

**To: Heads of higher education
institutions in Wales**

Reference: W06/49HE
Date: 15 November 2006
Response By: 6 December 2006 (return
Annex A to UCAS by 24 November)
Further Information: Dr Cliona O'Neill
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DEVELOPMENT OF TQI AND THE NSS

- 1 In August 2006 we wrote to institutions with an update on Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey (NSS) – HEFCW Circular letter W06/33HE. In that letter we drew institutions' attention to the fact that the TQI site needed substantial refocusing. The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) Review Group report in England, 'The Review of the Quality Assurance Framework: phase two outcomes' sets out the review group's recommendations (HEFCE 2006/45, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_45/). It also outlines in broad terms how the changes to Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey (NSS) will be implemented, and the implications for institutions. These recommendations include the removal of all qualitative information provided by institutions from the TQI site.
- 2 This letter describes the more specific plans and proposals for TQI and the NSS, and invites comments on some of these proposals.

ACTIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS

- 3 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are reminded to provide the requested contact details for students to be included in the 2007 NSS, to Ipsos MORI, by **15 November 2006**. Notification of this was sent out by Ipsos MORI in their 'NSS 2007 Guidance Note to HEIs.'
- 4 HEIs should complete the form at Annex A and return it directly to UCAS by **24 November 2006**.
- 5 Responses to the questions asked in Annex B of this circular are invited by **6 December 2006**.

2007 NATIONAL STUDENT SURVEY

- 6 The 2006 NSS was completed successfully, and results were published in August. The University of Bristol was commissioned to undertake a detailed analysis of the results. The reports of that analysis will be published on HEFCE's website.
- 7 The QAF Review Group recommended that the NSS should be conducted annually for the time being. Wales has agreed to participate in the 2007 NSS. The questionnaire will remain the same, and the timing and methodology will be similar to last year. However, some improvements will be implemented, as follows:
 - a. The algorithm for identifying students to be included in the 2007 NSS will be the same as for the 2006 NSS, although there will be an additional category of students – those on closed courses (those run by specific arrangement e.g. with businesses, and are not available outside of such arrangements) – which institutions can exclude from the survey;
 - b. There will be additional efforts to increase online participation in the survey, and reduce further the amount of telephone follow-up, while maintaining a healthy overall response rate. Ipsos MORI will disseminate good practice guidance to institutions on encouraging online responses, and there will be some improvements to the central marketing support offered.
- 8 HEIs can access their target lists for the 2007 NSS via the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data collection system on submission of their 2005-06 data this autumn. They are reminded to provide Ipsos MORI with the requested contact details for students on these lists by 15 November 2006, in accordance with the reminder sent out by Ipsos MORI some weeks ago.

- 9 Ipsos MORI will liaise directly with NSS contacts at HEIs with further details of the 2007 NSS, and options for timing and for marketing materials. HEIs will be able to select one of five starting weeks for their survey, from 8 January 2007.

RELAUNCH OF THE TQI SITE

- 10 UCAS has been commissioned to redesign and launch a more user-focused website in summer 2007, in line with the QAF Review Group recommendations. HEFCW officers were involved in the tender process considering, in particular, the Welsh language dimension of the work.
- 11 This will involve providing all institutions with new facilities to review quantitative data before publication, add commentaries on the data and links back to the institution's own site, and monitor usage of the future TQI site. Institutions should provide UCAS with details of their principal contact, who will be responsible for registering users of these facilities within the institution. The form at Annex A should be completed and returned by 24 November 2006.
- 12 The redesign of the site will draw on user feedback about the current site. New designs will be trialled and tested with user groups throughout the development phase. A key priority will be to present the data in a user-friendly way. The aim is to ensure that the site provides a good level of coverage at an appropriate level of detail.
- 13 Annex B sets out proposals to improve the way that data are organised and the protocols that are applied to them, including:
 - a. Improvements to the subject classification used on the site;
 - b. Lowering the thresholds for publishing NSS results;
 - c. Principles for aggregating data across years and across subject areas.
- 14 Annex B also proposes:
 - a. That a summary of key statistics should be made available on the site;
 - b. That a summary of the institution's profile of students should be added, to provide contextual statistics about the make-up of an institution's student body.

