

National Student Survey 2023: Quality report

1. This quality report contains information on the quality characteristics of the data collected through the National Student Survey (NSS) 2023.
2. The NSS was open to respondents from 11 January to 31 April 2023. The survey is mixed-mode. Responses are collected online, via telephone and a small number are sent in the post.
3. The information in this report explains the strengths and limitations of the data, and indicates how to use it.
4. There is an accompanying Excel download with the tables from this report, referred to as Annex A.

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Changes to the survey

5. Since the last survey in 2022, we have made comprehensive changes to the survey questionnaire, and the way we process and publish the responses:
 - a. We have rewritten all survey questions. We have removed some questions and others have been added. We mainly ask students direct questions about their experience, whereas previously we asked them to agree or disagree with a statement.
 - b. For most questions, we present respondents with four main response options, rather than five. Respondents can no longer declare a neutral attitude about their experience, but must give a positive or negative response (or tell us that the question does not apply to them).
 - c. Questions are now routed according to the country of the provider that registers the students. One question, about freedom of expression, is only asked of students at English providers. One question, about overall satisfaction, is only asked of students at providers in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales.
 - d. We have changed some of the definitions used when presenting the survey results. This makes it easier to compare with other publications from the Office for Students (OfS) or Jisc.¹
 - e. We have changed the way we present the results. We have introduced more ways of splitting the data, and have produced benchmarks to accompany every key statistic. We have produced a new way of visualising the NSS data, which includes an improved presentation of statistical uncertainty.

Important points

6. Due to the changes described above, the 2023 NSS results cannot be straightforwardly compared with those from earlier years. In particular, the removal of the 'neutral' response option in 2023 means that we would expect more students to respond positively in 2023, regardless of any change in the student experience.
7. Students have engaged with the new questionnaire. Response rates remain high, and in-survey drop-out rates low. Students have used the full-range of response options, and rarely report that a question does not apply to them.
8. 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 of statistical uncertainty around some of these results, and they should always be viewed together with the uncertainty measures included in the data dashboard.

¹ For more details see Proposal 4 in our consultation response, available at [Consultation on the general approach to publication of the National Student Survey: Analysis of responses and decisions - Office for Students](#).

Accuracy and reliability

9. '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.
10. 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.
11. The response rates for the National Student Survey remain high, which reduces the risk of non-response bias. The overall response rate is 71.5 per cent. This an increase from NSS 2022 rate of 68.6 per cent. The response rates for the participating countries for NSS 2023 are 71.3 per cent for England, 73.4 per cent for Northern Ireland, 71.3 per cent for Scotland and 74.1 per cent for Wales (as shown in Table 1 in the accompanying Excel download, Annex A). The variation in response rates between different groups of students within characteristic splits is also typically low, with the exception of a largely single issue linked to part-time, distance learners who are mostly studying Combined Studies (as shown in Table 2 in Annex A). As an additional precaution against non-response bias, we suppress results when the response rate for the population is less than 50 per cent.
12. There is a risk that any disruption in the survey period, such as the staff strikes which took place in 2023, could affect 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. This may have affected how some students responded to the survey at provider level, but this would be very hard to detect. Neither do we see it as problematic, given that strikes may have had a real, relevant impact on the student experience.
13. 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. We mitigated this risk by testing the new questionnaire ahead of the 2023 survey (through cognitive testing, and two pilots), with each round of testing allowing us to improve the questions.
14. 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 single question common to all UK students (questions 1 to 26). This occurs at a rate of 3.2 per cent, lower than the rate for the 2022 survey (3.8 per cent over 27 questions). 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 the number of students answering the same way with 25 of the first 26 questions (1.7 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 comparable with previous surveys.
15. Students are able to select a 'This does not apply to me' option in response to all 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 core² questions for the respective nations. Of the remaining questions all are under 4 per cent, apart from question 25 ('How well does the students' union (association or guild) represent students' academic interests?') which is 14.6 per cent. This is expected as the extent of student union presence and awareness is different across providers and student groups. We also reviewed the variance in use of the 'This does not apply to me' option 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.

