

The effect of NSS scores and league tables on student demand and university application rates is relatively small.

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As competition for student recruitment continues to intensify, policymakers and administrators are encouraging an emphasis on 'student experience'. The National Student Survey (NSS) scores are one indicator that attempts to measure this. But do students really take any notice of NSS scores in making their university choices? [Stephen Gibbons](#) shares findings which suggest the effect of changes in NSS scores on demand for university places is actually quite small.



The season is here when the majority of next year's school leavers fill in their UCAS forms for application to university. Yet, as any of us who have known someone in this position will agree, picking a university is not always easy. For most subject areas, there are a large number of universities and courses to choose from and making a choice can involve a lot of research.

To help students with these difficult choices, The [National Student Survey](#) (NSS) was introduced in the mid-2000s to provide information about students' satisfaction with their degree course. The survey was introduced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which, at that time was responsible for distributing government grants to universities. The main aims of the survey were to help students make informed choices about their courses and to provide feedback to universities to help them improve the service they were providing.

The survey asks questions about students' university experience, such as their overall satisfaction, satisfaction with teaching, feedback, facilities, organisation and management, and whether their course improved aspects of their personal development – such as communication skills and confidence in tackling unfamiliar problems. These NSS scores are also one of several quality indicators used in the "league tables" – such as the Times Good University Guide, Complete University Guide and Guardian University Guide that are published in newspapers, books and online.

The topics covered by these questions are, arguably, only weakly linked to the main educational task with which universities and students are engaged. However, the survey has captured the attention of university teachers and administrators, and led to a renewed focus on the so called 'student experience', that is the 'consumer' aspects of the time spent at university, rather than its investment benefits in terms of higher earnings and better individual and societal outcomes. Universities have become particularly fixated on the annual round of NSS score because of concerns about the impact of the scores on future student recruitment.



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Maintaining student applications and numbers has obviously always been important for universities, given that the grant allocation from HEFCE was determined by formulae that were in part based on past student numbers. But since 2012, when student tuition fees were raised, universities have been directly dependent on fees to pay for teaching, and support from HEFCE for teaching has been greatly reduced or withdrawn. Universities are now in direct competition with each other for students (both nationally and globally), even more so after the removal of the cap that limited how many students a university could recruit. Good NSS scores are also likely to be a pre-requisite for universities being allowed to increase fees under the 'Teaching Excellence Framework' (reading list on 'teaching excellence' [here](#)), which is soon to be announced by the government. Doing well in the NSS and in league tables has therefore come to be seen as imperative for a course to survive. Now, the more students universities can attract, the more revenue they get, so many institutions are looking at ways to engineer better NSS results and boost their league table rankings.

But do students really take any notice of satisfaction scores in making their university choices, or are other factors more important? The first study to look directly at the effect of NSS scores on university applications was published recently in the leading academic journal in education economics, the *Economics of Education Review*. The research, carried out with my colleagues Professor [Eric Neumayer](#) and Dr [Richard Perkins](#) in the Department of Geography and Environment, links data on the NSS to applications data from UCAS for each subject and university from 2006 to 2011.

The study shows that NSS scores do matter for university applications. However, contrary to what many university managers might think, the effect of changes in NSS scores on demand for places is quite small. Moving from the bottom of the scale (around 65% satisfaction) to the top of the scale (about 95% satisfaction) will only result in a degree course gaining about seven more applicants for every 100 it already receives. And it isn't the separately published NSS data themselves which matter. The timing of the effects of the NSS scores, relative to their publication, reveals that the NSS impact on student demand works indirectly by affecting university rankings in published league tables, such as The Times Good University Guide.

A likely explanation for this result is that leagues tables, which rank departments on a single scale, are more readily available and easily understood by applicants than more complex NSS data. In other words, the format in which information is presented to prospective students matters. But here too the effects are small: a 10 place move up a

table of 100 universities only increases applications by around 2-3%. An improvement in position encourages a slightly more able pool of applicants (based on A-level tariff points). The effect of changes in league table position is also slightly bigger in subjects and places where there are more providers from which to choose, and amongst universities that are in the middle in terms of their entry qualifications.

Yet, across the board, student demand does not appear to be very responsive to improvements in NSS scores or league table positions. Instead, school leavers seem primarily to choose on a rather different set of criteria, related to more persistent factors (possibly academic reputation, the likelihood that the degree will lead to a well-paid or enjoyable job, or distance from home – for which see my [earlier work](#)). None of this is very good news in the short-term for those universities who have invested significantly in measures to improve student satisfaction in the hope that they will profit from increased demand. The NSS may nevertheless be good news for students if these investments mean they have a better time when they are at university.

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