

Office for
Students



Evaluation of the sexual misconduct survey 2025

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Executive summary

1. The sexual misconduct survey 2025 tested the feasibility of a new national approach to measuring the prevalence of sexual misconduct experienced by final-year undergraduate students at higher education providers across England.
2. The sexual misconduct survey was added as an optional survey at the end of the National Student Survey (NSS). Using the NSS as a platform meant the survey could potentially reach all eligible students, reduce set-up administration for universities and link responses to existing OfS administrative student data.
3. Eligible students (in England) who completed the NSS online to the last page were then invited to take part in the sexual misconduct survey. Of this group, 29.3 per cent of students went on to complete the sexual misconduct survey which shows good engagement for a survey of this nature. Across the total population of eligible students (including those that chose not to take part in the NSS, completed the NSS by telephone or exited the online survey before the last page), the overall response rate was 12.1 per cent.
4. Given that the sexual misconduct survey is an optional and sensitive survey delivered after the NSS questionnaire, it achieved strong completion rates among eligible students. This indicates that this is a viable and effective approach for collecting prevalence data about sexual misconduct in English higher education.

Safeguarding

5. The questionnaire focused on students' experiences of sexual harassment, sexual assault or violence, and on institutions' reporting mechanisms. The survey included clear content warnings, the option to skip any question and links to national and university support services, and was tested with students to ensure clarity and sensitivity. Very few students dropped out after opting in (around 1.6 per cent), suggesting that the design was effective.

Limitations to the survey

6. The delivery method has some limitations. Using the NSS platform narrowed the scope of the target population for the survey. Students who did not progress to their final year of study, postgraduates and those on courses shorter than a year were not included. The design also meant that only students completing the NSS online, and to the very last screen, received the invitation to take part in the sexual misconduct survey. Alternative approaches to include these groups may need to be considered.
7. As with any survey, people from different demographic groups may be more or less likely to take part. To help account for this, weighting was applied to the results using information from linked student records. This helped to correct for known differences in who did and didn't respond across the whole target population. However, weighting cannot adjust for unknown factors which may have influenced whether students chose to take part.

Conclusion

8. Overall, the sexual misconduct survey 2025 demonstrates a practical and scalable approach that offers strong analytical benefits compared with other options. Future improvements could focus on making it easier for respondents to access the survey, refining communications and boosting awareness and participation. Additional methods may also be needed to capture insights from excluded student groups.

Introduction

9. The sexual misconduct survey 2025 was designed to test a method of collecting national-level data from final-year undergraduate students. The questionnaire focused on students' experiences of sexual harassment, sexual assault or violence, and on institutions' reporting mechanisms.
10. This document evaluates the survey's design and implementation following the pilot in 2023. In doing so, it offers reflections on its strengths and limitations, and highlights areas where future surveys might be further developed.

Background

11. Addressing sexual misconduct in higher education is an important concern for the OfS. Historically, data on the prevalence of sexual misconduct affecting students in England has been limited, and its impact on students poorly understood at a sector level.
12. In 2023, the OfS ran a small-scale pilot survey to test an approach to measuring the prevalence of sexual misconduct in higher education in England, and to assess the feasibility of running a future large-scale prevalence survey.
13. This pilot tested a new questionnaire with students on undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses to gain an insight into the prevalence of sexual misconduct they had experienced since being a student. While this exercise was extremely useful in helping to calibrate our approach, only 12 providers participated and the survey achieved a relatively modest response rate (4 per cent). The approach to surveying also required significant set-up resources from the providers that volunteered to take part.
14. To address these issues, a revised research design was tested in 2025 which trialled an approach to collecting prevalence data across final-year undergraduate students in the English higher education sector using the National Student Survey (NSS) delivery platform.
15. The sexual misconduct survey supports the OfS's regulatory condition (condition E6) on harassment and sexual misconduct, which came fully into effect on 1 August 2025. This states that higher education providers must set out, in a single comprehensive source of information, the action they will take to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct, and to respond effectively to incidents where they occur. Requirements include training for staff and students, reporting and support systems, processes for investigating incidents and communicating their outcomes, a restriction on non-disclosure agreements, and policies to address abuses of power and conflicts of interest in intimate personal relationships between students and staff members.
16. The survey does not in itself determine compliance with condition E6. Rather, it provides contextual insight to inform understanding of patterns of reported experience across the sector and associated areas of risk, and can be regarded as a form of high-level regulatory intelligence. Where response thresholds are met, the survey may also generate contextual signals at provider level; however, it is not used to assess individual providers' compliance with condition E6.

The 2025 sexual misconduct prevalence survey

17. The 2025 survey aimed to:

- test an approach to capturing prevalence data at a national level
- understand the prevalence of sexual misconduct experienced by students
- gain insight on how and where interventions might be targeted to tackle sexual misconduct.

18. Ipsos was commissioned to administer the 2025 sexual misconduct prevalence survey to final-year undergraduate students in England. The sexual misconduct survey was appended to the end of the NSS, meaning that once a student had completed the NSS, they were invited to take part in the sexual misconduct survey. Although the two surveys used separate questionnaires, and their data were collected and stored separately, they shared the same infrastructure and delivery platform. This approach aimed to improve response rates and reduce the administrative burden on providers associated with setting up the 2023 pilot. The two surveys (the sexual misconduct survey and the NSS) had distinct branding and communications, making it clear that they were separate exercises.

