

The National Student Survey and the ‘Customerization’ of University Students: A Qualitative Study of UK Higher Education

Abstract

Has the National Student Survey ‘customerized’ the UK’s university students? This article examines the ‘customerization’ of university students in the UK and the impacts of reciprocity and social exchange behaviour on National Student Survey outcomes. Using a multi-method qualitative approach, the findings suggest that the National Student Survey is an imperfect barometer for measuring teaching quality and academic standards at universities. It finds that students are being treated as customers so they will give their universities positive evaluations in the National Student Survey. The findings also reveal that the discretion and decisions of students are mostly based on reciprocity, according to which students are willing to complete the National Student Survey favourably only if they get good grades and received ‘VIP treatment’. The article concludes by explaining the implications of its findings on practice and recommending an agenda for future research.

Keywords: National Student Survey, higher education, student, customerization, UK

Introduction

This article examines the ‘customerization’ of university students in the UK and the impacts of reciprocity and social exchange behaviour on National Student Survey (NSS) outcomes. The NSS was launched in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in 2005 as an essential element of a quality assurance framework for higher education in the UK (Arthur, 2020). The survey was designed to enable all publicly funded and some private higher education institutions assess the quality of their teaching and improve students’ satisfaction with their courses (Lenton, 2015). The NSS is predicated on and has heightened focus on the ‘student experience’ (Gibbs, 2010, 2012). Since its introduction, the NSS has become one of the main instruments for recruiting students and a yardstick for competitive advantage. In the highly competitive world of higher education, neoliberal universities now focus on the market and consumer choice (Olssen & Peters, 2005) with an emphasis on efficiency and productivity (Ball, 2012; Kenny, 2017). The NSS scores are used to rank student satisfaction across universities in the UK and for university rankings in university league tables (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2008). Students often sought after universities with good rankings when making their choices because they offer objective benefits in that employers use university rankings as an indication of the quality of graduates and thus prefer to recruit from among the graduates of more highly ranked universities (Dearden et al., 2019). International students in particular rely on rankings to make their choices (Bell & Brooks, 2016) along with their perceptions of potential peer interactions (Merola *et al.*, 2022). Hence, the league table plays an important role in students’ university choices in the UK (Matzdorf and Greenwood, 2015). There are several league tables in the UK, all of which consider student satisfaction as measured by the NSS as a factor in the ranking (Bell and Brooks, 2016). This has led to some universities ‘playing the rankings’. Research undertaken by Agnew *et al.* (2016) highlights the key

relationship between perceptions of value added and feedback and NSS scores achieved, meaning that lecturers have a clear avenue by which they can maximise their NSS results.

The importance and benefits of NSS as a stable measure of teaching quality and in providing quality assurance and public accountability have been well documented in the extant literature (Cheng & Marsh, 2010; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2004).

However, this article questions whether the NSS has ‘customerised’ the UK’s university students. It is argued herein that the traditional approach of the student-lecturer relationship has been eroded by the NSS; and that students are now perceived and treated as customers rather than students (Franz, 1998; Guilbault, 2016). As a result, lecturers are forced to act not in what they perceive to be the students’ best interests in the long run, but rather in what the students believe to be their best interests in a particular moment. As noted by Thiel (2019, p. 538), the ‘hierarchies between students and academic teaching staff are a relic of the past’. This is because the once clearly defined pyramidal order between lecturer and students has now been replaced with an egalitarian system according to which students judge their courses and quality of teaching through the NSS (Ipsos MORI, 2006). The ‘individualised, self-managed, and intrinsically motivating’ role of lecturers (Kenny, 2017, p. 889) seems to have been replaced by what Ball (2012, p. 20) describes as the ‘tyranny of metrics’, which often supersedes professional academic judgements.

In order to address the objective of this study, the article uses social exchange theory, with a focus on reciprocity. The study examines the obligation of students to complete NSS, which seems to be based on a quid-pro-quo or social exchange arrangement. The positive gestures that are exchanged are voluntary and are in accordance with the norms of reciprocity (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). This article makes two important contributions to the field. First, we use social exchange theory to examine the current strategy of NSS, which encourages the quid-

pro-quo arrangement. Second, we integrate social exchange theory with the extant literature on NSS, student feedback, and higher education in the UK, which further enhances our understanding of NSS and should stimulate a rethink of the student feedback process. The remainder of the article is organised as follows. In the next section, the extant literature on NSS, student feedback, and higher education in the UK is reviewed. A discussion on social exchange theory as the theoretical lens by which we aim to understand student behaviour concerning completing NSS follows. The following section provides an examination of the approaches we adopted to collect the data. The findings of the study are then presented, followed by a discussion thereof and a conclusion. In the final section, the implications of the study are outlined, and an agenda for future research is provided.

