The National Student Survey

An introductory guide for students’ unions
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NSS: An introduction
Introduction to the NSS

What is the NSS?
The National Student Survey (NSS) has been running since 2005, and surveys all final year undergraduates in publically-funded providers of higher education (HE) in the UK. This includes all UK universities and, in England and Wales, further education colleges that provide HE. The survey is open to private providers also, who can choose to opt in.

The NSS is funded and overseen by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of all the HE funding councils across the UK. The survey itself is run by the polling company IPSOS-Mori, and the results website is administered by Texunatech Technologies Ltd.

The NSS produces one of the largest and most comprehensive datasets of any survey in the UK, with almost 321,500 final-year students completing the survey in 2014; 71% of all final-year students in the country. It offers unparalleled data on students’ academic perceptions and experiences of higher education.

According to a review of the survey commissioned by HEFCE in 2014, the NSS serves 3 core purposes. These are:

1. Informing prospective student choice
2. Enhancing the student academic experience within HE institutions
3. Ensuring public accountability

NUS are primarily interested in using the survey for the second purpose: enhancing and improving students’ academic experiences in HE.

In order to inform prospective student choice, NSS data on all HE courses is part of the ‘Key Information Sets’ (KIS), and hence made publically available. The data informs many of the most prominent league tables of universities. In order to be made publically available, data on a course must meet a minimum threshold of 50%, including 23 individual responses.

The survey questions

The NSS is formed of twenty-three questions: twenty-two about the academic experience on a course, and one about the students’ union.

Questions are answered on a five-point scale, from ‘Strongly Agree’ to ‘Strongly Disagree’.

The core questionnaire is divided into sections or ‘banks’ that ask about different aspects of the academic experience. Your institution may also opt-in to the ‘optional banks’ of questions. Finally, there are two free-text questions where students can comment on positive and negative aspects of their experience.

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Using the results site
How to use the results website

The results website
NSS data is accessible via a website run by Texunatech on behalf of IPSOS-Mori. The site address is: https://nss.texunatech.com

Your union should have a named ‘NSS contact’ with a username and password to access the site. If you do not, or you are not sure who the contact is, email nss@texunatech.com

The website has a full ‘Help’ section that addresses common queries and contains videos to guide you through many of its functions.

Different types of data
Public vs Internal: Data is made publically available for institutions and for subjects (JACS Level 3 – see below) that meets the threshold of 50% and 23 respondents. Data is available internally at a far greater depth, and this is the data that is most useful for students’ unions, including breakdowns by demographics and departments. Free-text comments are not public data and are only available internally.

Taught vs Registered: The ‘taught’ dataset only includes students who are taught by your institution. The ‘registered’ dataset includes students who are taught by your institution and students registered with your institution but taught in partner institutions. In the majority of cases, students’ unions should only need to use the ‘taught’ dataset.

JACS Codes and departments: Data by subjects is available in 3 ‘levels’ of detail, in classifications known as ‘JACS’ codes. This is to enable different levels of comparison for the vast diversity of subjects taught in higher education. You can also access data by departments or schools, but because these are institution specific they are often in codes which may have to be translated by someone in your institution.
Accessing data: static reports
To access a single spreadsheet that contains a basic yet comprehensive set of useful data, follow this pathway:

Login ➔ Static reports ➔ My Organisation Reports – Taught Data, Current year

This will open a workbook with either 20 or 40 spreadsheets, and will be the basis for the rest of this guide that relates to quantitative data.

Click on spreadsheet one (01). You will see a table with a large amount of data.

Making this useful and understandable requires you to filter out some of the rows. Use the filter function in column B to filter out all rows except the option ‘% Agree’.

This should leave your spreadsheet looking much more intelligible, like the one below.

The data for ‘% Agree’ is the most common set of data used when analysing NSS results; it is the percentage of students who answered a question either ‘Mostly Agree (4)’ or ‘Definitely Agree (5)’.

As we can see below, it is now very easy to compare your institution with other HEIs, the top quartile, and the average in your nation.
What data is available?

If you return to the contents page of your workbook you will see a full-list of the different breakdowns available in each spreadsheet. The ones most likely to be useful for students’ unions are listed below.

**Age (02)** – Shows response-scores of ‘young’ and ‘mature’ students. ‘Mature’ is defined as over 21 upon commencing higher education.

**Course (03)/Department (04)** – The classifications of courses and departments are often very specific and so incomparable with other institutions. You institution may use a coding system for Departments.