16. The survey mechanism means that students have to answer each sequential question and cannot miss questions out. This means that students who do not complete the survey can be identified by looking at the response rate for each question, which shows the point at which they stop answering. The dataset that is used to generate the NSS results already records students who respond to 17 or fewer questions as non-respondents. Hence the dropout rate during these earlier questions cannot be derived until this data is received at a later point in the cycle and will be reviewed in due course. However looking at questions 18 to 26³ and comparing with the response rate for question 1, the response rate only drops by 0.66 per cent for the sector as a whole. In comparison, the 2022 NSS showed a similar drop of 0.43 per cent by the last question for the sector as a whole. The dropout rate (between question 18 and 26) for different student characteristics shows no concerns with all splits, with over 10 students deviating from the UK average no more than ± 0.25 per cent. Overall, these very small drops in response rate show that after question 17 all students remain highly engaged with the core aspects of the survey.
17. The NSS is a mixed-mode survey: respondents can answer the survey either online or by telephone. In 2023, 78.8 per cent answered the survey online, compared with 77.1 in 2022. 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 measure⁴ between online and telephone respondents varies by question, with an average difference of three percentage points and a maximum difference of seven percentage points. This is a reduction in the difference seen in previous years, which may be due to the new questionnaire.
18. 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 550 seconds. For online it was 437 seconds. This duration is similar to the 2022 NSS for online respondents (442 seconds) and by phone (463 seconds). The slightly longer duration for the phone respondents in the NSS 2023 may be attributed to the question-specific response choices.

² 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.

³ 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 them in any of the nations.

⁴ This is the proportion of respondents who gave one of the two most positive answers to each question. Using the first question as an example, the positivity measure would be the proportion of respondents who answered 'Very good' or 'Good', out of all those who gave an answer which was not 'This does not apply to me'.

These may have taken longer to readout in this mode, compared with the identical ones used for each of the questions in NSS 2022.

19. In introducing rephrased questions with/and new response options there is a risk that students may respond in a very different or unexpected way to questions that were similar in the previous survey design. This could indicate that to some extent either the previous approach, or the revised one, is soliciting a different reflection of the student experience. To explore this we compared similar questions between the NSS 2023 and 2022 surveys to sense check if there were any extensive differences between 'paired' questions. There are 20 similar questions between the two surveys. The difference in results can be found in Table 3 at Annex A. In all cases the result for NSS 2023 was higher than for NSS 2022. The average difference is 6 per cent higher, with nine of the questions having a difference of below 5 per cent. There were three questions with over 10 per cent difference. These related to marking and assessment, feedback and the students' union. We would expect to see some difference between surveys as the respondents are a different cohort, with different experiences. It is also worth noting that there was no neutral option in NSS 2023, which may have led students to choose a different answer had it been present. There is some evidence of this in question 26,⁵ which saw the highest use of the neutral option in NSS 2022 (32 per cent).
20. As part of the NSS results, we produce theme measures. These summarise the data by combining responses to similar questions. We examined whether the proposed themes were supported by the data – essentially, did respondents tend to answer questions within a theme in similar ways?⁶ As there was only a short period in which to complete this analysis ahead of the initial publication, we were only able to undertake limited analysis. We concluded that the theme measure can be published alongside the 2023 question data, as an experimental statistic. These results should be treated with caution. Detailed analysis will be undertaken ahead of a decision to publish the themes in 2024, and the theme measures could change following this analysis. In particular, we could not investigate any variations in themes for different groups of students.
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 2023, we have not found it necessary to suppress any results due to inappropriate influence.

⁵ In NSS 2023 this question was 'How well does the students' union (association or guild) represent students' academic interests?' In NSS 2022 it was 'The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.'

⁶ Our analysis and findings are described in 'Publication of theme measures for the 2023 National Student Survey', available at [Consultation on the general approach to publication of the National Student Survey: Analysis of responses and decisions - Office for Students](#).

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

Relevance

22. 'Relevance' refers to the degree to which the NSS results we produce meet users' needs. It is well documented that users value the results.⁸
23. Many use the results to help them make decisions. For example, prospective students use them when deciding where to study, and higher education providers use them to decide which aspects of their provision need attention. With the development of the new questionnaire, we recognised a risk that the results could become less relevant. This would happen, for instance, if almost all students gave positive answers to the questions, making it harder to distinguish the strengths and weaknesses of particular providers and courses.
24. To assess this, we looked at two factors:
- a. We considered the spread of different response options over the survey as a whole and for specific questions. In NSS 2023 overall questions, 20 per cent of responses were negative and 79 per cent were positive choices. This compares with 12 per cent negative and 73 per cent positive in NSS 2023 – 15 per cent were neutral. The proportion of students using the most positive and most negative responses was the same for both surveys. This shows that students continued to engaged with the full range of response options with no sign that different types of response options affected this engagement to a large extent.
 - b. We also looked at the positivity measure for each question over all providers, which showed a good spread of positivity measures across the sector.⁹
25. Data users have told us through consultation and informal feedback that they need to see the NSS results split by additional characteristics.
- a. We have expanded the splits published at provider level to include apprenticeships as a separate mode, which also aligns more closely with other sources of higher education statistic.
 - b. In the autumn we will publish data at sector level with added personal characteristics. These have been informed by a consideration of those characteristics that would add most value for a range of users, including students, providers, and the organisations responsible for the funding and regulation of providers. Results for each personal characteristics will be available both UK-wide and country-specific, to meet the needs of data users across the UK.
 - c. Providers are also able to access an expanded range of personal characteristic splits through the Texuna dissemination portal. This data is for internal use by providers only and will not be published.

⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/nss-review-phase-one-report/.

⁹ See dashboard of all results here: [National Student Survey data: provider-level dashboard - Office for Students](#).

26. We have published a full list of the new splits in our response to the consultation on the approach to publication of results for the NSS.¹⁰
27. While generating the NSS statistics, we assessed the completeness of the underlying student data that is used to report by student characteristic and inform benchmark calculation. Table 4 in Annex A reports the proportion of data which is missing, unknown, or not collected for each of the student characteristic splits. Points of note are:
- a. 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. We also suppress cases where more than 50 per cent of a benchmarking factor are unknown. This led to the suppression of benchmarks for 150 groups (out of a total of 121,000).¹¹
 - b. Discussions are still underway with the Department for Economy, Northern Ireland regarding the provision of a number of the new data splits for Northern Ireland colleges that were not able to be provided in full this year. It is hoped that the number of populated student characteristic splits for these colleges can be increased for NSS 2024.
 - c. For the first time, students 'not domiciled in the UK' has been introduced as a category within the ethnicity split. This aligns with the approach used in the OfS student outcomes and teaching excellence. This is preferable to including them with UK students who refused to give their ethnicity or reported it as unknown.
 - d. A number of fields have a proportion of students categorised 'This data is not collected'. This reflects the fact that for a number of splits the data is not collected in the Individualised Learner Record (ILR)¹² for further education colleges or for colleges in Northern Ireland.
 - e. The amount of data that is unknown, missing or not collected is higher in the new fields introduced into the provider portal in 2023. This is used to give users additional information about the relationships between their student population and NSS results but are not benchmarking factors. Hence, although not ideal, the benefit of supplying these splits where possible outweighs the impact of the increased number of missing values.
 - f. For NSS 2022 we incorporated, for the first time, students on reduced records as part of the NSS additions and removals process. This led to a small increase in missing or unknown values. For NSS 2023 we only accepted additional students onto the target list if they had a full and present record in the previous year. This has meant that no missing values were introduced through this route for the current survey.

¹⁰ See 'Analysis of responses and decisions', available at [Consultation on the general approach to publication of the National Student Survey: Analysis of responses and decisions - Office for Students](#).

¹¹ For more information on benchmarking see 'Benchmarking in the NSS publication', available at [NSS documentation and definitions - Office for Students](#).

¹² See www.gov.uk/government/collections/individualised-learner-record-ilr.

Coherence and comparability

28. 'Coherence' is the degree to which data that are derived from different surveys or methods, but also refer to the 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.
29. 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 Survey¹³ 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 affect them. Though this a valuable UK-wide survey and there is some overlap in focus, its scope is different from the NSS. It is not a census survey and it has a significantly smaller number of respondents, so direct comparisons cannot be made.
30. This is the first year of the revised survey. Hence as the questionnaire has changed, it is no longer statistically robust to create time series data at question level that includes 2023 data alongside data from previous years. This is the case even where the questions remained unchanged. Students may answer the same question differently where different questions are asked earlier in a survey. So any time series may be misleading.
31. For some previous NSS surveys, when a provider did not have enough responses in a single year to meet publication thresholds (at least 10 respondents and 50 per cent of potential respondents), we drew on responses from the previous year to allow it to reach this target. For the reasons outlined above we are not aggregating the results from NSS 2023 with those from NSS 2022. However this is an approach we may return to in future years in order to support the provision of data for providers with lower response rates.¹⁴
32. 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 as the constituency and student characteristics of their students will vary. To account for some of the factors that contribute to different NSS results, we construct benchmarks (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. For the NSS 2023 survey, we have increased the splits at which results are benchmarked to include subject, level and mode (along with the existing provider-level benchmarks). 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.
33. Benchmarks are created for each question and theme measure using all the students who answered. This means that questions that are not asked to students across the whole UK will have benchmarks based on a smaller number students. The question that relates to overall satisfaction will therefore have benchmarks created based on students at providers in

¹³ See: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/reports-publications-and-resources/student-academic-experience-survey-saes#saes2022>.

¹⁴ For more information on our approach to aggregation, see our consultation response, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-approach-to-publication-of-the-nss-analysis-of-responses-and-decisions/.

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.

