

October 2004/33

Core funding/operations

Report on consultation and next steps

Details of lead contacts at HEIs to be returned by 22 October 2004

Results from the National Student Survey will be an essential element of the revised quality assurance framework for higher education. This document summarises responses to the consultation on the survey, sets out the decisions made and the rationale for them, and provides guidance to higher education institutions on the actions they need to take to participate in the first full-scale survey in 2005.

National Student Survey 2005

Outcomes of consultation and guidance on next steps

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National Student Survey 2005

Outcomes of consultation and guidance on next steps

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of HEFCE-funded further education colleges Heads of universities in Northern Ireland
Of interest to those responsible for	Learning and teaching, Information management, Student data, Quality assurance
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Enquiries to	At HEFCE: Rachael Tooth tel 0117 931 7066 e-mail r.tooth@hefce.ac.uk At Ipsos UK: HEI Helpline Service tel 020 8861 8110 e-mail nss@ipsos.com

Executive summary

Purpose

1. Results from the National Student Survey (NSS) will be an essential element of the revised quality assurance framework for higher education, as part of a package of new public information on teaching quality. The survey is designed primarily to inform prospective students and their advisers in choosing what and where to study.
2. The details of the survey have been the subject of consultation (in HEFCE 2004/22), and a pilot exercise. This document summarises responses to the consultation, sets out the decisions made on conducting the first full scale NSS, and provides guidance to higher education institutions (HEIs) on the actions they need to take to participate in the survey.

Key points

3. The first full NSS will be conducted during the spring term 2005. We will aim to publish results in summer 2005 on the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) web-site hosted by HERO, alongside other statistics and reports on teaching quality in higher education.
4. The 2005 NSS will include all undergraduate students registered at publicly-funded HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, during or near to their final year of study (with some exceptions, see paragraphs 23 and 30). The questionnaire to be used has been revised and shortened (see Annex A).
5. The survey will be ambitious in attempting to report results that are both reliable and at a detailed level. A high response rate will be needed for this, and hence a range of survey methods

including telephoning will be used. We have appointed Ipsos UK to conduct the 2005 NSS using a range of online, postal and telephone survey methods, and to co-ordinate a promotional campaign across the sector to boost responses. In summary, the process will involve:

- a. As soon as practicable, institutions selecting when, during the spring term, the survey should take place for their students, and then providing contact details for all relevant students by the end of November 2004.
- b. Ipsos UK will then invite students by e-mail to complete the questionnaire online. Those students who do not respond will then be sent a postal questionnaire, to their term-time address. Those students who still do not respond will then be followed up by telephone. In some cases, attempts will be made to contact students at their vacation addresses.
- c. Ipsos UK, in consultation with key stakeholders, will also develop an independent, national brand for the survey, and will produce promotional materials aimed at students. These will be distributed to institutions and students' unions for local dissemination.

6. While these multiple attempts to contact students will be necessary, the survey will avoid the possibility of students feeling intruded upon. Students will be able to opt out at any stage in the process, and the survey will be carefully managed so that once a student has responded, no further contact will be made.

7. We will aim for a response rate near to 60 per cent, so that results can be published at subject level, for each institution. Users of the TQI web-site will be able to generate comparisons between selected provision, using a 'basket' approach. Results will not be available on the site if the data fall below a certain 'reliability threshold'.

8. Concerns were raised about the proposed use for reporting purposes of the 19 main subject areas defined by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). We have therefore asked HESA to develop a more detailed subject categorisation, which also takes into account cohort sizes.

9. During the autumn, a range of reporting formats will be tested with users, and, following some consultation seminars in January 2005, decisions about reporting methods will be taken.

10. As well as publishing results on the TQI web-site, we will commission researchers to assess the survey's reliability and identify national trends in the data, and to work with HEIs and other interested parties such as students' unions, to provide them with feedback. HEIs will have the opportunity to define their internal structure of subjects for this feedback.

11. A new steering group is being established to oversee and review the 2005 NSS, advise on the reporting issues, and advise on the longer term strategy for developing and embedding the survey, in the light of lessons learnt during the first full-scale exercise.

Action required

12. The conduct of the NSS will be centralised as far as possible, so that it is seen to be independent, and to minimise the burden on HEIs. We have appointed Ipsos UK to conduct the survey and co-ordinate a promotional campaign across the sector.

13. Institutions should nominate a main contact for liaison with Ipsos UK, by completing the form at Annex D and returning it by **Friday 22 October**. Ipsos UK will make contact shortly thereafter, to:

- confirm start dates
- make arrangements for providing student contact data. As described below, institutions should generate a list of students to be included in the survey, using the web-facility described in '2003-04 statistics derived from HESA data: guide to HEFCE web facility' (HEFCE 2004/29). Contact data for these students should be completed and provided to Ipsos UK by 30 November 2004
- arrange facilities for Ipsos UK to e-mail students
- arrange promotional activities. It would be beneficial if students' unions become involved in the promotional activities, and additional contacts at students' unions may be sought¹
- endeavour to answer any queries regarding the survey.

14. In January 2005 we are hosting three events to consult with institutions, students' unions and other key stakeholders on reporting methods. Institutions should use the forms at Annex E to book places for these events, by **Tuesday 30 November 2004**.

¹ A briefing note about the NSS for students' unions is available on the NUS web-site.

Background

15. A revised quality assurance framework for higher education was developed following the completion of subject review by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA). This is based on the premise that higher education institutions (HEIs) are primarily responsible for assuring and publishing information about the quality and standards of their teaching. A Task Group was set up to recommend what information the new framework should generate.

16. The group consulted on proposals (HEFCE 01/66), and concluded (as set out in HEFCE 02/15) that an essential element would be consistently gathered and published student feedback, through a new national survey.

17. To scope out proposals for the survey, the student feedback project was commissioned in 2002.² It confirmed that a new national survey would be needed to generate comparable feedback, as internal feedback mechanisms within HEIs are too diverse, and have a different purpose – specifically to inform internal improvements. It was felt that this would be put at risk if internal feedback was used to generate public results in a systematic and comparable form.

18. In terms of the national survey, the student feedback project concluded that:³

- a. The main purpose of the NSS is to help inform the choices of future students, alongside other sources of information about teaching quality. To do so, the survey must aim to publish feedback data at subject level.
- b. The survey is also expected to contribute to public accountability by supporting periodic external audit by the QAA, as part of the revised quality assurance framework.
- c. In order to generate results at subject level, the survey would need to be large scale, including all undergraduate students at or near completion of their programmes.
- d. The questionnaire should focus on generic issues relating directly to the quality of teaching. A single questionnaire should be used for all students.
- e. A pilot would be needed to develop methods and ensure robustness, and the sector should be consulted on the proposed method, before the survey is implemented.

19. Following this project, we undertook two developmental pilots: first in summer 2003 with 23 HEIs; and then, with further refinements, in early 2004 with 11 HEIs. Through the pilots, a questionnaire was developed and refined, and through these refinements shows a good level of reliability. A range of methods for conducting the survey were tested. The pilots concluded that, although ambitious, a full-scale survey of this nature is feasible. They provided evidence about how to conduct the first full-scale exercise, with the expectation that further lessons would be learned from the first full survey, to inform its longer term development. Details of the pilots and their outcomes can be found at <http://iet.open.ac.uk/nss/>

² The recommendations and the full report of the project – ‘Collecting and using student feedback on quality and standards of learning and teaching in HE’ – are available on the HEFCE web-site under Publications/2003/R&D reports.

³ The project also led to a guide to good practice in the use of student feedback internally in HEIs. ‘Collecting and using student feedback: a guide to good practice’ (LTSN, March 2004) is available from the Higher Education Academy, www.heacademy.ac.uk.

20. The National Student Survey Pilot Steering Group (NSSPSG) was established to oversee the pilots, and to make recommendations for implementing the full-scale survey, on the basis of the pilot results and in the light of consultation with stakeholders. (Membership of the group is at Annex B.)

21. In May 2004 we published 'National Student Survey 2005: consultation' (HEFCE 2004/22), which sought views on proposals, based on evidence from the pilots, for the first full-scale survey in 2005. A summary of responses to the consultation is at Annex C. The NSSPSG has now considered the outcomes of the consultation, and made its final recommendations on the conduct of the 2005 NSS. These final recommendations, and the rationale for them, are reflected in this document. It sets out our decisions in each of the following areas:

- a. The scope and coverage of the survey, including processes for identifying students and generating contact data for them.
- b. The content and structure of the questionnaire.
- c. The administrative methodology, including a promotional campaign.
- d. Reporting issues.
- e. Steering and review arrangements.

