

Annex A: Guidance on the 2021 NSS for providers returning student data to HESA

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) will be carried out in 2021 across higher education 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 2021 NSS will follow a similar timetable to the 2020 survey.
2. This annex provides guidance specifically for UK higher education providers returning student data to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).
3. The responsibilities of providers in the successful management of the NSS are as follows:
 - a. Timely submission of the (HESA student record and HESA student alternative record. The final submission date is in October 2020 for providers returning to HESA student and in early November 2020 for providers returning to student alternative.
 - 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 2020 to February 2021.
 - c. Timely issuing of NSS pre-notification email to eligible students. Further details can be found in the NSS 2021 setup 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 phone numbers) when requested by Ipsos MORI (November 2020).
 - 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 the timing of the survey and the choice of optional bank questions. Optional bank choices should be made in conjunction with the relevant students' union.
 - g. Providers in England are not required to promote the survey to students – this is a change for NSS 2021. Providers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are required to promote the survey. Providers that promote the survey to their students must ensure that all activities meet the guidelines on marketing and promoting the survey and on avoiding inappropriate influence, as provided by Ipsos MORI in the good practice guide.

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4. For NSS 2021, in addition to targeted follow-up, all providers that are at risk of not meeting the publication threshold will be automatically put into the booster phase to send additional reminders to their non-responding students. This is additional promotional activity to encourage students to complete the survey. Providers are not required to take any action in relation to the booster phase.
5. Providers may access the responses and results of the survey via the NSS data dissemination portal provided by Texuna Technologies (July 2021), the OfS website (including benchmarked data) and the Discover Uni website (for students).
6. Providers can access their target lists for the 2021 NSS via the HESA data collection system. They should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by **27 November 2020**. Further details can be found in the NSS 2021 setup guidance for providers, sent to provider contacts by Ipsos MORI. The guidance document is also available on the [NSS extranet](#).¹
7. 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.
8. Eligible students may opt out of the survey at any stage during the survey fieldwork process.
9. 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

10. The following providers are covered by the NSS 2021:
 - 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.

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

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- 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.
11. 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 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:
- students on programmes that do not lead to undergraduate qualifications or credits
 - students on a course lasting one year or one full-time equivalent, or less
 - any students who were surveyed in the 2020 NSS (whether or not they responded) and who remain at the same provider
 - 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 2020-21.
12. Students are included in the 2021 survey population if they are expected to complete between 1 February 2021 and 31 January 2022 inclusive.
13. 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 2021 set-up guidance provided by Ipsos MORI.
14. 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 providers who complete the HESA student record
 - early January for those providers who complete the HESA student alternative record.
15. Requests should be submitted as soon as possible 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.
16. With the exception of students on enhanced first degrees, postgraduates are not included in the NSS.

Reasons for excluding individuals from the survey

17. 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) such that seeking a response may be distressing for them.
 - 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).
18. Students in groups b and c will still be able to complete the survey if they wish, through the survey website.²
19. 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 2021 setup guidance provided by Ipsos MORI.
20. If the provider feels that students are incorrectly included in the target population because of errors in the data, then these should be submitted as removal requests, using the process in paragraphs 13-15.
21. If a provider identifies an error and wishes to remove students after it has submitted data to HESA, 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 such a change.
22. 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.
23. 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

24. 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 supply 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.

² See <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>.

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25. Students should be informed by the provider that their contact details may be passed on. 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 are provided in the NSS 2021 setup guidance issued to providers by Ipsos MORI.
26. Providers have the opportunity to define their own structure for receiving their 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.
27. Providers should submit the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by **27 November 2020**. 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

28. The 2021 survey will be conducted during the spring term so that the results can be published in summer 2021. 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.
29. 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 11 January and 8 February 2021 for the survey to start. There will be no communication with students by Ipsos MORI outside the times agreed with each provider. Students will be able to access the survey through survey website³ from 6 January 2021 onwards.
30. 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 some targeted follow-up may be needed 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.
31. 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

³ See <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>.

conduct the survey during that time. Any provider that wishes to make a case for an extension should contact Ipsos MORI by **27 November 2020**.

Promoting the NSS

32. To reduce the burden on providers, it has been agreed by the OfS that providers in England are not required to promote the 2021 survey to their students.
33. Providers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are required to promote the survey, as agreed by the funding bodies in these nations.
34. Providers that promote the survey are expected to review any internal campaigns to ensure that they meet with the guidance on marketing and promoting of the NSS and avoiding inappropriate influence (please see the 2021 good practice guide).⁴
35. The good practice guidance on NSS 2021 will be available from the Ipsos MORI NSS extranet, and included in this is comprehensive guidance on promotion of the survey. It is important that providers adhere to guidance on avoiding inappropriate influence 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 to ensure that the process we adopt to respond to allegations is fit for purpose, and to make any improvements to the process and guidance for providers and students before fieldwork takes place. This allegations procedure guidance⁵ 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.
36. 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.
37. 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 have offered printer credits for students who complete the survey online.

⁴ Available at <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/nss/extranet>.

⁵ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/inappropriate-influence/.

38. Students on flexible programmes will receive tailored communications that more accurately reflect their participation in higher education.

Questionnaire distribution

39. There are two main methods of data collection: online and phone. Ipsos MORI operates a live, open-access website, where students can log in and complete the survey, 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.
40. We are committed to increasing the online response rate and so reducing the amount of phone 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.
41. To monitor responses and to process data for analysis and reporting, we link all responses to students' HESA numbers or known student identifiers. Phone 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.
42. Throughout the process Ipsos MORI will send reminders to students who have not responded.
43. Response rates, by provider and by subject area, will be monitored continuously during the process. During the phoning 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.
44. For NSS 2021, in addition to targeted follow-up, all providers that are at risk of not meeting the publication threshold will be automatically put into the booster phase to send additional reminders to their non-responding students during survey fieldwork. This will be started automatically if a provider's response rate is below 43 per cent by mid-March and will continue for some providers until mid-April. An additional SMS reminder will be included in the schedule of contact to non-responding students during the booster phase.
45. 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.
46. 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 2021 good practice guide sent to

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provider contacts by Ipsos MORI. National response rates data will not be made available to providers.

47. 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 provider-level or subject-level publication thresholds. 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 2021 NSS results

48. 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.

49. The OfS will consider the outcome of the NSS review to ensure the 2021 NSS results are aligned with any new direction of travel resulting from the review. A decision regarding the publication of results for providers in England will be taken in early 2021 following the outcome of the first phase of the review of the NSS. For providers in other nations, detailed information and a timetable for publication of the data will follow in April 2021.

50. The current publication threshold for NSS results is a 50 per cent response rate with at least 10 students responding. Results that meet the publication threshold and criteria will be published on the Discover Uni website.⁶ 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.

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

52. 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 that is not available publicly through the OfS website this will be at aggregate level and will not allow providers, courses or individuals to be identified.

⁶ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/>.