

**November 2005**

# **National Student Survey 2005: process audit**

**A report to HEFCE by Ipsos UK**

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# 1. Introduction

The administering of the first full scale National Student Survey (NSS) was successfully completed in April 2005. It required co-operation and input from a range of stakeholders, including 141 higher education institutions (HEIs) and many student unions (SUs).

To achieve the objectives of the NSS, a key challenge was managing the relationship and facilitation requirements from HEIs and SUs.

As part of HEFCE and Ipsos UK's commitment to performance improvement, it was proposed to undertake a process audit of the first NSS amongst HEI and SU contacts, to identify lessons and best practice, in preparation for implementing the 2006 NSS.

## 1.1 Objectives

Based on the HEIs' experiences (and SUs' where applicable) of the NSS 2005 to date, the objectives of the audit were:

- Identify actionable areas for improvement for future years of the NSS, relating to:
  - marketing and communication activities
  - the submission of sample data
  - emailing and IT related issues
  - timing and logistical arrangements
  - communication and the provision of information
  - response rates achieved
  - other relevant issues
- Identify areas of best practice displayed by HEIs, facilitating the success of the NSS in future years, leading to high response rates.

## 2. Executive summary

As part of HEFCE and Ipsos UK's commitment to performance improvement, a process audit was undertaken of the first NSS amongst HEI and SU contacts. This identified a number of lessons for the 2006 survey.

- Overall, 62% of respondents felt the promotional support provided by Ipsos UK and HEFCE for the NSS 2005 was effective. This was slightly lower than the 68% who rated the local marketing activities undertaken as effective.
- A key lesson for marketing the NSS 2006 in order to increase response rates entails targeting the campaign more closely to the intended audience, and communicating more effectively the purpose of the survey to students.
- It was also highlighted that it would be beneficial to provide additional supporting materials to assist institutions with the local promotion of the NSS, and to ensure that institutions are aware of the full range of support available.
- Seventy-two percent of respondents found that the process of producing and supplying the student contact database worked efficiently.
- The main sample issue experienced during the NSS 2005 related to institutions' initial concerns regarding the criteria for including/excluding students from the sample. This has since been addressed.
- The technical aspects of notifying students by email of the online NSS appeared to work without problems for the majority (81%) of responding institutions. The possibility of using alternative student email addresses to notify students of the NSS was raised on a number of occasions.
- Regarding the communication of the NSS, over 80% of respondents felt that the input required from their institution by HEFCE and Ipsos UK to facilitate the survey was clearly communicated.
- To improve communication, institutions were keen to receive communications in a concise a format as possible, and to ensure they are kept informed at all stages of the NSS process. For the NSS extranet, it would be beneficial to provide more frequent information updates, and encourage greater use amongst institutions of the response rate reports.
- Institutions were asked about their opinions of the timing of the survey fieldwork. The majority, 81%, said they found it to be acceptable. The flexibility of the start dates was viewed as being essential.
- Many institutions identified both the marketing campaign and their sample quality as key influences on the response rates achieved. However, the impact of proactive staff involvement at department level and the multi-method approach employed by Ipsos UK to contact students for the NSS were also felt to play a significant role.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology for conducting the audit combined qualitative, quantitative and desk research.

#### 3.1 Qualitative research

In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 19 NSS contacts at ten institutions, across the categories shown in Table 1. Of the 19 completed interviews, 18 interviews were held with HEI contacts and one interview was held with an SU contact.

Emphasis was placed on interviewing “high response rate/highly co-operative” institutions to elicit a greater understanding of good practice and local activities employed to achieve a high response rate.

(Figures show the number of institutions participating in the qualitative research. Figures in brackets show the total number of NSS Contacts participating. The classification of co-operative / less co-operative institutions relates to the ability of the institution to supply contact details and the known support or lack of support of the institution for the NSS. It does not refer to the help provided and approach of the individual contacts.)

**Table 1. Response profile - qualitative**

<b>Institution Type (RR = Response Rate)</b>	<b>Face-to-Face</b>	<b>Telephone</b>	<b>Total</b>
High RR – Co-operative	3 (5)	3 (6)	6 (11)
High RR – Less Co-operative	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (2)
Low RR – Co-operative	1 (2)	1 (2)	2 (4)
Low RR – Less Co-operative	0 (0)	1 (2)	1 (2)
Total	4 (7)	6 (12)	10 (19)

The in-depth interviews were conducted between 27 June 2005 and 13 July 2005.

#### 3.2 Quantitative research

The Ipsos UK contact database for the NSS held 453 contacts split across the 141 institutions.

To achieve accurate and comprehensive feedback, all NSS contacts were invited to participate in the quantitative element of the audit. The nature and extent of their involvement in administering the NSS varied, and the online questionnaire was programmed so that only questions relevant to their involvement were asked.

Table 2 shows the response profile for the quantitative element of the audit.

**Table 2. Response profile - quantitative**

<b>Contact Type</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>		
	<b>HEI</b>	<b>SU</b>	<b>Total</b>
The main NSS contact	50	0	50
Involved in the marketing and promotion	48	4	52
Involved in supplying the student contact database	47	1	48
Involved in ensuring students received an email invitation to the survey	42	1	43
None of the above	3	4	7
Total number of respondents	92	9	101

The NSS contacts were emailed on 4 July 2005 inviting them to take part in the online survey. The closing date for completion of the survey was 13 July 2005.

### **3.3 Desk research**

Desk research was undertaken to identify the influences on response rates, by analysing the response rate achieved at each institution against their questionnaire responses. The audit also considered the sample quality received from each institution and its effect on response rates achieved.

## 4. Marketing and promotion

### 4.1 HEFCE/Ipsos UK promotional support

The following promotional materials were made available by HEFCE/Ipsos UK to institutions to promote the NSS:

- printed materials – posters/postcards
- banners/towers
- pre-prepared newspaper articles
- pre-prepared radio materials
- beer mats.

Ipsos UK also produced guidelines for use of these promotional materials and other activities, for NSS contacts.

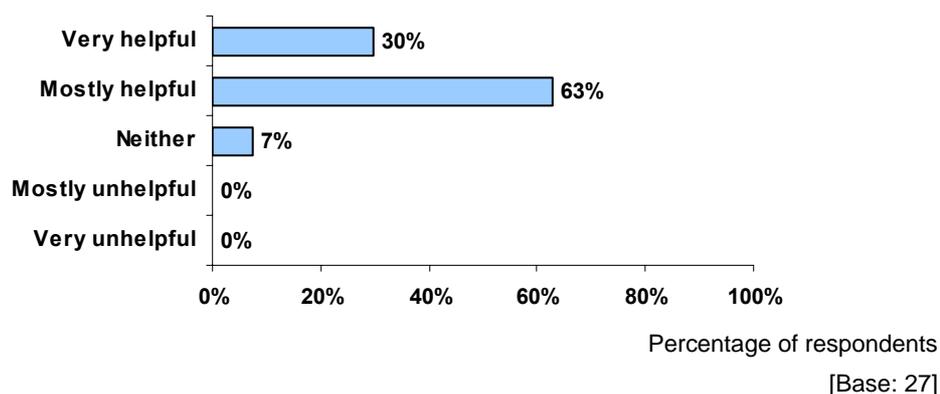
#### 4.1.1 The NSS promotional guidelines

There was a mixed response as to the extent the guidelines were used by institutions. Only 58% recall receiving an email explaining how to access the guidelines. Of those that did, 93% read or referred to them.

The results in Figure 1 show that the majority (93%) found them to be helpful.

**Figure 1. The NSS guidelines for use of promotional materials and other activities**

How helpful did you find the guidelines?



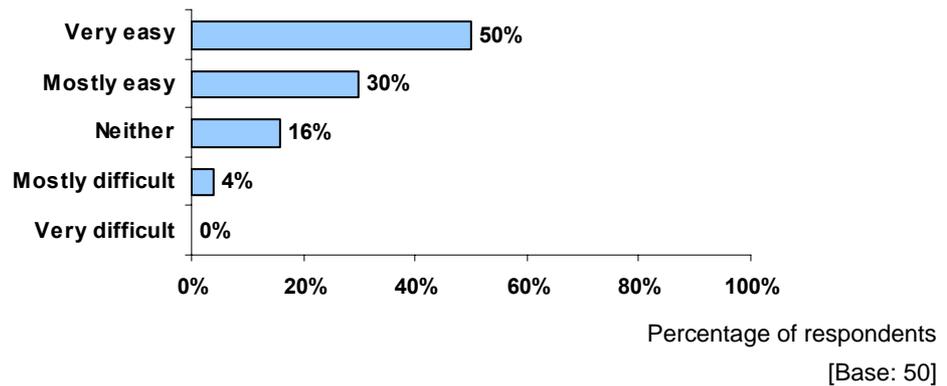
**Recommendation:** Reinforce the existence of the NSS promotional guidelines, to ensure institutions are aware of the full range of the promotional materials and support available to them.

### 4.1.2 The ordering process

The process of ordering promotional materials from Ipsos UK was described as mostly easy or very easy by 80% of responding institutions, shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. The ordering process**

How easy did you find the process of ordering promotional materials for the NSS from Ipsos UK?



### 4.1.3 Usage of the promotional materials

Figure 3 shows the level of usage of the promotional materials supplied by HEFCE/Ipsos UK.