22. In parallel to piloting the NSS, the Teaching Quality Information (TQI) site was developed by HERO as the mechanism for publishing the information aspects of the new quality assurance framework. During 2004-05 the TQI site will be populated with a range of reports and statistics on the quality of teaching in higher education (HE). The results of the NSS will be added to the site during summer 2005.

Scope and coverage of the survey

Coverage

23. In HEFCE 2004/22 we sought views on a proposed definition of students to be included in the survey. At the same time we provided HEIs with a preview of the sample at their own institution. In the light of the consultation responses, and decisions taken by the respective funding bodies, the confirmed coverage of the 2005 NSS is as follows:

- a. All publicly-funded HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be included.
- b. All full-time and part-time undergraduate students registered at these HEIs will be surveyed, during their final year of study (or, for flexible programmes where the final year cannot be predicted, during their fourth year of study) with the following exceptions:
 - i. Students on programmes that do not lead to undergraduate qualifications or credits.
 - ii. Students on short courses (of less than one year full-time equivalent) or very low-intensity courses (typified as continuing education students).
 - iii. Students on directly funded higher education courses in further education colleges (FECs). At present this provision is subject to a separate, programme-level, quality assurance system. We intend to review this system as the cycle of academic reviews is

completed, and to include this provision on the TQI site from 2005-06 onwards. This may in future include participation in the NSS, but not for 2005.

iv. Students on Initial Teacher Training (ITT) courses in England funded by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA). These are subject to inspection by OfSTED, and students are surveyed shortly after graduation by the TTA. There is a range of quality-related information for intending ITT students on the TTA web-site, and such students will be directed to it from the TQI site.

v. Students whose provision is funded by the NHS. The Department of Health participated in the pilot and has indicated that it intends to include NHS-funded students in future, as information systems develop, but not for the 2005 NSS.

24. A few respondents to the consultation suggested that taught postgraduates should be included. This issue may be revisited in future, but we would need to consider whether the additional benefits would outweigh the additional costs and complexities. It is unlikely that the NSS, designed for undergraduates, could simply be extended to postgraduates without significant adaptation, in terms of the questionnaire design, administrative methodology, timing, and reporting methods.

25. Some institutions commented that they would be able to identify continuing education students from their records more reliably than with the proposed algorithm. However, no institutions were able to propose a general algorithm that would apply equally to all institutions. So to ensure consistency the standard algorithm will be used.

26. A few institutions wanted to be able to defer surveying students who were repeating a year until the following year. This would be possible, but it would add an extra burden during the short turnaround time given to institutions. Such students will have had a significant experience of HE (in line with students on flexible programmes who would not necessarily be in their final year); so they should be included in the 2005 NSS.

27. Some institutions expressed concerns that where students opted out of sandwich years-out they would be missed from the survey, as they would graduate a year early. It would not be possible to adapt the target lists to capture such students, so we would have to rely on institutions manually adding them to the lists, which could lead to errors. Therefore institutions should ensure such changes in course length are properly reflected in returns to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) each July.

28. We estimate, on the basis of current data with an uplift reflecting the growth in entrants in the relevant year, that the total survey population across England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be around 280,000 students.

Reasons for excluding individuals from the survey

29. In HEFCE 2004/22 we recognised that HEIs might need to exclude some individuals identified from the July 2004 HESA return, as the survey will no longer be appropriate to them in early 2005. We proposed that the reasons for exclusion should be clear and applied consistently. Respondents to the consultation generally agreed with this approach.

30. In the light of responses to the consultation, we agree that the following can be excluded from the survey:

- 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 us for the NSS, request that they do not wish to be contacted for the survey.
- d. Students included in the HESA record due to an error by the institution.

31. Where a student is excluded from the NSS, the institution will need to record one of the above reasons (using codes a to d) and return this, instead of the student's contact details. To enable us to monitor exclusions and verify their consistent application, institutions should retain evidence to support exclusions. Where a student asks that their details are not passed on, we would expect HEIs to retain evidence of the request. If the number of such requests at any HEI is so high as to affect our ability to conduct the survey successfully, we may decide not to accept these requests and to insist on the contact data.

32. In the consultation, some institutions also wanted to be able to exclude students known to have withdrawn (by a certain date, possibly 1 December). However, students who withdraw in their final year will have had significant interaction with the institution; therefore their opinions could be valuable and should be included.

Student contact data

33. As discussed further below, a significant challenge for the survey will be to achieve a high enough response rate to enable detailed reporting. During the pilots we found that a range of survey methods, including telephoning, would be needed to achieve sufficient responses. Although a few respondents to the consultation were concerned about the potential 'intrusiveness' of using multiple contact methods, there was no evidence that students taking part in the pilots felt intruded upon. Nevertheless, students will be able to opt out at any stage in the process, and will not be contacted once they have made a response at any stage.

34. So while we will avoid intruding on students, we believe it both necessary and appropriate to use a range of electronic, postal and telephone methods, including the use of mobile phones. To support these methods, the following contact information is requested for each student:

- name
- term-time e-mail address
- term-time postal address
- term-time telephone number
- additional term-time telephone number, such as mobile number
- additional e-mail address (if available)
- vacation postal address
- vacation telephone number.

It would assist Ipsos UK in contacting students if institutions could inform them about students who have withdrawn from their studies. Institutions will have the option of indicating this when they provide the data.

35. For students excluded from the survey by the HEI, the above information will not be needed, but the HEI should specify the reason for exclusion from the agreed list of categories (at paragraph 30 above) and retain the necessary evidence to support the exclusion.

36. The data should be provided through the following process:⁴

a. During autumn 2004, HEIs should generate a list of students to be included in the survey. This should be done through the web-facility described at Appendix 7 in '2003-04 statistics derived from HESA data: guide to HEFCE web facility' (HEFCE 2004/29).

b. Contact data (or reasons for exclusion where appropriate) for these students should be completed and provided to Ipsos UK by 30 November 2004.

c. Some checks on the quality and completeness of the data will then be performed, including a comparison against finalised HESA data to check whether all the relevant students are included. Any data quality issues or discrepancies will then be fed back to institutions in mid-December (the soonest possible date following HEFCE's receipt of finalised HESA data). HEIs may then need to update the data as appropriate, in advance of the start of the survey. An early response to data queries by Ipsos UK will be important to keep the survey to schedule.

37. To achieve a sufficiently high response and hence enable the survey to generate reliable and detailed results, it will be important for institutions to provide data that are as accurate and complete as possible. Nevertheless, we recognise that institutions' records systems vary in the nature of contact information typically held about students, and in the formats in which data is held. Therefore if institutions anticipate limitations in the data they are able to supply, or difficulties with the timetable or process, they should make early contact with Ipsos UK. Assistance can be offered, for example in transferring data from internal systems, and where possible some flexibility in timing can be accommodated provided the issues are raised early enough.

Other data to be provided by HEIs

38. Through the consultation process, institutions said that they would like the feedback they receive to be grouped in a way that fits their institutional structure, rather than or in addition to feedback using the structure of the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS). HEIs have the opportunity to define their own structure for receiving institutional feedback, through an optional field to indicate the internal 'department code' for each student. These codes, where provided, will be used solely for providing feedback to the institution.

39. Institutions should note that when providing feedback we will need to ensure no individual students are identifiable. We will commission researchers to develop feedback mechanisms for institutions and students' unions, and it is likely that they will identify a range of options, for example, by 'department code' alone, or by breaking down results further into variables such as mode of study,

⁴ Under the conditions of their financial memorandum with us, institutions are obliged to provide HEFCE, or agents acting on our behalf, with the information we require to exercise our functions, to a satisfactory quality and at the times and in the formats we specify.

gender, age and so on. Institutions should ensure that their department codes contain substantial numbers of students, so that (taking into account a significant proportion of non-respondents) there will be sufficient data for us to provide feedback that does not enable individuals to be identified.

40. We also envisage providing the data grouped by the JACS-based subject categories to be used on the TQI web-site, to enable institutions to make external comparisons.

