study indicated that academics often felt that the results were of more concern to senior managers than to them; that response was more suitable at departmental, rather than individual level and that 'Individuals respond by implementing the changes pressed on them by others' (Child, 2011:54). These findings suggest a gulf between the interests of managers and academics and a distance between academics and the results of the survey. Such findings were not reflected in the Greenfields study, but there was a sense in which academics felt the problems and potential solutions were outside their control. Those involved in

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<sup>13</sup> The Green Paper (2015) refers to all those offering higher education as 'providers' with private organisations referred to as 'alternative providers'.

the management of courses (PGL and Heads of School), however, particularly in the art area, found that the NSS provided sufficient evidence to argue for improved resourcing, a point of view echoed by the DeanLIS. NSS was cited as a source of evidence or the starting point for some strategic decisions. The VC commented on the decision to relocate a subject area to a different faculty, the DeanBus to an exploration with a subject group of staff of some deep rooted and longstanding problems. These examples indicated that some issues could only be dealt with through management intervention.

The approach at Greenfields was largely for course teams to identify appropriate ways of addressing low scores. CLArt1 described the way in which the course team had 'clawed back' control by taking a celebratory and visually-led approach, meaningful to students on the course. It was clear, however, that responses to NSS were required. The systematic analysis and publication of results within the institution, their consideration through quality processes and reporting through the committee structure meant that student feedback, once a matter largely for students and the course team, had become public property. It was no longer a matter for individual choice or judgement to be made about what warranted a response. A corollary of this was that academics were also exposed directly to student comments some of which were considered personal, vindictive and unjustified.

## **7.7 Implications for higher education (1)**

### **7.7.1 Practice**

Yorke *et al* (2014) emphasised the importance of informed interpretation of NSS results with a need for an understanding of context and subject differences. Yet results are often cited without any such qualifications or explanations, particularly at sector level. Institutions are able to draw on the open comments from students which are of vital importance in understanding the scores, identifying themes and taking action which will address student concerns. It is not always clear when comment is made about the generic nature of the survey and the concomitant limitations of the data, whether examination goes beyond the quantitative scores. Analysis of qualitative data at Greenfields showed a strength and consistency of message that was difficult to refute; it was also capable of illustrating where students perceived strengths and weaknesses at course level. A focus on the results of the survey as opposed to the feedback contained therein can lead to short term, 'palliative' responses which may prove damaging in the longer term (Hart and Rush, 2007: 75).

#### **Co-ordinated response to student feedback**

Effective responses to NSS can only be achieved if action is taken at appropriate levels within the institution – this means that there needs to be a co-ordinated and communicated approach enabling course leaders and others the means either to resolve issues themselves or to refer them to those who can. In reality, not all feedback will elicit the response sought, but there needs to be a means of co-ordinating this so that judgements are made that are sound, proportionate and effective.

### **Proportionate responses on the basis of clear evidence**

Action taken in response to NSS needs to be judged on the basis, not only of other indicator evidence, but also in light of consistent messages over time. Course leaders reported changes in results from year to year which did not reflect whether action had been taken or not. Short term reaction, if not underpinned by a clear understanding of the situation, could lead to increased pressure on staff and wasted effort.

### **Support for staff through all levels of management**

While student comment provides a rich seam of information, it can be very difficult for staff to be faced with, particularly when students use it as a place to voice negative comments. Institutions need to be mindful of this and consider how best to support colleagues including the presentation, dissemination and use of student comments. The accounts of course leaders within the investigation indicated that their experience of how results were managed could be affected by local management style.

Academics need to be engaged with the NSS. Greenfields appeared largely to have achieved this but there was overall exasperation by staff, students and managers that it had not been effective in securing sustained and consistent improvement across provision amidst a rising sector. The challenge for Greenfields was how to achieve this without losing the engagement of staff. From the student perspective, consideration needs to be given to how NSS data sits alongside more meaningful student feedback without overloading them with requests for their views.

As the spotlight on NSS results increases through its inclusion in TEF, institutions should consider carefully how to work with academic staff on NSS. The burden of this may fall particularly on more junior staff as TEF brings greater attention to those teaching rather than researching. Part-time staff may be a particular focus for this. Yet accountability and staff development mechanisms are often looser for part-time, compared with full-time staff, constituting an additional complication.

