

Circular

Development of TQI and the NSS: Outcomes of Consultation W06/49HE

4 April 2007

Ref: W07/15HE

To: Heads of higher education institutions in
Wales

Summary: This letter summarises the conclusions of
the consultation in England and Wales and
sets out the decisions made by the UK
TQI/NSS Steering Group on the basis of the
responses.

Response by: No response required

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INTRODUCTION

1. In November 2006 we consulted institutions on plans and proposals for Teaching Quality Information (TQI) and the National Student Survey (NSS) (Circular W06/49HE). This consultation was run in parallel with a similar consultation by HEFCE in England.
2. This letter summarises the conclusions of the consultation in England and Wales and sets out the decisions made by the UK TQI/NSS Steering Group on the basis of these responses.
3. The changes will be implemented on the re-launched TQI site in summer 2007. The TQI/NSS Steering Group believes that the changes will greatly enhance the value of the site in helping potential students and their advisers choose what and where to study.

BACKGROUND

4. In August 2006 we wrote to institutions with an update on the TQI and the NSS (HEFCW Circular letter W06/33HE). In that letter we drew institutions' attention to the fact that the TQI site needed substantial refocusing.
5. This issue was highlighted in the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) Review Group Report in England (HEFCE 2006/45, http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2006/06_45/). The report recommended that the TQI site should focus more on the needs of applicants and their advisers and that its design and development should be driven by user testing and user need, while maintaining the accuracy and integrity of the information. It also recommended that data should be presented at a useful and meaningful level of detail, while providing a good level of coverage across the sector.
6. In November 2006 we wrote to you describing the more specific plans and proposals for TQI and the NSS and inviting your comments (Circular W06/49HE). This circular describes the outcomes of the consultation and the subsequent decisions taken by the TQI/NSS steering group. Further detail on the consultation responses is available at **Annex A** to this circular.

DECISIONS BY THE STEERING GROUP

7. Overall, the main proposals received support from the HE sector in England and Wales. The following decisions are therefore broadly in line with the proposals in the consultation document:
 - (i) The TQI site will present data at level 3 in the subject hierarchy of the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS). More detailed data at course level will be incorporated at the earliest opportunity;
 - (ii) Subject to user testing, details of cohort sizes and response rates to the NSS will be reported alongside the data;
 - (iii) Subject to user testing, the summary of key data and the student profile data described in the consultation will be developed for inclusion on the site in summer 2007.
8. Views in relation to other proposals were mixed and some respondents argued that the changes should be implemented in a different way. The steering group wished to explore these issues further, to see how the approach might be adapted to address these concerns where possible. It therefore decided:
 - (i) To seek advice from the Equality Challenge Unit on the possibility of displaying additional contextual data on students at an institution including, for example, students' ethnicity, the proportion of students with disabilities, and the percentages of students from areas with low rates of participation in higher education. The steering group was concerned about how or whether these data could support potential students making choices about what and where to study. Following receipt of this advice, the steering group has resolved that the data should not be included in the results for the 2007 survey, but to consider the issue further for 2008.
 - (ii) To seek advice from an expert statistical group on what the threshold for responses to the NSS should be, in order for the results to be included on the TQI web-site. Notwithstanding this decision, the survey will continue to aim for a 50 per cent response rate for each

institution and subject combination. Following receipt of this advice, experts have recommended further work to determine the most appropriate thresholds. The percentage threshold will remain at 50 per cent for the 2007 results. The work to consider the lowering of the threshold for the number of responses is currently underway and it is anticipated that the outcomes will be known in time for implementation on the re-launched TQI site in August. We will write to you in due course to confirm the final threshold for number of responses.

- (iii) Where data are not available at JACS level 3 using one year's results, to develop and test various options for aggregating data, by subject or across years, or both.