41. In Wales, all students will be e-mailed and receive postal questionnaires bilingually, and a Welsh-medium web-site will be available. Some students have a stated preference for being contacted in Welsh, so in the telephone follow-up stage Ipsos UK will seek to telephone these students in Welsh in the first instance. To enable this, there is an additional field in the spreadsheet for HEIs in Wales to identify students who have a known preference for communicating in Welsh. The opportunity to be interviewed in Welsh will also be available to all students studying at HEIs in Wales.

Data protection

42. Several HEIs in the consultation process sought further clarification about the data protection issues and whether students would be able to 'opt out' of the NSS.

43. We wrote to institutions in July 2003 (HEFCE Circular letter 22/2003) telling them that they might need to pass on students' personal data for the NSS, and advising them to consider what information they provide to students about passing on such data. As plans firmed up, we advised institutions clearly in HEFCE 2004/22 that we or our appointed agents would require students' personal data, and that institutions should thus inform students that:

- a. Information about them may be supplied by the institution to HEFCE or agents acting on its behalf.
- b. HEFCE's appointed agent may contact them directly to take part in a survey to provide feedback about the quality of their programmes of study.
- c. HEFCE may share this information with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (for institutions in Wales) or the Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland (for institutions in Northern Ireland).⁵

44. If institutions have not already done so, they should now ensure that students are informed, before providing the agency with the data. The following paragraphs clarify the issues raised in the consultation.

45. The NSS is part of the revised quality assurance framework under which, through agreement with the sector, we exercise our statutory duty to ensure that teaching quality is assessed. As the survey will be undertaken as part of our statutory functions, institutions should inform students that their personal data will be passed on, rather than requesting explicit consent to do so, as they do for other statutory uses of student data. The information could be provided in a number of ways, for example:

- with the enrolment form and the institution's own data protection statement

⁵ Given the Department of Health's decision not to take part in the 2005 NSS, the reference to it in the consultation document does not apply at this stage.

- on a web-site with the institution's own data protection information
- in a student handbook or other reference source for students.

46. HESA has added information about the NSS to its updated student collection notice, which institutions typically use to inform students about the use of their personal data by HESA and other statutory users. For further information see www.hesa.ac.uk/dataprot/collnotices.htm.

47. Although students should be informed about the use of their data, rather than asked for explicit consent, we recognise that, unlike most other statutory uses of students' personal data, the NSS involves contact by an external agency. Thus if a student specifically requests that their data should not be used for the NSS, we intend to respect their wishes, provided that:

- the institution retains evidence of the request, and states this as the reason for exclusion in the sample spreadsheet
- the number of such requests at any given institution does not significantly reduce our ability to successfully conduct the NSS at that institution.

48. In addition to respecting such requests before institutions pass on personal data, students will be able to opt out of the survey at any stage during the process.

49. The survey itself, in each format (described below), will include information about the handling and uses to be made of students' responses and other data held about them. It will explain how we will link their responses to HESA student record data and clarify that neither feedback to HEIs nor published statistics will enable their individual responses to be identified. Their contact data will be destroyed once it is no longer needed for the purpose of the 2005 NSS, and will not be used for any other purpose.

The questionnaire

Content

50. The 2004 pilot used a questionnaire that had been refined after the 2003 pilot. In finalising the questionnaire for use in 2005, a sub-group of the NSSPSG considered an analysis of data from the 2004 pilot, which assessed the statistical properties of individual items, groups of questions, and the questionnaire overall. A report providing this analysis is available at <http://iet.open.ac.uk/nss/>. Comments provided via the consultation process were also considered. In revising the questionnaire for use on the 2005 survey, we aimed to:

- ensure that in terms of their statistical properties, the items, groups of items and the questionnaire overall have a good degree of reliability
- ensure that the questionnaire captures the essential dimensions of teaching quality, as a basis for providing useful information to future students
- shorten the questionnaire as far as practicable, as this will help both to increase response rates and to contain the costs of the exercise.

51. The revised questionnaire, for use in the 2005 NSS, is at Annex A. This defines the content and structure. Ipsos UK will design and format the questionnaire and ensure it adheres to good practice in terms of accessibility. It will produce paper-based, web and telephone interview versions, each with

the same questions and response options. Students with disabilities will be offered a range of formats as appropriate. Welsh-medium versions of each of these will be available to students studying at institutions in Wales.

52. The main changes to the questionnaire, from that used in the 2004 pilot, are:
- a. Removal of the section on 'workload'. It had a low correlation with students' overall perceptions of quality, lacked internal consistency, and the items needed improvement (two were negatively worded). However, we do not rule out re-introducing a section on workload in future surveys, if there is demand from users for this information, and if more satisfactory items are found.
 - b. Removal of the section of 'other' questions. Most of these items were piloted to test their potential for future inclusion; however none were found to add significantly to any of the core sections of the questionnaire, and so have been removed. The item regarding 'variability' was helpful in assessing whether joint degree students had greater difficulty summarising their experiences than other students. This is discussed below.
 - c. The 'assessment' section had less strong statistical properties than others. However, rather than remove this altogether on statistical grounds, it has been merged with feedback, as assessment is seen as an important aspect of quality. However, we have left open the option of reporting the results for feedback and for assessment separately, or together.
 - d. Removal of a few individual items within remaining sections, where they added little in statistical terms, or their wording was regarded as ambiguous or problematic.
 - e. Removal of the summative item on 'investment' as this was felt to be ambiguous and did not add value to the statistical analysis.
 - f. A small number of detailed improvements in the wording of some remaining items (for example, adding a reference to 'services' in the item about libraries); and renaming the section on 'support and advice' to 'academic support', to remove potential ambiguity.
 - g. Removing 'not applicable' from the response option '3', as this could affect results inappropriately. Instead, there will be a separate 'not applicable' option.
53. The 2005 NSS questionnaire thus has 23 items, grouped into the following aspects of quality:
- a. Teaching.
 - b. Assessment and feedback.
 - c. Academic support.
 - d. Organisation and management.
 - e. Learning resources.
 - f. Personal development.
 - g. A summative item on overall satisfaction (item 22).
 - h. An open-ended item asking respondents to highlight any particularly positive or negative aspects.
54. The intention is to report results for each group of items a-f above (although it is possible that assessment and feedback will be reported separately). The summative item (22 on the questionnaire)

is included for statistical analysis, to assess the reliability of the questionnaire and the correlation between results for each section and overall views. It is not intended to generate published results as such. The open-ended item is also included to help assess how far the questionnaire adequately captures all the issues that students think are important. The open-ended comments will not be publicly reported. However, institutions and students' unions have said they would value this information, so we will make arrangements for these comments to be fed back, anonymously, for internal purposes. Respondents will be made aware of this when completing the questionnaire.

Joint degree students

55. In both pilots, students on combined programmes were expected to complete a single questionnaire relating to their whole experience. To assess this approach, in the second pilot we included an item about whether it had been difficult to answer questions because of the variability of experience. The results indicated that joint degree students did not in general have significantly greater difficulty than other students in summarising their responses on one questionnaire. Given this, and the added complications if we sought to issue multiple questionnaires or an adapted questionnaire for these students, we have decided that all students, including those on joint degrees, will be asked to complete a single questionnaire.

56. We will, nevertheless, need to consider how the results are to be reported for students on combined degrees. It may be desirable and feasible to report results in a way that allows users of the data to view results separately for joint degree students and for single honours students, within each subject area.

Administration of the survey

Timing

57. We had proposed conducting the NSS during the spring term of 2005, so that results could be published in summer 2005, in time to inform the next cohort of applicants to higher education. We proposed a four week 'window' during January and February 2005, within which HEIs could choose to start the survey, in order to fit with term timetables, avoid clashes with examinations, and so on. Most respondents to the consultation did not raise any significant problem with the proposed timing, and selected their preferred start date within the window, indicating that this flexible approach is necessary.

58. Some respondents raised difficulties related to the timing, for example concerns about the potential impact on internal surveys, although some also said they could find solutions to potential overlap. We have considered these concerns seriously, as we do not wish the NSS to disrupt important internal feedback processes. However, overall the number of respondents expressing concerns was small. When weighed against the disadvantages of delaying the survey, we do not feel this issue merits revising the overall timetable, as this would involve increasing the gap between the completion of subject review by the QAA and providing detailed public information about quality. In addition, adequate response rates are less likely to be achieved after students have completed.