Basis for the questionnaire

19. The 2025 sexual misconduct survey questionnaire was based on the OfS 2023 pilot. It used a design approach that focused on specific behaviours associated with sexual harassment and sexual violence, rather than simply asking respondents whether they had experienced, for example, 'sexual assault'. This behavioural approach to questionnaire design is widely used in prevalence research because it reduces ambiguity in question wording, improves consistency in how respondents interpret questions and provides more reliable data. Because it does not require respondents to label their experiences, it also helps to identify and capture experiences that respondents may not have previously thought of as sexual harassment or sexual violence, uncovering incidents that might otherwise go unreported or unrecognised.

20. The sexual misconduct survey questionnaire design draws on established survey instruments, most notably the victimisation module of the ARC,¹ which is itself based on the Sexual Experiences Survey – Short Form Victimization.² These two instruments have been extensively tested for internal validity and reliability, meaning they are designed to measure behaviours consistently and accurately, and therefore provide a strong evidence base for underpinning the sexual misconduct survey.

¹ Kevin M. Swartout, William F. Flack Jr., Sarah L. Cook, Loreen N. Olson, Paige Hall Smith and Jacquelyn W. White. 'Measuring campus sexual misconduct and its context: The Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Consortium (ARC3) survey' (*Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 2019[Jul], Vol 11[5], 495-504). The ARC3 survey is available at <https://www.arc3survey.org/>.

² Koss, M.P., Abbey, A., Campbell, R., Cook, S., Norris, J. and Testa, M., 2006. 'The Sexual Experiences Survey - Short Form Victimization'. Tucson, AZ, USA: University of Arizona.

21. An evaluation of the 2023 pilot, including a report on the cognitive testing of the questionnaire, was published on the OfS website in 2024. This evaluation recommended the use of a shortened version of this questionnaire in the 2025 sexual misconduct survey.³

Methodology

22. To improve the reach and response rate of the survey compared with the 2023 pilot, the 2025 sexual misconduct survey utilised the existing NSS mechanism for managing the survey process. Each year, administrative student record data held by the OfS is used to identify those students who are in scope for that year's NSS. For the 2025 sexual misconduct survey, this same 'target list' was used as the basis for identifying the eligible student population for the survey. sexual misconduct survey eligibility was defined as undergraduate students who were over 18 years old, in their final year of study and studying at a provider based in England. This gave a total population of 427,649 students.
23. This approach also allowed data from the sexual misconduct survey to be linked back to the underlying administrative student record data, which included student individual characteristics. Importantly, this linkage provided a clearer picture of the characteristics of the whole student population, making it possible to understand which students had not participated in the survey. This linkage offered further analytical opportunities (see discussion of weighting in the methodology paper).⁴

Guidance and communications about the sexual misconduct survey 2025

24. Ipsos issued separate guidance documents for the NSS and sexual misconduct survey to the designated NSS contact at each participating provider. These contacts also carried the responsibility for sharing sexual misconduct survey information with relevant staff, such as Student Support Officers and Welfare teams. Guidance documents were updated during the fieldwork period to address stakeholder concerns.

Addressing sector concerns – The questionnaire

25. Before launching the 2025 sexual misconduct survey, some providers and sector groups raised concerns about the wording of certain questions and whether they might upset or distress students. In response, we explained that students had been involved in designing the questionnaire from the start, and that sensitive sections were clearly highlighted with content warnings. Students were also able to skip any questions they did not want to answer.
26. Providers were also asked to give Ipsos a link to their student wellbeing and support services. These support links were incorporated into the survey alongside links to national support resources. They were included on the survey's landing page and again immediately before the section that introduced questions about sexual assault or violence.

³ See [Sexual misconduct prevalence survey pilot 2023 - Evaluation - Office for Students](#).

⁴ See [Sexual misconduct survey 2025 - analysis of results - Office for Students](#).

27. All communications emphasised that the survey was strictly opt-in. Information was provided to both providers and students' unions to explain the context and purpose of the survey.
28. Given the sensitivity of the topic, direct correspondence with students was intentionally kept to a minimum. However, providers were required to send a GDPR compliance email about the sexual misconduct survey in December, separate from but analogous to the NSS process. This email explained the optional nature of the survey and when and how it would be available, and included details on how data would be collected, stored and used.
29. The GDPR email also informed students that they could opt out of receiving the sexual misconduct survey altogether by contacting Ipsos directly, while still taking part in the NSS, if they wished.
30. Providers were not required actively to promote the survey. However, students' unions and guilds were asked to raise awareness of the survey's purpose and importance among their student communities (for example, via social media and webpages) and to encourage participation from all students, regardless of their experiences.
31. Providers and Ipsos were also not given response rate targets for the sexual misconduct survey and no separate reminders about the survey were sent to students by email or text.
32. In one case, the OfS proactively arranged for a small number of students identified by a provider as being at particular risk of distress (less than 20) to be removed from the sexual misconduct survey distribution list to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation.