THE NSS AND NHS-FUNDED PROVISION

9. Subsequent to the publication of Circular W06/49HE, Skills for Health (the Sector Skills Council for healthcare) and the Department of Health decided that students studying NHS subjects in England would take part in the NSS. These students would be requested to respond on-line only to enable them to be asked additional questions regarding their placements. Additional information on the process for these students is available at **Annex B**.
10. In Wales such students are funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and as such, have been included in the NSS from its inception. However, some institutions had recorded WAG-funded students as being NHS students and so these had not been included in the survey to date.
11. HEFCW agreed that all students in Wales studying NHS subjects would be invited to participate in the questionnaire in 2007 using all methods (telephone, online and postal). No additional questions would be asked of any students.
12. Our Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC) recommended that we consult with institutions offering this provision to gain their views on whether or not additional questions should be asked of these students in 2008 and beyond. We have done so, and received four responses out of a possible six. All responses supported the inclusion of the additional questions in the survey for students studying NHS subjects.
13. Opinions were divided on whether institutions would remain in favour if the survey was to be available online only for these students, as is the case for English students of NHS subjects in the 2007 survey. Two institutions stated that they would continue to support the additional questions if they were online only, but reported some concerns about this methodology, and emphasised the desirability of enabling respondents to use all methods. The other two respondents did not support the inclusion of the additional questions if they were to be asked online only.
14. The LTC considered the outcomes of the consultation. It recommended that students studying NHS subjects should be included in the NSS in 2008 and beyond, and should be asked to respond to the additional questions.
15. The LTC recommended that these additional questions should be asked even if the response were to be online only.

RE-LAUNCH OF THE TQI WEB-SITE

16. The four Funding Councils have commissioned a UCAS/Hot Courses consortium to design a more user-focused web-site, in line with the recommendations by the English Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) Review Group. The site will be re-launched in early August 2007 with a new 'brand' and 'identity' and will provide all institutions with new facilities to review quantitative data before publication, add commentaries on the data, add links back to the institution's own web-site, and allow the institution to monitor usage of the future site.
17. UCAS will soon be getting in touch with the institutional contacts nominated in Annex A of Circular W06/49HE.

18. The outcomes of this consultation and the QAF review are now being implemented, with the redevelopment of the TQI web-site to meet the needs of potential students and their advisers. The steering group intends to continue reviewing the site to ensure it meets its key objective of supporting potential students and their advisers in choosing what and where to study.

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS REPORTS

19. The consultation also requested views on whether Welsh institutions should share external examiners' reports with student representatives. This followed the recommendation of the QAF review that all qualitative information provided by HEIs be removed from the TQI site, including the summaries of external examiners' reports, which were not published for Wales.
20. The LTC considered the consultation responses and recommended that institutions which did not already share external examiners' reports with student representatives should consider doing so.

Annex A

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

1. Six responses were received for Wales by the date requested, of which four were from HEIs and two from individuals. This level of response was too small for us to make any report to the TQI/NSS steering group with confidence. However, responses were broadly supportive of the changes proposed, and comments from Wales were presented to the TQI/NSS steering group.
2. HEFCE had a total of 118 responses to their consultation:
 - 86 higher education institutions (HEIs)
 - 28 further education colleges (FECs)
 - three sector bodies (the Quality Assurance Agency, GuildHE and the 1994 group of universities)
 - one Scottish institution.
3. The TQI/NSS steering group, which has a UK-wide remit to oversee the development of the TQI site and the NSS, considered the consultation responses in finalising its recommendations and decisions. This included the views of Welsh respondents.
4. Overall the proposals received broad support from the sector. The steering group's decisions are outlined below.

USE OF LEVEL 3 IN THE JACS-BASED SUBJECT HIERARCHY

Consultation question 1

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

5. The proposal to present data on the site at JACS level 3 in the subject hierarchy, wherever possible, was supported by 89 per cent of HEFCE respondents. This proposal was also broadly supported by Welsh respondents. Respondents recognised that data at level 3 would provide more specific information, closer to course level. Institutions welcomed the move towards providing course level data in the future, as this will be more useful for potential students.
6. The steering group agreed that data should be presented at JACS level 3, and that course level data will be incorporated at the earliest opportunity.

LOWERING THE NSS PUBLICATION THRESHOLD

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?