59. For the institutions that raised these concerns, we believe there is sufficient scope to avoid potential problems. (Institutions often conduct multiple student surveys themselves, for different purposes, at similar times.) This scope is provided through:

- the 'window' approach which allows some local flexibility on the timing of the NSS

- the independent branding of the NSS, which will clearly distinguish the purpose of the NSS from internal surveys, and present it as a national initiative independent of the HEI. (There is also scope for HEIs themselves to clarify the purposes and nature of internal surveys in relation to the NSS)
- complete centralisation of the survey's distribution, so that the HEI is not involved in contacting students to complete the NSS.

60. Only a few respondents were concerned that at the proposed time of year students' experiences would be incomplete, and thus may affect the validity of their perceptions of quality. Only a few respondents suggested or implied that alternative timings (generally after completion) would be preferable.

61. The timing of the survey and the window approach is thus confirmed as follows:

- Each HEI can select a week, between 17 January and 11 February 2005, for the survey to start. Ipsos UK will need all HEIs to make their selections by 30 November 2004.
- Ipsos UK will conduct the survey at each HEI using the same sequence of e-mail, postal and telephone surveying. This will take up to eight weeks at each HEI (although there may be a need for some additional follow-up beyond this to boost response rates).

62. A few HEIs indicated particular practical difficulties throughout the proposed window, but indicated that a short extension to the window could resolve these. We do not wish to extend the window overall, as this could involve an overall delay to the process, but will consider individual requests for a short extension to the window, where the activities of students during the window make it impractical to conduct the survey at that time. If any institution wishes to make a case for a short extension they should contact Ipsos UK, by 30 November 2004.

Branding and awareness raising

63. We proposed in HEFCE 2004/22 that the appointed survey agency would develop a national brand for the NSS, and produce promotional materials for HEIs and students' unions to distribute locally. These would be to clarify the purpose of the NSS (distinguishing it from internal surveys), and to encourage students to respond. We also invited suggestions for further promotional activity to raise response rates. The general principle of the independence of the survey was supported. We therefore confirm this approach to national branding and co-ordination by the survey agency of local promotional activity.

64. Institutions varied in their attitudes to being actively and visibly involved in activities to encourage students to respond. Although most HEIs made positive suggestions about promotional activity, some felt it inappropriate as a matter of principle to be visibly involved in what they felt should be a wholly independent process. Many also felt that students' unions should be active in promoting the NSS. Discussions with students' union officers indicate that they support this view, and in addition would be keen to receive feedback on the results at their institution, for use in their quality-related work.

65. We recognise that both HEIs and students' unions will wish to become involved to varying degrees in actively promoting the survey. Nevertheless, it will be important, to ensure a level of consistency and maximise the chances of adequate response rates across the sector, for HEIs to be

responsible for a minimum level of local promotion. We would thus expect, as a minimum, for HEIs to ensure that promotional materials such as posters and leaflets provided to them by Ipsos UK are distributed and displayed. These will be produced using the national NSS brand, to ensure that the exercise is seen to be independent.

66. On the basis of consultation responses, many HEIs and students' unions appear keen to encourage a high response rate and would want to undertake further promotional activity. Such activity, although optional, will be supported by Ipsos UK, who will offer advice on good practice, as well as some guidelines to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency across the sector. We anticipate that one useful means of promoting responses will be through the use of pop-ups or notices on HEI portals, providing links to the online questionnaire.

67. When it contacts HEIs, Ipsos UK will discuss who in the institution is best placed to co-ordinate promotional activity.

68. A number of respondents to the consultation suggested there should be some incentives offered to students, such as a prize draw. We have considered whether it would be appropriate to use public funds to support this, and concluded that it may be appropriate to offer some incentives for students' unions to undertake effective promotional work, by contributing to student hardship funds, for example. We will work with the National Union of Students and Ipsos UK to develop such incentives.

Questionnaire distribution

69. HEFCE 2004/22 set out broad proposals for the distribution method, based on evidence from the pilots. It involved HEIs sending e-mails and reminder e-mails, followed by the agency distributing postal questionnaires, and then conducting telephone interviews.

70. The broad approach is confirmed, although with some modifications concerning e-mailing processes. The consultation exercise raised several issues regarding the mechanisms, and workload implications on HEIs, for the proposed e-mailing and reminder e-mails being handled by the HEI. Also, several HEIs proposed using web portals instead of e-mails. We have concluded therefore that e-mailing should be handled centrally by the survey agency, in order to avoid potential local technical difficulties, to minimise burden on HEIs, and to maintain the independence of the process. This central approach will require HEIs to make facilities available for Ipsos UK to e-mail their students. Ipsos UK will liaise with institutions individually about this and will be able to offer technical advice and assistance.

71. In order to monitor responses and to process data for analysis and reporting, we will need to link all responses to students' HESA unique student identifier (HUSID) numbers. Postal questionnaires will be personalised and include the HUSID. Telephone interviewers will have automatic access to HUSIDs. For online responses, we had proposed that students should log-in with their HUSID. However, several respondents to the consultation suggested that students' internal institutional ID number would be more familiar. Hence, students will be able to log-in using these internal ID numbers, with some additional details (such as name and date of birth) to verify their identity, so that their responses can then be matched to HUSIDs. Students who access the online questionnaire via the e-mail invitations sent by Ipsos UK will be automatically logged-in without the need to enter such information. Assistance will be available via an e-mail helpdesk to anyone having difficulty logging-in, and to answer other queries.

72. In summary, the distribution process will involve the sequence shown in Table 1. At each stage, students who have responded to the survey by any method will be rapidly removed from the sample, and not contacted further.

Table 1 The distribution process

Week 1	Ipsos UK will e-mail students with a link to the web-site, explaining the survey and inviting a response. A reminder e-mail will be sent a week later to those that have not responded.
Week 2 - 3	Paper questionnaires will be posted to those that have not responded to e-mails. A reply-paid envelope will be included. A reminder postcard will be sent a week later to those that have not responded. This will refer to the first letter and will also give the web-site address.
Weeks 4 - 8	Those who have not responded will be telephoned (using all available numbers starting with landlines) until either contact is made or the numbers are written-off as being incorrect or unusable. ⁶

73. Throughout the process, students will be encouraged to log onto the web-site and complete the questionnaire online. Alternative formats will be available on request throughout the process to cater for disabled students.

74. Response rates will be continuously monitored during the process, by institution and by JACS-based subject area (together these are the main reporting units). During the telephone stage, response rates will be reviewed and some areas may be identified for additional targeted follow-up activity, to bring response up to a sufficient level to generate reportable results. This additional activity would involve additional telephoning and sending postal questionnaires to the vacation address at the start of the spring vacation.

75. There were some concerns, including from some students' unions, about the NSS intruding on students because of repeated attempts to elicit a response. During the pilots, students who were contacted using similar sequences did not raise any complaints of this nature. In follow-up focus groups, students confirmed that they generally intended to respond to the survey, but often had not got round to returning the postal questionnaire or completing it online, and were generally willing to be telephoned and provide their feedback in this way. Nevertheless, we do not want students to feel that the NSS is intrusive, and thus students will be able to opt out at any stage with minimal effort.⁷ Responses will be logged continuously and once any form of response is received, no further contact will be made.

⁶ In addition, to test its potential for future surveys, a small random sample of students will be given the opportunity to complete the questionnaire by interactive voice response. They will either be informed about a freephone number which can be accessed at any time to record responses, or sent an SMS text message to their mobile phone; on replying to the message they will be telephoned and connected to the service.

⁷ Note that this is in addition to the opportunity for students to inform institutions, prior to the survey, that they do not wish their contact details to be passed on for the NSS, as described in paragraph 47.

76. In general we believe a response rate of at least 50 per cent will be needed to generate reliable results. We recognise it is inevitable that response rates will vary between and within HEIs. We will therefore aim for an overall response rate significantly higher than 50 per cent, and targeted follow-up activity will be directed at those areas below the 50 per cent threshold. Clearly, the completeness and accuracy of students' contact data, as supplied by institutions, will be a significant factor in the survey's ability to achieve this.