Addressing sector concerns about the delivery method – Impact of the sexual misconduct survey on the NSS

33. Care was taken to ensure that hosting the sexual misconduct survey on the same platform as the NSS did not negatively affect NSS uptake. Students were only offered the sexual misconduct survey if they had fully completed the NSS. At this point they could choose to take the sexual misconduct survey straight away, decline the survey or return to the sexual misconduct survey later. This approach aimed to minimise burden on students and acknowledged that providers might allocate 'NSS-time' at the end of teaching sessions, where students could complete the NSS but might not feel comfortable answering sexual misconduct survey questions in a public setting.
34. To return to the sexual misconduct survey, students had to revisit the NSS platform and click through the NSS again to reach the sexual misconduct survey. A technical safeguard was put in place to ensure that NSS responses would not be overwritten.
35. This approach helped prioritise NSS completion and reduced perceived survey burden. It also offered students control over when and where they completed the survey.

The 2025 survey questionnaire

36. Following the recommendations from the 2023 pilot evaluation, the overall length of the survey was reduced to minimise the risk of survey fatigue.
37. The questions focusing on the core prevalence items were retained but some that related to gathering additional information about the reported sexual misconduct experience were

removed. These included: details of the alleged perpetrator; the impact of the reported sexual misconduct on the student; and support-seeking behaviour. Other sections were simplified. This included reducing the number of categories for locations of the reported misconduct and shortening the section on staff-student relationships. A table summarising these changes can be found in Annex A.

38. To ensure these changes did not compromise the effectiveness of the questionnaire, Ipsos conducted pre-fieldwork questionnaire testing interviews. These assessed comprehension of question wording, the suitability of content warnings, clarity of information provided and participants' overall views on the questionnaire.
39. Feedback from these interviews informed improvements to the clarity of certain questions, revisions to introductory text and enhancements to content warnings to ensure that they were clear and appropriately placed.

Discussion

The following discussion evaluates the success of the 2025 sexual misconduct survey against its three main aims.

Terms used

'Linking to the student record' means that responses to the sexual misconduct survey can be combined with existing administrative data already held by the OfS about the student population. This means that the survey does not need to collect lots of additional demographic information. It also means that when undertaking the analysis, we already know about the characteristics of **both** those who responded to the survey, and those who did not (e.g., age at entry, disability, IMD quintile, provider typology). This enables construction of survey weights that up-weight underrepresented groups or down-weight overrepresented groups so that estimates reflect the full eligible population.

Weighting is a powerful tool in survey analysis because it can help to address differences in response propensity (how likely it is that a person with a particular set of characteristics will respond to the survey) across certain characteristics. However, weighting cannot fully address:

- double opt-in bias (students must complete the NSS **and** choose to take part in the sexual misconduct survey)
- exclusions (students not progressing to their final year; NSS non-completers; postgraduates; students on short courses, etc.)
- unobserved differences (relating to willingness or ability to respond).

Aim 1: Testing a delivery method for a national sexual misconduct survey

40. The 2025 survey tested an approach to collecting sexual misconduct prevalence data on a national level. Using the existing NSS infrastructure for distributing the sexual misconduct survey to students, it improved upon the approach taken in the 2023 pilot by:

- a. Extending the reach of the survey to final-year undergraduate students at all providers participating in the NSS, across England.
 - b. Securing a higher response rate than the 2023 approach (12.1 per cent compared with 4 per cent in 2023).
 - c. Utilising an already established administrative process for managing the survey. This considerably reduced the upfront burden on providers (in comparison, the 2023 pilot required the creation of a separate data return process for the sexual misconduct survey to establish the survey population).
 - d. Linking the survey responses to student record data, which provided reliable information about the overall student population. This allowed the OfS to see which types of students did or did not complete the survey, helping us understand any potential response bias and identify possible patterns in prevalence.
 - e. Using existing record data, so it was not necessary to ask students for demographic information within the survey itself. It also informed the weighting strategy used in the analysis.
 - f. Using a delivery partner (NSS) that students view as a recognisable brand to deliver the survey.
41. The 2025 sexual misconduct survey is the largest survey on the prevalence of sexual misconduct in UK higher education. A total of 349 providers took part, giving a sample of 427,649 students. Of these, 53,920 students responded, representing 12.1 per cent of all eligible final-year undergraduates. The overall response rate is a useful indicator of data quality because it reflects how much information the survey captured and, in turn, how confidently we can estimate national level prevalence.
42. However, students were only invited to take part in the sexual misconduct survey if they completed the NSS to the very last page and did not close down their internet browsers. Of the 279,897 students who completed the NSS online, 182,009 students received the invitation to the sexual misconduct survey and, of these, 53,290 participated. Comparing the invitation and participation data generates a second engagement metric of 29.3 per cent. Given the delivery approach (i.e. an optional survey offered after a lengthy, unrelated questionnaire), this engagement rate is best understood as a measure of students' willingness to participate. Table 1 provides a summary of these figures.

