

## Annex C: Guidance on the NSS 2025 – for further education colleges in England

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) will be carried out in 2025 across higher education providers in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland by the Office for Students (OfS), working on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies.
2. The timetable for NSS 2025 will run as follows:
  - a. The NSS will launch on **8 January 2025**.
  - b. The survey fieldwork will take place between **9 January and 30 April 2025** and will be run by Ipsos.
  - c. A provisional date for publication of the NSS results on the OfS website is **9 July 2025 at 0930**. Detailed results will be disseminated to individual providers through the new NSS data dissemination portal provided by CACI Limited on the same date and time. The NSS 2025 results publication is subject to decisions and final agreement from the UK funding and regulatory bodies following the quality review of the data.
  - d. NSS results at course level will be published on the [Discover Uni website](#).<sup>1</sup>
3. This annex provides guidance specifically for further education colleges and sixth form colleges as providers of higher education in England.
4. The responsibilities of providers in the successful management of the NSS are as follows:
  - a. Timely issuing of NSS pre-notification email to eligible students. Further details can be found in the NSS 2025 set-up guidance, sent to provider contacts by Ipsos. The guidance document is also available on the Ipsos NSS extranet.<sup>2</sup>
  - b. Timely submission of student contact details (email addresses and telephone numbers) when requested by Ipsos (by **29 November 2024**).
  - c. Ensuring good data quality by checking the NSS report (target list) generated by the OfS data checking tool. Requests for any necessary changes which cannot be resolved by correcting the student data may be directed to Ipsos for approval by the OfS.
  - d. Engagement with all guidance and requests issued by the OfS, UK funding and regulatory bodies, Ipsos and CACI Limited, and attending training and events run by them as necessary.

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk>.

<sup>2</sup> See [NSS extranet](#).

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- e. Submitting survey preferences to Ipsos by **29 November 2024**. This includes the timing of the survey and the choice of optional bank questions. Optional bank choices should be made in conjunction with the relevant students' union.
  - f. Providers in England are not required to promote the survey to students but can do so if they wish; this follows the same process as in NSS 2024. However, providers that choose to promote the survey to their students must ensure that all activities meet the guidelines on marketing and promoting the survey and on avoiding inappropriate influence, as provided by Ipsos in the good practice guide and is available on the NSS extranet.<sup>3</sup>
5. Colleges can access their target lists for the 2025 NSS on the 2023-24 individualised learner record (ILR) data checking tool. To ensure that the target list generated by the OfS data checking tool can be replicated on receipt of ILR data from the data service, colleges have been asked to ensure that their final version of their ILR R14 return has been uploaded to the data checking tool, as described in [2023-24 ILR data checking tool](#).<sup>4</sup> They should then provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos by **29 November 2024**. Further details can be found in the NSS 2025 set-up guidance, which is sent to provider contacts by Ipsos. The guidance document is also available on the Ipsos NSS extranet.<sup>5</sup>
  6. If a college feels that the target population does not accurately reflect the students currently in the final year of eligible courses, then it should engage with the additions and removals process as outlined in paragraphs 14-16. Any such requests for additions or removals must be submitted to Ipsos and agreed by the OfS prior to their inclusion in or removal from the final target list. If approved, the OfS will inform the provider and make the amendment to the target list.
  7. Eligible students may opt out of the survey at any stage during the fieldwork process.
  8. Providers may choose up to six banks of optional questions and may include up to two additional questions specific to the provider. Providers are asked to agree with their student representative body their choice of optional banks of questions for inclusion. Providers should submit their choice of optional banks and additional questions to Ipsos.
  9. For NSS 2025, in addition to targeted follow-up, all providers that are at risk of not meeting the publication threshold will be automatically put into the booster phase to send additional reminders to their non-responding students. This is additional promotional activity to encourage students to complete the survey. Providers are not required to take any action in relation to the booster phase.

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<sup>3</sup> See [NSS extranet](#).

<sup>4</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/data-checking-tool/2021-22-ilr-data-checking-tool/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/data-checking-tool/2021-22-ilr-data-checking-tool/).

<sup>5</sup> See [NSS extranet](#).

10. Providers may access the detailed responses and results of the survey via the NSS data dissemination portal provided by CACI Limited, from the OfS website and from the Discover Uni website (for students).

