



Scottish Funding Council
Comhairle Maoinachaidh na h-Alba

National Student Survey 2021

SFC Guidance

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Summary: Guidance on arrangements for The National Student Survey (NSS) 2021 and the action required from all participating universities and other higher education providers in Scotland.

FAO: Principals of Scotland's universities

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The National Student Survey 2021

Summary

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) is managed by the Office for Students (OfS) on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies – the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland), the Scottish Funding Council and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales. The survey provides information for prospective students to help them find the right course for them. It also provides valuable information for stakeholders and policymakers.
2. This publication sets out the arrangements for NSS 2021 and the action required from all participating universities, colleges and other higher education providers by **27 November 2020**. Providers are asked to:
 - Provide up-to-date contact details.
 - Submit survey options, including start week, optional bank questions and provider-specific questions.
 - Check the sample list of students to be included in the survey (the ‘target list’) and provide students’ contact details.
3. For 2021, the core survey questions¹ will not change. However, other changes have been made to some parts of the survey in agreement with UK funding and regulatory bodies:
 - Providers in England are not required to promote the 2021 survey to their students, (the requirement for Scottish institutions to publicise the survey has not changed).
 - During survey fieldwork, where providers response rates are below 43% by mid-March, they will be included into an automatic booster phase to try to ensure their publication threshold is met. For some providers this will continue until mid-April.
 - An additional SMS reminder will be included in the schedule of contact to non-responding students during the booster phase.
4. The survey will be delivered on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies by:
 - Ipsos MORI, who will administer the survey.
 - Texuna Technologies, who will deliver the data dissemination portal for providers.

¹ A copy of the 2021 survey questionnaire is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/.

5. Detailed guidance relating to NSS 2021 and the action requested from all participating higher education providers is in the Annex.

NSS review

6. The OfS has announced a two-stage internal review following a request by the Universities Minister in England. The first stage will address concerns in England as outlined in the announcement and will report later this year. The second stage will look more widely at the role of the NSS, including which questions should be asked to support regulation and student information across all four countries of the UK.

Actions for providers

7. All participating providers are asked to review and (where necessary) update their relevant NSS provider contact details by **27 November 2020**. The information should be supplied using the 'My details' form on the [NSS extranet](#).² Ipsos Mori issued login details for the NSS extranet to the nominated main and secondary NSS provider contacts in the week commencing 19 October 2020.
8. All participating providers should also submit their completed 'My survey options' form by **27 November 2020** through the NSS extranet. This form asks for providers' preferences on their survey start week, optional questions and details of any prize draws.
9. All providers should populate their NSS 2021 sample templates with the requested contact details for all students on their target list; this is a list of all students eligible for NSS 2021 based on the student data submitted in 2019-20. Details should be supplied by **27 November 2020** via the 'Upload sample data' section of the [NSS extranet](#).
10. Instructions on how to supply this information are included in the NSS 2021 setup guide, which will be issued to provider contacts by Ipsos MORI on **26 October 2020** and is also available on the NSS extranet. The guidance includes information regarding survey administration, key responsibilities and dates.

² See <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/nss/extranet>.

NSS 2021

Introduction

11. The NSS is a UK-wide survey undertaken by final year higher education students to give feedback on their course. The survey is managed by the OfS on behalf of the four UK funding and regulatory bodies.
12. The survey is a key component of the quality assurance and wider regulatory landscape in UK higher education. Participation is compulsory for higher education providers as follows:
 - In England, all providers registered with and regulated by the OfS will be expected to participate in the NSS as an ongoing condition of registration.
 - In Northern Ireland, NSS participation is a condition of funding as set out in the financial memoranda between universities and the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland). Further education colleges in Northern Ireland take part in the NSS to meet the requirements of the Revised Operating Model for Quality Assurance.
 - In Scotland, participation is a condition of the Scottish Funding Council's funding for higher education providers.
 - In Wales, all regulated providers and funded providers are expected to participate in the NSS to ensure that the views of the diverse student body are represented, in line with their statutory responsibility to help safeguard against discrimination and promote equality, and the outcomes inform the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales' regulatory responsibilities.
13. For 2021, the core survey questions³ will not change and the survey will be delivered across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland.
14. To reduce the work required by providers, it has been agreed by the OfS Board that providers in England are not required to promote the 2021 survey to their students. Providers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are still required to promote the survey. We expect that providers that promote the survey will review any internal campaigns to ensure that they meet the guidance on marketing and promoting of the NSS and avoiding inappropriate influence (see the 2021 good practice guide⁴).

