

Debate Pack

20 April 2023

Number CDP-0089

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Office for Students

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Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for Wednesday 26 April 2023 on the Office for Students. The debate will be opened by Emma Hardy MP. This debate pack provides background information, relevant parliamentary material and news articles on the Office for Students.

1 Background

The [Office for Students](#) (OfS) is the higher education regulator in England. It was established by the [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#) and came into existence in 2018.¹ It is a non-departmental public body of the Department for Education (DfE).

The OfS inherited some of the funding responsibilities of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (research funding responsibilities passed to [UK Research and Innovation](#)) and the Office for Fair Access's responsibility for promoting fair access to higher education.

1.1 Purpose of the OfS

The OfS aims to ensure that higher education in England delivers positive outcomes for students. It is expected to encourage competition to improve student choice, to intervene when providers are failing in areas such as equal access, and to protect the interests of students, the Government, and society at large.

In contrast to the organisations tasked with funding and managing higher education in the rest of the UK, the OfS is a regulator and competition authority. The OfS performs its regulatory functions in several ways:

- through the operation of a register of higher education providers
- the application of its [regulatory framework](#)
- the awarding of degree awarding powers and the title of university
- the monitoring of access and participation
- the assurance of quality and standards
- the oversight of data collection and publication.

In performing these functions, the OfS must have regard to the need to protect institutional autonomy and academic freedom, promote choice for students, encourage competition between providers, and promote value for money and equality of opportunity in connection with access and participation.

¹ Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, [Case for the creation of Office for Students \(OfS\)](#), 7 June 2016

2022-25 strategy

The OfS’ mission is “to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.”

The OfS’ [2022-25 strategy](#) outlines its goals and objectives for the period, and how it intends to achieve them. The OfS’ two areas of focus for 2022-25 are quality and standards and equality of opportunity.

The OfS has said it will deliver its strategy through its regulatory approach and while “much of the provision in the English higher education sector is exemplary; our focus as a regulator will be on addressing cases that fall short”.²

The regulatory baseline is a set of regulatory expectations representing the minimum performance to which students and taxpayers are entitled. The baseline is predominantly expressed through “[conditions of registration](#)” which all providers are required to satisfy. The OfS regulates by reference to this regulatory baseline. It can take action to ensure providers’ compliance, for example through monetary penalties.

1.2

Relationship to Government

A [framework document](#) outlines the OfS’ relationship with the Department for Education.³ The OfS [publishes guidance received from Government](#) on its website. This includes an annual letter sent ahead of each financial year in which the Government sets out its policy priorities for the regulator. The most [recent letter was sent in March 2022](#) (PDF).

[Section 2\(3\) of the Higher Education and Research Act \(HERA\) 2017](#) says, in performing its functions, the OfS must have regard to guidance issued by the Secretary of State.” In issuing this guidance the Secretary of State must have regard to the need to protect the institutional autonomy of higher education providers and the guidance must not relate to:

- (a) particular parts of courses of study,
- (b) the content of such courses,
- (c) the manner in which they are taught, supervised or assessed,

² OfS, [Office for Students strategy 2022 to 2025](#), 23 March 2022, p2

³ Department for Education (DfE) and the Office for Students (OfS), [Office for Students framework document](#), 16 January 2023

(d) the criteria for the selection, appointment or dismissal of academic staff, or how they are applied, or

(e) the criteria for the admission of students, or how they are applied.

Other relevant sections of HERA 2017 include:

- [Section 76](#), which gives the Secretary of State power through regulations, to “confer on the OfS such supplementary functions relating to higher education as the Secretary of State considers appropriate”.
- [Section 77](#), which gives the Secretary of State power to “give the OfS general directions about the performance of any of its functions”.
- [Sections 78 to 80](#), which give the Secretary of State powers “to obtain information and advice” from the OfS.

