

# NSS: A guide for course reps

A guide for course reps on using the National Student Survey to drive educational change

# What is evidence?

**(definition) The available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid.**

As a student rep, it is important that you know that the points you make in meetings are representative of what other students think. This is important for the following reasons:

- To ensure you are fulfilling your role as a representative
- To make sure that what you are asking for is actually what students want
- To ensure that university staff will take your points seriously

## What evidence can I use?

The best source of evidence is the students currently studying on your course. You could survey them; ask “show of hands” questions at the start of lectures; run focus groups; ask for responses on social media, or one of many other methods of communication. Your students’ union can help you with this.

However, this evidence is strengthened by being supplemented with other, additional sources. As a general rule, the best arguments are backed up by one piece of evidence from each of these three categories:

**Quantitative** – numbers, e.g. 78% of students think...

**Qualitative** – verbal feedback, e.g. “after talking to twenty students, the main theme that came up was...”

**Policy** – documents from your university, union or external sources that back up your argument

**Quantitative** data can come from your own research, or from data that already exists. Examples of such data include:

- ✓ Satisfaction survey data such as the National Student Survey (NSS), International Student Barometer (ISB) or Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)
- ✓ Module evaluation scores and internal university satisfaction surveys
- ✓ Numbers of students in a module, on a course or applying for a course
- ✓ Staff-student ratios or number of hours contact time
- ✓ Salary and employment data from Unistats website

**Qualitative** data can also be gathered by you or found pre-existing. Sources of data include:

- ✓ Free text comments in the National Student Survey (or other survey)
- ✓ Posts in a Facebook group (check how you can suitably anonymise these and make it clear why you want to use them)
- ✓ Tweets on a course hashtag

**Policy** statements are normally found in pre-existing documentation, and can add extra weight to your evidence-based argument.

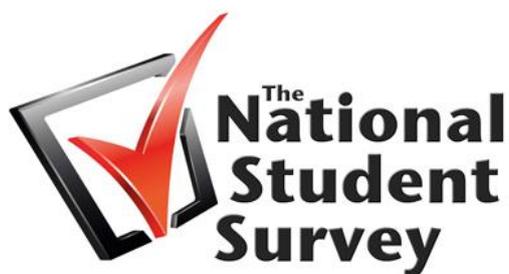
Examples of policy evidence include:

- ✓ University policies, guidelines or committee minutes
- ✓ Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) expectations or indicators of good practice
- ✓ Students’ union policies or committee minutes
- ✓ Guidance on good practice from NUS or the Higher Education Academy
- ✓ Academic research

### Ask your students’ union!

Ask a member of staff or elected officer at your students’ union about what kind of evidence they have available

# What is the National Student Survey?



The National Student Survey is a survey of academic experience aimed at final year undergraduates at HE and FE institutions across the UK. It is the third largest survey in the UK: over 400,000 students are asked annually to complete the 5 minute survey, which achieves a response rate of over 65%.

The survey is run by the independent social research agency Ipsos-MORI, who conduct the survey on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). It achieves a high response rate as there are three ways students can fill it in: through a website, over the phone or by post.

In order for results to be published, a response rate threshold of 50% must be met. Each department must also have more than 23 respondents for the data to be published: this is to maintain the anonymity of the students completing the survey.

## Accessing the results

For the full, internal data, including students' free-text comments, ask your students' union.

Public data is accessible either on HEFCE's website (<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/whatwedo/it/publicinfo/nationalstudentsurvey/nationalstudentsurveydata/2013/>) or through [unistats.direct.gov.uk](http://unistats.direct.gov.uk).

## Why is the NSS a good source of evidence?

The survey offers an unparalleled amount of robust data on students' opinions. It is completed at every higher education provider in the country and offers a high degree of comparability as the questions asked are always the same. NSS data forms a large part of the Key Information Set (KIS) which prospective students use to make decisions about what and where to study, and the results are included in the calculation of some league tables. Because of the public nature of the data and the importance of the results to their reputation, higher education providers take the results very seriously.

