

## OfS student panel meeting

27 October 2022

Time: 1400-1800

Location: Finlaison House, London, and virtual.

Present Members:

- Martha Longdon (Chair)
- Nkechi Adeboye
- Molly Edwards
- Thomas Freeston
- Anita Hashmi
- Thibau Grumett
- Oscar Minto
- Misha Patel
- Amy Stanning
- Michael Steele
- Lila Tamea

Attending:

- Jamie Black (Head of Markets) (Item 5)
- Harriette Cradock (Strategic Advisor to Director for Fair Access and Participation) (Item 6)
- Emma Douthwaite (Safeguarding and Welfare Manager) (Item 2)
- Obioma Egemonye (Student Engagement Intern) (Items 1-7)
- Ali Griffiths (Senior Officer – Compliance and Student Protection) (Item 5)
- Benjamin Hunt (Student Engagement Manager) (Items 1-7)
- Christie Jones (Student Engagement Officer) (Items 1-7)
- Sarah Matthews (Leadership Development Officer) (Item 6)
- Conor Ryan (Director of External Relations) (Items 3-4)

Apologies:

- Susan Lapworth (Chief Executive)
- Rahul Mathasing
- Ezra Rose

## **Item 1 – Chair’s welcome and update**

1. The chair welcomed the student panel members.
2. The chair thanked those who participated in recent events and workshops including those who:
  - a. Filmed videos for the promotion of our blended learning review.
  - b. Attended a UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) student advisory group meeting.
  - c. Attended a workshop on how to use OfS platforms.

## **Item 2 – Update on the statement of expectations on harassment and sexual misconduct**

3. The chair invited the Safeguarding and Welfare Manager to the meeting to introduce the update on the statement of expectations on harassment and sexual misconduct.
4. The Safeguarding and Welfare Manager shared initial findings of the evaluation of the statement of expectations.
5. A consultation is currently in development on the topic and OfS staff are scoping a ‘prevalence survey’ to understand the scale and nature of sexual misconduct in higher education.
6. Panel members asked the following questions:
  - a. What the justifications were for the prevalence survey now and why this was something that the OfS is seeking to do?
    - i. The Safeguarding and Welfare Manager explained that whilst there is an acknowledgement that sexual misconduct is an issue, there are still knowledge gaps in the sector.
    - ii. A prevalence survey would be useful for both providers and the OfS to provide data to tackle sexual misconduct appropriately.
  - b. Whether the statement of expectations was aimed at protecting students only, or staff at providers as well?
    - i. The Safeguarding and Welfare Manager responded that the OfS only has jurisdiction for matters that involve students, but within the statement there is a recommendation that providers should take a similar approach to protecting staff and visitors from harassment and sexual misconduct.
  - c. Whether there was any correlation between the type of institution and their approach to the statement of expectations?
    - i. The Safeguarding and Welfare Manager said that evaluators would be publishing more analysis on this topic.

7. The Safeguarding and Welfare Manager thanked the panel and left the meeting.

### **Item 3 – Chief executive’s update**

8. The chair welcomed the Director of External Relations to the meeting to deliver an update on behalf of the chief executive. This included:

- a. The publication of the National Student Survey (NSS) consultation outcomes.
- b. Work being done around the rising cost of living.
- c. The upcoming access and participation consultation.
- d. New guidance on the student submission for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).
- e. The blended learning review findings.
- f. The upcoming consultation on a new condition of registration to address harassment and sexual misconduct.

9. Questions were answered regarding:

- a. How the new mental health question in the NSS would be phrased to ensure it encourages the views of different student groups.
  - i. It was noted that there’s a distinction between communication of mental health services and access to services. Would those be asked in one question, or two separate questions?
  - ii. The Director of External Relations responded that they hadn’t finalised the wording yet, but question wording would be tested with students.
- b. The reasoning for removing the learning community question from the NSS.
  - i. The Director of External Relations said they wanted to make sure there was the right balance of questions in the survey. Students and providers had been consulted on what questions worked, and what didn’t. This included the extent to which there was a common understanding of the terminology used.
- c. Why the timing of the NSS window had changed, and how this might affect the response rate:
  - i. The Director of External Relations replied that if the NSS were later, there could be a drop-off in response rate, but this would be mitigated by improved contact by the survey provider.
  - ii. There was a separate question about why it is conducted before students complete their courses. The director responded that the danger of conducting it after exams was that the response rate could be reduced significantly where students were no longer on campuses.

- d. Whether there was ever a correlation between responses to the overall satisfaction question and the grade that students received?
  - i. The Director of External Relations responded that the correlation would not necessarily be there as the NSS is normally completed before students receive their final grades.