While the OfS is designated as a regulator, it also has a role as a funder. Higher education learning and teaching in England is primarily funded by tuition fees paid by students and grant funding from the UK Government provided through the Office for Students. The UK Government provides direct funding to support the teaching of ‘high cost’ courses in England through the Strategic Priorities Grant. In 2022-23, this totalled £974 million.⁴

1.3

OfS board

The Office for Students is governed by a [board](#) that sets its strategy. According to the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, the OfS should consist of a chair, a Chief Executive Office, a Director for Fair Access, and at least seven and not more than twelve other members, all appointed by the Secretary of State.⁵ The current senior OfS team includes:

- Chief Executive
- Director for Fair Access and Participation
- Director of External Relations
- Director of Resources and Finance
- Director of Quality
- Director of Monitoring and Intervention.⁶

⁴ OfS, [Recurrent funding for 2022-23](#), 15 July 2022, p5

⁵ [HERA 2017, schedule 1, paragraph 2\(1\)](#)

⁶ OfS, [Our senior team](#), February 2023

The [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Bill](#), which was introduced in the House of Commons on 12 May 2021, would create a new Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the OfS.⁷

The current chair of the OfS, Lord Wharton, has faced criticism for being a Conservative Party donor who takes the Government whip in the House of Lords.⁸ He has also been criticised for endorsing the “far-right, autocratic regime” of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and sharing a platform with Zsolt Bayer, a racist and anti-Semitic journalist, at the Conservative Political Action Conference in Hungary in 2022.⁹

Student panel

The OfS board is advised by a [student panel](#). The OfS website says:

Our student panel advise our board and inform policy development across the organisation. They help us to understand students’ views and perspectives and challenge us to regulate in the interest of students.¹⁰

In April 2023, at an evidence session for the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee inquiry into the work of the OfS,¹¹ former student panel members suggested panel views were “actively suppressed” if they did not align with the OfS’ “pre-established” aims and policies.¹² As an example, they highlighted the OfS’ focus on free speech at the expense of value for money concerns and how they relate to student experience.

1.4

The OfS register

Under the [Higher Education and Research Act \(HERA\) 2017](#), higher education providers in England must register with the OfS to access public funding, award degrees, and recruit international students.¹³ There is no legal requirement to register with the OfS to deliver higher education, but providers must register to access these benefits.

⁷ [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Bill](#)

⁸ “[‘Cronyism’ warning over Tory peer as student watchdog](#)”, BBC News, 10 February 2021 (accessed 19 April 2023); “[Independent student watchdog could keep Tory whip](#)”, BBC News, 2 February 2021 (accessed 19 April 2023)

⁹ [HC Deb 13 June 2022 \[Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Bill\] cc75-7](#). “Office for Students chair speaks at same event as denounced racist”, The Guardian, 23 May 2022 (accessed 19 April 2023)

¹⁰ OfS, [Our student panel](#), April 2023

¹¹ House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee, [The work of the Office for Students](#)

¹² “[OfS accused of seeing student engagement as ‘tick box exercise’](#)”, Times Higher Education, 18 April 2023 (accessed 19 April 2023); “[OfS tried to silence us, say student panel members](#)”, Wonkhe, 18 April 2023 (accessed 19 April 2023)

¹³ OfS, [Benefits of registration](#), February 2022

To be included on the [OfS register](#), higher education providers must meet initial and ongoing conditions of registration demonstrating their ability to provide quality higher education.

Registration conditions relate to financial sustainability, good governance, and student access, participation, and outcomes.¹⁴ These conditions enable the OfS to exert a degree of control over the quality of higher education provision in England.

Post-legislative scrutiny of HERA 2017

In December 2022, a [post-legislative scrutiny memorandum for the Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#) was published.¹⁵ It provided a preliminary assessment of the [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#) (HERA), which introduced the OfS.

The memorandum set out the Government’s view that the establishment of the OfS has been “broadly effective”, but acknowledged some sector stakeholders believe the OfS could do more to reduce regulatory burden and is not sufficiently risk based.¹⁶

1.5

Access and participation work

The Office for Students (OfS) is responsible for extending access to higher education and supporting successful outcomes for students from underrepresented groups in England. The OfS inherited this responsibility from the now defunct [Office for Fair Access](#) (OFFA).