**Disability (05)** – Shows response-scores by ‘Learning disability’, ‘Disability (excluding learning disabilities’ and ‘No known disability’.

**Domicile (06)** – Shows response-scores for students from the ‘UK’, ‘EU excluding UK’ and ‘Outside EU’.

**Ethnicity (07 & 08)** – The two-way split is by ‘White’ and ‘Non-white’. The four-way split is by ‘White’, ‘Black’, ‘Asian’ and ‘Other’.

**Gender (10)** – Currently only split by ‘Male’ and ‘Female’. NUS is working with HEFCE and other sector organisations to have this approach to collecting data changed to include those who do not identify in a binary way.

**Mode of Study (13)** – Shows response-scores for ‘Part-time’ and ‘Full-time’ students.

**Religion (15)** – This is available for Northern Irish institutions only.

**Socio-economic classification (16)** – This data is returned by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and is tracked from students’ entries on their UCAS application in answer to a question on occupation (of self or parents). However, it is of only limited use in most cases as a substantial percentage of students are classified as ‘Unknown’ or ‘Not applicable’.

**JACS Subjects Levels 1-3 (18, 19 & 20)** – This shows the scores for different subjects grouped under the JACS classification scheme explained above. The data is better for benchmarking with other institutions than the ‘Course’ or ‘Department’ data mentioned above.

We recommend that on opening any new spreadsheet you immediately apply the ‘% Agree’ filter in order to make the data intelligible for a basic analysis.

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**Stuck with Excel?**

We unfortunately don’t have the space in this guide to provide detailed guidance on using Microsoft Excel or Numbers for Mac.

If you are unfamiliar with using this software then there are number of ways to find help, either by asking a colleague, your institutional IT support, buying or borrowing a guidebook, or (easiest of all) simply entering your problem into Google.
Accessing basic qualitative data – free-text comments

To view a spreadsheet containing a selection of students’ free-text comments from your institution, follow this pathway:

*Login → Student comments → Create a new report*

Select the following options.

*Type of provider – ‘Taught’*

*Search filters – Year: ’[ensure current year is specified]’. Keyword: ’[leave blank for your first spreadsheet]’*

*Row items – Row 1: ‘Subject – Level 2’*¹

*Column items – Leave blank*

*View settings and export options – Leave blank*

Then click *Generate report; Expand all and Export to Excel.* You should then have a spreadsheet with all your students’ free-text positive and negative comments divided up by subject.

**Adding a keyword filter**

You can search for keywords directly in Excel, or you can create new reports with keyword filters by going back to the report-generating page and entering a keyword under *Search filters.*


If your filter is too specific you may not get enough comments to pass the threshold of ten individual comments and so will not be allowed to view them. Try to use generally applicable terms that students may use, and enter keywords as singular rather than plural terms in order to get the most results.

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¹ This should be appropriate for most institutions, but some institutions with a smaller range of courses may need to choose ‘Subject – Level 3’. Make sure all options are selected in the dropdown box which will appear.
Understanding Your Results

**Heat-mapping**

One of the quickest ways to get a broad idea of how well different courses, subjects or departments in your institution compare is to use conditional formatting on your spreadsheet to give a ‘heat-map’ of their results.

To do this, choose a spreadsheet that shows your institutions’ results broken down by either JACS subject, course, or department. The spreadsheet that is most appropriate to use will depend on the number of courses, departments, or subjects in your institution. If in doubt, start with JACS Subject Level 2 (spreadsheet 19 on your workbook).

Make sure you perform the filter function to leave only ‘% Agree’ visible for each subject. Then, select all the numerical data and use **Conditional Formatting → Highlight Cells Rules** to perform the following:

- All cells greater than (>) 80, format green.
- All cells less than (<) 65, format red.
- All cells between 66 and 79, format yellow.

You can experiment with variations on the above formatting rules to produce a heat-map you find most useful, either by changing the range of colours, or the values you input into the rules. Excel has a number of default conditional formatting options that you can play with.

This should give you a quick idea of the subjects where you might need to focus attention as a union, and those where you might be able to find and understand good practice. It might also direct your priorities with different groups of course reps, or inform areas to focus on in further research or policy.
Looking at demographics

Another useful overview of your data is to create a spreadsheet with comparisons of different demographics’ scores, in order to uncover any potential educational advantage or disadvantage at your institution.

