2021 Student Experience Survey

Methodological Report

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**Contents**

[1. Introduction 2](#_Toc98240067)

[1.1 About this report 2](#_Toc98240068)

[1.2 Background 2](#_Toc98240069)

[1.3 Objectives 2](#_Toc98240070)

[1.4 Overview 3](#_Toc98240071)

[1.5 Project milestones 4](#_Toc98240072)

[2. Sample preparation 5](#_Toc98240073)

[2.1 Target population 5](#_Toc98240074)

[2.2 Institutional participation 6](#_Toc98240075)

[2.3 Sample frame 6](#_Toc98240076)

[2.4 Sampling preparation overview 6](#_Toc98240077)

[3. Survey design and procedures 13](#_Toc98240078)

[3.1 Institutional engagement 13](#_Toc98240079)

[3.2 Student engagement 14](#_Toc98240080)

[3.3 Contact protocol 15](#_Toc98240081)

[3.4 Data collection 25](#_Toc98240082)

[3.5 Student support 26](#_Toc98240088)

[3.6 Prize draw 27](#_Toc98240089)

[4. Questionnaire 29](#_Toc98240090)

[4.1 Development 29](#_Toc98240091)

[4.2 Overview 29](#_Toc98240092)

[4.3 Changes from 2020 29](#_Toc98240093)

[4.4 Additional items 30](#_Toc98240094)

[5. Data preparation 31](#_Toc98240095)

[5.1 Definition of the analytic unit 31](#_Toc98240096)

[5.2 Data cleaning and preparation 31](#_Toc98240097)

[5.3 Course coding 32](#_Toc98240098)

[5.4 Coding and processing of open text responses 33](#_Toc98240099)

[5.5 Data deliverables 33](#_Toc98240100)

[6. Final dispositions, response rates and reportable strata 35](#_Toc98240101)

[6.1 Final dispositions and response rates 35](#_Toc98240102)

[6.2 Factors affecting response rate in 2021 35](#_Toc98240103)

[6.3 Achievement of response rate targets 37](#_Toc98240104)

[6.4 Strata meeting the desired level of precision 37](#_Toc98240105)

[7. Response analysis 38](#_Toc98240106)

[7.1 Response by time 38](#_Toc98240107)

[7.2 Non-response analysis 39](#_Toc98240108)

[7.3 Sources of response 45](#_Toc98240109)

[8. Considerations for future surveys 47](#_Toc98240110)

[8.1 Response rate and representativeness 47](#_Toc98240111)

[Male student engagement 47](#_Toc98240112)

[International student engagement 47](#_Toc98240113)

[8.2 Sampling process 47](#_Toc98240114)

[List of abbreviations and terms 48](#_Toc98240115)

**List of tables**

[Table 1 Key project statistics 3](#_Toc98240116)

[Table 2 Key project milestones 4](#_Toc98240117)

[Table 3 Citizen/resident indicator (E358) by final offshore status 9](#_Toc98240118)

[Table 4 Strata count by target response rate category (±7.5 per cent precision) 10](#_Toc98240119)

[Table 5 Example of response rate targets for an institution with high student numbers and few study areas 11](#_Toc98240120)

[Table 6 Example of response rate targets for an institution with low student numbers and many study areas 12](#_Toc98240121)

[Table 7 Invitation and reminder schedule 15](#_Toc98240122)

[Table 8 2021 SES email plan message theme 17](#_Toc98240123)

[Table 9 Email send outcomes by round of activity (August round) 19](#_Toc98240124)

[Table 10 Email send outcomes by round of activity (September round) 19](#_Toc98240125)

[Table 11 SMS based follow up activity outcomes 21](#_Toc98240126)

[Table 12 Post field reminder calls outcome summary 22](#_Toc98240127)

[Table 13 Facebook campaign outcomes by gender 24](#_Toc98240128)

[Table 14 Student enquiries to the SES helpdesk overall 27](#_Toc98240129)

[Table 15 Prize draw schedule 27](#_Toc98240130)

[Table 16 SES module themes 29](#_Toc98240131)

[Table 17 Resolution of coding anomalies 33](#_Toc98240132)

[Table 18 Items coded and source for coding decisions 33](#_Toc98240133)

[Table 19 Final survey dispositions 35](#_Toc98240134)

[Table 20 Response rate comparison by citizenship status, 2020 to 2021 36](#_Toc98240135)

[Table 21 Response rate comparison by stage of study, 2020 to 2021 36](#_Toc98240136)

[Table 22 Strata meeting desired level of precision for undergraduates in full-time study 37](#_Toc98240137)

[Table 23 Response rates by day (August and September rounds) 38](#_Toc98240138)

[Table 24 List of administrative variables used in the analysis, available for both respondents and non-respondents (student level) 40](#_Toc98240139)

[Table 25 Administrative variables with largest differences between responding and non-respondent students (student level) 41](#_Toc98240140)

[Table 26 Relative contribution of selected administrative variables in predicting 2021 response (student level) 42](#_Toc98240141)

[Table 27 Comparison of weighted and unweighted indicators (student level) 44](#_Toc98240142)

[Table 28 Comparison of response rates and representativity indicators (student level) 45](#_Toc98240143)

[Table 29 Sources of response 46](#_Toc98240144)

# Introduction

## About this report

This methodological report describes the sample preparation, data collection, data processing and reporting aspects of the 2021 Student Experience Survey (SES, ‘the survey’), conducted on behalf of the Australian Government Department of Education (‘the department’) by the Social Research Centre. This report is organised into the following sections:

* Section 1 introduces the survey background, objectives and provides a general overview.
* Section 1.5 describes the target audience and sample design.
* Section 3 documents the survey design and procedures for conducting the study.
* Section 4 outlines the questionnaire development phase, including changes made to the questionnaire in 2021 and an overview of the institution-specific items.
* Section 5 describes the data preparation process.
* Section 6 documents the final dispositions and response rate.
* Section 7 presents an analysis of response.
* Section 8 outlines key learnings and considerations for future iterations of the SES.

## Background

The SES is a component of the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) suite of surveys, commissioned by the department. In 2015, the SES replaced the University Experience Survey (UES), which was a government-commissioned survey administered by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA) from 2011 to 2014. For a more detailed history of the SES and its predecessor instruments, see the *2017 SES Methodological Report*.

## Objectives

The broad aim of the SES is to measure the higher education experiences of commencing and later year students including perceptions regarding the quality of teaching and overall satisfaction. The development, collection and reporting of these measures provides a national framework for collecting feedback on the higher education student experience.

The specific research objectives of the SES are to measure the following five key aspects of the student experience:

1. Skills development.
2. Learner engagement.
3. Teaching quality.
4. Student support.
5. Learning resources.

The information collected helps higher education institutions and the government improve teaching and learning outcomes and provides the source data for the ComparED website. The ComparED website informs the choices of prospective students by facilitating a comparison of official study experience and outcomes data from Australian higher education institutions, at the study area level within institution.

Responses to specific modules in the survey also help the department ascertain perceptions of freedom expression on campus and better understand the international student experience at higher education institutions in Australia.

## Overview

Undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students in their first or final year of study at a participating Australian higher education institution were invited to take part in the 2021 SES.

A total of 139 higher education institutions participated in the 2021 SES, including all 42[[1]](#footnote-1) universities and 97 non-university higher education institutions (NUHEIs).

Table 1 provides an overview of key statistics for the participating institutions. In total 712,799 commencing and later year undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students were approached with 643,337 identified as in-scope to participate in the SES. A total of 264,660 online surveys were completed (unique student respondents) across the August and September rounds, giving a total response rate of 41.1 per cent.

Table 1 Key project statistics

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **University (42 institutions) - UG** | **University (42 institutions) - PGCW** | **NUHEI (97 institutions) - UG** | **NUHEI (97 institutions) - PGCW** | **Higher Education Institutions (139 institutions) - UG** | **Higher Education Institutions (139 institutions) - PGCW** | **Total** |
| Total sample (n) | 442,219 | 200,107 | 45,504 | 24,969 | 487,723 | 225,076 | **712,799** |
| Final in-scope students (n) | 401,315 | 178,905 | 41,088 | 22,029 | 442,403 | 200,934 | **643,337** |
| Surveys completed (student level) | 165,371 | 73,282 | 16,641 | 9,366 | 182,012 | 82,648 | **264,660** |
| Response rate (%) | 41.2% | 41.0% | 40.5% | 42.5% | 41.1% | 41.1% | **41.1%** |
| Surveys completed (course level) | 180,658 | 73,695 | 16,667 | 9,394 | 197,325 | 83,089 | **280,414** |

Note: For the purpose of QILT projects, ‘response rate’ is defined as ‘surveys completed (unique student level)’ as a proportion of ‘final in-scope students’, where final in-scope students excludes unusable sample (e.g., no contact details), out-of-scope and opted out. This definition of response rate differs from industry standards by treating certain non-contacts and refusals as being ineligible for the response rate calculation. See American Association for Public Opinion Research (2016) for standard definitions.

The analytic unit for the SES is the course, rather than the student, so after adjusting for students completing double degrees, a total of 280,414 surveys were completed at the course level.

Student sample, including contact information, was provided by the higher education institutions. A *Collection and Sample Guide* was provided to institutions to help them administer the survey (see Appendix 1). Notwithstanding modifications made to the international student module and the addition of freedom of expression items, the 2021 SES survey instrument remained largely consistent with previous years.

The survey was fielded online in English only. Invitations were sent by email and reminders were sent to sample members by email and SMS. Participating institutions could also commission additional reminder calls after the conclusion of the main online fieldwork period (‘post field reminder calls’) or full interviews via Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). Surveys completed as a result of post field reminder calls are included as completed surveys in this report.

## Project milestones

Table 2 provides a summary of the key project milestones for the 2021 SES.

Historically, the SES was conducted once per year in August. A secondary round conducted in early September was introduced in 2017 to accommodate institutions with non-traditional academic calendars. In 2021, fieldwork for the September round was postponed by three weeks to minimise overlap with the National Student Safety Survey (commissioned by Universities Australia) that was running nationally during September. As a result, post-field reminder call activity was not offered for the September round to accommodate this change.

Table 2 Key project milestones

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Task** | **2021 SES** |
| **Establishment** |  |
| Questionnaire development | 14-Jun-21 to 29-Jun-21 |
| Sample preparation | 21-May-21 to 18-Jun-21 |
| **Fieldwork** |  |
| **August round** |  |
| Soft launch main online fieldwork (NUHEIs) | 27-Jul-21 |
| Start main online fieldwork (Universities) | 29-Jul-21 |
| Main online fieldwork closes\* | 29-Aug-21 |
| Post field reminder calls† | 30-Aug-21 to 15-Sep-21 |
| Fieldwork closes† | 15-Sep-21 |
| **September round** |  |
| Soft launch main online fieldwork (NUHEIs) | 28-Sep-21 |
| Start main online fieldwork (Universities) | 30-Sep-21 |
| Main online fieldwork closes\* | 31-Oct-21 |
| **Reporting** |  |
| Draft data and documentation to the department | 19-Nov-21 |
| Draft National Report to the department | 26-Nov-21 |
| Final data and documentation to the department | 30-Nov-21 |
| Methodological Report to the department | 13-Dec-21 |
| Draft International Report to the department | 24-Dec-21 |
| Final National Report to the department | 24-Dec-21 |
| Data files and Tableau report to institutions | 14-Jan-22 |
| Final International Report to the department | 28-Jan-22 |

\* Institutions that did not opt for post field telephone reminders.

† Institutions that opted for post field telephone reminders.

# Sample preparation

## Target population

The in-scope population for the SES consisted of commencing and later year onshore undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions. As introduced in 2020, the in-scope population also included students who intended to study onshore but were offshore at the time of the survey’s administration due to travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The definition of commencing and later year students has remained unchanged since 2013. However, in 2017, postgraduate coursework students were included for the first time. Postgraduate students were assigned to commencing and later year categories using the same approach as for undergraduate students.

If a student was enrolled in multiple courses concurrently, the major course was determined by prioritising postgraduate coursework over undergraduate enrolments, then selecting the course with the highest aggregated student load (E339), at the highest course level (E310) if there was a tie, and in alphabetical order if there was still a tie.

Institutions were able to request inclusion of additional populations such as offshore or middle-year students on a fee-for-service basis, however, these responses were excluded from national reporting and analysis.

### Commencing students

To qualify as commencing students, sample members must be in the first year of their course and meet the following criteria:

* enrolled in an undergraduate or postgraduate by coursework course
* studying onshore, or had intended to study onshore but were located offshore due to COVID-19 restrictions, and
* enrolled in and completed at least one full teaching period

### Later year students

Conceptually, later year students are those in the final year of their studies and studying onshore. However, in the sampling frame there is no indicator which can be used to identify students who are about to complete their studies. Instead, an estimate of course duration, derived from a number of existing sample variables, is used to identify completing students.

In principle, student progression can be estimated by calculating the ratio of ‘cumulative EFTSL (Equivalent Full-Time Student Load) completed successfully’ (E931) and ‘currently in progress’ (E339) to the total EFTSL for the course (E350).

In practice, identifying student progression using ‘EFTSL completed successfully’ is challenging, particularly for part-time and external students, students taking a leave of absence, students transferring from one course to another, and students whose initial enrolment may have extended back by up to ten years. It can also be unclear what a student intends to do in future study periods, including Semester 2 or summer term.

For the purpose of identifying the SES target population two ratios are designed to identify later year full-time and part-time students:

* full-time students, in a three-year course, qualify as later year students if their cumulative EFTSL is 83 per cent of the total EFTSL for the course
* part-time students qualify as later year students if their estimated cumulative load is 92 per cent of the total for the course.