7. The proposal to reduce the threshold for publishing NSS results to a 40 per cent response rate, and 20 students responding (from the current minimum of 50 per cent and 30 students), was supported by 76 per cent of HEFCE respondents and was broadly supported by Welsh respondents. However, a number suggested a threshold of a 50 per cent response rate and 20 respondents, on the basis that it would still require the majority of students to have informed the data and hence prevent a minority view prevailing.

8. The steering group considered these options and requested further advice from an expert group of statisticians. Notwithstanding this, the steering group agreed that the survey should continue to aim for a 50 per cent response rate for each institution and subject combination.
9. The expert group has concluded that further work is required to consider potential non-response bias¹, and that the percentage response rate element of the threshold should remain at 50 per cent until the outcomes of this work is known. It is unlikely that this will be known in time for implementation on the re-launched TQI site in August.
10. The expert group also considered the 'number of responses' element of the threshold. It concluded that further work is required to assess what this should be. However, it did conclude that it could be reduced if confidence intervals² could be implemented on the site. The work to consider this is currently underway and it is anticipated that the outcomes will be known in time for implementation on the re-launched TQI site in August.
11. The steering group also considered whether the revised threshold should be applied retrospectively. A few respondents argued that this would not be appropriate as the data were collected under the previous threshold. The steering group decided that as the students who responded were not made aware of the threshold that would be used, it is unlikely to have influenced whether or how they responded. In addition, the steering group was concerned that having different thresholds for different years could confuse users of the site. Given the recommendations of the QAF review that usability was the key criterion, the steering group decided that whatever response threshold is applied in the future, it should also be applied retrospectively.
12. The TQI/NSS Steering Group has endorsed this decision. Therefore for the purposes of the revised TQI site, to be launched in early August, the threshold will be 50 per cent response rate with the number of responses as yet to be defined. We will write to you in due course to confirm the final threshold.
13. A high proportion of respondents suggested that providing the sample sizes and response rates for the NSS would help users to interpret the data on the site. A number of respondents commented that if the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data were reported as percentages, the cohort sizes would also provide important information for users.
14. The steering group agreed that this would help to re-focus the site towards students and their advisers and that therefore, subject to user testing, details of cohort sizes and response rates should be reported alongside the NSS and HESA data.

AGGREGATION OF DATA

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?

15. Even with a lower threshold, NSS results will not be publishable for a significant proportion of 'cells' (combinations of a specific subject at a specific institution) on the basis of one year's data. The consultation in Circular W06/49 HE therefore proposed two options for aggregation of data:

¹ The respondents to the survey may not be representative of the whole population, as the non-responders to the survey may have replied differently had they responded. Therefore, the group wish to analyse this potential 'non-response bias' before considering reducing the 'response rate' element of the publication threshold.

² Broadly these define a range of values between which we can be reasonably confident that the true result for the population as a whole lie.

- a. Aggregate data to broader subjects. (This would involve moving up each level of the subject hierarchy, including, where necessary, to the whole institution.)
 - b. Combining data across years.
16. HEFCE received mixed responses to these proposals. Thirty-three per cent agreed that, in principle and subject to user testing, data should be aggregated across subjects rather than years. Respondents were concerned that aggregation across years could mask changes over time. However, 29 per cent agreed that aggregation using subjects and years was viable, and some said that the site should provide users with options to aggregate data by subject and/or by year. Most Welsh respondents were in favour of aggregation across subjects and years, with a range of views similar to those reported in England.
17. The steering group considered these views and decided that, as there was no clear overall preference, various options will be developed and tested with potential users.
18. Some respondents argued that a maximum of two years' of data should be aggregated. There was concern that aggregation over a longer period could mask changes in the quality of the provision. The steering group agreed and decided that, where aggregation over years is used, it should be aggregated over a maximum of two years.

SUMMARY PAGES

Consultation question 4

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

19. The proposal to present an up-front summary of key data, drawn from the various categories of more detailed data, was supported by 64 per cent of respondents to HEFCE and was also broadly supported in Wales, with some comments. A number of respondents also felt that it would be useful to provide a distribution of responses to the question about overall satisfaction with the course. The steering group agreed that the summary of key data would enhance the site for users and that, subject to user testing, it should be developed for implementation in summer 2007.

