Office for Students
OfS

English higher education 2021

The Office for Students annual review

Contents

Chair's foreword

Lord Wharton of Yarm, OfS chair

Since beginning my role as chair of the Office for Students (OfS), I have been struck by the higher education sector's response to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. In a difficult and unprecedented period for the entire country, many universities and colleges, and their students and staff, have truly gone above and beyond. From the medicine and healthcare students serving on the frontline, to the researchers who have developed life-saving vaccines, there is much of which the sector can be proud.

The challenge for the future is simple: to ensure that we continue to have a world-leading higher education sector characterised by high-quality learning and teaching and equality of opportunity. These two priorities are inextricably linked: you cannot have one without the other. Any suggestion that quality must be sacrificed to enhance equality, or vice versa, does a disservice to both students and the sector as a whole.

The forthcoming launch of the second OfS strategy heralds a new era for us as a regulator, one in which we will be more assertive in intervening to ensure that universities and colleges uphold their obligations. The pandemic has brought to the fore many of the positives of higher education in England. However, where there are pockets of poor-quality provision failing to deliver positive outcomes for students, the OfS is committed to using the regulatory tools at its disposal.

It is crucial that universities and colleges deliver the student experience that is promised, and that students leave higher education equipped with the skills they need to thrive. One course that fails to deliver positive outcomes for students is one course too many. Similarly, universities and colleges where there is rapid and unjustified grade inflation must be challenged to provide, instead, meaningful and long-lasting positive outcomes for students through high-quality provision.

While the higher education sector in England has made significant strides in relation to equality of opportunity, there is still more that must be done. As the universities minister noted in recent statutory guidance, large groups, such as white working-class boys, are still woefully underrepresented. We must additionally now be alert to the uneven effects of the pandemic, where already disadvantaged students have been hit hardest. There is also the challenge of tackling regional inequalities. Our data shows that participation rates are lower for students from coastal regions, and parts of the north and midlands. Well paid graduate employment is concentrated in London and the south east. As we recover from the pandemic, we must redouble our efforts to ensure that 'where you are from' continues to matter less, and 'what you can offer' continues to matter more.

The next OfS strategy will be ambitious, but ambition need not and will not lead to unnecessary regulatory burden for the sector. It is our intention that universities and colleges should be enabled to achieve their ambitions free from unnecessary red tape, so long as they continue to meet the OfS's baseline requirements. As a regulator, we will take a risk-based approach to ensure that those providers that meet their obligations are given the space and autonomy needed to innovate and excel. The past 12 months have shown what English higher education is capable of at its best; it is in that spirit that we set out our goals for the future.

Finally, I would like to pay tribute to Chris Millward, who stands down as Director for Fair Access and Participation at the end of this year. Chris has led our work on access and participation with authority and dedication since the setup of the OfS. I would also like to thank our chief executive, Nicola Dandridge, who will be stepping down from May 2022. The achievements of the last year set out in this review, and the establishment of the OfS as an effective higher education regulator, would not have been possible without Nicola's leadership. She continues to serve as an outstanding chief executive, working diligently to ensure the OfS does everything it can to protect the interests of students. My thanks to Nicola and Chris for their contributions and my best wishes to them for the future.

1. Chief executive's commentary

Nicola Dandridge CBE, OfS chief executive

This year marks the end of our first OfS strategy. Since we opened for business in 2018, we have established a new regulatory model that has consistently prioritised the interests of current and future students and, notwithstanding an exceptionally challenging external environment, enabled a diversity of universities and colleges to thrive.

Establishing a new regulatory model that works for the 418 providers that we have registered to date was no easy task. The very diversity that is the strength of our English higher education sector makes regulating according to a single framework challenging. Nonetheless, we are confident that the model that we have developed will deliver the high quality, and equality of opportunity, that every student has the right to expect.

This last year was again dominated by the pandemic. At the beginning of 2021, we were still in lockdown, with the majority of students learning remotely and unable to access the campus. During the year, as the vaccine rollout extended to all staff and students, the focus shifted to how to return to something approximating normal. Whether in lockdown or emerging from it, the resilience of students, staff, and indeed everyone involved in their higher education communities, has been truly remarkable.

The OfS's initial response to the pandemic was to adjust our regulatory requirements to allow universities and colleges the space to focus on the public health emergency. During the course of last year, in anticipation of returning to our usual regulatory approach, we began to reset our ambitions on quality and standards. In doing this we signalled our ambition to raise the bar significantly on this fundamental issue, as well as making clear that we expected universities and colleges to honour the commitments they made in their access and participation plans. We have taken action as a result of a range of notifications received from students, particularly where they have not received the teaching or broader experience that were promised to them. We also closely monitored the finances of providers, which continue to hold up well despite the gloomy predictions many offered at the start of the pandemic.

The consultation for our new strategy, covering 2022 to 2025 and published in November, sets out our two priorities of quality and standards and equality of opportunity. The quality of courses in England is generally good, with many examples of truly outstanding provision.

Where universities and colleges offer high-quality courses, we want to minimise our regulatory involvement with them, allowing them to flourish, innovate, and determine their own priorities for their students. But there are still too many students on courses where quality is poor, dropout rates are high, and the chances of securing a good degree or finding professional employment are not what students want or expect. Similarly, substantial progress has been made on improving fair access and student success in recent years, but too many talented people still find their background blocks them from succeeding. There is much more to do, and our new strategy will map out how we will address these matters.

In our new strategy we will continue to work collaboratively with stakeholders and partners, particularly UK Research and Innovation, with whom we have many common areas of interest and concern, for instance in relation to postgraduate students. We also will continue liaising closely with our counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure appropriate coordination of our different policies and approaches.

England's higher education system is rightly admired around the world. It remains an attractive destination for international students, and young people took up places this year at greater rates than ever before. There is plenty to celebrate, and many reasons to be hopeful as we look ahead to 2022.

Maintaining and raising quality during the pandemic

Ensuring that quality was maintained for students during the pandemic was challenging: universities and colleges were operating in uncharted territory in switching to largely online provision. Our focus was on ensuring that, whether online or face-to-face, quality was maintained. We intervened in a number of cases. Although

we decided that in the circumstances it was not appropriate to publish details of those interventions, we were clear about what we expected of providers, particularly the importance of clear communications with students about what they should expect, the need to consult them about changes, and the need to deliver on what had been promised.

Notwithstanding the efforts of universities and colleges, the consequences of the pandemic for individual students have been profound. Many have lost relatives or friends to the disease. Some will have been unwell themselves, or found that their mental health and wellbeing were affected. All were forced to get used to an entirely changed world that has affected their courses and restricted their lives – whether they were mature students who juggled their courses with home-schooling their children, or young students whose on-campus experience was entirely different from anything they had imagined.