Table 1: Summary of student eligibility and participation in the sexual misconduct survey

Item	Count
Total population of NSS eligible students in England	432,547
Total population of sexual misconduct survey eligible students (within the total NSS population)	427,649
Students completing the NSS survey (both online and by telephone)	308,634
Students completing the NSS survey online	279,897

Item	Count
(potentially able to receive an sexual misconduct survey invitation)	
Students invited to the sexual misconduct survey (those who made it to the very last page of the NSS)	182,009
Students who chose to take part in the sexual misconduct survey	53,290

43. The NSS 2025 (for England) achieved a response rate of 71.4 per cent but lower response rates are common in surveys on sensitive topics, including sexual misconduct. Comparisons with similar surveys help place the sexual misconduct survey results in context. For example, the Irish HEA National Survey of Student Experiences of Sexual Violence and Harassment (2021)⁵ achieved a 3.2 per cent response rate. Likewise, the 2021 Australian National Student Safety Survey recorded a response rate of 11.6 per cent⁶.
44. These comparisons show that the sexual misconduct survey overall response rate of 12.1 per cent fits within the expected range for surveys of this type, while the engagement rate of 29.3 per cent demonstrates strong participation among students who were offered the survey. The 53,290 sexual misconduct survey responses provide a robust dataset for producing reliable sector-level prevalence estimates and supporting meaningful analysis.
45. Only a small number of students (30) requested to opt out of receiving the sexual misconduct survey.
46. Among those who chose to take part, the drop-out rate was very low. Only 1.6 per cent of respondents who answered the first question (question A) exited before completing the survey.⁷ This suggests that students who started the survey were generally willing to complete it.⁸

Disadvantage of using a ‘follow-on’ survey delivery structure

47. A disadvantage of the sexual misconduct survey following on after the NSS was that students had to pursue the NSS to the very last page (beyond completion of the questions) to trigger the invitation to the sexual misconduct survey. Although 279,897 students completed the NSS questions online, only 182,009 made it to the sexual misconduct survey invitation page – leaving a substantial number of uninvited potential participants.
48. We do not know what proportion of these students might have taken part in the sexual misconduct survey had they received the invitation. However, finding ways to address this issue could help to improve the response rate and this should be explored for future surveys.

⁵ [Reports on National Surveys of Student and Staff Experiences of Sexual Violence and Sexual Harassment in Higher Education launched by Minister Harris.](#)

⁶ [2021 National Student Safety Survey – Universities Australia.](#)

⁷ Recorded specifically as students who dropped out before answering section P (questions on student-staff relations).

⁸ See [OfS sexual misconduct survey 2025.](#)

Impact of the sexual misconduct survey on the NSS

49. Care was taken to mitigate any potential negative impact on the uptake of the NSS from hosting the sexual misconduct survey on the same platform. Enabling students to complete the sexual misconduct survey at a time of their choosing helped prioritise NSS completion and reduced perceived survey burden. It also offered students control over when and where they complete the survey.
50. Analysis of NSS response rates shows only a small decrease of 0.8 per cent between 2024 and 2025, consistent with typical year-on-year variation. It does not suggest that the presence of the sexual misconduct survey had a material impact on NSS participation.

Administrative advantages

51. In the evaluation of the 2023 sexual misconduct survey pilot, a recommendation was made to reduce the administrative burden on providers in future surveys (following feedback from the providers that took part). Using the same student target lists and fieldwork window as the NSS helped to address this issue in sexual misconduct survey 2025.
52. From the OfS perspective, using the NSS infrastructure brought several advantages. Students were already aware of the NSS 'brand' and have consistently been informed that it is an independent, official source of information. Also, efficiency savings were gained by using an existing platform and data collection process for the sexual misconduct survey rather than creating a new system.
53. From the student perspective, linking the two surveys was intended to offer flexibility – allowing them either to complete both surveys in one sitting or return to the sexual misconduct survey later. However, due to technical constraints, the system did not work as well as intended. Students who chose to return to the sexual misconduct survey later had to click through the NSS screens again before reaching the sexual misconduct survey launch page, which created an unnecessarily cumbersome user experience. This represents a clear area for improvement in any future version.
54. Students could also choose not to complete the sexual misconduct survey at the end of the NSS or to opt out entirely by asking Ipsos to remove them from the sexual misconduct survey target list.

Guidance and communication with providers about the survey

55. Provider feedback gathered by Ipsos indicated that most providers felt well supported by Ipsos and the sexual misconduct survey guidance. However, some commented that receiving the guidance earlier would have been helpful, noting that while the content was clear and comprehensive, earlier delivery would have allowed more time for internal planning and communication.

Summary

56. For meeting the objectives of the first aim of the survey (testing a delivery method for a national sexual misconduct survey), the approach trialled here for the sexual misconduct survey was a success at reaching high numbers of students across providers in England. It provided clear advantages over that of the sexual misconduct survey 2023 pilot by reducing burden on providers and allowing linkage to the student record for a clearer understanding of

which students did or did not participate. There are however limitations to using the NSS processes which will be discussed in the next sections.

Aim 2: Understanding the prevalence of sexual misconduct experienced by students

57. At sector level, there is good evidence that data from sexual misconduct survey 2025 can provide valuable insight into the prevalence of sexual misconduct among final-year undergraduate students at higher education providers in England. Because the survey was linked to the NSS, students from 349 providers had the opportunity to participate in the sexual misconduct survey. This – combined with relatively high response rates – has ensured that data covering a wide range of courses and provider types is available for OfS analysis, and for dissemination back to providers.
58. Institutional-level data was shared with providers where response numbers reached publication threshold. This was possible for 194 providers. For those that have not previously carried out their own surveys on sexual misconduct, this represents the first opportunity to access provider-specific insights on this important issue, even if at a broad level.
59. Analysis of the sexual misconduct survey data in 2025 found that the following groups of students reported a higher prevalence (compared with the alternative group/groups within the same category) of both sexual harassment and sexual assault/violence within the survey sample:
 - a. Female
 - b. Lesbian, gay, bisexual or identify with another sexual orientation
 - c. Those under 21 at the start of their course
 - d. Disabled
 - e. Jewish, hold no religion or 'any other religion or belief'
 - f. The least deprived Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD quintile 5)
 - g. Not eligible for free school meals.
60. Supplementary analysis, published alongside this evaluation, offers additional detail about students' experiences of sexual misconduct. It shows that students with the following characteristics were more likely to report experiencing at least one instance of sexual harassment than students overall:
 - a. Studying at a higher education institution not local to their home address
 - b. Undergraduate courses with a postgraduate component
 - c. Parental education that includes a higher education qualification
 - d. Studying specific courses – Language and area studies, Medicine and dentistry or Veterinary sciences
 - e. Having a mental health condition, or multiple or other impairments.

