Comparative analysis of National Student Survey responses: Exploring the perspectives and feedback of undergraduate sport students

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Higher education is constantly evolving to meet the demands of education, industry, and student's needs. Despite the ever-changing landscape, limited literature has investigated the changes which occur as students develop from the onset (Level 4) to the end (Level 6) of their undergraduate studies. **Aim:** To investigate the experiences and perceptions of students enrolled on sports-based undergraduate degree programmes at a UK-based Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Method: A total of 261 students responded to the National Student Survey (NSS), consisting of Sports Therapy (ST, n = 93, 35.5 %), Sports Coaching and Management (SCM, n = 91, 34.7 %), and Sport and Exercise Science students (SES, n = 77, 29.8 %). The cohort was then analysed by year group (Level 4 (n = 105, 40 %), Level 5 (n = 88, 33.6 %), and Level 6 (n = 69, 26.3 %).

Results: Significant differences were observed for Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice, and Overall Course Satisfaction ($p \leq 0.05$). Pairwise comparisons revealed Level 4 students had significantly higher satisfaction when compared against Levels 5 and 6 for the sub-sections ($p \leq 0.001$ to 0.032), however, no differences were observed between Levels 5 and 6 throughout. Qualitative responses alluded to the rationale behind significant differences for each sub-section and question, such as assessment rubrics and audio feedback.

Conclusion: One aim of the NSS survey is to provide data that supports universities to improve the student experience. Whilst the large number of respondents (<340,000 in 2023) translates to a highly reliable tool for gathering large quantities of information, this information is arguably given without deeper consideration of the many factors that may influence the student's responses. Herein, the potential value in investigating individual degree programmes more closely and of considering any differences between year-groups is highlighted. The utility of adding a qualitative element to better establish the reasoning behind each survey answer is also discussed.

Collectively, this may drive a feedback mechanism that can allow students and HEI's to derive more informative outcomes and better decision making thereafter.

1. Introduction

1.1. Higher education landscape

Higher education (HE) is widely accepted to be the pinnacle of education, both in helping to support academic development but also providing a constant source of knowledge exchange, ultimately benefitting both individuals and society as a whole (Tilak, 2008). Given the massification of HE, and the ever-growing costs associated with living as a HE student, institutions are under increasing pressure to retain all students from the commencement to conclusion of their degree programmes (Crosling, Thomas, & Heagney, 2008). The Office for National Statistics, 2023 reported that the average student had seen an increase of 17 % for general living costs (£924 in 2022 to £1078 in 2023), with 92 % of students experiencing higher living costs, and 91 % were "somewhat or very worried" about further rising costs (OnS, 2023). These issues are not just UK specific, with issues also reported in other developed countries such as the United States, where the proportion of HE educated individuals in the population is falling behind other nations for the first time in its history (Campbell and Mislevy, 2013). Back in the UK, it is reported that ~50 % of income for most major HE Institutions (HEI), comes from student tuition fees (Universities UK 2017–18). For other HEIs student tuition fees may contribute to <50 % of income, as is the case in the present study. Subsequently, increased scrutiny has been given to the quality of encompassed teaching, learning and assessment in the recent decades (McDonnell and Curtis, 2014).

Perhaps given the increase in student fees, a more outcome-focused approach is evident (Jones, 2018; Ostrom, Bitner, & Burkhard, 2011), with students driven to seek the best value for money. One of the most popular tools available to potential students are easily accessible online 'ranking tables' and student survey data (Tomlinson, 2017). Progressively these tools, which strongly centre around student satisfaction, return as key foci and trackable metrics for many HEIs, partly driven by a desire to positively impact public recognition and manage general perception (Salleh, Azman, & Zahari, 2021), including that of the students. Where universities may have the dual purpose of increasing individual and societal knowledge at their core (Guilbault, 2018), such student-driven feedback models, within a paid system supported by student loans, instead serves largely to reinforce the position of students as customers.

