

Office for
Students



National Student Survey 2026

Procedures for investigating allegations
of inappropriate influence on survey
results



Department for the
Economy

Medr

Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

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Introduction and scope

1. This document outlines the Office for Students' (OfS's) procedures for the reporting, handling and resolution of allegations of inappropriate influence in the promotion and running of the National Student Survey (NSS).
2. The procedures apply to all higher education providers that participate in the NSS and all students, student organisations and other parties involved in the survey.
3. The OfS is responsible for managing this process on behalf of all the UK higher education funding and regulatory bodies (Department for the Economy Northern Ireland, Medr and Scottish Funding Council). Where relevant, the OfS will work with the relevant UK funding and regulatory bodies to resolve concerns raised under these procedures and will share relevant information as appropriate.
4. In view of its uses, the UK funding and regulatory bodies need to ensure the integrity and robustness of the NSS data. All users should be reassured that students who complete the survey have responded in a manner that wholly reflects their true opinion, and that they have not been influenced by their provider, other students, student organisations or other parties.
5. 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 higher education experiences in their NSS responses.
6. Procedures set out in this document relate solely to matters relating to perceived inappropriate influence. Other concerns about NSS data integrity may be raised and resolved through other routes depending on the nature of the issue. These are presented below but may be subject to change.

NSS data integrity: Routes for raising concerns

Use and publication of NSS results	Concerns about the use of data by providers should be directed to the Advertising Standards Authority or the Competition and Markets Authority. For more information, see https://www.asa.org.uk/ and https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/competition-and-markets-authority
Personal interest disclosures	Concerns about financial irregularity and impropriety, waste and fraud at funded providers should be routed to the appropriate funder/regulator: For England , concerns should be routed through the OfS's complaints and notifications process: Complaints - Office for Students For Wales , concerns should be routed through: info@medr.cymru For Scotland , concerns should be routed through: enquiries@sfc.ac.uk For Northern Ireland , concerns should be routed through: hepolicy@economy-ni.gov.uk

Provider data amendments or errors

A number of different data sources are used for the NSS and the Discover Uni website which providers sometimes ask to be amended.

The OfS's data amendments panel assesses all proposed amendments and judges whether the identified errors are widespread and significant enough to require action.

For more information, see [Data amendments process - Office for Students](#)

7. These procedures are subject to periodic review, which will take place at least once per year before the NSS survey is live (January to April).

Background

8. The NSS is a UK-wide survey which collects information about students' higher education experiences. The resulting data supports public accountability, helps inform the choices of prospective students and assists providers in enhancing the student experience. The survey is managed by the OfS on behalf of the other UK funding and regulatory bodies, namely the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland (DfENI), Medr, and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC).
9. Providers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are expected to promote the NSS to their students. However, for NSS 2026, it is not a requirement for higher education providers in England to promote the NSS; instead, promotion is optional. Whether providers promote the survey or not, the definitions and procedures outlined in this document remain relevant. For all nations, it is important that higher education providers do not encourage students to reflect anything other than their genuine perceptions of their experience in their answers to the survey.
10. Results of the survey are published by the OfS and made available to higher education providers and students' unions on a dedicated data dissemination portal. NSS results are also made available to prospective students on the Discover Uni website.¹
11. The results of the NSS provide an important dataset for a range of users, including:
 - higher education providers and student organisations, to identify good practice and areas for enhancement
 - prospective students, to inform decisions about where to study
 - the UK funding and regulatory bodies and governments, to inform policy and for regulatory purposes
 - third parties that provide public information, such as league table compilers and student information websites.

¹ Available at: [Discover Uni Home](#) | [Discover Uni](#).