Many universities and colleges successfully developed and refined their online offering over the last year. However, the 2021 National Student Survey outcomes showed a fall in students' agreement with positive statements about their experience. Students have overwhelmingly made clear their desire to return to largely in-person learning. This became more possible in 2021. Students on practical courses were increasingly able to return to laboratories and studios, and as the new academic year began this autumn we saw in-person teaching restored more widely.

There is, however, much to be learnt from how universities and colleges reshaped their curricula and pedagogy during the early throes of the pandemic. Sir Michael Barber's report on digital teaching and learning, published in March, set out some of the ways in which higher education teaching may change in the short, medium and long terms, partly as a consequence of the

pandemic.[1] The challenge for all of us now is to identify what was best about the online experience that was so abruptly forced on us, and expand and build on it imaginatively and collaboratively, while resuming the in-person experience that students tell us is so important to them. For now, the focus of the OfS's regulation will continue to be on the quality of provision, however it is delivered.

We have, over this year, been engaged in a range of consultative work on the future regulation of quality and standards. Some of this has provoked quite a debate, and we have adjusted our plans as a result of feedback we have received. It is important to emphasise again that we expect the majority of registered providers to comfortably outperform the requirements we set in our quality conditions: there will not be armies of OfS inspectors assessing teaching quality, creating rafts of additional bureaucracy. Many providers that we regulate already offer good or outstanding higher education and will be left to get on with what they are already doing well.

What we cannot do is tolerate the minority of providers that are letting students down. Nobody embarks on a higher education course expecting to find it uninspiring and of poor quality, so that they end up dropping out, or to be unable to find employment afterwards. Universities and colleges heavily promote the quality of their courses and the employment prospects of their graduates in their marketing; they know how important these are to their students. So courses that offer little to students will have to change, or they will have to close. We are also clear that we will not accept pockets of poor provision in otherwise high-performing providers, nor lower expectations for certain groups of students.

We will continue to engage productively with the sector on these issues. We will also make sure that students have access to the information they need to make decisions about what courses may be right

for them. Discover Uni offers helpful course comparison tools, while our new Proceed measure, published in May, sheds light on how likely new entrants to degree courses at individual universities and colleges are to complete their course and go on to further study or find employment at a professional level. This is information that matters to students and the public.

Providing degrees that last

Students deserve and expect to be awarded a degree which stands the test of time. Similarly, employers need assurance that the graduates they take on will be well qualified. YouGov employer polling for the OfS shows that almost a third of respondents are only sometimes able to recruit the quality of graduates they want, while a 2019 survey by the Confederation of British Industry found a quarter of respondents dissatisfied with the literacy and numeracy skills of young people leaving education.[2] Other research has found that weak literacy skills are relatively common among graduates in England, and that poor literacy may keep graduates in jobs that school leavers could do.[3]

These statistics will have been influenced by a range of factors. Nonetheless, higher education providers are responsible for their graduates, and the polling and research results sit uncomfortably with the increasing proportion of high grades awarded to graduates in England. Figures published in January showed a further jump in the proportion of first-class degrees awarded in 2020, following a levelling off in 2019, though this may be a consequence of the impact of the pandemic.[4] We know that as a result of the pandemic a number of universities and colleges made changes to their assessment polices, with 'no detriment' policies ensuring students on course for a 1st did not see their final grade drop. Even so, the stark reality is that the proportion of 1sts has more than doubled in the last decade. OfS analysis of results up to 2019, which takes into account a range of factors that

could drive an increase in the top grades, finds a large proportion of this increase is unexplained by changes in the graduate population.[5] While this does not rule out the explanation that improved teaching and learning have driven some of this increase, it is unlikely that this accounts for it all.

Universities had begun to take steps to address this sector-wide problem, and the figures from 2019 showed that the tanker, if not turned, had at least been slowed. 2020 will always be anomalous and the impact of the pandemic will continue to be one aspect of our regulatory consideration of these issues.

However, it is essential that assessments in the coming years remain fair to everyone, present an accurate picture of students' achievement, and are credible in the eyes of the public and employers. We have been clear that we are ready to act where standards are not maintained, and our new proposed quality conditions would give us clear powers to do so.

Equality of opportunity

We continue to prioritise our work to secure equality of opportunity. Despite progress, stubborn gaps in terms of both access and success mean that talented people still miss out on the life-changing opportunities higher education can bring.

The access and participation plans agreed by Chris Millward, who leaves his role as Director for Fair Access and Participation at the end of the year, demonstrate a step up in ambition that would mean their successful delivery would transform thousands of lives. The increased ambition of universities and colleges is testament to the influence Chris has had, through his determined, informed and thoughtful way of working. He has done much to highlight some of the most persistent gaps in access and outcomes, as well as being a powerful advocate for the need for students from disadvantaged

backgrounds to be properly supported so that their efforts can be fully realised when they are at university and after they graduate.

We now look forward to welcoming John Blake, who will be taking over from Chris as Director for Fair Access and Participation from January 2022. John will join us with a wealth of experience in the schools sector, enabling a greater focus on how universities and colleges can work even more closely and productively with the school and college sectors to address equality of opportunity.

Despite the progress that has been made, John inherits one of the most challenging problems in higher education. It is self-evident that where you live, the school you go to, and what your parents do for a living should not be a barrier to success in life. At the same time, we know that too often where you come from determines where you will end up in life.

Higher education participation is especially low among certain groups – white students who have been eligible for free school meals, young people who have been in care, those from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities.[6] The important role of place has threaded itself through the access debate over the course of the last year, highlighting the areas of low participation concentrated in towns and parts of cities in the North and Midlands, and in coastal regions.[7]

We know that opportunities remain unequal as students progress. OfS analysis published in June found that the areas of highest-paying graduate roles were concentrated in London and the South East.[8] While some graduates have always moved to London early in their career – and probably always will – this should never be a requirement to find a good job. The OfS's local graduates programme continues to fund projects to help boost opportunities for graduates who

want or need to live in the areas where they grew up or went to university.

We also know that fewer mature students have been accessing higher education during the last decade, and that the poor availability of flexible learning has contributed to this.[9] As part of the government's proposals to encourage lifelong learning, and in preparation for the Lifelong Loan Entitlement, the Department for Education asked the OfS to launch a challenge competition aimed at testing student and employer demand for new short courses to address employer skills needs. The £2 million competition was closed in September, and bids are now being assessed. The first courses are expected to be available from September 2022.