### Scope and coverage of the survey

11. The following providers are covered by NSS 2025:
- a. In England, all providers registered and regulated by the OfS will be expected to participate in the NSS as an ongoing condition of registration.
  - b. In Northern Ireland, NSS participation is a condition of funding as set out in the financial memoranda between universities and the Department for the Economy (Northern Ireland). Further education colleges in Northern Ireland take part in the NSS to meet the quality assurance requirements.
  - c. In Scotland, participation is a condition of the Scottish Funding Council's funding for higher education providers.
  - d. In Wales, all regulated providers and funded providers are expected to participate in the NSS to ensure that the views of their diverse student populations are represented, in line with their duties to advance equality of opportunities, eliminate unlawful discrimination, foster good relations and promote equality. NSS outcomes will provide information to Medr, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research,<sup>6</sup> the regulator of tertiary education in Wales.
12. All full-time and part-time undergraduate students registered at participating providers are eligible to undertake the NSS during their final year of study (or, for flexible programmes where the final year cannot be predicted, after they are expected to have undertaken more than one full-time equivalent and not before their fourth year of study), with the following key exceptions:
- a. students on programmes that do not lead to undergraduate qualifications or credits
  - b. students on a course lasting one year or one full-time equivalent, or less
  - c. any students who were surveyed in the 2024 NSS (whether or not they responded) and who remain at the same provider
  - d. any students who we expect, by the end of academic year 2024-25, to have completed one full-time equivalent year or less since they were last surveyed.

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<sup>6</sup> Medr, Wales's Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, is the arm's-length body responsible for funding and regulating tertiary education and research from 1 August 2024. This includes further education, higher education, apprenticeships, school sixth forms, adult community learning, and government-funded research and innovation.

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13. Students are included in the 2025 survey population if they are expected to complete their course between 1 February 2025 and 31 January 2026 inclusive.
14. It is possible to add students to or remove them from the NSS target list if a college feels that the target population does not accurately reflect the students currently in the final year of eligible courses. For example, if the length of a student's course has decreased after a college has submitted its ILR return. The full criteria are in the NSS 2025 set-up guidance provided by Ipsos.
15. Providers will be able to make requests to add students or remove them from the NSS population once the target list has been finalised by the OfS. The additions and removals process will start approximately one week after the OfS receives final student data from the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). Providers will be notified ahead of the process opening. Requests will not be accepted after 1 March 2025.
16. Requests should be submitted as soon as possible to ensure they can be processed prior to, or early in, the survey period. All requests must be made through the Ipsos NSS extranet and should be made in a single file, including the required level of detail.<sup>7</sup> The OfS or relevant funding body will review all requests for additions and removals and may request further details from providers where necessary. Submitting requests as early as possible and responding to queries in a timely manner will help expedite the process. It may be necessary for the OfS to prioritise approvals by survey start week, but we will endeavour to action all requests prior to the chosen survey start date.
17. Except for students on enhanced first degrees, postgraduate students are not included in the NSS.

### Reasons for excluding individuals from the survey

18. We enable providers to exclude specific groups of students from being contacted by Ipsos. These groups are:
  - a. Students who are deceased.
  - b. Students with serious health difficulties (including mental health difficulties), such that seeking a response may be distressing for them.
  - c. Students who, having been informed that their contact details will be passed onto the survey agency (Ipsos) for the purposes of the NSS, state that they do not wish to be contacted (students will also be able to opt out during the survey process).
19. Students in groups b and c will still be able to complete the survey if they wish, through the survey website.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See [NSS extranet](#).

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>.

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20. These are the only grounds on which students may be excluded from the target population. Providers should code these students on their sample submission as category 'C' and providers should not provide contact details for these students. More information on the process is in the NSS 2025 set-up guidance provided by Ipsos.
21. To enable us to monitor exclusions and verify their consistent application, providers should retain evidence to support them. Where a student asks that their details are not passed on, we will expect providers to retain evidence of this request. If the number of such requests at any provider is so high as to affect our ability to conduct the survey successfully, we will discuss this with the provider.
22. If the provider feels that the target population does not accurately reflect the students currently in the final year of eligible courses, then it should engage with the additions and removals process as outlined in paragraphs 14 to 16. Reasons for differences will usually be due to changes in the student's circumstances such as taking a year out or retaking a year.
23. Although some students may withdraw in their final year, they will have had significant interaction with the provider, so their opinions are valuable and should be included. If students withdraw without engaging in their final year, it may be possible to remove them through the additions and removals process.
24. If a college identifies an error and wishes to remove students after it has submitted data to the Education and Skills Funding Agency, it will need to explain to the OfS the nature of the error and identify the students affected. The OfS will then decide whether these students should be removed from the target list. In this case, providers may wish to review the data for these students and consider if they should submit a data error summary to the OfS for consideration.<sup>9</sup> If on reviewing this summary we believe the errors are widespread and material, this may result in a requirement to amend the underlying student data.
25. Students should not be removed from the student data file supplied by Ipsos even when their contact details are not supplied.