1.2. Teaching, learning and assessment for sport students

Of relevance to this study, undergraduate sport students are expected to study a broad range of practical-based disciplines, with content typically delivered to small classes across multiple face-to-face campus settings (lectures, seminars, laboratory practical, and workshops) (Keogh, Gowthorp, & McLean, 2017; United Kingdom Quality Assurance Agency, 2019). In more recent times, the emphasis placed on teaching, learning, assessment, and perhaps most importantly, overall course satisfaction, was further highlighted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many HE programmes delivered using an online-only approach (McCullogh, Allen, Boocock, Peart and Hayman, 2022). In the case of sport courses, many practical sessions were simply removed or replaced with online demonstrations and workshops due to the restrictions that were put in place.

Finlay, Tinnion and Simpson (2022) investigated the perceptions of undergraduate (Level 4 and 5) sports students following periods of both virtual-learning only and blended-learning, perhaps as expected with a vocational course, students significantly preferred blended learning with greater overall course satisfaction (3.55 ± 1.11 versus 3.93 ± 0.99, $p = 0.033$, $d = 0.36$). In response to between-year differences, the authors observed increased satisfaction for the areas of organisation, teaching, learning and assessment, alongside the more social aspects of student voice, academic support and learning community. Offering an explanation for the increased satisfaction in Level 4 studies opposed to Level 5, the authors highlighted that Level 5 students had the reference of a 'normal year' before the study was conducted and restrictions were put in place. This conflicts with the potential discrepancies between expectations and experience observed upon entering Level 4 by others (Parkinson and Forrester, 2004) which may promote stress initially (Leese, 2010) and later a loss of confidence and self-esteem (Haggis, 2006; Longden, 2004). Alternatively, the evolution of course structure from foundation to application, helps to develop competencies required as a sports graduate via the implementation of entrustable professional activities (EPA) (Bradley, Board, Archer and Morgans, 2022) and perhaps may influence student perception. However, no qualitative responses were gathered in the study, except for a final qualitative box to summarise the experience of the virtual learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, no direct analysis could suggest to the differences between-year groups for areas of teaching, learning, assessment and organisation within normal day-to-day studies. Both Finlay et al. (2022) and McCullogh et al. (2022) agree that as we progress from periods of virtual learning only, the student experience need to be closely observed, as we move into a more flexible and disputably open approach of teaching, learning and assessment. In doing so, the student experience also needs to appreciate individual learning experiences (as experienced prior and through COVID-19) which may substantially impact the perspectives of students both independently and collectively. Nevertheless, research exploring the teaching and learning experiences of students has been limited, despite raised concerns prior to the emphasis that the pandemic brought (Lane and Whyte, 2006).

The HE sector, as suggested by Parkes and Fletcher (2016), is subject to an increasing challenge of balancing teaching and learning expectations alongside academic workloads. They contend that given such parameters and expectations, it is not unsurprising that students feedback on factors such as assessment is frequently negative. Similarly, Mulliner and Tucker, 2017 offer that despite

assessment feedback being considered central to student experience and learning, many students across the sector commonly report dissatisfaction with the feedback they receive. Additionally, there is evidence which suggested that assessment was the most significant pedagogical driver of efficient and effective online learning (Dison and Padayachee, 2022), indicating that although assessment and feedback is reported to be frequently negative, it is a substantial factor of effective learning, both online and in person. Correspondingly, Carless and Boud (2018) infer that the persistent dissatisfaction with assessment and feedback from both student and staff advances the need for new ways of thinking surrounding assessment and feedback, especially in a post-COVID-19 landscape. However, it is not currently clear if these issues can be identified by means of a survey which is currently administered to the general student population. It is therefore intuitive to suggest that if the needs and perceptions of the student, using the data derived from perception surveys, are better understood, then changes within the curriculum can be tailored to the requirements of students, thus maintaining a harmonious balance between overall student satisfaction, and the learning opportunities or process with which the students engage. In doing so, this avenue may present an opportunity for students to not only feel heard but to better engage with the learning process and as a result gain a deeper understanding of the current programme of study (Biggs and Tang, 2011).