Reporting issues

Results to be published on the TQI site

77. HEFCE 2004/22 proposed a number of principles for reporting results on the TQI site, recognising that further work – including testing with users – will be needed before deciding on the detailed reporting methods. Following the consultation exercise, a number of the proposed principles are confirmed, and we have identified the need for further work in defining subject areas for reporting NSS results. However decisions on the details of reporting methods have not been taken at this stage. These will be taken in the light of planned user testing in the autumn, and consultation seminars in January 2005. In terms of the principles for reporting:

- a. The 'basket approach' was supported and is confirmed. Users will browse the TQI site and put into a 'basket' a number of selections (such as particular subject areas within an institution) which they want to compare. We will aim to have a basket size of up to six items. The NSS is not intended to generate comparisons across the whole sector, as this would not take account of the different contexts of provision in different HEIs.
- b. The principle of not reporting results that fall below a 'reliability threshold' was supported. We confirm that such a threshold will be applied, defined in terms of both response rate and number of responses; these might be in the order of 50 per cent, and 50 respectively. These figures will need to be reviewed, and confirmed or amended, on the advice of the NSS steering group and in the light of some forthcoming analysis of the extent of response bias experienced in the pilot.
- c. Many respondents raised issues about how results will be grouped into subjects. We had proposed that results would be grouped, in the first instance, into the main 19 HESA subject areas, and that users of the TQI site would then be able to drill down to more detailed principal subjects, where sufficient data were available. However, many respondents doubted that the main 19 subjects would be sufficiently detailed to be useful, and in many cases would summarise across a range of diverse provision within the institution. At the same time, there is unlikely to be sufficient data in many cases at principal subject level. As a result, we have asked HESA to develop an intermediate classification of subjects, that would be more meaningful to users and also generally contain sufficient student numbers to generate reliable results. This might involve a classification of around 30-40 subjects, defined by combining academically cognate JACS principal subjects.
- d. The proposed intermediate classification will have implications for small institutions and areas of provision with 'modest' student numbers. In developing the classification, HESA will take full consideration of cohort sizes, to maximise the proportion of subject areas within HEIs that are likely to be able to exceed the reliability threshold.

e. We confirm the intention to report a score (whether mean or percentage) for each aspect of quality, for each subject area within the HEI. The main intended use of this is to generate comparisons (such as graphs) across the selected 'basket', on each aspect of quality.

f. There were a number of concerns about the possibility of generating overall scores for each subject area within each HEI, as this would obscure the more useful detail provided by reporting on each aspect of quality. The steering group generally shared these concerns and has recommended that we do not seek to publish overall scores for each subject area.

g. The opportunity for HEIs to produce a commentary on results was supported, including the opportunity to link to further information such as internal feedback results, on HEIs' own web-sites. Several queried the timing and process for generating the commentary. We intend to provide an opportunity for HEIs to preview results and prepare the commentary prior to publication, but must also ensure that results are published with ample time for 2006 applicants to make use of the data. Further details will be provided in due course.

78. A range of display formats will be developed and tested with focus groups of users during autumn 2004. The results of these will then be discussed at consultation events during January 2005, before decisions are taken on the formats to be used for publishing the results of the 2005 survey. Institutions and students' unions should use the form at Annex E to book places for these events.

Results to be provided back to HEIs

79. While recognising that the main purpose of the NSS is to inform public choice, HEIs as well as students' unions said that they are keen to receive feedback from the survey for internal purposes, to supplement internal student feedback mechanisms. They would prefer this feedback to be grouped in line with the internal structure of the HEI, rather than (or in addition to) the JACS-based structure to be used for the TQI site. To enable this, HEIs will have the option (described in paragraph 38 above) to define their internal structure. We will then provide feedback according to these self-defined structures, in addition to standard feedback using the JACS groupings.

80. The open-ended item on the questionnaire is included mainly to help assess whether the questionnaire is capturing all the key issues. It is also felt to encourage responses. However, HEIs and students' unions said that they would like the full text of these responses for internal use. We will aim to do this, provided that the anonymity of respondents can be preserved. The questionnaires and accompanying material will inform students that these responses will be fed back in this way, and advise students to avoid making comments that could enable them to be identified. To ensure anonymity, hand-written responses to postal questionnaires will be converted into electronic text before being fed back to institutions.

81. There are many possible ways of providing both the quantitative and free-text data to HEIs, in various aggregations, as relatively 'raw' data or as reports. We will commission researchers to evaluate the overall dataset, to assess overall reliability and national trends. They will also work with institutions and students' unions to identify their feedback preferences, and to generate the data or reports for each institution. This could include, for example, generating reports from a defined menu, or providing relatively raw data, with advice on how to analyse it or software tools for institutions to produce their own reports. The seminars mentioned above (paragraph 78) will initiate discussion of these issues; the appointed researchers will then discuss firmer proposals in more detail during spring 2005 after they have begun work with preliminary data.

Management and review

82. The NSSPSG was established to oversee the pilots and the consultation exercise, and to make recommendations on the conduct of the 2005 NSS. Its final recommendations are reflected in this document, and the group's work is now complete. We will establish a new steering group to oversee and advise on the 2005 and subsequent NSSs, including:

- to make recommendations on reporting formats, in the light of user testing and consultation
- to receive progress reports from and provide advice to the survey agency
- to receive reports from and provide advice to the commissioned researchers, in producing an overall assessment of the 2005 NSS and in providing feedback to HEIs
- reviewing the 2005 survey and recommending any changes to improve and embed the survey over time.

83. In addition to the NSS Steering Group's review of the 2005 NSS, we are committed to assessing, in partnership with Universities UK and SCOP, the overall cost-effectiveness of the revised quality assurance framework, of which the NSS is a part. The first phase of the review, focusing on overall costs and QAA institutional audit, is currently under way. After the public launch of the TQI site in summer 2005 and publication of results from the NSS, phase two of the review will focus on these elements of the framework, including the usefulness of the information to the intended audiences.

Timetable

84. The timetable for the 2005 NSS is as follows:

Autumn 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HEIs nominate contacts for liaison with Ipsos UK• Liaison between Ipsos UK and HEIs to finalise start-dates and logistical arrangements• HEIs populate self-generated target lists with student contact data• User testing of a range of reporting formats• Ipsos UK develops branding and promotional materials, with input from key stakeholders
November 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• HEIs provide student contact data
December 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student contact data checked and HEIs informed of any issues arising; HEIs provide updates as necessary• Ipsos UK supplies HEIs with promotional materials
January - April 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• At agreed times, Ipsos UK surveys students using a sequence of methods, for a period of up to eight weeks (and any additional follow-up action)• HEIs, preferably with students' union involvement, distribute promotional materials locally and undertake further promotional activity as appropriate• Consultation seminars to discuss reporting methods; decisions

	<p>taken on reporting methods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioned researchers identify feedback preferences of HEIs and students' unions
May - July 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ipsos UK completes the compilation of data and submits it to HEFCE • HEFCE processes data and provides it to HERO; HERO prepares data for publication on the TQI site • HEIs preview their results on the TQI site
August - September 2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results published on TQI site • Commissioned researchers provide additional feedback to HEIs and students' unions

National Student Survey 2005 Questionnaire

For each statement, show the extent of your agreement or disagreement by putting a cross in the **one** box which best reflects your current view of the **course as a whole**.

- 5** Definitely agree
4 Mostly agree
3 Neither agree nor disagree
2 Mostly disagree
1 Definitely disagree
N/A Not applicable

The teaching on my course	5	4	3	2	1	N/A
1. Staff are good at explaining things.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Staff have made the subject interesting.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. The course is intellectually stimulating.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<hr/>						
Assessment and feedback						
5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Feedback on my work has been prompt.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I have received detailed comments on my work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<hr/>						
Academic support						
10. I have received sufficient advice and support with my studies.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<hr/>						
Organisation and management						
13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Learning resources	5	4	3	2	1	N/A
16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities, or rooms when I needed to.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Personal development						
19. The course has helped me to present myself with confidence.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. My communication skills have improved.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. As a result of the course, I feel confident in tackling unfamiliar problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Looking back on the experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight? (More space will be provided in the actual questionnaire.)