## 7.8 Implications for higher education (2)

### 7.8.1 Policy

The study has demonstrated the impact of a national policy at all levels within an institution. It was originally part of a move to 'light touch' quality assurance (Richardson, 2013:76) which included the provision of greater quantities of public information. The papers from the Cooke Review demonstrated efforts to introduce a policy that would not place excessive additional demands on the sector (HEFCE 2002a and 2002b). Nonetheless, the evidence is that NSS is a sector and institutional preoccupation, consuming significant amounts of time and effort.

Different governments have chosen to pursue policies which place increasing importance on public information in spite of very limited evidence of its use by those it is aimed at informing. The 2015 Green Paper is explicit in its intention to influence institutional behaviour, not only in terms of the strength of the student voice but also in the way that institutions have responded to research assessment through REF by creating 'industries' (BIS, 2015 :73). Experience in regard to NSS would suggest that it seems unlikely that it will be successful in introducing change that will not result in significant effort by the sector. Even though there was objection to the survey from the outset, the initial resistance dissipated as the momentum gathered, so much so that institutions outside the scope of the survey participated on a voluntary basis. The belief that the survey influences student choice, its use in newspaper league tables and the continued reference to it in national policy documents have led to a position in which the survey is embedded and pervades institutional business. Perhaps of greater concern is when this influence causes an institution to respond in ways that might be considered contrary to the preferred and prevailing ethos.

Reflecting extensive institutional use of the survey data, national policy documents cite the NSS with some frequency. Through league table use, the survey became a conduit for student opinion to be regarded as a measure of the quality of higher education provision, national policy has also contributed to this. NSS was not designed to measure institutional performance but it contributes to the outcomes of quality assurance reviews. TEF will intensify this further with proposals that both quality review outcomes and NSS will form important elements in its assessment. Thus, in effect, institutions are being increasingly judged in multiple ways on the outcomes of NSS. In addition, within a month of the publication of the detailed proposals for the development of the TEF, the THE will announce how it intends to incorporate it in its league tables.

The importance accrued to the outcomes of the survey has meant that it exercises an influence beyond the intentions of the policy. Before the survey was introduced, it was envisaged that

institutional internal surveys were more suitable and would continue to be the prime source of information for enhancement (HEFCE 2003b). Harvey's concerns regarding the impact on internal feedback systems were realised: indications are that it has become common practice to align institutional surveys to NSS, which has in turn determined the focus on specific areas identified within the survey. Any charges that the NSS treats students as passive recipients of their education may therefore be extended to institutions who choose to use it with students earlier in their higher education experience. There is the danger that student feedback, at all stages, is essentially channelled into those areas that are covered by the NSS. The survey may, therefore, be setting the parameters for university action: the sector focus on assessment and feedback and on learning resources may have resulted in positive changes, but there may well be other areas of academic provision that students feel are in greater need of action.

An additional unintended consequence of institutions responding in this way may be that the sector becomes increasingly cautious in an attempt not to upset students, in effect changing the relationship of students and their learning: 'With regard to determining the worth of what is studied, the authority is now ceded to the novice.' (Staddon and Standish, 2012:635). Thus teaching and learning become bland and higher education risks losing much that is currently valued and distinctive, they argue.

## 7.9 Concluding comments

The study suggested that it was a common perception that NSS could affect student recruitment and the wider reputation and standing of the university, but that this perception did not mesh with interviewees' experience of working with students. Growing student concern with employment outcomes may mean that interest in NSS diminishes slightly as DLHE results come further under the spotlight. Similarly, the apparently growing sector interest in student engagement surveys may mean that there is less attention paid to NSS data by institutions.

After ten years, a slight waning of interest in the NSS might have been anticipated. This now seems unlikely, particularly in light of its inclusion as a core metric in TEF. It seems highly likely that this will intensify the pressure to improve scores with the concomitant impact on staff at all levels within institutions. Notwithstanding academic critiques and reservations, the reification of NSS, its status as a 'fact-totem' (Sabri, 2013) looks set to be enshrined within government policy and institutional practice, a story of unintended consequences, politics and pragmatic acquiescence

## Appendices

## Appendix A     References in national policy documents (2003 -2015) to students 'driving up quality'

Emphasis added to highlight text

### 2003 White Paper: *The future of higher education*

Better information for students including a new annual student survey and publication of summaries of external examiners' reports to help **student choice drive up quality**;  
(DfES, 2003:7)

