

Annex A: Guidance on the 2020 National Student Survey for higher education providers and alternative providers

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) will be carried out in 2020 across providers in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland by the Office for Students (OfS) working on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies. Ipsos MORI will manage the survey process and Texuna Technologies will provide the data dissemination portal services. The 2020 NSS will follow a similar timetable to the 2019 survey.
2. This annex provides guidance specifically for UK higher education providers and participating alternative providers in England.
3. The responsibilities of providers in the successful management of the NSS are:
 - a. Timely submission of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student Record and alternative provider student record. The final submission date is in October 2019 for higher education providers and in November 2019 for alternative providers
 - b. Ensuring good data quality by checking the NSS report (the target list) generated by HESA. Requests for any necessary changes which cannot be resolved by correcting the student data may be directed to Ipsos MORI for approval by the OfS or the relevant funding body within the period December 2019 to February 2020
 - c. Timely issuing of NSS pre-notification email to eligible students. Further details can be found in the NSS 2020 set up guidance, sent to provider contacts by Ipsos MORI. The guidance document is also available on the NSS extranet
 - d. Timely submission of student contact details (email addresses and telephone numbers) when requested by Ipsos MORI (November 2019)
 - e. Engagement with all guidance and requests issued by the OfS, UK funding and regulatory bodies, HESA, Ipsos MORI and Texuna Technologies, and attending training and events run by them as necessary
 - f. Submitting survey preferences to Ipsos MORI. This includes timing of the survey and the choice of optional bank questions. Optional bank choices should be made in conjunction with the relevant student representative body (students' union, association or guild)
 - g. Promotion of the survey to students, ensuring all activities meet the guidelines on avoiding inappropriate influence provided by Ipsos MORI and the UK funding and regulatory bodies' code of practice for higher education data collections
 - h. Where appropriate, if advised by Ipsos MORI that response rates are low, undertake additional promotional activity to encourage students to complete the survey (during the surveying period January 2020 to April 2020)

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- i. Access the responses and results of the survey via the NSS data dissemination portal provided by Texuna Technologies (July 2020), the OfS website (including benchmarked data) and the Discover Uni website (for students).
4. Providers can access their target lists for the 2020 NSS via the HESA data collection system. They should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by **Thursday 28 November 2019**. Further details can be found in the NSS 2020 set up guidance for providers, sent to provider contacts by Ipsos MORI. The guidance document is also available on the [NSS extranet](#)¹.
5. Additions to or removals from the target list are admitted only under specific circumstances, details of which are provided in this guidance. Any such requests for additions or removals must be submitted to Ipsos MORI and agreed by the OfS or relevant funding body prior to their inclusion in or removal from the final target list. If approved, the OfS will inform the provider and make the amendment to the target list.
6. Eligible students are able to opt out of the survey at any stage during the survey fieldwork process.
7. Providers may choose up to six banks of optional questions and may include up to two additional questions specific to the provider. Providers are asked to agree with students' unions their choice of optional banks of questions for inclusion. Providers should submit their choice of optional banks and additional questions to Ipsos MORI.

Scope and coverage of the survey

Coverage

8. The following providers are covered by the NSS 2020:
 - a. In England, all providers registered and regulated by the OfS will be expected to participate in the NSS as ongoing conditions of registration.
 - b. In Northern Ireland, NSS participation is a condition of funding as set out in the financial memoranda between universities and the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland). Further education colleges in Northern Ireland take part in the NSS to meet requirements of the Revised Operating Model for Quality Assurance.
 - c. In Scotland, participation is a condition of the Scottish Funding Council's funding for higher education providers.
 - d. In Wales, all regulated providers are required to participate to meet the requirements of the Quality Assessment Framework for Wales.
9. All full-time and part-time undergraduate students registered at participating providers are eligible to undertake the NSS during their final year of study (or, for flexible

¹ See: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/nss/extranet>

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programmes where the final year cannot be predicted, after they are expected to have undertaken more than one full-time equivalent and not before their third year of study) with the following exceptions:

