

Analysing the determinants of student satisfaction in the NSS

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Since 2005 the NSS scores have become one of the main metrics used to measure Departments and Universities progress in enhancing the students' learning experience. Students' perceptions of various dimensions of learning such as teaching quality, assessment and feedback, academic support and learning resources are collected, investigated and interpreted in order to identify the determinants of students' overall satisfaction.

The 2021 NSS results were published on July 15 and this paper adds this latest evidence to past data in order to 1) discuss the latest trends in NSS within the economics sector also in comparison with the performance in similar cognate subjects such as Business Studies, Finance, Mathematics and Politics; 2) identify the dimensions of learning (teaching quality, assessment and feedback, learning community etc.) that contribute the most to the explanation of economics students overall satisfaction with their studies; 3) measure whether response rates play any role in explaining students overall satisfaction not only in economics but also across other subjects.

The 2021 NSS results have shown a marked decrease of about 7 to 8 percentage points in students' overall satisfaction not only within economics but also across the other cognate subjects. A 'pandemic/online learning' effect seems to have affected all the dimensions of learning with average decreases of about 3% in 'teaching quality' and 'learning opportunities' and of about 7% in 'assessment and feedback' and 'academic support'. The largest falls in students satisfaction have been registered for the 'learning resources' and 'learning community' scales with average falls of, respectively, 10.8 and 9.3 points. However, not all is doom and gloom with economics (as well as mathematics) students showing a slight increase in satisfaction relative to 2020 with respect to question 16 "The timetable works efficiently for me". The NSS asks students to reflect on their overall learning experience while at University. The 2021 cohort experienced about one and half years of disruption caused by the pandemic and it could be argued that either the Universities responses to the challenge or the students' disappointment with the overall impact of the pandemic or a mix of these two effects are the most likely determinants of the overall fall in satisfaction.

The relationship between overall satisfaction (Q27) and the other 'scales' or dimensions of satisfaction is not straightforward. Research that included evidence up to 2020 showed that the most stable determinant of students' satisfaction in the sector was question 15 'the course is well organised and runs smoothly'. Looking at the 2021 NSS responses there is no reason to believe that such a relationship will be weakened with a fall of about 4 points in the average satisfaction for Q15 between 2020 and 2021. However, interestingly, in 2021 the smallest fall in satisfaction was recorded for scale 5 "Organisation and Management" with an average fall of about 2 points relative to NSS2020.

The relationship between response rates and students' satisfaction is subject to considerable

discussion. The main point of contention concerns the response rate by “unhappy students”. On the one hand, it is argued the ‘unhappy students’ are more vociferous and, hence, more likely to complete the NSS. Hence, a high response rate is likely to offset the negative responses. On the other hand, it is argued that ‘unhappy students’ are more likely to just ignore the NSS and that continuous reminders to complete the NSS is just likely to attract either negative or ‘neutral’ responses from students who, otherwise, would not be interested in completing the NSS. Our research shows that within the economics sector there is a *negative* relationship between overall satisfaction and response rates. However, the relationship is heterogeneous across Institutions and may be related to the size of the Institutions with smaller Institutions displaying higher response rates and higher levels of satisfaction on average. The extension of the analysis to other subjects shows a much weaker and less clear and sensitive relationship.