Improving Response Rates

In order for NSS results to be published, a threshold of 10 respondents and 50% response rate has to be met.

These thresholds are set by UK higher education funding bodies for the purpose of ensuring that the survey data published is useful to the user institutions. Thresholds are applied to ensure that there are enough responses to preserve individuals’ anonymity. Data not meeting these thresholds can therefore not be released.

This briefing sheet provides an overview of some of the measures employed by institutions to improve their annual response rates.

Results from the NSS 2015 identify that of those online respondents who answered the additional question about how they found out about the NSS:

- 40% identified that they were told about the survey by a lecturer / member of staff
- 25% received an email link from the institution (e.g. Vice Chancellor, Principal department/course leader)
- 33% followed a link from a University homepage / portal

Please note respondents could select more than one option

Engaging Departments and Teaching Staff

Support ‘from the top’, from senior and academic staff, can be key to the success of the NSS at an institution. As mentioned above, 40% of students who answered the marketing question, heard about the NSS through a member of academic staff. Department and academic staff are often best placed to communicate the benefits and importance of the survey - they can communicate directly with students about how the results will be used by prospective students and to improve the student learning experience at the institution more generally.

Institutions identify that they encourage staff to get involved in the following ways:

Pre-survey launch

- Briefing staff to explain the nature and purpose of the survey, how to engage students, an overview of eligibility, how the incentives and prize draw process works (if offered), as well as to remind them (and students) about the conduct of the survey (e.g. anonymity).
- Holding meetings with senior management, heads of schools and marketing teams to discuss an action plan and form a clear communication strategy for engaging students and encouraging completion. A thorough communications plan built into the student and staff calendar, and around Ipsos MORI’s survey schedule, is highly useful to avoid over-contacting students. Please see below for more information on communication planning.

During fieldwork

- Encouraging staff to sign up to ‘key responsibilities’, e.g. distributing promotional materials, implementing an NSS feature on their department website, and co-ordinating email communication to students making them aware of the oncoming survey and the email invitation they will receive from Ipsos MORI.
- Encouraging staff to deliver lecture shout outs to their final year students using Ipsos MORI produced presentation slides and video/advert, or even something created internally. They can also help to
promote the survey by handing out flyers to students during seminars.

Circulating weekly response rates to teaching staff/department heads, highlighting areas of good and bad performance and pointing out where their department is compared to others.

Encouraging staff to arrange course-specific dedicated sessions for the NSS, possibly incentivised, so students can make use of their personalised links. These can be built into tutors’ timetables from the outset.

Encouraging staff to use their social media platforms to reach out to students about the survey.

Many institutions identify department support as essential in meeting response rate targets, given their ability to directly engage with students. Some ideas implemented include:

**Monitoring response rates** - using the weekly response rate reports provided by Ipsos MORI to guide internal promotion of the NSS.

**Create a competition** – introducing a league table for departments/subjects to identify top and bottom performers. Some institutions have implemented prizes for those who get the overall best response rate. Social media is particularly effective in creating a sense of competition among students and boosting response rates. Please see our ‘Social Media Toolkit’ for examples on how to do this.

**Keep staff abreast of survey progress** - forward response rate reports to course leaders, heads of departments and senior management so that they are aware of where targets are and are not being met and can act on it effectively.

**Building a social media presence** – use departments’ social media profiles to post reminders about the survey, response rate updates and details of any incentives and prize draws on offer.

**Email Communication**

Electronic communication has been identified by respondents and institutions as an important way to promote the NSS fieldwork. 25% of students who answered the 2015 marketing question stated they found out about the NSS through an email link and 33% through links on their institution’s website or portal.

Some institutions send introductory emails ahead of fieldwork to students to forewarn them that the survey will be coming and to look out for their email invitations. These emails should include a link to the survey website www.thestudentsurvey.com so students can find out more.

Many institutions send emails to students addressed from the Principal, Dean of the institution or Pro-Vice-Chancellor. This adds weight to the message.

Some institutions believe that messages from a named contact known to the individual student (e.g. course leader/head of department) are more effective.

Some institutions provide the email details of eligible students to subject/department staff to reduce burden on them. This enables them to target messages more efficiently. Introductory and reminder emails regarding the NSS should only be sent to eligible students rather than all final year students to avoid confusion for those students who are not eligible.