See the Commons Library briefing [Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England](#) for more information on the work of the OfS in this area.¹⁷

A “new approach” to access and participation

In November 2021, the Government announced [a “new approach” to access and participation](#) (PDF). It includes a focus on outcomes for students, universities working with schools and colleges to raise educational standards,

¹⁴ OfS, [Conditions of registration](#), February 2022

¹⁵ Departments for Education and Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, [Memorandum to the Education Select Committee Post-legislative scrutiny of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), December 2022

¹⁶ Departments for Education and Business, Energy, and Industrial Strategy, [Memorandum to the Education Select Committee Post-legislative scrutiny of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), December 2022. An independent report on providers’ experiences with the OfS was published in January 2023: [Report for the Office for Students: Provider engagement](#), 26 January 2023

¹⁷ Commons Library briefing CBP-9195, [Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England](#)

and universities increasing the proportion of students taking apprenticeships and higher technical qualifications.¹⁸

In February 2022, the OfS set out its priorities for the next four years in this area.¹⁹ They reflected the Government's call for a new approach and called on providers to:

- develop, enhance, and expand partnerships with schools and other local and national organisations, to help raise the pre-16 attainment of young people from underrepresented groups across England;
- develop more diverse pathways into and through higher education through expansion of flexible [level 4 and 5 courses](#) and degree apprenticeships;
- ensure access to higher education for students from underrepresented groups leads to successful participation on high quality courses and good graduate outcomes;
- improve the quality and volume of evaluation of access and participation plan activity;
- make [Access and Participation Plans](#) (APPs – see below) more accessible in a way that prospective and current students, their parents, and other stakeholders can easily understand.²⁰

The OfS has also introduced an “[equal opportunity risk register](#)”, which identifies 12 sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in higher education.²¹ This means providers will have to submit new [Access and Participation Plans](#), outlining their approach up to 2027, which should include more details on the activities the provider is undertaking to address the risks they have identified, as well as their access and participation targets.

Access and Participation Plans

[Access and Participation Plans](#) (APPs) set out the actions that providers are taking to increase access to, success in, and progression from higher education by students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Since 2018, APPs have been a condition of registration for providers in

¹⁸ Letter from the DfE to the OfS, [The future of access and participation](#) (PDF), November 2021. DfE press release, [New levelling up plans to improve student outcomes](#), 24 November 2021

¹⁹ OfS, [Next steps in access and participation. Speech given by John Blake, the Office for Students' Director for Fair Access and Participation](#), 8 February 2022

²⁰ OfS, [Next steps in access and participation. Speech given by John Blake, the Office for Students' Director for Fair Access and Participation](#), 8 February 2022

²¹ OfS, [Equality of opportunity risk register](#)

England wanting to charge higher level tuition fees.²² They must be approved by the OfS' Director for Fair Access and Participation.

As part of its “new approach” to access and participation, the Government said it wants the OfS to renegotiate current APPs with higher education providers so they align with the Government’s new priorities and give due consideration to regional inequalities, prior attainment in schools, and the findings of the [white working-class boys report](#).²³

Uni Connect

Alongside APPs, the other major element of the OfS’ access and participation approach is the Uni Connect programme. Uni Connect is the latest in a series of state-funded collaborative outreach programmes dating back to the early 2000s.²⁴

Launched in 2017, the programme brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, and local partners. The aim of Uni Connect is to:

- Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.
- Enable young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education.
- Support local universities, colleges, schools, and other partners to facilitate higher education outreach, enable engagement with attainment-raising activity, and address outreach ‘cold spots’ for underrepresented groups.
- Contribute to a stronger evidence base around best practice in higher education outreach, and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.

1.6

Quality assurance work

Quality assurance is based around a combination of internal review of practices by universities themselves and external review by designated bodies. In the UK, this external role is undertaken by the independent charity and quality body the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education](#) (QAA).

²² [Higher Education and Research Act 2017](#), section 12

²³ Letter from the DfE to the OfS, [The future of access and participation](#) (PDF), November 2021

²⁴ The OfS, [Uni Connect](#)

In July 2022, the QAA said it no longer wished to be the designated quality body for England from March 2023.²⁵ It said this was because the requirements of the current regulatory approach in England were “not consistent with standard international practice for quality bodies”.²⁶ Instead, the QAA wanted to remain on the [European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education](#).

