

IV. Improving Response Rates

In order for NSS results to be published, a threshold of 10 respondents and 50% response rate has to be met.

These thresholds are set by UK Higher Education funding bodies for the purpose of ensuring that the survey data published is useful to the participating institutions. Thresholds are applied to ensure that there are enough responses to preserve individuals' anonymity. Data not meeting these thresholds can therefore not be published.

Ipsos MORI will follow up with providers where response rates look as if they will be below those that can be published. The funding bodies reserve the right to agree changes to the survey period with individual providers at risk of not meeting the publication threshold. HEFCE will publish information on its website about its approach and the actions it may take by January 2018. The completeness and accuracy of students' contact data, as supplied by providers, will be a significant factor in achieving a publishable level of responses.

This briefing sheet provides an overview of some of the measures employed by institutions to improve their annual response rates.

1. Tips to boost response rates

Engaging Departments and Teaching Staff

Support 'from the top' - from senior and academic staff - can be key to the success of the NSS at an institution. Four in ten students told us that they heard about the NSS through a member of staff. Institutional staff are often best placed to communicate the benefits and importance of the survey - they can communicate directly with students about how the results will be used by prospective students and to improve the student learning experience at the institution more generally.

Institutions identify that they encourage staff to get involved in the following ways:

Pre-survey launch. Briefing staff to explain the nature and purpose of the survey, how to engage students, an overview of eligibility, how the prize draw process works (if offered), as well as to remind them (and students) about the conduct of the survey (e.g. anonymity and inappropriate influence).

Holding meetings with senior management, heads of schools and marketing teams to discuss an action plan and form a clear communication strategy for engaging students and encouraging completion. A thorough communications plan built into the student and staff calendar, and around Ipsos MORI's survey schedule, is highly useful to avoid over-contacting students. Please see below for more information on communication planning.

During fieldwork. Encourage staff to:

- Sign up to 'key responsibilities', e.g. distributing promotional materials, implementing an NSS feature on their department website, and co-ordinating email communication to students making them aware of the oncoming survey and the email invitation they will receive from Ipsos MORI.
- Deliver lecture shout outs to their final year students using Ipsos MORI produced presentation slides and video/advert, or materials created by your own institution. They can also help to promote the survey by handing out flyers to students during seminars.
- Arrange course-specific dedicated sessions for the NSS, possibly incentivised, so students can make use of their personalised links. These can be built into tutors' timetables from the outset.
- Use their social media platforms to reach out to students about the survey.
- Circulate weekly response rates to teaching staff/department heads, highlighting areas of good and bad performance and pointing out where their department is compared to others.

Many institutions identify staff support as essential in meeting response rate targets, given their ability to directly engage with students. Some ideas implemented include:

Monitoring response rates. Using the weekly response rate reports provided by Ipsos MORI to guide internal promotion of the NSS.

Create a competition. Introducing a table for departments/subjects to identify top and bottom performers. Some institutions have implemented prizes for those who get the overall best response rate. Social media is particularly effective in creating a sense of competition among students and boosting response rates.

Keep staff abreast of survey progress. Forward response rate reports to course leaders, heads of departments and senior management so that they are aware of where targets are and are not being met and can act on it effectively.

Building a social media presence. Use departments' social media profiles to post reminders about the survey, response rate updates and details of any incentives and prize draws on offer.

Email Communication

Electronic communication has been identified by respondents and institutions as an important way to promote the NSS fieldwork. 25% of students who answered the 2016 marketing question stated they found out about the NSS through an email link and 33% through links on their institution's website or portal. Institutions:

- Send introductory emails ahead of fieldwork to students to forewarn them that the survey will be coming and to look out for their email invitations. These emails should include a link to the survey website www.thestudentsurvey.com so students can find out more.
- Send emails to students addressed from the Principal, Dean of the institution or Pro-Vice-Chancellor. This adds weight to the message. Messages from a named contact, known to the individual student (e.g. course leader/head of department), are more effective.
- Provide the email details of eligible students to institutional staff to reduce burden on them. This enables them to target messages more efficiently. Introductory and reminder emails regarding the NSS should only be sent to eligible students rather than all final year students to avoid confusion for those students who are not eligible.

Redirecting to the NSS Website

Some institutions have established a pre-survey webpage, which can be branded locally and helps them to manage their own incentives more effectively. These micro-sites link directly to the survey, and provide some background information and details about any incentives.