Definition of inappropriate influence

12. As stated in paragraph 5, 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 higher education experiences in their NSS responses.
13. Inappropriate influence is determined by how the influence is perceived by students, not how it was intended to be understood.
14. Conversations between peers discussing their views about the courses do not constitute inappropriate influence. However, deliberately seeking to encourage others to respond to the survey questions in a particular way that does not wholly reflect their own opinion is deemed to be inappropriate influence.
15. In communications, it is important that students are reminded that the survey is independent of the provider, and that they should provide their true opinion of the course.
16. The UK funding and regulatory bodies, working in collaboration with the survey supplier, Ipsos, have published a good practice guide to marketing and promoting the NSS, which includes guidance on avoiding inappropriate influence. This good practice guide and information on promotion of the NSS is available on the OfS website² and should be read in conjunction with this procedure.
17. There is a student guide on inappropriate influence to help raise awareness among students of the value of their honest views, what to expect from the promotion of the NSS, what is and is not allowed, and where they should go for help and support if they are concerned about being influenced.³ Providers are asked to inform students about this guide as part of their pre-launch survey plans.
18. If promoting the survey, providers should consider whether their campaign could inappropriately influence how participants respond. The UK funding and regulatory bodies expect providers to have processes to ensure that all staff involved in the administration (including academic and professional services) and any promotion of the NSS, have engaged with the good practice guide and that measures are in place to prevent inappropriate influence throughout their NSS activities.
19. Alongside this guidance, providers should take account of the data collection Codes of Practice in higher education, published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and the UK funding and regulatory bodies. This sets out the standards and principles providers are expected to meet.⁴

² For further information, please see: [Promotion of the NSS - Office for Students](#).

³ Available at: [Inappropriate influence - Office for Students](#).

⁴ For further information, please see: [The data collection Codes of practice | HESA](#).

20. The OfS is designated as a producer of official statistics and is committed to following the Code of Practice for Statistics. Details can be found on the website of the UK Statistics Authority.⁵
21. Examples of inappropriate influence which could impact on NSS data integrity include, but are not limited to:
- a. Explicit or implicit instruction on the type of responses students should make, including the provision of standard or example responses.
 - b. How the survey is presented to students by providers, other students and student organisations or other parties. This includes drawing attention, explicitly or implicitly, to the consequences of negative responses, for example with regard to:
 - i. conflation with other surveys undertaken by providers, whether internal or external
 - ii. league tables, the Teaching Excellence 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. Providers are advised to reference the Ipsos Good Practice Guide for information on managing the successful promotion of the survey.⁶
 - f. Holding compulsory sessions at which the NSS must be completed.
22. Providing factual information about the uses of the NSS data is not deemed to be inappropriate influence, but consideration should be given to how this will be received. Students should also be reminded of the importance of giving their true opinion in their responses.

⁵ For further information, please see: [Code of Practice for Statistics](#).

⁶ Available at: [Promotion of the NSS - Office for Students](#).

Guiding principles to be used by the OfS and on behalf of the UK funding and regulatory bodies

23. The OfS will determine on a case-by-case basis whether **two** conditions have been met:

- whether inappropriate influence has taken place; and
- whether such inappropriate influence could have materially affected the NSS results.

24. Where the OfS determines these two conditions have been met, it will consider what action it should take as a result. Importantly, it may be necessary for the OfS to take different actions where concerns relate to influence by students or student groups (as opposed to concerns relating to influence by providers or their members of staff), as the OfS has a different relationship with students than it does with providers.

25. Our aim is not to define rigidly what is inappropriate. Ultimately it is important for providers to take responsibility for meeting the expectations of HESA's data collection Codes of Practice and to adopt good survey management principles.

26. In our management of procedures for investigating allegations of inappropriate influence, we will be guided by the following principles:

- Transparency
- Fairness and proportionality
- Primary focus on the student and public interest.