Eighty-eight per cent of respondents used the posters and postcards to promote the NSS; 8% (or six) responding institutions did not know whether they had used the posters and postcards. The remaining 4% (two institutions) that did not use the posters and postcards achieved an average response rate of 37% for the NSS, compared to the overall institution average of 60%.

<b>Recommendation:</b> Encourage all institutions to use the printed materials supplied to them to raise awareness of the NSS and increase response rates.
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Over half the respondents used the banners and/or towers, placing them on a variety of websites. The beer mats were used by almost three-quarters of respondents.

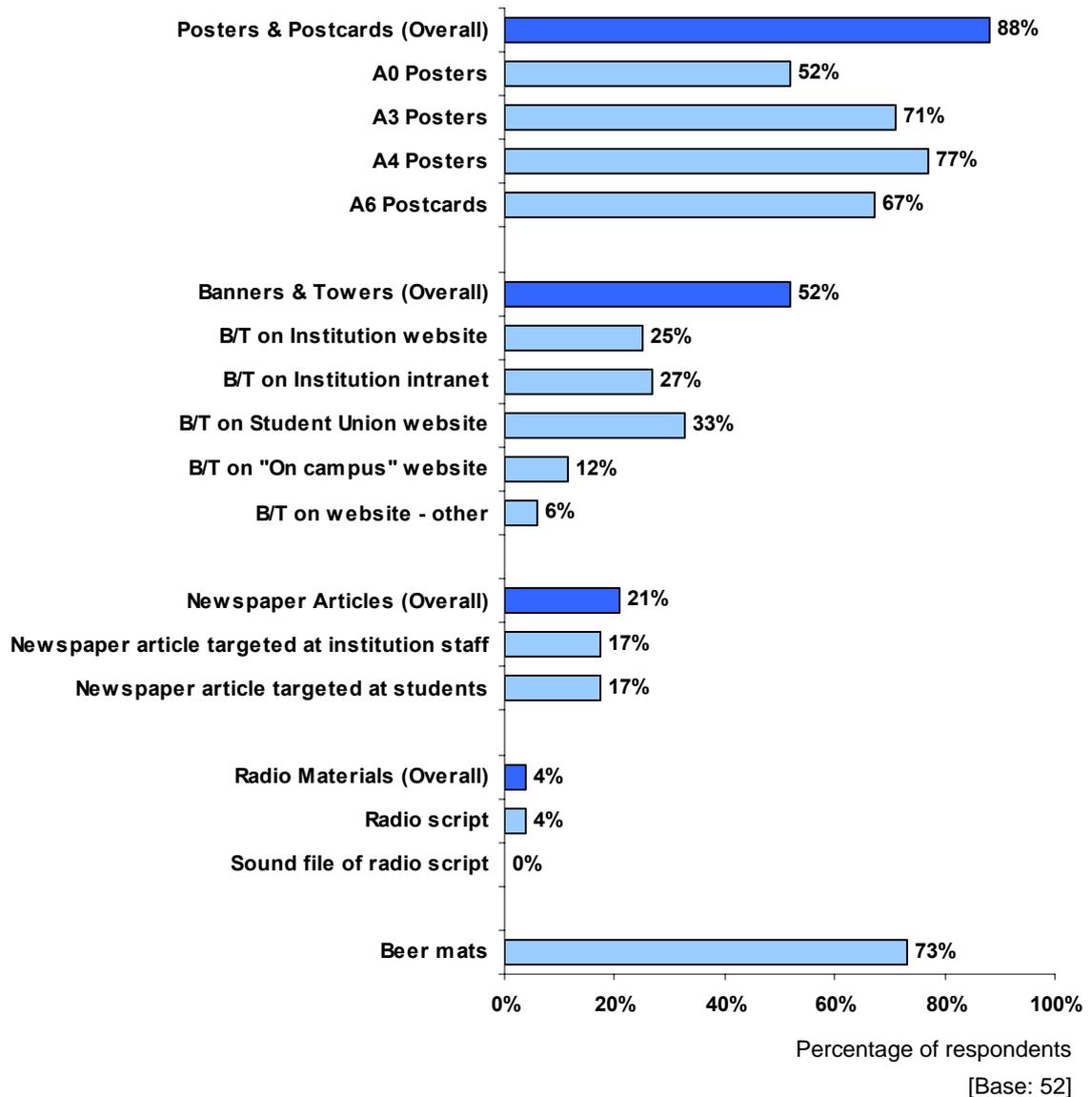
Figure 3 shows that a relatively small proportion of respondents used the pre-prepared newspaper and radio materials supplied to them. The qualitative element of the audit revealed that there was low awareness of these materials at some institutions:

- *Do not recall any information on banners, newspaper articles or radio info – could be my mistake.*
- *The only thing I knew about were posters, cards and beer mats – no electronic material reached us.*

Recommendation: Increase awareness amongst institutions of the full range of promotional materials available to them from HEFCE and Ipsos UK.

**Figure 3. Usage of the promotional materials**

Which of the following did you use to promote the survey?

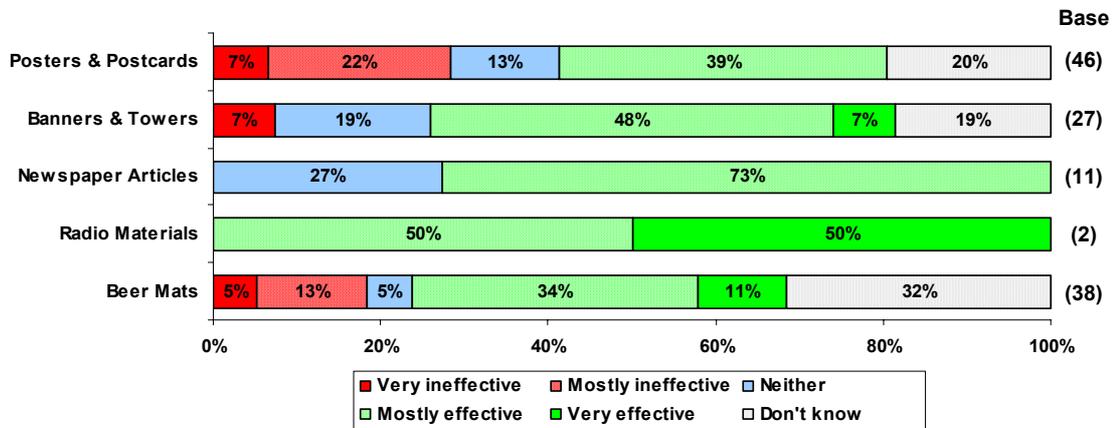


#### 4.1.4 The effectiveness of the promotional materials

Respondents were asked to state how effective they thought each of the materials supplied to them were at raising awareness. The results are shown in Figure 4.

#### Figure 4. The effectiveness of promotional materials

How effective do you feel the materials were in raising awareness of the survey?



There were mixed opinions regarding the posters and postcards. Whilst 39% found them to be effective, 29% described them as ineffective. Suggestions were received to improve the posters by clearer targeting and communication of the purpose of the survey (discussed later in section 4.1.4).

These thoughts were echoed in the qualitative feedback, and it was largely felt that the posters played a key part of the marketing campaign. The A3 and A4 size posters were found to be most suitable as many institutions stated they did not have the ability to display posters of a larger size:

- *Smaller posters are preferable – the very large posters were unusable in most environments where there is limited space available on notice boards.*
- *Big posters were too big - A0, A1 - we didn't really have anywhere to put them.*

Recommendation: Form a marketing panel consisting of HEI and SU representatives to test proposed NSS marketing materials.

Fifty-five percent of respondents using the banners and towers considered them to be effective at raising awareness.

The feedback to the beer mats was varied: some institutions felt they were untargeted and posed problems with litter, whilst others felt they were a valuable addition to raising awareness of the NSS.

At a general level, both the qualitative and quantitative elements of the audit highlighted **targeting** and **communicating the purpose of the NSS** as areas to be addressed for the next NSS marketing campaign.

