National Student Survey 2024

Quality report

Contents

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 and for stakeholders to support a high quality learning experience.

National Student Survey 2024: Quality report

1. This report contains information on the quality characteristics of the data collected through the National Student Survey (NSS) 2024.

2. The NSS was open to respondents from 8 January to 30 April 2024. The survey is mixed-mode, with responses collected online, on telephone and a small number of postal responses.

3. The information in this report will help you to understand the strengths and limitations of the data and decide best how to use it.

Changes to the survey

4. Since the last survey, in 2023, we have not made any changes to the survey questionnaire. However, changes were made to the way we process and publish the results, including:

   a. Publication of the healthcare, allied health, and clinical practice placement questions. As part of the proposals resulting from the 2023 consultation on the approach to publication of the results of the NSS,[1] we undertook work to ensure that the students targeted for these questions accurately reflected the intended recipients. There was evidence to support this and hence these questions are included in the public release for the first time since 2020.

   b. We have reviewed our approach to publication response rate thresholds, benchmarking, and to the number of themes that questions are grouped into. We have not made any changes to these areas for NSS 2024.

Important points

5. As this is the second year of survey with a consistent questionnaire, we will have two years of comparable NSS data upon release. This includes publication of NSS 2023 healthcare questions results.[2]

6. The 2024 survey is the first NSS to be published using data from the HESA Data Futures model. There is an issue with the completeness of some of the data reported by providers to Jisc, and we have used data from the previous year in places to mitigate as far as possible the effect of this issue (see paragraph 25a).

7. Because it is useful to providers, students and the general public, we publish NSS results based on very small populations (as low as 10 students). There is a high degree

[1] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/ba5a292e-08a0-464b-aa51-31c39bbee22d/general-approach-nss-pub-con-response.pdf.

[2] See provider level dashboard: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/provider-level-dashboard/.

of statistical uncertainty around some of these results, and they should always be viewed together with the uncertainty measures included in the data dashboard[3].

Accuracy and reliability

8. Accuracy and reliability relate to the degree of closeness between an estimate and the true value, in this case between the view of respondents as expressed in response to the survey questions, and the true views of the target population about their student experience.

9. The National Student Survey is a census survey: we survey every student in our target population of final year undergraduates. The survey results therefore cannot be subject to sampling error.

10. The response rates for the National Student Survey remain high, which reduces the risk of non-response bias. As an additional precaution against non-response bias, we suppress results when the response rate for the population is less than 50 per cent. The overall response rate for NSS 2024 is 72.3 per cent. This is a small increase from the NSS 2023 rate of 71.5 per cent. The response rates for the participating countries are 72.3 per cent for England, 73.5 per cent for Northern Ireland, 72.6 per cent for Scotland and 72.3 per cent for Wales (as shown in Table 1 at Annex A). The variation in response rates between different characteristic splits, where the population is over 20 students, is also typically low (as shown in Table 2 at Annex A). This is with the exception of part time, distance learners, mostly studying combined studies, although these response rates were higher than in NSS 2023. In the underlying data for NSS 2024 there are also increased numbers of distance learners whose sexual orientation data was not available and this is reflected through into the response rate for that split of students.

11. There is a risk that any disruption in the survey period, such as staff strikes, could impact the survey's reliability. We have reviewed the response and outcome data and there is no evidence of unexpected volatility over the period at sector level in terms of response rate or positivity measure. There were reported staff strikes in October 2023, however no such action was reported during the 2024 survey period itself.

12. Estimates from a survey can also be inaccurate if the questions are misunderstood by the student, or otherwise answered in a way that does not reflect their true views. The new questionnaire introduced for NSS 2023 was developed through extensive testing and we will keep this under review.

13. Lack of engagement from respondents can also make survey results inaccurate – for example, if students focus on answering the questionnaire quickly rather than giving true reflections on their experience. To understand engagement, we have measured the proportion of respondents who gave the same response to every question common to all UK students (Questions 1–26). This occurs at a rate of 3.8 per cent, slightly higher than

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[3] See provider level dashboard: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/provider-level-dashboard/.

the rate for NSS 2023 (3.2 per cent). In some of these cases students may have been expressing their genuine view, rather than picking the same answer to complete the survey without engaging. To understand this, it is helpful to compare to the number of students answering the same way to 25 of the first 26 questions (1.9 per cent). This suggests that although some students may have given the same answer to all questions without fully engaging with the survey, the rate of students responding in this way was low and is comparable with that seen in previous surveys.