Students in longer or shorter courses require correspondingly lower or higher ratios, and specific adjustments are also required to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of a small number of institutions with less typical course structures.

## Institutional participation

The scope of the 2021 SES comprised all higher education institutions, including non-HESA institutions (as introduced in 2020).

Institutions were invited to participate in the SES via the Participation and Additional Services Form (‘PASF’, see Section 3.1.2 Invitation to participate). Invitations to complete the PASF were sent via email to all primary institutional contacts approximately two months prior to the commencement of the August round. All institutions previously invited to participate in the QILT surveys and new institutions that requested to be invited were sent an invitation to complete the PASF.

A total of 139 institutions participated in the 2021 SES, including 42 universities and 97 NUHEIs. Nine higher education institutions participated in the SES for the first time, including five non-HESA institutions. See Appendix 2 for a list of participating institutions.

## Sample frame

Historically, the SES has relied on a centralised approach to sampling whereby the population of first semester enrolled students is provided by the department and sourced through institutional reporting into the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS). The HEIMS platform is currently being replaced by the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) data submission platform.

It was initially hoped that the new TCSI platform would be fully operational prior to sample preparation for the 2021 SES. Sourcing the sample frame from a TCSI extract would have greatly reduced burden on institutions by relieving them of having to complete a manual template. However, delays in transitioning to TCSI meant that an extract would not be available for the 2021 SES collection. As such, all sample was submitted to the Social Research Centre via a template that contained all data elements required for survey scoping and reporting.

### Additional populations

Institutions were provided with the opportunity to include out-of-scope students as additional populations in the SES on a fee-for-service basis. In 2021, 17 institutions (14 universities and 3 NUHEIs) included additional populations, an increase from 14 institutions in 2020. These additional populations included middle years, offshore, foundation, non-award course and enabling students. Additional populations are not included in the *SES National Report* and do not appear in results presented in this report.

## Sampling preparation overview

Over time, the Social Research Centre has developed a streamlined sample preparation and processing system designed to reduce burden on institutions and maximise the efficiency of internal workflows.

Detailed information regarding the SES sampling process was available to institutions in the *Collection and Sample Guide* (see Appendix 1). The guide was provided to institutions ahead of sample preparation and outlined:

* the timeline for sample provision
* data elements required, including essential and optional fields
* processes for inclusion of additional populations, and
* steps for flagging the in-scope population.

The sampling process for the 2021 SES is summarised below.

### Sample template distribution

For the 2021 SES institutions were required to submit a full template containing all data elements to support survey scoping and reporting.

Two versions of the template were distributed: one for universities; and a truncated version for NUHEIs excluding EFTSL-related data elements, as these were not required for non-university institutions.

### Sample template submission and population frame creation

Institutions populated all essential data elements in the empty template for all currently enrolled students at the institution and returned the completed template to the Social Research Centre for processing.

Essential elements included institution and course details; demographic details; EFTSL-related variables in the case of universities, and student contact details (see Appendix 1, Table 2 for a complete list of essential and optional variables in the 2021 template).

Submitted templates were combined to create the population frame for the 2021 SES.

### Sample review and selection

The Social Research Centre reviewed and verified the returned template files, applying exclusion rules, derivations and flagging students meeting any additional population definitions to create a final population file for each institution.

Universities were sent a summary of the STAGE calculation and the onshore/offshore flagging applied to their sample.

All institutions were also provided with a workbook containing their final in-scope sample selections for their review. These actions ensured that any sampling- or scope-related queries were resolved before fieldwork commenced.

### Institution level targets

The Social Research Centre set targets for completed surveys for each of the 45 study areas within each institution and determined the number of selections by stratum in accordance with a sample design agreed in consultation with the department.

### Derivations and exclusions

#### 2.4.5.1 Derivations

Several variables were derived and appended to the population file to assist with analysis and the identification of the target population, including:

* Age (E913) – calculated at 31 December in the year prior to the reference year.
* Concurrent / major course indicator (E331) – flagged ‘the major course’ in which students were enrolled for inclusion in the survey.
* Commencing student indicator (E922), flagging students with a commencement date (E534) in the current year.
* Cumulative EFTSL completed successfully (E931).
* Groups excluded from the SES sample frame (EXCLUDE) – see the next section below.
* Extra quota group flag (EXTQUOTA) – identified additional populations for inclusion in the SES on a fee-for-service basis, along with the extra quota group description (EXTQUOTD).
* Commencing and final year student flag (STAGE) – undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students who met the agreed ‘commencing’ and ‘later year’ definitions.
* Sample frame categories (STRATA).
* 21, 45 and 73 study areas derived from E461 (AREA1, AREA451 and AREA731) and E462 (AREA2, AREA452 and AREA732).
* Disability code (E943) – derivation calculation updated to use E615 rather than the previous HEIMS code, E386

#### 2.4.5.2 Sample exclusions

Unless specifically identified for inclusion in the SES as an Additional Population (see Section 2.3.1), records were flagged for exclusion if they were:

* students in postgraduate research (E310=1, 2 or 3)
* students in non-award courses (E310=30, 41, 42 or 50)
* offshore international students (broadly E358=5, see the following section for adjustments due to COVID-19)
* students in the middle of their course (i.e. not ‘commencing’ or ‘later year’)
* a minor course for students with a concurrent enrolment (E331=3), or
* part of a stratum in which six or fewer students were enrolled.

Sample exclusions for NUHEIs closely matched the procedures for universities except for the inclusion of middle year students in the ‘later year’ student definition, and the size of the strata included in the sample frame.

### Sample processing quality assurance

Upon receipt of an institution’s populated template file, the Social Research Centre undertook a range of validation checks. Issues identified within a populated template file were documented, feedback was provided, and the institution was asked to submit a revised version of the file. This process continued for each file until all required validation checks were passed.

Quality assurance checks were undertaken in several stages, as follows:

* manual naming of the returned file to meet version control conventions,
* archiving an original reference copy of each returned file version,
* a basic visual inspection of the file to ensure it aligns with the required format for automated checks,
* processing the file through an automated sample checking script (the ‘auto-checker’). The auto-checker generated a summary report of the file structure, adherence to variable standards, completeness of the returned sample, record scoping, unit record logic checks, reviewing institution-provided course information against the Social Research Centre’s master course list and
* an extensive sample cleaning process on files validated by the auto-checker, before the files were operationalised for fieldwork.

### Sample cleaning

In addition to quality assurance and validation checks, the Social Research Centre also undertook an extensive sample cleaning process. The main components of sample file cleaning and manipulation were as follows:

* standardisation of sample return files – including compliance to a standard format,
* email address cleaning (e.g. correct domain formats, identification of non-personal emails, deduping),
* phone cleaning (e.g. leading zeros, country codes),
* name cleaning (e.g. correct capitalisation and salutations),
* address cleaning (e.g. standardisation of state), and
* various institution-specific corrections.

### Offshore status adjustments due to COVID-19

Ordinarily, offshore students are excluded from the SES in-scope population. However, students intending to study in Australia but eventually located offshore were a key demographic of interest in the 2021 SES. To ensure that these students were included in the in-scope population, institutions were asked to provide students’ intended location in the “IntendedLocation” variable, and this was used in combination with E358 (Citizen resident code) to determine their final offshore status for the purposes of the SES. Where students intended to study onshore but were currently flagged as code 5, residing outside of Australia, in E358, they were treated as onshore students for the purposes of the 2021 SES. Students’ onshore/offshore status was recorded in the variable OFFSHORE. As shown in Table 3, this affected 5,342 records flagged with E358=5.

Table 3 Citizen/resident indicator (E358) by final offshore status

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Citizen/resident indicator (E358)** | **Onshore** | **Offshore** |
| 1 | Australian citizen | 914,164 |  |
| 2 | New Zealand citizen | 11,630 |  |
| 3 | Permanent visa | 31,318 |  |
| 4 | Temporary entry permit | 258,438 |  |
| 5 | Residing outside Australia | 5,342 | 53,830 |
| 8 | Permanent humanitarian visa | 4,445 |  |
| 9 | No information | 44 |  |

### Sample review and selection

#### 2.4.9.1 Stratum parameters

Strata for the SES are defined on the basis of institution, study area, course level (i.e. undergraduate or postgraduate coursework) and stage of studies (i.e. commencing, middle years or later year).

While the ComparED website reports SES results based on institution, course level and 21 study areas to maximise the extent to which data can be reported, the SES sample design is based on 45 study areas. This design seeks to maximise representativeness within the 21 study areas reported on the ComparED website and facilitate more nuanced analysis and more detailed reporting where required.

The fields of education (E461) within each of the 45 and 21 study areas are listed at Appendix 3. The supplementary FOE code (E462) is used to assign courses undertaken by students in combined / double degrees to a second study area variable.

Students in combined / double degrees are allocated to the study area stratum with the fewest students. For example, a student in an Arts / Law course is typically allocated to a Law rather than an Arts stratum (with greater number of students). Students still answer the SES for both degrees but for the purpose of operational strata allocation and progress reporting they count towards Law.

#### 2.4.9.2 Setting strata targets

Target completed sample sizes are calculated at the stratum level taking into account the number of records available and the goal of reporting strata-level results at a level of precision of ±7.5 percentage points at a 90 per cent level of confidence.

See Appendix 4 for details of the method used to derive the target number of completed surveys by stratum for the 2021 SES. When this information is overlaid with historical response rates it is apparent that the response rate target is aspirational for many strata.

Table 4 shows the number and proportion of strata in each target response rate band for university and NUHEI undergraduates and postgraduates. At the ±7.5 per cent level, less than half (48.3 per cent) of the university undergraduate strata have an ‘achievable’ response rate, where for the purpose of this table ‘achievable’ is regarded as a response rate of less than 50 per cent.

Table 4 Strata count by target response rate category (±7.5 per cent precision)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Response rate category** | **University UG - n** | **University UG - %** | **University PGCW - n** | **University PGCW - %** | **NUHEI UG - n** | **NUHEI UG - %** | **NUHEI PGCW - n** | **NUHEI PGCW - %** |
| 100% | 32 | 3.0 | 44 | 5.0 | 24 | 9.7 | 23 | 22.5 |
| 75% to 99% | 210 | 19.6 | 271 | 31.0 | 96 | 38.9 | 39 | 38.2 |
| 50% to 74% | 312 | 29.1 | 289 | 33.1 | 84 | 34.0 | 21 | 20.6 |
| 25% to 49% | 328 | 30.6 | 213 | 24.4 | 33 | 13.4 | 7 | 6.9 |
| Less than 25% | 189 | 17.6 | 56 | 6.4 | 10 | 4.0 | 12 | 11.8 |
| **Total strata** | 1,071 |  | 873 |  | 247 |  | 102 |  |
| *Net 'achievable' (<50%)* | 517 | 48.3 | 269 | 30.8 | 43 | 17.4 | 19 | 18.6 |

For university postgraduate coursework, NUHEI undergraduate and NUHEI postgraduate coursework strata, the proportion of strata with an ‘achievable’ response rate is 30.8, 17.4 and 18.6 per cent respectively. Overall, aspirational stratum level response rates were higher for NUHEIs, relative to universities.

#### 2.4.9.3 Selections

As a result of the sample design, the SES is effectively a census of all commencing and later year students at all universities and NUHEIs, with the exception of the University of Melbourne and University of Western Australia, where a random sample of in-scope students was selected.

Where an institution requires a sample of greater than 90 per cent of students, a census is undertaken in order to minimise complexity in the promotion and administration of the SES within institutions.

After sampling and verification procedures were concluded, the number of students approached for the 2021 SES was 712,799, comprising 642,326 university students (442,219 undergraduates and 200,107 postgraduate coursework students) and 70,473 NUHEI students (45,504 undergraduates and 24,969 postgraduate coursework students).

### Institution level targets

Appendix 5 shows that target response rates for the 2021 SES differed greatly by individual university, from a low of 19.1 per cent to a high of 62.7 per cent. Response rate targets were aspirational and designed to shift institutions towards maximum reportability and representativeness. Response rate targets as presented to institutions were based on an expected proportion for the target variable of 50 per cent, a level of confidence of 90 per cent and a margin of error of 5 per cent (i.e. a higher level of precision than is required for stratum-level reporting of results).

By way of an example, Table 5 shows the required response rate by stratum for a large institution. This institution has a large number of students but a comparatively small number of study areas. As a result, the overall required response rate is low at 19.5 per cent but the stratum level target response rate varies widely from 100.0 per cent to 14.1 per cent.

This institution could easily reach an overall response rate of 19.5 per cent but could fail to meet targets for each stratum unless this was closely monitored. Given that response rates above 50 per cent are unlikely at an individual stratum level, even institutions appearing to have an ‘easy’ overall response rate target may still fail to meet reporting thresholds for individual study areas.

Table 5 Example of response rate targets for an institution with high student numbers and few study areas

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stratum** | **Corresponding Study Area** | **Sample n** | **Target n** | **Required response rate (%)** |
| 1 | Natural & Physical Sciences | 43,618 | 6,170 | 14.1 |
| 3 | Biological Sciences | 584 | 209 | 35.8 |
| 4 | Medical Science & Technology | 1,867 | 327 | 17.5 |
| 5 | Computing & Information Systems | 22 | 22 | 100.0 |
| 12 | Architecture & Urban Environments | 4,228 | 695 | 16.4 |
| 14 | Agriculture & Forestry | 5,860 | 2,218 | 37.8 |
| 15 | Environmental Studies | 928 | 161 | 17.3 |
| 21 | Dentistry | 49 | 38 | 77.5 |
| 29 | Business Management | 4,070 | 582 | 14.3 |
| 31 | Management & Commerce - Other | 252 | 207 | 82.1 |
| 34 | Humanities incl. History & Geography | 12,244 | 1,756 | 14.3 |
| 42 | Art & Design | 1,261 | 628 | 49.8 |
| 43 | Music & Performing Arts | 1,541 | 404 | 26.2 |
| 44 | Communication, Media & Journalism | 146 | 113 | 77.9 |
|  | **Total** | **12,831** | **2,507** | **19.5** |

Table 6 provides an example of an institution with challenging response rate targets. This institution has a comparatively small number of enrolled students but has a broad course offering across several study areas. Targets range from a low of 24.1 per cent to a high of 87.5 per cent with an overall required response rate of 45.9 per cent. Institutions showing this pattern of response rate targets are typically in regional areas where a variety of courses are offered.

