

Chapter 17

Understanding the National Student Satisfaction Survey in Light of Intellectual Capital Framework: The Case of Study Barometer Norway

Victoria Konovalenko Slettli

Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Norway

Elena Panteleeva

Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway

ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine whether an online national student survey can contribute to the understanding of intellectual capital in higher education institutions. The study adopts a performance management and measurement perspective towards NSS and applies the lens of intellectual capital measurement theory which distinguishes between human, relational, and structural capitals. By adopting a conceptual and explorative research approach, the study is based on an intensive analysis of document sources related to the Norwegian online national student survey – Study Barometer. The results suggest that the Norwegian national student survey reflects certain categories of the intellectual capital framework – including those categories that are of interest to university stakeholders. However, the scope of the intellectual capital categories in the survey is limited to a few certain items. The study concludes that national online student survey can be used as a performance measurement tool and assist our understanding of the IC in HEIs – even though to a limited degree.

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INTRODUCTION

National student surveys (NSS) have been employed in the higher education sector of different countries to measure “student satisfaction” or “student experience” concerning teaching quality, university facilities and student support; they are also used to create rankings and comparisons among institutions (Pötschulat, Moran, & Jones, 2020). Some of the stated purposes of NSS include informing prospective students about available studies, contributing to public accountability, and enhancing the quality of higher education (Callender, Ramsden, & Griggs, 2014).

NSS is an international phenomenon that provides student evaluation of teaching (Cheng & Marsh, 2010). Similar initiatives can be found in different countries – for example, the UK National Student Survey, Australian Course Evaluation Questionnaire, the US National Survey of Student Engagement, the Center for Higher Education University Ranking in Germany (Thiel, 2019), and Study Barometer in Norway.

NSS has been described in the literature as a “double-edged sword” revealing both strengths and weaknesses. Thus, some of the stated strengths include the following: robust, accessible and simple data that comes from a trusted source; high response rates; consistency in data collection; availability of contextual and explanatory data from open-ended text questions (Callender et al., 2014). These characteristics make NSS a reliable and valid instrument that supports internal quality assurance processes, provides an overview of sector performance and reinforces accountability. Further, NSS promotes democracy and strengthening of the student voice. In addition, NSS performs a benchmarking function by providing “comparable results both across time and between institutions” (Callender et al. 2014, 17). This allows higher education institutions (HEIs) to identify trends in student expectations and experiences and to make trustworthy comparisons between different study programs.

From another perspective, some serious drawbacks of NSS have been identified. For instance, the NSS has been accused of viewing students as customers to satisfy rather than active participants in their education, which has been strongly critiqued (Holligan & Shah, 2017). Other weaknesses of NSS include differences in the interpretation of survey items for different subject areas and learners, an overemphasis on recent experiences, susceptibility to the effects of factors not associated with the quality of teaching/learning, etc. (Langan and Harris (2019); Sharpe (2019)).

A review of the available literature on NSS suggests the prevalence of the education/pedagogical perspective on the subject. Thus, the education literature discusses such topics as a) the usefulness of NSS scores and rankings (Du (2016); Zilvinskis, Masseria, and Pike (2017); Langan and Harris (2019)); b) the relationship between different factors (such as teaching quality, assessment and feedback, and course organization) and student satisfaction (Bell and Brooks (2018); Sutherland, Warwick, Anderson, and Learmonth (2018); Nurunnabi, Abdelhadi, Aburas, and Fallatah (2019)). In this part of the research literature, the student experience is perceived as something sufficiently stable and credible to “be measured, improved and ranked” (Pötschulat et al., 2020, p. 14).

A much smaller group of contributions consider NSS from the performance management and measurement point of view. In this literature, NSS has been referred to as an “accountability structure” (Thiel, 2020) and a “regulatory control tool” (Canning, 2017). For example, Lenton (2015, p. 119) argues that quality rankings provided by means of the NSS serve as “important performance indicators,” especially in determining student demand. This part of the literature addresses NSS in light of university performance management and measurement (McCormack, Propper, and Smith (2014); Lenton (2015); Canning

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