In a statement in March 2023, announcing the de-designation of the QAA, the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships, and Higher Education, Robert Halfon, said the Office for Students would assume the QAA’s functions on an interim basis. The Minister said:

Where no body is designated to perform the assessment functions, the functions revert to the OfS. The OfS has confirmed that, from 1 April 2023, it will undertake all quality and standards assessment activity on an interim basis pending further consideration of future arrangements. The DfE, OfS and HE stakeholders will work closely to consider options for long-term arrangements for the assessment of quality and standards.²⁷

The statement also noted 31 of the 47 responses to the consultation on the QAA’s decision disagreed with de-designation, but “the majority of responses from representative bodies”, such as Universities UK, agreed.²⁸

The other three parts of the UK will continue to work with the QAA.

Teaching Quality

There have been efforts across the UK in recent years to improve the quality of teaching available to higher education students. In England, the [Teaching Excellence Framework](#) (TEF) was launched in 2017.²⁹

The TEF is a national scheme run by the Office for Students that aims to encourage higher education providers to improve and deliver excellence in teaching, learning, and student outcomes (whether students go on to managerial or professional employment, or further study). It does this by assessing and rating universities and colleges for excellence above a set of minimum requirements for quality and standards.

TEF assessments are carried out by a panel of experts in learning and teaching, including academic and student members. The assessment covers undergraduate courses and students, and is based on:

- evidence submitted by the provider;

²⁵ QAA, [QAA demits DQB status to focus on sector and students in England](#), 20 July 2022

²⁶ QAA, [QAA demits DQB status to focus on sector and students in England](#), 20 July 2022

²⁷ [HCWS695 \[Designated Quality Body Update\] 30 March 2023](#)

²⁸ See Department for Education, [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education - de-designation: government response](#), 30 March 2023

²⁹ OfS, [About the TEF](#)

- an optional student submission;
- a set of indicators produced by the OfS.

TEF rankings of gold, silver, bronze, or requires improvement are issued to providers and the exercise is carried out every four years. Data has been collected in 2022 and the next rankings will be published in 2023.

Student outcomes

In England, the Office for Students (OfS) consulted on a new approach to regulating student outcomes between January and March 2022 in order “to crack down on poor quality courses.”³⁰

Following the consultation, the OfS announced numerical thresholds to underpin requirements for minimum acceptable student outcomes. The thresholds can broadly be summarised in relation to a course’s continuation, completion, and progress rates. For full-time students studying a first degree, the thresholds are:

- 80% of students to continue their studies;
- 75% of students to complete their course;
- 60% of students to go on to further study, professional work, or other positive outcomes, within 15 months of graduating.³¹

Universities and colleges performing below these thresholds could face investigation so the OfS can understand the reasons for their performance. If, following investigation, performance is not adequately explained by a higher education provider’s context, the OfS has power to intervene and impose sanctions for a breach of its conditions of registration.

1.7

Comparison of UK approaches to managing higher education

The immediate contrast between England and Wales and Scotland is the existence of a regulation-based approach to how higher education is managed. In Wales and Scotland, the respective bodies are tasked with developing an overall vision for the higher education system. In England, any kind of overarching strategic approach is confined to the areas that the Office for Students (OfS) is tasked with regulating.

³⁰ OfS, [OfS sets out plans to crack down on poor quality courses](#), 20 January 2022. OfS, [A new approach to regulating student outcomes](#), July 2022

³¹ OfS, [OfS sets new expectations for student outcomes](#), 30 September 2022

This broader role also extends to funding responsibilities and the relationship with further education, which are the two other major areas of contrast between the Office for Students, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), and, from 2023, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER) in Wales.

The OfS has a remit that excludes research, which is the responsibility of [Research England](#) and [UK Research and Innovation](#) (UKRI). In Scotland, the SFC covers both research and the whole of learning and teaching for Scottish domiciled students. In Wales, the CTER will, as its predecessor the HEFCW did, also fund research. Both the SFC and CTER also have responsibility for further education, facilitating the joined-up management of all post-16/tertiary education.