Procedures

How to raise a concern

27. Concerns about how a provider, a member of staff at a provider, a student, a student organisation or another party may be attempting to influence the way students respond to the NSS (rather than simply encouraging the student to participate in the NSS) should be raised by email to the OfS's dedicated NSS allegations email inbox (nssallegations@officeforstudents.org.uk).
28. Concerns can also be raised via the survey supplier's dedicated NSS email inbox (nss@ipsos.com), but this may result in delays to the process.
29. The OfS will communicate with persons, organisations and providers by email; if an alternative means of communication is preferred, the OfS should be notified of this at the earliest opportunity.
30. Where concerns are raised directly with other UK funding and regulatory bodies, they are likely to be passed to the OfS to coordinate the process on their behalf to ensure, where possible, a fair and consistent approach across the UK.
31. A process map is provided at [Annex A](#) which sets out how the OfS will acknowledge, manage and investigate concerns. The stages of the process set out below correspond to box numbers on the process map.
32. All concerns should include sufficient detail about the matter to be addressed, to include where possible:
 - a. the full name of the person raising the concern and where relevant their provider or organisation name, their contact email address or postal address and, where possible, contact telephone number
 - b. the name of the provider and course to which the NSS data results relate
 - c. the nature of the concern, the date and, if relevant, the time of the interaction which caused the concern, including any supporting hard evidence or information
 - d. where relevant, whether (and if so, when) a concern has been submitted to a provider or student organisation and, if so, why they were dissatisfied with the provider's or organisation's handling of the concern. However, we do not expect persons or organisations to have raised a concern with a provider or student organisation prior to raising a concern with the OfS.
33. The inclusion of as many of these details as possible will help the OfS investigate the concern. Failure to provide these details may mean that the OfS is unable to investigate the concern. All concerns will be processed in accordance with the NSS allegations privacy notice.⁷

⁷ The NSS allegations privacy notice is available at: [Other privacy notices - Office for Students](#).

34. In handling cases, the OfS will at all times comply with its obligations under the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
35. Should excessive personal data be received which is not relevant to the processing of an allegation, this will be deleted and not processed further. Personal data relating to the person raising the concern shall be anonymised when taken forward unless it has been deemed necessary to share it with the NSS allegations panel or the provider in accordance with legal advice, or where the OfS is required to do so as part of our functions or by law.
36. The OfS will not consider anonymous complaints unless we believe the issues and evidence provided to be significant enough to warrant an investigation.

Time period for raising concerns

37. Concerns may be raised at any time during the year. However, it is helpful if they are brought to the OfS's attention as early as possible, particularly while the survey is active from January to April, so that timely action can be taken.

Process for managing concerns

38. The OfS will aim to provide an initial response to the concern within five working days of receipt [Annex A, Box 1]. The OfS will liaise with the relevant UK funding and regulatory body, if appropriate, in providing this response.
39. At this stage, for concerns relating to English higher education providers, the OfS will work to determine if there are any wider regulatory concerns relating to the provider in question and therefore might affect the investigation of a concern. The same approach would apply to concerns relating to the other UK funding and regulatory bodies.
40. For these concerns, it may be necessary that the case is taken forward by other regulatory teams within the OfS, or where relevant the other UK funding and regulatory bodies, as part of wider risk assessments and investigations. With this route, the senior member of the NSS team may be asked to seek further information or evidence to support the allegation to aid the investigation.
41. For all other concerns, in its initial response, the OfS will:
 - a. set out the next steps in the process for handling of the concern; and
 - b. confirm that sufficient information has been received to progress the concern, or request the person, organisation or provider who raised the concern to provide any information set out in paragraph 32 above that was not provided when they raised the concern. Those raising concerns will be asked to provide any requested information to the OfS within 10 working days [Annex A, Box 2].
42. Following receipt of any additional requested information, the OfS will consider whether it has sufficient information to proceed to the next stage of investigation [Annex A, Box 3]. This assessment will be undertaken by a senior member of the NSS team in conjunction with a member of an NSS allegations panel (see paragraph 44), seeking further input from regulatory colleagues or representatives from the relevant UK funding and regulatory body where

appropriate to determine whether there are wider regulatory concerns that should be considered for the provider in question.

Concerns taken forward will be considered by the NSS allegations panel, which will make recommendations in an advisory capacity to the OfS director with responsibility for making regulatory decisions. Part 5 (B) of the OfS scheme of delegation⁸ sets out the delegation arrangements for all directors to make decisions in respect of OfS functions.