- a. Students on programmes that do not lead to undergraduate qualifications or credits
 - b. Students on a course lasting one year or one full-time equivalent, or less
 - c. Any students who were surveyed in the 2019 NSS (whether or not they responded) and who remain at the same provider
 - d. Any students who we expect to have completed one full-time equivalent or less since they were last surveyed by the end of academic year 2019-20.
10. Students are included in the 2020 survey population if they are expected to complete between 1 February 2020 and 31 January 2021 inclusive.
 11. During the NSS 2020, we are running the first stage pilot of expanding the NSS to include students previously excluded from the NSS population. More information on the process is set out in the NSS 2020 set up guidance provided by Ipsos MORI.
 12. It is possible to add or remove students from the NSS target list in exceptional circumstances, for example if the length of a student's course has decreased after a provider has submitted its HESA return. The full criteria are in the NSS 2020 set-up guidance provided by Ipsos MORI.
 13. Providers will be able to make requests to add or remove students to or from the NSS population once the target list has been finalised by the OfS. Requests for changes can be made from:
 - early December for higher education providers
 - early January for alternative providers.
 14. Requests should be submitted as soon as possible after these dates to ensure they can be processed prior to, or early in, the survey period. All requests must be made through the [NSS extranet](#) and should be made in a single file, including the required level of detail. The OfS or relevant funding body will review all requests for additions and removals and may request further details from providers where necessary. Submitting requests as early as possible and responding to queries in a timely manner will help expedite the process. It may be necessary for the OfS to prioritise approvals by survey start week, but we will endeavour to action all requests prior to the survey start date.
 15. With the exception of students on enhanced first degrees, postgraduates are not included in the NSS.

Reasons for excluding individuals from the survey

16. We enable providers to exclude specific groups of students from being contacted by Ipsos MORI. These groups are:
 - a. Students who are deceased
 - b. Students with serious health difficulties (including mental health difficulties) where seeking a response may be distressing for the student
 - c. Students who, having been informed that their contact details will be passed on to the survey agency (Ipsos MORI) for the purposes of the NSS, state that they do not wish to be contacted (students will also be able to opt out during the survey process).
17. Students in groups b and c will still be able to complete the survey if they wish, through the [thestudentsurvey.com](https://www.thestudentsurvey.com) website.
18. These are the only grounds on which students may be excluded from the target population. Providers should code these students on their sample submission as category 'C' and providers should not provide contact details for these students. More information on the process is in the NSS 2020 set up guidance provided by Ipsos MORI.
19. If the provider feels that students are incorrectly included in the target population owing to errors in the data, then these should be submitted as removal requests, using the process in paragraph 13.
20. If a provider identifies an error after it has submitted data to HESA but then wishes to remove students, we may require the provider to submit a revised return to HESA that generates a revised target list where we believe the errors are widespread and material. HESA will apply a charge of 20 per cent of the provider's annual subscription to meet the costs of processing this change.
21. To enable us to monitor exclusions and verify their consistent application, providers should retain evidence to support them. Where a student asks that their details are not passed on, we will expect providers to retain evidence of this request. If the number of such requests at any provider is so high as to affect our ability to conduct the survey successfully, we will discuss this with the provider.
22. Although some students may withdraw in their final year, they will have had significant interaction with the provider, so their opinions are valuable and should be included.

Process for supplying student contact data

23. Following submission of the HESA data, a target list of students to be included in the NSS will automatically be generated. The provider should then provide contact details (email addresses and telephone numbers), according to the standard template that will be supplied by Ipsos MORI, for all eligible students on the list.

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24. Students should be informed by the provider that their contact details may be passed on. For higher education providers and alternative providers, text has been added to the model HESA student data collection notice to explain this. Providers should also send all students eligible to take part in the survey an NSS pre-notification email informing them that they will be contacted by Ipsos MORI. Guidance and an email template on this are provided in the NSS 2020 set guidance issued to providers by Ipsos MORI.
25. Providers have the opportunity to define their own structure for receiving their own NSS data, through one of two optional fields on the sample file to indicate the internal 'department code' for each student. These codes, where provided, will be used solely for providing feedback to the provider.
26. Providers should submit the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by **Thursday 28 November 2019**. Ipsos MORI will provide guidance to its contacts on how to supply these lists as part of the NSS guidance document. The NSS achieves a high response rate, and to ensure this continues it is important that providers submit complete and robust contact details to Ipsos MORI by this date.

Administration of the survey

27. The 2020 survey will be conducted during the spring term so that the results can be published in summer 2020. To avoid concerns regarding impact on internal surveys, Ipsos MORI will continue to:
 - brand the NSS independently, which clearly distinguishes its purpose
 - manage the survey's distribution centrally, so that providers are not involved in contacting students to complete the NSS.
28. A five-week 'window' will operate, so providers can choose to start the survey at a time that fits with term timetables and does not clash with exams. Providers may select a week between 13 January and 10 February 2020 for the survey to start. There will be no communication with students by Ipsos MORI outside of the timing agreed with each provider. Students will be able to access the survey through the thestudentstsurvey.com website from 6 January onwards.
29. Ipsos MORI will conduct the survey at each provider using a set sequence of email and telephone surveying. This will take up to eight weeks at each provider, although there may be a need for some targeted follow-up during and beyond this time to increase response rates. Ipsos MORI will deploy the survey modes tactically to personalise the survey to students and providers and help increase online responses and reduce survey costs.
30. The five-week window is in place to ensure that results can be published in time for prospective students to make informed choices. However, we will consider individual requests for a short extension, where the activities of students make it impractical to conduct the survey during that time. Any provider that wishes to make a case for an extension should contact Ipsos MORI by **Thursday 28 November 2019**.