Northern Ireland presents another variant of the management of higher education, in that it is characterised by oversight from a government department, the Department for the Economy, rather than through an intermediary body. This allows for higher education policy to align with broader economic research and policy. However, this has been undermined in recent years by the lack of a functioning Assembly and Executive in Northern Ireland.

Wales: Higher Education Funding Council for Wales / Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

The Welsh Government sets the overall policy direction for higher education in Wales. It is responsible for funding higher education through the [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) (HEFCW), and, from the 2023/24 academic year, the [Commission for Tertiary Education and Research](#).

Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW)

At present, higher education in Wales is the responsibility of the [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) (HEFCW), which is a non-departmental public body, as in England and Scotland, accountable to the Welsh Government.

HEFCW was established in May 1992.³² As a funding council, HEFCW is more similar to the Scottish Funding Council than England's OfS. However, given Welsh higher education providers levy tuition fees paid by students from Wales (unlike Scottish students who do not pay tuition fees), HEFCW also describes its work in regulatory terms, like the OfS, stating:

We regulate fee levels at higher education providers, ensure a framework is in place for assessing the quality of higher education and scrutinise the performance of universities and other designated providers.³³

³² [Further and Higher Education Act 1992](#)

³³ HEFCW, [Annual Report and Accounts 2021-22](#), 5 December 2022, p4

HEFCW allocates funding for teaching, research, and capital projects.³⁴ As with the other three parts of the UK, widening access to higher education is a priority of HEFCW.

Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER)

From November 2023 at the earliest, HEFCW will be dissolved, and its responsibilities assumed by a new body, the [Commission for Tertiary Education and Research](#) (CTER). There will likely be a phased approach to the assumption of responsibilities by the CTER.

The CTER is a unique development in the UK context bringing together higher education, further education, apprenticeships, sixth forms, and adult community learning. At present, HEFCW regulates and provides funding for higher education, while the Welsh Government does so for the other tertiary education sectors. The Commission will combine these activities into one body.

The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research will have a wider remit than HEFCW. The Welsh Government published a vision statement in 2020 that said:

We wish to see a joined up TER [tertiary education and research] system in Wales that is easy for all learners to navigate, is valued by the public, creates a highly skilled society, tackles inequalities, is globally renowned for excellent education, training, research and innovation, and has a civic mission at its heart.

Our approach will enable learners to move seamlessly from compulsory to tertiary education, building on our national mission for education reform.³⁵

These changes originated from a 2016 review of post-compulsory education, the Hazelkorn Review, which presented the independent evidence base for the introduction of a body like the CTER.³⁶ The review recommended the development of:

- an overarching vision for the post-compulsory education and training sector;
- a new arm's-length body responsible for the oversight, strategic direction, and leadership of the sector.

Scotland: Scottish Funding Council

The [Scottish Funding Council](#) (SFC), established by the [Further and Higher Education \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#), is the non-departmental public body charged

³⁴ HEFCW, [Funding](#)

³⁵ Welsh Government, [Post-compulsory education and training: Strategic vision](#), November 2020

³⁶ Welsh Government, [Towards 2030: A Framework for Building a World-Class Post-Compulsory Education System for Wales](#), 10 March 2016

with funding Scotland's further and higher education institutions, including its 26 colleges and 19 universities.

The Scottish Funding Council's work includes:

- Distributing money to fund tertiary provision and research.
- Planning and aligning funding with other partners.
- Sharing advice and evidence with the Scottish Government, partners, and the wider public.
- Ensuring students' interests are promoted and protected.
- Developing national operational policy for tertiary education and skills, research, innovation, and knowledge exchange.
- Setting expectations, targets, and conditions for funding.
- Scrutinising the governance and financial health of institutions to secure public investment and a sustainable sector.
- Collecting and disseminating data and analysis.

The relationship between the Scottish Government and the SFC is governed by a framework document,³⁷ and the Scottish Government sets out priorities for colleges and universities through guidance letters to the SFC.

