

data

The devil is in the ~~detail~~:

How HE
providers can
benchmark
their course
and module
performance



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●●● INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and evaluating student attitudes are imperative in an ever-changing HE landscape in the UK. Over the past decade, policy, regulatory and market conditions have contributed to a growing recognition of students as major stakeholders in the sector. The community is increasingly looking for ways to seek and listen to the views of students. HE providers now use a range of formal and informal mechanisms to understand the student experience in order to hear the 'student voice'. Measures to determine student 'success' and 'satisfaction' levels are becoming embedded within institutional quality enhancement processes and as such managers are faced with increasing volumes of data to analyse - that is the devil in the data.

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There is, without a doubt greater competition in the HE sector and this will only increase - not solely because of increased choice that students have but also as a result of the new tuition fee regime introduced in England in 2012, and new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) if, as, and when this is introduced. This will not only increase the momentum for continuous improvement of the student experience but also the importance and need to acquire even more depth and volume of data.

Electric Paper Ltd. has long recognised the value of comparative questions and the use of common questions in course and module evaluation presents an exciting opportunity for collaboration across the sector. A key finding from Breaking Down the Barriers report, published in 2014 by Electric Paper Ltd., is the need for sector-wide collaboration this area and the nurturing of a culture of sharing success in order to develop best practice. benchmarking capability for the first time. HE providers are able to benchmark their modular data across the institution, sector-wide and against specific sector groups to support their drive to improve the student experience. The 2015-2016 academic year was the first to benefit from this new capability. This review provides a vital input to – in that it identifies the most valued questions so that we can ensure the greatest benefits are delivered to the sector.

●●● EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is fourth in a series of publications that have been commissioned by Electric Paper Ltd. to investigate and promote effective course and module evaluation in higher education (HE). Earlier publications include: Effective Course Evaluation: the future for quality and standards in higher education; Closing the Loop: Are universities doing enough to act on student feedback from course evaluation surveys?; and Breaking Down the Barriers: how to deliver best practice in HE course evaluation.

This reports on the findings of a review, commissioned by Electric Paper Ltd. and which looks into the way HE providers approach course and module surveys; the range of questions they use; and what influences survey design in order to identify common questions for the sector and to inform the questions that will be used in MBE Module Bench™ marking.

The review focused on 33 surveys from a range of UK HE providers and a short questionnaire based survey amongst EvaSys users to gain additional insights into the rationale, development and use of course and module evaluation surveys within their institutions. Of the users approached, 11 responses were received.

The EvaSys users approached had used the survey automation software for varying periods of time, though was between one to

five years. Prior to implementing EvaSys, HE providers reported that they elicited student views in a variety of ways- some manually collated paper surveys while others used VLE's (virtual learning environments) or online survey tools like Survey Monkey. Departments, schools, or individual module leaders in many cases also had

- the introduction of institution-wide common questions in course and module evaluation
- standardisation in the timing and reporting of these surveys
- greater consistency in practices across different departments or schools
- institution-wide, comparable course and/or module data for strategic analysis and coherent, institutional responses to student feedback

“Prior to using Evasys, schools could undertake their own module evaluations using the Blackboard VLE.”

- Mike Palmer,
Head of Student Information and Systems
University of Stirling

“The rationale for having the module evaluation analysed centrally is to provide an institutional approach to listening to the student voice; to provide detailed and actionable feedback at module level; and to support module leaders in quality aspects”

- Christine Ferns
Market Intelligence Officer, Market & Student Intelligence
Edinburgh Napier University

●●● REPORT ON THE FINDINGS OF THE REVIEW















The review found that the National Student Survey (NSS) is having a strong influence on institutional surveys, with the majority of course and module surveys including a high proportion of NSS or NSS style questions. Some institutions reported that there were internal pressures to align with NSS questions from a strategic perspective.

The strong influence of the NSS across the sector is highly evident. The majority of surveys reviewed had a high proportion of NSS or NSS-style questions. The vast majority (79%) of HE provider surveys reviewed contained at least half or more questions that were identical or similar to NSS questions. HE providers surveyed also reported that the development of course and module questions within their institutions was influenced and in some cases driven to align to the NSS and NSSE and other existing surveys.