### Process for supplying student contact data

26. Following submission of the ILR data to the OfS data checking tool, a target list of students to be included in the NSS will be automatically generated. Colleges should use this to support the provision of contact details (email addresses and telephone numbers), according to the standard template that will be supplied by Ipsos, for all eligible students on the list.
27. For colleges, the standard collection notice already covers the use of student contact details in general surveys. However, given the nature and importance of the NSS, providers should send all students eligible to take part an NSS pre-notification email

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<sup>9</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/amendments-to-data/data-amendments-process/](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/amendments-to-data/data-amendments-process/).

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informing them that they will be contacted by Ipsos. Guidance and an email template are provided in the NSS 2025 set-up guidance issued to providers by Ipsos.

28. Providers can define their own structure for receiving their NSS data, through one of two optional fields on the sample file to indicate the internal 'department code' for each student. These codes, where populated, will be used solely for providing feedback to the provider.
29. For colleges, the OfS will map between LearnDirect codes on the ILR and the agreed publication subject hierarchy for publication purposes.
30. Providers should submit the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos by **29 November 2024**. Ipsos will provide guidance to its contacts on how to supply these lists as part of the NSS guidance document. The NSS achieves a high response rate and to ensure this continues it is important that providers submit complete and accurate contact details to Ipsos by this date.

### Administration of the survey

31. The 2025 survey fieldwork will be conducted from 9 January until 30 April 2024 during the spring term and the results will be published on the OfS website on 9 July 2025. To avoid concerns regarding impact on internal surveys, Ipsos will continue to:
  - brand the NSS independently, which clearly distinguishes its purpose
  - manage the survey's distribution centrally, so that providers are not involved in contacting students to complete the NSS.
32. Providers will be invited to select one of five weeks when Ipsos can launch the survey to their students. This is to ensure that the survey can start at a time that fits with term timetables and does not clash with exams. Providers may select a week between 6 January and 3 February 2025 for the survey to start. We would advise providers to make use of the earlier survey start weeks unless this would cause inconvenience to their students, so that there is the best chance of achieving a high response rate. There will be no communication with students by Ipsos outside the times agreed with each provider; however, students will be able to access the survey through the survey website<sup>10</sup> from 8 January 2025 onwards.
33. It is essential that all providers start their surveys during the five-week 'starting window' to ensure that results can be published in time for prospective students to make informed choices. We will, however, consider individual requests for a start date outside the five-week window where the activities of students make it impractical to conduct the survey during that time. Any provider that wishes to make a case for a different survey start date should contact Ipsos by **29 November 2025**.

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>.

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34. Ipsos will conduct the survey at each provider using a sequence of email and telephone surveying. This will take up to eight weeks at each provider, although some targeted follow-up may be needed during and beyond this time to increase response rates. Ipsos will deploy the survey modes tactically to personalise the survey to students and providers, and thus help increase online responses and reduce survey costs.

### Promoting the NSS

35. To reduce the burden on providers, the OfS has agreed that those in England are not required to promote the 2025 survey to their students, but they can do so if they wish to.

36. Providers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are required to promote the survey, as agreed by the funding bodies in these nations.

37. Providers that promote the survey are expected to review any internal campaigns to ensure that they meet with the guidance on marketing and promoting of the NSS and avoiding inappropriate influence (please see the 2025 good practice guide).<sup>11</sup>

38. The good practice guidance on NSS 2025 will be available from the Ipsos [NSS extranet](#) and includes comprehensive guidance on the promotion of the survey. It is important that providers adhere to the guidance on avoiding inappropriate influence and raise any queries with Ipsos. The UK funding bodies and regulators treat seriously any breaches of this guidance and may investigate and act where there is evidence of a breach. We undertake an annual review to ensure that the process we adopt to respond to allegations is fit for purpose and to make any improvements to the process and guidance for providers and students before fieldwork takes place. This allegations procedure guidance<sup>12</sup> is intended to be read in conjunction with the good practice guidance issued by Ipsos. We urge providers to ensure that all staff who are responsible for the running of the survey are familiar with Ipsos's guidance and seek advice where needed on their approach to avoiding inappropriate influence.

