

Research Domain: Student Experience

Title: Keeping the students satisfied: a longitudinal, comparative, institutional analysis of survey free-text comments.

Part two: outline (1000 words)

In an increasingly competitive Higher Education market meeting the expectations of current and prospective students is crucial. The last few years have seen a rapid rise in the use of student survey instruments to measure student satisfaction and engagement. The National Student Survey (NSS), launched in 2005, was originally designed to provide the student view of the quality of the institutional learning experience and help inform choice of prospective students about where to study. More recently, the potential of the NSS in the enhancement of the student learning experience has been considered (HEFCE 2010). If the survey is to be used for improvement then consideration needs to be given to the issues that underlie the satisfaction scores. Evidence suggests that the main development approach taken tends to be concerned with increasing scores without identifying the institutional issues that the scores raise (Flint et al. 2009). Furthermore overemphasis on the numerical output has led to academics being cynical and critical of the survey (Harvey 2008).

In addition to the likert scale questions free text responses are included in the NSS survey. Students are invited to leave free text comments. Most students leave a response (64% LJMU respondents in NSS 2011). These comments are a rich source of student feedback that only illuminate the scores but also identify significant themes that fall between the gaps of the survey scales. Despite their potential there is little published to suggest that these comments are used widely in HEIs. Reasons for this include the analysis of such vast textual datasets which is both time consuming and resource intensive. In 2011 86,362 words were left by students in LJMU NSS. There is also the sense that such 'qualitative' analysis can be subjective, or non systematic (Bolden and Moscarola 2000). Furthermore when read as individual statements free-text comments can also provoke a defensive response in staff as the language students use in describing their experience can be very emotional and contradictory. This research draws on developments in automated text analysis and explores in detail the free text comments from surveys administered across three years at Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU).

LJMU has participated in the NSS since 2005. In 2011 a 'mirror' survey, identical to the NSS, was launched for year 1 and year 2 students. We will be presenting a comparison of 2011 and 2012, by cohort and highlighting changes in the cohort's perception, attitudes and sentiments. Summarised here are the findings for Years 1 and 2. Final year student data will also be presented once the NSS results are released in August 2012.

Year 1: for both cohorts (2011 and 2012) course is the most important concept. The concept map shows a close proximity of course to concepts that are emotional and experiential, for example feel and support and demonstrate that course is closely associated with the affective domain of learning. Comparative analysis shows that an institutional strategy for improving feedback has resulted in a more positive perception of feedback and assignments. Feedback is directly linked to helpfulness and is in close proximity to tutor supportiveness indicating that improvements in feedback could be linked to enhanced personal tutoring support. New concepts in 2012 are practical and learning. A direct link was identified between active learning approaches and enhanced outcomes.

Year 2: in common with year 1 students, 2012 year 2 students perceive feedback more positively than 2011 second year students. In 2012 feedback is linked to helpful, assignments and tutors reflecting university policies to improve feedback turnaround and quality. In 2012 course is a less favourable concept. This could reflect an institutional curriculum restructure that increased programme identity but reduced the number of optional modules.

Year 3: comparative will be presented once 2012 NSS results are released.

Free text comments are a valuable source of student feedback. At the institutional level they represent a combined student voice reflecting institutional themes and revealing expectations that have been met and unmet. If HEIs are to use the NSS to enhance as well as measure the student experience then analysis of the free text data is crucial. These data describe the 'institutional topography' of the student experience and provide an insight into changing priorities throughout the student 'life cycle'. Through comparative and longitudinal analyses changes in the landscape are revealed allowing for the development of meaningful and effective strategies for enhancement.

References

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