“ Staff input was sought to inform [the questionnaire] design, as was current practice from the sector. [There was a] strategic drive to align with key NSS questions ”

- Dr Neil McKay
Dean of Students
Sheffield Hallam University

This table shows the relationships between the questions in use and common themes.

Themes by HEI	%
 Assessment and feedback*	100%
 Teaching*	100%
 Overall satisfaction*	85%
 Academic support*	82%
 Learning resources*	79%
 Course and module design/content**	79%
 Organisation and management*	64%
 Learning materials	45%
 Personal development*	42%
 Engagement***	33%
 Learning gain	30%
 Student voice***	12%
 Learning community**	9%
 Careers**	3%

*Existing NSS scales

**NSS optional bank of questions scales

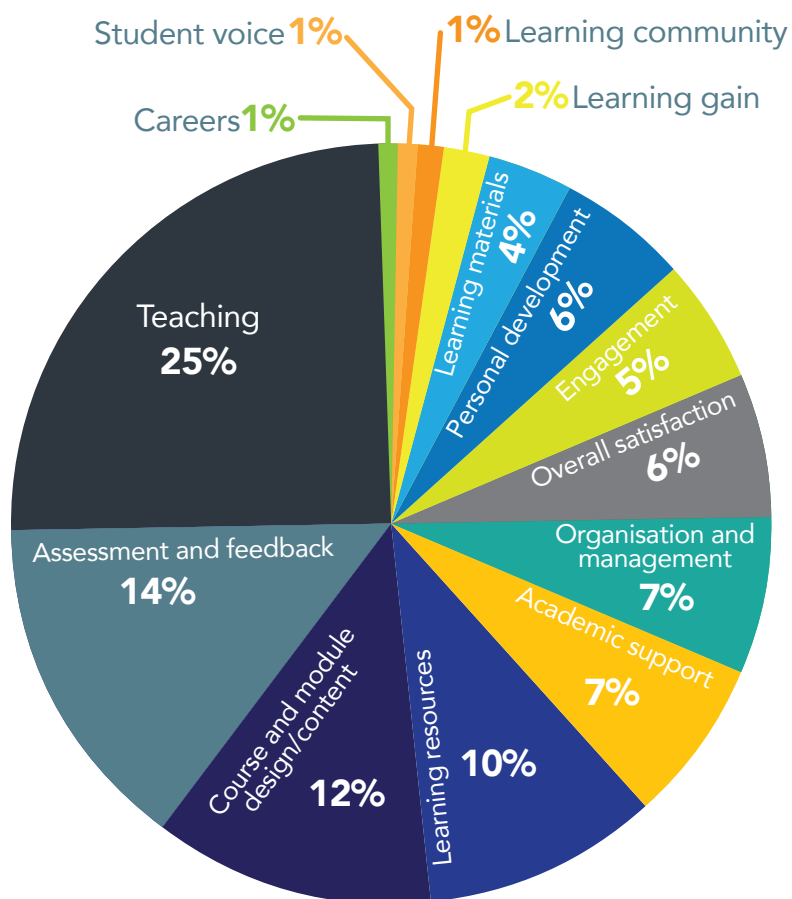
***Proposed NSS 2017 scales

●●● DESIGN

Course and module surveys were generally being designed by committees formed around quality enhancement, student experience or learning and teaching. In some cases, the initial design of surveys was carried out by an individual working in the area of student feedback, for instance, the Dean of Students, or a steering group tasked with looking after course and module evaluation. At times the surveys were also designed with advice from Achievability.

●●● THEMES

The review looked at a total of 680 questions, which comprised 582 closed questions and 98 open questions. Questions fell under 14 broad categories and the highest number of questions asked were around teaching (25%), followed by assessment and feedback (15%). A full breakdown of question categories is shown in the pie chart.



●●● SCALE

Nearly all of the surveys being carried out use a five-point Likert scale (e.g. definitely/strongly agree to definitely disagree/strongly disagree). One HE provider approached used a four-point Likert scale (e.g. strongly agree to strongly disagree); and two others used a combination of ranges (e.g. very good to very poor, too little to too much, very good to very poor, and yes, always to no, seldom).