³ A copy of the 2021 survey questionnaire is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/.

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

15. For NSS 2021, in addition to targeted follow-up, all providers that are at risk of not meeting the publication threshold will be automatically put into the booster phase to send additional reminders to their non-responding students. The booster phase will start automatically if a provider's response rate is below 43% by mid-March and will continue for some until mid-April.
16. This year, an additional SMS reminder will be included in the schedule of contact to non-responding students during the booster phase.
17. The timetable will run as follows:
 - The NSS will launch on 6 January 2021.
 - Fieldwork will take place between 6 January and 30 April 2021 and will be run by Ipsos MORI.
 - Results will be published in July 2021.
 - Results will be supplied to individual providers through a dissemination portal provided by Texuna Technologies.
 - Data will be published on the OfS website. All public data conforms to NSS publication thresholds (at least 10 student responses and a 50% overall response rate). If no data is available for a particular course on which students were surveyed, the data did not meet publication thresholds. A lack of publishable data does not reflect on the quality of a course or a provider.
 - NSS results at course level will be published on the [Discover Uni](#) website.⁵
18. The OfS will consider the outcome of the NSS review (see paragraphs 34 to 37) to ensure that the 2021 NSS results are aligned to any new direction of travel. A decision regarding the publication of results for providers in England will be taken in early 2021 following the outcome of the first phase of the review. For providers in other nations, detailed information and a timetable for publication of the data will follow in April 2021.
19. Ipsos MORI administers the survey on behalf of the OfS and funding bodies. It is responsible for contacting students, promoting the survey and providing cleaned data to the OfS and funding bodies. As part of its role, Ipsos MORI will liaise directly with providers regarding survey administration and will support the running of the survey by:
 - Offering guidance on the specifics of the survey programme, such as selecting optional questions.
 - For providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and any providers in England that want to promote the survey:

⁵ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk>.

- Supplying NSS-branded marketing materials and advising providers on the production of their own materials.
 - Facilitating provider incentive schemes to encourage students to take part in the survey.
20. Providers will be invited to select one of five weeks when Ipsos MORI can launch the survey to their students. There will be no communication from Ipsos MORI with students outside the times agreed with individual providers.
 21. Ipsos MORI will issue a comprehensive guidance document, 'Preparing for the National Student Survey 2021', for all participating providers on 26 October 2020. The guidance should be read in conjunction with this publication.
 22. For 2021, Texuna Technologies will provide the results dissemination portal on behalf of the OfS and funding bodies. The results portal allows providers to access additional, unpublished elements of their data, including open text comments, data from the additional bank of questions and provider-specific questions, and data below publication thresholds.
 23. Texuna Technologies also provides a dedicated NSS service desk to support providers in accessing their data and responding to queries.
 24. Texuna Technologies will contact providers' NSS contacts in spring 2021 to:
 - Confirm user and login details.
 - Confirm the details of publication of NSS 2021 results on the portal.

Costs

25. The costs of the NSS 2021 for universities and colleges in England, Wales and Northern Ireland will be covered by the relevant governments through the OfS, HEFCW and the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland). All providers in Scotland are required to contribute to the costs of their students' participation and will be contacted by the Scottish Funding Council with further details on this. The Scottish Funding Council will also contribute to the costs of the survey.

Optional banks

26. As has been the practice in previous years, providers will be able to choose up to six banks of optional questions. The choice of optional bank questions should be agreed with their students' union. Further information about this will be provided in the guidance from Ipsos MORI on 26 October 2020.

NHS questions

27. Students of NHS-funded courses in all countries in the UK are required to

answer an additional set of NHS-specific questions about their placements.