## **Targeting**

Institutions felt that targeting the marketing activities more closely to the intended audience would increase response rates:

- *The roundabout road sign logo is not at all explicit - nowhere does it say that this is for final year undergrads only, for instance.*
- *Need to re-evaluate the marketing material to ensure students know it's targeted at final year students and to give more information about it - students are not going to respond to a poster with such limited information.*
- *We modified some of the materials to state the survey was specifically targeted at final year students.*

Recommendation: Through the marketing materials, clearly communicate the intended target audience for the NSS.
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## **Communicating the purpose**

Institutions also believed that response rates would increase if the purpose and benefits of the NSS were clearly communicated on marketing communications:

- *Explain the benefits of the survey to current students and the institution as a whole. What, exactly will it achieve?*
- *There was no direct "call to action".*
- *Some students were not clear about what the purpose of this (the NSS) was.*
- *If we explain why we are doing the survey, our students are likely to complete it – emphasising how their feedback would help the institution.*
- *Students did not feel any added value in providing the information on yet another survey.*

Recommendation: Through the marketing materials, clearly communicate the purpose of the NSS to students.
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### **4.1.5 Other HEFCE/Ipsos UK activities**

Feedback was received from several institutions regarding the perceived value of increased media exposure for the NSS:

- *Need more in the way of press releases for the next year, to raise awareness.*
- *Once the results are published this year, I think it is at a national level that HEFCE can have the biggest impact on creating and increasing awareness.*
- *There should have been more coverage in the media.*
- *Increase publicity in educational press e.g. The Guardian.*

Recommendation: Maximise positive publicity for the NSS at a national level, to raise overall awareness.
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## **4.2 Local promotional activities**

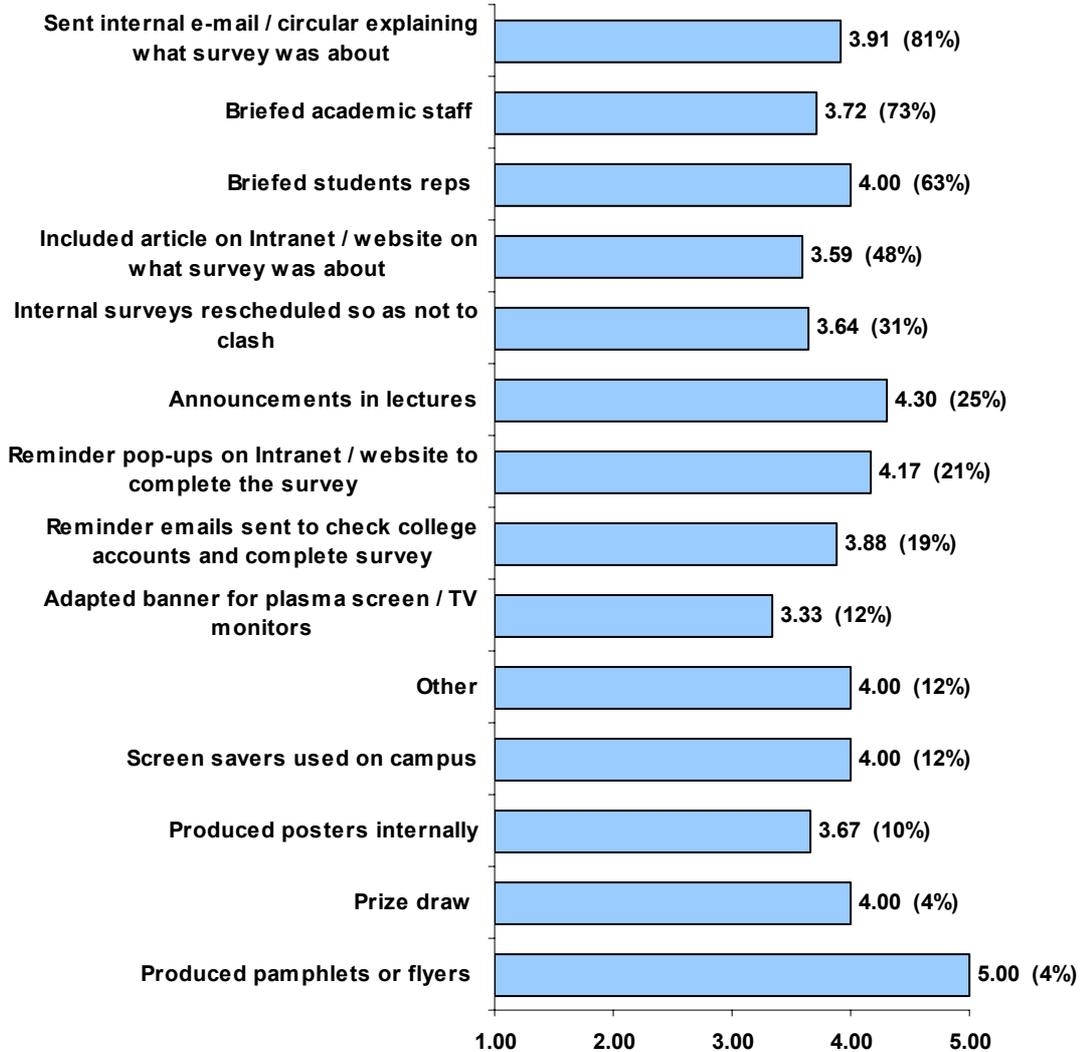
Leaving aside the materials supplied by HEFCE/Ipsos UK, the audit asked about the activities undertaken locally (at institution-level) to improve the response rates for the NSS.

The results show that the majority of institutions undertook additional promotional activities at a local level; in particular, ensuring staff were well-briefed, with over 80% sending an internal e-mail/circular explaining what the survey was about, and almost three quarters briefing academic staff. A further breakdown is shown in Figure 5.

**Figure 5. Local promotional activities**

Leaving aside the pre-prepared materials supplied to you by Ipsos UK/HEFCE to promote the survey, what else was your HEI/SU involved with to promote the survey and encourage responses from students?

Thinking about each of the local activities undertaken, please state how effective each of these were:



1 = Very ineffective; 2 = Mostly ineffective; 3 = Neither; 4 = Mostly effective; 5 = Very effective  
 (Percentage of respondents involved in activity shown in brackets)

[Base: 52]

When asked to expand on what additional activities were undertaken, the qualitative feedback could largely be grouped into the following three categories:

- written communications to students
- verbal communications to students
- response rate communication.

#### 4.2.1 Written communications to students

- *Mailed a small single-sided colour leaflet to all students. Promoted the NSS as “students’ chance to rank their department and university”.*
- *Writing a letter to all final year students letting them know the survey was going to take place – people took it seriously because it was from the university.*
- *Sending an email to students and staff – to let them know the NSS was going to take place, outlining the importance of taking time to complete it.*
- *Emails at department level to act as a reminder were felt to be very effective. We invited heads of departments to get involved with emailing their students so that it became a local promotion as well as a central one – we found this to be a very effective way of approaching it. Students identify strongly with their department and therefore an email from their department head carries quite a lot of weight.*
- *Writing to distance-learning students.*

Recommendation: Provide template emails and letters to institutions to use locally to promote the NSS.
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#### 4.2.2 Verbal communications to students

- *Feel that standing up in front of people was the best way – for example, announcements at the beginning of lectures, academic staff informed students of the NSS during tutorials. People are often inundated with email.*
- *Staff were asked to mention the NSS in their lessons in the week before the final due date.*
- *Once academic staff and student reps were briefed, and publicised it, our response rate shot up to 79%!*
- *The students need to be told about the survey from a trusted source or they will not act – Ipsos and HEFCE are too remote.*
- *Personal appeals made by heads of academic departments by email and large lectures worked well.*

#### 4.2.3 Response rate communication

- *Set up working group to promote NSS, maintained frequent contact with academic staff to update on response rates.*
- *Circulated feedback on response rates to heads of department so they knew if they needed to act further.*

Recommendation: Ipsos UK to promote the existence of the response rate reports by sending an email to institutions each week when response rates are published/updated.
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Recommendation: Encourage institutions to use response rate information proactively to target specific departments.
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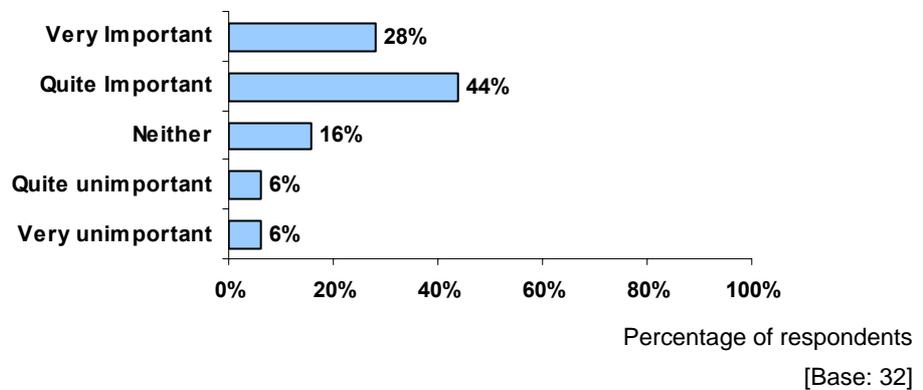
#### 4.2.4 Other local activities

In terms of other local activities undertaken, one institution set up a display which was manned during key periods. This provided students with an explanation of the survey and allowed them to ask questions. One institution employed final year students to encourage other final year students to complete the NSS, whilst another used their careers/final year student fair to promote it.

Seventy-two percent of institutions felt word of mouth was also important in raising awareness (Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Word of mouth**

How important do you feel word of mouth was in raising awareness of the survey?



### 4.3 Responsibility for NSS promotion

#### 4.3.1 HEI and SU responsibility

In just over half of the responding institutions, the promotional activities for the NSS were a joint initiative between the HEI and the SU, shown in Figure 7.

