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Research notes

What business school characteristics are correlated with more favourable National Student Survey (NSS) rankings?

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ABSTRACT

The reliability and importance of business school rankings has long been debated, however most of the discussion has centred on research rankings. With the introduction of the National Student Survey (NSS) the spotlight has been shone on student satisfaction with teaching. With a rumoured teaching excellence framework on the horizon, it is pertinent to analyse the variables correlated with higher NSS satisfaction scores. This paper finds that the variable significantly correlated with higher NSS satisfaction scores in the subject group of Management, Marketing, Business Studies and Human Resource Management is the value added by a higher education institution. The level of learning resources in business schools do not significantly explain any of the variation between student satisfaction levels. The percentage of staff who are an A on the REF is not significantly correlated with NSS scores, nor is spend per student. While not removing all concerns, these findings should at least help quell some misgivings around the appropriateness of using NSS data as a measure of the quality of teaching in business schools.

1. Introduction

A rise or fall in league tables can have significant consequences for a tertiary institution. As a result, understanding those higher education institution characteristics that are significantly correlated with higher scores on the National Student Survey (NSS) becomes increasingly important. This is due in part to the emergence of rankings using NSS data constructed by third parties such as media outlets, which shine a spotlight on student satisfaction levels. The 'University League Table' as produced by the Guardian is one such ranking (with the Times Higher Education World University Rankings being another with a teaching component) which directly uses student satisfaction levels from the NSS as components in determining their 'Guardian Score out of 100' which they use to rank universities in the UK. Additional university rankings in the UK include 'The Complete University Guide' compiled by Mayfield University Consultants, and 'The Good University Guide' published by The Times/The Sunday Times. All three of these rankings use NSS results as inputs into their final rankings. In addition, the NSS results are displayed in a form suitable for potential students on the Unistats website. It is also not an uncommon sight to see student satisfaction levels for a particular institution reported on their website, or even on the backs of buses.

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The traditionally admired universities, arguably, have little need for marketing. A national awareness that they have produced many of the country's most renowned scholars for centuries- and later employed them − is proof enough that an education at such a place is expected to be worthwhile. However, other universities, particularly those who comprise the group known as the United Kingdom's 'new universities', that have evolved since 1992, are more reliant on positive promotion in order to be able to compete for students. Therefore, the benefits of being favourably ranked on the NSS (22 questions answered by final year undergraduates) can be significant. Recent discussions in the UK around a framework to recognise the highest quality teaching have coincided with attempts to create a "nuanced benchmarking system" (Canning, 2015 p. 56), including the construction of a raw weighted student satisfaction score (WSSS) and a normalised weighted student satisfaction quotient (WSSQ). The calculation of the WSSS and standardising of the WSSQ can be found in the appendix of Canning's paper, however a brief summary is given below:

> "The main components of the model are the proportion (min, 0, max 1) who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the questions for a particular course, a weight for each of the questions (derived from Marsh and Cheng's (2008) factor analysis) and an adjustment for overall subject differences. This overall score is then multiplied by 100 to avoid the overuse of decimal places. This calculation has been performed for all 4128 courses which appeared in the National Student Survey (2014). The resulting WSSS scores are then standardised to a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. An average course will score 100" (Canning, 2016).

The objective of Canning's work is to allow courses to be ranked on absolute and relative performance, hopefully leading to a "more considered use of NSS data" (Canning, 2015 p. 56). This paper attempts to contribute to the current discussion by asking the research question 'what are the important higher education institution characteristics that are significantly correlated with higher scores and rankings on the NSS in business related subjects?' The recent work of Canning (2015) is also examined. Business related subjects were chosen as the focus as they are a readily identifiable subset of subjects clustered within most universities. The research outlined below suggests the biggest differences in NSS satisfaction ratings found is at the course level within universities. This makes a comparison of a specific subset of subjects between universities more appealing.

2. Literature review

When discussing the NSS, researchers have been divided in their assessment of the survey. A summary by Child (2011) of a 2010 major review of the NSS states the future role of the NSS is to provide information for prospective students, to provide information for quality assurance processes, and to support enhancement activities within institutions. Clearly the NSS is designed to help measure and improve teaching and learning activities within tertiary institutions. Currently, campus universities do perform strongly on the NSS, with 86% of the 321,000 students who responded satisfied with their course according to Grove (2015), who quotes Madeleine Atkins, chief executive of the Higher Education Funding Council for England stating the NSS had been "fundamental to driving change in our universities and colleges" (2015, p. 2). The same publication also quotes the universities minister Greg Clark saying "It is vital that higher education institutions further enhance teaching quality and improve the experience they offer to students" (2015, p. 2). Some research such as that of Hazelkorn (2011) suggests rankings were transforming universities and that "global rankings have raised the competitive bar" (p. 29). Hazelkorn (2011) goes on to state there has been a noticeable change in institutional behaviour as a result of the prominence rankings have achieved, creating a 'strong drive to improve comparative position (p. 309). It is also suggested by Hazelkorn (2011) that traditional schools maintain an advantage when it comes to ensuring student satisfaction; believing rankings favour older, better resourced, highly selective universities who have accumulated comparative advantages over time. An initial advantage held by traditional universities can become self-perpetuating, with Wilkins and Huisman (2012) claiming that "Rankings have a significant impact on a school's ability to attract top scholars, the most able students and research funding" (p. 367); while Giora and Corley (2002) claim that the extra revenue gained through higher rankings can in turn lead to better future research performance.

Child (2011) also highlights a number of academics who have criticised the validity of the NSS, including Harvey (2008) who claimed it was manipulated, shallow and methodologically worthless, along with Atwood (2010) who described the NSS as a statistically risible exercise. Alternatively, Child (2011) also reports the *Teaching Quality Information Review* describing 'a general level of acceptance' with the NSS (p. 7). Child (2011) concludes that while there is evidence for using the NSS to enhance teaching, it is difficult to separate that objective from the performance indicator and public information objectives. There is however some evidence suggesting that institutions are in fact using student feedback to attempt to improve the student experience, and enhance the quality of teaching (Richardson, Slater, & Wilson, 2007). Interestingly, prior research (Bótas, 2008; Dill, 2007; Pascarella, 2001) evaluating teaching quality has found there to be no direct relationship between institutions with the best resources and facilities, and students experiencing high quality teaching and learning in those institutions, and that rankings tend to favour institutions with more resources rather than those with the best educational practices. The rankings referred to have tended to be research based however, rather than teaching based. This paper contributes to this literature (Bótas, 2008; Dill, 2007; Pascarella, 2001) by attempting to identify if there are any higher education institution characteristics that are significantly correlated with higher scores and rankings on the NSS in business related subjects.