Positive :

Negative :

Annex B

Membership of the National Student Survey Pilot Steering Group

Members

Professor Gillian Slater (Chair)	Vice-Chancellor, Bournemouth University
Professor Bob Burgess	Vice-Chancellor, University of Leicester
Professor Noel Entwistle	Professor of Education, University of Edinburgh
Alice Frost	Head of Learning and Teaching, HEFCE
Ivor Goddard	Director General, Royal Statistical Society
Professor Harvey Goldstein	Professor of Statistical Methods, Institute of Education, University of London
Meriel Hutton	Senior Quality Assurance Co-ordinator, Department of Health
John Last	Vice-Principal, Arts Institute at Bournemouth
Sofija Opacic	Higher Education Policy and Research Analyst, National Union of Students
Professor Robin Sibson	Chief Executive, Higher Education Statistics Agency
John Thompson	Analytical Services Group, HEFCE
Keith Trigwell	Principal Research Fellow, University of Oxford

Observers

Helen Bowles	Standing Conference of Principals
David Caldwell	Universities Scotland
Celia Chambers	Department for Employment and Learning, Northern Ireland
Phil Gummett	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Bill Harvey	Scottish Higher Education Funding Council
Stephen Jackson	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Gareth Lewis	Higher Education Wales
Jane Tory	Department for Education and Skills
David Young	Universities UK

By invitation

Christopher Harris	Chief Executive, HERO
Professor John Richardson	Institute of Educational Technology, Open University
John Slater	National Student Survey Pilot Co-ordinator
Jane Wilson	Institute of Educational Technology, Open University

Secretariat

Katherine Andrews	HEFCE
Graeme Rosenberg	HEFCE

Annex C

Summary of consultation responses

Introduction

1. In May 2004 we published 'National Student Survey 2005: Consultation' (HEFCE 2004/22) and circulated it to all HEIs and FECs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, to other agencies and bodies on our regular circulation list, and, via the National Union of Students, to students' unions.

2. This annex summarises all responses received by the due date of 25 June 2004. In addition, during the consultation period we held a discussion seminar with student and staff representatives from the HEIs involved in the pilots. A note of the discussion is in paragraphs 49 to 56 below.

Consultation outcomes

3. The following numbers of responses were received:

HEIs in England and Northern Ireland	102
HEIs in Wales	8
Other	9
Total	119

4. 'Other' comprises:

- National Union of Students
- National Postgraduate Committee
- Association of Colleges
- Association of Managers of Student Services in HE (AMOSSHE)
- Society of College, National and University Libraries (SCONUL)
- 2 students' unions
- 2 further education colleges

Scope of the survey

5. HEFCE 2004/22 proposed the scope of the survey and an algorithm for identifying students to be included. We asked the following question:

Consultation question 1

Does the proposed definition of the survey population include appropriate categories of students and exclude those not appropriate? Any suggested changes to the criteria for including or excluding students should be clear and, if possible, applicable to the HESA record.

6. Of the 119 responses to the consultation, 63 were content that the proposed definition of the survey population includes the appropriate categories of students and excludes those not appropriate. The remaining 56 respondents did not clearly agree or disagree with the content of the proposed definition, although some raised particular issues as described below.

7. Thirty-five respondents commented on the proposed coverage of the survey, the most common response was unease about the exclusion of NHS-funded students (15 comments) and TTA-funded students (14 comments). Most institutions understood the organisational and administrative arrangements that underpinned the decisions; however they felt that these exclusions could result in a partial or distorted view of their provision.

8. Eight respondents suggested extending the survey to cover postgraduate taught students, as this would ensure consistency with the TQI dataset, and because they felt prospective postgraduates would be equally interested in the information.

9. Similarly, five respondents with a direct interest in FECs felt it would be useful to extend the survey to cover directly-funded HE provision in FECs.

10. Eight respondents suggested minor changes to the algorithms to take into account students on non-standard academic years.

11. One respondent commented that it would be able to identify continuing education students from their records more reliably than with the proposed algorithm. However, no institutions were able to propose a general algorithm that would apply equally to all institutions.

Exclusions

12. Fourteen respondents commented on the criteria for excluding students from the survey. Suggested exclusions were as follows:

- students known to have withdrawn (by a certain date, possibly 1 December)
- students who were repeating a year, who might be surveyed in the following year instead
- students with serious health problems, including mental health problems, where seeking a response might be distressing for the student
- students included in the HESA record due to an error by the institution
- students that have been excluded from the institution
- two respondents suggested that continuing education students should be excluded or that the data should be presented separately when published.

Timing and potential overlap with internal surveys

13. We asked:

Consultation question 2

Please identify when, during the 'window' of 17 January to 11 February, you would envisage the start date for collection at your institution. Please also state whether this is to avoid exams, or for other considerations.

Consultation question 3

Does your institution conduct internal surveys with final year students during this period? If so, how many and what kind of surveys are they?

Timing preferences

14. Institutions were asked to tick a box to indicate a preferred start date for the survey at their HEI.⁸ Of the 110 HEIs which responded to the consultation, the distribution at Table 2 emerged (some respondents ticked more than one box).

Table 2 **Distribution of timing preferences**

	w/c 17 Jan	w/c 24 Jan	w/c 31 Jan	w/c 7 Feb	Another date	No preference	No response
Number of responses	20	14	23	40	9	3	6

15. The reasons given for stated preferences were as follows:
- a. Sixty respondents said that they selected dates to avoid the exam period.
 - b. Thirteen institutions chose the date to avoid direct overlap with an internal questionnaire.
 - c. Nine HEIs chose dates later in the window to allow time for internal preparation work (such as providing the contact data, or early promotion).
 - d. Eight identified workload as a factor to consider.
 - e. Seven institutions chose the start date to fit around term/vacation times.
16. A few, in this section or elsewhere, raised timing as an issue that could affect the validity of responses, arguing that students' incomplete experience could compromise the validity or usefulness of their feedback.

Internal surveys

17. Institutions described a wide range of practices regarding internal surveys. In terms of their relationship with the NSS, they ranged from no relevant surveying at this time, through to surveys of a similar cohort, covering similar issues, at an overlapping time. Most fell somewhere between these two:
- a. Twenty-one said specifically that they do not conduct any relevant surveys at this time of year, or that they do not anticipate any overlap between the NSS and internal surveys.
 - b. Eighteen said that the NSS would overlap or clash with internal surveys, although to varying extents. Several of these indicated that they could find ways of avoiding or minimising an adverse impact (for example, by adopting the NSS for final year students and using their own surveys for first and second year students, or, if the NSS becomes biennial, alternating years.)
 - c. The remainder provided some information about internal surveys without indicating an overlap, or did not answer this question.
18. Thirteen responses – not always those who indicated a clear overlap – identified 'questionnaire fatigue' as a cause of concern. However, the number of internal questionnaires administered by HEIs

⁸ Some non-HEI respondents also ticked boxes but these are excluded from analysis of this part of the question.

over a year ranged from one to eight, and there did not appear to be any correlation between the number of internal surveys and a concern about questionnaire fatigue.

Promoting the NSS

Consultation question 4

Do you have any suggestions about the type of local promotional activities that could be effective in encouraging responses, and about the type of support that the national survey agency could usefully offer?

19. The majority of respondents (87) made positive suggestions about how students could be encouraged to respond. Eight said specifically that there should be no institutional involvement: some thought that this might affect the independence of the exercise or lead to potential bias. Four cited 'institutional burden' as the reason not to be involved in the promotion of the survey.
20. A range of activities/methods were suggested:
 - a. Students' unions were mentioned by 48 respondents. HEIs either said they intended to work with the union, or that the union would be expected to promote the survey within the institution. Many respondents suggested news stories or advertisements should be placed in student newspapers. Some respondents suggested paying students' unions or students to carry out work on behalf of the agency.
 - b. Online communications (45 respondents). Many suggested, in line with the proposals, e-mails to the survey population either from the agency, the HEI or the students' union. There was a split between those who felt strongly that the HEI should or should not send the e-mails, and there was concern from some about the extra work for HEI staff. Many also mentioned the use of 'pop-up' text when students logged on, to remind them of the survey and giving them a link directly to the web-site.
 - c. Posters/flyers (38 respondents). Some of these said that it would be useful if there was space on the posters so that they could be customised locally. Some highlighted that posters and flyers would have only a limited effect, especially for distance learning students, and that other methods would have to be used in conjunction.
 - d. Incentives (30 respondents). A number of HEIs said that they felt prize draws or incentives had been effective in their own experience. Many indicated that incentive schemes for the NSS would need to be national rather than local. Some incentives were suggested such as cash, laptop computers, holidays, or book tokens and vouchers for use in the students' union shop.
 - e. Word of mouth (19 respondents). This was identified as important, particularly by HEIs who supported the visible involvement of the institution. Word of mouth was suggested as important for raising awareness among academic staff as well as student representatives, and via these promoting the survey to students. Half of those who identified this method of promotion said that an information sheet for the target population and support materials for institutional staff would be useful. They felt that this would help manage the expectations of students, who might not see any direct benefits from responding. By informing staff they would be better able to answer questions and confidently promote the survey.