61. The analysis shows that experiences of sexual misconduct are complex and associated with a broad range of characteristics, rather than being explained by one or two key factors.⁹
62. A key limitation of the prevalence data is that, although it can show which groups are more likely to experience sexual misconduct, it does not explain why these differences exist. Further research would be needed to understand the underlying causes, including how and why particular incidents occur and what factors contribute to these patterns.
63. When interpreting the data, it should be remembered that surveys can suffer from response bias (or non-response bias). Students may be more or less likely to respond to the survey for a range of factors. Weighting has been applied to the sexual misconduct survey data, where appropriate, to help address this, but we recognise that not all sources of bias can be identified or removed. For example, those who have experienced sexual misconduct may feel the survey is personally relevant and be more inclined to participate. Similarly, students who feel they have nothing to report, or conversely those who wish to avoid revisiting difficult experiences, may be less inclined to take part. As a result, the data provides a broad indication of prevalence but may not fully reflect the experiences of all student groups or all types of misconduct (for example, the most distressing behaviours).

Design limitations – student populations not included in the survey

64. The 2025 sexual misconduct survey was distributed by using the NSS infrastructure. This approach demonstrated clear benefits when compared with the 2023 pilot, including higher response rates, less burden on providers and students, and the credibility of being linked to a well-known survey. However, using the NSS as the delivery method meant that the following groups of students were not included in the sexual misconduct survey population.

Students in early years

65. The survey asked students whether they had experienced sexual misconduct at any point since starting their studies, and whether any incidents had taken place in the past 12 months. The 12-month timeframe was chosen to ensure greater consistency across different courses and to improve recall, as longer periods can reduce accuracy. Detailed follow-up questions, for example whether the incident happened in a university setting, involved someone connected to the institution, or was formally reported, were asked only about incidents that occurred within the last 12 months.
66. As a result, although we know that incidents took place earlier in students' courses, contextual information about those experiences is missing. This is important because wider research suggests that first-year students, particularly those living in halls of residence, may face increased risk. The sexual misconduct survey data also highlights the extent of earlier year exposure: 24.5 per cent of final-year students reported experiencing sexual harassment since starting university, compared with 13.3 per cent in the past 12 months. For sexual assault/violence, 14 per cent reported experiences since starting university and 5.4 per cent reported experiences in the past year.
67. Students living in halls of residence are an important group to capture because there is currently no national data that specifically reflects their experiences. They are not included in

⁹ See [Sexual misconduct survey 2025: Analysis of student groups and study contexts](#).

the Office for National Statistics crime survey for England and Wales,¹⁰ which shows that full-time students are the occupation group most likely to experience sexual assault.

Students who did not take part in the NSS

68. Only students who completed the NSS were invited to take part in the sexual misconduct survey, with 29.3 per cent of those choosing to respond. Students who did not respond to the NSS or did not pursue the NSS to the end page, were not offered the sexual misconduct survey. This introduces a potential source of response bias. Although we have weighted the data to address this, we cannot determine whether alternative routes to participation would have changed response rates or demographic representation.

Students who did not progress into their final year

69. The survey cannot capture the experiences of students who left their course before their final year. We therefore cannot determine if experiences of sexual misconduct contributed to decisions to withdraw from study. Evidence from the United States has shown that experience of sexual misconduct can have a significant impact on students' mental health. This was echoed in the findings from the 2023 sexual misconduct survey which included questions on the 'Impact of sexual misconduct' (omitted in sexual misconduct survey 2025). Among the students who reported experiencing sexual misconduct, 44 per cent indicated poor mental health or emotional difficulties as a result, three per cent reported suspending their studies and 1 per cent reported choosing to change their institution.¹¹

Postgraduate students

70. Postgraduate students, particularly those on research programmes, are often identified in research as a potentially higher risk group because of isolated working patterns and blurred boundaries between academic and social life. Evidence also shows that, compared with undergraduates, a significantly higher proportion of postgraduate students report experiencing sexual harassment from staff members at their institution. However, the sexual misconduct survey 2025 design did not include postgraduate students.¹²
71. Students on taught postgraduate (PGT) courses were also excluded. Many PGT students study high-intensity one-year courses and the OfS currently lacks sufficient administrative data to include them in a survey of this type.

Undergraduate students on short courses

72. Students studying on short higher education courses¹³ are also excluded from the NSS population and so are not represented in sexual misconduct survey 2025. This includes students on foundation diplomas, CertHE and Diploma courses. Analogous to PGT students,

¹⁰ See [Sexual offences victim characteristics, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics \(2025\)](#).