Table 6 Example of response rate targets for an institution with low student numbers and many study areas

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stratum** | **Corresponding Study Area** | **Sample (n)** | **Target (n)** | **Required response rate  (%)** |
| 3 | Biological Sciences | 78 | 66 | 85.0 |
| 4 | Medical Science & Technology | 500 | 359 | 71.9 |
| 16 | Health Services & Support | 86 | 58 | 67.5 |
| 18 | Medicine | 72 | 54 | 75.0 |
| 19 | Nursing | 850 | 205 | 24.1 |
| 23 | Physiotherapy | 1,152 | 565 | 49.0 |
| 26 | Teacher Education - Early Childhood | 158 | 98 | 62.3 |
| 27 | Teacher Education - Primary & Secondary | 762 | 230 | 30.2 |
| 28 | Accounting | 213 | 119 | 55.7 |
| 29 | Business Management | 133 | 116 | 87.0 |
| 30 | Sales & Marketing | 693 | 572 | 82.5 |
| 31 | Management & Commerce - Other | 209 | 163 | 77.9 |
| 34 | Humanities inc History & Geography | 369 | 154 | 41.8 |
| 36 | Social Work | 81 | 71 | 87.5 |
| 37 | Psychology | 52 | 44 | 84.6 |
| 38 | Law | 468 | 223 | 47.6 |
| 41 | Sport & Recreation | 125 | 110 | 87.5 |
| 44 | Communication, Media & Journalism | 312 | 216 | 69.0 |
|  | **Total** | **7,427** | **3,406** | **45.9** |

# Survey design and procedures

## Institutional engagement

To build institutional engagement with the SES, the Social Research Centre employed a strategy based on the principles of stakeholder need, transparency, knowledge sharing and responsiveness The Social Research Centre’s institutional engagement strategy for the 2021 SES is described in this section and included:

• planning resources such as the QILT *Key Dates Calendar* and *Collection and Sample Guide*,

• communications inviting institution participation in the SES,

• webinars and newsletters,

• an ongoing dialogue with survey managers to build rapport, including the offer of support during field, and

• supporting institutions to undertake response maximisation activity (such as awareness-raising emails, social media posts and lecture slides) through the *Collection and Sample Guide* and *Marketing Pack* (see Section 3.2).

### 3.1.1 Planning resources

The Social Research Centre provided planning resources to support institutions in participating and publicising the SES, and to ensure project milestones were delivered to schedule.

The QILT *Key Dates Calendar* was accessible via the QILT provider portal and contained an overview of the 2021 SES project milestones (see Section 1.5). The calendar was kept up to date year-round with any project schedule adjustments.

A *Collection and Sample Guide* was made available to institutions via the QILT provider portal prior to the 2021 SES. A notification email was sent to all institutions advising of the release. The *Collection and Sample Guide* provided a stand-alone source of information to introduce the SES, provide timelines, outline the sample process, describe participation in the study, provide resources to assist in student engagement, outline response maximisation procedures and contact protocols, and document general conduct of the SES. The *2021 SES* *Collection and Sample Guide* (August round) is provided at Appendix 1. A separate version with relevant dates was distributed to institutions participating in the September round.

### 3.1.2 Invitation to participate

As noted in Section 2.2, prior to the 2021 SES the Social Research Centre sent an email to all key contacts at each institution, asking recipients to confirm their institution’s participation in the respective collection via a Participation and Additional Services Form (‘PASF’). Institutions were also asked to nominate additional fee-for-service activities. The 2021 SES included the following fee-for-service activities:

* Additional populations (see Section 2.3.1);
* Institution-specific items in the SES questionnaire (see Section 4.4.1);
* Additional SMS (see Section 3.3.4.1 Additional SMS); and
* Post field reminder calls (see Section 3.3.5).

### 3.1.3 Webinars and newsletters

As part of the institutional engagement strategy, a series of webinars and newsletters was provided to institutions prior to and during the 2021 SES collection. Newsletters were sent monthly covering information related to key QILT survey milestones, acting as a regular point of contact with institution contacts who subscribed.

A series of webinars was presented for institutions on a near monthly basis. Webinar topics were designed to guide institutions through key stages of the survey administration process and to share technical, methodological and analytical insights.

To ensure continued engagement with the webinar series, institutions were consulted to inform topics of interest for future sessions. Webinars relating directly to the 2021 SES covered topics such as sample preparation, response maximisation, fieldwork progress and analysis of prior year results.

### 3.1.4 Ongoing dialogue with institutions

An open dialogue with survey managers was maintained throughout the 2021 SES to build rapport, offer support, discuss fieldwork performance and better understand key issues that could impact the SES. The following engagement activities were conducted to connect with institutions:

* **Program of institutional outreach** – Telephone contact was attempted with all participating universities and selected NUHEIs during fieldwork for the 2021 SES. To assist with response maximisation, priority was given to contacting larger institutions and institutions with particularly high or low response rates.
* **Respondent Engagement Survey (RES)** – The research team created a five-minute survey designed to give institutions an opportunity to provide feedback on their experience using QILT resources such as the Marketing Pack. A total of 66 institutions participated in the 2021 SES RES. Key findings from the RES were analysed and displayed in a presentation available for institutions to download from the QILT provider portal and were also discussed at a webinar.

In addition to these activities, the QILT research, administration and consulting teams were in regular communication and contact with institutions to maintain a high level of engagement.

## Student engagement

In addition to the *Collection and Sample Guide*, a *Marketing Pack* was provided to institutions to assist with student engagement activities. Following the refresh of the 2020 SES *Marketing Pack*, minimal changes were made to the 2021 version. However, informed by institution feedback (see Section 3.1.4 Ongoing dialogue with institutions) a new digital asset was included in the *Marketing Pack* in the form of Learning Management System (LMS) tiles. These tiles were a series of images that contained a link to the online survey which institutions could embed on their LMS.

A SES *Marketing Pack User Guide* was included with the *Marketing Pack* to provide information for, and examples of, the intended use of the marketing materials. The *Collection and Sample Guide* for both rounds of the 2021 SES included further marketing information and an Engagement Activity Plan. The Engagement Activity Plan proposed a marketing campaign schedule that was aligned to the relevant SES fieldwork period and paired engagement activities with the appropriate *Marketing Pack* resource. The *Collection and Sample Guide* and the *Marketing Pack User Guide* are included at Appendix 1.

## Contact protocol

The 2021 SES employed an extensive protocol of contact attempts, including an email invitation and nine email reminders, as well up to three SMS reminders. Additionally, institutions could opt-in to an extra SMS and/or post-field reminder calls on a fee-for-service basis. In each mode of contact there was provision to opt-out or unsubscribe from future contact. Table 7 shows the date of contact activity, as well the number of emails and SMS sent. A copy of the SES email and SMS invitation and reminders is provided at Appendix 6.

Table 7 Invitation and reminder schedule

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Round of activity** | **Aug-21 Day of send** | **Aug-21 Number sent** | **Sep-21 Day of send** | **Sep-21 Number sent** |
| Email invitation (NUHEI) | Tue, 27 Jul | 284,135 | Tue, 28 Sep | 15,983 |
| Email invitation (University) | Thu, 29 Jul | 284,135 | Thu, 30 Sep | 15,983 |
| Email reminder 1 | Sat, 31 Jul | 308,408 | Sat, 2 Oct | 18,154 |
| Email reminder 2 | Mon, 2 Aug | 301774 | Mon, 4 Oct | 18,033 |
| Prize draw 1 close | Mon, 2 Aug | N/A | Mon, 4 Oct | N/A |
| Email reminder 3 | Thu, 5 Aug | 310,259 | Thu, 7 Oct | 17,510 |
| Email reminder 4 | Mon, 9 Aug | 291,945 | Mon, 11 Oct | 17,033 |
| SMS 1 | Mon, 9 Aug | 450,520 | Mon, 11 Oct | 25,795 |
| Prize draw 2 close | Mon, 9 Aug | N/A | Mon, 11 Oct | N/A |
| Email reminder 5 | Fri, 13 Aug | 282,771 | Fri, 15 Oct | 8,053 |
| Email reminder 6 | Mon, 16 Aug | 270,447 | Mon, 18 Oct | 15,557 |
| SMS 2 | Mon, 17 Aug | 358,482 | Mon, 18 Oct | 19,284 |
| Prize draw 3 close | Mon, 16 Aug | N/A | Mon, 18 Oct | N/A |
| Email reminder 7 | Fri, 20 Aug | 259,409 | Fri, 22 Oct | 14,769 |
| Email reminder 8 | Mon, 23 Aug | 258,380 | Mon, 25 Oct | 14,797 |
| F4S SMS | Mon, 24 Aug | 41,947 | Mon, 25 Oct | 1,527 |
| Email reminder 9 | Thu, 26 Aug | 266,596 | Thu, 28 Oct | 15,363 |
| Prize draw 4 close | Mon, 23 Aug | N/A | Mon, 25 Oct | N/A |
| SMS 3 | Thu, 26 Aug | 57650 | N/A | N/A |
| Online fieldwork close\* | Sun, 29 Aug | N/A | Sun, 31 Oct | N/A |
| Post-field reminder calls commence† | Mon, 30 Aug | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| Fieldwork close† | Sun, 19 Sep | N/A | N/A | N/A |

\* For institutions which did not commission post field telephone activities (i.e. reminder calls or full CATI surveys).

† For institutions which commissioned post field telephone activities.

### Email invitation and reminders

At the beginning of each round within the 2021 SES collection cycle, the Social Research Centre sent an invitation to participate in the survey to all in-scope sample members. The invitation email advised of their selection in the SES, summarised the survey objectives, outlined privacy provisions and communicated the value of participation. The invitation and reminders included a unique link that took the students directly into their survey. All emails referred to the QILT and SES webpages for further information about the SES, privacy provisions and prize draw terms and conditions. Further, an unsubscribe link was included in the footer of each email if sample members no longer wanted to receive correspondence.

The invitation email was followed by up to nine email reminders. Sample members who had completed the survey, those who were disqualified from participating (i.e. screened out because they were not eligible) or who had unsubscribed, were removed from the next scheduled email reminder.

The email send activity was designed to maintain survey completion momentum throughout the data collection period and maximise participation. The following email send and bounce outcome protocol was used for 2021 SES:

1. Invitation email sent to both the *Email 1* and *Email 2* fields:
   1. If both addresses failed (i.e. hard bounce) and *Email 3* was available, then *Email 3* was used.
   2. If *Email 3* failed and *Email 4* was available, then *Email 4* was used.

Provided at least one of the email addresses available was valid, all students would have been sent an email invitation.

1. For students with a failed outcome for all available email addresses:
   1. The survey remained accessible throughout field by logging in or authenticating via the SES landing page on the QILT website.
   2. They would have received at least one form of contact if a mobile number was available for them (i.e. they were included in SMS activity as described in Section 3.3.4).
   3. They may have been contacted if a phone number was provided for them and they were selected for post-field reminder calls (i.e. they were included in post-field reminder activity as described in Section 3.3.5).

When contacted by SMS, the student could access the survey directly via the unique link provided within the SMS. When contacted via a post-field reminder call, students were provided the option of receiving an email containing a unique survey link.

* 1. They would not have received contact about the survey if a mobile number was not available for them or if they were not selected for post-field reminder calls.

1. From reminder six onwards, students for whom *Email 1* or *Email 2* did not fail, emails were sent to the next available addresses (that is, *Email 3* and *Email 4*).

As a result, provided that all four addresses available were valid, sample members eligible for reminder six received an email to each valid email address for each remaining round of activity.

To enhance the respondent experience, all emails and SMS included a direct survey link which enabled respondents to enter their unique survey automatically. Further, in line with the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Spam Act 2003, each email and SMS contained an ‘unsubscribe’ facility if students no longer wanted to receive contact for the 2021 SES. Students could also ‘opt-out’ by contacting the SES helpdesk.

The overarching objective of the email plan was to appeal to a wide and diverse audience. As such, the theme, length and tone of each email varied. All emails featured text customised to the student and the content differed throughout the reminder schedule, mentioning average survey duration, confidentiality provisions and prize draw information where relevant. To minimise the risk of complaints due to contact fatigue, Reminder 6 highlighted the unsubscribe mechanism. The message intent for the SES emails is summarised in Table 8.

Table 8 2021 SES email plan message theme

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Round of activity** | **Message theme** |
| Invitation | Awareness raising and invitation |
| Reminder 1 | Your feedback is important, you are from a unique group of students |
| Reminder 2 | Encourage early completion with prize incentive, appreciate if you could spare the time |
| Reminder 3 | Recognise student may be busy, emphasise how institutions can use findings to improve |
| Reminder 4 | Grateful if you could spare the time to give feedback to benefit future students, have your say, prize incentive |
| Reminder 5 | Help improve the Australian Government's understanding of COVID-19 on student experience |
| Reminder 6 | Empathetic tone, acknowledge frequency of contact, improve course offerings at institution |
| Reminder 7 | Recognise student may be busy, reflect on your higher education experience to benefit current and future students |
| Reminder 8 | Final prize draw closes tonight, still need to hear from more students from your course |
| Reminder 9 | Last appeal, final chance to complete, help improve the Australian Government's understanding of COVID-19 on student experience |

In the email template design, consideration was given to the display of emails on different devices and how this could alter communication of message intent. Core message themes were communicated in subject lines and above the ‘start survey’ button. Content supplementary to the core theme was placed in the lower half of the email body. This made the ‘start survey’ button visible without the graduate having to scroll down.

