The National Student Survey

Improving Response Rates

In order for NSS results to be published a threshold of 23 respondents and 50% response rate has to be met.

These thresholds are set by HEFCE and the NSS Steering Group for the purpose of ensuring that the survey data published is useful to the user institutions. Thresholds are applied to ensure that there are enough responses to preserve individuals' anonymity. Data not meeting these thresholds can therefore not be released.

This briefing sheet provides an overview of some of the measures employed by institutions to improve their annual response rates.

Results from the NSS 2012 identify that of those online respondents who answered the additional question about how they found out about the NSS:

42% Identify that they were told about the survey by a lecturer / member of staff

35% Identify that they followed an email link

28% Followed a link from a University homepage / portal

Please note respondents could select more than one option

Engaging Departments and Teaching Staff

Support from senior and academic staff can be important to the success of the NSS at an institution. Instituions identify that they encourage staff to get involved by:

- Encouraging staff to deliver lecture shout outs to their final year students

- Circulating weeking response rates to teaching staff/department heads, highlighting areas of good and bad performance.

- Briefing staff to explain the nature and purpose of the survey as well as to remind them (and students) about the conduct of the survey (e.g. anonyimity).

Many institutions identify **department support** as essential in meeting response rate targets, given their ability to directly engage with students. Some ideas implemented include:

Monitoring response rates - using the weekly response rate reports provided by Ipsos MORI to guide internal promotion of the NSS.

Create a competition – introducing a league table for departments/subjects to identify top and bottom performers. Some institutions have implemented prizes for those who get the overall best response rate.

Keep staff abreast of survey progress - forward response rate reports to course leaders, heads of departments and senior management so that they are aware of where targets are and are not being met.

Outlining responsibilities – get staff to sign up to 'key responsibilities'. Some institutions identify that they encourage key members of staff to sign up to NSS duties, agreeing to distribute promotional materials, deliver lecture shout outs, organise dedicated time for students to complete the survey, implement an NSS feature on department website, and co-ordinate email communication to students.

Email Communication

Electonic communication has been identified by respondents and institutions as an important way to promote the NSS fieldwork.

- Some institutions send introductory emails ahead of fieldwork to students to forewarn them that the survey will be coming and to look out for it.

✓ Many institutions send emails to students addressed from the principal, dean of the institution or Pro Vice Chancellor. This adds weight to the message.

✓ Some instituions believe that messages from a named contact known to the individual student (e.g. course leader/head of department) are more effective.

✓ **Some institutions provide the email details of eligible students** to subject/department staff to reduce burden on them. This enables them to target messages more efficiently.

Redirecting to the NSS Website

Some institutions have established pre-survey websites, which can be branded locally and helps them to manage their own incentives more effectively. These micro-sites link directly to the survey, and provide some background information and details about any incentives.

Other internal sites used to promote the survey include:

✓ The institution's intranet site. Information can be subject specific or generic

✓ Institutions with virtual learning environments publicise the NSS via this tool (Moodle). Information can be subject specific or generic

✓ Advertise the NSS on IT terminals within the institution.

Promotional Materials

Intitutions use a range of promotional tools and methods to improve awareness of the survey and to encourage eligible students to participate. These include:

Using Ipsos MORI prepared promotional materials – displaying official NSS branded promotional material around the institution. Some methods used to maximise the coverage of these materials include:

✓ Targeting materials in places where final year students will see them. Some institutions work with the SU to identify 'traffic hotspots' such as learning resource centre/PC laboratories, the library, shops, bars or as a screensaver/presentation slide in final year lectures/tutorials.

✓ Targeted distribution of materials. For example, some institutions take the pens to specific lessons (e.g. with low response rates) as an incentive to complete the survey.

Creating institution specific marketing materials – some institutions prefer to create their own institutional branded posters, flyers, banners and screensavers. Others employ innovative promotional ideas such as NSS stickers on food labels, catering cards to be displayed on tables in cafes, bars etc and NSS branded clothing for representatives to wear on campus.

Other promotional tools used include:
- Communicating change – showing students what has changed as a result of the NSS and how they are listening e.g. "You Said, We Did" campaigns.
- On screen promotions – displaying information about the NSS on plasma screens and IT terminals around the institution.
- Institutional mascot – one institution has introduced a mascot that visits campuses with a laptop talking to final year students to encourage them to complete the survey.

Internal PR– examples include
- Publishing feature articles on the staff intranet to provide background information and tips to staff for engaging students.
- Articles to raise awareness such as feature interviews, publicising previous year's prize draw winners and communicating changes that have been implemented as a result of NSS findings.
- Features in student papers and/or radio stations to encourage completion.

Case Study

Engaging the Students' Union

Many institutions identify the role of the Students' Union as important to the promotion of the NSS. Furthermore, they identify that early engagement of the SU and involving them in planning can prove beneficial.

Creating a buzz – Student involvement with the SU means that they have an understanding of what appeals to potential respondents and can spread the word.

Targeting promotion – Some institutions consult their SU on the best places to display promotional material e.g. traffic hotspots. The SU offers a range of places to raise awareness e.g. SU offices/facilities, shops, bar etc

Communicating with students – Some institutions identify that their SUs have weekly newsletters, which can be used to promote the NSS.

NSS ambassadors – Many institutions have dedicated student reps that help to spread the word to other students about the NSS. Some institutions have a dedicated NSS champion/ambassador to help formulate NSS campaigns and help promote the completion of the survey to final year students.

The NUS also offers paid opportunities for NSS Ambassadors. They are paid £50 per month plus expenses upon the completion of tasks such as visiting unions, running a workshop, attending a national event or writing a briefing about the NSS.