**Student choice will increasingly work to drive up quality**, supported by much better information. A comprehensive survey of student views, as well as published external examiners reports and other information about teaching standards, will be pulled together in an easy-to-use Guide to Universities, overseen by the National Union of Students. (DfES, 2003:46)

The Government believes that **student choice will be an increasingly important driver of teaching quality**, as students choose the good-quality courses that will bring them respected and valuable qualifications and give them the higher-level skills that they will need during their working life. But **student choice can only drive quality up** successfully if it is underpinned by robust information – otherwise reputations will be built on perception rather than reality. (DfES, 2003:47)

To become intelligent customers of an increasingly diverse provision, and to meet their own increasing diverse needs, students need accessible information. We will ensure that the views of students themselves are published in a national annual survey available for the first time in Autumn 2003, which will explicitly cover teaching quality. We also expect institutions to make progress on their own internal systems for securing student feedback.

Students decide which HEIs to apply to, and employers decide which to recruit from, based on a wide range of different factors. Students take account of information from family, friends, and careers advisers, and not just about the academic aspects of different institutions and courses. Choices are bound to be complex; but we believe that the quality of the institution's teaching should be a very important consideration. Neither students nor employers should have to base their decisions on perceptions of

relative prestige which may be outdated or unreliable, but should be able to draw on up to date and robust assessments of the quality of learning and teaching.

The new arrangements for quality assurance in universities – discussed below – also require universities to publish far more information than ever before about the quality of their courses. Institutions will be expected to publish summaries of external examiners' reports – which offer clear external judgements about the quality of courses and the standards of students' work – from 2004.

But this needs to be drawn together in a helpful and clear form that students can use easily to make decisions. So we have agreed with the National Union of Students that they will take the lead in publishing a more comprehensive and easily accessible guide to higher education, that covers not only course data but other key factors such as whether the provider is a centre of excellence, the quality of its IT provision and other facilities, entry requirements, results, and the employment record of its graduates. We will make it available in user-friendly formats, with clear charts and explanations to help students compare courses, and find the best one for them.

We believe that bringing together this information, with the NUS in the lead to make sure that the focus is on the needs of the student, will be a very significant step forward in helping **student demand drive up quality**. (DfES, 2003:47-48)

This also means that institutions will be able to reap rewards for offering courses that serve students well. It will make **student choice a much more powerful force, and help choice drive quality**. (DfES, 2003:84)

**Browne Report 2010: Independent review of higher education funding and student finance:  
*Securing a sustainable future for higher education***

**Student choice will drive up quality** (Independent review, 2010:12)

Rather than create a bureaucratic and imperfect measure for quality, our proposals rely on **student choice to drive up the quality** of higher education. Students need access to high quality information, advice and guidance in order to make the best choices... The higher education system will expand to provide places for everyone who has the potential to succeed – and the expansion will follow the choices made by students (Independent review, 2010: 28)

## Appendix A

In our proposals, we are relying on **student choice to drive up quality**. (Independent review, 2010: 29)

Quality: Institutions actively compete for well informed, discerning students, on the basis of price and teaching quality, improving provision across the whole sector, within a framework that guarantees minimum standards. Our proposals are designed to create genuine competition for students between institutions, of a kind which cannot take place under the current system. There will be more investment available for the institutions that are able to convince students that it is worthwhile. This is in our view a surer way to **drive up quality** than any attempt at central planning. To safeguard this approach, we recommend that the HE Council enforces minimum standards of quality; and that students receive high quality information to help them choose the institution and programme which best matches their aspirations. (Independent review, 2010: 56)

### **2011 White Paper: *Students at the Heart of the System***

Enabling greater competition, while removing unnecessary regulations, is an important theme of this White Paper, because of the benefits for all users of higher education. We want to ensure that the new student finance regime supports student choice, and that in turn **student choice drives competition**, including on price. Chapter 4 sets out our proposals for freeing up student number controls as a first step to creating a more liberal system and for making it easier for new providers to enter the market by removing the barriers that currently exist. (BIS: 2011:19)

### **Chapter 2: Well-informed *students driving teaching excellence* (BIS, 2011:27)**

We want to ensure that English universities are at the forefront of improvements in formal and informal feedback from students on their learning experience. We believe that allowing students and lecturers within a university to see this feedback at individual module level will **help students to choose the best course for them and drive an improvement in the quality of teaching**. So we expect all universities to publish summary reports of their student evaluation surveys on their websites by 2013/14. Before this, we will work with the Higher Education Council for England (HEFCE), the National Union of Students (NUS) and others, to agree the information and format that will be most helpful to students. (BIS, 2011: 34)