43. The role of the allegations panel is to make recommendations to the OfS director on:
- whether any action should be taken in response to a concern; and
 - what form that action should take.
44. The NSS allegations panel will be chaired by a senior member of the NSS team and include OfS officers with expertise in running the NSS, regulation, data integrity and governance.
45. Where allegations relate to providers in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, the OfS will work with the appropriate UK funding and regulatory body to determine the approach. Where applicable, a representative from the relevant UK funding and regulatory body will join the NSS allegations panel as a member for the course of the investigation.
46. Where the OfS considers that there is a clear breach of guidance and there is sufficient supporting evidence for further investigation, it will normally contact the provider to which the NSS data relates promptly and request it to undertake an internal investigation [Annex A, Box 6]. The OfS shall anonymise this data unless it has been deemed necessary to share it with the NSS allegations panel or the provider in accordance with legal advice, or where the OfS is required to do so as part of our functions or by law.
47. Where necessary, details of the allegation passed to the provider may include the name or title of the individual against whom the concern has been raised and details of other third parties identified within the allegation. Should the concern relate to a teaching provider which is part of a registered provider, the OfS will request the registered provider to undertake an investigation. The OfS will request the provider to allocate the responsibility for the investigation to a senior person who can act independently of the parties whose actions have been called into question.
48. Where the OfS considers there is not a clear breach of guidance and/or there is insufficient evidence for further investigation, the allegation will be recorded, the case will be closed and no further action will be taken [Annex A, Box 5]. The OfS reserves the right to reopen a case in the event of supplementary evidence or repeat allegations being received.
49. The OfS will request that findings be reported in writing to the allegations panel within 20 working days of receiving the letter from the OfS [Annex A, Box 7]. The OfS recommends that the report is a maximum of five pages long, though this is not a formal requirement. As part of this, the NSS allegations panel may advise providers to seek input from their own internal auditors and may set conditions on the investigation to ensure it is transparent and robust.

⁸ The OfS scheme of delegation is available at: [Who we are - Office for Students](#).

50. Where an allegation relates to a student, or student organisation linked to a provider, the OfS will contact the provider to ask it to undertake the investigation.
51. The OfS may commission an independent investigation on its own behalf at the discretion of the director, for example if the NSS allegations panel considers that there is a conflict of interest, or there is no appropriate person within the organisation to take forward an investigation. Any such investigation will be requested to report its findings to the allegations panel within 20 working days of receiving the request for the investigation [Annex A, Box 6].
52. For an investigation, the organisation or provider against whom the allegation has been raised may, if appropriate, be provided with a copy of the report and be given an opportunity to respond within 10 working days.
53. The NSS allegations panel will consider the report of the investigation's findings [Annex A, Box 8] and will initially consider three questions:
- i. Was the process of investigation undertaken by the provider carried out appropriately, taking independent advice where appropriate?
 - ii. What are the findings of the investigation?
 - iii. Was the UK funding and regulatory bodies' and/or survey supplier's guidance breached?
54. The NSS allegations panel will consider each case on its own merits. In its work it will refer to previous cases and outcomes to ensure a consistent approach.
55. The NSS allegations panel will recommend that action should be taken if it considers, on the balance of probabilities, that:
- i. inappropriate influence has occurred; and
 - ii. such inappropriate influence could have materially affected the NSS results.
56. In recommending whether action should be taken, the NSS allegation panel will consider the following factors:
- a. The specific nature of the concern.
 - b. The robustness of the evidence.
 - c. The extent to which the integrity of the relevant NSS data is challenged by the case in question.
 - d. The investigation carried out by the provider, including whether the latter has been conducted in an appropriate manner, with independent advice where relevant and any response received in respect of such investigation.
 - e. Where the OfS has commissioned its own investigation, the findings of such investigation and any response from the person, organisation or provider against whom the concern was raised.

- f. How the OfS has dealt with other cases to promote consistency of approach.
 - g. UK funding and regulatory bodies' and survey supplier guidance on inappropriate influence.
 - h. The actions taken to resolve any breach.
 - i. Any wider regulatory concerns relating to the provider.
57. The director may seek further advice to assist their decision, which could include advice from those within the OfS responsible for wider regulatory concerns and data management relating to the provider, and from other UK funding and regulatory bodies where relevant.