●●● LENGTH

Surveys ranged in length but tended to be around 15 to 20 closed questions. The shortest survey reviewed consisted of four core questions but offered a bank of 25 additional optional questions. Only three of the HE providers approached had surveys with over 30 questions.

About a quarter of HE providers (24%) offered additional optional questions. All but two of the HE providers' surveys (91%) had open questions inviting students to share the most positive aspects of their experiences and make suggestions for improvements. Questions were reviewed periodically, with a few HE providers planning to modify their questions when the NSS questions change in 2017.

Number of questions	Number of HE providers
10 or fewer	11
11-20	10
21-30	9
Over 30	3

●●● MODULE DATA AND RESULTS

HE providers generally provided reports of survey findings to course or module leaders for them to reflect on and enhance the courses or modules. Some were required to produce action plans in response to the findings. Heads of Departments or equivalent also reviewed module reports to identify areas of good practice and where further development was needed. While a few HE providers used the data to input to staff appraisals, one respondent stated explicitly that this data was not used in this way or to inform staff disciplinary action.

“ Module Leaders and the Subject Group Leaders get the reports with the responses to open-ended questions. Others in the management line get reports without the responses to open-ended questions. Module Leaders and the teaching teams are supposed to use the report in their routine monitoring. It is supposed to support academics in delivering good quality modules. It is not supposed to be used for disciplinary procedures. ”

- Christine Ferns
Market Intelligence Officer, Market & Student Intelligence
Edinburgh Napier University

A small number of HE providers produced report backs to students to close the feedback loop, for example, 'You Said, We Did'. Some comparative analysis of data was also carried out at institutional-level with other HE providers.

●●● DEVELOPMENT OF SECTOR-WIDE MODULE BENCHMARKING

The 2015/16 academic year was the first to benefit from the MBE Module™ service launched by Electric Paper Ltd. in the spring of 2015. EvaMetrics enables participating HE providers to access high quality performance management information for their institutions as well as sector-side and for specific sector groups in order to benchmark their own performance.

QUESTIONS AND SELECTION

MBE Module Benchmarking™ comprises six core questions and a bank of 35 questions to choose from. Participating institutions must be able to benchmark against at least three of the six core questions and can choose to benchmark against any number of the additional questions. Institutions can choose to modify the wording for some of these questions and bring them into local context but the same principles must be followed to enable benchmarking. The core questions identified can be seen on page nine.

REPORTING OPTIONS

Participating institutions can upload their survey responses and module data, and access their benchmark reports through a secure benchmark portal. Two groups of reports are produced - institutional benchmark and national benchmark.

1. The institutional benchmark report includes data and summary results for all the institution's submitted questions at institutional, JACS and NSS levels (percentage agree). An extensive range of module data is displayed, along with organisational information if provided (owning department etc). An institutional benchmark is produced, together with an internal quartile; EvaSys' quality indicators are presented graphically.
2. National benchmark reports include data and summary results for an institution's national benchmark questions at institutional, JACS and NSS levels (percentage agree). The equivalent for the sector (the benchmark) are presented, along with the institution's quartile for each level, and a comparison to its NSS performance in the preceding three years (where the module benchmark question aligns to an NSS question)

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is a vital element of the MBE Module Benchmarking™ and each participant is required to enter into an agreement on confidentiality before they can access and use the data. Each participating institution has access to its own data, and to aggregate data for national benchmark questions of other participants. No institution can be identified from the national benchmark data. There is also a self-declaration option where the participating institutions can choose to waive their anonymity in order to benchmark against competitor HE providers.

For further information about MBE Module Benchmarking™ visit www.evasys.co.uk or call 0131 285 7970.

CONCLUDING REMARKS











This review has found that the NSS has had a significant impact on the development of institutional surveys and also influenced how institutions are using the data arising from such surveys. With the growing commitment to listening to and acting on the student voice, such student data shed light on course and module experiences and augment institutional understanding of how to continually enhance the learning and teaching delivered.

Greater competition and marketisation in the HE sector, particularly with the new tuition fee regime introduced in England in 2012, and new developments such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) will increase the momentum to continuous improvement of the student experience.