1.3. National student survey (NSS)

To ensure that the highest quality of perception and opinion data is collected, the use of a survey-based research design is required. This allows for the effective collection of a large amount of data (Kelley et al., 2003) and deeper exploration of the contextual issues which currently face HEIs. Arguably, the most well-known student survey is the National Student Survey (NSS, 2023), data annually collected in the second semester of Level 6 studies. In 2023, the NSS reported over 340,000 respondents, a 71.5 % response rate. A particular strength of the NSS is the high reliability ($r = 0.86$) which occurs due to the large number of students/respondents (Cheng and Marsh, 2010). The implementation of a large-scale survey allows for the classification student perceptions across eight sub-sections culminating with an overall course satisfaction rating. Prospective students are encouraged to review their institutional choices prior to attending an HEI, however, it should be noted that the NSS is not a direct measure of quality as it only engages with the students' personal experiences (O'Leary et al., 2006). Furthermore, the NSS is only conducted with departing Level 6 students, who are asked to recall their entire course and rank their overall satisfaction. Changes are then made to modules and whole programmes based on this cohort, without considering the experiences of those currently engaged at Levels 4, 5 or 6, presuming their perceptions to be identical. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to conduct an appropriately scaled student survey within an undergraduate degree population, who were all enrolled on a sport-based degree programme at the time of data collection. The primary research questions are to A) investigate if Level of study has a significant effect on the satisfaction of students, B) identify the core areas where student satisfaction is most likely to impact overall student satisfaction and C) explore the qualitative responses and reasoning for individual responses.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

To address the research questions, the present study utilised an online self-administered survey to examine the experiences of undergraduate students across cohorts of Level 4, 5 and 6. The survey was produced and distributed using JISC online surveys (formerly Bristol Online Surveys) and could be accessed voluntarily and anonymously by using an online weblink, QR code or, completed in person. This promoted a degree of diversity, based on individual needs and preferences.

2.2. Participants

In total, 261 undergraduate students at a North-West HEI volunteered for the present study. Students were enrolled on one of three-sports degree programmes; Sports Therapy (ST, n = 93, 35.5 %), Sports Coaching and Management (SCM, n = 91, 34.7 %), and Sport and Exercise Science (SES, n = 77, 29.8 %). Analysis between year-groups resulted in the following sub-groups, Level 4 (n = 105, 40 % [ST = 29, SCM = 34, SES = 42]), Level 5, 33.6 % (n = 88 [ST = 35, SCM = 29, SES = 24]), and Level 6 (n = 69, 26.3 % [ST = 29, SCM = 28, SES = 12]). Prior to participation, students were informed of the risks and benefits associated with the study and provided written informed consent. Institutional ethical approval for this study was obtained and all procedures were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (2013). The current study adhered to the BERA guidelines and GDPR regulations in relation to participants privacy and data storage (Bera, 2018).

2.3. Adapted NSS survey

The content of the survey replicated that of the NSS which has previously been shown to be effective in evaluating student perception and is currently the most recognised student perceptions survey (Finlay et al., 2022). The 27-item survey anonymously assessed nine aspects of Student Satisfaction (Teaching on my Course, Learning Opportunities, Assessment and Feedback, Academic Support, Organisation and Management, Learning Resources, Student Voice, and Overall Satisfaction) using a 1 (definitely disagree) to 5 (definitely agree) Likert-scale. Participants were instructed to answer all questions. In addition to the Likert-scale, the survey also provided the participants with an optional textbox for each question should they wish to expand on their perspectives in written format.

2.4. Statistical analysis

Comparisons between year-groups (Likert scores) were analysed via a Kruskall-Wallis test, with post-hoc comparisons completed with Dunn-Bonferroni correction (Mircioiu and Atkinson, 2017). Eta squared (η^2) effect sizes were calculated for Kruskal-Wallis tests and *r* for post-hoc comparisons, which were interpreted as small 0.01 and 0.1, medium 0.06 and 0.3, or large 0.14 and 0.5, respectively, according to Cohen (1992). Statistical significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$, exact p values are given in the text and tables. All survey data was exported and collated using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corp, Redmond, Washington, USA) and subsequently analysed using Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences Version 29 (SPSS, IBM, Chicago, IL, USA).

