

The National Student Survey

BACKGROUND

The National Student Survey was introduced in 2005 with the primary purpose of providing information that would help prospective students decide what and where to study. The NSS has now established itself in universities' calendars and with each year the data becomes more useful in allowing institutions to identify trends and also monitor the reaction of students to any initiatives.

COVERAGE OF THE SURVEY: THE TARGET LIST

The NSS covers all publicly-funded HEIs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Scotland has its own quality assurance and enhancement arrangements but some Scottish higher education institutions have chosen to participate. All full-time and part-time undergraduate students in their final year of study with the following main exceptions:

- students on programmes that do not lead to undergraduate qualifications or credits
- students on short courses (of less than one year full-time equivalent) or very low-intensity courses (typified as continuing education students)

The list of students to be included in the Survey, the "target list", is extracted from the University's "Student Return" to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (the "HESA return"), and inaccuracies in the HESA return may result in students being wrongly included in or excluded from the target list. To ensure that the target list is as accurate as possible, the QSIS team has developed a "Potential NSS Students Report" which Schools can download and check at any time but particularly in the key August and September period.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE SURVEY

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has commissioned Ipsos-MORI, a market research organisation, to conduct the survey and the associated marketing campaigns. The initial target list of students, with their contact details, is supplied to IPSOS by the institutions and contact with the students is through Ipsos-MORI. In order to achieve HEFCE's target 50% response rate, a variety of methods are used to contact students. Initially students are sent an email inviting them to complete the questionnaire online. Those students that do not respond are then sent a postal questionnaire, to their term-time address. Those students who still do not respond are then followed up by telephone. In some cases, attempts are made to contact students at their vacation addresses. Surveys become more reliable as the response rate increases and, within Queen's, academic staff are urged to encourage their final year students to complete the Survey (but staff *must not* attempt to influence students' scores).

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

From 2005 to 2011, the questionnaire used in the NSS had 23 questions grouped under seven headings:

- Teaching
- Assessment and feedback

- Academic support
- Organisation and management
- Learning resources
- Personal development
- Overall satisfaction

There is also an open-ended question which allows respondents to highlight any particularly positive or negative aspect of their student experience.

In 2012, a 24th question is being added which will provide a measure of student satisfaction with the institution's student union.

Since 2007, as well as the core questions, the Survey has included optional questions about other aspects of the student experience. Individual institutions select categories of questions which they wish to be put to their students, and Queen's has chosen the "careers", "learning community" and "social opportunities" categories of questions. These categories reflect the University's concerns (1) to enhance the employment prospects of students, and (2) to create a real and seamless academic and social community which all students feel part of. In 2010, institutions were allowed to add two further questions, this time ones they had written themselves. This has given the University an opportunity to include more detailed questions about the feedback students receive on their work; ensuring students get feedback which helps them understand and learn is probably the University's top learning and teaching priority.

PUBLICATION OF THE RESULTS

The results of the survey are analysed by IPSOS and published on the national Unistats website (www.unistats.com) normally in September each year. Within Queen's, the results are also published on the Centre for Educational Development website (www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/CentreforEducationalDevelopment/).

RESPONDING TO THE RESULTS

Within the University, the NSS has established itself as a key performance indicator and is increasingly taken into account in shaping University policy (for example, on assessment and feedback). The results are distributed to Directors of Education and heads of units in academic support areas. A report on the results is considered by the University Operating Board (UOB) and the Education Committee, and these committees will, in due course, receive reports on the action taken by Schools and units in response to the Survey results.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information about the NSS is available from the Centre for Educational Development www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/AcademicStudentAffairs/CentreforEducationalDevelopment/