As well as regional differences, there continue to be gaps between different groups of students. Black students, for example, are less likely to continue their studies, less likely to graduate with a 1st or 2:1, and less likely to find graduate-level employment.[10] This waste of talent not only affects individuals' life chances, but diminishes society as a whole.

While the awarding gap between black and white students closed by four percentage points between 2018-19 and 2019-20, it is impossible to say how far changes in assessment practices in response to the pandemic contributed to this. The targets we have set in this area demand urgent action as we seek to eliminate the unexplained gap in degree attainment between white and black students by 2024-25, and remove the absolute gap within a decade.[11]

Not a zero-sum game

Some suggest that improving equality of opportunity and driving up quality and standards are mutually exclusive. The argument is that universities and colleges with a high proportion of students from underrepresented groups should not be held to the same standards as those that recruit primarily from higher education's traditional constituencies. This amounts, however, to suggesting that students who are already disadvantaged should be expected to accept lower quality and weaker outcomes. We have always maintained that this is unacceptable.

Instead, we take the view that quality, and equality of opportunity, are closely linked and mutually enforcing. Improving equality of opportunity without maintaining quality and standards will not lead to positive student outcomes. Likewise, maintaining quality and standards without improving equality of opportunity means excluding students who would stand to benefit in a fairer system. We will always take context into account in our regulation, but not if that involves embedding disadvantage into our regulatory system.

Financial sustainability

Despite the many operational and financial challenges arising from the pandemic, the overall financial position of universities, colleges and other providers registered with the OfS across the higher education sector has remained sound over the course of the last year, with generally reasonable financial resilience.[12] This is testament to the fact that providers went into the pandemic in reasonable financial shape, and have managed the unprecedented circumstances well, even though in many cases they saw income from some sources plummet.

This sector-wide position should not disguise either the considerable variation between providers or the challenging and uncertain financial future facing the sector as a whole. Universities and colleges will need to continue to adapt to uncertainties and financial risks to protect their longer-term sustainability. For the OfS, we will carry on monitoring financial sustainability closely, identifying the signals and indicators of financial weakness and intervening when required.

Innovation, autonomy and regulatory burden

The OfS's risk-based approach to regulation is designed to ensure that universities and colleges that satisfy our minimum requirements are able to flourish and determine their own path. We want to stay out of their way, allowing them to innovate and to continue providing an outstanding academic experience for their students.

At the same time we are committed to reducing regulatory burden. The move to five-year access and participation plans, for example, allows universities and colleges to plan strategically, rather than be stuck in a never-ending cycle of writing next year's plan. With the initial registration period completed, we have removed many enhanced monitoring requirements, have suspended plans to use random sampling of providers, and are building a focus on burden reduction into all our activities.

We have also listened to feedback from universities and colleges about the way we communicate with them. We are seeking to ensure clarity, and have grouped major consultations and publications so that our communications are streamlined.

The OfS's priorities for 2022

As I reflect on this last year and look forward to next year, I am mindful of the fact that I will be standing down as chief executive of the OfS at the end of April 2022. The new chief executive will clearly want to stamp their own mark on our strategy and plans for the future. Nonetheless, whoever takes over at the helm, the three themes of quality, equality of opportunity and tackling harassment will undoubtedly play a central role in our work next year.

Quality

The proposal in our new strategy consultation is that we should continue to prioritise our work on quality and standards, as well as seeking to ensure equality of opportunity for all students, whatever their background.

On quality, we have been through a period of thorough consultation and analysis, which will have lasted well over a year. On such a fundamental issue, it is important that we can be sure we have tested and sought views from as wide a range of people and organisations as possible, on both the broad principles and the fine details of our proposals. We will set out our final position early in 2022.

While we will carefully analyse and consider all responses to our quality consultations, we have been clear that taking action on low-quality courses is a priority. We are confident that the measures we propose will raise quality, without contributing extra burden to the many universities and colleges that comfortably meet our expectations.

Equality of opportunity

John Blake will also want to set out his priorities as Director for Fair Access and Participation early in the new year. We do know, though, that students entering university straight from school or college will have faced unprecedented disruption to their education due to the pandemic. This applies to those still in primary school, right through to students applying now for courses that start in 2022. Research shows that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were disproportionately hit by the disruption to their education caused by the lockdowns. Close work with schools and communities to help raise awareness, aspirations and expectations will inform our work over the course of the next year, and will help to ensure that the disrupted generation does not become the disadvantaged generation.

Harassment and sexual misconduct

Next year we will consider how universities and colleges have responded to our statement of expectations on harassment and sexual misconduct. The facts are stark and disturbing. We know that full-time students are more likely to experience sexual assault than those in any other occupational group, and a study of over 5,500 students found that nearly half of women had been touched inappropriately.[13] A quarter of students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds have experienced racial harassment.[14] One in three Muslim students have experienced some type of abuse or hate crime where they study, while an investigation found 123 antisemitic incidents affecting Jewish students, academics and student bodies between 2018-19 and 2019-20.[15]

That universities and colleges tackle and respond effectively to harassment and sexual misconduct is fundamental to ensuring that students are successful in their studies. Our statement of expectations on harassment and sexual misconduct, published in April this year, set out the policies and procedures universities and colleges should have in place to prevent harassment from occurring in the first place, and to ensure an appropriate and effective response if it does happen. We will be reviewing providers' and students' responses in 2022, and then determine how to deliver the change needed in this area most effectively.

Universities and colleges face an uncertain policy environment in 2022. As I write, important legislation relating to skills and freedom of speech continues to progress through parliament. But whatever policy changes may occur, higher education in England will continue to flourish, offering outstanding education and life-changing opportunities for students and enabling them to contribute enormously to their communities and the country's wider economic and social wellbeing. Although

I will be leaving, I know that my successor and the outstanding team at the OfS will continue to work to make sure that all students, whatever their background and wherever and however they study, have an experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

Notes

1   OfS, 'All content about the Digital teaching and learning review' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/digital-teaching-and-learning-review/).

2   OfS, 'Key performance measure 16' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/outcomes-performance-measures/employers-think-that-graduates-are-equipped-with-the-required-skills-and-knowledge/); Confederation of British Industry, 'Education and learning for the modern world: CBI/Pearson 2019 education and skills survey report' (available at https://www.cbi.org.uk/articles/education-and-learning-for-the-modern-world/).

3   Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 'Building skills for all: A review of England' (available at https://skillspanorama.cedefop.europa.eu/en/useful_resources/building-skills-all-review-england); Woolcock, Nicola, 'Graduates "lack basic maths and literacy skills"', The Times, 12 September 2018 (available at https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/graduates-lack-basic-maths-and-literacy-skills-bwj37zlcs).

4   OfS, 'Official statistic: Key performance measure 18' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/outcomes-performance-measures/students-achieving-1sts/).