NSS in Brief

NSS was first launched in 2005 in order to capture the views of final-year undergraduate students in British universities (Arthur, 2020). The core NSS questions are grouped according to the following themes: ‘teaching on my course’; ‘learning opportunities’; ‘assessment and feedback’; ‘academic support’; ‘organisation and management’; ‘learning resources’; ‘learning community’; and ‘student voice’. Responses to the survey are collected following a five-point Likert scale. All public universities participate in the survey, as do most private universities and many colleges that provide higher education courses. NSS is unique in that it is administered before students have completed the final term of their studies. Many other countries take a fully post-experience approach (Sabri, 2013). The NSS data is used in many league table rankings (Pickford, 2013) and is also used in the Teaching Excellence Framework assessments of the Quality Assurance Agency and of the Higher Education Funding Council for England. NSS is generally used as an indicator of value in a market in which price is not an indicator of quality (Lenton, 2015) and was initially conceived to help potential students make

informed choices about which university they would like to attend (Pickford, 2013; Sabri, 2013).

The survey focuses on course-level experience, but comparisons may also be made at the institutional level (Pickford, 2013). The comparability of NSS scores is questionable as a panel regression approach conducted by Lenton (2015) explains that the average NSS scores use a range of explanatory variables. A university's location and research intensity are, to varying extents, statistically significant in explaining variations in NSS scores between institutions (Lenton, 2015). These factors are not directly measured by NSS; however, the fact that they are significant in explaining NSS variations is noteworthy. It implies that idiosyncratic variations exist and institution-level comparisons are unsound. Additionally, subject-specific factors appear to be highly explanatory, perhaps due to subject-specific variations in teaching styles and facilities, such as classrooms and laboratories. NSS rankings can be shown to be an unsound means of comparing institutions and are, at best, a snapshot of the end-of-degree student experience. Despite its flaws, NSS is a necessary quality measure and is a key element of league tables rankings, which guide student choice. This concept is taken further by Sutherland et al. (2018), who find differences between the priorities of students of business and non-business subjects after conducting a large-scale analysis of NSS data. For example, the study concludes that students on business programmes tend to highly value fair assessment and the ability of the academic staff to explain concepts, while students of non-business subjects seem to value intellectual stimulation more (Sutherland et al., 2018).

A key element of an institution's preparation for the NSS exercise is building a good relationship with the students, especially final-year students, who are the only students eligible to take part in the survey. Beech and Wolstencroft (2022) argue that much effort in terms of relationship building is simply 'keeping students happy', using a 'you said, we did' approach. However, this need to keep students happy has been said to result in tutors lowering standards

and rigour in order to capitulate to students' demands (Beech & Wolstencroft, 2022; Pickford, 2013). Some universities ensure that the weeks leading up to the survey release are free of incidents, and they use this period to get much closer to the students and tutor them using the survey language (Pickford, 2013).

Broadly speaking, NSS is a key metric in quality assurance and quality enhancement processes as well as a key indicator of market value to university applicants (Sabri, 2013). The fact that NSS is an input for university league tables and rankings, gives higher education providers a strong incentive to raise NSS scores quickly (Bell & Brooks, 2018). Many universities take NSS results seriously, as they often use the results, to identify areas requiring intervention rather than using internal key performance indicators. Using NSS scores as a measure of teaching quality can be difficult as the efforts of many lectures may be aggregated into one statistic (Pickford, 2013). In recent years, some general protest against NSS and the commercialisation of higher education has been observed (O'Connor, 2017). Most notable are the efforts of the National Union of Students and the student unions of the University of Oxford, the University of Cambridge, the University of Sheffield, the University of Manchester, the University of Liverpool, and the University of Bristol, University College London, and King's College London to boycott NSS (O'Connor, 2017).