14. Students are able to select 'This does not apply to me' in response to each of the questions. Increased use of this option could also indicate disengagement by respondents. The proportion of respondents using this option is under 1 per cent across nearly all core[4] questions for the respective nations. Of the remaining questions all are under 5 per cent, apart from Question 25 ('How well does the students' union (association or guild) represent students' academic interests?') which is 14.5 per cent at sector level. This is expected as the extent of student union presence and level of awareness is different across providers and student groups. The rate of use of 'This does not apply to me' was similar to that in NSS 2023. The highest rates of 'This does not apply to me' appear within the last nine questions of the core questionnaire. However, it should be noted the rates still vary between questions and it does not linearly increase showing that students are not routinely selecting this option as part of disengagement towards the end of the survey. It is more likely that the comparative increase reflects the fact that these questions focus on aspects of the student experience which do not necessarily apply to all students. We also reviewed the variance in use of 'This does not apply to me' within student characteristics. No concerns were raised regarding increased use of this option by particular sub-groups, where differences were evident this was again for Question 25 or those questions related to learning resources (which may not be used by all students). Overall, the low number of respondents using this option shows that nearly all the questions are highly relevant to the survey population.

15. The survey mechanism means that students must answer each question sequentially and cannot skip questions. This means that for students who disengage, 'dropout' can be identified by looking at the response rate for each question which shows the point at which they stop answering. The contractor running the NSS will only record a response as complete if the student has responded to at least 18 questions. Hence the dropout rate during these earlier questions cannot be derived until this data is received at later point in the cycle and will be reviewed in due course. However, looking at question Q18–Q26[5] and comparing to Question 1, the response rate only drops by 0.69 per cent for the sector. In comparison, NSS 2023 showed a similar drop of 0.66 per cent by Q26. The dropout rate (between Q18 and Q26) for different student characteristics with over 10 responses deviates from the UK average by no greater than ±0.7 percentage points.

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[4] Core questions for English respondents are Questions 1 to 26. For Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, core questions are Questions 1 to 26 and Question 28.

[5] These questions have been selected as they are consistent across the UK. We have also reviewed the country specific questions and have no concerns regarding the drop out for these questions in any of the nations.

Overall, these very small drops in response rate show that after Question 17 students remain highly engaged with the core aspects of the survey.

16. The NSS is a mixed mode survey: respondents can answer the survey either online or by telephone. In 2024, 80.2 per cent of respondents answered the survey online, compared with 78.8 in 2023. There is a risk with mixed mode surveys that responses can vary depending on the mode, which in turn affects the accuracy of the results. The positivity measure between online and telephone respondents varies by question, with phone responses an average of three percentage points and a maximum difference of 7 percentage points higher. This difference is the same as seen in NSS 2023.

17. The time taken by students to complete the survey online and by phone is recorded and can be used to monitor respondent burden. The median time for phone respondents was 572 seconds and for online was 450 seconds. This duration is higher but similar to NSS 2023 for online respondents (550 seconds) and by phone (437 seconds).

18. The survey questions remain unchanged from NSS 2023. This allows comparisons to be made between the two years. The positivity measure at sector level has increased for every question (Question 1 to Question 28 and healthcare questions). In most cases this is a small increase, a difference of under 1 percentage point. However, for 13 of the core survey questions the increase is between 1 and 3.2 percentage points at sector level. This increase does not raise any concern regarding the robustness of the survey as we would expect to see some difference between surveys as the respondents are a different cohort, with different experiences. It should also be noted that although the sector results have a degree of consistency between 2023 and 2024, there are more distinct variations in the differences within subjects and providers, which would be expected. We reported a larger step change between 2022 and 2023[6] between similar 'paired' questions, predominantly due to the change from five response options to four. The smaller difference between 2023 and 2024 results reflects a return to more consistent NSS outcomes as seen in the years before the COVID-19 pandemic.

19. With two years of consistent data, we could return to aggregating results across years, in the cases where publication thresholds are not met. This was typical before the COVID-19 pandemic, to reduce suppressions caused by low sample sizes. Although differences between the 2023 and 2024 results do not appear to be subject to large variations, it is difficult to interpret what a reasonable change is with only two years of data. We are therefore not aggregating data at this time, but will look again ahead of NSS 2025 publication to consider if aggregation is reasonable. We will still consider aggregation for the presentation of NSS results on the Discover Uni site, as users there are different and their needs may be better met by aggregate results.

