

Circular

Teaching Quality Information: plans for the 2008 National Student Survey

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To: Heads of higher education
institutions in Wales;
Principals of directly funded further
education colleges

Summary: This circular provides information on
plans for the 2008 National Student
Survey

Response by: 26 November 2007 to Ipsos MORI
(nss@ipsos-mori.com)

**Further
information:** Contact: Dr Cliona O'Neill
Telephone: 02920 682283
E-mail: cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk



Teaching Quality Information: plans for the 2008 National Student Survey

- 1 This letter provides information to institutions on plans for the 2008 National Student Survey (NSS).
- 2 Details of the plans for the 2008 NSS are available at **Annex A**.
- 3 Ipsos MORI has contacted institutions regarding populating the 2008 NSS target lists with requested contact details for students, and the means by which this may be achieved securely. Institutions are reminded to provide this information to Ipsos MORI by **Monday, 26 November 2007**. Any queries regarding this information should be addressed to Ipsos MORI (nss@ipsos-mori.com).

Results of the 2007 NSS

- 4 The 2007 NSS was successfully completed earlier this year and the results will be published on the new Unistats website in mid November. The results give an overwhelmingly positive endorsement of higher education in Wales and show that students have a high and sustained level of satisfaction with their experience of higher education.
- 5 In addition, and to help institutions identify areas for improvement and good practice, more detailed results will be available to institutions and students' unions via the Ipsos MORI dissemination site. Ipsos MORI has worked with the Higher Education Academy to improve the site and make it more user-friendly.

Analysis of the results

- 6 Paula Surridge's second report on the analysis of the NSS results (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2007/rd14_07/) provided a rich source of information on how students are responding to the survey. It does not, however, enable us to understand why they respond as they do. The funding councils have been working with the Higher Education Academy to identify areas of priority for further research to try to understand this and enable the Academy to work with institutions to make further improvements to the student experience. Outcomes of this work will be published in due course.
- 7 Paula Surridge is currently analysing the results of the 2007 NSS. Her report will be published in Spring 2008.

Plans for the 2008 NSS

- 8 The NSS will be repeated in 2008 across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and some institutions in Scotland, in collaboration with the National Union of Students. Ipsos MORI will continue to manage the survey process. The 2008 NSS will have a similar format and timetable to the 2007 survey. Further information on the plans for the 2008 NSS is available at **Annex A**.
- 9 Students studying on directly funded, prescribed HE courses at further education (FE) colleges in England and at members of HEFCE-recognised funding consortia will also be eligible to take part in the 2008 survey. HEFCW's Learning and Teaching Committee has resolved that for the time being HE in FE provision will not be reported separately for Wales, as scoping work would be required to determine the extent and volume of this provision before inclusion of the data could be considered and additionally, much of the data for this provision is small scale and would therefore not be publishable.
- 10 The survey questionnaire will remain the same for the 2008 NSS, so results can be directly compared with the 2007 survey. In the 2007 NSS, Ipsos MORI developed and piloted a centrally managed incentive scheme to encourage students to take part in the 2007 survey. The Teaching Quality Information (TQI)/NSS steering group has decided to include the incentive scheme in the 2008 survey. Ipsos MORI will communicate this information to its contacts.
- 11 Ipsos MORI will liaise directly with its NSS contacts at institutions concerning further details of the 2008 NSS, options for timing and for marketing materials. As with the 2007 survey, institutions will be able to select one of five starting weeks, from 7 January 2008.
- 12 HEIs can access their target lists for the 2008 NSS via the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data collection system, on submission of their 2006/07 data this autumn. As stated in paragraph 3, they should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by Monday, 26 November 2007.
- 13 We would like to thank all those responsible for the continued success of the NSS. This has enabled the valuable analysis of students' views of their higher education experience to be completed. The results are now a useful platform to enable us to try to understand why students are responding to the survey as they do and to enable the sector further to improve the student experience. In order to achieve this it is essential that we continue to work together to achieve high response rates to the 2008 and future surveys.

For further information contact Dr Cliona O'Neill (tel 029 2068 2283; email cliona.oneill@hefcw.ac.uk).