3. Results

Overall, there were no between year-group differences observed in the present study for the following sections of the NSS survey; Teaching on my course; Learning Opportunities; Academic Support; Organisation and Management; Learning Resources, and Learning Community (range, $p = 0.195$–0.424). The results presented in Table 1 indicate that between-year group differences were present, with students reporting significantly higher overall scores ($p \leq 0.05$) for Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice, and Overall Course Satisfaction.

Post-hoc comparisons revealed that Level 4 students reported significantly higher satisfaction for Assessment and Feedback when compared against Level 5 (positivity difference $= +32.5$ %, Z $= 4.566$, $p < 0.001$, ES $= 0.33$) and Level 6 (positivity difference $= +29.3$ % Z $= 4.037$, $p < 0.001$, ES $= 0.31$) students, with no differences being observed when comparing Level 5 and Level 6 (positivity difference $= -3.8$ %, Z $= 0.214$, $p = 1.00$, ES $= 0.02$). Regarding Student Voice, Level 4 students reported significantly higher scores in contrast to Level 5 students (positivity difference $= +22.0$ %, Z $= 3.219$, p $= 0.004$, ES $= 0.23$) and Level 6 students (positivity difference $= 17.8$ %, Z $= 2.905$, p $= 0.011$, ES $= 0.22$). No differences were observed between Level 5 and Level 6 (positivity difference $= -4.2$ %, Z $= 0.094$, p $= 1.00$, ES $= 0.01$). The culmination of the NSS survey requires students to score their overall experience from 1 to 5 (lowest satisfaction – highest satisfaction). Overall satisfaction was statistically significant between year groups with a small-medium effect size ($p = 0.010$, ES $= 0.03$), with Level 4 students scoring the experience higher than Level 5 (Z $= 3.00$, p $= 0.008$, ES $= 0.22$), but not Level 6 (Z $= 1.605$, p $= 0326$, ES $= 0.12$) with no significant difference between Level 5 and Level 6 p $= 0.747$, ES $= 0.09$).

Table 2 displays responses given by the study's participants. These optional open-ended short-text responses provide greater understanding of some perceived opportunities or challenges the students had concerning Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice and Overall Satisfaction. The quotations provided in the table are not the ones considered in the discussion.

4. Discussion

The current study employed a survey-based research design to explore the perceptions of undergraduate sport students as they progress through the journey that is HE education. The results of the survey, indicate that Overall Course Satisfaction was significantly greater for Level 4 students, in contrast to lower scores for Levels 5 and 6, respectively. To assess the root cause of these changes, between year-groups were analysed post-hoc, revealing that sections regarding Assessment and Feedback, as well as Student Voice, were scored significantly higher by those currently undergoing Level 4 studies, opposed to the students at Levels 5 and 6. One strength of the current study is the addition of qualitative data in response to each survey sub-section. These optional responses allude to some given reasons as to why there were significant differences located in the Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice and Overall Satisfaction.

4.1. Assessment and feedback

Within the NSS survey, Assessment and Feedback continues to represent a lower a scoring section/component nationwide (Burgess, Senior, & Moores, 2018). Broadly, Rust (2002) states that for students to comply with assessment requirements, they need criteria that

Table 1

Median ($\pm$ interquartile range) sub-section scores for Level 4, 5, and 6 students. Values closer to 1 representing lowest satisfaction, and values closer to 5 representing greater satisfaction. *Indicates significant difference (p $\leq$ 0.05), ES = effect size, eta squared (η^2) *Notes: The percentage of respondents who gave the two most positive answers to the survey questions is provided in parenthesis for each individual level of study.*