10. The chair thanked the Director of External Relations for providing the update.

#### **Item 4 – Discussion session 1: Communications in a changing policy environment**

11. The Director of External Relations facilitated a session on the OfS's communication approach. This included:

- a. How traditional student media is changing.
- b. How the OfS works with the media broadly to make sure that the outcomes of our work are communicated effectively.
- c. The OfS's relationship to government. Specifically, that the OfS is independent of government, but under the Higher Education and Research Act, ministers can shape the work that the OfS does, and those powers were agreed by Parliament.

12. Questions were answered regarding:

- a. Whether the OfS had considered surveying students regarding their awareness of the OfS?
  - i. The Student Engagement Manager stated that this is measured in an annual poll.
- b. Gen-Z audiences use TikTok as a media source to get their news. Could the OfS do this?
  - i. The OfS is always revisiting whether there are different forms of communication we could use.
- c. Is there any work done on capturing topical comments, conversations, or looking for trends on social media?
  - i. That work is being done and the OfS has invested in social listening tools.

13. The Director of External Relations thanked the panel for their questions and left the meeting.

#### **Item 5 – Discussion session 2: The OfS's approach to market exit**

14. The chair introduced the Head of Markets and a Senior Officer from the Compliance and Student Protection (CASP) directorate. They discussed the role of the OfS in requiring providers to protect the interests of students in the event of a market exit, and the OfS's approach to exercising these powers.

15. The panel discussed the timescales for students being given an opportunity to transfer their credits and find alternative places to study or receive evidence of academic achievement, the impact of market exit on offer holders and the current risks facing providers.

16. The OfS staff thanked the panel for their input and left the meeting.

### **Item 6 – Discussion session 3: Cost of living**

17. The chair invited the Strategic Advisor to the Director for Fair Access and Participation and the Leadership Development Officer to begin their session on the rising cost of living.

18. The panel were asked:

- a. Where can the OfS add the most value regarding the cost of living?
- b. What impact is the cost of living having on students and what differential impacts are there on different student groups?
- c. How have providers responded and what more could they do?

19. The panel fed back that:

- a. Students may have to work more hours due to increasing costs, which could impact their educational experience by:
  - i. Decreasing the time they can allocate to their studies, and affecting their focus during lectures.
  - ii. Potentially tempting students to disregard provider policies of how many hours (if any) they are allowed to work.
  - iii. Cutting back on their social activities due to workload, impacting sense of belonging and mental health.
- b. Another problem facing students is a reduction in their ability to afford learning resources, such as technology or books.
- c. Postgraduate research students are having to extend timescales and are under pressure to complete.
- d. Budgeting skills may not be as developed for students that are living away from home for the first time, so the full effect of the rising cost of living may not be realised until later months if they've had to use more of their funds on their first term than anticipated.
- e. Differential impact:
  - i. There may be differential impacts on first-generation immigrant students, and those who cannot rely on family support.
  - ii. Commuter students who have to consider the cost of socialising and accessing support services on campus against the cost of commuting.
- f. There are issues with students accessing funding:
  - i. Hardship funding information is sometimes unclear.

- ii. Hardship funding is often targeted at undergraduates, and so there may be differential impacts on postgraduate students.
  - iii. Many second and third years have rental contracts inclusive of utilities and so are not able to access energy rebates.
  - iv. Maintenance loans do not always cover increased costs.
- g. Providers have responded to the rising cost of living by:
- i. Reducing the price of food on campus.
  - ii. Creating 'how to manage your money' guides which can be perceived as patronising by staff and students.
  - iii. Offering free period products on campus.
  - iv. Opening food banks.
  - v. Introducing different funds, included a specific gender expression fund.
  - vi. Offering bike rentals for a small deposit that is returned at the end of the year.
- h. Panel members stated other actions providers could take include:
- i. Developing a community that encourages students to ask for help and support if they need it.
  - ii. Providers reviewing reading lists to ensure that learning materials are affordable.
  - iii. Offering asynchronous lectures so that students can manage work and study at the same time.
  - iv. Identify 'at-risk' student groups and create tailored support for these groups. An example was a provider offering free printing for neurodiverse students as it's a necessary learning aid that can become costly.
  - v. Introducing employment strategies that offer jobs to students before external applicants, and working with local job fairs to advertise study friendly employment options.
  - i. A panel member raised that the OfS should record the challenges and solutions that were successful for future learning.

20. The Strategic Advisor thanked the panel for their contributions, noting that what was discussed would be used to inform future work on the topic.

## **Item 7 – Overview of the panel terms of reference**

21. The chair invited the Student Engagement Manager to discuss the student panel terms of reference.

22. He provided an overview of the terms of reference which panel members had reviewed beforehand.
23. The panel approved the terms of reference with no changes.
24. The Student Engagement Manager also thanked the chair of the panel for their dedicated work throughout their time with the OfS, as their term will end at the end of 2022.
25. The chair thanked the Student Engagement Manager and Student Engagement Officer for their support. She also thanked the panel for their contributions.

### **Item 8 – Closed session**

26. OfS staff exited the meeting at this point to allow for a panel member closed session.