Guidance on the 2008 NSS

- 1 The NSS will be repeated in 2008 across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and some institutions in Scotland, in collaboration with the National Union of Students. Ipsos MORI will continue to manage the survey process and the 2008 NSS will have a similar format and timetable to the 2007 survey. We last published detailed guidance on the scope and coverage of the NSS in October 2004 (Circular W04/66HE, National Student Survey 2005: Next Steps). This annex provides details of changes for HEIs from last year's survey.
- 2 HEIs can access their target lists for the 2008 NSS via the HESA data collection system, on submission of their 2006/07 data this autumn. They should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by Monday 26 November 2007.

Students of National Health Service (NHS) subjects

- 3 Skills for Health (the Sector Skills Council for Healthcare) and the Department of Health decided that students studying NHS subjects in England would take part in the 2007 NSS. Students on these courses undertake practice placements, and so their experience of higher education is slightly different. These students were therefore surveyed on-line only, to enable them to be asked additional questions regarding these placements. These questions were approved by the TQI/NSS steering group prior to their implementation for the 2007 survey. The questions appeared as part of the 'standard' questionnaire, with question 22 concerning 'overall satisfaction' remaining the final question. The additional questions are as follows:
 - 1 I received sufficient preparatory information prior to my placement(s)
 - 2 I was allocated placement(s) suitable for my course
 - 3 I received appropriate supervision on placement(s)
 - 4 I was given opportunities to meet my required practice learning outcomes / competences
 - 5 My contribution during placement(s) as part of the clinical team was valued
 - 6 My practice supervisor(s) understood how my placement(s) related to the broader requirements of my course.
- 4 In Wales students of NHS subjects are funded by the Welsh Assembly Government and as such, have been included in the NSS from its inception. We agreed, in consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government, Higher Education Wales, and the National Union of Students Wales, that all students in Wales studying these subjects would continue to participate in the 2007 survey using all methods (telephone, online and postal), with no additional questions. We consulted with institutions offering this provision to gain their views on whether or not additional questions should be asked of these students in 2008 and

beyond. Our Learning and Teaching Committee considered the outcomes of this consultation and recommended that these students should be included in the NSS in 2008 and beyond and should be asked the additional questions, even if the response were to be online only. Institutions were informed of this in Circular W07/15HE, Development of TQI and the NSS: Outcomes of Consultation W06/49HE. The Welsh Assembly Government has informed the NHS trusts of the additional questions for 2008.

- 5 It has been agreed that students studying NHS-funded provision in England will take part in the 2008 survey and it is planned that they will continue to be surveyed via the online method only. Students of these subjects in Wales will therefore also respond to the survey via the online method only. We will write to you should any changes be made to these plans. Students of these subjects will be included in the NSS target lists generated by HESA, and institutions should populate these with the relevant student contact details and return them to Ipsos MORI in the usual way.

Key changes for HEIs

- 6 In previous years institutions were unable to alter their NSS target list once their HESA submissions had been finalised. However, because the target list estimates those students expected to be in their final year, it can occasionally omit some final year students, for example students who elect not to take a sandwich placement. Therefore, in 2008 institutions will be able to add students to the target list, if their course length has changed such that they are now expected to complete between 1 February 2008 and 31 January 2009 inclusive. Institutions will not normally be able to remove students from their target list.
- 7 As in 2007, students can opt out when the institution asks if they wish to have their contact details passed on to the survey agency (Ipsos MORI), or at any stage during the survey process.
- 8 Detailed guidance is outlined below.

Scope and coverage of the survey

Coverage

- 9 The coverage of the 2008 NSS is as follows:
 - a. All publicly funded HEIs in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and some institutions in Scotland.
 - b. All students studying on directly funded prescribed higher education courses at further education colleges (FECs) in England, and at institutions which are members of a HEFCE-recognised funding consortium.