28. The methodology for identifying students for the NHS practice placement questions in the NSS was originally set up by the Higher Education Statistics Agency, and means that if a student is funded by the NHS they are flagged to be asked the placement questions in the NSS. As a result of changes in the funding for NHS students, the number of students flagged for the NHS placement questions in the survey has reduced and will continue to do so. We are aware of the need to update the methodology to flag all medical students for the placement questions, but due to the NSS review this work has been paused.

Degree apprenticeship questions

29. Students who are on degree/graduate apprenticeships will automatically be included in the NSS if they meet the standard eligibility criteria (namely that they are in their final year of a first degree). This is in addition to the condition of funding by the Education and Skills Funding Agency for apprentices in England to be surveyed at multiple points through the 'FE Choices learner satisfaction survey'⁶
30. Students on degree/graduate apprenticeships in all countries in the UK are required to answer an additional set of specific questions about their training programme.
31. The degree/graduate apprenticeship questions will continue to be available to complete only online. The data will continue to be treated as research data to inform future approaches and will not be published at institutional level.

Inappropriate influence on the survey

32. The OfS is responsible for managing the process to address any concerns that students have been inappropriately influenced in their completion of the NSS. To maintain the integrity of the NSS data, we need to ensure that students who complete the survey have not been influenced by their provider, or any other parties, to respond in a way that does not reflect their true opinion.
33. Before fieldwork takes place, we undertake an annual review of the process we adopt to respond to allegations. This is to ensure that the process is fit for purpose and to make any improvements to the process and guidance for providers and students. This allegations procedure⁷ is intended to be read in conjunction with the good practice guide issued by Ipsos MORI, which explains

⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/fe-choices-learner-satisfaction-survey-2017-to-2018>.

⁷ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/inappropriate-influence/.

what constitutes inappropriate influence and how to avoid this when encouraging student participation. We would urge providers to ensure all staff who are responsible for the running of the survey are familiar with Ipsos MORI's good practice guide and seek advice where needed from Ipsos MORI or the OfS on their approach to avoiding inappropriate influence.

NSS review

34. The OfS will be leading a two-stage internal review of the NSS.⁸ The first phase of the review follows a request by the Universities Minister in England to address concerns about how the survey may be creating burden and impacting on standards in England, while ensuring that the NSS remains an important indicator of student opinion and that it reports later this year.
35. The second stage will look more widely at the role of the NSS, including which questions should be asked to support regulation and student information across all four countries of the UK.
36. The review of the NSS will hear the views of students and their representatives, university and college leaders, academics and employers, as well as studying different ways to understand students' perspectives on their higher education experience.
37. The terms of reference for the first phase of the review will be to:
 - Assess the bureaucratic burden the NSS places on providers and how this could be reduced.
 - Explore the unintended consequences of the NSS for provider behaviour and how these could be prevented, including whether the NSS drives the lowering of academic standards and grade inflation.
 - Examine the appropriate level at which the NSS could continue to provide reliable data on students' perspective on their subjects, their providers and the wider system, and what could be done without depending on a universal annual sample.
 - Examine the extent to which data from the NSS should be made public, including the implications of Freedom of Information legislation.
 - Ensure the OfS has the data it needs to regulate quality effectively.
 - Ensure the NSS will stand the test of time, and can be adapted and refined periodically to prevent gaming.
 - Ensure the UK-wide role of the survey is considered in any recommendations.

⁸ For further information see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-national-student-survey/.

Further support

38. The active support of participating providers is crucial to ensuring the survey data is of high quality, particularly in delivering high response rates. We encourage all providers and students' unions to draw on the resources available and to contact the OfS, Ipsos MORI or Texuna Technologies if they require additional support. Table 1 shows the contacts for different elements of the NSS.

Table 1: NSS contacts

Organisation	Email address	First point of contact for queries relating to
Ipsos MORI	nss@ipsos.com	The running of the survey, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preparing for and marketing the survey.• Student target lists.• Optional questions.• Incentive schemes.• Excluded students pilot enrolment.
Texuna Technologies	nss@texunatech.com	Providers' detailed results on the NSS data dissemination portal.
The Office for Students	nss@officeforstudents.org.uk nssallegations@officeforstudents.org.uk	Areas such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• NSS policy and development.• Use of results.• Allegations of inappropriate influence.