Consultation on Developing a National Approach to College Student Satisfaction and Engagement

Submission from Colleges Scotland

1. Introduction

The measurement of student satisfaction at course and college level has long been an important tool to inform quality improvement in this important area. Although a variety of innovative approaches to gathering data currently exists, in many colleges the use of a student survey remains at the core. Surveys have evolved over time, and are tailored to reflect the characteristics and needs of individual colleges.

The consultation on *Developing a National Approach to College Student Satisfaction and Engagement* has been discussed by members of the Colleges Scotland Board's Learning, Skills and Quality Committee and it was agreed to provide a sector response.

A range of issues in relation to the survey have been raised by colleges, including concerns over the design of the questions, the potential for use of results of a national survey in order to set up league tables, the dangers of 'survey fatigue' among students, and the need for such a survey to be of real use in enhancing the quality of learning and teaching at college level.

Colleges Scotland has provided comments on the proposed questions in Annex A and Annex B; however we have decided not to rank the questions or suggest alternative wording as individual college responses will provide this.

Colleges Scotland
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Organisation: Colleges Scotland

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Student Satisfaction and Engagement: Draft Questions for Consultation

1. Student Satisfaction		Priority
1.1	Overall, I am satisfied with my college experience	
1.2	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my learning experience	
1.3	Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my course	

Student Engagement

2.1 Progress & Goals		Priority
2.1.1	I have set personal goals during my time at college	
2.1.2	Staff regularly discuss progress with me	
2.1.3	The feedback I get on assessments tells me what I am doing well and where I need to improve	

2.2 Personal Development		Priority
2.2.1	I was encouraged to take responsibility for my learning	
2.2.2	I feel more confident in being able to express my opinions and contribute in lessons	
2.2.3	The way I'm taught really does help me learn	

2.3 Learning & Teaching		Priority
2.3.1	I am able to influence how my course is taught	
2.3.2	At the end of class, tutors regularly ask what we have learned or what we have enjoyed	
2.3.3	My lecturer involves me in planning how my course work is scheduled and assessed	

2.4 Next Steps		Priority
2.4.1	My course has fully prepared me to take the next steps in education, employment or training	
2.4.2	My time at college has helped me develop job or work-related knowledge and skills	

2.5 Quality Improvement		Priority
2.5.1	I am asked for my views on the quality of the course	
2.5.2	I believe student suggestions/contributions on the quality of courses are listened to and acted upon	
2.5.3	Things have improved as a result of suggestions	

2.6 Student Representation		Priority
2.6.1	The Student Representative system has made a difference to my learning experience at the college	
2.6.2	The college Students' Association has a strong voice in the college	

2.7 Equalities	Yes/No
I believe all students at the college are treated equally and fairly	

Comments

- In order to focus the questions, the scope of the survey should be clarified – is it confined to the students' experience of learning and teaching, or is it a survey which relates to student engagement with college life in its totality?

- With the Scottish Government's priorities on employability, a very important omission is the absence of questions on information and guidance, and on work experience which forms a significant part of many courses. In general, skills development should feature more prominently.

- If the survey relates to the wider college experience, then there are no questions relating to support services or resources.

- Assuming that the proposal is to have eight core questions, with the best selected from each grouping, it is suggested that this is too minimal an approach. In some of the groupings all of the questions could be considered relevant; for example in sections 2.1 and 2.3. Some of the options would be better grouped under an alternative heading, for example question 2.2.3 relates to learning and teaching yet appears in a section headed 'Personal Development'. In general, the question set as specified here is very limited, and the wording, number and categorisation of questions should be revisited.

- It is anticipated that colleges would wish to augment the national survey with their own additional questions, however care needs to be taken not to over burden students with surveys.

- Some colleges use an external provider to conduct their student survey and provide them with timely feedback and benchmarking data, and would probably wish to continue doing so.

- Colleges would need to be convinced that results of a national survey would lead to genuine improvements in student satisfaction, engagement and success within their own institutions. Many have developed a sophisticated range of approaches to seeking student feedback which varies as appropriate across subject areas, SCQF levels and modes of attendance. It may be considered that an additional 'one size fits all' approach would not enhance those systems which are already working well in individual institutions.

Student Satisfaction and Engagement: Issues for Consultation

13. Please comment on any of the issues set out below. Feel free to highlight any issues arising from the development of this survey which you believe are not covered in this paper.

Purpose

14. The purpose of seeking student feedback is to inform quality enhancement in colleges. A national approach to monitoring student satisfaction will provide a consistent basis for college regions to evidence impact and improvement.

15. A key purpose of the university sector National Student Survey (NSS) is to inform student choice. Clearly the pattern of recruitment to colleges is quite different to that for universities, with most applications coming from within college regions. However, we would welcome comments on the extent to which public information on student satisfaction and engagement might be useful in informing applicants to Scottish colleges.

Comments
• Given that applications to colleges in Scotland are normally dictated by geography, it is not considered that publically available information on student satisfaction would influence choice in a similar manner to HE recruitment. There is a vast range of college provision across Scotland. A single 'student satisfaction' figure, whether published at national, regional or college level, would not give context in a way that, for example, an Education Scotland inspection report provide.   As such it would be not be useful for the purposes of making comparisons between regions or individual colleges. • It is usefulness as a tool for benchmarking and quality improvement, however, is an area which should be further explored.

