Action planning after NSS: What do staff think?

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1   Introduction

The University of the Highlands and Islands is a relative late comer to the National Student Survey (NSS), participating for the first time in 2013. For the first couple of years of our participation, results were dealt with at a University-wide level, with analysis undertaken and then shared amongst senior committees, who looked to draw out institution-wide themes, and address these through specific interventions or development of policy. As our experience of the NSS developed, we realised that there was a great deal of variation between results at programme level, and actually that it was at this level that it was best to target any actions in order to impact positively on future NSS results.

To this end, an action planning process was put in place, from 2015. This involved asking those programmes falling beneath threshold to produce an action plan outlining enhancements they would make in response to the survey results. Thresholds have varied over the years but have been based around comparisons for the % agree scores for Overall Satisfaction:

- 2015 threshold: Programmes scoring below 80% agree for Overall Satisfaction (University score) 5 programmes
- 2016 threshold: Programmes scoring below 81% agree for Overall Satisfaction (University score) OR who had dropped 10% or more from 2015 score. 11 programmes
- 2017 threshold: Programmes scoring below 85% agree for Overall Satisfaction (Scottish HEIs score). 14 programmes

The action planning process has evolved organically. Overseen by the Dean of Students, all programmes falling below threshold meet with the Dean of Faculty and other relevant staff, to plan activities for the following year. Action plans are submitted to the NSS Strategic Steering Group, and updates are requested in January and June.

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the action planning process was undertaken in 2017/18 which focused on two aspects: the effect of action planning on programme NSS scores, and an examination of how staff perceived the NSS, the action planning process; and how this impacted their engagement with both the survey, and responding to the survey results.

2   Impact of action planning on NSS scores

Over the period in which the university has participated in the NSS, Overall Satisfaction at institutional level has fallen from 84% in 2013 to 79% in 2017. The picture at programme level is much more variable with some programmes scoring well in one year, and disastrously in the next. These huge variations are largely caused by the pool of students who are included in the NSS being much smaller than many other HEIs (UHI is a small institution, plus many of our 'final year' students are in ineligible to participate in the NSS such as students who have articulated from HNC to HND to degree, students who choose to leave with an Ordinary Degree). The aim of the action planning

process was to actively respond to students' concerns raised within the NSS and therefore to stabilise results at programme level.

The impact of action planning has been mixed (or perhaps inconclusive) in terms of its effect on scores in subsequent surveys, both for Overall Satisfaction and other scales within the survey. Table 1 below shows the outcomes (for Overall Satisfaction) for programmes involved in NSS action planning for the **two years** subsequent to action planning. For the year following action planning, nine out of 16 programmes saw increases in Overall Satisfaction scores (other scores went down and others were unknown due to very small student cohorts). Over the three years that action planning has been happening, there have been are six instances of programmes involved in action planning for two consecutive years, and one instance of a programme action planning for all three years (and potentially four, depending on the results for NSS 2018).

Q22/27 Overall satisfaction

Action plan + 1		Action plan + 2	
Scores go up	9	Scores go up	2
		Scores go down	1
		No data yet	6
Scores go down	4	Scores go up	1
		No data yet	3
Below publication threshold	3	Below publication threshold	2
		No data yet	1

Table 1: Effects of NSS action planning on programme scores for Overall Satisfaction, 1 and 2 years after

The impact of action planning on NSS scores has therefore been limited to date. Meanwhile, in the rest of the University, those programmes not involved in action planning have been experiencing the same aforementioned variation in scores. All of which has resulted in the decline of institutional NSS scores. Given the time and effort that the University has spent on the action planning process, investigation into its lack of impact on NSS scores seemed prudent.