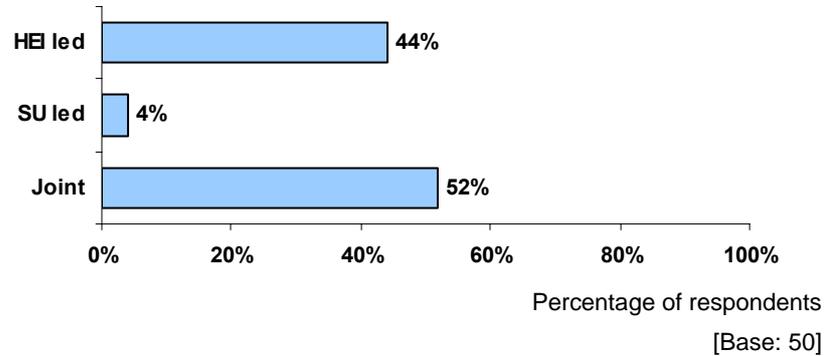
Almost all participants in the audit stated that they felt it was beneficial to work together in promoting the NSS (Figure 8). This was supported by the qualitative research findings, with the belief that combined HEI and SU support for the survey provided increased resource and added credibility to the survey:

- *We worked closely with our SU and found that worked well.*
- *This year it was a problem, because they (the SU) weren't really behind it.*

Recommendation:	Target SU involvement in the survey to a greater extent, both through the local SU contacts and at a national level.
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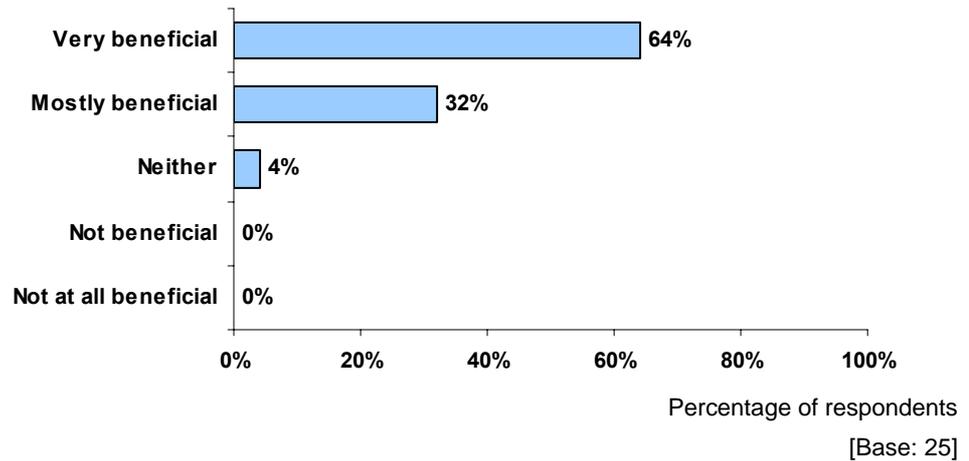
### Figure 7. Leading the promotional activities

Would you say the promotional activities were led by the HEI, led by the SU, or it was a joint initiative?



### Figure 8. Benefits of joint HEI/SU initiative

How beneficial do you consider it was to work together?



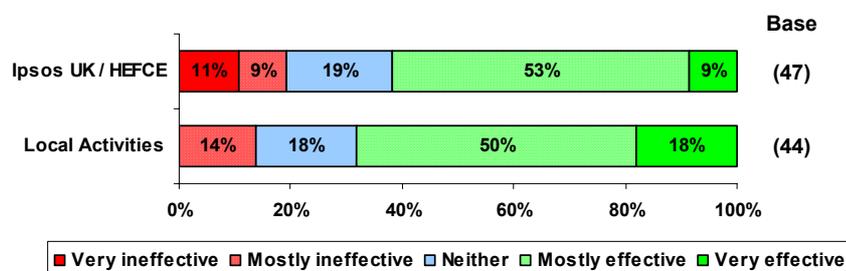
#### 4.3.2 HEFCE/Ipsos UK versus local responsibility

Overall, 62% of respondents felt the promotional support provided by Ipsos UK/HEFCE for the NSS was effective. This was slightly lower than the 68% who rated the overall local marketing activities undertaken as effective.

### Figure 9. The overall effectiveness of promotional support and activities

Thinking at an overall level, how would you rate the overall effectiveness of the promotional support provided by **Ipsos UK/HEFCE** for the NSS?

And how would you rate the overall effectiveness of the **local** marketing activities undertaken for the NSS?



Although the audit did not specifically prompt for feedback on whether HEFCE/Ipsos UK or the institutions should lead the promotion of the NSS, there were a number of opinions expressed:

*In favour of HEFCE/Ipsos UK-led promotion:*

- *I haven't got time for local marketing activities.*
- *I think we're very keen not to be seen to be pushing this too hard - standing back to let the students do the survey in a climate without university spin. I think we'd be concerned if we pushed too hard - so we didn't.*
- *The NSS represents a significant amount of work which was unscheduled and unfunded.*

*In favour of local (institution-led) promotion:*

- *HEFCE/Ipsos shouldn't set out to publicise the whole thing; they need to concentrate on engaging and facilitating institutions. The material should be more of a supporting nature.*
- *The processes required by Ipsos/HEFCE for staff involved in facilitation seemed smooth and non-intrusive.*
- *I don't think primary responsibility for promoting the survey should lie with HEFCE and Ipsos. The HEIs themselves are the most trusted source of information for students and HEIs should therefore take a lead in promoting the survey. Centrally supplied publicity is always going to be a bit bland.*
- *We, as a university, need to do much more next time out.*
- *We need to promote it more heavily, but better promotional materials from Ipsos would have been helpful!*

Recommendation:	Provide institutions with the supporting materials for implementing a local marketing campaign, e.g. templates for flyers, letters, screensavers, internal briefing documents, etc.
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## 5. The student contact database

The relevant NSS contacts were asked about their involvement in producing and supplying student contact details to Ipsos UK.

Figures 10 to 14 show the opinions of the information provided to institutions to enable them to produce the required contact details.

### Figure 10. The clarity of information

How clear were you about what information needed to be provided for each student on the student contact database?

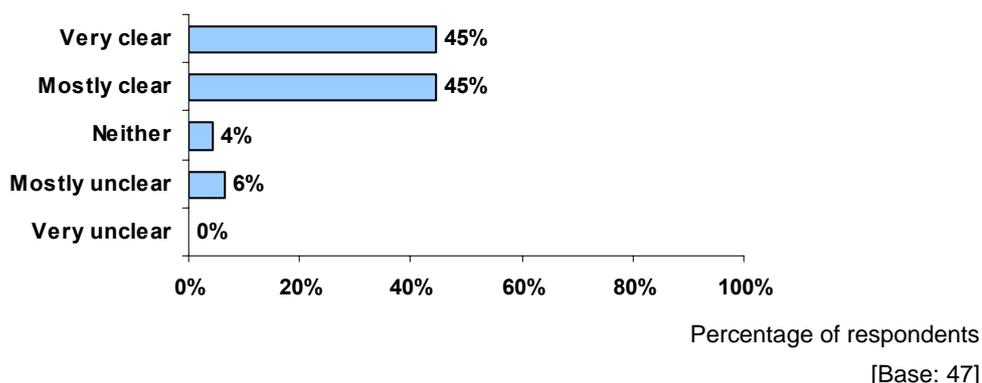
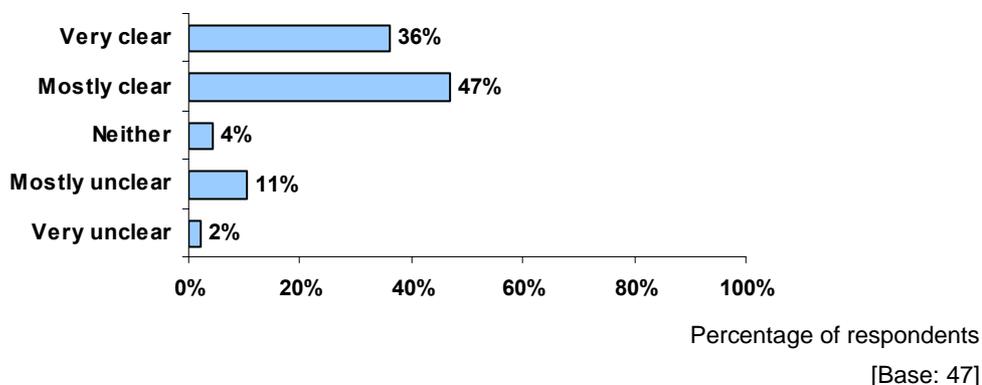


Figure 10 shows that nine out of ten respondents felt clear about what information needed to be provided on the student contact database.

However some felt that there was a need for greater clarity as to which students should and should not be excluded from the sample, reflected in the results shown in Figure 11.

### Figure 11. The clarity of exclusions/inclusions

How clear were you about which students should or should not be excluded from the student contact database?



During several of the qualitative interviews, concerns were expressed that some students who should have completed the survey were excluded whilst others were incorrectly included due to switching between different length courses:

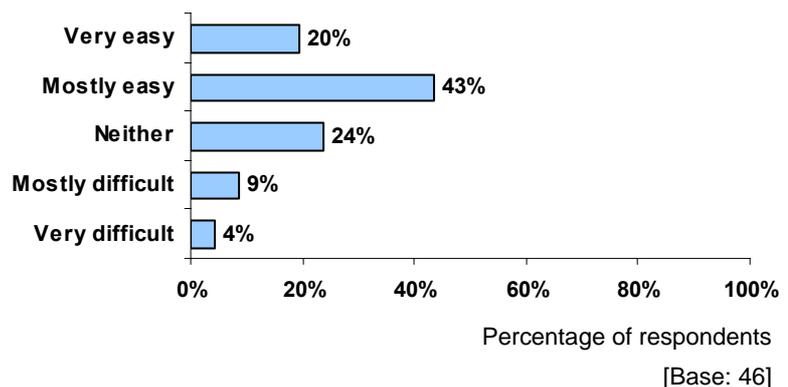
- We adapted our survey population to include/exclude various groups of students - but were subsequently advised that we should not have made these changes. Early advice on these matters would have made the process far more straightforward for us.
- There needs to be an exclusion code for those who are no longer final year students due to course transfer or interruptions of study.
- The HEFCE document needs to make it absolutely clear what criteria are applied to the dataset.