Incentives

A range of institutions offer incentives or prizes to encourage students to complete the NSS. In 2012, the most common incentives/prizes included:

- Cash prizes of up to £1000
- Vouchers – e.g. Amazon, book tokens entertainment, shopping and travel.
- Prizes – popular prizes included the Apple iPad and iPod.
- Graduation packages (e.g. gown hire, photo packages, champagne reception)
- University Ball Tickets

- Coffee vouchers
- Print credits.

Some institutions identify that they work with the SU to identify what 'prize' would be most appropriate for final year students.

The Power of Word of Mouth

Institutions recognise the importance of word of mouth promotion. This is achieved through SU representatives, department heads, administrators and/or tutors speaking directly with eligible students about the NSS. Remember:

Lecture shout-outs – maybe encouraging staff to include a dedicated slide at the end of every presentation or show the NSS video.

Student representatives – spread the NSS word among their peers and illustrate the value of student opinion.

Dedicated Time to Complete the Survey

The majority of institutions provide dedicated time or space to final year students to complete the NSS. Examples include:

Allocating time in tutorials to complete the NSS – some institutions build in time to their timetables to ensure that students complete the NSS. Some make sure that their class visits the PC lab or Learning Resource Centre

Dedicated PCs available for completion – some institutions allocate computers specifically for the use of the NSS during fieldwork. These labs are set up in areas visited by students.

Subject sessions – some subject leads have introduced NSS sessions, where they try to entice eligible students to participate by offering an incentive. Some institutions hire a room and offers free pizza/lunch.

Case Study

Planning and Coordination

Many institutions have a formal procedure for ensuring that response rates meet publication thresholds.

Dedicated NSS Operations Team and/or an NSS Steering Group – Examples include:

☑ Ensuring that representatives from across the institution meet regularly (e.g. once every 2 weeks) to discuss response rates and how to boost them.

☑ Getting a group together to brainstorm promotional ideas. They can openly discuss areas of low response and when appropriate invite department/subject representatives to discuss areas of lower performance.

☑ Tracking email conversations between representatives to communicate weekly response rates and discuss promotional needs.

☑ Bringing representatives from each department together at regular meetings and encouraging them to cascade information to their colleagues in department meetings.

Communications planning – In order to maximise response rates, some institutions have developed a communication plan for the NSS Fieldwork. Plans often include:

Preparing for fieldwork – Formal plans to ensure that staff are fully briefed on the NSS process, the importance of reaching required response rates and the start and end dates of fieldwork.

Timetable for promotional activity – Some institutions produce a detailed plan of promotional activity so that they target students appropriately.

This includes:
- Ensuring that internal email invitations do not clash with Ipsos MORI centrally administered invitations.
- Developing complementary email communications to reach students in the intervening periods between Ipsos MORI communications.
- Identification of key dates that may affect participation e.g. holidays, exams, and coursework deadlines.

Identification of key responsibilities – Some institutions have a formal document which identifies who will have responsibilities for communications e.g. those best placed to engage with students and what their key responsibilities should be.

Innovative ideas – Institutions explore different ideas to engage students with the NSS, including involving students from relevant specialism to get involved with the promotion e.g. Art & Design, Marketing and/or Communications to develop NSS strategies for the institution.

General awareness – Some institutions also explore ways to raise awareness of NSS amongst non final year students. This includes poster campaigns to promote changes that have been implemented as a result of NSS findings.

Contacting students – Survey fatigue and general annoyance from being over contacted can prevent eligible students from participating in the survey. Institutions should be co-ordinating their contact activity to avoid this, for example:
- Planning communication in line with the Ipsos MORI timetable
- Being aware of any other internal research that is being undertaken by the institution and planning communication so students are not bombarded
- Ensuring that communications with students are staggered
- Personalising emails or signing emails from representatives that are recognised by the student e.g. dean or subject head.

Case Study

Communications Checklist

Pre survey launch

☑ **Organise staff briefing,** providing an overview of fieldwork, NSS background, how to engage students and eligibility overview.

☑ **Display promotional materials in high traffic areas** – Discuss with SU reps and students where the most appropriate areas are.

☑ **Organise meeting with student representative/SU** – Discuss the plan for generating awareness for the survey on campus

☑ **Inform student media of survey launch** – Newspapers, radio, TV channel, resident bloggers, social media site.

☑ **Prepare PR** for institution intranet/student portal and student media.

☑ **Develop electronic presence** – display NSS screensavers in all areas with PC access , lecture theatre screens and/or plasma TV screens.

During fieldwork

☑ **Lecture shout-outs** – Ensure that lecturers/tutors are asking students to complete the survey and giving out the survey website.

☑ **Regular staff updates** – Circulate weekly response rate reports to staff, highlight areas that need to improve performance.

☑ **Email reminders** – ensure that central emails and course specific emails are sent to eligible students at times that do not disrupt the Ipsos MORI survey timetable. Discuss with Ipsos MORI.

☑ **Organise dedicated sessions to complete online survey** – general and course specific sessions, possibly incentivised (e.g. Pizza). These can be timed in line with the Ipsos MORI communications to utilise personal email links.

☑ **Consider offering incentives** – in addition to any main incentive offered, local incentives can be used to boost flagging subjects/departments.

☑ **Run PR/media activity** – consider features on the launch of the NSS, how the results are used (you said, we did) etc.

☑ **Word of mouth** – create a presence on campus, consider lecture and tutorial visits, engaging societies/associations, mascots etc.