3   Staff perceptions of action planning

One of the prompts for finding out about staff perceptions of NSS and action planning came after a University event on assessment and feedback. One of the speakers drew a parallel between the way some students treat assessment feedback they receive from academic staff, and the way that staff respond to the student feedback from the NSS. For many students, feedback does not impact on their learning because:

- It comes at the wrong time
- It is not appropriate for various reasons. For example, students don't see how it relates to the assessment criteria; or it is expressed using the discourse of the discipline that they don't yet understand
- They focus on the grade and not the comments
- The feedback doesn't tell them how to improve
- They don't act on the feedback, or need additional time and encouragement to do so

(see Gibbs and Simpson, 2003)

The NSS can be seen as a piece of feedback from students to staff that falls foul of some of the same issues above, and therefore may not have the intended effect on staff learning in relation to their teaching and assessment methods:

- It comes at the wrong time: Results come out in late July when everyone is on holiday
- It is in appropriate: Staff don't see how it relates to the assessment criteria of 'good teaching' and the discourse of 'satisfaction' is often rejected
- They focus on the grade and not the comments: NSS reports and data highlighting percentages relating to MCQs rather than comments
- The feedback doesn't tell them how to improve: difficult to see how to respond to the MCQs (In what way was the course disorganised?) and comments are sometimes vague ("It was all awful")

Just as interventions such as TESTA investigate students' experiences of assessment and feedback, in order to inform improvements to these processes, similarly, the aim of this research was to probe staff experiences of the NSS in order to test some of the assumptions that lay behind the move to action planning. These were: that staff understand what the NSS is, what it is for, where the results come from, what they mean and what they can do to improve them. Perhaps the lack of impact of action planning on subsequent NSS scores could be explained by the fact that this feedback from students was not necessarily understood, or taken seriously, by all staff.

3.1 Methodology

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with programme leaders, and other staff who were involved in the action planning process. Participants were asked about the following topics:

- Perceptions of the survey itself: its purpose and value
- Visibility of NSS results
- Communication of Action Planning
- Writing the Action Plan
- Implementing the Action Plan

There were six participants in total including five Programme Leaders; three from action planning programmes whose scores had subsequently gone up, two from programmes action planning after NSS 2017 (so no results yet). In addition, a Subject Network Leader also participated to give a higher level view on the approaches to NSS taken by different programme teams.

3.2 Findings

3.2.1 Perceptions of NSS

All of those interviewed perceived the NSS as important, but noted that this was not necessarily a view that was shared by their colleagues. The tertiary nature of UHI means that FE-focussed staff (including those who also teach in HE) don't see it as an important metric. It is also viewed as relating to the status of the University, rather than as direct feedback from students, and therefore not something that everyone cared about (as opposed to the status of their programme or their Academic Partner)

"It is the student speaking to us but (…) people can disassociate with the NSS as it's a UHI thing."

"How invested are you in raising the standing of the university nationally?"

Some interviewees also noted the perception amongst their colleagues that the NSS is a forum for students to complain. This means that poor results are sometimes dismissed as just being from 'the grumpy minority', even in those cases where the response rate for that programme was 100%.

Some staff regard the NSS as focussing on the wrong aspects of the student learning experience with emphasis on, for example, organisation, and how many resources that students had access to, rather than the quality of the learning they received.

> *This is the danger of the NSS. "I had a great time but I didn't learn much". Learning comes through pain and hard work. That's the problem with the survey.*

3.2.2   NSS Results

The visibility of these was variable. Despite the fact that results are widely distributed and publicised, many staff relied on local contacts to highlight the results to them. Where this happened, then the profile of NSS was high:

> *"It's taken seriously, and staff take it personally. It's one of the first things they get when they get back from holiday. Can have a huge effect on the morale of the team."*

> *"It shouts very loud"*

In particular, staff who are teaching but not Programme Leaders may not get results which are disaggregated to the relevant level. (One staff member related how she congratulated colleagues on learning of the NSS results for her Academic Partner only to discover that her programme was subject to action planning, and that results had been particularly poor for students from her Academic Partner).

3.2.3   Communication of Action Planning

All of the interviewees had been unaware of the action planning process prior to being personally involved in it. They were unaware that action planning occurred because of low results, or what the thresholds for inclusion were. The agreed process is that action planning is led by the Faculty Deans and so in most cases, people initially heard about their involvement by receiving an email calling them to a meeting with the Dean. This was shocking and disconcerting for many staff, who may not have had any interaction with this level of University management prior to this.