CONSULTATION RESPONSE

- 15 We welcome comments on the proposals at Annex B. Responses should be returned to Dr. Cliona O'Neill at our Llanishen offices using the form in Annex C.
- 16 These proposals, and the development of TQI and the NSS more generally, will be discussed at a national conference on 23 November, 'The future of TQI and the NSS'. For further details see www.ipsos-mori.com/tqinssconference.
- 17 The TQI/NSS Steering Group, which has a UK-wide remit to oversee the development of the TQI site and the NSS, and has representation from HEFCW, sector and students in Wales, will consider the consultation responses in finalising its recommendations and steering the project.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phil Gummert". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

PROFESSOR PHILIP GUMMETT

Annex A

Main institutional contact for the future TQI site

Please provide your institution contact information on line by visiting www.ucas.com/hefce/cms by 24 November 2006.

Alternatively complete this form, sign the declaration and return to:
FAO Mrs N Partridge, UCAS, Rosehill, New Barn Lane, Cheltenham, GL52 3LZ.

If you have any queries regarding the collection of this information please contact Nicky Partridge on 01242 544972.

This information will be held on a secure server and used as contact and registration information for the new TQI content management system.

INSTITUTION NAME (MANDATORY)

HESA INSTITUTION CODE

NAME OF NOMINATED CONTACT (MANDATORY)

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS (MANDATORY)

POSTCODE (MANDATORY)

TELEPHONE NUMBER (MANDATORY)

EMAIL (MANDATORY)

By providing the contact information and signing you are confirming that you:

- are authorised to provide this information on behalf of the above institution and confirm that the information provided in this application is correct;
- understand that HEFCW or its nominated parties may contact your institution regarding the new TQI website or the content management system on receipt of this information and in the future;
- agree to inform UCAS of any changes that may take place in the future in respect of the information provided on this form.

Print Name:

Signed:

Date:

Annex B. PROPOSALS FOR THE FUTURE TQI SITE

INTRODUCTION

- 1 In taking forward the recommendations of the QAF Review in England, the future TQI site will focus on the needs of applicants and their advisers. Its design and development will need to be driven by user testing and user need, while maintaining the accuracy and integrity of the information. Data will also need to be presented at a useful and meaningful level of detail, while providing a good level of coverage across the sector.
- 2 This Annex sets out proposals for organising and presenting the data and proposals for adding data about the profile of students studying at an institution. We invite institutions and students' unions to respond to these proposals. However, they should note that a number of the issues will need to be informed by user testing, which is taking place in parallel with this consultation, and by the further analysis of the NSS that is currently under way. The TQI/NSS Steering Group will consider the responses to the consultation, as well as the evidence from user testing and the further analysis, in forming its recommendations and steering the re-design of the site.

USE OF LEVEL 3 IN THE JACS-BASED SUBJECT HIERARCHY

- 3 A hierarchy of subjects, based on the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS), was developed for presenting data on the TQI site. For details see HEFCW Circular letter W05/13HE 'Update on National Student Survey and outcomes of consultation on TQI subject structure'.
- 4 Currently the TQI web-site presents data only at level 2 in this subject hierarchy (41 subjects). If no data are available at that level, it aggregates to level 1 (19 subjects) or level 0 (whole institution level).
- 5 However, users are generally interested in data that are closer to course level. Through the QAF Review, institutions also indicated dissatisfaction with the limitations of the current subject groupings. The QAF Review Group recommended that: 'The TQI/NSS Steering Group, liaising with HESA, should continue to identify specific problems and ways forward regarding JACS codes, and seek a better match between use of the system by HEIs and by UCAS.'

