

CHAPTER

3

Inappropriate Influence

144. Providers should ensure that students give honest feedback on their learning experience. Communications and/or providers' marketing materials must not attempt to sway the opinion of students in any way.

What is inappropriate influence?

145. The OfS (in partnership with the UK funding and regulatory bodies) define inappropriate influence as **any activity or behaviour that may encourage students to reflect anything other than their true opinion of their experiences during their course in their NSS responses.**
146. Inappropriate influence can emerge in several ways, for example:
- a. Explicit or implicit instruction on the type of responses students should make, including the provision of standard or example responses.
 - b. Explaining how the survey is presented to students and drawing attention, explicitly or implicitly, to the consequences of negative responses, with regard to:
 - I. conflation with other surveys undertaken by providers whether internal or external.
 - II. league tables, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) or Quality Assessment processes
 - III. employers' perceptions of positive and negative outcomes.
 - c. Instruction on how the response scale is understood by third parties.
 - d. Encouraging students to avoid a particular point on the response scale.
 - e. Failure to ensure that methods to encourage participation in the survey, such as campaigns, the use of promotional materials (either explicitly or implicitly) or incentivisation methods (such as prize draws), do not bias responses.
 - f. Holding compulsory sessions at which the NSS must be completed.
147. If promoting the survey, providers should take into consideration whether the campaign could inappropriately influence the type of responses participants may give. The OfS (in partnership with the UK funding and regulatory bodies) expects providers to have processes to ensure that all staff including both academic and professional services have engaged with the guidance and put measures in place to prevent inappropriate influence throughout their NSS activities.

- 148.** As part of pre-launch survey plans, providers are expected to send an email to all eligible students, informing them of the NSS, that their data will be transferred to Ipsos and how they will be contacted to complete the survey. This email will also contain details about inappropriate influence and include a link to a student guide on the topic. This will help to raise awareness among students on the value of their honest views, what to expect on NSS promotion, what is allowed and not allowed, and where students should go for help and support if they are concerned about being influenced. There is also a digital help card and OfS designed social media graphics available on the NSS Extranet which providers can use to raise further awareness with students about what is allowed and not allowed during survey promotion.

Avoiding Inappropriate Influence, Dos and Don'ts

Do:

- 149. Do run a neutral campaign that focuses solely on boosting responses in the NSS.**

It is important that the NSS is treated as an independent social research survey. As a result, if you opt to run a marketing campaign it should focus on the survey rather than the provider and should not encourage students to respond in a particular way.

- 150. Do provide examples of where NSS feedback has resulted in improvements in previous years.**

Demonstrating how feedback from the NSS has led to tangible changes at the provider can be a powerful way to promote the survey. For example: "Your feedback counts – in a previous NSS, students expressed that library opening hours were an issue. Since then, we introduced a 24-hour central library." However, care must be taken not to combine this with other internal campaigns – please see '**don't**' below.

- 151. Do encourage eligible students to participate.**

All eligible students should be targeted in any provider-led promotional campaigns.

- 152. Do allow students to give their feedback regardless of their opinion.**

When promoting the NSS, providers should encourage all students to participate regardless of their opinion of the provider or course.

- 153. Do be wary of tone and use of language when discussing the NSS and asking students to complete it.**

Be sure to keep promotion as neutral as possible. Staff can explain the importance of the NSS, improvements that their feedback has led to in previous years, and how it will help prospective students. **Do not** link the NSS to league tables, a provider's performance in the TEF or to the perceived value of students' degrees.

- 154. Do target promotion in departments or courses with low response rates.**

During the NSS fieldwork, Ipsos will share response rate information with providers, which can be used to identify targets for promotional campaigns.

- 155. Do inform students that they are free to interpret the survey questions how they wish.**

Questions for the NSS are self-explanatory. Students should be informed that they should answer the survey questions however they interpret them.

156. Do hold voluntary NSS completion sessions.

Organising completion sessions is an effective way to encourage students to complete the survey. However, these sessions must be voluntary.

157. Do ensure students have total privacy when completing the survey.

Students must not feel pressured to respond in any particular way. Therefore, staff should respect students' privacy when they are taking the survey. If opting to host voluntary completion sessions, staff must not look at students' screens or at the responses they are giving.