20. As part of the NSS results, we produce theme measures, which summarise the data by combining responses to similar questions. We published the theme measures alongside the 2023 question data as an experimental statistic, because we acknowledged that

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[6] See: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/0d546ac2-2172-46c4-8fe1-2ee292729131/national-student-survey-2023-quality-report_15aug2023.pdf.

further, detailed analysis would need to be undertaken ahead of a decision to publish the themes in 2024. We have now completed this analysis, and will continue to use the seven existing themes.

21. The accuracy of the NSS results depends on students being able to freely express their views about their experience. We recognise a risk that students may be influenced by teaching staff, and others, to respond to the survey in a way that does not reflect their experience. This would distort the survey and we have a process for identifying and dealing with inappropriate influence.[7] In 2024, we have not found it necessary to suppress any results due to inappropriate influence.

22. The NSS contains six questions focused on the experience of those students undertaking healthcare, allied health, and clinical practice placements. The established method used to identify the students up to and including the NSS 2022 had become increasingly ineffective and served to identify only a small subset of the students on relevant courses. While the data remained useful to some providers, we considered it potentially misleading due to the missing data, which is why we did not include it in recent publications. As part of NSS 2023 we revised our approach to identifying these students with an aim to increase the coverage and relevance of these questions to those answering them. Students are now identified based on information provided to OfS regarding such courses for funding purposes for English further education colleges[8] and for all other relevant providers we establish the target population for these questions using professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) data provided in the curriculum accreditation entity of the HESA Data Futures return.[9] We proposed that we would not include the results in the NSS publication for the 2023 NSS until we had been assured that the students targeted for these questions accurately reflected the intended recipients (although results were made available directly to the providers themselves via the NSS portal to support their internal quality assurance processes). We have now completed this analysis we have no concerns regarding the coverage of these questions based on the following evidence:

    a. the level of responses saying the questions were not relevant, across the sector and in specific subject groups, is low and is comparable to that seen in the main survey questions;

    b. the number of students in expected target subject areas who were not identified as eligible for these questions was low. We reviewed the proportion of students targeted within detailed subject splits (CAH[10] level 3) and found that in subject areas where we would expect a high proportion of the student to be included in the population this was the case, for example this was close to 100 per cent for medical, dental and

[7] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/teaching-quality-and-tef/national-student-survey/inappropriate-influence/.

[8] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8549/2022-23-ilr-data-checking-tool-2024-nss-target-list-technical-doc.pdf.

[9] See: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/student/datafutures/a/curriculumaccreditation.

[10] See: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/coding-manual-tools/hecoscahdata/cah.

children's nursing. Whereas in areas where we would expect a lower propensity of students to be covered, such as pharmacology or biomedical sciences, there was close to no population. It was however noted that a small number of intercalating medical students were not captured by the revised methodology. This is linked to how they were processed in finalising the target list and will be addressed for 2025 NSS.

Based on these outcomes, we are confident in our approach and we have published both the results for the 2023 and 2024 healthcare, allied health, and clinical practice placements questions as part of this NSS release.

Relevance

23. Relevance is the degree to which the National Student Survey results we produce meet users' needs. It is well documented that these data users value the results.[11]

24. Data users have told us through consultation and informal feedback that they value seeing the NSS results split by additional characteristics. In the autumn we will publish the NSS data at sector level with added personal characteristics in line with those we released for the 2023 NSS.[12] These have been informed by a consideration of those characteristics which would add most value for a range of users, including students, providers, and the organisations responsible for the funding and regulation of providers. Data drawing on personal characteristics will be available both UK-wide and country-specific, to meet the needs of data users across the UK. Providers are also able to access an expanded range of personal characteristic splits at the time of the main NSS publication through the NSS dissemination portal. This data is for internal use by providers only and will not be published.

25. While generating the NSS statistics, we assessed the completeness of the underlying student data which is used to report by student characteristic and inform benchmark calculations. Table 3 in Annex A reports the level of 'not available' and 'unknown' data for each of the student characteristic splits. Points of note are:

a. There is an issue with the completeness of some of the data reported by providers to Jisc as part of the Data Futures return. For this NSS release, this has an impact on our benchmarking process, which uses student characteristic data supplied by Jisc. To mitigate this, we will be bringing in student level data from the previous year to fill gaps for variables which have elevated levels of unknowns this year. For ethnicity, sex, care experienced, and socioeconomic classification (SEC), wherever the data is missing or reported as unknown we will instead use known data from the same student in the previous year. However, in all places where data has been reported in the latest return, including 'refuse to answer', we will use that data. These four variables were chosen because they are both subject to more missingness than

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[11] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/nss-review-phase-one-report/.