- 6 The TQI/NSS Steering Group has considered ways of improving this aspect of the site. It proposes that the site should in future present data at level 3 (107 subjects) wherever possible, and also allow users to access data at other levels (particularly whole institution). Further proposals are set out below for improving the links between courses and these JACS-based subjects.
- 7 Presenting data at level 3 would generally provide more specific information which is closer to course level; however there will generally be fewer students within these more specific subject groups, and therefore fewer NSS results would be publishable at this level of detail. Table 1 below indicates the proportion of 'cells' (combinations of a specific subject at a specific institution), and the proportion of students responding to the NSS, that would be publishable at levels 2 and 3 in the subject hierarchy.¹

Table 1 Proportion of publishable NSS data at levels 2 and 3

	2006 NSS data only		Combined 2005 and 2006 NSS data	
	Level 2	Level 3	Level 2	Level 3
Students	72%	65%	82%	79%
Cells	49%	35%	64%	50%

- 8 Table 1 shows that the proportion of data publishable at level 3, while lower than at level 2, is still substantial. We therefore propose that the data should be made available on the site at this level.

Consultation question 1: Do you agree that data should be presented at level 3 in the subject hierarchy, wherever possible?

- 9 It is important that the site makes data available for as much provision across the sector as possible, but as Table 1 shows, NSS results would only be publishable at level 3 for a certain proportion of provision. The steering group has considered various means of improving the coverage of the site, and the following are proposed:
- a. lowering the NSS publication thresholds, while maintaining reliability
 - b. aggregating data across years and/or to a broader subject, where it is unavailable at level 3.

¹ This table ignores mode of study. It is based on the current publication threshold of 30 students, and a 50 per cent response rate, and the actual responses achieved in the 2005 and 2006 surveys.

Lowering the NSS publication thresholds

- 10 Currently NSS results are only published on the TQI web-site where there is a 50 per cent response rate, with responses from a minimum of 30 students. These thresholds were introduced to ensure that the results were reliable for the purpose of informing student choices. They were based primarily on the expert judgement of the NSS pilot steering group, drawing from experience of other surveys, and following consultation with the sector. Having conducted and analysed the NSS, it is now possible to review these judgements taking account of the level of variation in the actual data.
- 11 HEFCE has modelled the effects of changing the thresholds, using the multi-level models developed by the University of Bristol, to determine the probability of each student responding, and then to model their expected responses to the 2005 survey. Using these models, simulations were carried out using varying publication thresholds, and the results compared to the average for the underlying population. When simulating the outcomes it was assumed that each combination of subject and institution (each 'cell') reached the required percentage response rate.
- 12 Figure 1 shows the proportion of cells that would be publishable at level 3 in the subject hierarchy, using a range of publication thresholds. Figure 2 shows the proportion of these cells that are within 0.1 of the true average for that cell (also at level 3 in the subject hierarchy).

