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Circular

Teaching Quality Information: National Student Survey 2009

Date: 7 November 2008
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To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Response by: 28 November 2008 to Ipsos MORI
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This circular provides information to all institutions on the plans for the 2009 National Student Survey (NSS) and also provides guidance on promoting the 2009 NSS. This will be of interest to staff involved in co-ordinating the NSS within institutions.

This document is available online, in large print, Braille, on CD and on audio CD and cassette. Should you or someone you know require this in an alternative format, please contact us on (029) 2068 2280 or email info@hefcw.ac.uk.

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Introduction

1. This letter provides information to all institutions on the plans for the 2009 National Student Survey (NSS) and also provides guidance on promoting the 2009 NSS. Action is required by all institutions.
2. Details of plans for the 2009 NSS and the action required of all institutions are available at **Annex A**.

Actions for institutions

3. All HEIs should update their relevant NSS contact details. This information should be supplied to Ipsos MORI by **Friday 28 November 2008** using the 'HEI & FEC Details' form, which is available on the NSS extranet, <https://client.ipsos.com/nss>.
4. All institutions should populate their 2009 NSS target lists with the requested contact details for students on these lists and supply them to Ipsos MORI by **Friday 28 November 2008**. Ipsos MORI has already provided details of how to do this securely to institutional contacts in its 2009 Guidance document.

Results of the 2008 NSS

5. The 2008 NSS was successfully completed earlier this year and the results have been published on the Unistats web-site, www.unistats.com. 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.
6. In addition, and to help institutions identify areas for improvement and good practice, more detailed results are now available to institutions and students' unions via the Ipsos MORI results site.

Analysis of the results

7. Paula Surridge's third report on the NSS results¹ provides us with a rich source of information on how students are responding to the survey and looks at trends and analysis over the first three years of the survey. It also highlights specific areas of interest such as part-time study and institutions' residual scores.

Review of the 2008 NSS process

8. Earlier this year HEFCE, on behalf of all the funders of the NSS, appointed Alan Brickwood and Associates to undertake a review of the 2008 NSS. Ipsos MORI had previously reviewed the survey process as part of an internal post-survey review. It was decided to carry out this independent review of the 2008 NSS process in order to identify good practice and

¹ All three of Paula Surridge's reports on the NSS can be read on the HEFCE web-site, www.hefce.ac.uk, under Learning & teaching/National Student Survey.

improve the 2009 NSS. The report will be available on the HEFCE web-site in December 2008.

NSS 2009

9. The NSS will be repeated in 2009 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 2009 NSS will have a similar format and timetable to the 2008 survey. Detailed guidance for HEIs is outlined in Annex A.
10. The survey questionnaire will remain the same for the 2009 NSS, so results can be directly compared with the 2008 survey. Ipsos MORI will continue to run a centrally managed incentive scheme to encourage students to take part in the survey.
11. Ipsos MORI will liaise directly with its NSS contacts at institutions concerning further details of the 2009 NSS, options for timing and for marketing materials. As with the 2008 survey, institutions will be able to select one of five starting weeks for their survey, between 12 January and 9 February 2009.
12. Following a small number of allegations of inappropriate attempts to influence the outcomes of the survey in 2008 HEFCE, on behalf of all the funders of the NSS, asked Ipsos MORI to strengthen its promotional guidance. This information is available as part of the 2009 guidance circulated by Ipsos MORI and has been sent to all participating institutions. We have also written to all heads of higher education institutions in Wales to draw this to their attention.
13. Following agreement from the Teaching Quality Information (TQI)/NSS Steering Group this year, potentially eligible students will be invited to participate in the Futuretrack survey at the end of the 2009 NSS. This decision was agreed in consultation with Higher Education Wales. Futuretrack is a longitudinal (five-year), single-cohort tracking study of the entrants to higher education in 2006, being undertaken by the Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick (on behalf of the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU)).
14. We would like to thank all those responsible for the continued success of the NSS. This success has enabled us to complete a valuable analysis of students' views of their higher education experience. It is therefore essential that we continue to work together to achieve high response rates to the 2009 and future surveys.

Further information / responses to

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

Annex A

Guidance on the 2009 NSS for higher education institutions

1. The NSS will be repeated in 2009 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 2009 NSS will have a similar format and timetable to the 2008 survey.
2. Higher education institutions (HEIs) can access their target lists for the 2009 NSS via the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data collection system. They should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by **Friday 28 November 2008**.

Students of NHS subjects

3. Students of NHS subjects in Wales have taken part in the standard survey since its inception, unlike students of these subjects in other countries of the UK.
4. Students of NHS subjects undertake practice placements, so their experience of higher education is slightly different from that of other students. In the 2008 survey students of NHS subjects in England and Wales responded to an additional set of questions covering their practice placements, and were surveyed by the online method only. These questions were approved by the TQI Steering Group prior to their implementation for the 2008 survey and will be the same for the 2009 survey. These questions will appear as part of the 'standard' questionnaire; question 22 concerning 'overall satisfaction' will still be at the end.
5. We are pleased to report that the National Leadership and Innovation Agency for Healthcare has agreed to pay the setup costs to enable students of NHS subjects in Wales to be surveyed by all methods.
6. These students 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.