	Level 4 (n = 104)	Level 5 (n = 88)	Level 6 (n = 69)	*p*	ES (η^2)
Teaching on my course	4.00 ± 0.50 (64.4 %)	4.00 ± 0.50 (53.4 %)	4.00 ± 0.50 (66.6 %)	0.195	0.00
Learning Opportunities	4.00 ± 0.60 (70.3 %)	4.00 ± 0.60 (62.5 %)	4.00 ± 0.60 (70.9 %)	0.402	0.00
Assessment and Feedback	4.00 ± 0.70 (71.1 %)	3.80 ± 1.00 (38.6 %)	3.8 ± 1.30 (41.8 %)	<0.001*	0.09
Academic Support	4.00 ± 0.60 (68.3 %)	4.00 ± 1.00 (54.6 %)	4.00 ± 0.60 (59.4 %)	0.329	0.00
Organisation and Management	4.00 ± 0.67 (71.1 %)	4.00 ± 0.92 (55.7 %)	4.00 ± 1.00 (62.3 %)	0.241	0.00
Learning Resources	4.00 ± 1.00 (71.2 %)	4.00 ± 0.92 (64.8 %)	4.00 ± 1.00 (72.3 %)	0.308	0.00
Learning Community	4.00 ± 1.00 (70.1 %)	4.00 ± 1.00 (68.1 %)	4.00 ± 1.00 (69.5 %)	0.424	0.00
Student Voice	3.75 ± 0.75 (48.1 %)	3.50 ± 1.00 (26.1 %)	3.50 ± 1.13 (30.3 %)	0.001*	0.04
Overall Course Satisfaction	**4.00 ± 1.00 (92.4 %)**	**4.00 ± 0.00 (84.1 %)**	**4.00 ± 1.00 (82.6 %)**	**0.010***	**0.03**

Table 2

Example qualitative feedback provided by students across Levels 4, 5, and 6. Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice and Student Satisfaction sub-sections are emphasised based on significant differences ($p < 0.05$) in responses (survey scores) between academic levels.

Sub-Section and question of the NSS	Agreeable Student Feedback	Disagreeable Student Feedback
Assessment and Feedback: "Marking and assessment has been fair."	*"With the feedback it is often clear to see what they mean and why they have given certain marks." (Level 5)*	*"I disagree because some assessors have been unfair in terms of group assignments. Get the same or less marks when you've done more work in comparison to someone else." (Level 4)*
Assessment and Feedback: "I have received helpful comments on my work."	*"The comments on my work always helps me in improving on those areas that needs to be improved." (Level 4)*	*"Sometimes it can be hard to understand the feedback and understand what needs to be done to correct the work." (Level 6)*
Student Voice: "I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course."	*"Different opinions are voiced which is good" (Level 4)*	*"Always done with a staff member present, feel obliged to be nice." (Level 5)*
Student Voice: "It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on."	*"Course reps are good for this." (Level 4)*	*"Not made clear" (Level 6)*
Student Satisfaction: "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course."	*"Course has been very interesting and enjoyable. Staff have been really good" (Level 4)*	*"I am happy with the quality. However, I am just unsure whether this course was actually for me. This is because my career choices are unclear and I have a range of career choices I want to explore." (Level 6)*