Outcome of review of evidence

58. Where the director decides that inappropriate influence has occurred and such inappropriate influence could have materially affected the NSS results, the OfS may take the following action (separately or in conjunction) [Annex A, Box 9]:
- a. Request an action plan from the provider to address the problems identified.
 - b. Request or commission an independent investigation (and potentially recover any costs associated with this).
 - c. Temporarily or permanently suppress the provider's NSS data, in whole or in part, to protect students' interests and/or to ensure data integrity. The OfS will not automatically suppress data upon receipt of an allegation.
 - d. Publish a previous year's data in place of the data concerned.
 - e. Where appropriate, re-survey a subset of the students originally surveyed at the provider and recover the costs of this.
 - f. Implement an audit of the provider's processes in the following survey year, which may include requiring all the provider's own survey material to be approved by the OfS, and where appropriate by the relevant UK funding and regulatory bodies.
 - g. For providers that are registered with the OfS, we will consider whether incidents where providers have breached the inappropriate influence guidelines will then impact our assessment of the risk of the provider breaching one of their ongoing conditions of registration.⁹
59. We will notify the parties involved of the decision of the director, including any actions to be taken, after the NSS allegations panel has reviewed the investigation report [Annex A, Boxes 9 and 10]. For cases of allegations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the relevant UK funding and regulatory body will be copied into any notifications to external parties.

⁹ For further information, please see: [Monitoring and intervention - Office for Students](#).

Time limits

60. Our expectation is that persons, organisations or providers raising a concern will keep to the time limits specified in these procedures. However, we may consider it appropriate (in the interests of fairness or to enable a full investigation to be undertaken) to amend or adapt the time limits set out in these procedures in a particular case. Any party seeking an extension of time should explain in writing to the OfS why they believe it is appropriate and the OfS will make a judgement on accepting or rejecting the request.

Requesting a review of the outcome of an investigation

61. Any party involved in a concern may ask for an investigation to be reviewed. The review will be considered by a panel with no prior involvement in the initial investigation. It will be chaired by a director from one of the UK funding and regulatory bodies, also with no prior involvement in the initial investigation or decision. This is the final element of challenge available to providers under these procedures [Annex A, Box 11].

How can a review be requested?

62. A party may request a review of the outcome of an investigation on the grounds of [Annex B, Box 13]:
- significant new evidence
 - a significant procedural irregularity.
63. A party must request a review in writing to the OfS chief executive within 10 working days of the date of the OfS's decision, by contacting:
- CEOOffice@officeforstudents.org.uk; or
 - Office for Students Chief Executive, Westward House, Lime Kiln Close, Stoke Gifford, Bristol, BS34 8SR.
64. The OfS will acknowledge receipt of the request and inform the other parties to the investigation, where relevant, that a request has been lodged [Annex B, Boxes 13 and 14].
65. A party submitting a request for review must provide in writing to the OfS any evidence to support its request within 10 working days of submission. If no such evidence is received within the period allowed, the OfS will be entitled to treat the request as having been abandoned [Annex B, Box 15].

What is the review process?

66. The request for review, together with supporting documents, will be checked by the panel set out in paragraph 61. Where appropriate, the review panel may involve a representative from another UK funding and regulatory body [Annex A, Box 16].