Higher Education in the UK and Feedback

The higher education sector in the UK has faced various issues in recent years. Researchers have thus provided some insights into some of these issues and their impacts on higher education in the UK. For example, the 'assault on universities' (Bailey & Freeman, 2011) refers to the motives behind government policies on higher education in terms of funding cuts and fee increases; 'universities at war' (Docherty, 2015) refers to the attacks on higher education in terms of the monetisation of academic works, according to which economic factors now determine the functions of universities; and the term 'toxic university' (Smyth, 2017) and

‘zombie university’ (Murphy, 2017) refer to a lack of transparency in different changes that universities undergo and how the changes are been imposed on them by political elites. The dramatic expansion of the UK higher education sector in the early 1990s, when polytechnics were granted university status and when the Labour government planned to ensure that 50% of school leavers would proceed to higher education, led to the emergence of a neoliberal project in UK higher education (Erickson et al., 2021). However, some researchers have criticised the neoliberalist approach to these changes. For example, Downs (2017) describes neoliberalism as a vague and conceptually overloaded approach. Similarly, Edmond (2017) and Olssen and Peters (2005) argue that neoliberalism systematically deconstructs professional autonomy. According to Erickson et al. (2021), this is done by means of the imposition of targets, performance criteria, and standardised systems for assessing research and teaching performance. It is thus still unclear whether the ‘neoliberal university’ has enough analytical purchase beyond its status as a well-worn trope for the conspiracy of global capitalism, where the focus is income generation (Downs, 2017).

The expansion of UK higher education from 1992 led to the introduction of significant performance measures, such as NSS, the Research Assessment Exercise, and the Research Excellence Framework, which are all used to assess and monitor the quality and impact of teaching and research through students’ feedback and peer reviews of publications (Erickson et al., 2021). The question remains whether NSS is an appropriate parameter of measuring teaching quality and whether students can assess the teaching quality and academic standards in an adequate manner. For example, Bishop (2016) argues that NSS cannot be regarded as indicative of quality teaching and that relying on the NSS as a reliable measure of teaching quality is like using people’s choices to evaluate nutritional content – the evaluation is highly likely to be biased. Similarly, Richardson (2005, p. 407) argues that ‘some resistance to the use of student ratings has been expressed based on the ideas that students are not competent to

make such judgements or that student ratings are influenced by teachers' popularity rather than their effectiveness'. It can therefore be concluded that the feedback provided by students through NSS cannot be totally free of bias or accurate.

Conceptual Framework: Social Exchange Theory

This section explains social exchange theory, which proposes that social behaviour is the outcome of an exchange process (Emerson, 1976; Skidmore, 1975) and that interpersonal interactions include exchanges of tangible and/or intangible resources. It is important to note that social exchange theory emphasises the give-and-take approach to a relationship between two parties in which satisfaction is primarily influenced by the economic and social outcomes of these exchanges (Blau, 1964). We speculate that the outcome of NSS not only depends on the students' experiences of quality of teaching and overall academic standards but also (and largely) on the students' perceptions of how they are treated, which may not be connected to quality of teaching and overall academic standards. For example, a student who scores poorly in a module at their own fault may feel unhappy and extend this feeling when they are completing NSS. In other words, a high perceived cost (a student perceived as being treated badly) may stimulate negative attitudes and may negatively affect NSS and vice versa. This issue must be considered in the context of human behaviour as explained by prospect theory, which holds that people value positive and negative experiences very differently (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Usually, negative experiences carry greater psychological weight than positive ones (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). It is to be expected that students are not balanced in their assessments as they are quicker to recall negative experiences than positive experiences. Therefore, universities have an incentive to ensure nothing goes wrong at all, especially in the exit term when NSSs are completed. It is important to note that student experience has become a nucleus part of higher education in terms of policy, student-lecturer relationships, institution-lecturer relationships, and higher education institutions and

government relationships (Sabri, 2011). Thus, universities take student experience seriously for these reasons.

Integral to social exchange theory is the norm of reciprocity whereby the exchange expectancy is related to some standard of equivalence (Gouldner, 1960). In this context, if the norm is violated (for any reason, such as strong negative emotions of anger, frustration, or dissatisfaction – which may be unintended), NSS scores, in turn, are negatively affected. We argue that this issue gives rise to the notion of the customerization of students – treating students like customers in order to keep them happy all the time. This article, in the findings section, provides evidence to support the use of social exchange theory as a theoretical basis for understanding students' behaviour in completing the NSS, which clearly demonstrates reciprocity in social exchange.