39. A student guide on inappropriate influence<sup>13</sup> is available to help raise awareness among students of the value of their honest views, what to expect from NSS promotion, what is and is not allowed, and where they should go for help and support if they are concerned about being influenced. Providers are asked to inform students about this guide as part of their pre-launch survey plans. More details on this are provided in the NSS 2025 set-up guide issued by Ipsos.

40. Ipsos will produce NSS 2025 promotional materials and social media materials for providers and students' unions to use locally. Providers will be able access the full suite of marketing materials from the Ipsos NSS extranet. If a provider or students' union wishes to use the NSS branding to develop its own marketing material, it may do so and should discuss this with Ipsos, who will advise on good practice and offer guidelines to

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<sup>11</sup> Available at [NSS extranet](#).

<sup>12</sup> Available at [Promotion of the NSS - Office for Students](#).

<sup>13</sup> Available at [Inappropriate influence - Office for Students](#).

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ensure a reasonable degree of consistency across the sector. When it contacts providers, Ipsos will discuss who in the provider is best placed to coordinate promotional activity. Further information about marketing materials and promoting the survey will be provided in the NSS 2025 good practice guide from Ipsos on 23 October 2024.<sup>14</sup>

41. Ipsos will manage incentive schemes on behalf of those providers who have selected the option to offer a prize draw to their students. For example, some providers have offered printer credits for students who complete the survey online.

### Questionnaire distribution

42. There are two main methods of data collection: online and telephone. Ipsos operates a live, open-access website, so that students can log in and complete the survey, in addition to the option to respond by following the link in a personalised email. The aim of the site is to verify the identity of students at the point of logging in; once students have completed the survey and their response is validated, they will be automatically removed from the target list and not contacted again. To enable this, and to enable efficient working of the survey more generally, providers should adhere to the deadline for supplying student contact details.
43. Although there are two methods of data collection, we are committed to reducing the amount of telephone contact. However, telephoning remains an essential element of the survey and will continue, so all providers are expected to provide each student's mobile telephone number and any other alternative contact number that is held.
44. To monitor responses and to process data for analysis and reporting, we link all responses to students' ILR learner reference number or known student identifiers. 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 again.
45. Throughout the process, Ipsos will send reminders to students who have not responded.
46. Response rates, by provider and by subject area, will be monitored continuously during the process. 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 will involve reminders by email and text message.
47. For NSS 2025, in addition to targeted follow-up, all providers that are at risk of not meeting the publication threshold will be automatically put into the booster phase to send additional reminders to their non-responding students during survey fieldwork. This will be started automatically if a provider's response rate is below 43 per cent by mid-March and will continue for some providers until mid-April. An additional text reminder will be included in the schedule of contact to non-responding students during the booster phase.

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<sup>14</sup> Available at [NSS extranet](#).



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48. At any stage during the survey process, students may opt out of the survey and will not be contacted again. To do this, students will need to verify their identity by providing some data, such as their date of birth.
49. Provider response rates will be shared by Ipsos during the fieldwork to help providers monitor their survey progress. Providers should not share this data more widely, and guidance on this is provided in the NSS 2025 good practice guide sent to provider contacts by Ipsos. National response rates data will not be made available to providers.
50. The UK funding and regulatory bodies reserve the right to agree changes to the survey period with individual providers at risk of not meeting provider-level or subject-level publication thresholds. The OfS will inform providers of any approaches and actions that may be necessary. The completeness and accuracy of students' contact data, as supplied by providers, will be a significant factor in achieving a publishable level of responses.

### Publication of 2025 NSS results

51. A major purpose of the NSS is to provide information to help potential students and their advisers make choices about higher education. It also has a key role in improving the student experience by helping providers to identify areas for action or development.
52. The current publication threshold for NSS results is a 50 per cent response rate, with at least 10 students responding. Results that meet the publication threshold and criteria will be published on the Discover Uni website.<sup>15</sup> Data will also be published on the OfS website
53. Data will also be available to providers on the NSS data dissemination portal delivered by CACI Limited. The results portal will allow providers to access elements of their data, including optional bank questions, students' open text comments and data below certain publication thresholds.
54. The OfS and UK funding and regulatory bodies may publish their own analysis of the data, including open text comments and optional banks. For data that is not available publicly through the OfS website, this will be at aggregate level and will not allow providers, courses or individuals to be identified.

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<sup>15</sup> See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/>.