**2015 Green Paper: Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice**

Since reforms to the higher education sector in 2012, **student choice has become a key driver of change**. But imperfect information about teaching quality, course content and graduate outcomes makes it hard for prospective students to make decisions on which courses to take or where to study. (BIS, 2015:11)

We know that information about what they can expect from university is crucial to young people making life changing decisions. We recognise that higher education is not the only option for young people, so it is essential that they have the best information and support available to be able to make these huge decisions. To be able to make the best choices about where and what to study, individuals need access to robust, timely and objective information regarding the quality of teaching they are likely to experience and what this is likely to mean for their future employment. (BIS, 2015:11)

A university's reputation is important for students but most league tables do not include a measure of teaching quality. League tables are not always an accurate reflection of the quality of education provided in each individual course. In addition, we know that students require a wider range of information. Course quality, teaching intensity and contact hours are all examples of information that are relevant to students. Information from the National Student Survey (NSS) (involving around 300,000 final-year undergraduates each year since 2004) and the annual, Higher Education Policy Institute surveys (undertaken with Higher Education Academy in 2015), gives some insight. (BIS 2015:11)

As the sector becomes increasingly **driven by student choice**, this may also bring an increased likelihood that a provider may need to exit perhaps as a necessity or alternatively through its own choice. "Exit" may happen at provider, course or campus level. (BIS, 2015:54)

## **Appendix B      Legitimate and non-legitimate use of NSS results**

**As part of the review of NSS in 2010, (CHES 2010) set out ways in which NSS data could legitimately be used and use for which it was unsuitable:**

**....the NSS results can be used responsibly in the following ways, with proper caution:**

To track the development of responses over time

To report absolute scores at local and national levels

To compare results with agreed internal benchmarks

To compare the responses of different student groups, including equity target groups

To make comparisons, with appropriate vigilance and knowledge of statistical variance, between programmes in the same subject area at different institutions

To help stimulate change and enhance dialogue about teaching and learning.

**However, they cannot be used responsibly in these ways:**

To compare subject areas, e.g. Art & Design vs. Engineering, within an institution – unless adjustments are made for typical subject area differences nationally

To compare scores on different aspects of the student experience (between different scales, e.g. assessment vs. teaching) in an unsophisticated way

To compare whole institutions without taking account of sources of variation such as subject mix and student characteristics

To construct league tables of programmes or institutions that do not allow for the fact that the majority of results are not materially different.

(CHES 2010:64-5)

## Appendix C Existing and proposed NSS questions

### C.1 The current NSS survey questionnaire

The following sets out the main survey, excluding questions for students studying NHS subjects.

Survey reproduced with permission from HEFCE

#### Main Questions

	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
<b>The teaching on my course</b>						
1. Staff are good at explaining things.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The course is intellectually stimulating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Assessment and feedback</b>						
5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I have received detailed comments on my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## Appendix C

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### Academic support

10. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.

<input type="checkbox"/>						
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11. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.

<input type="checkbox"/>						
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

12. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices.

<input type="checkbox"/>						
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### Organisation and management

13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.

<input type="checkbox"/>						
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.

<input type="checkbox"/>						
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly.

<input type="checkbox"/>						
--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------	--------------------------

**National Student Survey – main survey (contd)**

	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
<b>Learning resources</b>						
16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Personal development</b>						
19. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. My communication skills have improved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight?  
(Please use the boxes below.)

Positive :

Negative :

## Appendix C

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### Students' Union

Thinking of all the services, including support, activities and academic representation provided by the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at your institution, to what extent do you agree with the following statement

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	Definitely agree	Mostly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Mostly disagree	Definitely disagree	Not applicable
I am satisfied with the Students' Union (Association or Guild) at my institution'	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

## C.2 Proposed changes to NSS questions

The following proposals for changes to the survey are taken from *Review of information about learning, teaching and the student experience* (HEFCE 2015a). At the time of writing, the outcomes of the consultation on these changes are unknown.