Research Methods

The study adopts a qualitative interpretivist method for the data analysis. This means that words are used to interpret social reality. This methodological approach provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Cresswell, 2013) and leads to the discovery of richly detailed narratives of participants' experiences (Fassinger, 2001). Furthermore, given that the research is exploratory in nature and seeks to examine the 'customerization' of university students in the UK as well as the impact of reciprocity and social exchange behaviour on NSS outcomes, the qualitative method has been considered the most appropriate one for this study. The qualitative approach represents the participants' opinions very accurately (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000) and helps give an understanding of reality in a wide range of circumstances (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Data Sources

We considered it vital to identify a data collection tool that would be consistent with the qualitative interpretivist method; therefore, the multi-method qualitative study approach was chosen. This method encourages the use of multiple data sources (Saunders et al., 2012) and essentially uses a mixture of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. With the aim of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, participants' information was coded (Bryman, 2012). The data for this study was collected across three universities in London and was carried out over three months. One of the universities is an established research-focused institution, and the other two are post-1992 institutions with a stronger emphasis on teaching. In order to address the objective of this research, three focus group interviews (Table 1) and 31 semi-structured interviews (Table 2) were conducted. While the focus group approach helped us to obtain the participants' perceptions, rich experiences, and reactions, which would not have been feasible using other methods (Sim & Waterfield, 2019), the semi-structured interview approach allowed access to some important and hidden facts about the phenomenon under study (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

While the participants in the focus group interviews were all lecturers, the participants in the semi-structured interviews were lecturers and students, and they were interviewed at different times and using different platforms. We ensured that the students were all level-six students who had just completed their NSS exercise, and the lecturers were course leaders and faculty members who are directly or indirectly involved in getting students to complete NSSs.

Insert Table 1 about here

Participants were sought through the personal contacts of the researchers, the gatekeeper process, and phone calls using the snowballing technique, which involves judgemental or purposive sampling (Silverman, 2006). Purposive sampling assumes that a researcher has a

clear and reasonable understanding of what sample size needs to be used and consequently approaches the potential sample size and gatekeepers (Patton, 2015). Purposive sampling thus encourages selecting the cases (level-six students who had just completed NSSs and course leaders and faculty members working in this context) that would best enable us to achieve the study's primary objective. Most of the participants (approximately 90%) are home or domestic students. Only around 10% of the participants were international students.

Insert Table 2 about here

The participants were asked the same questions at different times and locations to reduce any chance of bias. The participants' details are written in pseudonyms in order to preserve their anonymity. All the interviews were conducted in English, and the duration of each interview was between 60 and 90 minutes (approximately). All the interviews were audio-recorded (only with the permission of the interviewees) following the interview procedures, except for nine participants who declined permission to record their voices. In these cases, we took extensive field notes and ensured that quotations were captured verbatim. After having completed three different focus group interviews and 23 individual semi-structured interviews, and after having analysed the emerging data we discovered that the themes were recurring and that further data collection would be unlikely to uncover new themes. However, in order to improve the study's reliability and to ensure that no important theme would be left uncovered, an additional eight 'confirmatory' interviews were conducted, resulting in 31 interviews being carried out in total. The findings of the eight 'confirmatory' interviews corroborated the themes found in the previous 23 interviews, with no new emerging issues. This means that the point that Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 61) describe as '*theoretical saturation*' was reached.

Data Analysis

We used an iterative approach whereby we moved back and forth between the data, relevant theory, and interpretations (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis then commenced with the inductive

formulation of codes that emerged from the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read meticulously in order to gain a holistic understanding of the interview discussions. The analysis followed a systematic approach, consistent with the recommendations of Pratt (2009). The transcripts were manually and independently coded by paraphrasing the statements of the participants into sentences, words, or phrases written in different ink colours. These groupings eventually became the themes. Writing the participants' statements into sentences, words, or phrases using various colours and papers highlighted the full statements and conversations of the participants within the transcripts. Consequently, the themes were selected based on the statements that were the most representative, rich, and descriptive. Each of these themes were subsequently analysed. To avoid excessive and redundant quotations, we present only representative quotations designed to demonstrate the consistency of the participants' views, experiences, and opinions. It is hoped that the contextual details and insights provided in this study will stimulate further research into this important area of study. Below are the study's key findings.

Analysis of the Findings

The findings shed light on the 'customerization' of students and their behaviour in terms of completing NSSs. The analysis also provides insights into the acceptance (by the participants) of NSS as a perfect barometer for measuring the quality of teaching and academic standards without bias. The three key themes that emerged in the data are: the NSS as an inadequate barometer of quality and standards; the customerization of students, and reciprocity.