5   OfS, 'Analysis of degree classifications over time: Changes in graduate attainment from 2010-11 to 2018-19' (OfS 2020.52, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/analysis-of-degree-classifications-over-time-changes-in-graduate-attainment-from-2010-11-to-2018-19/), pp13-14.

6   Gov.UK, 'Explore education statistics: Academic year 2019-20 – Widening participation in higher education' (available at https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education).

7   OfS, 'White students who are left behind: The importance of place' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/white-students-who-are-left-behind-the-importance-of-place/).

8   OfS, 'A geography of employment and earnings' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/).

9   OfS, 'Improving opportunity and choice for mature students' (OfS Insight #9, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/improving-opportunity-and-choice-for-mature-students/).

10   OfS, 'Access and participation data dashboard: Findings from the data' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/findings-from-the-data/).

11   OfS, 'Official statistic: Key performance measure 4' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-degree-outcomes-1sts-or-21s-between-white-students-and-black-students/).

12   OfS, 'Financial sustainability of higher education providers in England' (OfS 2021.20, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/financial-sustainability-of-higher-education-providers-in-england-2021/).

13 Brook, 'Our new research on sexual harassment and violence at UK universities' (available at https://legacy.brook.org. uk/press-releases/sexual-violence-and-harassment-remains-rife-in-universities-according-to-ne).

14 Equality and Human Rights Commission, 'Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged' (available at https://www. equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged), p26.

15 NUS Connect, 'The experience of Muslim students in 2017-18' (available at https:// www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/the-experience-of-muslim-students-in-2017-18); Community Security Trust, 'Campus Antisemitism in Britain 2018-20' (available at https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2020/12/17/ campus-antisemitism-in-britain-2018-2020).

2: Regulating universities and colleges

Last year we set out three objectives that would underpin our regulatory response to the pandemic: seeking to protect so far as possible the quality of teaching and learning, minimising long-term damage by enabling future recovery, and sharing information to support the government's public health objectives. These three principles have continued to underpin our work over the course of the last year.

Quality of teaching and learning

The covid-related questions in this year's National Student Survey (NSS) showed that 77.5 per cent of respondents in England agreed that they were able to access the learning resources they needed for their course (lecture notes, course materials, journals, virtual learning environments, etc.) during the pandemic. However, only 46.9 per cent agreed that they were content with the delivery of learning and teaching of their course during this time.[1]

Meanwhile, a survey by the Office for National Statistics has shown that 61 per cent of students who were in higher education prior to the pandemic reported that the lack of face-to-face learning had had a major or moderate impact on the quality of their course. Around half (52 per cent) said that the pandemic had a major or significant impact on their academic performance.[2]

OfS polling highlighted the need for increased support for teaching staff. While almost half of students (49 per cent) were very confident that they had the skills to benefit from digital teaching and learning, only 21 per cent of teachers said they were very confident that they had the skills to design and deliver them.[3]

In the course of 2020-21, we received 19 notifications relating to the quality of courses (with a further three to the end of October 2021), 33 relating to assessment or standards (with two more to the end of October), and 18 stating that a university or college was not delivering the course 'as promised or expected' (with three more to the end of October). Meanwhile, an annual survey carried out by the Higher Education Policy Institute in February and March 2021, asking about topics including teaching quality, students' priorities and their wellbeing, showed an increase in the number of students saying that their experience was worse than expected.[4] While this is not surprising in the circumstances, it reflects the importance of giving students clear and timely information about what they can expect before they start their courses, so that what they get is what they expect.

We intervened in a number of these cases, engaging with providers requiring them to explain what had happened, what they had done, and what action they were proposing to take. In some of the cases we required further action. Our experience of these interventions informed our communications with universities and colleges about areas where there appeared to be particular problems – for instance the need for clear communications with students about

teaching arrangements. Nonetheless, consistently with our approach last year, we were acutely mindful of the challenges facing universities during the pandemic and adjusted our regulatory responses accordingly.

Even in normal times, many potential applicants for university experience an 'information gap' in accessing the material they need to make an informed decision about their higher education course and destination. This is particularly true of those from disadvantaged backgrounds, those who intend to study part-time, and those beyond school leaving age. During the pandemic, universities and colleges were barred by social distancing and other public health measures from holding open days and other activities, making this situation even more challenging.

In January 2021 we asked universities and colleges to carry out a review of their compliance with consumer protection law, and inform us of any issues they discovered. This included assessing whether they had been sufficiently clear with their students about how teaching and assessment would be delivered in 2020-21, and how this might change; whether their students had received the promised teaching and assessment during the autumn term; and whether their plans for the remaining terms would ensure that this continued throughout the year.

During lockdown and the subsequent return of students to campus, we expected universities and colleges to provide students with clear information, advice and guidance about changes to teaching and assessment arrangements and their implications, and the students' options in response to this, including their entitlement to seek refunds or other redress if promises were not fulfilled. It was important to consider how these approaches affected all students, including those suffering from coronavirus and needing to self-isolate, international students, those unable or less able to access

remote learning, care leavers, students estranged from their families, and disabled students.

We made clear our expectations that standards should remain secure; that safety nets continued to be provided for individual students; that students were consulted about plans for assessment and awards; and that they should be kept adequately informed of these plans.[5] Any university at risk of not being able to comply with our condition of registration for consumer protection was required to notify us.

We also received 10 notifications in 2020-21 relating to refunds or waiving of tuition fees. There has been much debate on this subject, especially given how much teaching has taken place online. As an independent regulator, it is not for the OfS to get involved in debates about fees. Fee limits are set by ministers and parliament, and not the OfS. Instead, we provided information to students on the routes they could take if they thought their experience warranted a refund: to complain to their university and – if this was unsuccessful – to contact the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. We were clear with universities and colleges that we would expect them to consider requests for refunds on an individual basis, rather than having blanket polices to refuse such requests.

From the beginning of the lockdown, we took the view that whether studying remotely or in person, what mattered was the quality of provision, and notwithstanding the exceptional circumstances we expected universities and colleges to continue to satisfy our baseline quality requirements. As lockdown lifted and students have returned to campus this autumn, the overwhelming majority of providers have returned to offering in-person teaching, but drawing on their experience of lockdown to retain elements of digital provision that have added value for students – for instance the flexibilities that online teaching can offer.

Over the course of the next few months, we will be reviewing the teaching and learning that students are receiving across the sector to ensure that in-person teaching is being resumed where appropriate, and students' views on in-person or digital teaching are taken into account.