- c. All full-time and part-time undergraduate students registered at these HEIs and FECs 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 a course lasting one year or one full-time equivalent (FTE), or less;
 - iii. Any students who were included in the 2007 NSS (whether or not they responded), and who remain at the same institution;
 - iv. Any students who are expected to have completed less than one FTE since they were last surveyed by the end of academic year 2007/08.
- 10 Students are included in the 2008 survey population if they are expected to complete between 1 February 2008 and 31 January 2009 inclusive.
- 11 It may be possible to add students to the contact list in cases where they would have been included in the survey population, but were excluded due to the length of their course, and because the institution had already submitted its HESA return, as stated in paragraph 6. However, once students have been added it is not possible to remove them. If you wish to add to the target list, please contact Ipsos MORI (nss@ipsos-mori.com).
- 12 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 for 2008 will be approximately 325,000 students, included the directly funded HE in FE students in England.
- 13 Currently, taught postgraduates are not included in the NSS. This may change in the future, but 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.

Reasons for excluding individuals from the survey

- 14 We have enabled institutions to exclude students from the target population since the survey began, and will continue to do so for the 2008 NSS. Therefore, 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 onto the survey agency (Ipsos MORI) for the purposes of the NSS, request that they do not wish to be contacted.

- 15 We no longer use category d (error in the institution's HESA data), because any errors should be rectified through the HESA data collection process. However, if a HEI identifies an error after it has submitted data to HESA but then wishes to remove students, it is required to submit a revised HESA return, to HESA, that generates a revised target list. HESA will apply a charge of 20 per cent of the institution's annual subscription to meet the costs of processing this change.
- 16 Where a student is excluded from the NSS, the institution will need to record one of the reasons above (using codes a–c) and return this, instead of the student's contact details, to Ipsos MORI. Institutions should retain evidence to support exclusions to enable us to monitor exclusions and verify their consistent application. We expect institutions to retain evidence of requests by students not to pass their details on. If the number of such requests at any HEI is so high as to affect the ability to conduct the survey successfully, we will discuss this with the institution.
- 17 Although some students may withdraw in their final year, they will have had a significant interaction with the institution. Therefore their opinions could be valuable and they should be included.
- 18 It is only possible to exclude students from the target population using the reasons outlined above.

Process for supplying student contact data

- 19 Target lists of students to be included in the NSS will automatically be generated, following submission of the HESA data. The institution should then provide contact details, according to the standard template that will be supplied by Ipsos MORI, for all students on the list.
- 20 As in 2007, students should be informed by the institution that their contact details may be passed on for the 2008 survey. Text to explain this has been added to the model HESA student data collection notice.
- 21 Students who do not want their details passed on to Ipsos MORI for the purposes of the NSS can opt out of the survey by notifying the institution of this. They are also able to opt out during the survey process.
- 22 Institutions have the opportunity to define their own structure for receiving institutional feedback through an optional field on the student target list to indicate the internal 'department code' for each student. This can be used instead of, or in addition to, feedback using the structure of the Joint Academic Coding System (JACS). These codes, where provided, will be used solely for providing feedback to the institution.
- 23 Institutions should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists, to Ipsos MORI, by Monday, 26 November 2007. Ipsos MORI

has provided guidance to their contacts on how to supply them with these lists. We have achieved a relatively high response rate for the survey to date, and to ensure this continues it is important that institutions provide robust contact details by the deadline.

Administration of the survey

- 24 As in previous years, the survey will be conducted during the 2008 spring term to enable the results to be published in summer 2008, in time to inform the next cohort of applicants to higher education. To avoid concerns regarding impact on internal surveys, Ipsos MORI will continue to:
 - a. Independently brand the NSS, which clearly distinguishes the purpose of the NSS.
 - b. Centrally manage the survey's distribution, so that institutions are not involved in contacting students to complete the NSS.

- 25 The five week 'window' approach will continue, so institutions can choose to start the survey at a time which does not clash with examinations, fits with term timetables, and so on. Institutions can select a week for the survey to start, between 7 January and 4 February 2008. Ipsos MORI will conduct the survey at each institution using a set sequence of e-mail, postal and telephone surveying. This will take up to eight weeks at each institution, although there may be a need for some targeted follow up during and beyond this time to increase response rates.

