

UCAS response to the consultation on changes to the National Student Survey (NSS)



About UCAS

As an independent charity, UCAS is the leading authority on student progression. Our role as the gateway to post-secondary opportunities allows us unparalleled insight into the student mindset captured via our growing survey expertise. Through regular and bespoke surveys – which attract strong response rates in the region of 5-6% – alongside more in-depth [insight reports](#), we capture and promote student views, making recommendations for policy change and shaping and evolving our products and services.

In addition, we are a student-centric organisation with one of the UK's largest student audiences – [ucas.com](#) receives 30 million unique visits per year and more than 1,000,000 young people aged 16 and upwards register with us each year, exploring higher education, apprenticeships, and early careers.

It is this insight and understanding of the student mindset which underpins our response to this consultation. Our evidence is limited to those areas where our analysis and insight is most relevant and impactful – we look forward to further discussion with the Office for Students (OfS), and its partners including the funding councils in the devolved nations, ahead of its issuing of a response. A summary of our key points is as follows:

- **Any changes to the NSS must enable a more accurate capturing of students' views:** UCAS is keen to work with the OfS to concept test the proposed change to response scales to ensure it will achieve the aim of more accurate data capture.
- **The benefits of maintaining UK-wide coverage for the NSS:** The removal of the summative question for England will limit its usefulness as an information tool for prospective students.
- **Support for additional data about mental wellbeing:** UCAS research found that students who shared an existing mental health condition on their application form are more likely to have accessed information about mental health and wellbeing support services – 41% of those who declared an existing mental health condition, compared to 27% of those who did not declare their condition – as such, we would welcome a further discussion around research opportunities to explore how NSS outcomes may relate to the challenges we see at application stage.
- **Personalisation will underpin UCAS' future use of NSS data as part of careers education:** UCAS would value discussions with the OfS about how we can maximise the impact of the reformed NSS through our approach to personalisation and careers, information, advice, and guidance (CIAG).

Any changes to the NSS must enable a more accurate capturing of students' views

What are the consequences – positive and negative – of changing to the use of direct questions for the NSS?

UCAS is committed to ensuring prospective students have access to useful and accurate data about student views to help inform their decisions and next steps. The move from a five-point to a four-point response scale may restrict students' choice to express any neutral opinions they may hold and could increase positive responses. This could have the effect of making such information less useful as a decision-making tool. As the consultation document highlights, further testing is needed to ensure the changes will more accurately represent student views. We also welcome further concept testing to ensure that questions that focus on two concepts are not difficult to interpret or act upon.

UCAS' runs a [Student Advisory Group](#), which acts as a conduit for the student voice and informs UCAS' understanding of the student experience. UCAS would be willing to work with the OfS to task this Group with concept testing to add to the body of evidence around the usefulness of potential changes to the NSS. In addition, we would be happy to share insights from our own survey expertise or support any additional testing through our in-house surveys.

Maintaining UK-wide coverage for the NSS

What are the consequences – both positive and negative – of removing the summative question for England only?

The removal of the summative question for England only will create inconsistency in the availability of information to support prospective student decision-making. Given that tens of thousands of students each year explore options across borders, rising to 33,000 in 2021, this would influence the usefulness of the data set as an information tool.

It is also worth noting that whilst all final year students including those studying degree apprenticeships will be invited to complete the revised NSS, individuals studying apprenticeships through employer and training provider partnerships, Level 4/5 study, and credit-based study, will sit outside of its scope. Such incompleteness in coverage will naturally hinder its usefulness for some students.

If the summative question is removed, as a key consumer of NSS data, UCAS would wish to work with the OfS to articulate the rationale to students and support their interpretation of alternative metrics.

Mental wellbeing

Should a question on mental wellbeing provision be offered as an additional question after the core questionnaire?

We welcome any data that gives a broader understanding of students' awareness of mental health and wellbeing support in HE. However, the picture is nuanced, and any reporting should understand the wider context of those responding if it is to add value to the wealth of data on student mental health.

[Our research](#) shows that students who share an existing mental health condition in the UCAS application are more likely to be aware of support available at university or college (70% of those who shared an existing mental health condition compared to 61% of those who did not share). They are also more likely to have researched the university's mental health and wellbeing support services before starting their course (41% of those who shared compared to 27% who did not), and more likely to find that support helpful when they do access it (22% compared to 13% who did not share). This suggests a link between a student's awareness of support and how comfortable they feel in sharing a mental health condition – or has a support network that helps them to feel safe doing so.

Universities and colleges offer a wide diversity of mental health and wellbeing support services, which may not be directly comparable due to the differing nature of how students access and use them. Certain services may be restricted to those who are referred for support, others may be free to use for all (e.g., online resources). It is worth being aware that some national services (e.g., Student Space) are signposted by universities and colleges as part of their support package, but they are not directly responsible for them.

Early information about support services – whether specifically for mental health or for wider circumstances, which in turn supports their wellbeing – is critical for students making the transition to HE, and for preparing them for ongoing studies. We are currently exploring how we can better support students to make informed decisions based on their support needs during the research phase of their journey to higher education, by directly signposting to a provider's support via UCAS' search tool.

We found that 49% of students who applied to UCAS in 2020 with an existing mental health condition did not share this information – predominantly due to misconceptions about how this data would be used – and this under-reporting appears to be particularly notable for certain groups, including men and students in the Black and Asian ethnic groups. To address this, UCAS is working with the what works centre, [TASO](#) (Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education), to explore ways in which we can improve and enhance our content and messaging to encourage applicants to share mental health conditions.

UCAS is keen to work collaboratively with the OfS to help drive greater awareness of mental health and wellbeing services in HE because of any data collected through the NSS, and to explore ways in which we can support a more transparent and supportive journey to HE. As such, we would welcome a further discussion around research opportunities to explore how NSS outcomes may relate to the challenges we see at application stage.

UCAS' use of NSS data as part of careers education

UCAS already makes student outcomes data available both within the UCAS Hub and through its course search tool, which lists more than 30,000 opportunities. This includes data related to student satisfaction (derived from the NSS), employment 15 months after graduation, and the proportion of individuals who go onto work and study – all of which is derived from the Unistats dataset.

At UCAS, personalisation underpins our approach to information and advice, with students registering via the [UCAS Hub](#) – now used by 92% of students – early in their research and embarking upon their own individual journey based on their preferences and circumstances.

As part of upcoming developments for the Hub, personalisation will see us make greater use of more granular outcomes data, including that derived from the NSS. This is important because different individuals will be interested in different types of data; for example, [UCAS research](#) has previously identified that mature students (aged 25+) are more sensitive to the financial impact of tuition fees and the cost of travelling between their home and their place of study. Conversely, the cost of living is more likely to affect the decision-making of younger students (18 year olds), likely due to a greater propensity for this cohort to move away from home to study. In relation to the NSS, it is also the case that some individuals will be interested in metrics around assessment and feedback for undergraduate students, whereas others will wish to explore academic support for apprentices.

Indeed, given the multiple touchpoints across ucas.com and the Discover Uni platform, there is potential, as the OfS considers its strategy, to reduce overlaps by retiring the Discover Uni site in its current form given students find multiple sources of information unhelpful. Then, in partnership with the OfS, the UCAS Hub and broader ucas.com estate could become the key vehicle for surfacing student outcomes data, creating a more coherent experience for students and generating efficiencies for the sector.