**Redirecting to the NSS Website**

Some institutions have established pre-survey websites, which can be branded locally and helps them to manage their own incentives more effectively. These micro-sites
link directly to the survey, and provide some background information and details about any incentives.

Other internal sites used to promote the survey include:

- The institution’s intranet site. Information can be subject-specific or generic.
- Institutions with virtual learning environments publicise the NSS via this tool (Moodle). Information can be subject-specific or generic.
- Advertise the NSS on IT terminals within the institution – on computers, plasma screens, etc.

Promotional Materials

Institutions use a range of promotional tools and methods to improve awareness of the survey and to encourage eligible students to participate. These include:

Using Ipsos MORI prepared promotional materials – displaying official NSS branded promotional materials around the institution. Some methods used to maximise the coverage of these materials include:

- Targeting materials in places where final year students will see them. Some institutions work with the SU to identify ‘traffic hotspots’ such as learning resource centres/PC laboratories, lecture theatres, seminar rooms, the library, shops or bars. The NSS video/advert can also be played in these areas and screensaver/presentation slides can be displayed in final year lectures/tutorials.
- Targeted distribution of materials. For example, some institutions take the pens to specific lessons (e.g. with low response rates) as an incentive to complete the survey or send out flyers in the post to any online or distance learners.

Creating institution-specific marketing materials – some institutions prefer to create their own institutional branded posters, flyers, banners and screensavers. Others employ innovative promotional ideas such as NSS stickers on food labels, catering cards to be displayed on tables in cafes, bars, etc and NSS branded clothing for representatives to wear on campus. Internal promotional materials must adhere to HEFCE’s guidelines.

Other promotional tools used include:

- Communicating change – showing students what has changed as a result of the NSS and how they are listening, e.g. “You Said, We Did” campaigns.
- On screen promotions – displaying information about the NSS on plasma screens and IT terminals around the institution.
- Institutional mascot – one institution has introduced a mascot that visits campuses with a laptop talking to final year students to encourage them to complete the survey.
- Social media – building and maintaining a social media presence for the NSS at your institution throughout fieldwork where you can inform students of the dates of the survey, as well as providing them with links to more information on what the survey is and the survey video, and how the results have been used at your institution to implement change.

Internal PR – examples include:

- Publishing feature articles on the staff intranet to provide background information and tips to staff for engaging students.
- Articles to raise awareness such as feature interviews, publicising the previous year’s prize draw winners and communicating changes that have been implemented as a result of NSS findings.
- Features in student papers and/or radio stations to encourage completion.
The Ipsos MORI marketing pack provides examples of articles that could be used as a basis for communication.

**Engaging the Students’ Union**

Many institutions identify the role of the Students’ Union as important to the promotion of the NSS. SU support can give the NSS a student-friendly face and can run alongside your institution’s main campaign, giving a student-led and student-focused approach. Furthermore, they identify that early engagement of the SU and involving them in planning can prove beneficial.

**Creating a buzz** – student involvement with the SU means that they have an understanding of what appeals to potential respondents and can spread the word.

**Targeting promotion** - some institutions consult their SU on the best places to display promotional materials, e.g. traffic hotspots. The SU offers a range of places to raise awareness, e.g. SU offices/facilities, shops, bars, etc.

**Communicating with students** - some institutions identify that their SUs have weekly newsletters, which can be used to promote the NSS.

**NSS ambassadors** – many institutions have dedicated student reps that help to spread the word to other students about the NSS. Some institutions have a dedicated NSS champion/ambassador to help formulate NSS campaigns and help promote the completion of the survey to final year students.

**SU events** – institutions can include NSS promotions in any upcoming SU events, where reps can ask students to complete the survey there and then or hand out NSS-branded giveaways. Some institutions find that it is easier to approach students at these type of events where they are all gathered together.

**Social media** – encouraging SU reps to promote the NSS on their social media profiles is an effective way to encourage completion.

The NUS also offers paid opportunities for NSS Ambassadors. They are paid £50 per month plus expenses upon the completion of tasks such as visiting unions, running a workshop, attending a national event or writing a briefing about the NSS.