34. As outlined in our consultation response, we have also taken steps to align our definitions with other OfS and Jisc publications. This will make 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

35. 'Accessibility' is the ease with which users can 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.
36. The NSS statistics are available at sector and provider level, for each UK nation, and at the more detailed level of subjects, mode and level within providers. The statistics are available as:
- a. A viewed interactive tool, which can be easily used to interrogate and understand the data visually. For the NSS 2023 release, we introduced a new interactive dashboard tool that allows users to see results for providers, as well as the results for the whole sector and the UK 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.
37. The NSS statistics are accompanied by a brief and neutral summary of key points and an 'About the data' section that provides additional information on the data methodology and how it can be interpreted. As there have been a number of changes to the survey this year, we have reviewed and updated all our supporting documentation. There is a broad range of audiences for the NSS results, which includes students, prospective students (and their advisers), providers, the press and wider interested parties. Hence we seek to ensure that accessible and understandable documentation is available for all types of users.
38. In autumn 2023, 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. Discover Uni provides guidance¹⁵ about the source of the data, how it can be interpreted and also how (and if) comparisons should be made. This guidance will be updated to reflect the changes to the 2023 NSS survey and their implications. This will happen when the new NSS data is added to the Discover Uni website in the autumn.

¹⁵ See https://www.discoveruni.gov.uk/about-our-data/#the_national_student_survey.

39. The NSS 2023 data is available to providers via the Texuna portal in a number of 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 Texuna portal users also must accept the guidelines of access and use of NSS data.¹⁶ This sets out principles providers should follow when using any additional (unpublished) data submitted by their own students in the 2005 to 2023 NSS and how it can be used in public marketing materials. All the guidance and supporting documentation on the Texuna dissemination portal have been updated following the changes to the 2023 survey.
40. 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 5 May 2023. In line with the OfS policy on revisions,¹⁷ we would not expect to routinely change the published data to account for provider amendments or structural changes until the 2024 data is available.
41. The population who are surveyed 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 other 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 of students from the target list based on these changes. As part of this process for the NSS 2023, the OfS approved changes for 241 providers, which led to the addition of 14,765 students and the removal of 28,699 (the total number of students on the target list is 474,972). However, students in the final NSS population may not line up perfectly with the intended survey population due to providers not engaging with this process or unidentified data errors.

Timeliness and punctuality

42. The NSS 2023 is an official statistic and was published to schedule at 0930 on 10 August 2023. As part of this process, publicly accessible data is released on the OfS website and there was a simultaneous release of more detailed datasets, for providers only, via the NSS dissemination portal.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹
43. In previous years the survey has been published at the beginning of July. The NSS 2023 is a new survey with new direct core questions and new item-specific response scales. The OfS and UK funding and regulatory bodies had to consult with the higher education sector on the proposals for its approach to publication of the NSS from 2023 onwards. This consultation was held from 29 March 2023 and closed on 26 May 2023. The schedule for the analysis of the consultation responses and decisions on consultation outcomes were not taken until late July. Hence the publication of NSS 2023 results had to be delayed. If we were to have published the

¹⁶ See: <https://nss.texunatech.com/ui/guidance?1>.

¹⁷ See the OfS's statistical policy on revisions, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/official-statistics/compliance-statement/.

¹⁸ See <https://nss.texunatech.com/ui/login?0>.

¹⁹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/official-statistics/release-schedules/.

NSS results in early July as normal, this would have prejudged the consultation outcomes. In future years, we do not anticipate the same delays to the NSS results publication.

Exceptional issues

44. As part of the NSS 2023 survey, students on courses that include healthcare, allied health and clinical practice placements were asked an additional bank of questions relating to their practice experience.²⁰ Due to an error in the routing discovered at the end of January 2023, no students in this category were being asked these questions. This was the case from the survey opening on 11 January 2023 until the 26 January, at which point it was corrected. Students who were not asked the healthcare questions as anticipated were re-contacted and given a chance to complete these additional questions. For these questions, the response rate for the recontacted students is 67 per cent (compared with 75 per cent for those students who were correctly routed). It appears that recontacted students responded more positively to the first two questions and more negatively to the remaining questions, with the maximum difference being in the region of 2 percentage points. Although this effect looks slightly too large to be attributed to chance, neither is it clear how it would have been caused by the survey mechanism. We have therefore decided to release the healthcare results to providers, drawing their attention to this potential quality issue. In response to this error, the process and oversight of routing has been strengthened.
45. Due to a survey administration error in NSS 2023, question 28 was not asked of the majority of survey respondents from Glasgow Caledonian University. We have therefore replaced the overall Glasgow Caledonian results for question 28 with the Scottish sector average, with an associated note explaining to users what is shown. The error was not the fault of the provider and does not reflect on its quality. No other providers or questions were affected. Measures have been put in place to ensure that this error does not reoccur.

²⁰ See questions numbered 26 to 31 at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/c2ddb4c1-34cf-4df4-8c26-b6469412768f/nss-2023-questionnaire.pdf.