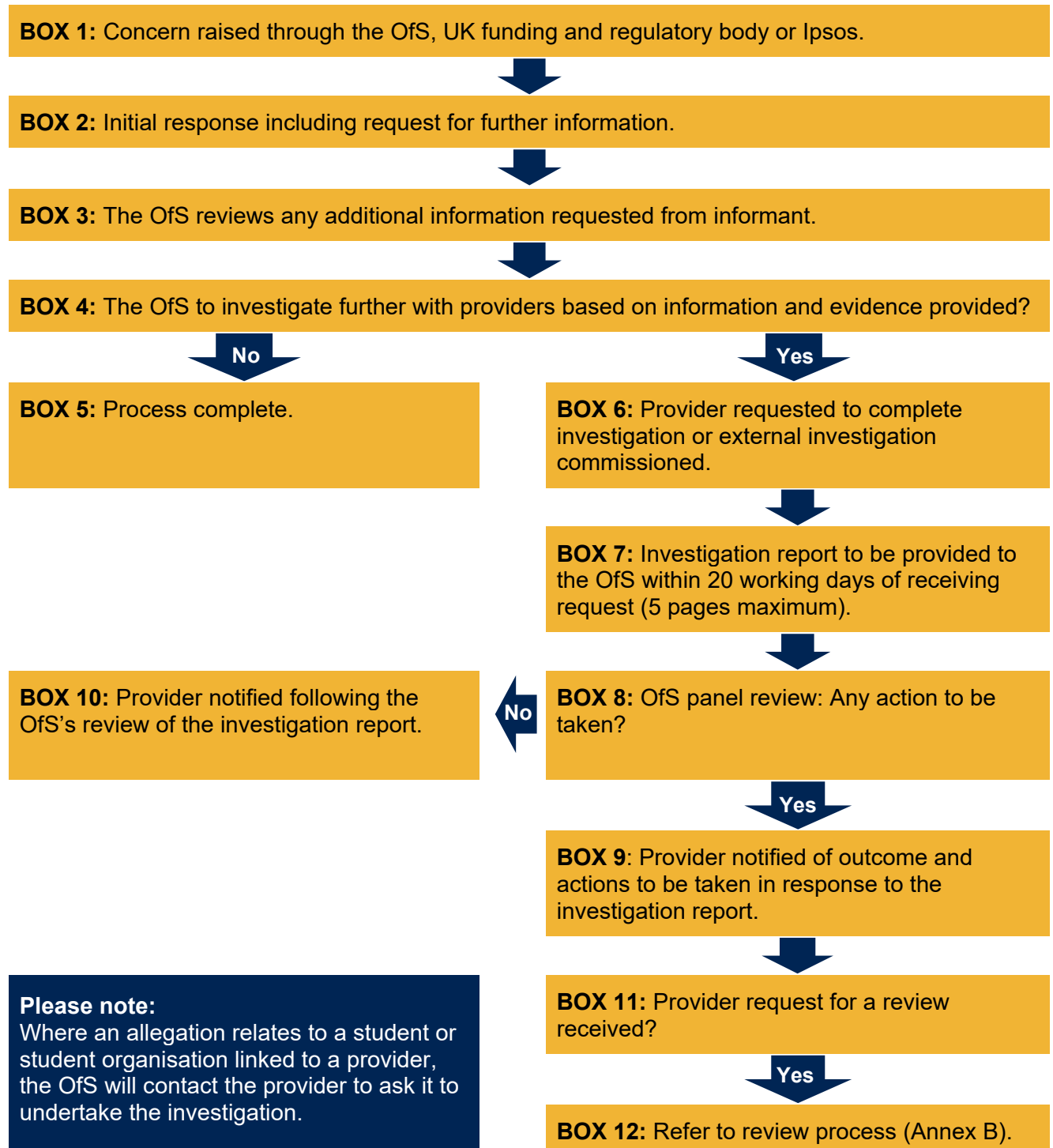
67. The review panel may seek advice as necessary from those with knowledge of the case. If these case advisers may have been involved in the original investigation, they will offer technical or process information only.
68. The review panel will make a recommendation to the OfS chief executive, who will make the final decision on the review, in consultation with any other relevant UK funding and regulatory body's chief executive.

What will happen with the results of the review?

69. The OfS aims to notify the parties of the review results as soon as possible after receipt of the review documents. There will be no further routes of challenge to the OfS chief executive's decision. However, this decision and the decision of the OfS director may be challenged by applying to the High Court for permission to ask for a judicial review. Any such application must be made promptly and, in any event, within three months of notification of the outcome of the appeal [Annex B, Box 17].

Annex A

National Student Survey 2026: Procedure for investigating allegations of inappropriate influence on survey results



Annex B

Procedure for requesting a review of the outcome of an investigation into concerns that a provider has attempted to influence NSS results inappropriately

BOX 13: Provider submits written request to the OfS within 10 working days of the date of the OfS's decision.



BOX 14: The OfS acknowledges review request.



BOX 15: Provider to submit review documents to the OfS within 10 working days of requesting review.



BOX 16: OfS panel reviews request.



BOX 17: Provider notified of outcome as soon as possible after receipt of the review documents.



BOX 18: Review process complete.



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