One interviewee's perception of the process shifted after the Dean of Students visited their Academic Partner during their 'action planning' year. He realised at that point that the view of the NSS is "our problem as a university, and not your problem as an Academic Partner". Prior to this visit, the action planning process had felt accusatory rather than supportive.

3.2.4   Writing the action plan

Many of the staff requested more extensive guidance to help them complete their action plans. (Although a template is provided, it is left to the judgement of staff e.g. which areas of the survey to address, and how many enhancement activities they will implement). They would also have valued

some exemplars from staff who had been involved in action planning in previous years, particularly around which approaches were successful.

There was some evidence of 'gaming' within action planning; focussing on things which were 'easy wins' that could be achieved within the academic year. This behaviour came from staff who were already very overloaded, and was usually coupled with the belief that the NSS was of limited value in revealing the true value of the student learning experience. The view of these Programme Leaders was that they wanted to raise their NSS scores in order to not have to be involved in action planning in subsequent years, rather than to make the student experience better (although they were committed to doing this, they felt that responding to the NSS was not the right way to go about it). This 'gaming' behaviour was seen within one programme whose scores rose after action planning, only to fall again in the following year, triggering the inclusion of the programme in action planning once more.

3.2.5   Implementing the action plan

Some Programme Leaders reported that implementing the action plan was made difficult because of the distributed nature of the University. For these networked programme the barriers were practical ("Getting people together is difficult, but essential to effect change") but also structural as Programme Leaders do not necessarily line manage those staff who lead modules within their programmes. There had to be a certain amount of negotiation after the plan had been written as to which actions would be taken forward and which would not. This view was echoed by the Subject Network Leader who was able to note the difference between single site and networked programmes within their area, and how structural barriers often prevent enhancements to networked programmes.

For 'single site' programmes, the structural and physical barriers to implementation were not there and so in some cases, the action planning process had initiated genuine change within programmes and Academic Partners. One Programme Leader reported how inclusion in action planning had led to a complete revision of how they approached quality enhancement with student feedback now being sought and responded to throughout the academic year. The programme in question continued the action planning process informally in subsequent years, despite their increased NSS scores taking them above the threshold for inclusion in the formal process.

In another single site programme, action planning has had positive effects, despite the Programme Leader not embracing the action planning process wholeheartedly. They said of the action plan:

> *Something turns up on your desk, and you just fill it in and send it back. It didn't reflect what we did in the long term. I didn't really know what to do. I don't think that I stuck to the plan. (but) It's good because it made me think about what I had to do.*

They used the action planning process as a prompt to think about quality enhancement, and then brought different groups of people together (academic staff, support staff, student service, student reps) to bring about change. Although the Programme Leader had reservations about the value of NSS as a survey, action planning had led them to open up lines of communication that had previously not existed:

The NSS has given student reps a 'proper' job to do (…) The survey itself is irritating, but getting the students involved and talking to us is good

4 Conclusions

In terms of its effect on subsequent survey results, the NSS action planning process has had mixed effects to date. It may be that certain enhancements take longer to impact on the student experience, and so ongoing monitoring and evaluation needs to take place.

The interviews revealed that staff attitudes towards NSS differed: some staff viewed the NSS as genuine feedback from students on the quality of the learning experience, and took the results seriously. Others were more sceptical about the value of the NSS and, although they valued student feedback more broadly, did not think that efforts to improve NSS scores would necessarily result in a better quality of learning experience. In these cases, there was evidence of different approaches to action planning, with 'gaming' behaviour seen amongst the more sceptical staff.

Where the action planning process has led to significant cultural change among some academic programmes this was found to be among single site programmes where the structural barriers for effecting change did not exist. The most profound change occurred within a programme which was both single site, and where the Programme Leader was fully invested in the value of the NSS.

5 References

Gibbs, G. and Simpson, C. (2004) 'Conditions under which assessment supports student learning'. *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*, 1, 3–31.

Jessop, T. (2012) *NTFS Project Final Report TESTA (2009-12): Transforming the Experience of Students through Assessment*. York: Higher Education Academy