**Recommendation:** To ensure the clarity of which students should be excluded and which students should be included within the NSS sample.

Whilst 63% of respondents found it easy to produce the database, 13% experienced difficulties (Figure 12), many having to undertake additional work to meet the criteria requested (Figure 13).

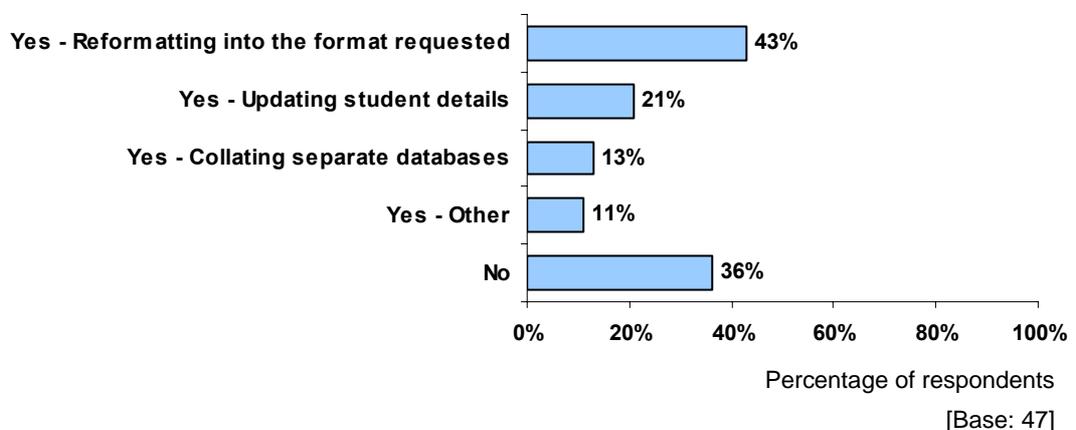
**Figure 12. The ease of producing the database**

How easy was it to produce the student contact database to meet the criteria requested?



**Figure 13. Additional work undertaken**

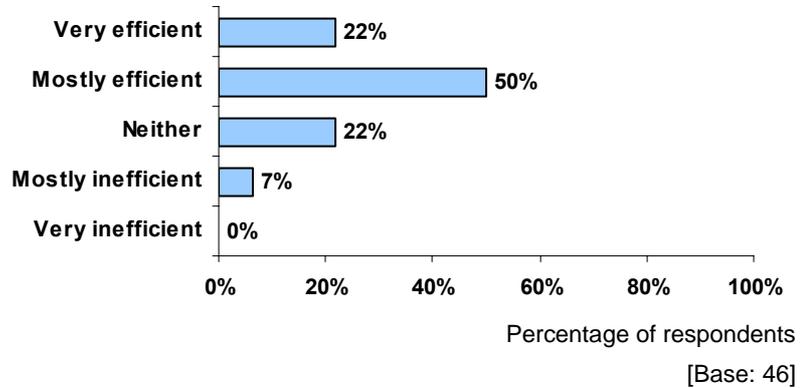
Did you need to undertake any additional work to meet the criteria requested?  
What was the main element of the additional work required?



**Recommendation:** Due to the additional work required, institutions were keen to be provided with as much prior notice as possible regarding precise sample requirements.

**Figure 14. The overall process**

How would you rate the overall efficiency of the process relating to supplying the student contact database?



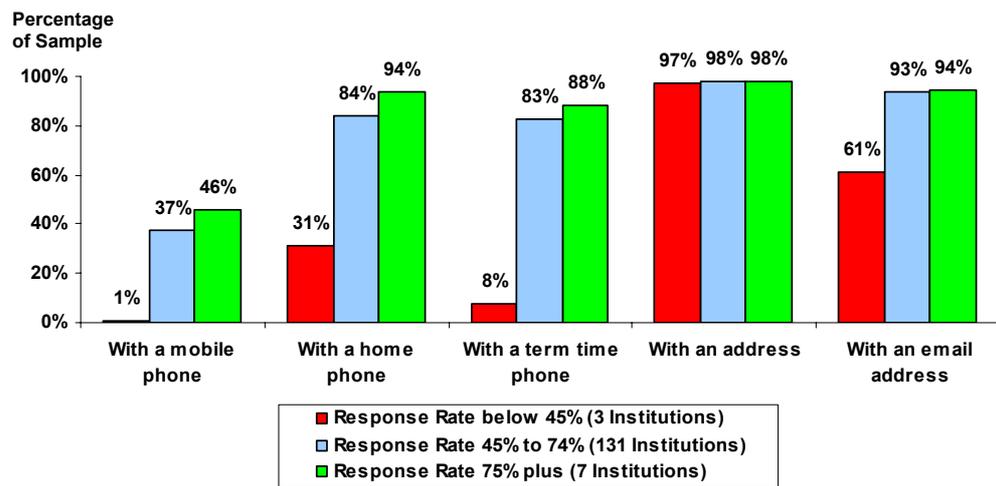
At an overall level, 72% found that the process of producing and supplying the student contact database worked efficiently.

**5.1 Sample collection analysis**

During the sample collection phase of the NSS, the quality of the database submitted by each institution was recorded, including the presence or absence of the key contact details required for the NSS.

Figure 15 compares the response rate achieved at institutions against the completeness of the contact details supplied for their students.

**Figure 15. Sample analysis**



Institutions achieving a response rate of 45% or above supplied significantly more comprehensive contact details than those achieving a response rate below 45%. In particular, the provision of contact telephone numbers was significantly less for those institutions achieving a low response rate, and therefore it was not possible to conduct the NSS by telephone with the majority of students at these institutions. Furthermore, with 39% of their

sample being supplied without an email address, this further inhibited the ability to contact students.

Therefore it is important for institutions to provide as comprehensive contact information as possible for their students, in order to achieve sufficient responses and feedback on their NSS performance.

One of the challenges highlighted during the audit was the difficulty some institutions encountered determining which email address students used if they had more than one email account. It could therefore be beneficial to response rates to make use of the alternative email address if no response is received from the main one. However it is also clear the situation varies from one institution to another:

- *There seems to be an assumption that all students have an email address – that is not necessarily the case.*
- *Low email response as large number of older students who do not use email regularly.*
- *Our students can and do access their university emails off campus, so it was unnecessary to provide additional email accounts. Similarly, most students use mobiles and we felt it superfluous to provide other landline numbers.*

We would therefore continue to request that institutions supply Ipsos UK with as complete contact details as possible.

Recommendation: Encourage all institutions to supply complete contact details, emphasising the importance relative to response rates achieved.
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## 6. Technical aspects of emailing the NSS

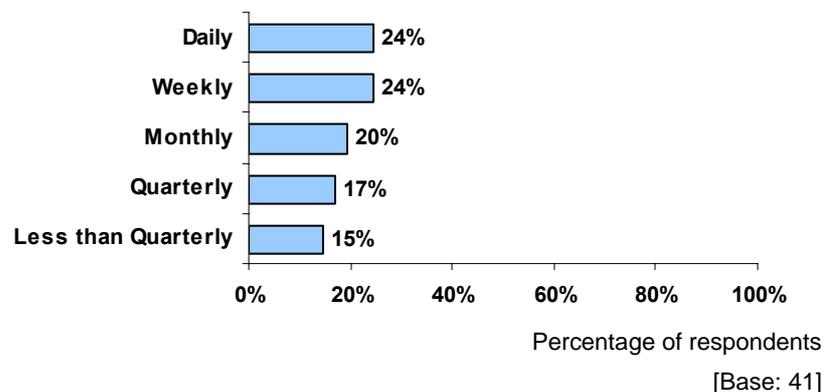
This part of the audit related to managing the technical aspects of the NSS, ensuring emails inviting students to participate in the NSS online were successfully received.

Firstly, we gauged how often email is used for sending central communications from institutions to students. Nearly half (48%) send out email communications at least weekly, however just under a third (32%) do so quarterly at most, as shown in Figure 16.

As a greater number of institutions begin to use email as their primary means of communication with their students, this should benefit the response rate achieved online.