[12] A list of the characteristics provided as part of the 2023 release: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/documentation-and-definitions/.

usual and are unlikely to change between years. While there will be some missingness remaining, this approach reduces the need to suppress benchmarked results due to missing data.

b. Where benchmarking factors have unknown values, or very small groups, for the purposes of benchmarking these are combined with the largest group within that factor. For instance, UK students with unknown ethnicity are combined with the white ethnic group.[13] We also suppress cases where more than 50 per cent of a benchmarking factor are unknown. This led to the suppression of benchmarks for 380 groups (out of a total of 120,000) for the NSS 2024 release. This is a higher rate of suppression compared to the NSS 2023 survey (where 150 groups were supressed) and is linked to the impact of the completeness issue, but has been reduced by the use of previous years' data.

c. There remains some data that is unknown or not available. This is often higher in the new fields introduced into the NSS portal in 2023. This is used to give higher education providers additional information about the relationships between their student population and NSS results, but are not benchmarking factors or published more widely.

d. Following discussions with the Department for Economy, Northern Ireland we have increased the number of populated data splits for Northern Ireland colleges. The number of populated student characteristic splits for these colleges in NSS 2024 is now closer to that of other similar providers and there is agreement to add further fields for NSS 2025.

Coherence and comparability

26. Coherence is the degree to which data that are derived from different surveys or methods, but which refer to the same student experience, are similar to the NSS. Comparability is the degree to which the NSS data can be compared between providers, the home nations and over time.

27. The NSS is the largest census student experience survey undertaken in the UK and has no direct comparator survey. Providers will undertake their own surveys, which may mirror its focus, but these results are for their internal use only. The annual Advance HE-HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey[14] surveys a panel of full-time undergraduate students and asks them to rate their time in higher education and their attitudes towards policy issues that impact upon them. Though this a valuable UK-wide survey and there is some overlap in focus, its scope is different to that of the NSS and it is not a census

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[13] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/documentation-and-definitions/.

[14] See: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes#saes2022.

survey, with a significancy smaller number of respondents, so direct comparisons cannot be made.

28. Because student populations are so different across providers and other groups of interest, it is not always helpful to directly compare them. Direct comparison of the positivity measure between such groups or providers should not be undertaken because the constituency and characteristics of their students will vary. To account for some of the factors which contribute to different NSS results, we construct benchmarks (weighted sector averages) for each group of interest and each question. This supports the interpretation of results for specific providers or groups in the context of their student population.[15] For NSS 2023 we increased the splits which are benchmarked to include subject, level and mode (along with the existing provider level benchmarks. These splits have been maintained for NSS 2024. We also provide an uncertainty measure in the difference between the actual result and benchmark to indicate that the values are estimates, and that the true value for the population may be somewhat different from that estimate.

29. Benchmarks are created for each question and theme measure using all the students who answered. This means that questions which are not asked in all nations of the UK will have benchmarks based on a smaller number of students. The question which relates to overall satisfaction will therefore have benchmarks created based on students at providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the question which relates to freedom of speech will have benchmarks created based on students in England. This is clearly highlighted in the results.

30. Our definitions are aligned with other OfS and Jisc publications. This makes it easier for users to compare figures from different data sources and reduce the burden caused by understanding slightly different results in different places.

Accessibility and clarity

31. Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the NSS data. This takes into account the formats that are available and the provision of supporting information. Clarity refers to the quality and sufficiency of the information relating to the release of the NSS results and the accompanying documentation.

32. The NSS statistics are available at sector level, UK nation, provider level, and at the more detailed level of subjects, mode and level within providers. The statistics are available as:

    a. An interactive tool, which can be easily used to interrogate and understand the data visually. The 2024 NSS release has an interactive dashboard tool which allows users to see results for providers, as well as the results for the whole sector and the UK

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[15] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/national-student-survey-data/provider-level-dashboard/.

nations. The key measures included are the positivity measure and the difference from benchmark.

  b. Summary Excel data downloads with the headlines for the UK as a whole and for each country.

  c. Excel data downloads for each provider with the data relating to that provider.

  d. CSV and Excel data downloads, for those users who want to view and manipulate large quantities of NSS results or read results into analytical software tools.