A breakdown of email send outcomes by round of activity is provided in Table 9 and Table 10.

As could be expected, open rates and ‘clicked on link’ rates generally trended downwards with each successive reminder. The invitation remained the most effective email in the schedule, with the highest open and ‘clicked on link’ rates across both the August and September rounds.

The exception to this trend was Reminder 4, which coincided with the first SMS. Reminder 4 recorded a higher email open and click through rate than the preceding reminder, Reminder 3 in the August round. Reminder 4 emphasised the upcoming prize draw in both the subject line and message body and was sent on the same day as the first SMS, which may have contributed to the high open rate. In the September round, Reminder 4 (which used the same content as the August Reminder 4) performed slightly better than the preceding reminder in terms of click through but did not mirror the open rate pattern of the August round.

The proportion of bounced emails (sent emails that return with a server response indicating non-delivery) across the 2021 SES collection cycle was low. This indicates that at the national level, the quality of contact details provided was good and that the Social Research Centre-instigated email cleaning processes were effective. Opt-outs were less than one per cent at each send, suggesting the nature of the survey and the timing of sends were not a concern for students.

To inform future contact strategy, the profile of students who did not open any emails was analysed. The characteristics of students that were marginally over-represented in the unopened email sample included undergraduate students, students aged under 25, students who spoke English as their home language, and domestic students. See Section 7.2 for further non-response analysis.

Table 9 Email send outcomes by round of activity (August round)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Total** | **Invite** | **R1** | **R2** | **R3** | **R4** | **R5** | **R6** | **R7** | **R8** | **R9** |
| Total sent (n) | 666,032 | 619,307 | 574,330 | 531,477 | 510,191 | 453,224 | 441,271 | 410,727 | 401,024 | 390,164 |
| Opened (%) | 56.4 | 50.1 | 47.3 | 41.5 | 42.6 | 37.4 | 38.5 | 36.7 | 35.4 | 31.5 |
| *Clicked on link (%)* | 11.8 | 9.5 | 7.9 | 4.2 | 6.7 | 3.2 | 3.9 | 3.2 | 2.7 | 3.0 |
| *Opt-out from link (%)* | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.7 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 0.3 |
| *Opened email (%)* | 44.3 | 40.1 | 38.9 | 36.6 | 35.3 | 33.7 | 34.1 | 33.1 | 32.3 | 28.2 |
| Unopened (%) | 42.7 | 49.8 | 52.5 | 58.4 | 57.2 | 62.4 | 61.3 | 63.2 | 64.4 | 68.3 |
| Soft bounce (%)1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.1 | 0.1 | 0.2 |
| Hard bounce (%)2 | 0.8 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| *Clicked on link as % opened* | 20.8 | 19.0 | 16.7 | 10.2 | 15.8 | 8.5 | 10.1 | 8.6 | 7.6 | 9.5 |

Table 10 Email send outcomes by round of activity (September round)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Total** | **Invite** | **R1** | **R2** | **R3** | **R4** | **R5** | **R6** | **R7** | **R8** | **R9** |
| Total sent (n) | 41,406 | 38,275 | 35,641 | 32,814 | 31,568 | 14,100 | 27,412 | 25,643 | 24,803 | 23,804 |
| Opened (%) | 56.5 | 52.4 | 49.2 | 46.4 | 45.5 | 42.6 | 43.0 | 42.1 | 40.1 | 34.7 |
| *Clicked on link (%)* | 8.2 | 7.8 | 7.2 | 3.8 | 5.4 | 2.8 | 3.5 | 3.7 | 2.9 | 2.8 |
| *Opt-out from link (%)* | 0.5 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.6 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 0.4 | 0.2 |
| *Opened email (%)* | 56.5 | 52.4 | 49.2 | 46.4 | 45.5 | 42.6 | 43.0 | 42.1 | 40.1 | 34.7 |
| Unopened (%) | 38.6 | 47.4 | 50.6 | 53.4 | 54.0 | 57.1 | 56.8 | 57.6 | 59.7 | 64.5 |
| Soft bounce (%)1 | 0.1 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.2 | 0.3 | 0.3 | 0.3 |
| Hard bounce (%)2 | 4.8 | 0.0 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.3 | 0.1 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.5 |
| *Clicked on link as % opened* | 14.5 | 14.9 | 14.7 | 8.2 | 11.7 | 6.6 | 8.0 | 8.8 | 7.2 | 8.1 |

1 A soft bounce occurs when an email could not be delivered because of a temporary issue, such as the recipient’s mailbox being full or inactive.

2 A hard bounce occurs when an email could not be delivered for permanent reasons, for example when the recipient’s email address does not exist or the recipient’s email server has blocked delivery.

### International student contact protocol

Multiple elements of the 2021 SES contact protocol were designed to support the broader QILT international engagement strategy. In an effort to appeal to international students, Reminder 5 in the email reminder schedule was customised based on past experimentation and included an image and text designed to appeal to international students compared to the standard image and content used (see Appendix 6 for a copy of the email).

Furthermore, based on real-time monitoring of response rates by citizenship status during field, the Research team sent an additional (fourth) SMS to 57,781 non-responding international students on 26 August. This message emphasised that the survey was closing soon and that it was an opportunity to share their experiences as an international student with their higher education institution and the Australian government.

At the time of publication, the Social Research Centre is conducting a series of qualitative focus groups with international students to better understand the drivers and barriers to survey response and evaluate the effectiveness of the targeted communications currently used in the SES. Findings from this research will be used to enhance and refine the international student contact strategy by way of updated communications materials and modes of contact.

### Male student contact protocol

As outlined in the *2020 SES Methodological Report,* male students were identified as a sub-group requiring particular attention in future contact protocols. This was due to a lower response rate than other sub-groups. To remedy this, experimentation was conducted on a series of emails (Reminder 3, Reminder 4 and Reminder 7) within the August round reminder schedule. The intention was to see if using different images in these emails would result in higher click-through rates, thereby hopefully increasing survey response. Half of recipients (the control group) saw the default image which had been used in numerous past collections, whilst the other half of recipients (the treatment group) saw a new experimental image. Analysis showed that the experimental image in Reminder 3 had a significantly positive effect on click-through rates for males, whilst the same effect was observed for females in Reminder 7. The experimental images were incorporated as the ‘default’ image in the September round due to these results and will most likely be used in future versions of the email reminder schedule.

### SMS reminders

SMS reminders were used during fieldwork to both compliment the email contact strategy and remedy email deliverability and respondent receptiveness issues that have become apparent across the broader QILT project in recent times. If an institution provided mobile numbers in their sample return, it was considered consent to contact students via SMS. Three SMS were sent in the August round and two in the September round as part of the standard QILT survey methodology. These messages were sent to all in-scope sample members with a valid Australian mobile number who had yet to complete the survey. Those who had already completed the survey or unsubscribed from email activity were excluded from the SMS sends.

The content of the SMS was aimed at driving survey completion and included a direct link to access the online survey, bypassing the need to provide login information. In compliance with the Australian Privacy Principles and the ACMA Spam Act 2003, all SMS messages identified the Social Research Centre as the sender, noted the study the SMS was referring to and had the functionality for recipients to unsubscribe. Sample members who replied ‘STOP’ to the SMS were opted-out of future communications, whilst all other responses were reviewed for further opt-outs and screen-outs. SMS content for all rounds is provided in Appendix 6

#### 3.3.4.1 Additional SMS

Institutions were offered the opportunity to opt-in to an additional SMS (‘F4S SMS’) on a fee-for-service basis. The SMS was sent on the day of the final prize draw for each round and featured an abbreviated version of the institution’s name.

Institutions could choose to send the message to either all survey non-responders with a valid mobile number, or a specific sub-group of their sample that they wished to target within a set budget.

In total, 18 institutions across the two rounds opted to send an additional SMS.

Table 11 provides a summary of the number of SMS sent and the SMS outcomes. The open rate for SMS 1 in August was higher than SMS 1 in September. However, open rates for the rest of the SMS in both rounds remained similar.

The F4S SMS across both rounds enjoyed the highest open rate. This may be due to the fact this SMS was sent on the same day as the final email reminder, which highlighted that it was the last chance to complete the survey. For timing of the SMS sends see Table 7.

Table 11 SMS based follow up activity outcomes

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Contact activity** | **Aug-21 - n** | **Aug-21 - %** | **Sep-21 - n** | **Sep-21 - %** |
| **SMS1** |  |  |  |  |
| Sent | 450,520 | 100.0 | 26523 | 100.0 |
| Opened | 409,827 | 91.0 | 21817 | 82.3 |
| Unopened | 29,378 | 6.5 | 3957 | 14.9 |
| Unsubscribed | 11,315 | 2.5 | 749 | 2.8 |
| *Completed* | *19,732* | *4.4* | *633* | *2.4* |
| **SMS2** |  |  |  |  |
| Sent | 358,482 | 100.0 | 19554 | 100.0 |
| Opened | 330,589 | 92.2 | 18417 | 94.2 |
| Unopened | 16,692 | 4.7 | 572 | 2.9 |
| Unsubscribed | 11,201 | 3.1 | 565 | 2.9 |
| *Completed* | *5,821* | *1.6* | *238* | *1.2* |
| **(F4S SMS)** |  |  |  |  |
| Sent | 42,331 | 100.0 | 1540 | 100.0 |
| Opened | 40,495 | 95.7 | 1500 | 97.4 |
| Unopened | 746 | 1.8 | 20 | 1.3 |
| Unsubscribed | 1090 | 2.6 | 20 | 1.3 |
| *Completed* | *743* | *1.8* | *29* | *1.9* |
| **SMS3** |  |  |  |  |
| Sent | 57,650 | 100.0 | N/A | N/A |
| Opened | 55,186 | 95.7 | N/A | N/A |
| Unopened | 1493 | 2.6 | N/A | N/A |
| Unsubscribed | 971 | 1.7 | N/A | N/A |
| *Completed* | *1531* | *2.7* | N/A | N/A |

### Post field reminder calls

Post field reminder calls were undertaken as part of a ‘push to web’ response maximisation strategy and were a fee-for-service activity to enable institutions to ‘top-up’ response rates for reporting purposes and their own internal analysis.

Post field reminders were conducted following the close of the main online fieldwork, with the online survey remaining open for approximately a two-week period (see Table 2) to allow for students of participating institutions to respond following telephone reminder contact. Online survey completions resulting from post field reminder calls were included in national reporting and analysis, as the mode of completion was consistent with online surveys completed as part of the main field period.

To qualify for the post field reminder calls, a student was required to meet the following criteria:

* phone number available in the sample,
* not completed the survey,
* not opted-out of the 2021 SES (i.e. either via the unsubscribe link in emails, an SMS or by submitting an opt-out request via the SES helpdesk), and
* met any custom criteria chosen by the institution (e.g. the institution may only want to top up response in certain study areas).

The purpose of post field reminder call activity was to confirm or update the best contact email address for students and ask students complete the survey online. Table 12 provides a summary of post field reminder call outcomes.

In 2021, nine institutions participating in the August round opted for post field reminder calls. Post field reminder call activity was undertaken for 8.7 per cent of the total sample approached for the 2021 SES. Contact rates were higher among postgraduate coursework sample members compared to undergraduate. Email addresses were confirmed or updated at a rate of 28.9 per cent for undergraduates and 32.1 per cent for postgraduates. Of the total sample initiated (i.e. Where contact was attempted), 6.6 per cent completed the survey directly from the email sent during post field reminder call activity, which equates to 20.1 per cent of the total contacts made resulting in a direct complete. There are also survey completions that may be indirectly attributed to the post field reminder calls (a further 1.1 per cent of the students called); this lower rate of indirect completion may be due to the cessation of other engagement activity during the post field period.

Table 12 Post field reminder calls outcome summary

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **UG - n** | **UG - %** | **PGCW - n** | **PGCW - %** | **Total - n** | **Total - %** |
| **Total sample initiated** | 43,731 | 100.0 | 18,479 | 100.0 | 62,210 | 100.0 |
| Unusable sample | 434 | 1.0 | 145 | 0.8 | 579 | 0.9 |
| No contact | 29,459 | 67.4 | 11,816 | 63.9 | 41,275 | 66.3 |
| **Total contact** | 13,838 | 31.6 | 6,518 | 35.3 | 20,356 | 32.7 |
| Collected student’s email | 12,650 | 28.9 | 5,936 | 32.1 | 18,586 | 29.9 |
| Other contact type | 1188 | 2.7 | 582 | 3.1 | 1,770 | 2.8 |
| *Completed directly\** | *2804* | *6.4* | *1288* | *7.0* | *4,092* | *6.6* |
| *Completed indirectly*† | *233* | *0.5* | *109* | *0.6* | *342* | *0.5* |

\* Graduate completed the survey directly via the post field reminder email.

† Given that standard response maximisation initiatives cease at the end of the main online fieldwork period, ‘Completed indirectly for post field reminder calls is defined as: graduate completed the survey by means other than the post field reminder email after being called from post field reminder calls (excludes calls to disconnected phone numbers).

Note: Unusable sample includes wrong numbers, disconnected numbers, not a residential number, fax lines, incoming call restrictions and respondent unreliable.