The [Financial Memoranda](#) with colleges and universities set out the formal accountability relationship between SFC and institutions, and the requirements that institutions are expected to comply with in return for funding. Individual [Outcome Agreements](#) set out what colleges and universities plan to deliver in return for their funding from the SFC.³⁸

The Scottish Funding Council differs in several ways to the OfS in England.

- It is a funding council not a regulator.
- It has responsibility for further as well as higher education.
- It funds research-related activity as well as teaching.

As undergraduate students who normally reside in Scotland do not pay tuition fees (they are paid by the Scottish government for them), the funding of learning and teaching for universities and colleges comes pre-dominantly from the Scottish Funding Council. This gives it a critical role in the management of higher education in Scotland.

³⁷ Scottish Funding Council, [Framework document](#), September 2022

³⁸ Scottish Funding Council, [Outcome agreements](#)

Northern Ireland: Department for the Economy, Higher Education Division

In contrast to England, Wales, and Scotland, there is no non-departmental public body responsible for managing and higher education in Northern Ireland. Instead, the [Higher Education Division of the Department for the Economy](#) acts as Government department, funding council, and regulator.

The Department for the Economy was established in May 2016, and is also responsible for wider economic policy, the operation of a range of employment and skills programmes, employment law, and the management and operation of a range of EU funding programmes. The role of the Department's higher education division is to formulate policy and administer funding to support education, research, and related activities in the higher education sector. It consists of several branches:

- [Student Support Branch](#)
- [HE Institution Finance Branch](#)
- [Capital and Student Finance Branch](#)
- [Policy and Coordination Branch](#)
- [Research and Knowledge Exchange Branch](#)
- [Quality and Governance Branch](#)

2 Parliamentary material

2.1 Commons Library publications

Commons Library briefing paper on [Higher education in the UK: Systems, policy approaches, and challenges](#) CBP-9640

2.2 Select Committee publications

Lords Select Committee news article on [New inquiry launched into the work of the Office for Students](#), 3 March 2023

Lords Select Committee Industry and Regulators Committee Inquiry [The work of the Office for Students](#)

2.3 Parliamentary questions

[Office for Students: Finance](#)

22 Feb 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 147162

Asked by: Emma Hardy

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment she has made of the adequacy of the financial performance of the Office for Students.

Answered by: Robert Halfon | Department for Education

Officials in the department and the Office for Students (OfS) regularly discuss the OfS's finances and funding and its business planning and efficiency, including the level of resource it needs to deliver its priorities.

The Framework Document between the department and the OfS can be found at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1129117/OfS_framework_document.pdf(opens in a new tab).

The document sets out the governance framework within which the OfS and the department operate, and the OfS's core responsibilities, including in relation to financial matters.

[Office for Students: Reviews](#)

22 Feb 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 147161

Asked by: Emma Hardy

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she expects the Public Bodies Review Programme for 2023-24 to assess the Office for Students.

Answered by: Robert Halfon | **Department:** Department for Education

The Cabinet Office has not yet published the list of public bodies to be prioritised for review in the 2023/24 financial year.

It is currently the intention that the Office for Students will be reviewed under the Public Bodies Review Programme from autumn 2023, with findings likely published by the end of the financial year. These timings may change.

Cabinet Office guidance outlines the requirements for reviews of public bodies, including the new requirements covering governance, accountability, efficacy and efficiency of arm's length bodies.

[Office for Students](#)

06 Feb 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 135190

Asked by: Bridget Phillipson

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she plans to take steps to ensure that the Office for Students improves its engagement with providers.

Answered by: Robert Halfon | Department for Education

The Office for Students (OfS) is responsible for its own approach to engagement with the higher education (HE) sector, and has an extensive provider engagement plan in place, which has recently been refreshed.

The OfS recently commissioned an external report on its communications and engagement approach, which highlighted a number of positive findings, and on which the OfS will take action to further improve its approach. The report is available at: [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/f86acfa2-5c6e-4e6e-9af5-40dada342862/ofs_provider-engagement-research-report.pdf\(opens in a new tab\)](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/f86acfa2-5c6e-4e6e-9af5-40dada342862/ofs_provider-engagement-research-report.pdf(opens%20in%20a%20new%20tab)).