- 26 We wish to avoid extending this window as that could jeopardise publication of the results in time for them to be useful for the next cohort of students. However, we will consider individual requests for a short extension, where the activities of students during the window make it impractical to conduct the survey at that time. Any institution that wishes to make a case for an extension should contact Ipsos MORI by Monday 26 November 2007.

Branding and awareness-raising

- 27 As in previous years, Ipsos MORI will produce promotional materials for institutions and students' unions to distribute locally. Since the first survey in 2005, the promotional materials have developed and the review of the 2007 NSS suggests that both institutions and students' unions find the current mix of materials useful to encourage students to respond to the survey.

- 28 However, if institutions and/or students' unions wish to use the NSS branding to develop their own marketing material they can do so, and should discuss this with Ipsos MORI. Ipsos MORI will offer advice on good practice as well as guidelines to ensure a reasonable degree of consistency across the sector. Ipsos MORI will discuss who in the

institution is best placed to co-ordinate promotional activity when it contacts institutions.

- 29 Ipsos MORI successfully managed a pilot incentive scheme during the 2007 NSS, for institutions wishing to participate. This was a centrally managed scheme which enabled institutions to provide an incentive to students to complete the NSS, eg some institutions provided printer credits for students completing the survey online. Ipsos MORI managed the scheme to ensure that institutions were not aware of who had or had not completed the survey. The TQI/NSS steering group has agreed that this should be included in the 2008 survey. Ipsos MORI will communicate this information to its contacts.

Questionnaire distribution

- 30 Ipsos MORI centrally manages the NSS. There are three methods of data collection: e-mail, post and telephone. This is also the sequence in which students are contacted. Ipsos MORI operates a live open access website, so that students can log in and complete the survey (this is in addition to the option to respond by following the link in a personalised e-mail). The aim of this site is to verify the identity of students at the point of logging in: once students have completed the survey, they are automatically removed from the target list and not contacted further. To enable this, and to enable efficient working of the survey more generally, institutions should adhere to the deadline for supplying student contact details.
- 31 Although there are three methods of data collection, we are committed to increasing the online response rate and so reducing the amount of telephone contact. We have had some success in achieving this since the 2005 survey, however, telephoning remains an important element of the survey and will continue.
- 32 In order to monitor responses and process data for analysis and reporting, all responses are linked to students' HESA or known student identifier. Postal questionnaires are personalised and include the student identifier. Telephone interviewers have automatic access to identifiers. Once students have completed the survey, they are removed from the target list and not contacted further.
- 33 Throughout the process Ipsos MORI sends reminders to students who have not responded.
- 34 Response rates will be continuously monitored during the process, by institution and by JACS-based subject area. 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 report results. This additional activity will involve reminders by e-mail, SMS mobile phone and post.

- 35 Students are able to opt out of the survey at any stage during the survey process and will not be contacted again. To do this, students need to provide their date of birth to verify their identity.
- 36 Regardless of the publication threshold set for the NSS, the TQI/NSS steering group agreed that the survey should continue to aim for a 50 per cent response rate for each institution and subject combination. However, the aim is to achieve an overall response rate of higher than 50 per cent, and targeted follow-up activity will be directed at those areas below this level. 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.

Publication of 2008 NSS results

- 37 The main purpose of the NSS is to provide information to help potential students and their advisers make choices about higher education. Therefore all results that meet the publication threshold will be published on the Unistats site in summer 2008.
- 38 The publication threshold for NSS results on the Unistats web-site is currently a 50 per cent response rate with at least 23 students responding. Paula Surridge will be completing further analysis of the 2007 results later this year, which could result in the steering group taking a decision to change the threshold percentage response rate. The outcome of the steering group's decision will be published in due course and prior to the publication of the 2008 results.
- 39 In addition more detailed data will be made available to institutions to help them to identify good practice and make improvements to the student experience. This is currently undertaken by Ipsos MORI via its dissemination website. This is the final year of their contract, so HEFCE will complete a procurement process for this work, on behalf of all the funding councils, including HEFCW input. Further details of the outcome of this process will be provided to institutions in due course.