### Fieldwork briefing

All call centre operators selected to work on the 2021 SES post field reminder calls attended a briefing session delivered by the Social Research Centre project management team prior to the commencement of post field activity. The briefing covered:

* an overview of the SES and QILT,
* privacy and confidentiality policy, and
* reminder call procedures.

The briefing slides are provided at Appendix 7.

### Quality control

In field quality monitoring techniques applied to the post field reminder component included:

* Listening-in validations conducted in accordance with ISO 20252 procedures.
* Field team de-briefing after the first shift, and thereafter, whenever there was important information to impart to the field team in relation to engagement techniques, data quality, consistency of administration, or project performance.
* Maintenance of a ‘field team handout’ document addressing any sample member engagement or data quality issues.
* Monitoring (listening in) by the Social Research Centre project manager and supervisory staff.
* Maintenance of a Wiki with answers to common student queries.

Quality assurance and applicable standards are discussed further at Section 3.4.3.

### Social media

A social media advertising campaign was conducted to support the broader SES response maximisation strategy. To support the administration of the campaign, the Research and Administration teams created an extensive content calendar to plan and schedule posts in advance.

Facebook and Instagram posts were shared on QILT social media accounts (https://www.facebook.com/QILT1, @qilt\_src) to build a general level of social media presence. The campaign included paid Facebook and Instagram ads purchased via Facebook Ad Manager that were timed to coincide with key fieldwork dates. Organic (i.e., unpaid) ads were also shared across the same platforms. Ad content was tailored with calls to action appropriate to each period of fieldwork (e.g., referencing a ‘chance to win’ during the prize draw period) and built upon themes introduced in the email reminder plan.

Paid ads were targeted to Facebook and Instagram users aged 18 to 65 who matched a range of interests related to higher education. Example keywords for targeting included ‘university’, ‘international students’ and ‘undergraduate study’. Delivery of the ads was determined by the lowest cost bid strategy and the campaign objective was to drive traffic to the link included in the posts.

Facebook campaign outcomes for the 2021 SES are shown in Table 13. This table presents data for ‘impressions’, that is, the number of times the ad was on screen, ‘reach’, that is, the number of people who saw the ad at least once and ‘link clicks’, that is, the number of people who clicked on the link[[2]](#footnote-2). The audience skewed towards males who comprised most of the impressions (75.0 per cent), reach (75.0 per cent) and link clicks (70.0 per cent). The cause of the gender disparity in the audience could be investigated ahead of future SES collections as it is not an intended outcome of the campaign design.

Table 13 Facebook campaign outcomes by gender

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Audience** | **Impressions - n** | **Impressions - %** | **Reach - n** | **Reach - %** | **Link clicks - n** | **Link clicks - %** |
| Female | 162,903 | 22.1 | 87,041 | 34.4 | 68 | 26.9 |
| Male | 552,836 | 75.0 | 189,922 | 75.0 | 177 | 70.0 |
| Unknown\* | 20,944 | 2.8 | 4192 | 1.7 | 8 | 3.2 |
| Total | **736,683** | **100.0** | **253,377** | **100.0** | **253** | **100.0** |

Note: Results are aggregated from ads displayed on the Facebook and Instagram platforms.

\*Includes data that can’t be grouped into other breakdown segments.

### Email deliverability testing

In the *2020 SES Methodological Report* email deliverability was identified as an issue of importance. For the 2021 SES, email deliverability testing processes were improved with the goal of maximising student email engagement by ensuring that all emails avoided delivery to a spam or junk folder. Further, testing was conducted to optimise emails for deliverability to primary inboxes (e.g. ‘primary’ tab in Gmail, ‘focused’ inbox in Outlook).

Actions taken to optimise email deliverability included:

* a dedicated Internet Protocol (IP) address range used only by the Social Research Centre for bulk email delivery. The reputation of this range was maintained year-round to keep the IP addresses ‘warm’. The dedicated range eliminated risks associated with bulk mailing from a shared IP pool (as was used during the 2020 SES),
* during sample cleaning, email addresses were validated to reduce bounce rates, thereby minimising the degradation of IP reputation,
* ongoing maintenance of technical services and policies to meet sender best practice,
* optimisation of all images, hyperlinks and HTML code used in emails to meet deliverability best practices,
* pre field testing of emails across a broad range of mail clients, devices and providers to confirm and optimise compatibility, display and delivery, and
* in field tracking of email deliverability using analytics tools.

Despite the advancements made in this area, consistency in the deliverability of bulk email remains an ongoing challenge for the SES and the QILT suite of surveys more broadly (see Section 3.3.1 for analysis of email send outcomes).

## Data collection

### Online survey

The online survey could be accessed by clicking on the link in the email invitation or reminders, via the SES landing page on the QILT website, via a redirect from the SES home page, by clicking the link in the SMS, or a redirect from social media ads. Clicking from the email invitation, email reminder or SMS would go directly to the beginning of the survey. From the SES landing page, students could log in to the survey with their unique username and password. In-scope students without a username or password could ‘authenticate’ their personal details (name, student ID, date of birth) against the sample information and receive an email invitation with a direct survey link. Alternatively, in-scope students without login details could access the survey by contacting the QILT Helpdesk.

Online survey presentation was informed by best practice accessibility guidelines and other relevant resources. Standard features included:

* optimisation for small screen devices (see Appendix 10),
* consistent presentation and placement of “Next” and “Previous” buttons,
* input controls and internal logic/validation checks,
* tailored error messages as appropriate,
* splitting long statement batteries over several screens to reduce the number of items that require vertical scrolling on a desktop,
* sizing the panels for free text responses commensurate with the level of detail required in the response,
* automatically ‘saving’ with progression to the next screen, and
* the capacity to save and return to finish off at another time, resuming at the last question viewed.

The survey look and feel was customised to be consistent with QILT branding guidelines, including the use of the SES logo and colour scheme. This ensured consistency with communications such as advertisements placed on social media and the QILT website. A copy of the questionnaire is included at Appendix 8 with screenshots of the online survey included in Appendix 9.

### Survey testing

Standard operational checks of the online survey were conducted pre-fieldwork to ensure implementation aligned with the intended questionnaire design.

Institutions with additional items (see Section 4.4) were sent test links to facilitate testing and sign off on these items prior to field launch.

The survey was soft launched with NUHEI students, which form a small component of the total population. Data was checked following the soft launch to ensure all survey sequencing was functioning as intended. No issues were identified during the soft launch data checks and the main survey launch proceeded as scheduled for each round of the SES. To further ensure the survey data quality, data checks were repeated on the data following the main launch.

### Quality assurance and applicable standards

All aspects of the SES were undertaken in accordance with the Privacy Act (1988) and the Australian Privacy Principles contained therein, the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2014 (superseded on 22 March 2021 by the Privacy (Market and Social Research) Code 2021), the Research Society’s Code of Professional Behaviour, and ISO 20252 standards.

All senior QILT staff are full members of the Research Society or maintain professional membership relevant to their role, and the Social Research Centre is also a member of the Australian Data and Insights Association (ADIA, formerly Association of Market and Social Research Organisations (AMSRO)). All sensitive or personally identifiable information such as sample and data were transferred using the QILT secure file exchange.

### Monitoring and progress reporting

Weekly fieldwork update emails were sent to institutions outlining the response rate that had been achieved and how the individual institution compared to the overall response rate, their cohort (university or NUHEI) average, and the previous year’s results.

The department was provided with weekly updates covering survey launches, in field milestones and the response rate of institutions overall.

### Live online reporting module

In addition to weekly updates, the department had access to a live online reporting module which provided an overview of response rates for each institution and a national average of universities and NUHEIs. Results were provided in real time and included a summary of sample outcomes (e.g., completes, out-of-scopes and opt-out) and response by institution.

Institutions were also able to monitor their progress through a subset of the same online reporting module. Each institution was provided with their own login which allowed them to track sample outcomes and response rates by a selection of key demographics.

Summary tables could be downloaded in .csv format by the department and institutions. Institutions also had the option of downloading sample outcomes at the unit record level. The reporting module enabled institutions to monitor response, identify under-performing demographic groups and target engagement activity based on live sample outcomes.



## Student support

The Social Research Centre maintained a SES helpdesk for the duration of the 2021 SES fieldwork period to provide students with an avenue to contact the SES team. The helpdesk featured a 1800 number and a specialised ses@srcentre.com.au inbox. Team members responded to queries within one business day. The 1800 number was also available to offshore students (with an international dialling code). The helpdesk was staffed seven days a week during call centre operational hours. All calls outside these hours were routed to a voicemail service. Additionally, a general qilt@srcentre.com.au inbox is maintained year round, managed by the QILT Administration team and staffed during business hours.

The SES helpdesk team was briefed on the SES background, procedures and questionnaire to enable them to answer a wide range of queries. To further support the helpdesk, a database was made available to the team to enable them to look up sample member information and survey links, as well as providing a method for logging helpdesk activities and outcomes. All requests to opt-out and out-of-scope notifications received via the helpdesk were removed from the in-scope sample to cease further contact with these students.

A summary of student enquiries to the SES helpdesk is provided at Table 14. In total, there were 1,712 helpdesk transactions during fieldwork, comprising 0.2 per cent of the overall sample approached for the 2021 SES. The majority of contact was made via email (87.7 per cent of the total contacts). The most popular reason for students to get in touch with the helpdesk was for assistance completing the survey online, followed by students nominating themselves as out-of-scope for the survey. Legitimacy/privacy concerns only formed 4.3 per cent of the total contacts. In further analysis (not shown here) the average contact time was found to be 4.2 minutes, with email having the quickest contact time at 2.9 minutes. These results show that the helpdesk continues to be integral in reducing respondent burden and encouraging participation in the survey.

Table 14 Student enquiries to the SES helpdesk overall

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Type of enquiry** | **1800 Number** | **SES Inbox** | **Total** |
| Change of contact details | 3 | 39 | **42** |
| Deletion or removal request | 1 | 1 | **2** |
| General query | 36 | 149 | **185** |
| Opt-Out | 14 | 192 | **206** |
| Other query | 4 | 44 | **48** |
| Out-of-scope | 30 | 269 | **299** |
| Survey query | 116 | 814 | **930** |
| **Total** | **204** | **1508** | **1712** |

## Prize draw

All respondents were entered into a four-week rolling prize draw, designed to encourage early survey completion by offering more chances to win the earlier the survey was completed (e.g. if the survey was completed by the end of the first week the respondent would be entered into all four prize draws). The terms and conditions of the prize draw were available on the Social Research Centre’s website and provided in all email communications sent to sample members.

There were four prize draws for the August round, with three $1,000, five $500 and six $250 prepaid Visa gift cards to be won each week (a total of $7,000 per week). The September round used a lower prize draw value due to the smaller sample size. There was one $1,000 gift card to be won each week. The total national prize pool was valued at $32,000. Table 15 provides the schedule of prize draws across the fieldwork period.

Table 15 Prize draw schedule

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **August 2021** | **September 2021** |
| Prize draw period opens/Fieldwork starts | 29-Jul | 30-Sep |
| Prize draw 1 close | 2-Aug | 4-Oct |
| Prize draw conducted | 4-Aug | 6-Oct |
| Prize draw 2 close | 9-Aug | 11-Oct |
| Prize draw conducted | 11-Aug | 13-Oct |
| Prize draw 3 close | 16-Aug | 18-Oct |
| Prize draw conducted | 18-Aug | 20-Oct |
| Prize draw 4 close | 23-Aug | 25-Oct |
| Prize draw conducted | 25-Aug | 27-Oct |

In compliance with State and Territory gaming and lottery legislation prize draw winners were notified by phone, in writing and published and on the QILT Facebook and Instagram accounts. Winners were published on the QILT Facebook and Instagram accounts on the same day as the prize draw was conducted. Prepaid VISA e-gift cards were sent to the winners’ confirmed email addresses.

# Questionnaire

## Development

The 2021 SES questionnaire was based on the 2020 Student Experience Questionnaire (SEQ), with standard operational updates made to align the questionnaire with current reference periods.

The international student items introduced in 2020 were retained in the 2021 questionnaire. As such, the most significant change to the questionnaire in 2021 was the introduction of a set of ‘freedom of expression’ items. See Section 4.3 for more information about these items.

In addition to the core questionnaire changes, institutions were able to add, modify or remove their specific items for each round. They could also nominate to include stakeholder items, such as the Workplace Relevance Scale (WRS) items, or the COVID-19 module introduced in 2020. See Section 4.4 more information about these items.

## Overview

Table 16 outlines the thematic areas of the main modules in the questionnaire. A copy of the generic survey instrument (i.e. excluding any institution-specific items) is included at Appendix 8 with screen shots of the online survey at Appendix 9.

Table 16 SES module themes

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Module** | **Themes** |
| Module A | Introduction and screening |
| Module B | Inclusion and learner engagement |
| Module C | Teaching and educational development |
| Module D | Support |
| Module E | Demographics |
| Module H | International student items |
| Module I | COVID-19 module |
| Module F | Additional items (departmental, institutional, etc.) |
| Module G | Course experience |

## Changes from 2020

The main changes to the core questionnaire were as follows:

**Freedom of expression item**

In consultation with the QILT Working Group, a new item (FOEX) relating to freedom of expression at higher education institutions was included in the 2021 SEQ. The purpose of this item was to measure students’ perceptions of freedom of expression on campus at Australian higher education institutions. The item was presented as a battery of three statements with a five-point Likert response scale. It was placed at the end of Module D (‘Support’) thus forming part of the core questionnaire.