The NSS as an Inadequate Barometer of Quality and Standards

The experiences recounted by the participants in this study suggest that NSS cannot be considered as an ideal barometer for measuring teaching quality and academic standards in universities. The participants (all lecturers) expressed their dismay at students' unreasonable expectations, which often affect NSS outcomes. For example, one participant said:

Students' expectations are higher than what they get, and this affects their evaluation of the cost of education and what they are getting...it affects the way they complete the NSS. They evaluate what they get against what they expect. (FGP 1, Participant 008)

Some students believe that paying in excess of £9,000 for tuition fees means that they have paid for the stress and hard work involved in achieving academic success and expect studying to be very easy. Another participant commented:

Yes. Some of the students expect to be spoon-fed...even to the point of expecting lecturers to write their coursework for them. I had a meeting with one student who refused to participate in a group presentation, which was part of the assessment. After I had explained the importance of her participation, she said, 'But I paid £9,300 for my tuition'. They don't want to put in the hard work! They believe they have paid for it, and they just take it out on NSS. (FGP 1, Participant 001)

Some students' expectations are inconsistent with the reality and rigour of university education – they expect it to be easy. As one participant mentioned, '*I do not think students know what the expected standards are. Their expectations are overly high. I think they expect learning to be fun and a walk in the park*' (LLU, Participant 1). As a result, the students measure their expectations against the reality of what they get when they are completing NSSs. Another participant also criticised using NSS as a measure of quality of teaching and overall academic standards:

NSS itself is flawed and not a good method of measuring the actual standard and quality of lecture delivery. No matter what you do, some students will never be satisfied, especially when the module is a difficult one in their eyes. Another challenge is the students' perceptions of the lecturers. So, apart from the teaching, do the students like the lecturers? That also affects their evaluation during NSS. (FGP 2, Participant 010)

Other participants commented on varying students' interests and the influence of peers in completing NSS, which is often biased. One participant commented:

Students' interests differ from the lecturers' expected professionalism, which influences the students' perceptions of quality and study evaluation. Students complete NSS based on their own interests and not the lecturers' or the university's expected professionalism and standards. Does NSS perfectly capture the students' experience of the quality of teaching and overall academic standards? I would say no. (LRU, Participant 004)

Another participant commented on the problem of peer influence:

There are opinion influencers among the students, and they also influence perceptions and student assessments. So, I do not think that NSS is a holistic perception of all the students. (LLU, Participant 003)

Many students (16) agree that they do not consider their level-four and level-five experiences and overly discount prior experiences when completing NSS in level six. One student said:

I have just completed the NSS, and to be honest, I completed it based on my second-term level-six experience because that is very recent and fresh in my memory (SSU, participant 003).

Another student commented:

When completing NSS, I just considered my present and most recent experience, most probably my first-and second-term level-six experiences. (SLU, Participant 6)

These findings reflect a strong 'present bias' in the students who complete the survey. A lecturer described most students as 'short-termist', as they only consider present and most recent experiences when completing NSS:

Most students are short-termist. They only remember their present and most recent experiences, and they take it out on NSS, especially if those experiences did not

conform with their expectations. So, NSS cannot be a perfect instrument to measure the quality of teaching and academic standards. (LRU, Participant 002)

This finding is supported by research undertaken to measure the experience of international students who typically face a diminishment of satisfaction between the first and final years of study (Merola *et al.*, 2022). It is therefore likely that the poor experience in the final year outweighs the better experience in the earlier years. All the lecturer participants felt that NSS is an inadequate barometer for measuring the quality of teaching and overall academic standards at universities.

The Customerization of Students

The idea of treating students as customers appeared prominently in the data and has an impact on student learning and the outcomes of NSS. All the lecturer participants admitted that they have needed to treat students as customers, which is a growing trend in contemporary higher education, especially in the UK. The quote below exemplifies that treating students as customers means that students complain about the service they receive if it does not conform with their expectations, even in terms of classroom behaviour:

I think the era of treating students purely as learners is gone. Nowadays, they are customers who complain about the service they receive if it does not correspond with what they expect. Some of them behave inappropriately in class because they see themselves as customers who should always be pleased. For example, some of them use their mobile phones while the lecture is proceeding. We try to keep them happy at all costs, otherwise the outcome of NSS will be horrible. (FGP 3, Participant 003)

Keeping students happy at all costs means that the traditional view of a university as a repository of knowledge where lecturers serve as gatekeepers to business ventures and are purveyors of educational products has changed – they now try to please their customers (students) at all costs (Baker *et al.*, 2008; Marlantes, 2000). Another participant added:

They see themselves as customers who have paid for the teaching and learning service they receive from the university. They form their opinions based on their expectations. For example, some students question why they undertake certain modules that they perceive as irrelevant to their degree programme. They then take out their frustration on NSS if the explanation provided is not satisfactory to them. (FGP 3, Participant 007)

The above comment provides insight into the mismatch that often occurs between what students think they need and what they get from the university. Lomas (2007) contends that lecturers should provide students with what they need and not what they want. Another participant commented on factors that could influence student evaluations of academic standards:

For me, I think it is inadequate and not normal that students evaluate the quality of teaching and the overall academic standards...because many factors could influence their judgement. It could be that a particular lecturer has upset them with a difficult assignment task, or they have just received a low mark for a particular module, or they do not like a particular lecturer or some other academic or non-academic related issue. Lecturers, mostly the course leaders, then resolve to treat them as customers to make them happy so that they can complete NSS favourably. (LSU, Participant 003)

Another lecturer describes students as customers that must always be satisfied because ‘the customer is always right’:

Students are customers, and we must always make them happy because ‘the customer is always right’. You make your customers happy if you want them to write a good review about your products – the same way you must keep your students happy if you want them to complete the NSS favourably. Sometimes, we bend the rules to make them happy...I have done it a couple of times. (LRU, Participant 002)

The assumption that ‘the customer is always right’ means that students are always pampered and kept happy even when they are wrong. This approach, according to Ferris (2002), is dangerous as it threatens students’ learning and may prevent them from getting corrective feedback. Student participants have divergent opinions about this theme. While the majority believe that they are customers because they pay for the teaching and learning service, only a few (three) believe that the educational service is unlike other services and should not be likened to other services where ‘the customer is always right’. The following quotations typify the opinions of students who perceived themselves as customers:

Well, I think the service is quite expensive. It is well over £27,000 over three years, and I must be treated well for paying that much. Yes, I am the university’s customer...and I have my expectations. (SLU, Participant 005)

The above quotation reveals the impact of the high tuition fees paid by students on the customerization of students. Another student participant said:

I think I am a customer because I am paying for the service, and it is not cheap. My review or evaluation of the service depends on whether I am happy with the service I get from the university...I will work hard, but all the same, I don’t expect to fail because I paid a lot of money. (SRU, participant 005)

This participant’s opinion corresponds with a lecturer’s comment:

Many students see themselves as customers. Some of them feel that they must pass without putting in the hard work simply because they paid a lot of money for their course. Their poor performance in their studies, which is mostly their own fault, often affects their evaluation during NSS feedback. We just try to make them happy as much as we can. (LRU, Participant 002)

Only three student participants believe that even though the universities offer teaching and learning services, students should not be treated as customers. This participant's quotation typifies their views:

I would not like to be treated as a customer because this is an educational institution and not a profit-making company where 'the customers is always right'. I believe that treating me like a customer will affect my orientation and learning...and even the respect I have for the lecturers. (SSU, Participant 007)

The quotations above reveal how the crucial traditional student-lecturer relationship, which was teacher-learner based, has shifted to a new one according to which students are treated as customers. This means that students are customers of universities and consumers of educational services in the form of programmes of study. This notion has been criticised as unhealthy for academic rigour and excellence by many researchers (Bay & Daniel, 2001; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Franz, 1998).

Reciprocity Behaviour

Reciprocity is evident in the participants' accounts. It tends to create a relationship of 'give and take', which is one of basic tenets of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), between the students and the university. Many students commented that their evaluation of the teaching quality and academic standards depends on the grades that they receive in their modules. One participant said:

I based my NSS evaluation on the grades I got on my modules. If the grades were good, my evaluation was good, and if not, I gave a bad evaluation...for me, it's like 'give me good grades, and I give you a good NSS evaluation'. Frankly, that is me. (SSU, Participant 004)

The discretion and decision of this participant are based mostly on reciprocity of good gestures, according to which the participant is willing to complete NSS favourably only if they get good

grades. This approach resonates with Thibault and Kelly's (1959) argument that people, either consciously or subconsciously, apply economic principles when evaluating relationships or when conducting analyses. Even though students are supposed to consider their experiences from level four to level six when completing NSS, all the lecturer participants believe that students only consider how they are treated around the time NSSs are completed, so the lecturers patronise them in exchange for favourable evaluations in NSS at this time. The quotations below help illustrate this point:

Many students don't consider the good things that we have been doing since level four. They just want to be treated like a 'king' in exchange for a good evaluation in NSS. I give good grades and organise some social events, especially around NSS time...and that is what I have been doing as the course leader. (LSU, Participant 002)

I just overwhelm them with different activities around the time of NSS evaluations. Sometimes, I introduce a little prize competition to make them happy so that they give us a good evaluation. Since students are now the judges who pass verdicts on teaching quality and academic standards, I have no choice but to devise methods of keeping them happy (such as organising various events and making sure that I give good grades) in exchange for a good NSS evaluation...and this is on top of my normal and standard duties to them. (FGP 1, Participant 009)

The exchange reported by the participants is bidirectional – something is given and something is returned. This phenomenon has caused some lecturer participants to question the veracity of NSS as a reliable method of measuring students' experiences of teaching quality and academic standards. One participant said:

Students want good grades (even when some of them have not worked for them) so they will give us good scores in NSS...and lecturers sometimes bend the rules to make them happy to get good NSS scores. How can NSS then be an honest method of measuring teaching quality? (FGP 2, Participant 004)

Another participant added:

I think the exchange and the give-and-take behaviour of ‘treat me well with good grades, and I will give you good NSS scores’ is understood by all students and lecturers. For me, that is what invalidates NSS as an adequate measure of academic standards. (FGP 2, Participant 006)

For the participants, reciprocity behaviour between students and lecturers negates the purpose of NSS and allows students to (most of the time subconsciously) compromise the standards and purpose of NSS.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented above were drawn from three universities in London, and no particular claims are made for the study’s representativeness of all the universities in the UK. Nevertheless, this study provides valuable insights into some critical issues concerning NSS. The study raises some crucial questions about the logic and credence of NSS (a generic survey instrument) as an appropriate barometer for measuring teaching quality and about whether students are credible assessors of teaching quality and academic standards. The study, based on the participants’ views, found NSS to be an inappropriate barometer for measuring the quality of teaching and academic standards due to students’ unreasonable expectations. Many students expect to be treated like VIPs with special privileges rather than students because they paid high tuition fees for their courses. When students are treated like the students they really are, the universities then suffer the unpleasant consequences in the form of negative feedback from the students in NSS. Students typically evaluate what they get compared with what they expect. Their evaluations in NSSs then suffer, even if what they get is the required quality and standards. This means that lecturers and/or institutions may perform very well in providing students with the required quality of teaching and academic standards and still perform poorly in terms of NSS outcomes if the students’ expectations are incompatible with what they get

from their university. This finding reveals a serious and fixed bias (on the part of the assessors – the students) in the completion of NSSs. It aligns with Roxa et al.'s (2021) argument that student ratings may not necessarily reflect the quality of learning and teaching that they receive. Similarly, Bell and Brooks (2018) also question the appropriateness of students as qualified assessors of the quality of their education. It is like a footballer officiating a match in which he is a player.

This phenomenon speaks volumes of the reasons why students are treated like customers. This study highlighted the prevalence of treating students like customers, who must be kept happy and satisfied at all times and at all costs so they will give good reviews of their universities' teaching quality and academic standards when completing NSS. This is deemed important for the university's image and its ability to recruit more students. Even though treating students like customers based on the assumption that 'the customer is always right' is dangerous to students' learning and will prevent them from getting corrective feedback (Ferris, 2002), the current higher-education system in the UK has moved away from the traditional university system to a new dynamic in which students are considered as customers of universities and consumers of educational services in the form of programmes of study. Many researchers (e.g. Bay & Daniel, 2001; Clayson & Haley, 2005; Franz, 1998) have described this notion as unhealthy for academic rigour and academic excellence. Furthermore, researchers have found that keeping students happy has resulted in lecturers lowering academic standards and rigour in order to meet students' expectations (Beech & Wolstencroft, 2022; Pickford, 2013). This study thus argues that the customerization of students and higher education will drag the fine UK academic system into unhealthy retail practices and will jeopardise students' learning and development.

The study also showed that reciprocity, a relationship of 'give and take' between students and universities is prevalent. The discretion and decisions of students are based mostly on

reciprocity of good gestures, according to which students are willing to give good reviews (to complete NSSs favourably) only if they get good grades. This finding evidences the basic tenets of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), which focuses on voluntary exchanges of values or favours by people and organisations in their attempts to maximise their gains in a social system (Calhoun et al., 2007). Students base their evaluations of teaching quality and academic standards on receiving good grades and being treated very well. Lecturers and universities, as a result of these expectations, then resolve to patronise the students with good grades and various social events in exchange for favourable evaluations in NSS. This reciprocity raises serious ethical issues and affects academic excellence, which stakeholders must address.

