

Annex D: Guidance on the NSS 2026 – for further education colleges in Northern Ireland

1. The National Student Survey (NSS) will be carried out in 2026 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 2026 will run as follows:
 - a. The NSS will launch on **7 January 2026**.
 - b. The survey fieldwork will take place between **8 January and 30 April 2026** and will be run by Ipsos.
 - c. The provisional date for publication of the NSS results on the OfS website is **8 July 2026 at 0930**. Detailed results will be disseminated to individual providers through the NSS data dissemination portal provided by CACI Limited on the same date and time. The NSS 2026 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](#).¹
3. This annex provides guidance specifically for further education colleges as providers of higher education in Northern Ireland.
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 2026 set-up guidance, sent to provider contacts by Ipsos. The guidance document is also available on the Ipsos NSS extranet.²
 - b. Timely submission of student contact details (email addresses and telephone numbers) when requested by Ipsos (by **28 November 2025**).
 - c. Ensuring good data quality by checking the NSS target list generated by the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfENI). Requests for any necessary additions or removals may be directed to Ipsos for DfENI approval.
 - 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.

¹ See [Discover Uni Home](#) | [Discover Uni](#).

² See [NSS extranet](#). Please note: the NSS extranet is accessible to those in the ipsosgroup.sharepoint.com directory.

- e. Submitting survey preferences to Ipsos by **28 November 2025**. This includes 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 Northern Ireland are required to promote the survey and 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.³.
5. The target lists will be derived from the Consolidated Data Return (CDR) and will be accessible to further education colleges via the Ipsos NSS extranet.⁴ Further education colleges should provide the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos by **28 November 2025**. Further details can be found in the NSS 2026 set-up guidance, which is sent to provider contacts by Ipsos. The guidance document is also available on the NSS extranet.
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 14-18. Any such requests for additions or removals must be submitted to Ipsos through identification in the sample template. The requested changes will be reviewed by Ipsos or the DfENI prior to their inclusion in, or removal from, the final target list. Providers should assume that all requested changes have been approved within eight working days of being submitted, unless they hear from the DfENI.
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 2026, 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.
10. Providers may access their detailed responses and results of the survey via the NSS data dissemination portal provided by CACI Limited. Public data can be accessed from the OfS website and from the Discover Uni website (for students).

³ See NSS extranet. Please note: the NSS extranet is accessible to those in the ipsosgroup.sharepoint.com directory.

⁴ See NSS extranet. Please note: the NSS extranet is accessible to those in the ipsosgroup.sharepoint.com directory.

Scope and coverage of the survey

11. The following providers are covered by NSS 2026:

- 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 DfENI. Further education colleges in Northern Ireland take part in the NSS to meet 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, 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 for NSS 2025 (whether or not they responded) and who remain at the same provider
- d. any students who we expect, by the end of academic year 2025-26, to have completed one full-time equivalent year or less since they were last surveyed.

13. Students are included in the 2026 survey population if they are expected to complete their course between 1 February 2026 and 31 January 2027 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 CDR). The full criteria are in the NSS 2026 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 and DfENI. The additions

and removals process will start approximately one week after the OfS receives final student data from DfENI. Providers will be notified ahead of the process opening. Requests will not be accepted after 27 February 2026.

16. From NSS 2026, providers only need to complete the sample template with a 'D' to request removals. **There will be no requirement to complete a separate removals template.** DfENI will review requests against future student data, once available, to verify accuracy.
17. Addition 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.⁵ Ipsos or DfENI will review all requests for additions and removals and may request further details from colleges 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 DfENI to prioritise approvals by survey start week, but it will endeavour to action all requests prior to the chosen survey start date.
18. Providers should assume that all requests have been approved within eight working days of being submitted, unless they hear from DfENI. It should not be expected that each request will be confirmed as previously.
19. Except for students on enhanced first degrees, postgraduate students are not included in the NSS.

Reasons for excluding individuals from the survey

20. We enable providers to exclude specific groups of students from the target population and 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).
21. Students in groups b and c will still be able to complete the survey if they wish, through the survey website.⁶
22. 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

⁵ See [NSS extranet](#). Please note: the NSS extranet is accessible to those in the [ipsosgroup.sharepoint.com](#) directory.