**International student module**

A number of changes were made to the international student module which was added to the SEQ in 2020 (see Appendix 8 for the full list of items in the module). The changes made to the module included:

* Replacing the open-ended item INTLIVEDIS (dissatisfaction with current living arrangements) with INTLIVEDISN, which included a pre-coded response frame based on analysis of responses collected in 2020.
* The addition of new pre-coded response options at the INTVISA (type of Australian visa held) and INTAUS (factors important when deciding to study in Australia) items.
* The removal of items INTAUSOTH (other factors important when deciding to study in Australia), INTINSOTH (other factors important when deciding to study at institution), INTEMP – INTHELPX (employment whilst studying in Australia, experiences of potential harassment and seeking help) and INTLIVEDIS (dissatisfaction with current living arrangements) from the international student module as these were either pilot items from 2020 or used to refine other code-frames in the module.

## Additional items

### Institution items

Since 2013, institutions have been offered the option of including non-standard, institution-specific items. Some of the content covered by institution-specific items included questions relating to the net promoter score, workplace relevance, campus life, university services, reasons for considering leaving, likelihood of recommending the course or institution to others, reconciliation, and the impact of COVID-19.

These institution-specific items were only presented to students after they had completed the core SEQ, resulting in a clear demarcation between the two survey modules. A statement was also added before the institution-specific items to further emphasise this: “The following items have been included by <(institution name)> to gather feedback from current students on issues important to their institution”.

In total, 19 institutions chose to include their own items. In addition to this, eleven institutions chose to include the Workplace Relevance Scale; three institutions chose to include the at-risk item; Navitas Colleges included a series of items measuring the international student experience and the Independent Higher Education Association (IHEA) included an item for its member institutions.

### COVID-19 module

The COVID-19 module was introduced in the 2020 questionnaire to ascertain the impact of the pandemic on the student experience. See Section 4.5.2 of the *SES 2020 Methodological Report* for further detail about the nature of the items in the module.

Given the continued effect of the pandemic in 2021, the COVID-19 module was again offered for inclusion on a fee-for-service basis. Three institutions chose to include either all, or some of the items. Only students of participating institutions were presented the items, after completing the core questionnaire, and prior to the institution-specific items.

# Data preparation

## Definition of the analytic unit

The analytic unit for the SES is the course, meaning that students in double degrees respond separately in relation to each degree, and as a result may appear more than once in the final data set.

In the 2021 SES data set, a record was considered complete and valid if the student had:

* completed units in the course / program
* a minimum of one valid SEQ scale score, and
* a minimum of one valid SEQ scale score from each of the five scales (i.e. ‘ENGAGE’, ‘TEACH’, ‘RESOURCE’, ‘SUPPORT’ and ‘DEVELOP’) for each course / program in a double degree and the course / programs are in different study areas.

Each scale covers a number of different items, for example the ‘SUPPORT’ scale includes thirteen items such as the availability of ‘academic or learning staff or systems’. To be considered as valid, a scale requires the respondent to record at least one valid value (i.e. respondent selected at least one answer such as ‘Very much’, excluding the ‘Not applicable’ response).

Where double degree students have completed units in both degree components and they are in the same study area, the first record is selected for analysis.

## Data cleaning and preparation

### Respondent (student) level

Demographic variables were first merged from the original population file for inclusion in the final analysis file. Records with newly entered course information were assigned a final course code, and final course level, field of education, and study area information was derived from the Social Research Centre’s master course list, based on available course data for each institution. Where new course codes were added to the master course list, accompanying information was sourced from the survey manager for the relevant institution. The coding process is described in further detail in Section 5.3.

The in-scope status of the respondent, that is whether they were enrolled in a course eligible for the SES, was then re-derived based on revised course level data. This process set out to ensure that respondents who had switched from an eligible undergraduate or postgraduate coursework course to an ineligible course, such as a postgraduate research course, were excluded from the dataset.

All items in the body of the questionnaire were re-filtered to their respective bases to ensure there were no errant responses, and the appropriate missing data conventions (see the *2021* *SES Data Dictionary* on the QILT website for more information) were applied.

After cleaning, normalised SEQ variables, SEQ scale variables, and consolidated demographic and analysis variables were derived as described in the *2021 SES Data Dictionary*. In the case of double degrees, SEQ scale variables were derived separately for each course in the respondent level file.

### Course level

After data was finalised, the respondent (student) level responses were split to course level:

* Where a respondent was enrolled in a single degree, the respondent level record became the course level record.
* Where a respondent was enrolled in a double degree and had completed units in only one course, the respondent level record became the course level record.
* Where a respondent was enrolled in a double degree (including two concurrent unrelated degrees) and had completed units in both courses, two course level records were created:
  + the respondent level record minus course specific items completed for the second degree, and
  + the respondent level record with course specific items completed for the first degree replaced with responses to course specific items completed for the second degree.

The variable ‘ANALYSIS’ was then created to identify the final status of a record.

There are five different final status outcomes identified based on the SEQ items completed and students’ course profile. Each status is defined as follows:

1. **Student.**

A respondent complete - the first course in a double degree or the second course in a double degree where a complete SEQ exists only for the second course.

1. **Second course in double degree.**

The second course in a double degree where the respondent has completed the SEQ for both components of the double degree and the two components of the double degree have different study areas.

1. **Same study area in both components of a double degree.**

The second course in a double degree where the respondent has completed the SEQ for both components of the double degree and both components of the double degree have the same study area.

1. **Incomplete: has no valid scale scores.**

No valid SEQ scale scores for this course component.

1. **Out-of-scope: No longer enrolled or not in first or last year of an in-scope course.**

The respondent is not currently enrolled at the institution or is not in the first or last year of an undergraduate or postgraduate coursework course.

Only records with ANALYSIS=1 or 2, ‘student’ and ‘second course in double degree’, are reported.

Records in ANALYSIS=3, ‘same study area in both component of a double degree’, are excluded from reporting to avoid double counting student responses in the same study area.

The *2021 SES Data Dictionary* lists the new or modified variables for the 2021 SES.

## Course coding

Revised course names entered by respondents in the survey were manually looked up against a master course list for the relevant institution. Where a course name matched multiple course codes the respondent was assigned to the course with the highest enrolment where no conflicts between the different courses existed.

Where an appropriate course code for the course name or double degree recorded by the respondent could not be found, queries were sent to the survey manager from the relevant institution. Where the survey manager advised that a double degree as entered by a respondent did not exist, they were treated as two unrelated concurrent degrees, as described in Table 17. Of the responses requiring course coding, several broad categories of anomalous response requiring further editing were identified. The categories and resolutions are described in Table 17.

Table 17 Resolution of coding anomalies

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Response** | **Resolution** |
| The respondent reported they were undertaking a double degree but entered the same single course for both components of the degree. | The respondent is flagged as being enrolled in a single degree. Where responses are recorded for two course components, only responses for the first component are kept. |
| The respondent entered a course not offered by the institution. | The respondent is flagged as ‘Not Currently Attending’ (*currenrol*=2) in the sample file, as they cannot be studying the given course at the relevant institution. |
| The respondent recorded two degrees that are offered as single degrees but not offered as a double degree by the institution. | Each course recorded by the respondent is treated as a separate single degree. Where the respondent indicated they had completed subjects in both degrees the respondent appears twice in the final course level analytic file (as they would for a double degree) but with two single degree records. |
| The respondent recorded the full title of a double degree in a field reserved for a single course. | Since it is not possible to determine which course component of the double degree the respondent is referring to in these cases, the respondent's response to the SES is considered invalid. |
| The respondent recorded an invalid course title. | Since it is not possible to determine the course the respondent is enrolled in, the respondent's response to the SES is considered invalid. |

## Coding and processing of open text responses

Spell checking and light cleaning of ‘other’ specify responses was applied to remove identifiers and expletives. Code frames were developed in conjunction with, and approved by the department, and remained mostly unchanged in 2021. Table 18 summarises those items which were coded using an external code frame as a source.

Table 18 Items coded and source for coding decisions

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Item coded** | **Code frame source** |
| Overseas country location | For students living overseas, country of residence was coded using the Standard Australian Classification of Countries (SACC, 2016, Second edition, ABS catalogue number 1269.0). |

## Data deliverables

The Social Research Centre provided institutions and the department the following data deliverables at the completion of the 2021 SES cycle:

* institution data files in .csv and SPSS format as a standard, and in SAS format for institutions specifically requesting this format,
* department national data file in SAS format,
* data dictionary and data map,
* files in Tableau packaged workbook format at the national (department), institution, Universities Australia (UA) and Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA) level,
* Report tables specific to the *SES International Report,*
* an institution fieldwork summary and data package summary in MS Word format,
* files of verbatim responses to open-ended questions in MS Excel, at the national (department) and institution level,
* tables of all data available on the ComparED website, and
* *National Report Tables,* available from the QILT website.

A master specification identifying the content and format for all data deliverables is maintained and updated for each SES implementation, as appropriate.

# Final dispositions, response rates and reportable strata

## Final dispositions and response rates

Table 19 shows the final survey dispositions at an overall level for the 2021 SES.

For the purpose of the QILT suite of surveys, ‘response rate’ is defined as completed surveys (as described in Section 5.1) as a proportion of final sample, where final sample excludes unusable sample (e.g. no contact details), out-of-scope and opted-out. This definition of response rate differs from industry standards by treating certain non-contacts and refusals as being ineligible for the response rate calculation (see American Association for Public Opinion Research 2016 for standard definitions of response rates).

The final response rate for the 2021 SES was 41.1 per cent, which was 3 percentage points lower than the 44.1 per cent response rate achieved in 2020. Potential explanations for this decrease are outlined in Section 6.2 below. Results between NUHEIs and universities were comparable (41.1 per cent for universities versus 41.2 per cent for NUHEIs). A similar pattern was observed when reviewing response by course type, with both the undergraduate and postgraduate response rate being 41.1 per cent.

The opt-out rate in 2021 (6.7 per cent) was slightly higher than the 2020 figure (5.7%), but similar to what was observed in 2019 (6.1 per cent). Opt-out rates over time will continue to be closely monitored.

Final survey dispositions by institution for the 2021 SES and a summary of response rates over time by institution are provided at Appendix 11.

Table 19 Final survey dispositions

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Institution** | **Sample provided** | **Unusable sample** | **Out-of-scope** | **Opted-out** | **Final sample** | **Surveys completed** | **Response rate (%)** |
| **2021 SES overall** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Total** | 712,799 | 260 | 21,568 | 47,894 | 643,337 | 264,660 | 41.1% |
| Universities | 642,326 | 177 | 18,897 | 43,209 | 580,220 | 238,653 | 41.1% |
| NUHEIs | 70,473 | 83 | 2,671 | 4,685 | 63,117 | 26,007 | 41.2% |
| **Course type** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Undergraduate | 487,723 | 114 | 11,172 | 34,148 | 442,403 | 182,012 | 41.1% |
| Postgraduate | 225,076 | 146 | 10,396 | 13,746 | 200,934 | 82,648 | 41.1% |

## Factors affecting response rate in 2021

Numerous factors are likely to have contributed to the drop in response rate observed in the 2021 SES collection, including: a decline in response by international students; a change in sample composition; a decline in response from a small number of large institutions; a drop in the number of mobile numbers provided; under-resourcing at institutions; and ongoing challenges with email deliverability. These are discussed in more detail below.

#### International students

In 2021, the tendency of international students to respond to the SES fell by 6.6 percentage points compared to the previous year, in comparison to the domestic response rate which declined by 1.7 percentage points. Ongoing border restrictions and online study may have caused a sense of disillusionment amongst international students in 2021, leading to the diminished response rate. In addition to this, there was a substantial increase in the number of international student respondents citing they were currently located overseas at the time of the survey, increasing from 10.1 per cent in 2020 to 32.8 per cent in 2021. Assuming that this is indicative of the non-responding international student population as well, it is quite possible that email and SMS communications were not received if students were located overseas at the time of the survey. Table 20 provides a comparison of response rates by citizenship status between 2020 and 2021.

Table 20 Response rate comparison by citizenship status, 2020 to 2021

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Citizenship status** | **2020 response rate (%)** | **2021 response rate (%)** | **Year on year change (pp)** |
| Domestic | 44.7 | 43.0 | -1.7 |
| International | 42.6 | 36.0 | -6.6 |
| **Total** | **44.1** | **41.1** | **-3.0** |

#### Change in sample composition

There was an increased proportion of later year students in the 2021 sample, as shown in Table 21. The total sample for 2021 was comprised of 51.8 per cent later year students, compared to 49.3 per cent in 2020. Historically, later year students have completed the SES at a lower rate than commencing students and given that that the final in-scope population in 2021 featured more completing students, it may have contributed to the reduced final response rate.

Table 21 Response rate comparison by stage of study, 2020 to 2021

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stage of studies** | **% of 2020 total sample** | **% of 2021 total sample** | **2020 response rate (%)** | **2021 response rate (%)** |
| Commencing | 50.7 | 48.2 | 47.2 | 44.6 |
| Later year | 49.3 | 51.8 | 40.7 | 37.8 |
| **Total** | **100.0** | **100.0** | **44.1** | **41.1** |

#### Institutional resourcing

Themes of under-resourcing and staff restructuring were cited by numerous institutional survey managers during the telephone contact conducted by the QILT Team (see Section 0). One survey manager stated that their team was going through a restructure and that more generally, their institution had suffered a ‘hit to their reputation’. Another survey manager noted that the budget for promoting the SES (and the QILT surveys more broadly) throughout their student body was extremely tight. The reduced capacity to support promotional activity as mentioned by some institutions may therefore have also contributed to the reduced response rate in 2021.