Other internal sites used to promote the survey include:

- The institutions' intranet sites. Information can be subject-specific or generic.
- Institutions with virtual learning environments (VLE) publicise the NSS via this tool, e.g. Moodle. Information can be subject-specific or generic.
- Institutions advertise the NSS on IT terminals within the institution, on computers, plasma screens, etc.

Promotional Materials

Institutions use a range of promotional tools and methods to improve awareness of the survey and to encourage eligible students to participate. These include:

Using Ipsos MORI prepared promotional materials. Displaying official NSS branded promotional materials around the institution. Some methods used to maximise the coverage of these materials include:

- Targeting materials in places where final year students will see them. Some institutions work with course reps to identify 'traffic hotspots' such as learning resource centres/PC laboratories, lecture theatres, seminar rooms, the library, shops or bars. The NSS video/advert can also be played in these areas and screensaver/presentation slides can be displayed in final year lectures/tutorials.
- Targeted distribution of materials. For example, some institutions hand out flyers in lessons (e.g. with low response rates) or send them out in the post to any online or distance learners to promote the survey and encourage completion.

Creating institution-specific marketing materials. Some institutions prefer to create their own institutional branded posters, flyers, banners and screensavers. Others employ innovative promotional ideas such as NSS stickers on food labels, catering cards to be displayed on tables in cafes, bars, etc. and NSS branded clothing for representatives to wear on campus. Internal promotional materials must adhere to HEFCE's guidelines. Other promotional tools used include:

- *Communicating change.* Showing students what has changed as a result of the NSS and how they are listening, e.g. "You Said, We Did" campaigns.
- *On screen promotions.* Displaying information about the NSS on plasma screens and IT terminals around the institution.

- *Institutional mascot.* One institution has introduced a mascot that visits campuses with a laptop talking to final year students to encourage them to complete the survey.
- *Social media.* Building and maintaining a social media presence for the NSS at your institution throughout fieldwork where you can inform students of the dates of the survey, as well as providing them with links to more information on what the survey is and the survey video, and how the results have been used at your institution to implement change.

Internal communication and PR

- Publishing feature articles on the staff intranet to provide background information and tips to staff for engaging students.
- Articles to raise awareness such as feature interviews, publicising the previous year's prize draw winners and communicating changes that have been implemented as a result of NSS findings.
- Features in student papers and/or radio stations to encourage completion.

[Annex B](#) provides examples of articles that could be used as a basis for communication.

Engaging Student Bodies and Representatives

In the past few years, many institutions with a student union, association or guild (SU) identified the role of the Students' Union as important to the promotion of the NSS. SU support can give the NSS a student-friendly face and can run alongside your institution's main campaign, giving a student-led and student-focused approach. Furthermore, they identify that early engagement of the SU and involving them in planning can prove beneficial.

However, if your institution has a students' union, association or guild, you will need to establish if they are supporting the NSS this year to be able to rely on their support.

Creating a buzz. Student involvement with the SU means that they have an understanding of what appeals to potential respondents and can spread the word.

Targeting promotion. Some institutions consult their SU on the best places to display promotional materials, e.g. traffic hotspots. The SU offers a range of places to raise awareness, e.g. SU offices/facilities, shops, bars, etc.

Communicating with students. Some SUs have weekly newsletters, which can be used to promote the NSS.

NSS ambassadors. Many institutions have dedicated student/course reps that can help to spread the word to other students about the NSS. Some institutions have a dedicated NSS champion/ambassador to help formulate NSS campaigns and help promote the survey to final year students.

Student events. Institutions can include NSS promotions in any upcoming SU events, where reps can ask students to complete the survey there and then or hand out NSS-branded giveaways. Some institutions find that it is easier to approach students at these type of events where they are all gathered together.

Social media. Encouraging SU reps to promote the NSS on their social media profiles is an effective way to encourage completion.

Incentives

A range of institutions offer incentives to encourage students to complete the NSS. The most common items offered in the past included:

- Cash prizes
- High street vouchers – e.g. Amazon, book tokens, entertainment, shopping and travel
- Smartphones and tablets such as iPads and Kindles
- Graduation packages, e.g. gown hire, photo packages, champagne reception
- University Ball Tickets
- Vouchers for free coffees or meal deals
- Print and photocopy credits

Some institutions identify that they work with the SU to identify the incentive that would be most appropriate for their students.

The Power of Word of Mouth

Institutions recognise the importance of word of mouth promotion. This is achieved through SU representatives, department heads, administrators and/or tutors speaking directly with eligible students about the NSS. Remember:

Lecture shout-outs. By encouraging staff to include a dedicated slide at the end of every presentation, show the NSS video in lectures or hand out flyers with any reading lists in seminars.