Listening to student concerns

During the year, we worked with the National Union of Students to improve awareness and understanding among students of how to raise concerns and issues with us. The OfS does not have a role in dealing with individual complaints or disputes between students and their university or college, nor should getting in touch with us replace discussion between students' unions and their providers, but we encourage students and others to let us know through our notifications process about potential breaches of our conditions of registration.[6]

The National Student Survey, run by the OfS on behalf of the funding bodies in the devolved administrations, is another essential source of information for prospective students, and has been particularly useful in showing the impact of the pandemic on their experiences.[7] Alongside the main data this year we also published a more experimental release, showing an NSS agreement rate based on data from the past three years.[8] We also included six questions specifically relating to the pandemic and its impact on students' experience.

In England, respondents to this part of the survey reacted positively to the questions relating to communication with their universities, with 72.9 per cent agreeing that 'I have received useful information about changes to my course from my university or college during the covid-19 pandemic,' and 63.8 per cent agreeing that 'I have received timely information about changes to my course from my university or college during the covid-19 pandemic.' This compares with only 46.9 per cent agreement that 'I am

content with the delivery of learning and teaching of my course during the covid-19 pandemic.' Students who had intended to take their courses via distance learning responded more positively to almost all the covid-related questions than those who would usually be engaged in face-to-face learning.[9]

We are reviewing the NSS to ensure it supports our regulatory activities effectively; this will include considering which questions should be asked to support student information across all four countries of the UK, in collaboration with the funding bodies in the devolved administrations. We are also considering how best to survey the views of postgraduate students on taught courses.

The OfS's Discover Uni website, which has expanded in functionality this year (as shown in Figure 1), provides data for prospective students and guidance on what to look for when applying. This year it has provided practical, up-to-date information on developments in key areas like school exams, the admissions process and student finance, as well as pointing to other official and trustworthy sources of information. We produced downloadable resources for applicants, teachers and advisers, including tips on researching options for higher education while awaiting exam results, and advice on deciding whether to withdraw from or defer a course.

Assessments, awards and degree standards

One of the OfS's regulatory objectives is that students' qualifications hold their value over time. We have therefore been concerned to tackle grade inflation, to avoid a situation where a degree classification awarded today reflects a lower level of student achievement than the same classification awarded in the past.

One of the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic was on methods of assessment,

as in-person exams and face-to-face assessments could not take place as usual. Universities and colleges needed to be able to adjust exams and other assessments so as to observe national restrictions and keep students and staff safe. However, it was equally important to ensure that any adjustments did not result in assessments being seen as any less rigorous or qualifications holding a lower value, than in previous years. Enabling adequate exams and assessments therefore became one of our central priorities in protecting students' interests during the peak of the pandemic.

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in January 2021 showed that there was an increase in the numbers of students who were awarded first class degrees during the early part of the pandemic.[10] This is likely to have been due,

at least in part, to the 'no detriment' policies adopted by many providers, to prevent students from being unfairly penalised as a result of the period of intense disruption.

The guidance we issued on quality and standards during the pandemic recognised that these policies might be right for some universities and colleges, to reduce pressure on students in the difficult circumstances.[11] Our focus as a regulator was to ensure that they continued to assess their students' achievement reliably, basing qualifications and credit on sound evidence.

Before the pandemic OfS analysis indicated that unexplained grade inflation at universities and colleges in England had begun to slow.[12] However, it is important that this trend should continue in the long term, ensuring the maintenance of the rigorous

Figure 1: New features on Discover Uni

New features on Discover Uni in response to user feedback

Better search features
Set preference for study mode.
Search by postcode and nation.

Compare more courses
View 7 courses side by side.
Apply personal star ratings.

Even more resources
Guide for international students.
Up-to-date information on covid-19.

Discover Uni

standards associated with a world-renowned higher education system. Assessments and awards are integral to our renewed approach to ensuring high-quality courses and reliable standards.

Review of proficiency in written English in assessment practices

In summer 2021 we carried out a review of assessment practices in a small number of universities and colleges, to identify examples of approaches that maintain rigour in student assessment, and examples of those that do not. The review focused on the assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar, and found that some providers' interpretation of the Equality Act 2010 and other relevant legislation had led to their not assessing technical proficiency in written English for all students. We do not consider this approach necessary or justified.

The policies and approaches identified in the review could lead to students getting higher marks than they otherwise would. This would not only undermine the rigour of assessment processes, but might also contribute to unexplained grade inflation. The report makes it clear that providers should assess spelling, punctuation and grammar where relevant to the course, subject to compliance with their obligations under equality legislation. We would expect this to mean that most students on most courses should be assessed on their technical proficiency in written English.

Case study: Assessment of written English

The university's assessment policy states that technical proficiency in written English should only be assessed if identified as a learning outcome for a module or course.[13] This means that there is no general or universal requirement to assess students' proficiency in written English. In all cases, module leaders are required to seek approval for assessing technical proficiency in English. The policy is clear that, provided a marker can assess the content of a student's written answer or other learning outcomes effectively, marks should not be reduced on the basis of, for example, spelling, punctuation, use of grammar, overuse of subclauses, poor paragraph structure or regional differences in expression. Although the policy rules out summative assessment of written English in all but exceptional circumstances, it does allow markers to provide formative feedback to students on their use of language, expression and structure.

This approach is unlikely to preserve a rigorous approach to assessment. Rather than helping students, it could result in their being disadvantaged at a later stage in their studies, or following graduation, because they have not been required to demonstrate such proficiency. Introducing these policies may have lowered standards, which in turn may have contributed to greater proportions of students being awarded higher degree classifications. Employers may be affected if the graduates they employ are unable to perform written tasks to an appropriate standard. All of these effects would be detrimental to taxpayers, who would have contributed to the funding of courses that had not delivered the intended social benefits.

The Prevent duty

Universities and colleges must have systems in place to comply with their duty to have due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism, including to approve external speakers and events. These systems ensure that they consider the risk of radicalisation for students, staff and visitors, while having particular regard to ensuring freedom of speech as part of their decision-making processes, as well as other issues such as health and safety and whether there is sufficient space.

Since 2018-19, universities and colleges have been asked to report instances where an external speaker or event was rejected for reasons relating to the Prevent duty. This helps us to understand whether they have given particular regard to the duty to secure freedom of speech within the law. Fewer than five such events were reported for 2018-19 and 2019-20 combined. Where a university or college has reported that an event has been rejected for a reason not related to the Prevent duty, we have not (to date) asked for further information about that event.[14]

Funding

Funding is one of the OfS's regulatory tools. We fund to incentivise activities beyond our regulatory baseline, and for high-cost subjects where the costs of provision exceed the tuition fee. During the course of the year, we have run consultations in relation to recurrent grant allocations and capital funding. The recurrent grant consultation attracted over 8,000 responses.