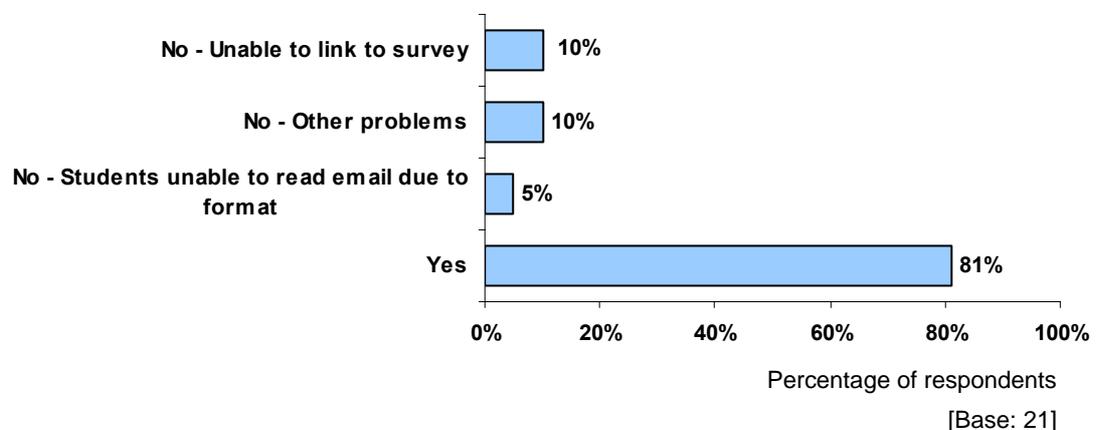
**Figure 16. Email communications**

On average, how often is email used for sending central communications from your institution to your students?



**Figure 17. Access to the online NSS**

Were students able to link to the online survey without problems on receipt of the emails sent from Ipsos UK advising them of the NSS? If no, what problems were experienced?



When asked how the technical aspects of the NSS could be improved in the future, a number of suggestions were made:

- *If the survey is repeated then something should be done to encourage greater usage of the online questionnaire.*
- *It would have been useful to be sent an acknowledgement once the emails to students had been sent, to enable any white-listing measures to be restored.*
- *Generally was well received, and the test email was found to be an effective way of ensuring the safe path of future emails.*

Recommendation: Send an acknowledgement to institutions when the emailing of their students has been completed.

- *It would be helpful to send the emails overnight so that the volume could be dealt with more effectively.*

Recommendation: Send initial emails notifying students of the NSS overnight/during least busy periods.

- *The use of the Own Institution ID confused the student on what number they had to put in. In the Student Record package we use this number. It's not just the Student number (first 7 characters) but has other digits added which is of relevance to the Registry. A facility to state that the NSS should only take x characters of this number would be appreciated.*
- *Many did not have easy access to ID number required to access survey – they couldn't work out which number they needed to input.*

Recommendation: Clearly communicate to students the ID number required to access the online survey.

- *In my opinion the survey would have had much better coverage if students received it at their college and personal email addresses.*
- *Best to have email notifying both internally and externally – you receive so many. Some students felt hassled, but it's trying to find the right balance.*
- *Not easy for the institution to determine what email address students use.*

Recommendation: Send an email reminder to (non-responding) students' alternative email address, where available.

## 7. Communication

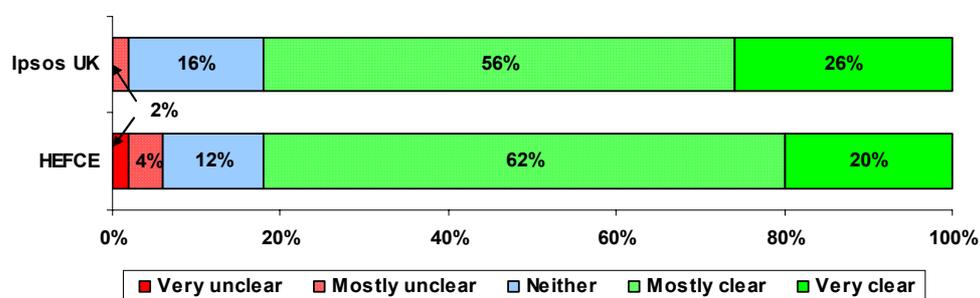
The audit asked NSS main contacts to consider the quality of the communication and information they had received regarding the NSS from both HEFCE and Ipsos UK.

### 7.1 General communication

Over 80% of respondents felt that the input required from their institution by HEFCE and Ipsos UK to facilitate the NSS was clearly communicated to them, as shown in Figure 18.

**Figure 18. Clarity of communication**

At a general level, do you feel that the input required from your institution by HEFCE and Ipsos UK to facilitate the survey was clearly communicated to you?



Percentage of respondents

[Base: 50]

Some suggestions were made during the in-depth interviews as to how the communication could be improved. The most notable responses requested more clarity regarding timings, and communicating information as concisely as possible:

- *All the information was hidden in documents.*
- *Would have been useful to highlight key points and deadlines.*

Recommendation: For communications sent from HEFCE and Ipsos UK to more clearly emphasise the key points and key deadline dates of input required, via a management summary.

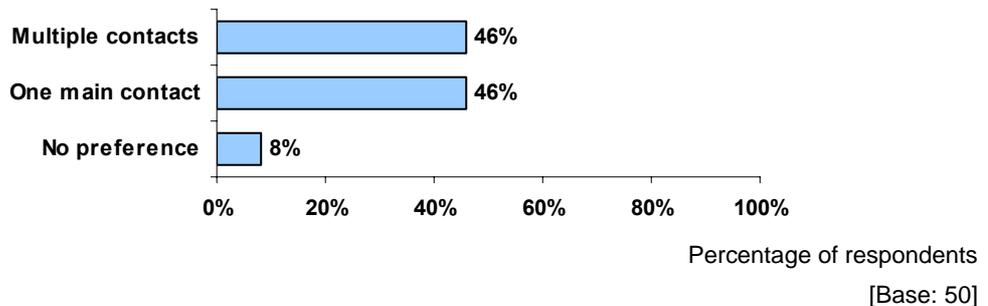
- *Too much paper – would prefer it electronically.*

Recommendation: Provide information electronically as far as possible, via the NSS extranet. Send email notification of all information updates to the NSS extranet.

The main contacts for the NSS were asked about the best way of distributing information to them:

### Figure 19. Preferences for distribution

For future surveys, would you prefer that all information distributed to institutions be sent to the multiple contacts within your institution, or just to the one overall main contact?



An equal number responded to the options of having information sent to multiple contacts and to just the one main contact (i.e. themselves).

It was also raised that some NSS information was sent to heads of HEIs and this was not felt to be always communicated to the main NSS contact:

- *Sending highly sensitive information to only heads of HEIs is not perfect, please can I be copied as the main contact person for NSS.*
- *It's all very well sending stuff to the vice-chancellor but he's not going to do anything with it.*

Recommendation: Continue to send information to all NSS contacts, and notify NSS contacts of all relevant information distributed to senior HEI contacts.
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#### 7.1.1 NSS results communication

Several institutions said that they would have liked more information and communication regarding the forthcoming NSS results through the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) site and NSS dissemination site:

- *The after-survey information appears patchy. Communication seems to come from both HEFCE and Ipsos, which is confusing. At this point of 13/07/75 we apparently don't have a definite date for publication.*
- *Need to ensure minimum delay between final data capture and the publication of summaries to maintain interest in the exercise overall.*
- *Want league tables to be able to put information into context.*
- *We have not seen our results - if we have missed the notification regarding results availability I think this reflects the lack of clarity of some of the communications.*

Recommendation: Maintain sufficient level of post-survey communication with institutions.
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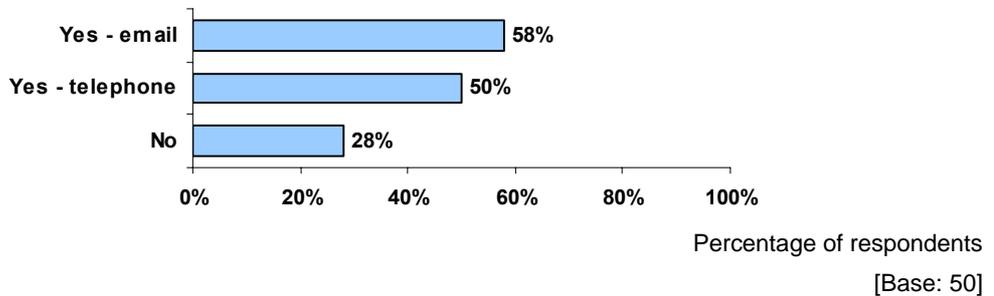
Recommendation: Improve clarity as to which organisation(s) is responsible for different aspects of the NSS (e.g. sample collection, TQI site, dissemination site, etc) to institutions.

## 7.2 The NSS helpline

Half of all respondents had used the NSS telephone helpline and slightly more, 58%, had used the email helpline facility (Figure 20). Over two-thirds of respondents stated they channelled most of their queries through the official helpline routes.

**Figure 20. NSS helpline usage**

Have you used the NSS helpline facility, telephone or email?

