

3. Inappropriate influence

Institutions are encouraged to communicate with their students to engage them in the survey. They have a responsibility to ensure that their students are encouraged to give honest feedback on their learning experience. Communications and/or institutional marketing materials must not attempt to sway the opinion of students in any way.

Q1. What is inappropriate influence?

HEFCE (in partnership with the relevant funding partners) defines inappropriate influence as **any activity which may encourage students to reflect anything other than their true opinion of their experiences during their course in their NSS responses.**

Inappropriate influence can emerge in several ways, for example:

- Explicitly instructing students on how to complete the survey, such as explaining the meanings of questions or the NSS scale. The questions and scale are self-explanatory and students should be left to interpret these in a way they see fit. Institutions are not permitted to recommend that students respond in a certain way, e.g. 'I recommend that you select agree or mostly agree', or misrepresent the scale to students, i.e. defining the 'neither agree nor disagree' as a negative response.
- Linking the NSS to league tables, job prospects and the perceived value of students' degrees. Institutions are **not** permitted to tell students that if their courses do not achieve good satisfaction scores, this will make their degrees look bad to future employers.
- Arranging compulsory sessions for students to complete the NSS. Completion of the NSS, while beneficial to institutions, is completely voluntary for students. While arranging completion sessions is allowed, institutions should not enforce them nor make students feel there may be consequences should they not attend.
- Taking students through the survey on an individual basis. Institutions should not stand or sit beside students when they are completing the survey, or take them through their responses question-by-questions. Students should be given due privacy so they can respond with honesty.
- Comparing the NSS scale to other scales with different purposes, i.e. assignment marking schemes.

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

Q2. What questions should my institution consider to help avoid inappropriate influence in our NSS campaign?

When promoting the survey, institutions should take into consideration whether the campaign could inappropriately influence the type of responses participants may give. HEFCE (in partnership with the relevant funding partners) expect institutions to have processes in place to ensure that all staff (both academic and professional services) have engaged with the guidance and that measures are in place to prevent inappropriate influence throughout their NSS activities. They advise that institutions should consider the following when developing marketing materials:

- The campaign should not influence the results of the survey but rather should boost response rates;
- The campaign should promote the survey, **not** the institution;
- The campaign should be a 'call to action' for students and should encourage all eligible students to participate, whatever their opinion of the institution or course;
- The campaign should not be interpreted by a student or an external person as an attempt to influence the answers they might give; and

With regards to direct communications with students (e.g. emails to eligible students or lecture shout outs), institutions should ensure that all those responsible for communicating with students regarding the NSS are aware of the key messages, the purpose of the research and the particular guidance on inappropriate influence. [Annex A](#) is a document to circulate for this purpose. Key tutors and staff should be wary of their tone when discussing the survey and asking students to complete it. They should always give them privacy if completing in class; tutors and staff should **not** take students through the survey or complete on their behalf.

If there is any uncertainty about any of these items, please speak to the survey manager at the institution or to the person who deals with the institutional data submissions, who should be able to provide further guidance regarding 'influence' in student surveys.

Q3. What could the consequences of inappropriate influence be for my institution?

Where a concern or allegation is raised, it will be investigated by HEFCE. 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. HEFCE (in partnership with the relevant funding partners) could take action to suppress the affected NSS data for the institution. This would mean that no NSS results would be published for the affected courses at the institution in the specific year, nor would it be available to use in marketing activities, learning enhancement work or inclusion on Unistats, HEFCE's website etc. More information on the HEFCE concerns process, and how they deal with allegations of inappropriate influence, can be found in their guidance 'Ensuring the integrity of National Student Survey data: Reporting and investigating concerns about institutional data quality, including attempts to influence results inappropriately'; this guidance can be read in full [here](#). HEFCE and the UK funding bodies will update this guidance in due course.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding these issues, please do not hesitate to contact us at 020 8861 8110 or nss@ipsos.com.