- f. National campaign (13 respondents). These thought that a national media campaign would be effective. Some thought this would help students to differentiate between the NSS and institutional surveys. Five specifically mentioned a television campaign.
- g. Local/regional campaign (11 respondents). These thought that a local campaign would be useful, using a range of local media. (Five respondents wanted both a national and a local campaign.)

21. Several institutions raised doubts about the ability to motivate enough students to respond, citing the lack of incentive for them (other than altruism), final year pressures, and so on.

Reporting methods

22. We asked:

Consultation question 5

Do you have any comments about the proposed principles for reporting, or the broad content of, published results?

23. The most frequently raised reporting issues were:

- a. Issues about disaggregating results by JACS/HESA subject area (raised by 40 respondents).
- b. Concerns about small cohorts not being represented (21).
- c. Concerns about the use of overall scores (22).
- d. General concerns about how useful the data would be to the intended audience (16).
- e. Issues about the HEI commentary on results (14).
- f. Presentation of results for joint honours students (10).
- g. Presentation of results for franchised provision (9).

Disaggregation of data by subject

24. Forty institutions expressed concern about the proposed use of the main 19 HESA subject areas to present the data on the TQI web-site, generally for one or both of the following reasons:

- a. These broad subject areas cut across courses and departments within the institution, and hence results grouped in this way would compromise their meaningfulness.
- b. Reporting by these broad subject areas would be of limited usefulness to prospective students, as they would generally want more detailed data, ideally at programme level.

25. A number of the responses appeared not to appreciate that the proposal was to report at the broad subject level in the first instance, and allow users to 'drill down' to more the more detailed principal subject level wherever numbers were sufficiently large; they responded as if only the broad subject areas would be available.

26. Some of these responses, while raising concerns, also acknowledged that the use of the JACS subject structure is necessary in order to provide comparative results. Responses on these issues did

not in general propose any alternative. Only a few responses proposed or implied that reporting at course level should be pursued.

Small cohorts

27. Several respondents expressed their support for the proposed 'reliability threshold', below which data would not be published. However, 21 institutions were concerned that these thresholds, in conjunction with the proposed subject structure, would mean that data for many areas of their provision would be omitted. This was a concern particularly among smaller institutions, and some were concerned this would provide a distorted view of their institution as a whole.

Overall scores

28. Twenty-two respondents were concerned about the potential use of overall scores, as they felt they would encourage misleading or simplistic league tables, and/or speculated that they would be unhelpful or of little value to prospective students.

29. A few respondents supported the use of overall scores but said they should be generated from the controlling items on the questionnaire, not aggregated from the questionnaire as a whole. One respondent recognised that league tables were inevitable and argued that it would be better to have overall scores calculated by HEFCE, rather than by the creators of the league tables.

HEI commentary on results

30. Fourteen respondents commented on this aspect, generally welcoming the opportunity but often querying the timing and process. One institution felt it would be difficult to comment against JACS codes, which did not match their internal structure.

Joint honours students

31. Ten HEIs were unsure or concerned about how joint degree provision would be represented. This was seen as particularly important for institutions with a large proportion of such provision.

Franchised provision/location of delivery

32. Nine institutions suggested that in order to avoid 'distorting' their results, and to be more useful to prospective students, the data on the TQI web-site should distinguish provision taught at the HEI from that taught at other sites. This was raised particularly by HEIs with franchised provision at FECs. While some accepted the formal responsibility for teaching quality of the registering HEI, most that raised this issue felt franchised students' experiences could be very different from those of students studying at the HEI. The issue was also raised by one HEI made up of distinct and separate sites.

33. In a similar vein, a small number suggested that sub-degree provision should be reported separately from degree provision.

Other

34. A number of other issues were raised, less frequently than those above, including:

- a. Some respondents stated they would welcome the opportunity to comment on how the data will look before they are made available on the TQI web-site. Some also expressed interest in the results of the proposed user testing.

- b. Several commented on the basket approach, suggesting that the basket size should be six rather than five items for comparison, reflecting the number of choices on the UCAS form. One or two queried how comparisons could be made in the basket, if data are available at different levels of subject granularity for different HEIs.
- c. Several commented on whether mean scores or percentages of positive/negative responses should be used. Opinions were divided, with a few supporting each option.
- d. A few argued that scores should only be published for each individual item, and should not be grouped into the 'aspects' of quality.
- e. Some commented on the use of confidence intervals, either to argue that they do not provide a measure of statistical reliability as such, or to query how easily they will be understood by users.
- f. Several comments were made about the data to be reported back to HEIs, either querying whether the data will be useful to institutions, or suggesting that in order to be useful, data should be detailed and grouped in a way that matches the institution's structure (rather than by JACS code). A few commented on the potential for the NSS data to supplement internal data, for example for benchmarking.

Additional comments

35. We asked:

Consultation question 6

Do you have any other comments about the proposals set out in this document?

36. This question attracted a wide range of responses and was often used to comment on other aspects of the NSS in general; 92 of the 119 respondents made a comment. Comments tended to emphasise points raised by questions 1 to 5, but some additional issues or more general comments were also made. Where the comments were relevant to other issues covered above, we have summarised responses there. The most frequently raised additional issues were:

- a. Comments on the questionnaire (by 36 respondents).
- b. Issues about the proposed e-mailing by HEIs (26).
- c. General comments on the likely outputs of the survey, and their perceived value to users (21).
- d. Issues about student contact data (18).
- e. Burden on HEIs (15).
- f. Data protection issues (14).

The questionnaire

37. Almost all of the 36 who commented on the questionnaire made detailed observations on the wording or inclusion of specific items. The most common criticisms were:

- a. The negative wording of two of the 'workload' questions (although one respondent thought there should be a more even mix of positively and negatively worded questions).

- b. The relevance or clarity of the item about 'investment', and to a lesser extent, the item on 'careers advice'.
- c. Various problems with the item about 'deadlines' being 'evenly spread'.

38. Note that all of these items have been removed from the revised questionnaire. Overall there were 64 comments or queries about individual items: 46 of these relate to items that have since been removed; 18 relate to items that remain, and of these, only two items received more than two comments. (The item about 'library resources' received four comments and the item 'I have been able to contact staff when I need to' received three comments.)

39. Several suggested additional topics or items. The only issues raised more than once related to intellectual curiosity and rigour, and curriculum breadth/depth.

40. Several argued that a response of '3' should not be used for 'not applicable', as this could distort results.

41. A few respondents were dissatisfied about the questionnaire in general.

Role of HEIs in e-mailing students

42. Twenty-six HEIs raised issues about the proposal that institutions should e-mail out the questionnaire initially to students:

- a. Most sought clarification on how they would be informed about those students who had not responded, in order to trigger a follow-up e-mail.
- b. Some did not feel it appropriate to be involved directly in an 'independent' survey.
- c. Some suggested that using web portals, or managed or virtual learning environments (MLEs/VLEs) would be better than e-mailing out to students.
- d. Some identified problems with the incompleteness of their e-mail contact data, or with students using private accounts rather than those provided by the HEI.
- e. Some were concerned about workload and burden on the HEI.

Student contact data

43. Eighteen respondents raised issues about student contact data, with varying degrees of significance. Most described some limitation in their data, usually for telephone/mobile numbers or e-mail addresses, but there were also some issues about general up-to-dateness. A small number of specific 'gaps' were identified, for example data about franchised students at FECs not being held by the HEI. A few indicated they would actively seek to address problems. Others merely noted them as limitations, or implied they were beyond their control (for example, saying that it is up to students to inform them of changes). Five HEIs stated that they would not have contact data for students who had transferred or withdrawn.