#### Individual institution performance

The individual performance of some institutions also declined in the 2021 collection, with some of the largest universities in the sample achieving a lower response rate in 2021 compared to 2020. The top six most populous universities in the 2021 sample experienced drops in their response rate of which 1.8 per cent of the drop in national response could be attributed to. However, it should be noted that some universities’ response rates were higher in 2021 compared to 2020; for example, The University of Sydney experienced a 7.3 percentage point increase to their response rate in 2021. Such variance may indicate that unique institutional factors are contributing to a decline in response, rather than a systemic issue with the administration of the survey. Performance by individual institution will continue to be monitored by the Social Research Centre in future SES collections to address this phenomenon.

#### Email deliverability

Email deliverability remains an ongoing concern. Whilst not as severe as 2020, the 2021 collection continued to experience inbox placement issues especially with Hotmail/Outlook domains, thus potentially affecting the ability of email reminders to be seen by students. The Social Research Centre continues to strengthen its internal response to this issue (including checking that institutions have implemented whitelisting procedures as outlined in the *Collection and Sample Guide* and upgrading deliverability testing software). However, the rapidly changing environment of spam filtering technology means this issue will likely remain relevant to future collections.

## Achievement of response rate targets

A total of 29 out of 42 universities and 24 out of 97 NUHEIs achieved the response rate target that was established as a result of the process described in Section 2.4.10. As mentioned previously, these were aspirational targets only and varied by institution based on the size of the target population. This explains why the proportion of NUHEIs which achieved the response rate target was much lower than for universities, which typically have much larger student populations. For some institutions, the overall response rate target was unachievable (for example, the Nan Tien Institute response rate target was 100 per cent).

For full details of institution performance against response rate targets, see Appendix 5.

## Strata meeting the desired level of precision

Table 22 shows the number and proportion of strata meeting the desired level of precision (+/- 7.5 percentage points at the 90 per cent level of confidence) over time, by the Quality of entire educational experience (QOESAT) indicator, for undergraduates in full-time study. Strata are defined by institution at the 21 study area level.

For universities, three quarters (76.4 per cent) of the eligible strata in the 2021 SES met the desired level of precision. For NUHEIs, less than half (33.7 per cent) of the eligible strata met the desired level of precision. Response maximisation initiatives will continue to seek to both enhance the overall representativeness of the achieved sample and maximise the proportion of strata meeting the desired level of precision.

Table 22 Strata meeting desired level of precision for undergraduates in full-time study

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **University** | **2018** | **2019** | **2020** | **2021** |
| **Total strata (n)** | 611 | 608 | 613 | 627 |
| Strata below minimum population (n) | <5 | <5 | <5 | <5 |
| Strata with no completed surveys (n) | <5 | <5 | <5 | <5 |
| Eligible strata for reportability (n) | 611 | 607 | 612 | 626 |
| Strata meeting the desired level of precision (n) | 497 | 484 | 464 | 478 |
| **Strata meeting the desired level of precision (%)** | 81.3 | 79.7 | 75.8 | 76.4 |
| **NUHEI** |  |  |  |  |
| **Total strata (n)** | 151 | 204 | 221 | 210 |
| Strata below minimum population (n) | <5 | 5 | 5 | 5 |
| Strata with no completed surveys (n) | <5 | <5 | <5 | <5 |
| Eligible strata for reportability (n) | 147 | 199 | 216 | 205 |
| Strata meeting the desired level of precision (n) | 69 | 82 | 87 | 69 |
| **Strata meeting the desired level of precision (%)** | 46.9 | 41.2 | 40.3 | 33.7 |

# Response analysis

## Response by time

Figure 9 illustrates the daily and cumulative response rate for the August and September rounds. Engagement activities (i.e. email invitation and email and SMS reminders) undertaken by the QILT team are overlayed. Note that the response rates shown in Table 23 are raw and derived before post field reminder calls are completed and data processing is undertaken. As a result, the raw response rates are slightly lower than the rates presented in Table 1, which is also a combined overall response rate.

The pattern of response across all emails in the 2021 SES cycle was broadly similar to previous implementations. Both collections followed a comparable trajectory, although numerous reminders in the schedule fared slightly better in the September round, relative to the August round, when defined by the cumulative response rate. As observed in the 2020 collection, the most effective response across both roundsoccurred when two forms of communication (i.e., an email and SMS) were sent on the same day, as evidenced by the relative performance of R4/SMS1 & R6/SMS2. The strong daily response of prize draw timed reminders (R2, R4, R6, R8) is visible in both rounds, though diminished by Reminder 8. Response was front loaded in both rounds, with almost half of the final response achieved by the day of the Reminder 4 and SMS1 send.

Table 23 Response rates by day (August and September rounds)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Day in field** | **August Daily Technical completes (%)** | **August Cumulative Technical completes (%)** | **September Daily Technical completes (%)** | **September Cumulative Technical completes (%)** |
| Day 0 | 0.6% | 0.6% | 2.1% | 2.1% |
| Day 1 | 0.1% | 0.7% | 1.9% | 4.0% |
| Day 2 | 4.5% | 5.2% | 3.7% | 7.7% |
| Day 3 | 1.5% | 6.7% | 1.3% | 9.0% |
| Day 4 | 4.0% | 10.7% | 4.0% | 13.0% |
| Day 5 | 2.3% | 13.0% | 1.6% | 14.6% |
| Day 6 | 5.6% | 18.6% | 5.2% | 19.8% |
| Day 7 | 0.7% | 19.3% | 1.0% | 20.8% |
| Day 8 | 0.2% | 19.4% | 0.3% | 21.1% |
| Day 9 | 1.6% | 21.0% | 1.6% | 22.7% |
| Day 10 | 0.5% | 21.5% | 0.6% | 23.3% |
| Day 11 | 0.2% | 21.7% | 0.2% | 23.5% |
| Day 12 | 0.1% | 21.8% | 0.3% | 23.7% |
| Day 13 | 6.6% | 28.4% | 4.8% | 28.5% |
| Day 14 | 0.6% | 29.0% | 1.1% | 29.6% |
| Day 15 | 0.7% | 29.7% | 1.2% | 30.8% |
| Day 16 | 0.1% | 29.7% | 0.5% | 31.3% |
| Day 17 | 1.2% | 30.9% | 0.7% | 32.0% |
| Day 18 | 0.3% | 31.2% | 0.2% | 32.2% |
| Day 19 | 0.2% | 31.4% | 0.2% | 32.4% |
| Day 20 | 3.2% | 34.7% | 2.6% | 35.0% |
| Day 21 | 0.4% | 35.0% | 0.4% | 35.4% |
| Day 22 | 0.1% | 35.1% | 0.2% | 35.7% |
| Day 23 | 0.1% | 35.2% | 0.2% | 35.8% |
| Day 24 | 1.0% | 36.2% | 1.3% | 37.1% |
| Day 25 | 0.3% | 36.5% | 0.3% | 37.5% |
| Day 26 | 0.2% | 36.6% | 0.3% | 37.7% |
| Day 27 | 1.3% | 38.0% | 1.5% | 39.3% |
| Day 28 | 0.2% | 38.2% | 0.5% | 39.7% |
| Day 29 | 0.1% | 38.3% | 0.4% | 40.2% |
| Day 30 | 1.3% | 39.5% | 0.3% | 40.4% |
| Day 31 | 0.3% | 39.8% | 1.0% | 41.4% |
| Day 32 | 0.1% | 39.9% | 0.3% | 41.7% |
| Day 33 | 0.1% | 40.0% | 0.3% | 42.0% |

## Non-response analysis

This section assesses the extent and impact of non-response bias on estimates made from the 2021 SES. Non-response bias occurs when persons who respond to the survey are systematically different from those who do not, leading to results that do not accurately reflect the population of interest. The following assessment is approached from several perspectives, by:

* Identifying administrative characteristics of students that are most different between respondents and non-respondents and that are most strongly associated with the propensity to respond to the survey;
* Determining if adjusting for non-response changes the key SES indicators; and
* Supplementing response rates with measures that account for the composition of respondents compared to the population.

Note that the focus of this section is on students and so some of the results will not exactly match those reported elsewhere where the focus is instead on courses.

#### 7.2.1 Characteristics most different between respondents and non-respondents

The most basic check for potential non-response bias is to identify if there are characteristics on which respondents and non-respondents are markedly different. The characteristics that are available for each student in the population are shown in Table 23.

Table 24 List of administrative variables used in the analysis, available for both respondents and non-respondents (student level)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Characteristic** | **# categories** | **Categories** |
| Age group | 10 | Aged 19 or less, Aged 20-24, …, Aged 50-54, Aged 55+, Not stated |
| Birthplace | 4 | Australia, Other English-speaking countries, Non-English-speaking countries, Unable to establish |
| Citizenship indicator | 2 | Domestic, Overseas |
| Course level | 2 | Undergraduate, Postgraduate (Coursework) |
| Disability indicator | 2 | No disability, Disability |
| Gender | 3 | Male, Female, Indeterminate/Intersex/Unspecified |
| Institution | 44 | - |
| Provider type | 2 | University (Table A-B), NUHEI (Private) |
| Indigenous indicator | 2 | Non-indigenous, Indigenous |
| Institute type | 3 | Group of 8, Other university, NUHEI |
| Institution size | 5 | 1-6,500 records, 6,501-13,500 records, 13,501-19,500 records, 19,501-27,500 records, 27,501+ records |
| NESB indicator | 2 | English speaking background, Non-English speaking background |
| Stage of studies | 3 | Commencing, Middle years, Completing |
| Study area | 21 | - |
| Type of attendance code | 3 | Full-time, Part-time, No information |

For a collection as large as the Student Experience Survey, notions of “statistical significance” are meaningless since even the most trivial of differences will be judged as significant by most commonly used statistical methods.

Instead, this analysis will be limited to categories whose representation among respondents and non-respondents is most different, as shown in Table 24. This table compares the relative frequencies of each demographic sub-group for the population as a whole, as well as for respondents and non-respondents and includes the difference in proportions between the latter two groups. A negative difference means the student sub-group was under-represented among respondents, compared to among non-respondents, whereas a positive difference means the sub-group was over-represented. For a survey where the respondents perfectly mirror the population, all the differences would be zero. The largest differences occur for age group (persons aged 20-24 years are under-represented among respondents), for gender (males are under-represented) and stage of students (completing students are under-represented).

Not shown here, the largest difference across study area was just over 6 percentage points (for Business and management) and the largest difference across institutions was less than 3 percentage points.

Given that the maximum differences across all sub-groups was just over 11 percentage points, only a small impact on overall survey outcomes could be expected due to non-response bias. The impact of this observation will be quantified later in this section.

Table 25 Administrative variables with largest differences between responding and non-respondent students (student level)

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Administrative variable** | **Population (%)** | **Respondents (%)** | **Non-respondents (%)** | **Difference** |
| **Age group** |  |  |  |  |
| Aged 19 or less | 23.26 | 25.48 | 21.99 | 3.49 |
| Aged 20-24 | 41.62 | 34.70 | 45.60 | -10.90 |
| Aged 25-29 | 15.48 | 14.67 | 15.94 | -1.27 |
| Aged 30-34 | 7.04 | 8.07 | 6.44 | 1.63 |
| Aged 35-39 | 4.65 | 5.74 | 4.02 | 1.72 |
| Aged 40-44 | 3.11 | 4.16 | 2.51 | 1.65 |
| Aged 45-49 | 2.29 | 3.19 | 1.77 | 1.43 |
| Aged 50-54 | 1.35 | 2.01 | 0.98 | 1.03 |
| Aged 55+ | 1.21 | 1.99 | 0.76 | 1.23 |
| **Gender** |  |  |  |  |
| Male | 42.26 | 35.13 | 46.36 | -11.23 |
| Female | 57.56 | 64.67 | 53.47 | 11.20 |
| Indeterminate/Intersex/Unspecified | 0.18 | 0.21 | 0.17 | 0.04 |
| **Stage of studies** |  |  |  |  |
| Commencing | 48.26 | 53.25 | 45.39 | 7.85 |
| Middle years | 3.33 | 3.52 | 3.22 | 0.30 |
| Completing | 48.41 | 43.24 | 51.38 | -8.15 |

*Note: The unit of analysis for this table is students and so the figures may not exactly match course-level results reported elsewhere.*

#### 7.2.2 Characteristics most associated with student response propensity

While helpful as a first check, the above comparisons of respondents and non-respondents only enable characteristics to be considered one at a time. In reality, the relationship between characteristics and propensity to respond is complex and requires a more nuanced approach. To provide greater insight to the joint effect that characteristics may have on student participation in the survey, a statistical model was employed to predict whether or not a student would respond to the survey, conditional on their characteristics (see Table 23). The particular model used here, a binary logistic regression, quantifies the contribution of each category of each characteristic to predicting a student’s participation in the survey – some sub-groups (such as being aged 55+ years) might be associated with an increase in survey participation whereas others (such as part-time attendance) might be associated with a decrease in survey participation.

As well as quantifying the impact on non-response of a student being in a particular sub-group (such as being aged 55+ years), the model can also quantify the overall impact that a characteristic has on response propensity (that is, the average overall impact of age on response propensity). It does this by selectively adding or removing characteristics from the model, noting whether the ability to predict student participation is notably improved or worsened. If excluding a characteristic entirely from the model reduces our ability[[3]](#footnote-3) to predict student participation, the characteristic is judged to be relatively more important as a predictor of response. On the other hand, if excluding a characteristic from the model makes little difference in the predictions, it is judged to be relatively less important.

Through this process, it is possible to quantify[[4]](#footnote-4) the average contribution that each characteristic makes in predicting survey response, as shown in Table 26. The values in this figure represent each characteristic’s relative contribution to the model’s overall predictive ability, and thus sum to 100 percent. If one characteristic on its own could be used to predict response to the survey, it would have a relative contribution of 100%. If a characteristic had no impact on the model’s predictions, it would have a relative contribution of 0%. In this figure, the characteristics made a range of contributions to predicting response, with age group being most important (contributing roughly 29%) and Indigenous status the least (less than 1%). Characteristics appearing in Table 24 but not in the figure (namely, Higher Education Provider type, Institute type and Institution size) were dropped during the modelling process either because they were too correlated[[5]](#footnote-5) with other characteristics or they made no noticeable contribution to model predictions.