Figure 1 Proportion of cells reaching the publication threshold

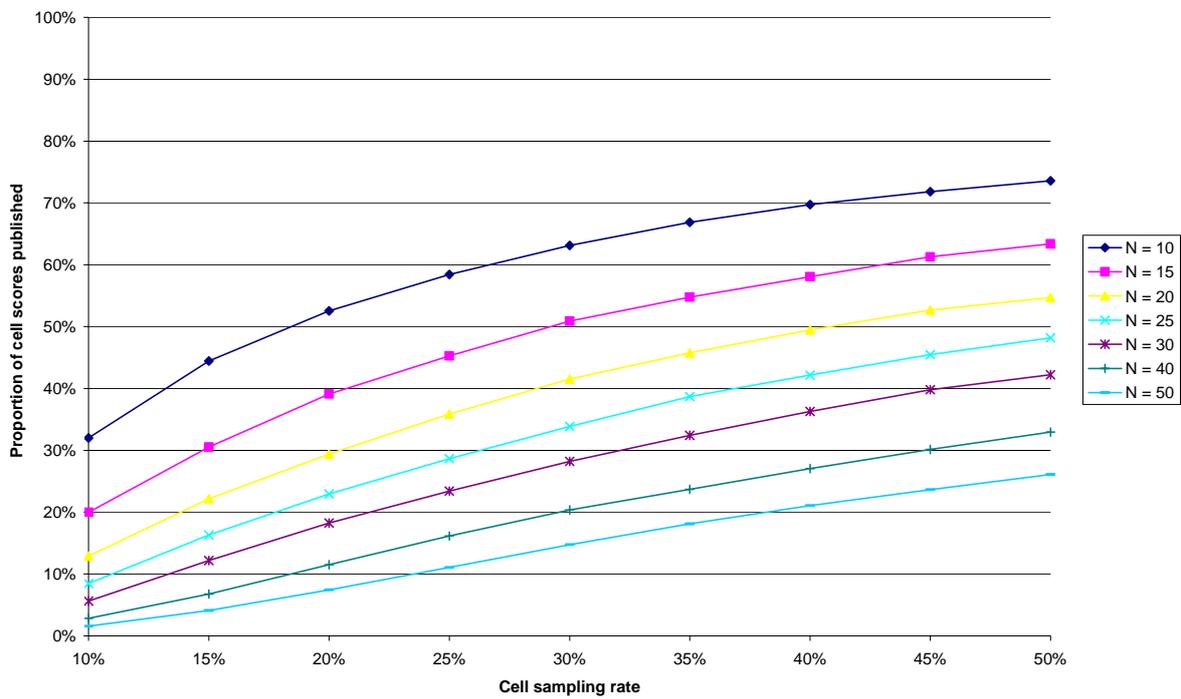
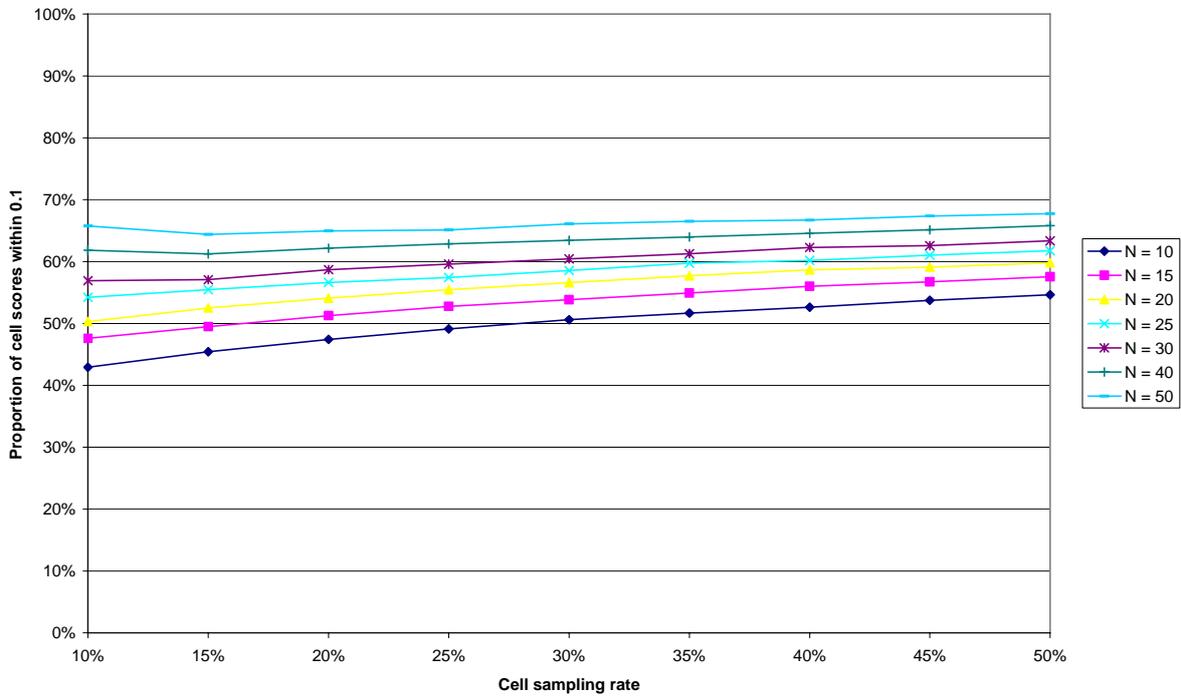