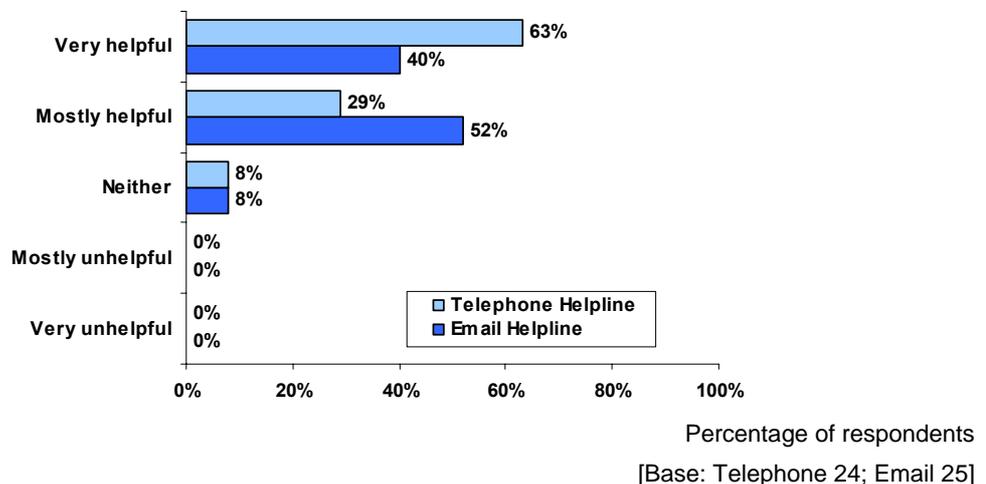


Those that say they had used the helpline were then asked how helpful they had found it. Over 90% described the combined methods as helpful (Figure 21). This view was supported through the qualitative feedback:

- *The staff at Ipsos were very quick to respond to queries and to sort out any hitches.*
- *The agency was excellent if you had any queries.*

**Figure 21. Opinion of NSS helpline**

How helpful did you find the NSS **telephone** helpline?  
How helpful did you find the NSS **email** helpline?



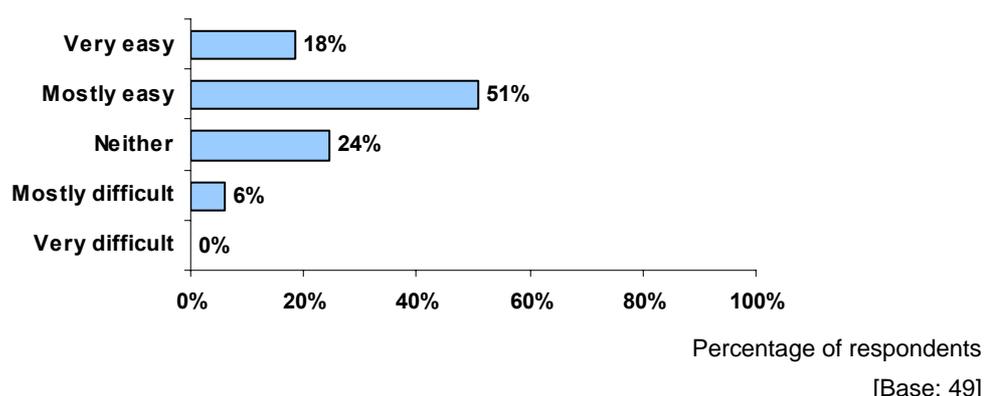
### 7.3 The NSS extranet

The NSS extranet was set up as a portal to communicate NSS information to the institutions.

It was identified through the qualitative interviews that not all NSS main contacts were familiar with the extranet. Of those who were familiar, just over two-thirds (69%) found it easy to navigate, as shown in Figure 22.

**Figure 22. NSS extranet navigation**

How easy did you find the NSS extranet site to navigate?



A fifth of respondents stated they had initially encountered problems trying to access the NSS extranet, and the following comments were received regarding the extranet in general:

- *Would be useful if bodies involved in the NSS could share the same portal – there are so many different things to keep track of.*
- *Timescale detailing next release of data would have been useful.*
- *The process was very straightforward, although I felt that the information provided on the Ipsos UK website was unclear. There was no information about what was available from clicking through the various links, and there was little in the way of news and updates. The email update feature was useful, except it needed setting up for each area of the website.*

Recommendation:	Update the NSS extranet more frequently and provide notice of when the next information update is due.
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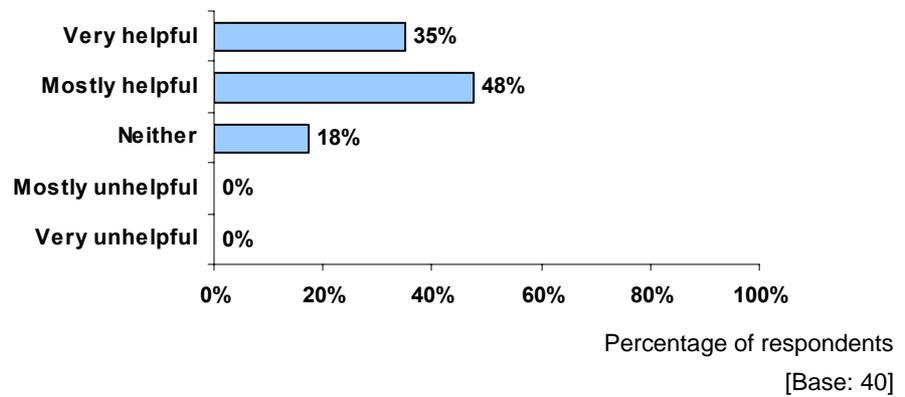
Recommendation:	Examine ways to improve the user-friendliness of the NSS extranet.
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#### 7.3.1 Response rate information

Response rate information was made available to institutions on the NSS extranet, updated weekly during the fieldwork period. Of the 82% of respondents who accessed the response rate information, over 80% described it as being helpful to them.

**Figure 23. Helpfulness of response rate information**

How helpful was this (response rate) information to you?



From the research, it was felt it would be beneficial to provide a greater level of explanation as to what the response rate information means for their institution:

- *A better explanation of the student response statistics available via the extranet would have been helpful.*
- *Would have like to have known how we were doing in comparison to other institutions – something to benchmark against.*

Recommendation: Provide a more detailed explanation of the response rate statistics on the extranet.
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## 8. Timing

The audit examined two aspects of the timing; the time available for institutions to implement the NSS, and the timing of the fieldwork period.

### 8.1 The implementation period

Eighty-five percent of the NSS main contacts responding felt they were given sufficient time to fulfil the input required from them for the NSS. The majority of feedback from the qualitative interviews also reflected this view:

- *We were under no pressure at any point in the process to implement the marketing programme and submit the student details.*
- *Plenty of time to submit contact database and implement marketing programme.*

However, a small number of conflicting views were expressed:

- *I think perhaps the whole process has been rushed, probably as a result of pressure from the Government.*
- *The time scale for extracting the data and making the return should be reviewed. There are increasing demands for data from institutions and the NSS should be co-ordinated with these.*
- *The timing of the process cut across more important activities such as preparing a HESA return.*
- *In future we assume the timescales, particularly for providing the student info, will not be so tight and there will be greater opportunity to raise awareness of the survey before it happens.*

Recommendation:	As far as possible, provide more prior notice of NSS activities, allowing institutions more opportunity to facilitate the NSS.
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### 8.2 The fieldwork period

Institutions were asked about their opinions of the timing of the survey fieldwork.

Those that didn't find the timing acceptable most commonly cited the fact that it coincided with a heavy workload for staff and students, and several stated that they had needed to reschedule their own internal survey and/or were concerned about the effect of the NSS on the response rates to their own surveys:

- *Timing is problematic - coincides with our own, very detailed student survey which includes all students not just final year, so some confusion, although appreciate it is the right time for a national one.*

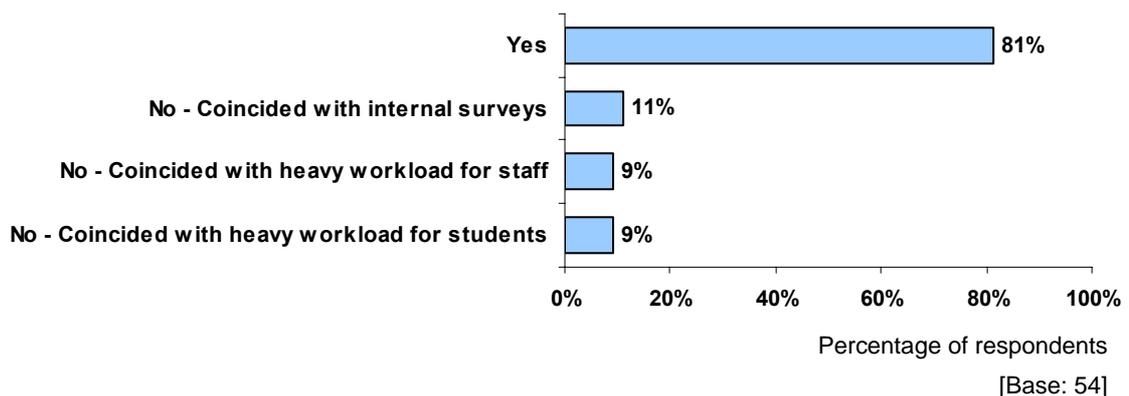
When asked if there was a more suitable time to conduct the fieldwork, the month of March was the most commonly suggested. Two respondents suggested conducting the NSS after students had graduated to gain a “more rounded response”:

- *Processes worked well on the whole but I am concerned that students are being asked to reflect on their time in HE before some major elements of their course are complete. I would prefer the survey to be despatched later in the academic year so that students can comment on the entirety of their experience.*

The main response from the qualitative element was “No time is ever going to be ideal”; however the current timing was deemed by the majority to be acceptable. This was also reflected in the quantitative results, shown in Figure 24, with 81% considering the timing of the fieldwork to be acceptable. The flexibility of the start dates was viewed as being essential.

**Figure 24. Acceptability of fieldwork timing**

Did you find the timing of the survey fieldwork acceptable to you?  
If no, why did you find it unacceptable?