describe the task and a sample of the proposed quality. In this manner, it is logical that varying levels of assessment literacy and poor understanding of the assessment briefs (both written components and elements such as grade rubrics) may play a contributory role to section/component scores, one that may be observable on both an individual and year group level. This was explored in a study by Chan et al., 2021 who determined that assessment structure and grading rubric content does not always translate well or smoothly to students. This was evidenced by some participants within this study: *"Have been mostly clear but when explained as good or excellent explanation I am unsure what that specifically means." (Level 4), "Other than a general grade boundary sheet for some, wouldn't actually understand what they would be looking for either practical or essay." (Level 5), "… don't know what they have been looking for, so could have improved on 2:1's." (Level 5).* The clear concern around assessment literacy expressed by the students in this study is perhaps best explained by Bradley, Anderson and Eagle (2020), who suggest that while grading rubrics can be a positive tool in the assessment process, student engagement, clarity and the language used around them are strong contributors towards the effectiveness of understanding assessments. Indeed, students benefit from instruction and discussion around their assessment, and for assessments to be deemed successful, students require supportive pedagogy around implementation and relevance to their work (Jones, Allen, Dunn and Brooker, 2017; Stevens and Levi, 2013). In one example, the absence of student discussion surrounding the marking of example standards negated students' ability to develop knowledge and improve (Handley and Williams, 2011). Hendry, Armstrong and Bromberger (2012) later found that "teacher led marking and discussion of exemplars in class results in increased understanding of standards and higher achievement" (p.149), with students having difficulty understanding criteria in the absence of example standards. Wimshurst and Manning (2013) challenged this, reporting that students who marked example standards and provided explanation for their marks, were more successful on their own work, even in the absence of any detailed marking criteria. Collectively, it appears that while there may be room for greater clarification regarding assessment briefs, for this to be successful, active engagement from both staff and students is also required.

The lack of understanding, or comprehension, of assessment briefs was not evident for all, with the significant improvement in satisfaction regarding Assessment and Feedback for Level 4 (versus Levels 5 and 6, respectively) echoed in their written responses: *"Clear assessment brief with marking criteria." (Level 4).* However, the reason behind this variance in comprehension surrounding assessment was not directly measured in this study and may be of interest in future research.

When further considering Assessment and Feedback, audio feedback was expressed as a key positive contributor towards the communication of assessment feedback, the participants expressed how this format of feedback enabled greater comprehension: *"Certain lecturers providing verbal feedback makes it more clear to understand and improve on." (Level 4), "The use of voice comments has been very helpful." (Level 4).* Similar to other literature (Hennessy and Forrester, 2013; Lunt and Curran, 2010), the participants recorded a positive association with audio feedback. This style of feedback can improve engagement by students (Parkes and Fletcher, 2016) through providing an opportunity for more personalised, detailed responses relative to written feedback. Interestingly, positive associations with audio feedback were reported by the majority of Level 4 students, potentially contributing to the differences observed in comparison to Levels 5 and 6. Additionally, it could be argued that given that the sample are undergraduate sport students who aspire to work within front facing in-person roles, this verbal style of feedback is preferred. The nature of these roles will largely include verbal interactions and will comprise of giving feedback (i.e. to clients, players) on a daily occurrence (Finlay et al. 2022; McCullogh et al. 2022). Therefore, gaining experience of listening, interpretating, acting upon and delivering audio feedback will aid their development of skills for post HEI.

4.2. Student voice

Student Voice has become increasingly prominent within HE (Brooman et al., 2015) due to its influence on pedagogical work and contribution to the rising demands of teaching and learning (Darwin, 2016). When exploring Student Voice within this study, there were mixed perspectives, with the participants highlighting both the opportunities and challenges they face when contributing to

Student Voice. Some participants emphasised the repeated opportunities they had in being able to contribute towards the course design and access through regular feedback points: *"Surveys are given frequently." (Level 5)*, *"Regular feedback questionnares." (Level 6)*. The participants within this study are routinely provided with the opportunity to feedback per mid module each semester to provide their comments on the module, in addition to overall course and university experiences. Therefore, these responses are somewhat expected as the students are provided with frequent occasions to participate in Student Voice, and therefore are offered with openings to advise or query items which can then be used modify or improve future performance in their courses and university wide (Gormally et al., 2014). However, other students indicated towards their perception of the lack or inconsistent opportunities in being able to provide feedback on their course: *"I have only filled out this form." (Level 4)*, *"For some modules more than others." (Level 4)*. These noted repeated opportunities, or lack of, to contribute feedback can however be explained as a result of the time of data collection (during semester one in the academic year), and the Level of the study of the participants. Levels 5 and 6 had at least one academic year worth of opportunities to contribute via module feedback forms and would have gained a greater understanding of this process. Level 4 comparatively were still in their first semester and may have not had the same amount of feedback opportunities like that of Levels 5 and 6 to reflect upon.