Figure 2 Proportion of cells within 0.1 of underlying average



- 13 It is important to note when considering Figure 1 that, although the proportion of cells covered using any of the thresholds is relatively low, the proportion of students responding to the survey included in the published figures would be much higher. For example, where the threshold is 40 per cent response and 20 students, the proportion of cells covered is 49 per cent; yet this accounts for 88 per cent of the students included in the survey.
- 14 Figure 2 shows that the main driver for ensuring that the results are close to the underlying average is the number of students who have responded; the response rate has a less significant impact.
- 15 The results of this modelling suggest that, given the importance of publishing at a greater level of subject detail and ensuring a good level of coverage, there is some scope to lower the thresholds, without significantly affecting the reliability of the results. Having considered the options, the steering group proposes that the threshold should be lowered to a 40 per cent response rate, and 20 students responding. Notwithstanding this, the steering group also recommends that the survey should continue to target a 50 per cent response rate for each institution and subject combination.
- 16 This recommended option would result in roughly 60 per cent of published cells being within 0.1 of the true underlying average, according to our models. If 50 per cent response rates are achieved in future surveys, the coverage (using a single year's data, at level 3 in the hierarchy) is likely to increase to around 89 per cent of students and 50 per cent of cells.

Consultation question 2: Do you agree that the threshold for publishing NSS results should be lowered to a 40 per cent response rate, and 20 students responding?

- 17 If the threshold is lowered for the 2007 NSS, it is proposed that it should be applied retrospectively, to make results from the 2005 and 2006 NSS available according to the new threshold. This would ensure consistency on the future TQI site, and would enable data to be combined across years in a consistent way to ensure a high level of coverage, as discussed below.

Aggregation of data

- 18 Even with a lower threshold, NSS results will not be publishable for a significant proportion of 'cells' on the basis of one year's data. This can be addressed by:
- Aggregating data to broader subjects. (This would involve moving up each level of the subject hierarchy, including, where necessary, to the whole institution).
 - Combining data across years.²
- 19 UCAS will conduct some testing to determine what alternatives users would like, if data are not available at level 3, and also how much control users want over aggregating data. In principle, at this stage, given the importance of presenting data for more specific subjects, it would seem preferable to aggregate across years in the first instance, before broadening the subject. However, the NSS results show that, while the outcomes at sector level appear stable between the 2005 and 2006 surveys, there is a fair degree of change when looking at particular subjects at particular institutions. Further analysis will be needed to determine the extent of and reasons for change between years. This analysis, and the responses to this consultation, will inform decisions about whether any particular aggregation options should be offered on the site. Other than that, the results of user testing will determine the exact approach to aggregation and the options and extent of control that are offered to users.

Consultation question 3: Do you agree that data should be aggregated across years and/or subjects, where it is unavailable at level 3 using one year's data? Are there any options for aggregating data that should not be offered to users?

- 20 Regardless of the eventual approach to aggregation, user feedback indicates that users would like to access the data for the institution as a whole in addition to data relating to courses (i.e., level 3 or the next best alternative). Therefore this option should also be available on the site.

IMPROVING LINKS WITH COURSES

² Currently the TQI site aggregates data in the following way:

- the first and optimum outcome is to show 2006 NSS data at the level of the 41 subjects
- if this is unavailable, 2005 and 2006 NSS data are combined at the 41-subject level, where the combined results meet the reliability threshold
- if this is unavailable, the site shows 2006 NSS data at the 19-subject level
- if this is unavailable, the site shows 2006 NSS data at whole-institution level.