¹¹ Carey KB, Norris AL, Durney SE, Shepardson RL, Carey MP. Mental health consequences of sexual assault among first-year college women. *J Am Coll Health*. 2018 Aug-Sep; 66(6): 480-486.

¹² [The 1752 Group 'Power in the Academy'](#), 2022.

¹³ Any higher education course lasting up to one year, or up to one FTE (full-time equivalent) if taken part-time over a longer period.

their inclusion in a survey of this type would require the availability of additional administrative data that is currently lacking.

73. These exclusions reflect a deliberate methodological trade-off: prioritising feasibility and data quality through the NSS linkage, while limiting the scope of insight into other groups of students. Future research may consider complementary approaches to address these gaps.

Factors affecting response rates

74. The sexual misconduct survey received more than 50,000 responses, providing a substantial dataset for estimating sector-level prevalence of sexual misconduct among final-year undergraduate students. This represents a response rate of 12.1 per cent of the overall eligible student population, which is not unusually low for a survey covering such a sensitive topic. Several factors are likely to have influenced this rate. One key factor is the delivery method: the sexual misconduct survey was only available to students who fully completed the NSS, creating a double opt-in. Within this group, engagement was considerably higher, with 29.3 per cent of NSS completers choosing to take part in the sexual misconduct survey, indicating strong participation among students who reached the point of offer.
75. The students who did not complete the NSS online had no route to participate in the sexual misconduct survey. Offering alternative or parallel access to the sexual misconduct survey that does not depend on NSS completion could allow these students to take part in any future iterations of the survey.
76. Of those students who were offered the sexual misconduct survey, their participation may have been affected by several factors:
 - a. Survey fatigue – completion of the NSS may have had an impact on students' willingness to take part in the sexual misconduct survey. Each survey takes, on average, between 10 and 15 minutes to complete and, for some students, this may require significant emotional effort. This may have discouraged students from completing both in one sitting. The extra step of having to log back into the NSS platform and click through the NSS screens again before reaching the sexual misconduct survey created an additional barrier. Conversely, some students may not have sought out or completed the sexual misconduct survey at all had it not been offered immediately after the NSS.
 - b. Lack of awareness – students might not have opened or paid attention to the GDPR email about the sexual misconduct survey and may have been unaware of their provider or students' union's efforts to raise awareness of the survey.
 - c. Lack of survey reminders – some students may have intended to complete the sexual misconduct survey but forgot or ran out of time. Unlike the NSS, the sexual misconduct survey did not include reminder emails, and the NSS reminders, by design, did not mention the sexual misconduct survey. Introducing sexual misconduct survey-specific reminders could be considered in future rounds, as similar surveys have used reminders effectively to boost response rates.¹⁴

¹⁴ Steele B, Degli Esposti M, Mandeville P, Hamnett G, Nye E, Humphreys DK. Oxford Understanding Relationships, Sex, Power, Abuse and Consent Experiences (OUR SPACE) cross-sectional survey: a study protocol. *BMJ Open*. 2021 Nov 2;11(11).

- d. A perceived lack of relevance – students who felt that they had ‘nothing to report’ may not have felt the incentive to take part.
- e. In contrast, those students wishing to avoid recall of upsetting experiences may have chosen to avoid the survey.
- f. The theme of the survey – some students may have felt uncomfortable taking part in a survey that asked questions of such a highly personal nature or because of the explicit language used. However, the OfS did not receive any direct complaints from students about the questionnaire, and in pre-launch testing, students reported feeling comfortable with the nature of language, recognising the need for it to be explicit, and the importance of the survey. The low drop-out rate (1.6 per cent) would also suggest that the language of the survey was not a major deterrent.

Promotion of the survey

- 77. Due to the sensitive nature of the survey, providers were not required to promote the sexual misconduct survey but were asked to share information about it with staff and students, working where appropriate with their students’ unions or guilds. The extent of this awareness building is likely to have varied significantly across providers. Increasing student awareness of the survey and its context could help improve response rates.
- 78. Sexual misconduct survey communications (via Ipsos) were channelled to NSS contacts with the expectation that they would disseminate the information to relevant colleagues. We do not know how effective this approach was, particularly in larger institutions where NSS contacts are often based in analytical or business support functions rather than student-facing roles.
- 79. Future approaches could test sending communications directly to named, relevant, student-facing officers at providers. This may offer a simpler and more direct route for disseminating information to staff and students, supporting greater engagement with the survey and reducing the burden on NSS contacts.

Summary

- 80. Using the NSS as a vehicle for the sexual misconduct survey enabled responses from a large number of students and provided high quality data with which to estimate the sector-level prevalence of sexual misconduct experienced by final-year undergraduate students in England. It also enabled the sexual misconduct survey data to be linked to the student record, giving an important understanding of the characteristics of the responding student population.
- 81. The design of the survey excludes certain groups of students, including postgraduates and students on short courses, and provides less information about undergraduate experiences of sexual misconduct in the earlier years of study.
- 82. Until additional administrative student record data on students becomes available, it will be difficult to include these groups of students within the model tested here without increasing the burden on providers. However, alternative routes of gathering information about these student groups could be explored to complement the current data and enhance our understanding of wider prevalence patterns.