Student representatives. Reps could spread the NSS word among their peers and illustrate the value of student opinion, they can create a presence for the survey on campus though creating NSS mascots and they can engage societies/associations.

Dedicated Time to Complete the Survey

The majority of institutions provide dedicated time or space to final year students to complete the NSS. These sessions must be held in neutral environments, e.g. computer rooms or study centres. Staff must not oversee students' responses or make them feel that they must answer in a certain way. Please make staff aware of the rules and regulations surrounding inappropriate influence.

Examples of how sessions are done include:

Allocating time in tutorials to complete the NSS. Some institutions build time into their timetables to ensure that students complete the NSS. Some tutors make sure that their class visits the PC lab or Learning Resource Centre.

Dedicated PCs or 'hubs' available for completion. Some institutions allocate computers or specific areas called 'hubs' specifically for the completion of the NSS during fieldwork. These labs are set up in areas visited by students.

Subject sessions. Some subject leads have introduced NSS sessions, where they try to entice eligible students to participate in the survey by offering an incentive. Some institutions hire a room and offer free pizza/lunch.

Mobile devices. Student reps with mobile devices can be sent to areas frequented by eligible students. This could be in the form of a stall with incentives for those who complete it there and then.

Planning and Coordination

Many institutions have a formal procedure for ensuring that response rates meet publication thresholds.

Dedicated NSS Operations Team and/or an NSS Steering Group

- Ensuring that representatives from across the institution meet regularly (e.g. once every 2 weeks) to discuss response rates and how to boost them.
- Getting a group together to brainstorm promotional ideas. They can openly discuss areas of low response and when appropriate, invite department/subject representatives to discuss areas of lower performance.
- Tracking email conversations between representatives to communicate weekly response rates and discuss promotional needs.
- Bringing representatives from each department together at regular meetings and encouraging them to cascade information to their colleagues in department meetings.

Communications planning. In order to maximise response rates, some institutions have developed a communication plan for the NSS Fieldwork before the launch of the survey.

Preparing for fieldwork. Formal plans to ensure that staff are fully briefed on the NSS process, the importance of reaching required response rates and the start and end dates of fieldwork.

Timetable for promotional activity. Some institutions produce a detailed plan of promotional activity so that they target students appropriately. This includes:

- Ensuring that students are aware of any prizes on offer and how the process for these works.
- Developing complementary email communications to reach students in the intervening periods between Ipsos MORI communications.
- Identification of key dates in the student and staff calendar that may affect participation, e.g. holidays, exams, and coursework deadlines.

Identification of key responsibilities. Some institutions have a formal document which identifies who will have responsibilities for communications, e.g.

those best placed to engage with students and what their key responsibilities should be.

Innovative ideas. Institutions explore different ideas to engage students with the NSS, including involving students from relevant specialisms to get involved with the promotion, e.g. Art & Design, Marketing and/or Communications to develop NSS strategies for the institution.

General awareness. Some institutions also explore ways to raise awareness of the NSS amongst non-final year students. This includes poster campaigns to promote changes that have been implemented as a result of NSS findings.

Contacting students. Survey fatigue and general annoyance from being over-contacted can prevent eligible students from participating in the survey. Institutions should be co-ordinating their contact activity to avoid this, for example:

- Planning communication in line with the Ipsos MORI timetable.
- Being aware of any other internal research that is being undertaken by the institution and planning communication so students are not bombarded.
- Ensuring that communications with students are staggered.
- Personalising emails or signing emails from representatives that are recognised by the student, e.g. Dean or subject head.

2. Communications checklist

Findings from the NSS 2017 suggest that contact from the institution plays a key role in boosting [response rates](#). Around 37% of students completing the online survey (who answered the relevant question) identified that they heard about the NSS from a lecturer/member of staff and 34% followed a link from their University or College homepage/portal.

Many institutions have kindly shared with Ipsos MORI a number of initiatives that they have found to be helpful in encouraging students to respond to the survey. The following section summarises some of the initiatives adopted, which institutions can follow both before and throughout the fieldwork period.