It is of note that although Level 6 demonstrated a non-significant score in Student Voice in comparison to Level 5, although they scored a higher satisfaction, the majority of the written comments which they provided detailed the opportunities which they had experienced with staff regarding student voice: *"Always willing to hear students options and provide feedback" (Level 6)*, *"Try their best to communicate about our concerns." (Level 6)*. These positive associations can be supported by Brooman et al. (2015) who advocate for the importance and value of students being felt heard and seen in regard to their experiences within individual modules, courses and whole university involvement, and further denote how this can improve their perspectives and attendance. It is therefore of importance to ensure that staff and students have, or continue to have, open dialogue regarding opportunities and challenges (both of student and staff) which can positively impact and benefit individual and collective experiences.

In the UK, student unions have a long history of supporting HE students in assisting the organisation of social activities, representing students, and additionally providing support in academic issues (Brooks, Byford, & Sela, 2015). Nevertheless, when highlighting the role of the student's union, as asked in the NSS question *"The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests."*, the data reported demonstrated a greater satisfaction for Level 4 students, indicated by the percentage of positive responses (48.1 %), relative to both Levels 5 (26.1 %) and 6 (30.3 %), which were similar. This was observed despite a general absence of comments, which may have otherwise elucidated where any differences emerged. This could imply a lack of awareness on how the student's union may influence or represent their academic interests. For example, in one of the few comments available, a Level 6 participant stated: *"I don't know if they do or don't."* (Level 6). Interestingly, of the few comments provided by the participants, the majority reflected upon the social connotations of the student's union rather than its academic contribution. With this in mind, the results of this paper leave room to suggest there is a need for a greater level of understanding to be provided by students' unions on how they contribute (if at all) to the academic interests of undergraduate students, and how their influence impacts the students within their service.

4.3. Overall student satisfaction

It is largely known that one of the key reasons individuals choose to attend university is to gain the correct knowledge and skills which will better prepare them for their chosen career choices (Schwartz, Gregg and McKee, 2018). For courses with a large focus on practical application, alike to the sport courses of this paper, knowledge and skills (personal and work) are acquired during the course of studying for an undergraduate degree (Sleap and Reed, 2006), and these are fundamental to their future day-to-day employed operations. This emphasis on practical application was highlighted by some participants: *"The course is overall effective and challenging and is very useful to apply for future careers." (Level 6)*. As Schwartz et al. (2018) suggest, student success is enhanced when the students are presented, and engage within, learning which connects classroom activities with their chosen professional occupation, informing their career choices. Other participants additionally highlighted their engagement within their respective courses, signifying towards their enjoyment and increased learning: *"Especially this year, I feel fully engaged and enjoy most things that I do." (Level 5)*, *"I'm getting a lot of new things out of it." (Level 5)*. Linking to above, when students can connect their learning to industry working and their future careers, their interest and motivation to learn can be positively impacted (Trolian and Jach, 2020; Johnston, Rockhill, & Pastore, 2021).

It is important to highlight however that although the option of the qualitative text boxes was utilised by numerous participants, the information they presented only afforded a small insight. For example, in the above quotes, the participants did not specify why they felt especially engaged that year, or what new things they were learning. As supported by Whitton and Langan (2019), there are individual differences (between both students and staff) which can contribute towards how learning can be deemed as enjoyable or fun. Although this addition of qualitative data provided greater depth than what would have been collected if solely using the Likert-scale, alike to the 2022 NSS, it has indeed led to more questions which seek to understand the individual influences behind the answers.