Aim 3: To gain insight on how and where interventions might be targeted to tackle sexual misconduct

83. The sexual misconduct survey 2025 collected prevalence data to support understanding of the scale and distribution of sexual misconduct experienced by students. Over time, repeated surveys may enable monitoring of broad sector-wide trends. From a policy perspective, this data complements condition E6 by providing contextual insight into patterns of reported experience and potential areas of risk.
84. Where providers have received their own institutional-level sexual misconduct survey data without breaching confidentiality safeguards, they may find these insights useful when reflecting on aspects of their preventative and response arrangements. While the sexual misconduct survey does not determine compliance with condition E6, it offers high-level contextual intelligence that can inform wider sector understanding and support providers' ongoing work to strengthen governance, reporting systems, training and student support mechanisms.
85. The survey generated data providing a broad overview of final-year undergraduate students' reported experiences of sexual misconduct. Further detail and primary analysis are set out in the OfS data analysis report.¹⁵
86. The supplementary analysis published alongside this document builds on the 2025 report by examining additional demographic characteristics and breakdowns by subject, level of study and institutional characteristics.¹⁶ It offers further descriptive insight into how reported experiences of sexual harassment and sexual assault or violence vary across academic pathways, institutional contexts and intersecting student characteristics.
87. The findings reinforce the conclusion that experiences of sexual misconduct are complex and associated with a wide range of characteristics. In doing so, the report highlights how the sexual misconduct survey may help to inform consideration of where targeted prevention, reporting and support activity could be most effective.

Providers with returnable data

88. Where it was possible to protect student anonymity, institutional-level data was returned to individual providers.¹⁷ This enabled them to view their results alongside sector-level findings to support internal reflection.
89. Out of the 349 providers participating in the sexual misconduct survey, 194 had returnable data. However, the students at these providers who were eligible to take part in the sexual misconduct survey represent 99.4 per cent of the survey's whole target student population. The 194 providers with returnable data include all providers categorised by the OfS student typology system as high and medium tariff, and over two-thirds of providers in the 'low or unknown tariff' and 'Specialist: creative' categories.¹⁸

¹⁵ See [Sexual misconduct survey 2025 - analysis of results - Office for Students](#).

¹⁶ Available at [Sexual misconduct survey 2025: Analysis of student groups and study contexts](#).

¹⁷ Where providers had responses from over 13 students.

¹⁸ See the table in Annex C.

90. In total, 155 providers did not receive any sexual misconduct survey data because, within each, fewer than 13 students responded to the survey. Of these, 99 were providers specialising in Level 4 and 5 qualifications (vocational qualifications including Higher National Diplomas and Certificates, Foundation Degrees and Higher Apprenticeships), representing around three-quarters of this tariff category. A further five providers did not have enough students to meet the threshold of 13 even if they achieved a 100 per cent response rate.
91. A significant proportion of further education colleges did not receive institutional-level sexual misconduct survey results. We know this because 90 out of 122 providers that submit data via the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) process did not have returnable data.
92. Providers without returnable data are limited to accessing sector-level sexual misconduct survey results only. While these may support internal reflection, they may not fully reflect the specific characteristics or experiences of their own student populations.

Summary

93. A total of 194 providers received returnable data. These institutions collectively represent over 99 per cent of the survey's target student population. This high level of coverage of the student population demonstrates the reach, representativeness and potential utility of the sexual misconduct survey.
94. The survey offers providers insights which could translate into stronger prevention and support arrangements, benefitting a large proportion of the undergraduate student body. If the survey were to be regularly repeated it could also allow for understanding how patterns of reported experience change over time and, alongside other information, may help providers to reflect on the effectiveness of their arrangements.
95. Furthermore, given its scale and design, the sexual misconduct survey may contribute to the OfS's broader regulatory intelligence by providing contextual insight into sector-level patterns of reported experience. It does not in itself determine compliance with condition E6 or trigger regulatory action but may be considered alongside other contextual sources of information to inform proportionate engagement when appropriate.

Conclusion

96. The methodology tested in the 2025 sexual misconduct survey showed that the design of the survey allowed it to reach a very large and diverse student audience while placing comparatively low demands on providers, especially when compared with alternative approaches. The expanded reach and improved response rate delivered good quality data that could be validated against the HESA student record, giving the OfS a strong initial insight into the prevalence of sexual misconduct among final-year undergraduate students.
97. The data represents students across a wide range of characteristics and provider types. Further analysis published alongside this document explores how reported prevalence of sexual misconduct varies between students with different characteristics. Where providers have received their own data, these insights could support local reflection on how best to target support for students.

98. Although the data provides insights, it is not a complete picture of the student experience. It lacks representation from important groups such as postgraduates, early-year undergraduates and students on short courses. Interventions that support final-year students may be less effective for those starting their undergraduate course or undertaking postgraduate study.
99. As noted earlier, it is important to recognise that surveys can be affected by response bias, where some groups are more or less likely to take part. Weighting has been applied where appropriate to help reduce these effects, though not all sources of bias can be eliminated.
100. Despite these limitations, the NSS infrastructure remains an effective way to reach students and generate sector-level estimates of the prevalence of sexual misconduct. Greater student awareness in future survey rounds may help to increase response rates and enable more providers to receive returnable data to inform their interventions.