Across HE providers, the high level of alignment of course and module questions to NSS or NSS-style questions offers opportunities for sector-wide sharing and collaboration, for instance, identifying areas of strength and weakness in subjects or disciplines. Course and module-level data offer granularity at subject level that is not as easily captured in general student surveys such as the NSS, PTES and PRES. Focusing on the detail of course and module data can inform improvements in learning and teaching and make a difference to learning outcomes. Achievability is keen to support HE providers in this continuous drive for improvement and has developed a service that enables participating HE providers to benchmark their modular data across the institution, sector-wide and against specific sector groups.

Questions
<input type="radio"/> Staff are good at explaining things
<input type="radio"/> Staff have made the subject interesting*
<input type="radio"/> Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching
<input type="radio"/> This module was intellectually stimulating
<input type="radio"/> My understanding of the subject has increased as a result of taking this module
<input type="radio"/> Staff delivered teaching at the right pace
<input type="radio"/> I have been able to contact module teaching staff when I needed to
<input type="radio"/> The balance between teaching (e.g. lectures, seminars, online) and independent learning was appropriate
<input checked="" type="radio"/> This module has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth
<input checked="" type="radio"/> This module has enabled me to bring information and ideas together from different topics
<input checked="" type="radio"/> This module has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt

Questions	
<input type="radio"/>	The level of intellectual challenge of this module was greater than for other modules at the same level
<input type="radio"/>	The module has increased my knowledge of the subject
<input type="radio"/>	This module challenged me to do my best work*
<input type="radio"/>	I put the required amount of effort into this module
<input type="radio"/>	I felt I contributed to and engaged with the module
<input type="radio"/>	The overall workload for this module has been manageable
<input type="radio"/>	This module has required me to undertake private or independent study outside of class (e.g. preparing for class, studying, reading, writing, practising, etc)
<input type="radio"/>	I participated in and contributed to class discussions and other learning activities
<input type="radio"/>	I came to class fully prepared (e.g. directed reading, studying, practising, other preparation) in order to participate in all activities
<input type="radio"/>	I have attended all or most of the classes for this module
<input type="radio"/>	I understood what was expected of me to do well on this module
<input type="radio"/>	Marking and assessment for this module have been fair
<input type="radio"/>	Feedback on my work for this module has been timely
<input type="radio"/>	I have received helpful and informative feedback on my work within this module so far*
<input type="radio"/>	Feedback has helped me develop and improve my learning*
<input type="radio"/>	Feedback will help me improve my future performance
<input type="radio"/>	Feedback on my work within this module has helped me clarify things I did not understand
<input type="radio"/>	The timetable for this module works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned
<input type="radio"/>	Any changes in this module have been communicated effectively
<input type="radio"/>	This module is well organised*
<input type="radio"/>	I have had opportunities to work with other students as part of this module
<input type="radio"/>	I have been encouraged to use technology to enhance my learning on this module
<input type="radio"/>	Learning materials for this module have effectively supported my learning
<input type="radio"/>	The library resources (e.g. books, online services) have supported my learning on this module well
<input type="radio"/>	IT resources and facilities have supported my learning on this module well.

Questions	
	I have been able to access module-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software) when I needed to
	I have had opportunities to provide feedback on this module
	I am clear about how students' comments on this module have been acted on
	Staff value students' views and opinions about this module
	As a result of this module, I feel more confident in tackling unfamiliar problems
	This module has provided me with experiences that could be applicable to the workplace
	This module has helped me improve my career prospects
	I have achieved the learning objectives and outcomes of this module
	I would recommend this module to other students
	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of this module*

*Core question to be used for the MBE Module Benchmarking™™ 2015 – 2016

 Teaching	 Assessment and feedback	 Learning resources	 Academic support	 Organisation and management
 Overall satisfaction	 Engagement	 Learning materials	 Student voice	 Careers

●●● ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Electric Paper Ltd.
19 Silvermills Court
Henderson Place Lane
Edinburgh E3 5DG
United Kingdom
Tel.: +44 (0) 131 285 7970
enquiries@evasys.co.uk
www.evasys.co.uk

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