**Incentives**

A range of institutions offer rewards or prizes to encourage students to complete the NSS. In 2014, the most common rewards/prizes included:

- Cash prizes of up to £1,000
- Vouchers – e.g. Amazon, book tokens, entertainment, shopping and travel
- Prizes – popular prizes included the Apple iPad and iPod
- Graduation packages, e.g. gown hire, photo packages, champagne reception
- University Ball Tickets
- Coffee vouchers/meal deal lunch vouchers
- Print credits

Some institutions identify that they work with the SU to identify what ‘prize’ or ‘reward’ would be most appropriate for final year students.

**The Power of Word of Mouth**

Institutions recognise the importance of word of mouth promotion. This is achieved through SU representatives, department heads, administrators and/or tutors speaking directly with eligible students about the NSS. Remember:

- **Lecture shout-outs** – maybe by encouraging staff to include a dedicated slide at the end of every presentation, show the NSS video in lectures or hand out flyers with any reading lists in seminars.
Student representatives – reps can spread the NSS word among their peers and illustrate the value of student opinion, they can create a presence for the survey on campus though creating NSS mascots and they can engage societies/associations.

Dedicated Time to Complete the Survey
The majority of institutions provide dedicated time or space to final year students to complete the NSS. These sessions must be held in neutral environments, e.g. computer rooms or study centres. Staff must not oversee students’ responses or make them feel that they must answer in a certain way.

Examples of how these are done include:

Allocating time in tutorials to complete the NSS – some institutions build time into their timetables to ensure that students complete the NSS. Some tutors make sure that their class visits the PC lab or Learning Resource Centre.

Dedicated PCs or ‘hubs’ available for completion – some institutions allocate computers or specific areas called ‘hubs’ specifically for the completion of the NSS during fieldwork. These labs are set up in areas visited by students.

Subject sessions – some subject leads have introduced NSS sessions, where they try to entice eligible students to participate in the survey by offering an incentive. Some institutions hire a room and offer free pizza/lunch.

Mobile devices – student reps with mobile devices can be sent to areas frequented by eligible students. This could be in the form of a stall with incentives for those who complete it there and then.

Planning and Coordination
Many institutions have a formal procedure for ensuring that response rates meet publication thresholds.

Dedicated NSS Operations Team and/or an NSS Steering Group – Examples include:

Ensuring that representatives from across the institution meet regularly (e.g. once every 2 weeks) to discuss response rates and how to boost them.

Getting a group together to brainstorm promotional ideas. They can openly discuss areas of low response and when appropriate, invite department/subject representatives to discuss areas of lower performance.

Tracking email conversations between representatives to communicate weekly response rates and discuss promotional needs.

Bringing representatives from each department together at regular meetings and encouraging them to cascade information to their colleagues in department meetings.

Communications planning - In order to maximise response rates, some institutions have developed a communication plan for the NSS Fieldwork before the launch of the survey. Plans often include:

Preparing for fieldwork - Formal plans to ensure that staff are fully briefed on the NSS process, the importance of reaching required response rates and the start and end dates of fieldwork.

Timetable for promotional activity - Some institutions produce a detailed plan of promotional activity so that they target students appropriately.

This includes:
- Ensuring that internal email invitations do not clash with Ipsos MORI centrally administered invitations.
Case Study

- Ensuring that students are aware of any incentives and/or prizes on offer and how the process for these works.
- Developing complementary email communications to reach students in the intervening periods between Ipsos MORI communications.
- Identification of key dates in the student and staff calendar that may affect participation, e.g. holidays, exams, and coursework deadlines.

**Identification of key responsibilities** – some institutions have a formal document which identifies who will have responsibilities for communications, e.g. those best placed to engage with students and what their key responsibilities should be.

**Innovative ideas** - Institutions explore different ideas to engage students with the NSS, including involving students from relevant specialism to get involved with the promotion, e.g. Art & Design, Marketing and/or Communications to develop NSS strategies for the institution.

**General awareness** – some institutions also explore ways to raise awareness of the NSS amongst non-final year students. This includes poster campaigns to promote changes that have been implemented as a result of NSS findings.

**Contacting students** – survey fatigue and general annoyance from being over contacted can prevent eligible students from participating in the survey. Institutions should be co-ordinating their contact activity to avoid this, for example:

- Planning communication in line with the Ipsos MORI timetable.
- Being aware of any other internal research that is being undertaken by the institution and planning communication so students are not bombarded.
- Ensuring that communications with students are staggered.
- Personalising emails or signing emails from representatives that are recognised by the student, e.g. Dean or subject head.
Communications Checklist

Pre-survey launch

- **Organise staff briefing(s)** - providing an overview of fieldwork, NSS background, how to engage students, what students will be asked and an overview of eligibility as well as the incentives/prize draw process (if offered).