2.1. Pre-survey launch

- ❑ **Organise staff briefing(s).** Providing an overview of fieldwork, NSS background, how to engage students, what students will be asked and an overview of eligibility as well as the prize draw process (if offered). A useful summary document to circulate is [Annex A](#) of this document. Please ensure that all staff or colleagues involved with the NSS read and understand the guidelines on avoiding inappropriate influence and the marketing guidelines for promoting the survey and encouraging completion.
- ❑ **Develop a clear strategy and timeline for contacting students.** Hold meetings before the start of the survey with senior management, heads of school and marketing teams to discuss aims and build a communication plan around the Ipsos MORI's [survey schedule](#), as well as around any upcoming events in the student calendar. This is useful to avoid over-contacting students during stressful periods i.e. exams, or to capture them when they are all together, i.e. any SU events. This is also a good opportunity to ensure the marketing guidelines and rules on inappropriate influence are distributed across the higher levels at the institution.
- ❑ **Display promotional materials in high traffic areas.** Discuss with student reps and students where the most appropriate areas are – examples include libraries, student bars or lecture rooms.
- ❑ **Organise meetings with student representatives.** Discuss the plan for generating awareness for the survey on campus/site, as well as via the multitude of social media platforms
- ❑ **Inform student media and PR of the survey launch.** Contact institutional newspapers, radio, TV channels and resident bloggers of the survey launch, and prepare institutions' intranet/student portals – please use the supporting materials supplied by Ipsos MORI as a basis for communication
- ❑ **Develop electronic presence.** Display NSS screensavers and Powerpoint slides in all areas with PC access, lecture theatre screens and/or plasma TV screens. Play the NSS video and advert on plasma screens around campus and place on institutional websites, as well as on social media profiles to make students aware of the oncoming survey. Ensure that the NSS electronic banners are included on email signatures and that portals/intranet sites have details about the survey and a direct link to www.thestudentsurvey.com. Consider building a pre-survey micro-site, which can be branded locally and helps institutions to manage their own incentives more

effectively. These micro-sites link directly to the survey, and provide some background information and details about any incentives offered.

- ❑ **Build a social media presence for the NSS at your institution.** Inform students via your social media profiles (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.) of the dates of the survey, as well as providing them with links to more information on what the survey is and the survey video, and how the results have been used at your institution to implement change ('You Said, We Did' campaign).
- ❑ **Send a pre-emptive email to students.** This can be sent the week before the launch of the survey to make eligible students aware of the email invitation they will be receiving from Ipsos MORI, any other communications they may receive regarding the survey (i.e. telephone calls if non-responsive) and what they should do with personalised email links. This is also a good opportunity to explain details of any prizes on offer and the process of how to enter any prize draws. This can be sent from a known figure at your institution and include a link to the survey website.

2.2. During the fieldwork period

- ❑ **Lecture shout-outs.** Ensure that lecturers/tutors are asking students to complete the survey and giving out the survey website. Lecturers should use the NSS video or advert to play to students or the Ipsos MORI produced PowerPoint slides. All lecturers or colleagues giving shout outs should be made aware of the guidelines for promoting the survey, particularly on what they can and cannot say in these shout outs. They should be especially wary of the tone and information they use.
- ❑ **Regular staff updates.** Circulate weekly response rate reports to staff and highlight areas that need to improve performance. Ensuring staff have a clear understanding of where their particular school/department is compared to others may aid them in how they promote the survey to their students.
- ❑ **Email reminders.** Ensure that central emails and course specific emails are sent to eligible students at times that do not disrupt the Ipsos MORI survey timetable. Please contact Ipsos MORI if you would like to discuss this.
- ❑ **Organise dedicated sessions to complete the online survey.** Many institutions hold dedicated sessions for students to complete the survey. This is done in many different ways, including:

- Teaching staff setting aside some time in their seminars to complete the survey.
- Organising sessions in a neutral environment (e.g. computer rooms or study centres).
- Sending representatives with mobile devices to places frequented by eligible students.
- Dedicated NSS stalls with mobile devices to complete the survey - some institutions offer incentives in return for students completing the survey there and then (e.g. sweets, chocolate, soft drinks...).

General NSS sessions in computer areas can possibly be incentivised (e.g. pizza, coffee, etc.). These sessions can also be course-specific where tutors' timetables are designed to fit in with specific sessions for their students, or can be timed in line with Ipsos MORI's communications to utilise personalised email links. Once students have completed the survey, there could be a dedicated area for them to take a photo or video which could then be uploaded to institutions' social media accounts.

Please see [Annex A](#) for a summary document that can be circulated to staff holding dedicated sessions; this will provide them with all the necessary information to give to students. Students should be encouraged to give their honest opinion. Please note that staff should not appear to be 'standing over students' and must not complete on behalf of students. Staff should make it clear that they are there to provide support on technical issues and not to monitor responses or attempt to influence the scores. There may be consequences where institutions are found to be inappropriately influencing students' responses. Please see [HEFCE's guidelines](#) for more information.