33. The NSS statistics are accompanied by a brief and neutral summary of key points and a 'frequently asked questions' section which provides additional information on the data methodology and how it can be interpreted. There is a broad range of audience for the NSS results, which includes students, prospective students (and their advisors), providers, the press and wider interested parties. Hence, we seek to ensure that accessible and understandable documentation is available for all types of users.

34. In Autumn 2024, we expect the NSS data to be included in the Discover Uni website. Here the data is presented in language designed to be accessible to prospective students. We provide guidance[16] about the source of the data, how it can be interpreted and also how (and if) comparisons should be made.

35. The NSS 2024 results are available to providers via the NSS portal in several formats to allow users with different needs and experience to access and understand the data. This includes pre-populated data dashboards, Excel spreadsheets, custom reporting tools and Open Data formats. Before accessing the NSS portal users also must accept the guidelines of access and use of NSS.[17] This sets out principles providers should follow when using any additional (unpublished) data submitted by their own students in the 2005 to 2024 NSS and how it can be used in public marketing materials.

36. The underlying data we use to generate the NSS statistics includes amendments to the data made by universities and colleges and signed off on or before 29 May 2024. In line with the OfS policy on revisions[18] we would not expect to routinely change the published data to account for provider amendments or structural changes until the 2025 data is available.

37. The NSS population is determined using a set of eligibility criteria applied to providers' student data returns. Following this initial identification, it is possible that students' circumstance could change and some may become eligible for the survey, and others ineligible. It is also possible that a provider could identify an error in its underlying data submission. Hence providers are strongly encouraged to request the addition or removal

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[16] See: https://www.discoveruni.gov.uk/about-our-data/#the_national_student_survey.

[17] See: https://nss.texunatech.com/ui/guidance?1.

[18] See OfS statistical policy on revisions, available at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/official-statistics/compliance-statement/.

of students from the target list based on these changes. As part of this process for NSS 2024, we approved changes for 231 providers, adding 18,782 and removing 23,078 students (the total number of students on the target list is 478,271). However, students in the final NSS population may not perfectly line up with intended survey population due to providers not engaging with this process or unidentified data errors.

38. To maximise the number of students we are able accept into the NSS population, we occasionally add records that are not complete. This year we took steps to reduce the amount of missing values by backfilling the data for these students from the previous year's record, or the year prior, where it was full and complete. This has resulted in no missing values being introduced for the current survey.

39. As part of this process we were unable to add a small number of students who were dormant and did not have any record in the current year's HESA data. We are investigating options for how we can add such students as part of NSS 2025.

Timeliness and punctuality

40. The NSS 2024 is an official statistic and was published to schedule at 0930 on 10 July 2024. This included publicly accessible data released on the OfS website and a simultaneous release of more detailed datasets, for providers only, via the NSS portal[19]. The date and time for release of the publicly available data (and any subsequent updates) are published in advance on the OfS official statistics release schedule[20].

Exceptional issues

41. The introduction of the Data Futures framework for data collection by Jisc caused some delays and data gaps. These particularly affected the processes to identify and confirm the sample population, and the completeness of the student characteristics data to which the NSS results are linked.

42. The most important impacts on the NSS were as follows.

   a. The data returned had less validation than in previous years, and so there were more missing or incorrect values. In some cases, this was improved by amended submissions from providers, but missingness is still higher than usual. This missingness particularly affects benchmarking, which uses student characteristic data supplied by Jisc. To mitigate this, in line with other OfS products this year, we will be carrying forward student level data for ethnicity, sex, care experienced status and socioeconomic classification (SEC) from the same student in the previous year. These variables were chosen for imputation because they are both subject to more missingness than usual, and are unlikely to change between years. While there will

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[19] See: https://nss.texunatech.com/ui/login?0.

[20] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/official-statistics/release-schedules/.

still be some missingness remaining in these variables, this imputation reduces the need to suppress benchmarked results due to missing data.

b. Due to a delay in the delivery schedule for the HESA 2022 data it was necessary for six providers to enter the survey field using self-generated target lists, rather than those created by OfS. This ensured that students from these providers were able to access the survey in time. The target lists used by four of the providers were able to be reviewed and we have no concerns regarding the impact of using these self-generated target lists in these instances. With the two remaining providers, we have completed a baseline check against the HESA student data and restricted the population to active undergraduate students.