### Summary of proposed changes:

- Agreed criteria for inclusion of questions in main survey to be applied.
- Inclusion of new questions on student engagement.
- Amendment of questions on Learning Resources and on Assessment and Feedback.
- Merging duplicative questions.
- Transferring Personal Development and Students' Union questions to optional question banks.
- Updating the optional question banks.

### Proposed student engagement questions (covering: Academic challenge, and integrative learning; the student voice and the learning community and collaborative learning)

- My course has challenged me to achieve my best work
- My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth
- My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics
- My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt
- I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course
- Staff value students' views and opinions about the course
- It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on
- I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course
- I feel part of a community of staff and students (HEFCE 2015a:32-33)

### Proposed replacement questions on learning resources (HEFCE 2015a:34):

**Current question:** The library resources and services are good enough for my needs

**Proposed replacement:** The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning well

## Appendix C

**Current:** I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to

**Proposed:** The university/college's IT resources and facilities have supported my learning well

**Current:** I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to

**Proposed:** I have been able to access subject specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when I needed to

### **Proposed replacement questions on assessment and feedback (HEFCE 2015a:34):**

**Current:** Feedback on my work has been prompt

**Proposed:** Feedback on my work has been timely

**Current:** I have received detailed comments on my work

**Proposed:** I have received helpful comments on my work

### **The removal of duplicative questions (HEFCE 2015a:35):**

**Retain:** Staff have made the subject interesting

**Remove:** Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching

**Retain:** Marking and assessment have been fair (**retain**)

**Remove:** The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance (**remove**)

**Retain:** I have received helpful comments on my work (replace 'detailed' with 'helpful')

**Remove:** Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.

### **Personal development questions (HEFCE 2015a:35)**

Removal from the main survey of some or all of the personal development questions which were thought to be ambiguous and of limited use to potential students. The questions would continue to be available as part of the optional bank of questions.

### **Satisfaction with the student union question (HEFCE2015a:36)**

Removal from the main survey of the question on satisfaction with the student union and proposed development of further student union questions to include partnership and academic engagement for the optional bank of questions.

## Appendix D Framework for assessing the validity of documents

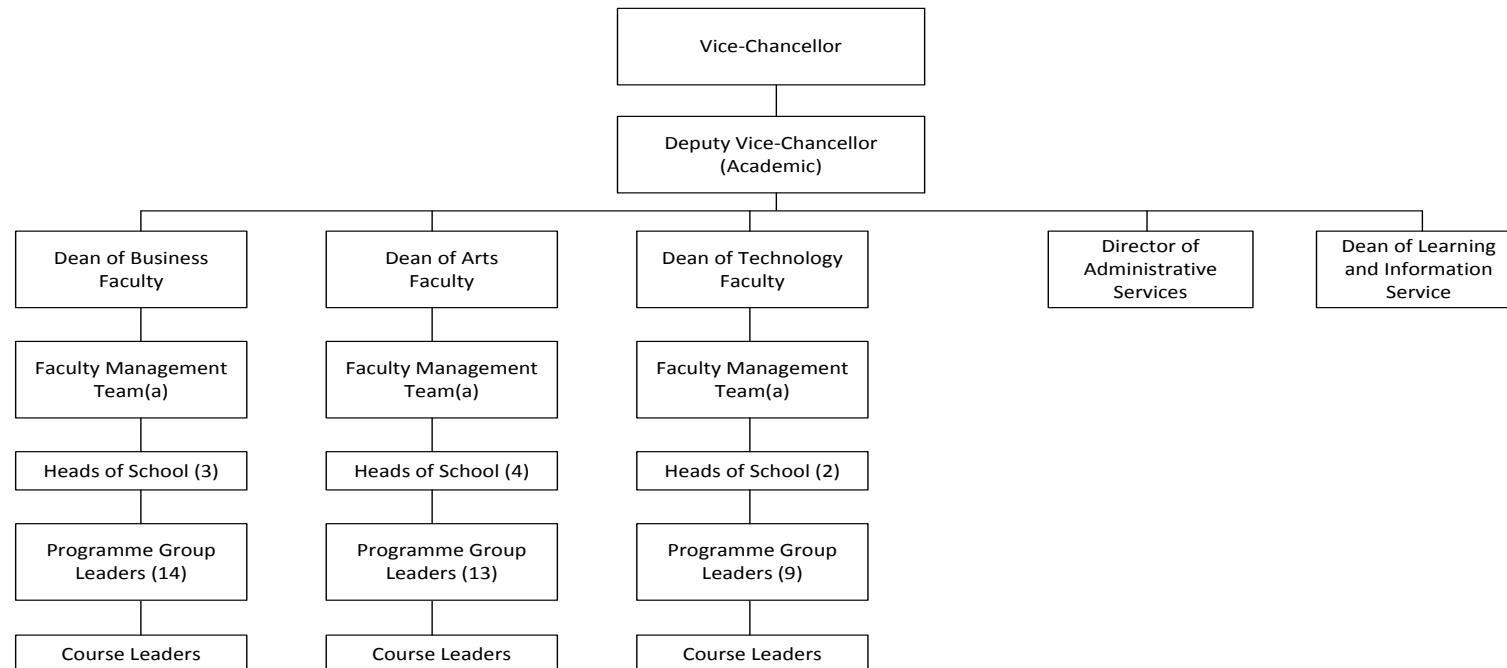
The following table shows the assessment of documents against the criteria identified by Scott (1990, cited in Fitzgerald (2007) for assessing the validity of documents.