## 9. Response rates

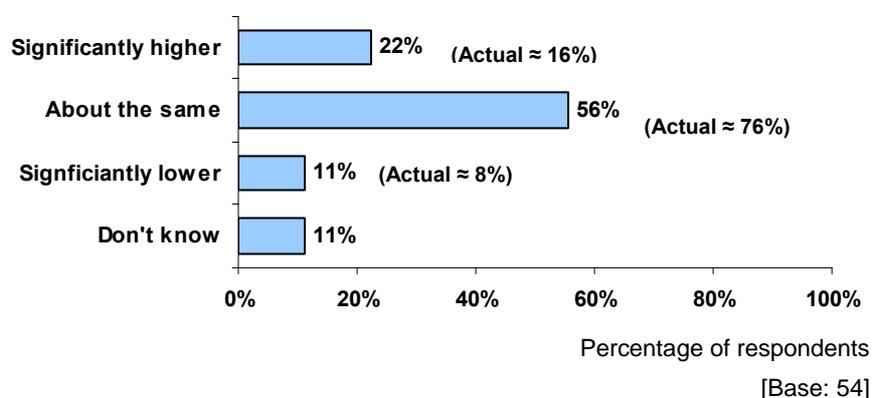
The final part of the audit asked institutions specifically about the response rates achieved at their institution.

Figure 25 show the level of response institutions believed they had achieved.

**Figure 25. Institution response rates**

The average response rate achieved for the NSS was approximately 60%. Was the response rate achieved at your institution significantly higher than 60%, significantly lower than 60%, or about the same?

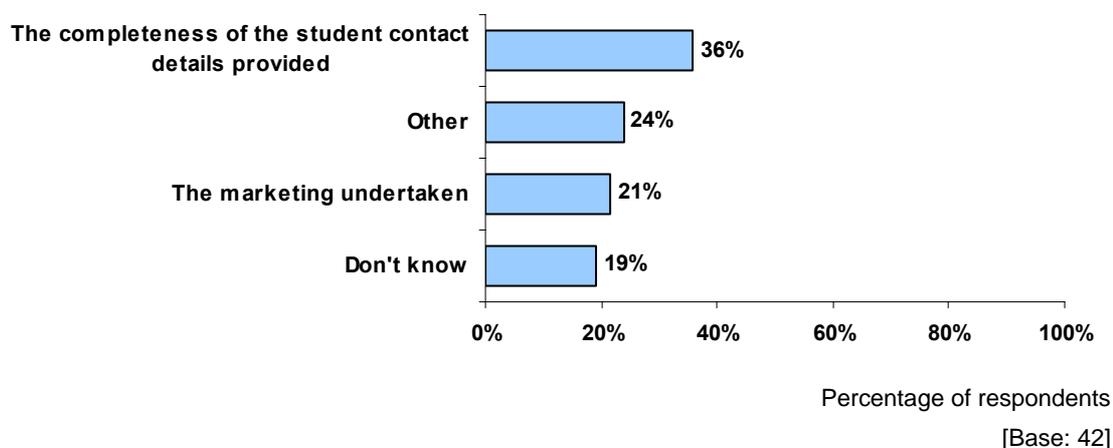
(The approximate actual percentage of the 141 institutions in each category is shown in brackets).



Of the 78% (or 42) institutions responding that said they achieved a response rate similar to or higher than the average, they were asked what they considered to be the main contributing factor to this.

**Figure 26. Contributing factors**

What do you consider to be the main contributing factor to the high response rate achieved at your own institution?



The results shown in Figure 26 confirm the aforementioned importance of receiving high quality contact details from institutions, and the implementation of an effective marketing programme. The 24% (or 10) responses stating the main contributing factor as “other” could largely be categorised into two items: **staff involvement** and the **multi-method approach**, detailed further in sections 9.1 and 9.2.

### 9.1 Staff involvement

- *Strong support from the vice-chancellor - influenced the staff to take it seriously.*
- *Knowing response rates by course helped – could target students specifically.*
- *College ethos – we encourage dialogue between students and staff x3.*
- *Both SU and university involved in promoting the survey.*
- *Commitment and involvement of academic and support staff, and also officers of the Students' Guild.*
- *Encouragement within departments for their students to complete the survey was probably the most effective method of communication.*
- *The department heads emailing students directly was key. Some departments actually booked time in a lab so students had computers available on which to complete their survey.*

### 9.2 The multi-method approach

- *The fact that it was communicated by email and during term time was a major help.*
- *The persistence of the telephone campaign.*
- *Personal contact with the students.*
- *Email responses contributed significantly to high response rate.*
- *The persistence of the follow-up processes.*

It was noted that 11% of respondents – NSS main contacts – did not know what their response rate was. This confirms the need to ensure that NSS contacts must be made aware of the importance of using the response rate information to maximise response rates at their institution.

### 9.3 Further suggestions

The following suggestions were made by institutions as to how to increase response rates for the future, in addition to the aforementioned items:

- *Walk around and do it face to face – it's possible, just costly.*
- *To increase our response rates we need to (1) fill in gaps in personal email addresses and (2) use text messages as a form of communication – we will implement this for NSS next year.*
- *Could tell them they don't get their degree until they fill it in!*
- *More attention to the non-traditional students for whom the mainstream channels of communication do not work.*

# 10. Recommendations

The audit has produced a mixed response from institutions regarding their experience of the first NSS and highlighted a number of recommendations for consideration for the NSS 2006 to assist facilitation and achievement of high response rates:

## 10.1 Recommendations for HEFCE and Ipsos UK

### *Marketing and promotion*

- Reinforce the existence of the NSS promotional guidelines, to ensure institutions are aware of the full range of the promotional materials and support available to them.
- Encourage all institutions to use the printed materials supplied to them to raise awareness of the NSS and increase response rates.
- Increase awareness amongst institutions of the full range of promotional materials available to them from HEFCE and Ipsos UK.
- Form a marketing panel consisting of HEI and SU representatives to test proposed NSS marketing materials.
- Through the marketing materials, clearly communicate the intended target audience for the NSS.
- Through the marketing materials, clearly communicate the purpose of the survey to students.
- Maximise positive publicity for the NSS at a national level, to raise overall awareness.
- Provide template emails and letters to institutions to use locally to promote the NSS.
- Ipsos UK to promote the existence of the response rate reports by sending an email to institutions each week when response rates are published or updated.
- Encourage institutions to use response rate information proactively to target specific departments.
- Target SU involvement in the survey to a greater extent, both through the local SU contacts and at a national level.
- Provide institutions with broader tools for implementing their local marketing campaign, e.g. templates for flyers and screensavers, and internal briefing documents.

### *The student contact database*

- To ensure clarity about which students should be excluded and which students should be included within the NSS sample.
- Due to the additional work required, institutions were keen to be provided with as much prior notice as possible regarding precise database requirements.
- Encourage all institutions to supply complete contact details, emphasising the importance relative to response rates achieved.

### ***Technical aspects of emailing the NSS***

- Send an acknowledgement to institutions when the emailing of their students has been completed.
- Send initial emails notifying students of the NSS overnight or during least busy periods.
- Clearly communicate to students the ID number required to access the online survey.
- Send an email reminder to (non-responding) students' alternative email address, where available.

### ***Communication***

- Communications sent from HEFCE and Ipsos UK to more clearly emphasise the key points and key deadline dates of input required, via a management summary.
- Provide information electronically as far as possible, via the NSS extranet. Send email notification of all information updates to the NSS extranet.
- Continue to send information to all NSS contacts, and notify them of all relevant information distributed to senior HEI contacts.
- Maintain a sufficient level of post-survey communication with institutions.
- Improve clarity as to which organisation(s) is responsible for different aspects of the NSS (e.g. sample collection, TQI site, dissemination site).
- Update the NSS extranet more frequently and provide notice of when the next information update is due.
- Examine ways to improve the user-friendliness of the NSS extranet.
- Provide a more detailed explanation of the response rate statistics on the extranet.

### ***Timing***

- As far as possible, provide more prior notice of NSS activities, giving institutions more opportunity to facilitate the NSS.

## 10.2 Recommendations for HEIs and Student Unions

### *To increase response rates*

- Fully utilise the promotional materials supplied by HEFCE/Ipsos UK to raise awareness of the NSS.
- When requested, clearly state which and how many promotional materials are required from those available, to enable the type and quantity to be tailored to each institution.
- Brief staff and student representatives internally regarding the purpose and importance of the NSS (HEFCE/Ipsos UK to supply a briefing pack).
- Write to distance-learning students encouraging their response to the NSS.
- Encourage academic staff to announce the NSS in lectures.
- Encourage heads of departments to send reminder emails (or letters) to students (HEFCE/Ipsos UK to supply templates).
- Refer to NSS extranet regularly for updates of information relating to the NSS. Ipsos UK will notify NSS main contacts by email each time the NSS extranet is posted with new information.
- Utilise the response rate reports updated weekly on the NSS extranet during the fieldwork period, to proactively target response rates within specific departments.
- Encourage joint HEI and SU involvement, adding credibility and increasing resource for promoting the NSS.
- Supply comprehensive contact details for students, enabling Ipsos UK to more easily contact students for the NSS. Include alternative email addresses, where available, for students.