Recommendations for future surveys

101. The following recommendations could support the effective implementation of future surveys.
 - a. Retain the current link with the NSS while seeking to improve the user experience for students, for example by redesigning access so students can return to the sexual misconduct survey without navigating through the NSS again.
 - b. Develop in parallel an alternative route for accessing the sexual misconduct survey that does not require students to take part in the NSS.
 - c. Enhance the promotion of the survey using OfS-provided materials and campaigns.
 - d. Consider the use of reminders to raise student awareness of the survey during the fieldwork period.
 - e. Consider alternative approaches for making students aware of the survey.
 - f. Ensure information about the survey is sent directly to student-facing staff in providers, reducing the burden on NSS contacts to disseminate messages internally.

For more information on our work in this area, see our [guide to the sexual misconduct survey](#).

For queries, please contact smsurvey@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Annex A: Comparison of the 2023 pilot and 2025 survey question areas

SMS pilot 2023 question areas	SMS 2025 question areas
Sexual harassment section	Sexual harassment section
Experiences of sexual harassment since being a student (list of unwanted behaviours)	Experiences of sexual harassment since being a student (list of unwanted behaviours)
Experiences of sexual harassment in the last 12 months	Experiences of sexual harassment in the last 12 months
Number of incidents	
University/non-university setting - Location within the university setting	University/non-university setting
Alleged perpetrator information: - Connection to university - Number/ sex of alleged perpetrators	Alleged perpetrator information: - Connection to university
Seeking support	
Reporting	Reporting
Sexual assault/violence section	Sexual assault/violence section
Unwanted sexual contact since being a student (list of unwanted acts).	Unwanted sexual contact since being a student (list of unwanted acts).
Experiences of unwanted sexual contact in the last 12 months	Experiences of unwanted sexual contact in the last 12 months
Number of incidents	
University / non-university setting - Location within the university setting	University / non-university setting
Alleged perpetrator information: - Connection to university - Number/ sex of alleged perpetrators	Alleged perpetrator information: - Connection to university
Seeking support	
Reporting	Reporting
General	General
Impact of experiencing sexual misconduct	
Understanding of process	Understanding of process
Student-staff relations (8 questions)	Student-staff relations (3 questions)

Annex B: Comparison of the 2023 pilot survey and the 2025 sexual misconduct survey

This table provides a side-by-side comparison of the 2023 sexual misconduct survey pilot and the 2025 sexual misconduct survey conducted by the Office for Students (OfS). It highlights key similarities and differences in purpose, methodology and outcomes.

Category	2023 sexual misconduct pilot survey	2025 sexual misconduct survey
Purpose	Test feasibility of a national survey on sexual misconduct in higher education	First exercise of a full-scale national rollout to gather comprehensive data
Target group	All-years students (including postgraduates) in England	Only final-year undergraduate students in England
Eligible student population	129,220	427,649
Provider count	12	349
Provider participation	Voluntary	Mandatory
Survey participation	Opt-in	Opt-in, after the NSS
Contact method	Student GDPR email then personal email to boost response rate	Student GDPR email only
Survey period	25 September to 3 November 2023	9 January to 30 April 2025
Reminder emails	Two sent	None sent
Number of responses	5,090	53,290
Student response rate	4%	12.1%
Administered by	IFF	Ipsos
Survey platform	IFF's own	Integrated with NSS platform but branded and handled as a separate survey.
Question design	Developed from existing surveys with student and expert input as well as cognitive testing.	Refined (shorter) version of 2023 questionnaire following feedback and further cognitive testing.
Student data collection	Providers submitted student data collection of eligible students and their contact details for IFF.	Ipsos used NSS target lists as basis for contacting students eligible for the sexual misconduct survey.
Data use	Data used to inform feasibility and design of future surveys.	Data used to inform OfS policy and provide information for providers.

Category	2023 sexual misconduct pilot survey	2025 sexual misconduct survey
Data publication	Aggregate findings only	Aggregate findings published at sector level. Data returned to providers where thresholds to protect student anonymity allowed.
Ethical safeguards	Support services provided; ethical review conducted.	Enhanced support and data protection protocols.
Limitations identified	Small sample size of providers; limited awareness; opt-in bias.	Broader reach, opt-in bias. Populations limited to final-year students.

Annex C: Providers with returnable data (OfS student typologies by tariff points)

Note that five providers had fewer than 10 students.

Name for provider group	Count of providers in SMS 2025	Count of Providers with returnable data	Count of Providers – no returnable data	SMS eligible students represented (FPE ¹⁹)	% students represented by providers with returnable data
High tariff	23	All	-	114,660	100%
Medium tariff	39	All	-	108,260	100%
Low or unknown tariff	72	55	17	164,660 (out of 165,540)	99.5%
Large Level 4/5 (over 50% FTE at Level 4/5, FTE more than 300)	79	27	52	11,380 (out of 13,770)	82.6%
Small Level 4/5 (over 50% FTE at Level 4/5, FTE less than 300)	53	6	47	1,960 (out of 3,340)	58.7%
Specialist: creative (75% or more FTE in one subject area or 90% or more FTE in two main subjects in creative arts)	38	27	11	15,260 (out of 15,780)	96.7%
Specialist: other (75% or more FTE in one subject area or 90% or more FTE in two)	40	17	23	5,020 (out of 5,650)	88.8%
Total	344*	194	150	421,200 (out of 423,660)	99.4%

¹⁹ We report on student populations in headcount terms, at person level. The data expresses student populations as counts of full-person equivalents (FPE), so that a student who was actively studying multiple instances of higher education at the same registering provider, at the same broad level of study, in the same reporting period, will only count once per year.