⁶ See www.thestudentsurvey.com/.

category 'C' and providers should not provide contact details for these students. More information on the process is in the NSS 2026 set-up guidance provided by Ipsos.

23. To enable the DfENI to monitor exclusions and verify their consistent application, colleges 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 college is so high as to affect our ability to conduct the survey successfully, we will discuss this with the provider.
24. 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.
25. 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.
26. If a college identifies an error in the target list and wishes to remove students, the college will need to explain to the DfENI the nature of the error, identify the students affected, and explain how it will ensure the error does not occur again. The DfENI will then decide whether these students should be removed from the target list. This may result in a requirement to amend the underlying student data.
27. 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

28. The first CDR extract will be run on 3 November 2025. This file will be used to generate the cohort for the NSS target list. Following this, the provider should supply contact details, according to the standard template that will be supplied by Ipsos, for all students on the list.
29. 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 also send all students eligible to take part a NSS pre-notification email informing them that they will be contacted by Ipsos. Guidance and an email template are provided in the NSS 2026 set-up guidance issued to providers by Ipsos.
30. 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.

31. For colleges, the DfENI will map between Register of Regulated Qualification codes on the CDR and the agreed publication subject hierarchy for publication purposes.
32. Providers should submit the requested contact details for students on these lists to Ipsos by **28 November 2025**. 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

33. The NSS 2026 survey fieldwork will be conducted from 8 January until 30 April 2026 and the provisional date for the publication of the NSS 2026 results on the OfS website is 8 July 2026. 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.
34. 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 5 January and 2 February 2026 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 outside the times agreed with each provider; however, students will be able to access the survey through the survey website⁷ from 7 January 2026 onwards.
35. 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 **28 November 2025**.
36. 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 help increase online responses and reduce survey costs.

⁷ See www.thestudentsurvey.com/.

Promoting the NSS

37. Providers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are required to promote the survey, as agreed by the funding bodies in these nations.
38. Providers that promote the survey are expected to review their internal campaigns to ensure that they meet with the guidance on marketing and promoting of the NSS and avoiding inappropriate influence (please see the NSS 2026 good practice guide).⁸
39. The good practice guidance for NSS 2026 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 funding bodies 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 guidance⁹ 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.
40. A student guide on inappropriate influence is available¹⁰ to help to 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 2026 set-up guide issued by Ipsos.
41. Ipsos will produce NSS 2026 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 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 2026 good practice guide from Ipsos on 22 October 2025.¹¹

⁸ Available at [NSS extranet](#). Please note: the NSS extranet is accessible to those in the [ipsosgroup.sharepoint.com](#) directory.

⁹ Available at [Promotion of the NSS - Office for Students](#).

¹⁰ Available at [Inappropriate influence - Office for Students](#).

¹¹ Available at [NSS extranet](#). Please note: the NSS extranet is accessible to those in the [ipsosgroup.sharepoint.com](#) directory.

42. Ipsos will manage incentive schemes on behalf of those providers who have selected the option to offer a prize draw to their students. These enable providers to offer incentives to students to complete the NSS. More details about this are provided in the NSS 2026 set-up guide issued by Ipsos.

Questionnaire distribution

43. 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.
44. 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 supply each student's mobile number and any other alternative contact number that is held.
45. To monitor responses and to process data for analysis and reporting, we link all responses to STUDENT_ID within a college. 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.
46. Throughout the process, Ipsos will send reminders to students who have not responded.
47. 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.
48. For NSS 2026, 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.
49. 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.
50. 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 2026 good practice guide sent to provider contacts by Ipsos. National response rates data will not be made available to providers.

51. 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 2026 NSS results

52. 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.
53. 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.¹² Data will also be published on the OfS website.
54. Detailed NSS data will also be available to providers on the NSS data portal delivered by CACI Limited. The NSS data portal will allow providers to access unpublished elements of their data, including optional bank questions, students' open text comments and data below the publication thresholds.
55. 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 analysis will be at aggregate level and will not allow providers, courses, or individuals to be identified.

¹² See [Discover Uni Home](#) | [Discover Uni](#).