To do this, create a new blank spreadsheet in your workbook. Copy and paste into that spreadsheet the top-row of questions from one of the existing spreadsheets. Then, copy and paste into your new spreadsheet the ‘% Agree’ data from each of the following spreadsheets:

- Age (02)
- Disability (05)
- Domicile (06)
- Ethnicity (07)
- Gender (10)
- Mode of Study (13)

Label each set of data you have copied, and you should have your new spreadsheet looking like the one below.

In order to compare each demographic quickly and easily, insert a new row beneath each ‘set’ of data, and enter a subtraction formula (e.g. =C4-C3) to show the difference between comparable demographics (e.g. young and mature, or white and non-white). You can then use conditional formatting to ‘heat-map’ (see above) to gain an overview of what the data is telling you.
Your final spreadsheet should look like this one, where we can clearly see that mature students are happier with academic support than young students, but less happy with the detail of their feedback on assessment.

![Spreadsheet Image](image)

This should give you a rough idea of which demographics of students are most and least happy with different aspects of their academic experience. This might inform your campaigns on which groups of students you need to prioritise engaging with. It might also give you evidence to help assist your liberation groups, or to challenge your institution on potentially unfair or discriminatory practice.

*Some caution* – The more you breakdown your data, the more likely you will be dealing with small or very small data-sets (e.g. less than 30 students), which makes your findings less robust and less reliable. You may sometimes need to check the size of the cohort whose results you are analysing by filtering in the ‘Headcount’ data.

**Questions to ask of your data**

- Which departments/subjects have the strongest and weakest scores? Does this correspond with the feedback you get from your course reps?
- Are there groups of departments/subjects that have similar strengths and weaknesses? If so, what do they have in common?
- Does your demographic data show evidence of educational disadvantage, and if, in what specific areas?
- Do the same exercise with your previous year’s data (available from the results website). Have there been any substantial variations?
Using the NSS for enhancement
Using your results for enhancement

The enhancement cycle
The majority of institutions will have a regular annual cycle of analysing and reflecting on NSS results, and subsequently agreeing actions to be taken for enhancement. This might be conducted at a school, department or faculty level, or at an institution-wide level. It will typically take place from September to December.

It’s important to find out when these discussions are taking place and ensure that the student voice is heard at them, either by responding to your institutions report on the results, or presenting your own report with your own interpretations.

The limitations of the NSS
The NSS is a controversial instrument, especially amongst many academics who questions its appropriateness for evaluating learning and teaching. In a recent survey by UCU, 55% of academic respondents did not believe the NSS has had a positive impact of the student learning experience.

Whether you agree with such arguments or not it is important to be aware of some of limitations of the NSS in order to give your own arguments greater credibility.

Some criticisms of the survey include:
- ‘Satisfaction’ is not the measure of a quality education, and should not be equated with it. ‘Satisfaction’ is the difference between one’s expectations and one’s experience.
- The NSS evaluates multiple units of analysis, unlike module evaluation questionnaires, which evaluate single modules or individual teachers. This makes it problematic to compare courses directly.
- The NSS is used for league tables and ranking institutions and departments, which feeds further marketization in education.
- Institutions use NSS scores as KPIs for staff, which is inappropriate and puts unfair pressure on teachers.
- The 22 core NSS questions do not cover everything that is important to students’ learning experience, and this often limits the scope of enhancement activity.

Supporting your course reps
You can use your heat-mapping and free-text comment analysis to support and give leadership to your course reps in a number of ways:
- Identify the highest and lowest performing questions or set of questions for each course or department, and ask your reps to ask their peers questions related to these topics.
- Get together reps from different courses or departments, where some have high scores on a particular topic (e.g. course organisation) and others have low scores, and get them to share their experiences.
- Produce NSS results reports for each course or department and ask your reps to present them at staff-student liaison meetings.
Using supplementary evidence

Given that NSS provides only one perspective on the student experience, it is useful to analyse your results in tandem with supplementary evidence to make more robust arguments.

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Students are not an under-researched group. There is a substantial amount of existing research that exists on students’ views and experiences of learning and teaching, some of which you can find on NUS Connect. If you’re unsure where to find supplementary evidence, get in touch with a member of NUS staff at nss@nus.org.uk

Contact and further information

For questions or support about the NSS results website, email nss@texunatech.com

NUS has a small project team specialising in the NSS and learning and teaching enhancement, who are happy to answer any and all questions related to the survey and direct you to helpful resources. Email nss@nus.org.uk

Further reading

Alex Buckley, *Making it Count: Reflecting on the National Student Survey in the process of enhancement* (Higher Education Academy, 2012).


SEDA Learning and Teaching Blog - http://thesedablog.wordpress.com/