STUDENT PROFILE DATA

Consultation question 5

Do you have any comments about the proposed student profile data?

20. The proposal to present contextual data on the students at an institution, which gives some indication of the diverse nature of institutions, was supported by 61 per cent of respondents in England and by all respondents in Wales, subject to user testing. The steering group agreed this data should be developed for the re-launched TQI web-site.
21. A number of respondents suggested that data should also be included on, for example, students' ethnicity, proportions of disabled students, and the percentage from low participation neighbourhoods and state schools. The steering group expressed concerns about how these data could be used to inform student choice. The steering group therefore sought advice from the Equality Challenge Unit. Following receipt of the advice, the steering group agreed not to include the data for the 2007 NSS, but to consider the issue further for 2008.

EXTERNAL EXAMINERS' REPORTS

Consultation question 6

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

22. 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. English institutions are now expected to share these reports with student representatives. The views of Welsh institutions were sought on whether this should also be done in Wales.
23. An additional two responses were received and considered in relation to this matter. Responses were broadly supportive of sharing external examiners' reports with student representatives in principle, with a number of respondents noting that the reports were already shared with student representatives.
24. HEFCW's Learning and Teaching Committee considered the outcomes of consultation and recommended that institutions which did not already share external examiners' reports with student representatives should consider doing so.

Annex B: NHS-funded students and the National Student Survey

INTRODUCTION

1. The QAF review recommended that NHS-funded students should take part in the National Student Survey (NSS). This was agreed by the Department of Health and Skills for Health for 2007 this type of provision.
2. Following the recommendations of HEFCW's Learning and Teaching Committee (LTC), students studying these subjects in Wales will respond to additional questions and will answer the NSS in 2008 and beyond. This means that they will follow the same procedure as English students.

QUESTIONNAIRE

3. Students on NHS-funded courses undertake practice placements, so their experience of HE is different from most other students. Therefore, in addition to the standard 22 questions in the survey, NHS-funded students will be asked questions covering practice placements (see paragraph 7 below). These will appear before the final question on 'overall satisfaction' and so will seem part of the 'standard' questionnaire. This approach was successfully trialled during the NSS pilots in 2004, which included NHS-funded students.

METHODOLOGY AND PRESENTATION OF RESULTS ON THE TQI WEB-SITE

4. NHS-funded students will be surveyed online only. All other eligible students at the institution will be surveyed using the standard methodology, ie online, postal and telephone.
5. The average response rate for the online method in England was approximately 32 per cent at the beginning of April, although some institutions achieved an online response rate in excess of 50 per cent. Using this method could thus have an impact on the institution's overall response rate and subsequent publication of results on the TQI web-site. Therefore, the TQI/NSS steering group agreed that results on the TQI web-site, for institutions with NHS-funded provision, should be presented in the following way:
 - a. Results on the site at level 0 (whole institution level) will include NHS provision and non NHS provision wherever possible.
 - b. However, if the data do not meet the reliability threshold at level 0 for publication, then the site will present non NHS provision only – where that meets the reliability threshold.
 - c. At the subject level, the site will show all results (that is, NHS provision and non NHS provision combined) wherever possible, as this will give a more representative picture for subjects with large numbers of NHS-funded students.
6. Ipsos MORI and the National Union of Students (NUS) have developed a good practice guide to help promote the online survey method. The NUS will continue to work with students' unions to promote the NSS, particularly the online responses for NHS-funded students. Institutions can monitor response rates via the Ipsos MORI extranet, so that they can target marketing to specific students. The TQI/NSS steering group has also asked Ipsos MORI to consider options for improving the online response rate for these students.

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR NHS-FUNDED STUDENTS

7. NHS-funded students will be asked to respond to the following additional statements about their practice placements:
 - a. I received sufficient preparatory information prior to my placement(s).
 - b. I was allocated placement(s) suitable for my course.

- c. I received appropriate supervision on placement(s).
- d. I was given opportunities to meet my required practice learning outcomes/ competences.
- e. My contribution during placement(s) as part of the clinical team was valued.
- f. My practice supervisor(s) understood how my placement(s) related to the broader requirements of my course.