Cost and burden on HEIs

44. Fifteen HEIs commented on the increased workload and costs associated with the NSS. Some sought clarification on how much it is likely to cost institutions. Specific points raised were:

- a. The provision of student contact details is seen by some as being time consuming, particularly for small HEIs, as they will be in the process of completing their HESES data return at the same time.
- b. Several raised this issue in the context of undertaking their own internal surveys and not seeing the added value of the NSS. They therefore opposed any additional burden on them due to the NSS.
- c. Five HEIs raised it in the context of the particular difficulties for small institutions, in that they would face a disproportionately high burden, and yet are likely to generate a limited output because of small numbers of students.
- d. Some who had made positive suggestions about undertaking local promotional activity requested that additional funds be provided for this.
- e. Some noted that HEIs had already experienced increased workload last year following the introduction of the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey for part-time students.
- f. Some requested early notification of the information institutions are expected to provide, so that staff are able to plan their workload in advance.

45. A small number welcomed the fact that the use of the central agency would minimise burden for HEIs.

46. As well as concerns about burden on HEIs, several respondents commented on the overall cost or value for money of the NSS; some stressed the need to evaluate its costs and benefits.

Data protection

47. Fourteen respondents, all from HEIs, commented on data protection issues. Some institutions confirmed that they had made or would make the necessary arrangements to inform students that their data would be passed on for the NSS. Other issues raised included:

- a. The suggestion that institutions would need to gain advice on whether or not they legally could provide student contact details to an agency.
- b. Concern was expressed from one institution at the timescale for institutions to inform students about passing their data on. One felt that the advice provided by HEFCE on this was inadequate.
- c. Confirmation was sought on the timeframe for the destruction of personal information after the survey, so that HEIs could be assured that data were not held for too long.
- d. Whether or not there is a statutory obligation on HEIs to return all student contact details.
- e. Whether or not the Data Protection Act would prevent institutions from bulk e-mailing their students.
- f. Written confirmation was sought from one HEI, before they provide contact details, that student data will not be used for any purpose other than the NSS, and that an agreement will

be drawn up between HEFCE and the agency to prevent contact details being used for another purpose.

g. A Welsh institution sought assurances about the flow of personal data between HEIs, the central agency and the two funding bodies.

48. In addition, and related to the data protection issues:

a. A few respondents (including from students' unions) argued that the proposed sequence of survey methods – especially if using mobile phone numbers – would be regarded by students as intrusive.

b. Several respondents argued that there must be, or sought further clarification about, an opt-out process for students who do not wish to be contacted or pursued.

Issues raised by pilot participants

49. Staff and students from the 23 institutions involved in the pilots were invited to a seminar on 28 May 2004 to discuss the consultation proposals. Staff representatives attended from eight institutions, and student representatives from two HEIs. Many of the issues raised were similar to those described above; the following paragraphs summarise the main points raised.

50. There were some issues raised about the coverage of the survey:

a. Students with mental health issues who have asked for no further contact with the institution should be excluded from the survey.

b. There is a question about what year students will be surveyed if they have deferred or extended their studies and will complete a year late.

c. It would be difficult to survey students who spend their final year abroad. (It was also clarified that only students who remain registered at the UK HEI, and for whom data are returned to HESA when studying abroad, would be included.)

d. Clarification was sought on whether students who will achieve two awards, such as medical and architecture students, will be surveyed twice.

51. In terms of timing, all delegates were confident that they could find a suitable time for the survey to be carried out within their institution during the proposed window. Some expected a possible overlap between the 'tail end' of the NSS and internal surveys, particularly for HEIs that choose a later start date within the window. There was some concern about questionnaire fatigue.

52. There was general support for the proposed national branding. Some suggestions were made about local promotion, such as institutions writing to students, separately to the questionnaire, about the survey; and making students aware of the survey at the end of their (January) exams, for example by their course representatives.

53. Rather than e-mailing students, the pilot HEIs thought that it would be easier to put messages on the student portal when they logged in to use their IT account. It was noted that the word 'survey' is a key word used in spam filters, and that many students have an automatic forward to a private internet service provider, which may use such filters. For completing the questionnaire online, it was

suggested that students would find it easier to use their student ID number, with which they are familiar, rather than the HUSID.

54. The following points were raised in relation to the publication of results on the TQI site:

a. Though the method and intentions of the survey were supported, the press will inevitably produce league tables and will thus simplify the data. There was concern that under Freedom of Information legislation journalists may be able to request and use data not on the TQI site that has fewer than 50 responses. The importance of briefing the press was raised. There was some discussion about whether league tables do in fact influence the choices of students and there were differing views on this – depending partly on the nature of the student body at different HEIs.

b. The ‘basket’ of HEIs for comparison should hold six items because this is the number of applications that can be made on a UCAS form.

c. There was a query about the timing and process for HEIs to prepare their commentaries on the results, for publication on the TQI site.

d. A query was raised about the validity of making comparisons between the results for different HEIs, when the students providing the feedback generally only have experience of one HEI, and lack external reference points. The group noted that students are not asked to make comparisons when responding, but to say how far the quality of the programme meets their own needs. Comparisons of the results are then made about the extent to which students at different HEIs say that the course meets their needs.

55. The following points were made about the data to be fed back to HEIs:

a. JACS codes do not match the internal structure of institutions, and feedback using this structure would be of limited value internally.

b. If possible the HEI should have the option of adding its own internal code to the student lists. Data could then be given back to the institution in a usable structure, while still retaining the students’ anonymity.

c. Further discussion would be needed to identify the most useful means of feeding data back to HEIs.

d. Institutions would value the textual comments. They would want to receive the actual text rather than the codes, recognising that respondents must remain anonymous. So any hand-written text would need to be converted to electronic format before feeding it back to HEIs.

56. HEIs would need to consider carefully how to use the data to supplement internal work, and avoid duplicating internal burden, for example in analysing the NSS data for internal purposes.

Annex D

Institutional contact with Ipsos UK

Please use this form to nominate a lead contact within the institution to liaise with Ipsos UK regarding arrangements for the survey.

Institution.....

Name.....

Position.....

Address.....

.....

.....

Contact telephone number.....

Additional telephone number.....

E-mail.....

Preferred method of contact.....

Please return this form to Ipsos UK by Friday 22 October 2004

By post: National Student Survey, Ipsos Public Affairs, Ipsos UK, Kings House, Kymberley Road, HARROW, HA1 1PT

By fax: 020 8861 8121

By e-mail: nss@ipsos.com

Students' union contact with Ipsos UK

Students' unions are also encouraged to use this form to nominate a contact to liaise with Ipsos UK regarding activities to promote the survey. The same form for students' unions is also available on the NUS web-site as part of a briefing note on the NSS.

Annex E

Consultation events on NSS reporting methods

Three events during January 2005 will be held to consult with institutions and students' unions on reporting issues and methods. The development of a subject classification system, and the results of user tests of reporting formats for the TQI web-site, will be presented to delegates for discussion. There will also be discussion of how results can best be reported back to institutions and students' unions. Delegates' views will be fed back to the new NSS Steering Group to help inform their advice on methods for reporting the results of the 2005 NSS.

NSS consultation events - registration form for institutions

- I will be attending the conference in Cardiff on 21 January 2005
- I will be attending the conference in London on 25 January
- I will be attending the conference in Manchester on 27 January
- I will not be able to attend any conference

(Please tick one box)

Name.....

Institution.....

Address.....

.....

.....

Position.....

Dietary requirements.....

Contact telephone number.....

E-mail.....

Please return this form to Alison Felton at HEFCE by 30 November 2004

By post: Alison Felton, HEFCE, Northavon House, Coldharbour Lane, BRISTOL, BS16 1QD

By fax: 0117 931 7479

By e-mail: a.felton@hefce.ac.uk

Further details will be sent to delegates during December 2004.

NSS consultation events - registration form for students' unions

This form is also available on the NSS web-site, as part of a briefing note for students' unions about the NSS.

I will be attending the conference in Cardiff on 21 January 2005

I will be attending the conference in London on 25 January

I will be attending the conference in Manchester on 27 January

I will not be able to attend any conference

(Please tick one box)

Name.....

Institution.....

Address.....

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Please return this form to Alison Felton at HEFCE by 30 November 2004

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By fax: 0117 931 7479

By e-mail: a.felton@hefce.ac.uk

Further details will be sent to delegates during December 2004.

List of abbreviations

FEC	Further education college
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEI	Higher education institution
HERO	Higher Education and Research Opportunities (Web portal for information on higher education in the UK, www.hero.ac.uk)
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HUSID	HESA unique student identifier
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
JACS	Joint Academic Coding System
NSS	National Student Survey
NSSPSG	National Student Survey Pilot Steering Group
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
TQI	Teaching Quality Information
TTA	Teacher Training Agency