Implications, Limitations, and an Agenda for Future Research

This study's findings have several potential implications for practice. The image of UK higher education may be adversely affected if the current regime of NSS is not reviewed. One argument could be if it makes the lecturers and universities to treat students well, however compromised, the reciprocity is right. However, there is strong evidence that such behaviour threatens students' learning and prevents them from getting constructive and corrective feedback (Ferris, 2002). It may also negatively affect the value of a university as a citadel of learning and may reduce the status of a lecturer to that of a customer service assistant.

As a student satisfaction measure has a much-needed purpose, the question is how the NSS exercise can be improved. If the UK were to follow the example of many other countries by restyling the NSS as a post-experience survey, the extent of the reciprocal relationship between students and lecturers may become less direct as lecturers would have less need to 'treat the students like kings' as they would not be studying modules while responding to the survey. In terms of improving league table rankings as an aid for students' university choices, reducing the weight on NSS as a measure of student satisfaction and using measures with multiple

touchpoints (such as the International Student Barometer) may be helpful as these measures better reflect the entire student journey and overcome the present bias identified in NSS.

Despite the important contributions of this study, it does have some limitations, several of which lend themselves to directions for future research. From a methodological point of view, it is worth noting that this is a qualitative study with a small sample size. Future research may employ a quantitative approach with a large sample size across the UK. This will promote generalisability. Similarly, we argue that many students make their NSS judgements based on reciprocity considerations. However, we cannot assume this position applies to all UK students. Thus, future research with greater geographical coverage and larger sample size may confirm or refute this argument. Furthermore, the use of Microsoft Teams as a medium for collecting data via semi-structured interviews and focus groups has some limitations in terms of developing a rapport with the participants and identifying non-verbal cues, which would not have been problems in face-to-face interviews. Future research may conduct interviews face to face in order to capture non-verbal cues and establish an unhindered natural rapport. Finally, Zepke (2018) highlights the importance of student engagement and the relationship between student engagement and quality of teaching. Future research may examine the impact of student engagement on student satisfaction and overall NSS.

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Table 1: Focus Group Brief

Focus Group Participants (FGP)	No of Participants	University Affiliations	Duration of the Interview
FGP 1	10	University of Sky	60 minutes
FGP 2	12	University of Land	85 minutes
FGP 3	10	University of Rivers	95 minutes

Table 2: Semi-Structured Interviews Brief

Serial no	Codes	University Affiliations	Gender	Positions
1	LSU 1	University of Sky	Female	Course leader
2	LSU 2	University of Sky	Female	Course leader
3	LSU 3	University of Sky	Male	Course leader
4	LSU 4	University of Sky	Female	Faculty member
5	SSU 1	University of Sky	Male	Student
6	SSU 2	University of Sky	Male	Student
7	SSU 3	University of Sky	Female	Student
8	SSU 4	University of Sky	Female	Student
9	SSU 5	University of Sky	Female	Student
10	SSU 6	University of Sky	Male	Student
11	SSU 7	University of Sky	Female	Student
12	LLU 1	University of Land	Female	Faculty member
13	LLU 2	University of Land	Male	Course leader
14	LLU 3	University of Land	Male	Course leader
15	LLU 4	University of Land	Male	Faculty member

16	SLU 1	University of Land	Female	Student
17	SLU 2	University of Land	Female	Student
18	SLU 3	University of Land	Female	Student
19	SLU 4	University of Land	Male	Student
20	SLU 5	University of Land	Female	Student
21	SLU 6	University of Land	Male	Student
22	LRU 1	University of Rivers	Female	Course leader
23	LRU 2	University of Rivers	Female	Faculty member
24	LRU 3	University of Rivers	Male	Course leader
25	LRU 4	University of Rivers	Male	Course leader
26	SRU 1	University of Rivers	Male	Student
27	SRU 2	University of Rivers	Female	Student
28	SRU 3	University of Rivers	Female	Student
29	SRU 4	University of Rivers	Female	Student
30	SRU 5	University of Rivers	Male	Student
31	SRU 6	University of Rivers	Male	Student
Key guide: LSU means lecturer at University of Sky, while SSU means student at University of Sky LLU means lecturer at University of Land, while SLU means student at University of Land LRU means lecturer at University of Rivers, while SRU means student at University of Rivers				