This use of regression modelling to quantify non-response is very valuable since it provides more insight than was evident from the simple comparisons of respondents and non-respondents in Table 25. In particular, the model identified Institution as a strong predictor of response propensity, second only to age group. By contrast, differences between respondents and non-respondents for this characteristic were too small to be listed in Table 25. The same applies to Study area, albeit to a lesser extent.

Table 26 Relative contribution of selected administrative variables in predicting 2021 response (student level)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Report label** | **Relative contribution to pseudo-R2 (%)** |
| Age grouping | 33.0 |
| Higher Education Provider | 25.5 |
| Gender | 19.4 |
| Study area 1 (E461) | 12.9 |
| Stage of studies | 2.7 |
| Type of attendance code | 2.1 |
| Disability indicator | 1.0 |
| System variable: Course level categories | 1.0 |
| Birthplace | 0.9 |
| Citizenship indicator | 0.8 |
| NESB indicator | 0.5 |
| Indigenous indicator | 0.1 |

#### 7.2.3 Adjusting for non-response

Although the composition of respondents versus non-respondents in Table 25 revealed only small imbalances in representation, it is useful to assess whether adjusting for non-response would change the key survey indicators in any meaningful way. A common technique to adjust for differences between survey respondents and the population of interest is the calculation of “weights”. These are values derived for respondents to denote how much each should “count” towards survey results.

Persons that are under-represented among respondents compared to non-respondents (males, for instance) are assigned a higher weight so that their contribution to the survey results correctly reflects their representation in the population. In a similar way, persons that are over-represented among respondents (females, for example) receive a lower weight. By scientifically balancing the extent to which respondents contribute to survey results, some more and some less, we can ensure that the results of the survey represent the student population as closely as possible. This is a very common approach to deriving estimates from a subset of the population and is used the world over by official statistics agencies such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Table 24 and Figure 10 together identify the characteristics that were most different between respondents and non-respondents as well as the characteristics that were most associated with response to the survey. On the basis of these results, a weight was calculated[[6]](#footnote-6) for each responding student to account for imbalances in the following characteristics:

* Age group;
* Institution;
* Gender;
* Study area; and
* Stage of studies.

If the exercise that generated Table 24 was repeated, but instead summing weights rather than just counting students, the distribution of respondents would now exactly match the population distribution on these characteristics. Weights rather than counts would then be used in all subsequent derivations of survey results. Doing so reduces the extent of bias that may occur in the results due to any compositional differences between respondents and non-respondents.

Table 25 (see next page) compares overall results for seven key indicators derived for the 2021 survey, using both simple counting of respondents along with summing of their weights[[7]](#footnote-7). Also included is the percentage point difference between the two methods, where a negative difference shows that the adjusted (weighted) calculation yielded a higher value for the indicator than the unadjusted calculation, and a positive value shows that the unadjusted calculated yielded a higher value than the adjusted calculation.

Table 27 Comparison of weighted and unweighted indicators (student level)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Indicator** | **Counting students (%)** | **Summing weights (%)** | **Difference** |
| Skills development – positive rating | 79.18 | 78.86 | 0.33 |
| Learner engagement – positive rating | 46.61 | 47.05 | -0.44 |
| Teaching quality – positive rating | 79.61 | 78.61 | 1.00 |
| Student support – positive rating | 72.91 | 72.13 | 0.78 |
| Learning resources – positive rating | 79.31 | 78.20 | 1.11 |
| Quality of entire educational experience – positive rating | 73.12 | 71.75 | 1.37 |

Note: The unit of analysis for this table is students and so the figures may not exactly match course-level results reported elsewhere.

Differences between the two methods are very small, all less than 1.5 percentage points, signifying that adjusting for non-response across the identified student characteristics made essentially no difference in indicators derived for the survey. Although not shown here, if the comparison was repeated for a range of sub-groups (Study area, Institution, and Stage of studies), the largest differences between unadjusted and adjusted indicators are all less than 3 percentage points with most differences being less than 1 percentage point.

#### 7.2.4 Supplementing response rates with representativity indicators

The final perspective on non-response and bias concerns the relationship between response rates and the representativeness of respondents. The response rate is a common quality indicator for surveys and is calculated as the ratio of respondents to total persons. This indicator varies between 0 and 1, where higher is usually seen as better. It is a very crude measure, however, since it ignores the composition of respondents compared to the population. It is easy to envisage two different scenarios – one survey with a low response rate but the responding sample is strongly representative of the population, and another survey with a higher response rate but the respondents are very unlike the population. Using response rate as the measure of survey quality would lead to the false conclusion that the second survey was “better”, even though the first survey would give the most accurate results.

Because the response rate is insufficient as an indicator to measure the potential bias arising from non-response[[8]](#footnote-8), a number of other indicators of respondent representativeness have therefore been developed. Many of these make use of response propensities, the probability that each person in the population will respond to the survey. This ties in with the section above, where a regression model was used to predict the response probability for each person on the basis of their characteristics. The simplest version of a family of so-called R-indicators is derived from the standard deviation of the modelled response propensities:

Here *U* is the complete set of respondents and non-respondents, *N* is the size of this set, is the modelled propensity for person *i*, is the average propensity across all persons (respondents and non-respondents), and is the standard deviation of the response propensities. varies between 0 and 1, where 1 indicates the most representative response and 0 the least. The way to understand the extremes of this range is as follows:

* If it is completely random whether or not someone responds to the survey, there will be no systematic differences between respondents and non-respondents. In such a case, the modelled response propensities will be all the same, their standard deviation will be 0 and so will be 1. This corresponds to a strongly representative sample.
* On the other hand, if there is a systematic pattern of non-response, respondents will be predictably different from non-respondents. In such a case, the modelled response propensities will group together near either 0 (for non-respondents) or 1 (for respondents), leading to a large value for the standard deviation so that will be 0. This corresponds to a strongly unrepresentative sample.

The same as there is no threshold for what separates a “good” response rate from a “bad” one, there are no absolute standards for R-indicators. Their primary usefulness here is to judge if changes in response rates have impacted the representativeness of the responding sample. The following table (Table 26) compares response rates and R-indicators for the 2019 SES, 2020 SES and 2021 SES. Using only response rate as a measure of quality, one might conclude that 2020 was “better” than 2021 (44.1 per cent versus 41.1 per cent). When looking at the R-indicators, however, it is apparent that the representativeness in 2021 was almost identical to that in 2020, falling slightly from 2019, and still much more representative of the population than a 41.1 per cent response rate might suggest on its own.

Table 28 Comparison of response rates and representativity indicators (student level)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Response rate %** | **R-indicator** |
| 2019 | 42.6 | 0.795 |
| 2020 | 44.1 | 0.785 |
| 2021 | 41.1 | 0.786 |

While some slight imbalances for several characteristics (notably age group, gender, institution, stage of studies, and study area) were identified when exploring the extent and impact of any biases that may have occurred in the 2021 SES due to differences between survey respondents and the underlying population of students, adjusting for non-response had only a minimal impact on the survey’s key indicators.

## Sources of response

Table 27 (see next page) summarises the breakdown of online survey completion methods and includes sources of response by gender, stage of studies, citizenship indicator or age due to the variation in method of accessing the survey within these groups. Only minimal differences were observed when reviewing source of response by institution type or course level; as such, these groups are not displayed in the table.

Table 29 Sources of response

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Total (%)** | **Gender - Female (%)** | **Gender - Male (%)** | **Stage of studies - Commencing (%)** | **Stage of studies - Later year (%)** | **Citizenship indicator - Domestic (%)** | **Citizenship indicator - International (%)** | **Age - Under 30 (%)** | **Age - Over 30**  **(%)** |
| *Final response rate* | 41.1 | 46.0 | 34.4 | 44.5 | 37.8 | 43.0 | 35.9 | 38.5 | 53.2 |
| **Survey completion method breakdown** |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Authentication | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.5 | 0.3 |
| Survey link (email) | 84.5 | 85.7 | 82.3 | 83.9 | 85.2 | 84.4 | 84.9 | 83.5 | 88.0 |
| Survey link (SMS) | 10.9 | 10.4 | 11.7 | 11.1 | 10.6 | 11.5 | 8.8 | 11.5 | 8.6 |
| Survey link (LMS) | 2.6 | 2.3 | 3.2 | 3.1 | 2.0 | 2.3 | 3.5 | 2.8 | 2.1 |
| Post field reminder calls | 1.5 | 1.2 | 2.3 | 1.4 | 1.7 | 1.3 | 2.3 | 1.8 | 0.9 |
| ICS | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

Survey completion via a link from an email communication was most popular for all subgroups. However, males were less likely to respond via a link in an email communication than females (82.3 per cent vs. 85.7 per cent). Completing via the direct link in SMS was the next most popular method of response amongst all subgroups. It is interesting to note that males were more likely complete via the SMS link than females. Students aged under 30 were also more likely to complete via the SMS link compared to those aged over 30. Additionally, completing via a link displayed on a student’s LMS page was another popular response mechanism for males (3.2 per cent vs 2.3 per cent for females) and international students (3.5 per cent vs 2.3 per cent for domestic students). This highlights the continued need to preference other communication methods, including SMS and LMS links, over extensive email contact for these subgroups.

It should be noted that only completed surveys directly attributable to the post field reminder calls and SMS are recorded as such in Table 27. It is possible that, for example, reminder call activity may prompt a student to click on the direct survey link in an email they had previously received. In this context, the analysis presented at Table 27 should only be considered indicative. It should also be noted that the opportunity to complete via each method was not necessarily equal between subgroups.

# Considerations for future surveys

## Response rate and representativeness

While response rate will almost certainly remain an important lens for understanding and comparing survey performance, the broader QILT project has also focused on improving representativeness in recent collections. The purpose of this approach is two-fold; increasing representation strengthens the quality of data collected but should naturally also lead to an improvement in response. As such, two particular sub-groups will be targeted in future SES collections: the male and international student cohorts.

Male student engagement

The male student cohort was underrepresented in the 2021 SES (see Sections 3.3.3, 7.2), illustrating a continuation of the trend observed in previous iterations of the survey. It is likely that the current engagement strategy still needs further refinement to have a greater appeal to this cohort.

Potential strategies to engage with this population include further engagement with institutions with large male populations, a customised and nuanced email communication plan appealing directly to this audience, experimentation to determine messaging and imagery that appeals to male students and increased SMS contact with potentially reduced email contact.

International student engagement

Compared to prior year results, and the 2021 domestic response rate, the response rate for international students in the 2021 SES fell substantially.

Further analysis is needed to understand what may have caused this drop and if particular nationalities or other factors (university vs. NUHEI students; stage of studies; study areas) are driving the trend. The Social Research Centre will investigate and use any findings, combined with qualitative data collected in the focus groups described at Section 3.3.2, to strengthen response maximisation amongst the international cohort. Future response maximisation activities in this space should continue to highlight the opportunity for international students to contribute their unique voice and reward them for doing so. Communication materials need to feature diverse imagery and customised text and modern, eye-catching layouts.

## Sampling process

It is expected that the TCSI data collection platform will be operational ahead of the 2022 SES collection. This will likely alter the existing sample preparation workflow as changes are made to data submission timelines and variables. The Social Research Centre will work in consultation with department and sector stakeholders to develop an appropriate sample preparation workflow.

List of abbreviations and terms

**ABS** Australian Bureau of Statistics

**CATI** Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing

**DEEWR** Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

**EFTSL** Equivalent Full-Time Student Load

**GCA** Graduate Careers Australia

**GOS** Graduate Outcomes Survey

**GOS-L** Graduate Outcomes Survey - Longitudinal

**HESA** Higher Education Support Act

**HEIMS** Higher Education Information Management System

**ISO** International Standards Organisation

**LMS** Learning Management System

**NUHEI** Non-University Higher Education Institution

**QILT** Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching

**SES** Student Experience Survey

**SEQ** Student Experience Questionnaire

**UEQ** University Experience Questionnaire

**UES** University Experience Survey

**WRS** Workplace Relevance Scale

1. The number of universities increased from 41 in 2020 to 42 in 2021. This is due to Avondale University (formerly known as Avondale University College) being accredited as a university in 2021. Prior to 2021, Avondale University participated as a NUHEI in the SES. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://www.facebook.com/business/help/447834205249495 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For instance, by comparing the model’s predictions of whether or not a student participated in the survey with their actual observed participation. The measure used here to assess a model’s predictive ability is McFadden’s pseudo-R2. It varies from 0 (for predictions that are unrelated to the observations) to 1 (for predictions that perfectly match the observations). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Azen, R., & Traxel, N. (2009). Using dominance analysis to determine predictor importance in logistic regression. Journal of Educational and Behavioral Statistics, 34(3), 319-347. doi:10.3102/1076998609332754 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This refers to the issue of multicollinearity where two characteristics are so strongly related that including them together in a model causes it to fail entirely or to yield unreliable results. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Deville J-C, Sarndal C-E, Sautory O (1993) Generalized raking procedures in survey sampling. Journal of the American Statistical Association 88 (423), 1013-1020. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The first column is the number of persons that gave a positive rating as a percentage of all persons, whereas the second is the sum of the weights for persons that gave a positive rating as a percentage of the sum of the weights for all persons. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Shlomo, N., C. Skinner and B. Schouten (2012). Estimation of an indicator of the representativeness of survey response. Journal of Statistical Planning and Inference 142, 201-211. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)