- Implement a dedicated Survey Day/Week for completing the NSS.** Organise a specific week during the fieldwork period when most students will be on campus, i.e. when they are back from placement and exams are not taking place. Encourage students to complete the NSS by holding activities, such as sports or party games in the same area where students can complete the survey.
- Consider offering incentives.** In addition to any prize draws being offered via the online survey through Ipsos MORI, local incentives can be used to boost flagging subjects/departments, such as free coffee in exchange for completing the survey.
- Run PR/media activity throughout the fieldwork.** Consider features on the launch of the NSS, how the results are used (you said, we did), etc.
- Word of mouth.** Create a presence on campus; consider lecture and tutorial visits, engaging societies/associations, mascots etc.

- ❑ **Creating response rate competitions between different schools/departments.** Circulating emails or PowerPoint slides to eligible students, or posting on social media profiles, each week with scores on a school by school basis may help to create a sense of competition, thus boosting [response rates](#). Offering an additional incentive to the winning school/department (e.g. money for more resources or charitable donations) can also encourage completion.
- ❑ **Maintain NSS social media presence.** Continue to promote the survey via the institution's social media profiles through regular posts including links to the online survey. For more ideas on how to use social media effectively, please see the '[Social Media](#)' section above. Consider how you may use a hashtag to support any of your campaigns, for example #NSSHadMySay.
- ❑ **Senior management support.** Support 'from the top' can be key to the success of the NSS at an institution. Senior staff may wish to write to students and departmental staff to explain the nature and purpose of the NSS as well as results relevant to your institution prior to the survey launch. Senior staff may also wish to remind staff and students that survey responses are treated anonymously, and students should feel free to express their honest opinions.
- ❑ **Students' Union (Association or Guild) or student rep involvement.** Students' Unions (Associations or Guilds) or course/student reps (if applicable) can give the NSS a student-friendly face and their support can run alongside the institution's main campaign, giving a student-led and student-focused approach. The Students' Union (Association or Guild) can also be a useful channel for communicating to students how feedback from previous years of the survey has made a difference. Lecture 'shout outs' by student representatives, handing out giveaways to students and setting up an NSS stall with dedicated mobile devices can be an excellent platform to promote the NSS during an institution's first week of the survey, as well as reminding students about the survey throughout the fieldwork period. SUs and student reps can also be instrumental in creating an on-campus buzz for the survey and reaching students through social media platforms.
- ❑ **Institutional staff.** Institutional staff and colleagues are well positioned to communicate the benefits and importance of the survey - they can communicate directly with students about how the results will be used by prospective students and to improve the student learning experience at the institution more generally. Please see [Annex A](#) for guidelines for staff to ensure that they are aware of the NSS promotional rules and regulations, particularly on avoiding anything that could be considered inappropriate influence.

Staff can utilise the promotional tools to promote the NSS during seminars and lectures, and direct emails from someone that the student is familiar with can also help boost student interaction with the survey.

- ❑ **Online promotion.** Online banners and links to www.thestudentsurvey.com make it easy for students to access the survey in their own time. The easier it is for students to log on to the survey, the more likely they are to complete it. We recommend using banners, screensavers, adverts/videos and links on institutional websites and computers made available for use by eligible students.
- ❑ **Targeted email reminders.** Sending targeted emails that invite eligible students to complete the survey at www.thestudentsurvey.com can be useful, however too many reminders may have an adverse effect. Please ensure that the content is signed off by a senior member of staff. The NSS team at Ipsos MORI is available to discuss the co-ordination of sending targeted emails to ensure that students are not over-contacted. Please see the Ipsos MORI communication schedule to ensure that direct communication happens at the optimum time during fieldwork.

Please remember when sending out reminder emails to only send these to students on your NSS target list.

- ❑ **Engaging 'harder-to-reach' students.** Some institutions undertake extra measures to engage students that have historically proved harder to reach. Some examples include:
 - **International students.** Some institutions liaise with student societies/associations to engage international students, briefing representatives on the importance of the survey and encouraging them to attend dedicated sessions.
 - **Distance learners/off site learners and students on placements.** Since these students are not necessarily exposed to the marketing materials or the 'on campus buzz', some institutions adopt additional measures to engage these students. Examples include sending flyers with any postal communication to these students, including any relevant promotions or information on student portals to engage online learners, arranging dedicated sessions through 'keep in touch days', reaching them via their social media accounts or sending direct emails from their course leaders outlining the importance of the survey and asking them to participate.