In October, we launched a consultation for world-leading specialist institution funding, recognising that specialist providers contribute to the diversity of the sector and to student choice, and that the small size and specialisms of these providers mean that they are unable to cross-subsidise from other areas of activity.

Changes to our funding method will enable funds to be targeted in subject areas where skills are in high demand, while avoiding giving privileged status to London, with its relatively high levels of provision.

Notes

1   OfS, 'NSS data: Covid-19 questions' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-covid-19-questions/).. In 2021, the NSS included six topical questions on the pandemic and its impact on students' experience. As these were only asked online after the main survey was completed, the response rate was lower than for the main survey of final-year undergraduates. While the NSS is held across the UK, this figure refers only to England.

2   Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 24 May to 2 June 2021' (available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/england24mayto2june2021). Note that the question did not specify a negative impact.

3   OfS, 'Gravity assist: propelling higher education towards a brighter future', Executive summary (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/gravity-assist-propelling-higher-education-towards-a-brighter-future/executive-summary/).

4   Higher Education Policy Institute, 'The student academic experience survey 2021' (available at https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2021/06/24/the-student-academic-experience-survey-2021/).

5   OfS, 'Letter to accountable officers: Regulation during the current phase of the coronavirus pandemic' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/letter-to-aos-regulation-during-current-phase-of-pandemic/).

6   For more information on our notifications process, see OfS, 'Notifications' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-students/ofs-and-students/notifications/).

7   OfS, 'The National Student Survey: Student experience during the pandemic' (OfS Insight #10, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/the-national-student-survey-student-experience-during-the-pandemic/).

8   OfS, 'NSS data: additional analysis' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-additional-analysis/).

9   OfS, 'NSS data: Covid-19 questions' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-covid-19-questions/).

10   HESA, 'Higher Education Student Statistics 2019/20 released' (available at https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/27-01-2021/he-student-statistical-bulletin-released).

11   OfS, 'Guidance for providers about quality and standards during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/guidance-on-quality-and-standards-during-coronavirus-pandemic/).

12   OfS, 'Analysis of degree classifications over time: Changes in graduate attainment from 2010-11 to 2018-19' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/analysis-of-degree-classifications-over-time-changes-in-graduate-attainment-from-2010-11-to-2018-19/).

13   This case study combines observations from multiple providers to preserve anonymity.

14   OfS, 'Prevent monitoring: Summary of annual accountability and data returns - 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20' (OfS 2021.37, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/prevent-monitoring-summary-of-annual-accountability-and-data-returns/).
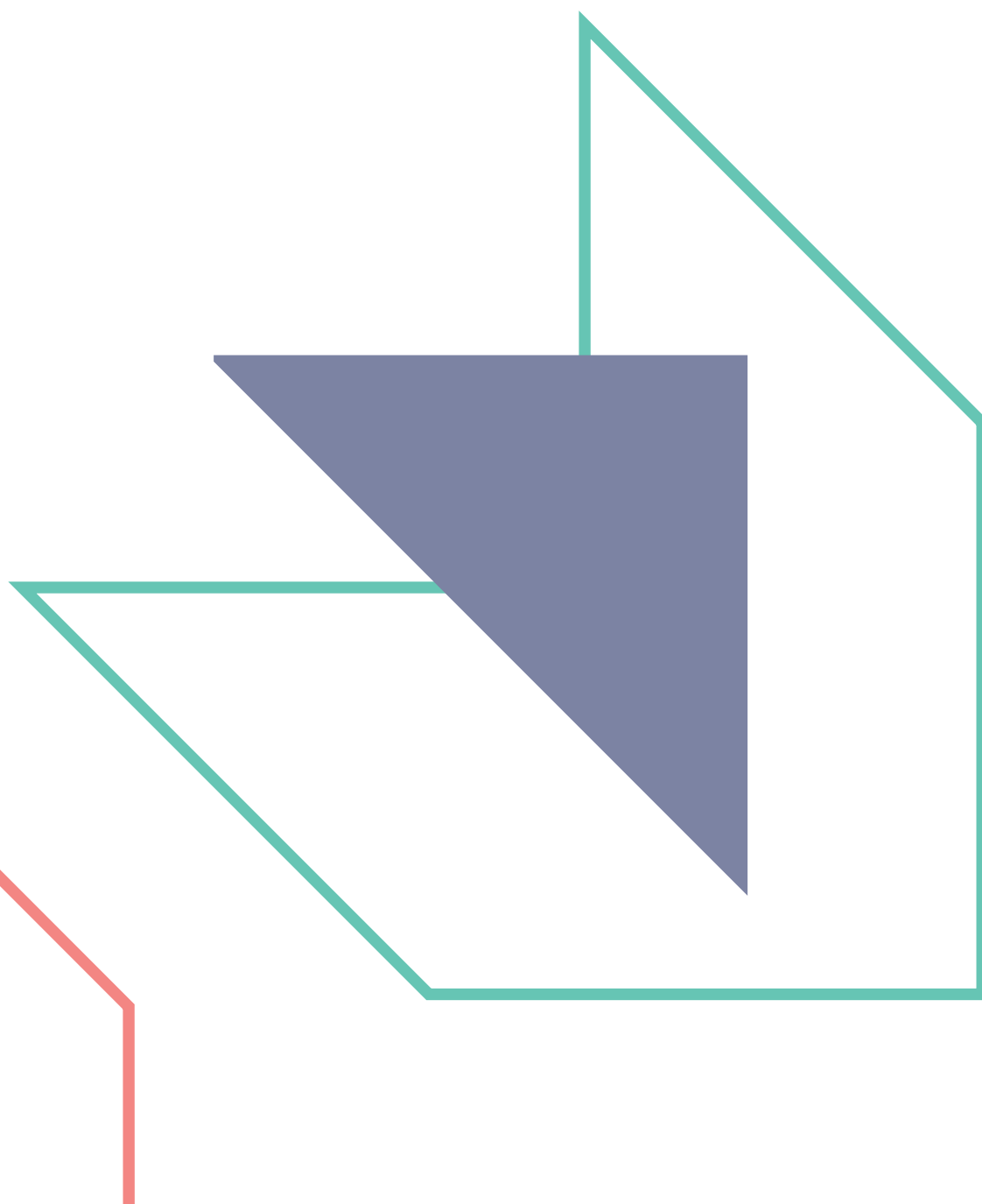
3. A new approach to regulating quality and standards

Quality and standards matter to students. High-quality teaching and learning, and a credible qualification, are among the most important things they expect from their degree. As part of our phased resumption of regulatory requirements following the pandemic, the OfS launched a major series of consultations to reset our approach to quality and standards. In doing this, our primary focus is on those universities and colleges most at risk of breaching our conditions of registration, to ensure their students receive a high-quality education and successful outcomes.