- **Develop a clear strategy and timeline for contacting students** – hold meetings before the start of the survey with senior managements, heads of school and marketing teams to discuss aims and build your communication plan around the Ipsos MORI survey schedule, as well as around any upcoming events in the student calendar. This is useful in order to avoid over-contacting students during stressful periods i.e. exams, or to capture them when they are all together, i.e. any SU events.

- **Display promotional materials in high traffic areas** – Discuss with SU reps and students where the most appropriate areas are – examples include libraries, student bars or lecture rooms.

- **Organise meetings with student representatives/SU** – Discuss the plan for generating awareness for the survey on campus/site.

- **Inform student media of the survey launch** – Contact newspapers, radio, TV channels and resident bloggers of the survey launch – you can use the support materials supplied by Ipsos MORI as a basis for communication.

- **Prepare PR** - for institution intranet/student portal and student media. The Ipsos MORI marketing pack provides examples of articles that could be used as a basis for communication.
Case Study

- **Develop electronic presence** – display NSS screensavers in all areas with PC access, lecture theatre screens and/or plasma TV screens. Play the NSS video and advert on plasma screens around campus and place on institution and SU websites, as well as on social media profiles to make students aware of the oncoming survey. Ensure that the NSS electronic banners are included on email signatures and that portals/intranet sites have details about the survey and a direct link to [www.thestudentsurvey.com](http://www.thestudentsurvey.com). Consider building a (two different fonts) pre-survey micro-site, which can be branded locally and helps institutions to manage their own incentives more effectively. These micro-sites link directly to the survey, and provide some background information and details about any incentives or prizes offered.

- **Build a social media presence for the NSS at your institution** – inform students via your social media profiles (Facebook, Twitter, etc) of the dates of the survey, as well as providing them with links to more information on what the survey is and the survey video, and how the results have been used at your institution to implement change (‘You Said, We Did’ campaign).

- **Send a pre-emptive email to students** – this can be sent during the week before the launch of the survey to make eligible students aware of the email invitation they will be receiving from Ipsos MORI and what they should do. This is also a good opportunity to explain details of any incentives and prize draws on offer and the process of how to claim incentives and enter prize draws. This can be sent from a known figure at your institution and include a link to the survey website.

**During fieldwork**

- **Lecture shout-outs** – Ensure that lecturers/tutors are asking students to complete the survey and giving out the survey website.

- **Regular staff updates** – Circulate weekly response rate reports to staff and highlight areas that need to improve performance. Ensuring staff have a clear understanding of where their particular school/department is compared to others may aid them in how they promote the survey to their students.
Email reminders – ensure that central emails and course specific emails are sent to eligible students at times that do not disrupt the Ipsos MORI survey timetable. You can discuss this with Ipsos MORI.

Organise dedicated sessions to complete online survey – general NSS sessions in computer areas, possibly incentivised (e.g. Pizza, coffee, etc.). These sessions can also be course-specific where tutors’ timetables are designed to fit in with specific sessions for their students. These sessions can be timed in line with the Ipsos MORI communications to utilise personal email links. Please see Annex D for a briefing document you can circulate to staff holding dedicated sessions; this will provide them with all the necessary information to give to their students.

Consider offering incentives – in addition to any main reward scheme offered, local rewards can be used to boost flagging subjects/departments, such as free coffee in exchange for completing the survey.

Run PR/media activity throughout the fieldwork – consider features on the launch of the NSS, how the results are used (you said, we did), etc.

Word of mouth – create a presence on campus, consider lecture and tutorial visits, engaging societies/associations, mascots etc.

Creating response rate competitions between different schools/departments – circulating emails or PowerPoint slides to eligible students, or posting on your social media profiles, each week with scores on a school by school basis may help to create a sense of competition, thus boosting response rates. Offering an additional reward to the winning school/department (e.g. money for more resources) can also encourage completion.

Maintain NSS social media presence – continue to promote the survey via your institution’s social media profiles through regular posts including links to the online survey. For more ideas on how to use social media effectively, please see our Social Media guidelines in the NSS Guidance document.