Criteria	Comment
<p><u>Authenticity</u></p> <p>Authenticity in this context is used to refer to the 'soundness and authorship' of the document (Fitzgerald, 2007: 285). At its most basic this check is about ensuring that the researcher is working on the correct document – i.e. it is a complete document, authored by the writer that the researcher believes wrote it and in a form that has not subsequently been adjusted. The importance of understanding the 'complex administrative processes' (Fitzgerald, 2007:285) comes into play here.</p>	<p>All documents were drawn from official sources: largely the university committee intranet site and occasionally from the committee clerk. Greenfields has a well-established process for committee papers with clear identification of authorship and a formal procedure for the approval of minutes.</p>
<p><u>Credibility</u></p> <p>This is concerned with the accuracy of the document.</p>	<p>Care was taken to use only the final published versions of papers or those confirmed through official channels, so that their accuracy can be regarded as reliable.</p> <p>The accuracy with which committee papers report data or record the views of those discussing papers, is assured to a certain extent by the established process for writing papers, committee discussion and confirmation of the minutes.</p>

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Criteria	Comment
<p><u>Representativeness</u></p> <p>This refers to whether the document is representative of the issue being researched and may apply either to the documents that have survived (and are, therefore, the main source of information about a particular event) or the availability or ease of access, for other reasons, of certain documents.</p>	<p>With the exception of the first year of study when the agenda and minutes but not the detailed papers were available for committees other than Academic Board, the full documents were largely available and complete records were reviewed.</p> <p>Committee business is largely cyclical and this pattern provides some assurance that the papers considered provided a reasonable representation of committee business. Occasionally, a committee may have a 'special' meeting to consider an item of particular importance before the next scheduled meeting.</p>
<p><u>Meaning</u></p> <p>This relates to the interpretation of the document – and requires an understanding of the context in which the documents were produced. An understanding of the accepted definitions of the terminology used is important.</p>	<p>Extensive work with university committees has given me a good understanding of how papers are written, the terminology used, the nuances of language and the political dimensions of committee business.</p>

## Appendix E Greenfields University organisational structure: faculties and academic services



This chart is limited to the positions of faculties and academic services within the organisation. As elements of the structure changed during the period of the study, this is an approximate representation. Greenfields had approximately 100 course leaders, including those for courses not surveyed by the NSS (e.g. HNCs, postgraduate taught courses).

(a) Heads of School were also members of Faculty Management Teams.

## Appendix F Interview schedules

### University staff

**Introduction:** purpose of the research; confidentiality and consent. Reiterate that may withdraw from the project.

#### Interviewee experience

1. Please could you briefly describe your role and time within the university.
2. Please could you briefly outline any experience you have of working with/in other higher education institutions or universities?

#### Impact of the NSS within the university/changes over time

3. What would you say has been the impact of NSS within the university?
4. How has this manifested itself?
5. The NSS was introduced in 2005. What do you think has changed since then (or since you have been at the university) in the way that the university considers and acts on student feedback as a result of the NSS?
6. To what extent, in your opinion, is this typical of other institutions with which you are familiar? [question to be asked if appropriate]
7. Do you think the changes at Greenfields are due to NSS or to other factors? (and if other factors, what are they?)
8. Do you think that the changes have resulted in improvements to the student experience or are there perhaps superficial changes made with a view to improving NSS scores?
9. How, in your experience, do staff view the NSS?

