



INDEX Survey: Response rates and quality of survey data

The purpose of the INDEX Survey is to understand more about the digital experiences and expectations of students and staff who teach in Irish higher education so that we can work together towards enhancing digital learning and teaching. Maximising survey response rates is one important way to ensure the quality of the survey data. This short document outlines: (1) how to ensure minimum acceptable response rates for your surveys, (2) additional factors that can affect the quality of survey data, and (3) suggestions for maximising response rates and data quality.

1. RESPONSE RATE

Response rate is defined simply as the number of survey responses divided by the total population eligible to complete the survey. At minimum, a survey must collect enough responses for the survey data to be representative of the target population. As the population gets larger, a valid and reliable sample can be assumed with a smaller proportion of the whole. To calculate minimum acceptable response rates for your INDEX Survey:

- i) Establish the number of students and staff eligible to complete the survey at your institution¹, i.e., (a) students age 18 or over, and (b) staff who teach or who support learning and teaching.
- ii) Use the table below to calculate the minimum number of responses you need to ensure you have a representative sample². This assumes a 5% margin of error. As the population gets larger, you can assume a valid and reliable sample with a smaller proportion of the whole.

Number of students or staff in target population	Responses needed for 5% margin of error (number)	Responses needed for 5% margin of error (% of total population)
50	44	88%
100	80	80%
150	108	72%
200	132	66%
250	152	61%
300	169	56%
400	196	49%
500	217	43%
700	248	35%
1000	278	28%
1500	306	20%
2000	322	16%
3000	341	11%
5000	357	7%
>5000	384	<7%

¹ Individual institutions can use their own current data on populations for Students and Staff Who Teach, as defined in the INDEX Survey, in order to calculate target response rates.

² Table adapted from [Jisc Planning to Use Insights Surveys](#)



If the number in your target population falls between two numbers in the first column, use the guidelines for the smaller population. Please note that the table above identifies *minimum* acceptable response rates for a 5% margin of error. Overall, the aim is to reach as high a response rate as possible.

2. ADDITIONAL FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY OF SURVEY DATA

In addition to response rate, additional factors can be analysed to try to reduce bias and ensure the quality of your survey data:

Representativeness – Rather than the presence or absence of low response rate bias, you can test for it. You can compare key demographic details of your survey responses to those of your overall population. Variances can be analysed and addressed, both during and after the survey period.

Non-response bias – The response rate guidelines in the above table ignore non-response bias, i.e., these assume that survey responses are evenly spread among the entire population. Non-response happens when there is a significant difference between those who responded to a survey and those who did not. Efforts to reduce non-response bias have been included in the design of the INDEx Survey (e.g. by adapting a validated and well-tested survey instrument), however, reducing non-response bias should also be a focus of all survey engagement efforts.

3. SUGGESTIONS FOR MAXIMISING RESPONSE RATE AND DATA QUALITY

- Ensure that the survey reaches all members of the target populations, particularly by reaching populations that are often missed:
 - Students, e.g., international students, students with disabilities, part-time students, distance students, students on placement, apprentices, access students, disadvantaged students
 - Staff, e.g., staff on part-time contracts, staff on fixed-term contracts, staff who support learning and teaching in various different job roles
- Engage with as many students and staff as possible – one-on-one, or as personally as possible.
- Engage especially with those who may think the survey is not for them, e.g., those who see themselves as ‘non-digital’ – this is an opportunity to identify what’s needed.
- Use multiple platforms and spaces to share news of and complete the survey, e.g., public digital displays, libraries, lobbies, cafés, lounges, staff rooms, the VLE, social media, etc.
- Communicate clearly, both before and during the survey period, that you will share the survey findings with students and staff after the data is analysed, and also will engage in broad-based discussions with students and staff on ways forward in light of these findings.