Scope and coverage of the survey

Coverage

7. The coverage of the 2009 NSS is:
 - a. All publicly funded HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and some institutions in Scotland.

- b. All full-time and part-time undergraduate students 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 2008 NSS (whether or not they responded) and who remain at the same institution.
 - iv. Any students who we expect to have completed less than one FTE since they were last surveyed by the end of academic year 2008/09.
- 8. Students are included in the 2009 survey population if they are expected to complete between 1 February 2009 and 31 January 2010 inclusive.
- 9. As in 2008, where students have been excluded from the survey population due to the length of their course, and the course length has changed such that they are now expected to complete between 1 February 2009 and 31 January 2009 inclusive, it may be possible to add them to the target list. However, once students have been added it is not normally possible to remove them. If you wish to add to the target list, please contact Ipsos MORI (e-mail nss@ipsos-mori.com).
- 10. Currently, taught postgraduates are not included in the NSS. This may change in the future, but it is unlikely that the NSS, which is 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

- 11. Since the survey began, we have enabled institutions to exclude students from the target population and will continue to do so for the 2009 NSS. Therefore, the following may 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.
- 12. In a change from previous years, institutions should code all excluded students on their sample submission as category c (regardless of whether

they meet criteria a, b or c above) and institutions should not provide contact details for these students.

13. 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, we require it to submit a revised return to HESA, which will generate 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.
14. Where a student is excluded from the NSS, the institution will need to record this using code c and return this instead of the student's contact details to Ipsos MORI. 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 institutions to retain evidence of this request. 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.
15. 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 should be included.
16. It is only possible to exclude students from the target population for the reasons outlined above.

Process for supplying student contact data

17. Following submission of the HESA data, a target list of students to be included in the NSS will automatically be generated. 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.
18. As in 2008, students should be informed by the institution that their contact details may be passed on for the 2009 survey. Text to explain this has been added to the model HESA student data collection notice.
19. As before, if a student does not want their details passed on to Ipsos MORI for the purposes of the NSS, they can opt out of the survey by notifying the institution. Students will also be able to opt out during the survey process.
20. 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 would be 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.

21. Institutions should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos MORI by **Friday 28 November 2008**. Ipsos MORI will provide guidance to its contacts on how to supply these lists. We have achieved a high response rate for the survey so far and to ensure this continues it is important that institutions provide robust contact details to Ipsos MORI by this date.

Administration of the survey

22. As in previous years, the survey will be conducted during the 2009 spring term so that the results can be published in summer 2009, 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.
23. The five week 'window' approach will continue, so institutions can choose to start the survey at a time which does not clash with examinations, which fits with term timetables, and so on. Institutions can select a week between 12 January and 9 February 2009 for the survey to start. 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.
24. We wish to avoid extending this window because 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 **Friday 28 November 2008**.

Branding and awareness raising

25. As in previous years, Ipsos MORI will produce promotional materials for institutions and students' unions to distribute locally. 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. When it contacts institutions, Ipsos MORI will discuss who in the institution is best placed to co-ordinate promotional activity.

26. During the 2008 NSS Ipsos MORI successfully managed a pilot incentive scheme for institutions that wished to take part. This centrally managed scheme enabled institutions to provide an incentive to students to complete the NSS. For example, some institutions provided printer credits for students who completed the survey online. Ipsos MORI managed the scheme to ensure that institutions were not aware of who had or had not completed the survey. This facility will be available again this year.

Questionnaire distribution

27. Ipsos MORI manages the NSS centrally. There are three methods of data collection: on-line, post and telephone. This is also the sequence in which students are contacted. Ipsos MORI operates a live, open-access web-site, 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 that site is to verify the identity of students at the point of logging in; once students have completed the survey, they will be 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.
28. 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.
29. In order to monitor responses and to process data for analysis and reporting, we link all responses to students' HESA or known student identifier. Postal questionnaires will be personalised and include the student identifier. Telephone interviewers will have automatic access to identifiers. Once students have completed the survey, they will be removed from the target list and not contacted further.
30. Throughout the process Ipsos MORI will send reminders to students who have not responded.
31. 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 responses up to a sufficient level to report results. This additional activity would involve reminders by e-mail, SMS and post.
32. At any stage during the survey process students are able to opt out of the survey and will not be contacted again. To do this, students will need to provide their date of birth to verify their identity.

33. Regardless of what the publication threshold is set at 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, we aim for an overall response rate of higher than 50 per cent, and 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 2009 NSS results

34. 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 web-site² in summer 2009. Students on directly funded HE in FE or franchise programmes will not be reported separately, unlike England.
35. 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. In addition we will make more detailed data 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 their results web-site: the re-named NSS results web-site.

² www.unistats.com