- 21 Over time further work could be done to present data on the TQI site at course level. However, currently this information is not available and, following revisions to the HESA student record, is only expected to be available from 2011.
- 22 In the short to medium term we propose to provide clearer links between courses and the subject-related data, as follows:
 - a. Providing direct links from courses listed on the UCAS site, to the relevant subject data on the future TQI site (over time, this approach could be extended to other course-based web-sites).
 - b. Enabling institutions to tailor their commentaries on the data for each subject. Institutions could use this to explain how the subject data relate to courses.

PRESENTATION OF STATISTICS

- 23 Feedback on the current site indicates that users would prefer the statistics to be presented as percentages of students within each category, rather than numbers of students. They see this as more meaningful and easier to compare, where there are different cohort sizes. Subject to testing with users, we intend to adopt this approach in future.
- 24 Following discussion with HESA, we intend that percentages will be presented for any cohort of at least 20 students. Cohorts between 20 and 52.5 students would be rounded to the nearest 5 per cent; cohorts with more than 52.5 students would be rounded to the nearest 1 per cent.

SUMMARY PAGES

- 25 User feedback has indicated that an up-front summary of key data, drawn from the various categories of more detailed data, would be valued. This would provide a quick picture of the institution and/or subject the user is considering, while also giving access to the more detailed information. The QAF Review Group recommended that: 'the TQI/NSS Steering Group should explore this further; it will be important to consider the appropriate level of granularity for any such summary and avoid over-simplification of complex information.'

- 26 The steering group has considered what might be appropriate for such a summary. The summary should contain key statistics, drawing on existing data from each area of the TQI site. The group recommends that the following items would be suitable for a summary, as they do not over-simplify the information and are less vulnerable to misinterpretation by users:
- a. Groupings of highest qualifications on entry;
 - b. The proportion of first year full-time first degree students who were continuing their studies or had gained their intended award;
 - c. The proportion of honours degree students that achieved firsts and two-ones;
 - d. The proportion of leavers in graduate jobs;
 - e. The distribution of responses to question 22 of the NSS about 'overall satisfaction' with course quality (this could be, for example, the distribution between 'positive', 'neutral', and 'negative' responses).
- 27 The content and design of the summary will also be informed by user testing.

Consultation question 4: Do you have any comments about the suitability of the proposed items for a summary of key data?

STUDENT PROFILE DATA

- 28 A concern about the TQI site raised by institutions is that it presents information in a uniform way, without reflecting the diversity of the sector. One means of addressing this is to present contextual data that gives some indication of the diverse nature of institutions, and which could be of value to the site's users. The QAF Review Group recommended that the TQI/NSS Steering Group should consider developing contextual quantitative statistics on the profile of students at the institution, to be added to the site.
- 29 Following consideration by the steering group, it is proposed that contextual statistics should be developed, to be presented at the whole institution level. These should use only data that are both related to the academic environment and already collected on the HESA record or elsewhere.

- 30 It is proposed that the following items would be suitable, and should be tested with users:
- a. Students studying at each level;
 - b. Home, EU and overseas students (by level);
 - c. Male and female students;
 - d. Students by broad subject group;
 - e. Young and mature students;
 - f. Mode of study including the extent of sandwich provision;
 - g. Proportion of students taught in Welsh (for Welsh HEIs).
- 31 Again, the development of the profile data will be informed by user testing.

Consultation question 5: Do you have any comments about the proposed student profile data?

- 32 Please specify your name, role and organisation in your response. Please also specify whether this is an individual response or an institutional response.
- 33 We will publish an analysis of responses to the consultation and will share this with HEFCE. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the Freedom of Information Act.

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS

- 34 The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) Review Group report recommended the removal of all qualitative information provided by institutions from the TQI site. This included the removal of summaries of external examiners' reports, which were not published for Wales. A consequence of the removal of this information is that English HEIs will be expected to share external examiners' reports with their institution's student representatives. The views of Welsh HEIs are sought on whether this would be appropriate in Wales.

Consultation question 6: Do you think that institutions in Wales should share external examiners' reports with student representatives?