Promoting the NSS

31. Good practice guidance on NSS 2020 will be available from the Ipsos MORI NSS extranet, included in this is comprehensive guidance on appropriate promotion of the survey. It is important that providers adhere to this guidance and raise any queries with Ipsos MORI. The UK funding and regulatory bodies treat seriously any breaches of this guidance and may investigate and take action where there is evidence of a breach. We undertake an annual review of the process we adopt to respond to allegations to ensure that the process is fit for purpose and to make any improvements to the process and guidance for providers and students before fieldwork takes place. This allegations procedure² guidance is intended to be read in conjunction with the Good Practice Guidance issued by Ipsos MORI. We would urge providers to ensure all staff who are responsible for the running of the survey are familiar with Ipsos MORI's guidance and seek advice where needed on their approach to avoiding inappropriate influence.
32. Ipsos MORI will produce promotional materials for providers and students' unions to distribute locally. If a provider or students' union wishes to use the NSS branding to develop its own marketing material, it may do so and should discuss this with Ipsos MORI who will advise on good practice and offer guidelines to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency across the sector. When it contacts providers, Ipsos MORI will discuss who in the provider is best placed to coordinate promotional activity.
33. Ipsos MORI will manage incentive schemes in which providers may take part. These are centrally managed schemes that enable providers to offer incentives to students to complete the NSS. For example, some providers offered printer credits for students who completed the survey online.
34. Students on flexible programmes will receive tailored communication that more accurately reflects their participation in higher education.

Questionnaire distribution

35. There are two main methods of data collection: online and telephone. Ipsos MORI operates a live, open-access website, where students can log in and complete the survey (this is in addition to the option to respond by following the link in a personalised email). The aim of the site is to verify the identity of students at the point of logging in; once students have completed the survey and their response is validated, they will be automatically removed from the target list and not contacted again. To enable this, and to enable efficient working of the survey more generally, providers should adhere to the deadline for supplying student contact details.
36. We are committed to increasing the online response rate and so reducing the amount of telephone contact. However, phoning remains an important element of the survey and will continue, so all providers are expected to provide students' landline and mobile phone numbers.

² Available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/inappropriate-influence/

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37. To monitor responses and to process data for analysis and reporting, we link all responses to students' HESA numbers or known student identifiers. Telephone interviewers will have automatic access to identifiers. Once students have completed the survey, they will be removed from the target list and not contacted again.
38. Throughout the process Ipsos MORI will send reminders to students who have not responded.
39. Response rates, by provider and by subject area, will be monitored continuously during the process. During the telephone stage, response rates will be reviewed, and some areas may be identified for additional targeted follow-up activity, to bring responses up to a sufficient level to report results. This additional activity will involve reminders by email and text message.
40. At any stage during the survey process students may opt out of the survey and will not be contacted again. To do this, students will need to verify their identity by providing some data, such as their date of birth.
41. Provider response rates will be shared by Ipsos MORI during the fieldwork to help providers monitor their survey progress – providers should not share this data more widely and guidance on this is provided in the NSS 2020 good practice guide sent to provider contacts by Ipsos MORI. National response rates data will not be made available to providers.
42. Ipsos MORI will follow up with providers where response rates look as if they will be below those that can be published (see paragraph 44). The UK funding and regulatory bodies reserve the right to agree changes to the survey period with individual providers that are at risk of not meeting the provider-level or subject-level(s) publication threshold. The OfS will inform providers of any approaches and actions that may be necessary. The completeness and accuracy of students' contact data, as supplied by providers, will be a significant factor in achieving a publishable level of responses.

Publication of 2020 NSS results

43. A major purpose of the NSS is to provide information to help potential students and their advisers make choices about higher education. It also has an important role in improving the student experience, by helping providers to identify areas for action or development.
44. The current publication threshold for NSS results is a 50 per cent response rate with at least ten students responding. Results that meet the publication threshold and criteria will be published on the [Discover Uni website](#)³. Data will also be published on the OfS website, including benchmarking data. We may publish more data and analysis from the survey than previously available.
45. Data will also be available to providers on the NSS data dissemination portal delivered by Texuna Technologies. The results portal will allow providers to access particular

³ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/>

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elements of their data including optional bank questions, students' open text comments and data below certain publication thresholds.

46. The OfS and UK funding and regulatory bodies may publish their own analysis of the data including open text comments and optional banks. For data which is not available publicly through the OfS website this will be at aggregate level and not allow providers, courses or individuals to be identified.