Intriguingly, as of NSS 2023 and at the time of writing, the final question which asks the participants of the NSS to highlight their overall satisfaction has been removed for students in England, and is now only available to students in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. The consultation document produced expressed concern regarding the wording of the question, particularly around the word 'satisfaction', and how the phrasing may detract from the importance of understanding individual academic experiences. Possibly in its place, the NSS (at time of writing) now includes an open-text question at the end of the survey which asks participants to express their 'positive or negative aspects' on their university experiences (Office for Students, 2022). Perhaps the NSS understands that the

integration of qualitative data can provide a greater understanding to the perspectives of undergraduate students, and within this universities can better provide services and support to help them with their HE journey, however, due to being a new addition more time and data will be required to assess whether this revision will lead to more successful outcomes following the completion of the annual survey.

4.4. Student satisfaction: an individual experience

The NSS provides both universities and prospective students with the opportunity to track HEI performances based on past students' perspectives. The use of the NSS as part of this study enabled the paper to be able to examine student perspectives within the different sub-sections which all collectively contribute towards the overall student experience. Moreover, this paper emphasised the individual perspectives of students, as provided by numerous participants through the optional textboxes, which highlighted, albeit brief, personal experiences. This when collectively brought together presents a challenge to explicitly determine the reasons behind the statistical results.

This paper indeed highlights the balance between the tangible data, as provided through the Likert-scale of the NSS, and the different personal perspectives which supported the rankings. Through developing this paper, it became important to signify the reasonings behind the numbers which are more convoluted and complicated in nature and instead reflect on the nuanced and personal experiences which are felt by the participants. The views presented within the study are a small window into the complex and varying opinions of the undergraduate students on their perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment, plus the other important influences such as Student Voice, which are all unique to each individual student (Finlay et al., 2022). This is especially significant given the renewed importance of collecting, understanding and adjusting to students needs and wants post COVID-19, and how HE teaching and learning can be better adjusted to suit the needs of UK (and global) undergraduate students. On institution-level, there may be utility in attempting to document the changing student experience in the same students as they move between undergraduate levels 4–6. It is of note that this paper only represents the perspectives of 261 undergraduate sport students across study level at one North-West UK HEI, emphasising the potential intricacies, opportunities and challenges that each university may experience in their own student population, even when approached on the individual level. Further research may look to establish broader similarities, such as differing student perspectives between sport courses (such as the ones utilised in this paper) and/or more locally within their student cohort.

This paper sought benefit of asking and understanding the perspectives of students across all the levels of undergraduate study. Although the feedback provided by the NSS allows HEI to feedforward the results to better understand their provision and improve their services (Office for Students, 2023), there may be greater beneficial impact for the NSS to be integrated with each Level cohort/year group, as opposed to exclusively seeking finishing Level 6 students. As depicted by one Level 6 student: "*Usually the feedback is used to effect the years below who are coming up.*" *(Level 6)*. Although the paper does not diminish the logistical complexities this would involve, this will enable HEIs to be more aware to the needs of their current students in a more customer centric landscape, where students are more outcome focused. Therefore, HEIs could be become more proactive as opposed to reactive, through provided insight and expertise from existing students, as in addition to alumni.

5. Conclusion

The present study explored the comparative differences between sport students and their study Level, highlighting the key differences in student satisfaction as they progress through their degree programme. Interestingly, the highest satisfaction was observed in Level 4 students in relation to Assessment and Feedback, Student Voice and Overall satisfaction, with a reduction in satisfaction as students' progress into Level 5, with no significant increases in response to Level 6 studies. This study demonstrated that the NSS can provide HEIs, and prospective students, with tangible information for overall student satisfaction and sub-section data, helping to judge performance and contribute towards improving services. However, as depicted within this paper, there is additional value in the exploration of individual student perspectives which can offer greater depth and understanding surrounding the findings. There remains potential for HEIs to integrate Level/year group specific surveys (alike to an internal NSS) to investigate the delivery of their services from the perspectives of current students with the view to better understand and respond to the needs of their students. Future research may also look to build upon this paper by identifying and considering potential differences in student perception between sport degree programmes (e.g. SES, SCM, ST) or wider faculty differences to measure and compare outcomes within teaching, learning and assessment.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Dobson B.: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Ward S.:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Corden S.:** Writing – review & editing, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Tinnion D.:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Methodology, Formal analysis.

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