## Promoting the survey

Course reps can be hugely influential when it comes to promoting the survey. If you're a final year rep, there's a lot you can do to encourage students to fill it in.

- ✓ Ask your lecturer if you can quickly talk about the importance of filling in the survey at the start of a lecture
- ✓ Share the link on social media with reasons why the survey is important
- ✓ Email the link round to your coursemates with examples of how you have used the data to achieve changes this year
- ✓ Contact your students' union and ask how you can help with their promotional efforts

**The NSS is a great way to start conversations with staff about what students think of their course: it puts the student voice at the heart of dialogue around academic quality and can be used to identify areas for improvement.**

# Using your NSS results

Since the survey began in 2005, satisfaction with all areas has increased across the board. Teaching and overall satisfaction are the highest scoring areas, and teaching has been found to be the section that has the most impact on overall satisfaction scores.

Assessment and feedback has consistently been the lowest scoring area, although improvements have been made since the survey began. The survey has driven big changes in practice over the past nine years and continues to be an important tool for improving the quality of UK higher education.

## What can I find in the data?

- ✓ The % of respondents who answered 'Definitely Agree' or 'Mostly Agree' to each of the 23 questions.
- ✓ The average for each 'set' or 'bank' of questions.
- ✓ Breakdown of scores given by different demographics (i.e. by gender, ethnicity, mode of study, disability).
- ✓ Free-text comments made by students, both positive and negative.

## How can I use the results?

- ✓ Use the data to start conversations with fellow students. Ask them about areas that score poorly in the NSS to combat apathy and collectively press for change.
- ✓ Pull out some of the free text comments and use them to bring the figures to life
- ✓ Talk to your students' union about running a campaign on a specific issue (e.g. feedback, support, timetabling, or hidden costs).
- ✓ Ensure that the results are discussed at your staff-student liaison committees. Try to find solutions to issues raised in the NSS in partnership with academic staff.

When using evidence to drive change and improvements in your department or school it's important to open a constructive dialogue with academic staff. Consider the following precautionary measures:

- ✓ Find out if the issues you are raising have been discussed in recent years, and how they were dealt with.
- ✓ Look at data from previous years for long-term trends, to account for the margin-of-error in the data.
- ✓ Avoid singling out individual staff in meetings and open forums.
- ✓ Be open to long-term solutions rather than quick fixes.
- ✓ Close the feedback loop: tell your classmates when improvements are made.

National Results			
	2005	2013	2014
The teaching on my course	77	86	87
Assessment and feedback	59	72	72
Academic support	67	80	81
Organisation and management	69	78	78
Learning resources	76	84	85
Personal development	75	82	82
Overall satisfaction	79	85	86
Students' Union	n/a	67	67

More information, resources and support are available on the NUS website:

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/highereducation/nss/>

## Satisfaction by subject

2014	The teaching on my course	Assessment and feedback	Academic support	Organisation and management	Learning resources	Personal development	Overall satisfaction
Agriculture & related subjects	87	70	81	74	81	80	83
Architecture, building & planning	86	71	82	77	85	83	86
Biological sciences	88	71	81	82	86	82	87
Business & administrative studies	82	71	80	80	85	83	85
Combined	87	85	80	84	80	71	90
Computer science	81	72	80	77	84	79	82
Creative arts & design	85	75	81	72	83	81	80
Education	88	80	82	79	83	86	86
Engineering & technology	83	69	81	78	87	82	84
Geographical Studies	89	72	82	84	86	83	89
Historical & philosophical studies	93	78	84	85	82	80	91
Initial teacher training	89	73	86	74	89	89	88
Languages	91	76	83	83	84	81	89
Law	88	71	79	82	85	83	89
Mass communications & documentation	81	70	78	73	84	80	78
Mathematical sciences	86	75	83	86	87	73	89
Medicine & dentistry	91	59	81	72	92	92	87
Physical sciences	89	71	84	81	89	82	89
Social studies	87	72	80	81	83	81	86
Subjects allied to medicine	88	71	81	71	88	88	85
Veterinary science	94	59	83	68	91	88	91

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