

SEXUAL MISCONDUCT SURVEY 2025

Advice for Staff

December 2024



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Introduction to the SMS

What is the 2025 Sexual Misconduct Survey (SMS) Pilot?

- In 2025, the Office for Students (OfS), the regulator of higher education in England will be asking all final year students across England to complete a pilot survey which asks about their experiences of sexual misconduct.
- The objective is to gain insight into the number of students who have experienced sexual misconduct, both within and outside of the university or college context and location.
- On our behalf, Ipsos will offer the SMS to all students once they have completed and submitted the National Student Survey (NSS).
- Sexual misconduct is any unwanted or attempted unwanted conduct of a sexual nature and includes, but is not limited to, sexual harassment; sexual assault; and rape.

Why has the survey been introduced and why should we fill it in?

- **To help develop measures to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct: Every student has the right to be safe from harassment and sexual misconduct.** Better quality data will improve our understanding of the extent of sexual misconduct in higher education and could point to areas in which providers' approaches could be developed to better support students.
- **To address sexual misconduct effectively we must first understand it:** There is currently limited data at a national level on how sexual misconduct affects students in higher education in England. We want to know how many students experience sexual misconduct and, in doing so, gain an understanding of how and where interventions might be targeted to tackle this issue.
- **Build on previous pilot:** The 2025 questionnaire will be a shortened version of the pilot survey we tested in 2023 with a small number of volunteer universities and colleges. This survey aims to further this research at a national level.
- **Supporting and listening to students:** Students have told us clearly that addressing harassment and sexual misconduct is a key priority for them. We've heard them, and an important part of our ongoing work in this area is understanding its prevalence. This pilot survey will give students in England the opportunity to tell us about their experiences and, in future, could help universities and colleges better understand the issues affecting students enabling them to tailor their approaches accordingly. We also want to ensure that the sector continues to address the issues students are facing in this area, and to continue to collect data regarding students' experiences. This survey is part of that ongoing work.
- The pilot tests an approach to capturing prevalence data at a national level and will help to inform how we capture data on sexual misconduct in future.

The survey

Who is the survey for?

- We want to hear from **all** eligible students in England, whether they have experienced sexual misconduct or not. Every perspective is valuable and contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the student experience.

How can students fill in the survey?

- Before Christmas, students will receive an email about GDPR from their university or college. This will notify them about the Sexual Misconduct Survey (SMS) and include the privacy notice explaining how their personal data will be used. This information will also explain how they can opt out from receiving the survey if they want to.
- The surveys will be available between 8 January and 30 April 2025.
- Students will be offered the opportunity to take part in the Sexual Misconduct Survey immediately after they have completed the NSS. The survey is not part of the NSS (the two are entirely separate) but shares the same delivery platform.
- After completing the NSS, their responses will be automatically saved. If students prefer to do the SMS at a later stage, they can do so by using the original NSS invitation link to return to the survey platform. Because of the sequential nature of the surveys, students will need to click through the NSS again to reach the SMS. But don't worry – this won't overwrite original NSS responses as these will have already been saved.

Is participation voluntary and confidential?

- Participation in the survey is **entirely optional** and **completely confidential**.
- Students who choose to participate can skip any questions if they wish to by selecting “prefer not to say”.
- If students do not wish to take part, they can simply choose not to accept the survey when it is offered at the end of the NSS. This won't affect their NSS responses in any way.
- Students can opt out of being sent the SMS by contacting Ipsos using the link in the privacy notice which will be sent to them as part of the GDPR pre-notification email message in December.
- Ipsos will securely share survey responses in a way whereby individuals cannot be directly identifiable in any results published or shared with universities or colleges. In all data processing we will take measures to protect student confidentiality.
- Full details are available in our [privacy notice](#), available under 'student surveys'.

What are the plans regarding publication of survey data?

- Where possible, we plan to publish data from the 2025 SMS pilot aggregated at sector level with a breakdown analysis of the data by student characteristics.
- As the SMS is a pilot survey distinct from the NSS, we do not plan to publish provider-level data at the same time, nor will data appear as part of the 2025 OfS-published NSS dataset.
- Where data quality is sufficient however, **and student anonymity can be assured**, we plan to share with providers their own 2025 pilot data so that it can support any local initiatives on this important issue. Again, this data will be aggregated to ensure student anonymity.

What will the survey ask?

The survey questions are presented in four parts:

- Part 1 asks about experiences of sexual harassment.
- Part 2 asks about sexual assault and/or violence.
- Part 3 asks about experiences, understanding and awareness of reporting sexual misconduct.
- Part 4 asks about relationships between staff and students.

Key information

Will students find the content distressing?

- Testing the survey with students has shown that participants were generally comfortable with the direct language used in the survey and identified with the importance of the work.
- However, the survey content may be distressing for some students. We've therefore taken great care to ensure that questions are designed to limit this as much as possible. We've carefully considered research ethics, and consulted with students to test the comprehension and readability of the questions, as well as their suitability for a wide audience.
- The survey will explore sensitive subjects and the language in some of the questions is deliberately explicit. It's important that the questions are asked in this way so that students are clear about what we mean and can identify the types of behaviours or incidents that may have affected them. These explicit questions are much more likely to provide an accurate picture of the prevalence of forms of sexual misconduct and so reduce the risk of understating the scale of the issue.
- Such questions will be clearly marked with content warnings throughout, and students will be able to skip any questions or sections that they don't wish to answer, select "prefer not to say", or stop at any time.
- Our [help and support page](#) lists national organisations and charities that may be able to provide support for those who have experienced or been impacted by sexual misconduct. The survey will also provide links to these services and details of any support available at your university or college.

What are we asking from Students' Unions?

- To ensure the most robust data collection possible, we're asking Students' Unions to promote the survey by raising awareness of what it is, how to complete it, and its importance/objectives, whilst ensuring that those who may be emotionally impacted are signposted to the appropriate support services.
- We recommend Students' Unions use the above information to develop comms on their social media and/or webpages about the SMS to inform their student community.
- Ultimately, we want the Unions to encourage as many students as possible to complete the SMS.

In summary

- The Sexual Misconduct Survey will ask all final year students across England about their experiences of sexual misconduct. The data is being gathered to gain insight into the number of students who have experienced sexual misconduct.
- Every voice and opinion is important for understanding and tackling sexual misconduct.
- Whilst optional, the more students who take part in the survey, the better our understanding will be of this issue, its prevalence across Higher Education in England, and the ability of universities and colleges to address it effectively.
- The survey is a completely confidential opportunity for all to contribute their experiences.
- With student wellbeing a priority;
 - The survey allows participants to skip sensitive questions should they wish.
 - Support services are available at universities or colleges should participants be impacted by any of the issues raised in this survey.