The future of quality and standards in English higher education

In the early part of 2021, the OfS consulted on its broad approach to quality and standards. In doing this, we signalled our intention to prioritise clarity and transparency, communication and engagement, and reduction of regulatory burden. In formulating the consultation proposals, we drew on our experience of implementing the new regulatory system since the OfS's establishment in 2018, the shift from registering providers to a 'steady state' of monitoring and intervention activity, and our experience of regulating during the pandemic.

Our work on quality and standards starts from the premise that all students are entitled to the same minimum level of quality. We do not accept that students from underrepresented groups should be expected to accept lower quality and weaker outcomes than other students. Nor do we embed their disadvantage into the regulatory system by setting lower minimum requirements for universities that typically recruit these types of students.[1] Regulating minimum requirements for quality and standards safeguards both quality and equality of opportunity, because it ensures that all students (including those with protected characteristics) receive an education that meets these requirements. It is a mutually reinforcing relationship. Both need to be protected and promoted if we are to achieve our aim of ensuring positive outcomes for all students, whatever their background.

This approach is underpinned by a commitment to reducing burden on providers that do not pose specific increased risk, by targeting our activity where it is most needed. Many universities and colleges in England offer high-quality courses and teaching, and will comfortably meet our minimum requirements. Our focus is, rather, on those offering low-quality courses and declining standards that do not offer value for money for students nor taxpayers. Our proposals for change aim to pave the way for the OfS to intervene swiftly, decisively and transparently to protect students from such practices, working where appropriate

with our designated quality body, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education.

A new approach

The responses to our consultation on our broad approach to quality and standards were analysed in the early part of the year. That analysis informed a further consultation published in July 2021,[2] which set out proposals for more detailed conditions of registration – the new B conditions. These comprise:

- Condition B1, which would mandate a high-quality academic experience in which courses are up-to-date and effectively delivered, and provide educational challenge
- Condition B2, which would require all students to receive the resources and support they need to succeed
- Condition B4, which would require students to be assessed effectively and receive credible qualifications that stand the test of time
- Condition B5, which would ensure that standards are consistent with sector-recognised standards.

We are now analysing the results of that consultation, and expect to publish the outcomes in early 2022. Our regulation of quality is also concerned with the outcomes higher education delivers for students: Did they complete their course? What did their progression to employment or further study look like? These are important elements in assessing the quality of a course. In January we will be publishing a further consultation setting out more detailed proposals for our condition of registration B3, relating to student outcomes.

Excellence above the baseline: The TEF

Above the baseline regulatory requirements, one of the main ways in which we seek to incentivise universities and colleges to improve their teaching and learning

is through the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF). This gives universities and colleges the freedom to innovate and pursue excellence as they see fit, reflecting the character of their own students, subjects and provision. It reflects the diverse and autonomous nature of the sector we regulate and helps to maintain and strengthen its world-leading international reputation.[3]

In tandem with our consultation on regulating student outcomes, we will be consulting on the future development of the TEF and its quality metrics.[4] The intention is that the criteria of the TEF, applying above the baseline, will be coherent and consistent with our regulatory baseline requirements. We are also seeking to ensure consistency between the data and indicators that underpin both our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF.

Our proposals will be informed by evidence from previous TEF exercises and the independent review by Dame Shirley Pearce, as well as the findings of our own subject-level TEF pilots. Drawing on this evidence, we are proposing that each university or college would be rated as a whole, rather than giving ratings by subject. A provider's overall rating would take into account the quality of teaching and student outcomes across the full spectrum of its undergraduate courses. The Pearce review did, however, recommend that there could be an important role for highlighting the evidence of quality at subject level, and this consideration will be directly reflected in our proposals.

Transnational education

The OfS's remit extends beyond students studying in England, to the 360,000 students studying around the world for qualifications offered by English universities. The reputation of our higher education sector continues to attract students from across the globe, and many higher education

providers have established a range of partnerships for transnational education (TNE). These can increase innovation and diversity in teaching and research, while supporting student and staff mobility.

It is our role to protect the interests of anyone studying for a qualification issued by an English provider, at home or abroad. TNE students are entitled to the same quality and standards as those in the UK, and we should seek out and improve poor-quality courses wherever their students are based. In our quality and standards consultation, we were explicit that our proposals would mean that all courses would be subject to the same minimum requirements.[5]

From 2022 we plan to use and publish data and case studies to explore the size and shape of English TNE in more depth. Later work will focus more closely on particular territories, types of course or delivery approaches. We will also consider how we can bring the data we collect about TNE students in line with that for UK-based students.[6]

We will work to raise the regulatory profile of the OfS beyond the UK, and to increase understanding of how our approach to TNE fits within the UK's wider approach. This includes targeted engagement with government and regulatory bodies and representative groups.

Protecting standards in higher education: Contract cheating

The past year has seen renewed concern about students' use of essay mills – businesses offering essay-writing services to students for a fee. Universities and colleges have policies in place to identify and respond to cheating in assessment, and the consequences for students can be severe, including expulsion. Those who escape detection miss out on valuable learning and the chance to practice key skills, and may fall behind in their studies.

The shift to online learning and assessment has led to more and more sophisticated sites targeting students in England in this way.[7] In October 2021 the government signalled its intention to make it a criminal offence to provide, arrange or advertise these cheating services to students for financial gain, and we are working with the Department for Education and sector bodies to address the issue.[8] We are considering how our other powers might be brought to bear on the problem.

Freedom of speech and academic freedom

Our existing regulatory requirements on free speech and academic freedom are embodied in our public interest governance principles, with which all registered providers must comply. These provisions include requiring universities and colleges to have systems in place to make good decisions on matters relating to free speech and academic freedom.

In May the government introduced the Higher Education (Free Speech) Bill into parliament. If passed, the bill would strengthen the legal duties on higher education providers and make significant changes to the regulation of free speech within providers and their students' unions. It would give the OfS the responsibility for resolving complaints about free speech or academic freedom from individual staff, students or visitors. We will work with the government to implement any changes that result from new legislation.

Pending any changes resulting from new legislation, we intend to continue using our existing regulatory approach. Where universities or colleges are not meeting our existing regulatory requirements, we will intervene. In doing so, we will raise awareness of areas that give rise to regulatory concern, and encourage compliance across the sector.

Notes

1   Our work with universities and colleges to improve access to higher education for underrepresented groups, and to narrow the gaps between the outcomes achieved for these students and the most advantaged, is discussed in Chapter 5.