The OfS's Chief Executive, Susan Lapworth, also set out publicly on 26 January 2023 how the OfS is refreshing its engagement with universities, colleges, and other HE providers.

[Office for Students](#)

06 Feb 2023 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 135188

Asked by: Bridget Phillipson

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether she has had discussions with bodies representing the universities sector on the (a) effectiveness and (b) direction of the Office for Students in the period since 25 October 2022.

Answered by: Robert Halfon | Department for Education

The department regularly engages with the higher education (HE) sector representative bodies, and a variety of individual HE providers, to understand the issues facing the sector and the impact of policy proposals. We have also engaged directly with sector representative groups since October 2022.

Matters relating to the role of the Office for Students (OfS), as the independent regulator of the HE sector, are raised at those meetings.

The department strongly supports the OfS's ongoing work to ensure students get the high-quality, value for money HE that they have paid for.

Office for Students

05 Dec 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 97677

Asked by: Matt Western

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if she will make an assessment of the potential impact of the removal of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education designation to perform assessment functions in England after the end of March 2023 on the Office for Students.

Answered by: Robert Halfon | Department for Education

The Office for Students (OfS) has imposed rigorous requirements for quality for all universities and colleges, and is investigating where it has information suggesting there may be cause for concern. The OfS will continue with this important work beyond 31 March 2023.

On the 14 October 2022, the OfS published an update on arrangements for assessing quality and standards from 1 April 2023. This sets out how the OfS will take on the activities currently delivered by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education for new providers seeking registration or degree awarding powers. The update from the OfS is available here: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-sets-out-arrangements-for-assessing-quality-and-standards-from-april-2023/>. (opens in a new tab)

The department will continue to receive advice from officials and the OfS on the effective assessment of quality and standards.

Office for Students: Staff

08 Nov 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 73883

Asked by: Matt Western

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, whether the number of staff at the Office for Students is proportionate to the needs of the regulator to regulate the higher education sector.

Answered by: Robert Halfon | Department for Education

The number of staff employed at the Office for Students (OfS) is a matter for the OfS and is not determined by the Secretary of State. Likewise, the recruitment of any additional staff at the OfS is a matter for the OfS. If the OfS determines that it needs additional staff to fulfil its workload, it can seek to recruit the staff that it requires. This includes any additional resource required to accommodate any new duties required by the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill.

The department works closely with the OfS to ensure that its responsibilities are fulfilled effectively, and that the world-class standards of our higher education institutions are maintained.

[Office for Students: Codes of Practice](#)

24 Oct 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 65968

Asked by: Matt Western

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what recent assessment he has made of the compatibility of the Office for Students' Code of Conduct for Board members with the Cabinet Office's Code of Conduct for board members.

Answered by: Andrea Jenkyns | Department for Education

The Office for Students' (OfS) code of conduct for board members was developed by the OfS and is a matter for the OfS. However, the OfS code of conduct states that it is based on current best practice, including that from the Civil Service code and guidance from Cabinet Office, HM Treasury and the Department for Education.

Board members of the OfS are also expected to adhere to the standards set out in the Cabinet Office's code of conduct for members of public bodies, as well as their own code of conduct.

3

News articles

[OfS accused of seeing student engagement as 'tick box exercise'](#)

Times Higher Education

18 April 2023

[OfS tried to silence us, say student panel members](#)

WonkHE

18 April 2023

[Pro-VCs among recruits to run Office for Students inspections](#)

Research Professional News

4 April 2023

[Don't get rid of the Office for Students, urges Dandridge](#)

Times Higher Education

16 March 2023

[The Office for Students, expertise and legitimacy in the regulation of higher education in England](#)

Higher Education Policy Institute

4 September 2022

['Cronyism' warning over Tory peer as student watchdog](#)

BBC

10 February 2021

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Further information

[Office for Students: about us](#)

Office for Students

[SUMS' final report published from our evaluation of Office for Students' statement of expectations](#)

SUMS

[One size won't fit all: the challenges facing the Office for Students](#)

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