

INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION

IHE response to the OfS consultation: Update on theme measures, benchmarking and response thresholds in the NSS

May 2024

Question 1 - The first issue in this feedback gathering exercise relates to changes in the number of theme measures. We propose to change the number of themes from 7 to 6. Do you agree with our proposed approach? Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed changes.

Yes, partially.

We would urge the Office for Students (OfS) to exercise caution when grouping questions 15-18. We remain concerned about the levels of variance in the factors from the Principal Component Analysis (PCA). Thematically, questions 15 and 16 focus on teaching staff, whilst questions 17 and 18 focus on course management. These two sets of questions have significant potential to be answered by students in different ways, particularly those studying in industry environments or with courses with complex organisational structures (including placements, study abroad, etc).

IHE members who teach in these industry settings are constrained by the industry venues they teach within, which can impact the perception of course organisation despite the teaching-based questions scoring highly. By grouping these questions, overall teaching scores could appear altered as a result. We strongly encourage the OfS to keep this grouping under review, paying close attention to specific provider types, like specialist providers, in the future.

Additionally, there is also no specific mention of the questions beyond question 24 in the grouping proposals. IHE would appreciate clarification over the grouping of these questions, to understand whether they are to remain ungrouped at the end of the NSS.

Question 2 – Our approach to benchmarking will not change following the changes in the theme measures. Please describe any issues you can anticipate with the proposed approach.

IHE strongly encourages the OfS to continue to keep benchmarking under review in the near future. We would like to reiterate our proposals to incorporate age, accelerated provision, and online provision into benchmarking. This will become increasingly critical to include in benchmarking as the LLE is introduced and more courses with greater diversity will be delivered in the sector. IHE anticipates an increase in mature students, accelerated courses and online delivery through the LLE implementation period and beyond as its funding model will attract diverse students into higher education allowing these courses to flourish. As this proportion of student diversity and course delivery increases, so will its potential for material impact on benchmarking allowing them to be included in benchmarking calculations.

Question 3 – We are not going to consider making changes to the minimum response threshold for the NSS at this stage. Do you have any reasons why you believe we should prioritise this work?

IHE agrees that changes to the threshold measures should not be a priority for the OfS at this time and welcomes the decision to maintain the existing minimum response thresholds. However, we would request the OfS keeps this under review as the nature of higher education and delivery models changes. As the landscape of the sector changes and different types of student are studying within it, our previous concerns around student groups or course groups unlikely to respond due to the timing of the NSS – thus resulting in low response rates – will become increasingly relevant. By reviewing this on a regular basis, there is an increased chance to publish more NSS data in future.

Contact IHE

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