158. Do use incentives or a prize draw to promote the survey.

Incentives and prize draws are both proven to be effective in improving response rates. This can form a part of the promotional campaign. Students should be made aware that there is no link between how they respond and their chances of winning a prize. Completion of the survey cannot be a condition to entering the online prize draw as all eligible students have an equal chance of winning. Please see the [MRS guidelines on incentives and prize draws](#) for more information. Do ensure that all staff are aware of the guidelines.

159. To facilitate understanding of the guidelines and to prevent inappropriate influence in the promotion of the NSS, there is a **digital help card** which can be circulated to academic staff, staff in professional services such as administrative or student support staff, or any other members of staff in a student-facing role.

Don't:**160. Do not embed NSS marketing activity in broader provider promotional activities, for example 'Pride' and 'I Love' campaigns.**

A clear division between marketing campaigns must be made to ensure all promotion of the NSS is neutral. This includes 'you said, we did' campaigns, where it must be clear that particular changes came about from the NSS rather than from internal campaigns.

161. Do not combine the NSS with other surveys being undertaken at the provider.

The NSS must be promoted independently and students must not be led to confuse the NSS with other surveys, whether internal or external, undertaken at the provider.

162. Do not explicitly or implicitly advise students on how to interpret the survey.

It is very important that students are not influenced on how they interpret the survey questions or response scale. These have been cognitively tested and are self-explanatory so students should be left to interpret them in a way they see fit. Providers are not permitted to explain the meanings of questions or response scales.

163. Do not advise or request students to respond in a certain way.

Providers are not permitted to recommend that students respond in a certain way, e.g. 'I recommend that you select a certain response from the scale or provide standard or example responses.'

164. Do not make entering a prize draw conditional on completing the NSS.

Prize draws have been proven as a good way to encourage student interest in the NSS. However, taking the NSS cannot be made an explicit condition to enter the prize draw, as all students eligible to take the NSS can enter, not just those who complete the survey.

165. Do not link the NSS to league tables, job prospects and the perceived value of students' degrees.

Providers are **not** permitted to tell students that negative responses could make their degrees look bad to future employers. There should be no link made between completion of the survey and

employers' perceptions of positive and negative outcomes. This includes links between the NSS and university league tables or the TEF.

166. Do not indicate that the survey is compulsory.

Participation in the NSS, while beneficial to providers, is completely voluntary and this should be made clear to eligible students.

167. Do not make it a requirement or pressure students to attend dedicated NSS sessions.

Arranging dedicated NSS sessions is allowed however providers should not enforce them or make students feel there may be consequences if they do not attend. The voluntary basis of the sessions should be made clear.

168. Do not take students through the survey on an individual basis.

Providers should not stand or sit beside students when they are completing the survey or take them through their responses question-by-question. Students should be given due privacy so they can respond with honesty.

169. Do not complete the survey on behalf of the student

The survey should not be accessed or completed on behalf of the student. The NSS is a strictly confidential student feedback survey and should only be completed by the eligible student.

170. This is not an exhaustive list and providers should be alert to other possible types of inappropriate influence.

What could the consequences of inappropriate influence be for my provider?

171. Where a concern or allegation is raised, it will be investigated by the OfS through the Allegations Procedure³. If an investigation were to find that promotional activities and/or marketing materials had resulted in inappropriate influence, whether intentional or unintentional, the integrity of the NSS data could be called into question. The OfS (in partnership with the UK funding and regulatory bodies) could take action to suppress the affected NSS data for the provider meaning that no NSS results would be published for the affected courses in that specific year, nor would it be available to use in marketing activities, learning enhancement work or inclusion on Discover Uni, the OfS's website etc.

172. More information on the Allegations Procedure for raising concerns, and how the OfS deal with allegations of inappropriate influence, can be found in their guidance 'National Student Survey: Procedures for investigating allegations of inappropriate influence on survey results'; this guidance can be read in full at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/promotion-of-the-nss/>

173. If you have any questions or concerns regarding inappropriate influence, please speak to the survey manager at the provider or to the person who deals with the provider's data submissions, who should be able to provide further guidance regarding 'inappropriate influence' in student surveys. Alternatively, please do not hesitate to contact the OfS Allegations team at NSSAllegations@officeforstudents.org.uk or Ipsos on 0808 2022 111 or at nss@ipsos.com who can pass this on to the OfS for investigation.

³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/inappropriate-influence/>