#### The NSS as a means of collecting student feedback

10. Looking at the NSS itself, as you know it has come under a lot of criticism for encouraging a consumerist approach to education by students— do you think this is valid? Why?
11. What is your response to the view that NSS is a blunt instrument that is unable to capture adequately the student experience? Is it able to tell us about teaching, for example?
12. How could it be improved?

**Use of the NSS**

13. What about the view within the sector that it has been used as a management tool? Do you have experience of this? Tell me about it
14. Are there any examples that you can think where NSS is used in ways that are not appropriate given its position as a student satisfaction survey?

**What the committee papers show and whether this resonates with the interviewee's experiences**

15. OK, let me tell you what I have found out from my research which has focused, so far on looking at what committee papers show about how the university has considered and acted on student feedback over the last 12 years: it appears that while the university has a tradition of considering student feedback, prior to the introduction of the NSS, this was rather unfocused and there were few, if any, links across the university even though there were attempts to do so. For the past four of five years, however, there has been an increasing focus on NSS and this has acted to pull things together so that faculty and institutional consideration is aligned. Just tell me, as a [job title] whether this interpretation rings true with you.

**Interview schedule –Students’ Union presidents**

Interviewee experience

1. Please could you briefly your role and time within the university
2. Please could you briefly outline any experience you have of other higher education institutions or universities.

Impact of the NSS within the university/changes over time

3. What would you say was the impact of NSS at Greenfields while you were at the university?
4. How did that manifest itself?
5. The NSS was introduced in 2005. What do you think changed while you were at the university in the way that it considered and acted on student feedback as a result of the NSS?
6. To what extent, in your opinion, is this typical of other institutions with which you are familiar? [question to be asked if appropriate]
7. Do you think the changes at Greenfields were due to NSS or to other factors? (and if other factors, what were they?)
8. Do you think that the changes resulted in improvements to the student experience or were there perhaps superficial changes made with a view to improving NSS scores?
9. How, in your experience, did students view the NSS? Did they know about it? Did new students know about it? Did they view it as a way of giving feedback or a way of giving a message to the outside world about Greenfields?

The NSS as a means of collecting student feedback

10. Looking at the NSS itself, as you know it has come under a lot of criticism for encouraging a consumerist approach to education by students – do you think this is valid? Why?
11. What is your response to the view that NSS is a blunt instrument that is unable to capture adequately the student experience? Is it able to tell us about teaching, for example?
12. How could it be improved?

Use of the NSS

13. What about the view within the sector that it has been used as a management tool?
14. Are there any examples that you can think of that NSS is used in ways that are not appropriate given its position as a student satisfaction survey?
15. Anything else you would like to say?

## Appendix G List of interviewees

Role	Central or Faculty	Notes
Vice-Chancellor	Central	Previous senior lead responsibility for NSS in former PVC and DVC roles.
Deputy Vice-Chancellor	Central	Lead senior responsibility for NSS over much of the review period.
Dean Arts Faculty	Arts Faculty	Member of university senior management team and senior faculty academic manager.
Member of Faculty Management Team	Arts Faculty	Cross-faculty responsibilities.
Head of School	Arts Faculty	Faculty academic manager with responsibility for art based courses.
Programme Group Leader	Arts Faculty	Academic lead for a group of art based courses within the above school.
Course leader 1	Arts Faculty	
Course leader 2	Arts Faculty	
Dean Business Faculty	Business Faculty	Member of university senior management and senior faculty academic manager.
Faculty Management Team member	Business Faculty	Cross-faculty responsibilities.

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Role	Central or Faculty	Notes
Head of School	Business Faculty	Faculty academic manager with responsibility for business courses.
Programme Group Leader	Business Faculty	Academic lead for group of business- based courses.
Course leader 1	Business Faculty	
Course leader 2	Business Faculty	
Dean, Learning and Information Service	Central	Member of university senior management team. Service has responsibility for learning resources, IT and student support
Director of Administrative Services	Central	Member of senior university management team. Service responsibility includes central student administration and quality.
Students' Union president	Students' Union	In post 2010-11 and 2011-12. A student at Greenfields 2005-10.
Students' Union president	Students' Union	In post 2012-13 and 2013-14. A student at Greenfields 2009-12.

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