Satisfaction and learner engagement

16. SFC's interest in student satisfaction is in relation to the learning experience. We are clear that satisfaction is not a proxy for quality. Student engagement is a key pillar of the sector's approach to quality. Engagement can take many forms and it would be unproductive to try to define this strictly. But broadly speaking, students should be engaged in their own learning; they should have opportunities to be involved in decisions about their course and in wider college life. For further discussion of these issues please consider the Student Engagement Framework produced by sparqs:

http://www.sparqs.ac.uk/upfiles/SEFScotland.pdf

Comments
• Improving learner engagement is high priority for colleges. It is essential that students understand how they can influence their learning, and that they feel they are supported in this process. The role of the Student Association is paramount. The survey should be used to provide feedback in this important area.

Use of data / survey returns

17. We will use data collected by colleges on core questions to produce summary reports for each college/college region. SFC will also aggregate the summary data to produce a national picture. Over time, SFC will explore with colleges other potential future uses of the data, such as tracking progress within subjects and different levels and types of provision, e.g. vocational courses and modern apprenticeships.

18. However, it will be important at the outset of this project to gather views on whether, any of this data should be put in the public domain. Data from the core question set of the (HE) NSS is available publicly and comparisons can be made. This has also inevitably led to the publication of league tables. It is worth bearing in mind the issues which may arise if data were to be gathered on student satisfaction/engagement and not made publicly available.

19. SFC will also seek advice from the college sector Statistics Advisory Group (SAGE) on questions relating to the ownership and use of student survey data collected by colleges.

Comments
• Feedback from SAGE would be welcomed in order to inform this process.
• If the SFC national performance framework were to be augmented with a performance indicators (PIs) relating to student satisfaction, or if included in regional outcome agreements (ROA) reporting, then this information would be in the public domain. Lying behind any summary figure would be a multiplicity of factors which influence the measurement at college level, for example small cohorts, varying modes of attendance, delivery of a wide span of SCQF levels. Most of these factors are either not applicable or not as significant as in an HE context. Levels of 'satisfaction' often relate directly to an individual's classroom experience on a day to day basis.
• The most appropriate use of a summary student satisfaction PI would be as part of trend analysis to show that actions for improvement are having an impact. The concern remains, however, that any benefit gained from this in terms of public accountability would be outweighed by those seeking to make inappropriate comparisons in order to draw up league tables.

Benchmarking

20. However, data sets will be provided to colleges to enable them to benchmark their practice against national or UK survey results, and across subjects, to help identify areas and issues for enhancement.

Comments
• This would be welcome, as would discussion about how the results are grouped (class/ course/level etc). These factors (among others) already impinge on the current set of publically available performance indicators, particularly at FE level where a multiplicity of awards abounds.
• The data should be provided in a suitable timeframe so as to allow actions for improvement to be built into the next quality planning cycle.
• An important statistic is response rate, and that should also be supplied.

Rankings/scale

21. Each question will invite responses on a scale (e.g. strongly agree/agree/disagree/strongly disagree). We propose using a four point scale, to discourage 'median' responses. Each question will also offer a 'not applicable' response where it is not relevant to the student. This reflects the practice used nationally for the NSS and in many current college surveys.

Comments
• The use of a four point scale to discourage median responses is supported. Care should be taken in the use of a 'not applicable' response. It is difficult to see that any a 'not applicable' response would be appropriate for any of the questions given in Annex A, however if the survey were wider and applied to all modes of attendance then it would be more so. If it is intended that the survey should replace core questions embedded within colleges' own surveys, then consideration should also be given to allowing space for comments.

Piloting

22. The survey questions will be tested initially by college members of the working group, to gauge student reaction and understanding and allow for some fine-tuning of the wording. Thereafter, we propose that the survey be piloted by all colleges in April – May 2015. This should enable students to reflect on a full year of study in their responses.

23. Please let us know if you would like to participate in this pilot.

Comments
• It is very important to time the issue of the survey to maximise the response rate. Whilst surveying in April or early May has the benefit of allowing students to reflect on their study over a reasonable time frame, there is also the potential for excluding those who have already left the course. To minimise any skewing of results, as many early leavers as possible should be encouraged to complete the survey at the point of exit. • Given that it is believed that further work will be necessary in order to develop this survey, there is concern that implementing a pilot for the 2014/15 academic session is ambitious.

Target group for pilot

24. We propose that the survey is piloted initially with all (SFC and non SFC-funded) full-time students so that feedback is obtained from a fairly homogenous group. Once we have refined the survey questions, the survey should be rolled out to **all** students irrespective of mode of study and funding provider.

Comments
• It is agreed that the survey should be completed by all students. Again, the setting of any single summary figure in the context of the variety of modes of attendance and range of SCQF levels is very important. Colleges may wish to have separate figures for separate categories of students. • A very useful part of conducting a survey such as this is the establishment of a baseline for future trend analysis. It takes some time (usually three years results) to be able to comment on trends. Given that the baseline data for the modified survey would be 2015/16 data, the establishment of meaningful trends is a medium to longer term benefit.

Online or paper?

25. The presumption is that the surveys will be deployed online, to aid accessibility and the collation of returns.

Comments
• Whilst undoubtedly the preferred option from an administrative point of view, care needs to be taken that this is not a barrier to accessibility. Colleges may need to provide the resource for on line access. Also there are some students (individuals and groups) who may need additional support in order to complete the survey. Maximising the response rate is important.
• If colleges are incorporating the national questions into their own surveys, consideration needs to be given to facilitating the separate collection of colleges' 'own' data.
• Need to consider what the 'incentive' would be for a student to take the time to complete the survey in the first place.

26. We would like to invite your college to participate in the pilot group. We hope to have a representative sample of colleges based on geography and size for the pilot.

Please provide below details of the person(s) in your college who will be the main contact for any future SFC communications on student satisfaction and engagement.

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