2   OfS, 'Prevent monitoring: Summary of annual accountability and data returns – 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20' (OfS 2021.37, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-quality-and-standards-conditions/).

3   See Part 1 of OfS, 'Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England' (OfS 2018.01, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/securing-student-success-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/). For a discussion of the OfS's principles-based approach, see OfS. 'A matter of principles: Regulating in the student interest' (OfS Insight #7, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-matter-of-principles-regulating-in-the-student-interest/).

4   OfS, 'TEF: Update on the development of proposals for the future exercise' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/tef-update-on-the-development-of-proposals-for-the-future-exercise/).

5   OfS, 'Consultation on quality and standards conditions' (OfS 2021.24, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-quality-and-standards-conditions/).

6   OfS, 'Offshore opportunity: protecting students in transnational education' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/offshore-opportunity-protecting-students-in-transnational-education/).

7   See figures from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, quoted in Hansard volume 689 (https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-02-10/debates/5E37B30F-EFD9-40A2-AA28-5D05327A7596/EssayMills(Prohibition)).

8   Gov.UK, 'Essay mills to be banned under plans to reform post-16 education' (https://www.gov.uk/government/news/essay-mills-to-be-banned-under-plans-to-reform-post-16-education). This applies specifically to students taking a qualification at any institution in England providing post-16 education, including universities.
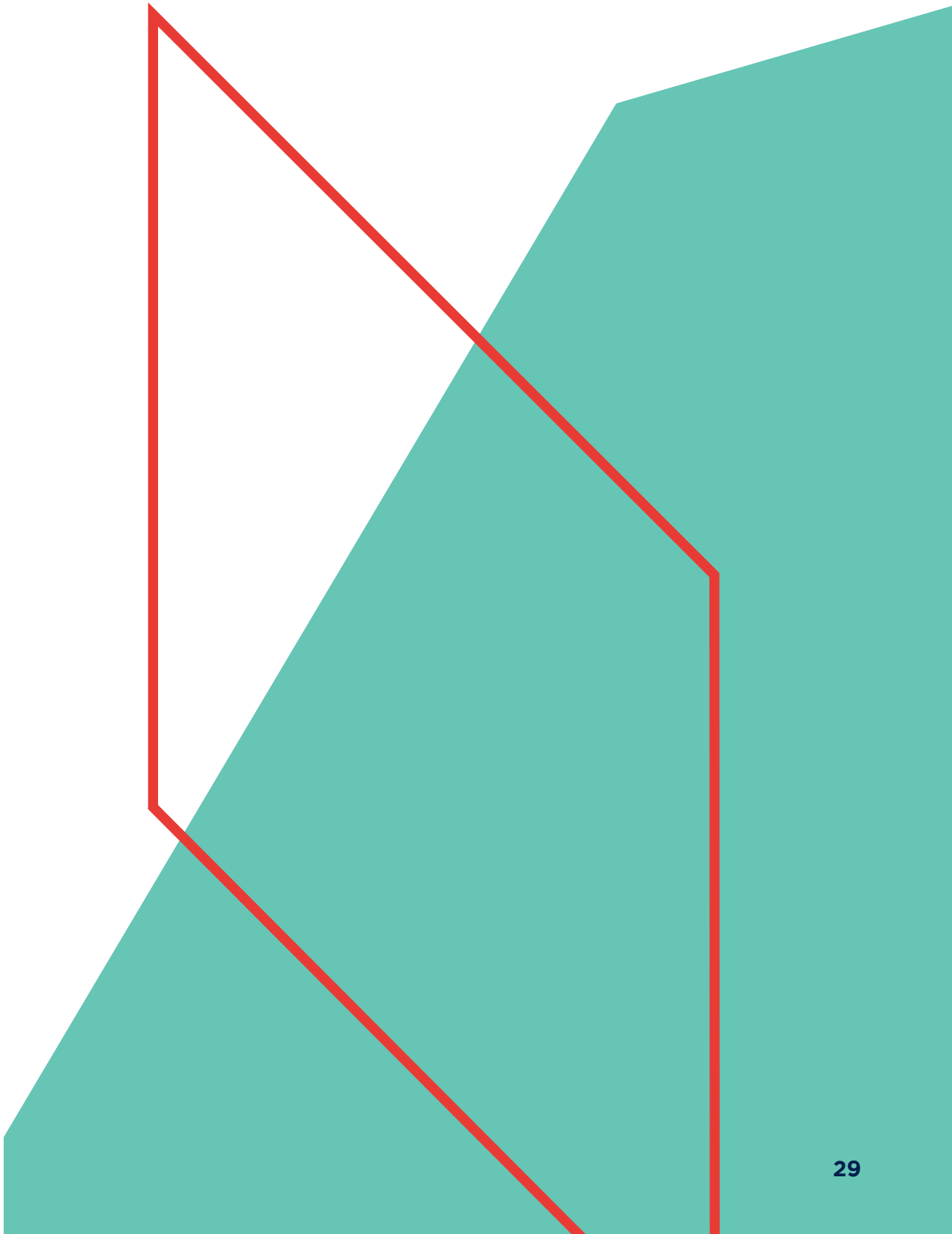
4. Improving students' experience of higher education

This last year has continued to present enormous challenges to students and providers. In the early part of the year, the national lockdowns meant that students were still learning predominantly online, with anything approximating a normal student campus experience entirely upended. Students have now largely returned to campus this autumn, but the disruption of the last two years will have a long-lasting impact, and existing challenges such as mental health and harassment still remain. This chapter focuses on our work to address some of these challenges over the last year.

Admissions

The 2021 cohort of school leavers applying to university faced a different set of challenges from those in 2020, for whom the effects of the pandemic, though severe,

applied only during the final months of their schooling. The 2021 leavers had experienced more than a year of unpredictability and disruption to their teaching, including the loss of many hours of classroom time.

The summer saw students receive A-level and equivalent grades, which were awarded through a process of teacher assessment. Students had endured an enormously difficult 18 months, and this method sought to ensure that they were fairly judged on their attainment. We were explicit in March 2021 that the sector should not admit more students than it could effectively teach, despite an increase in entrance grades. On the eve of A-level results, we made it clear that, while providers needed to honour places to students who had met the terms of their offer, there must be no compromise on the quality of provision.

A record 211,000 UK 18-year-olds were accepted into university four weeks after results day in 2021, representing a 5.7 per cent rise since 2020. In 2021, 6.1 per cent of students from the communities most underrepresented in higher education gained places at the most selective universities; proportionally this was a 12.7 per cent increase to the rate in 2020. But this was accompanied by a similar increase in the proportion of students entering these universities from the areas with the highest

This chapter discusses issues relating to mental health and suicide. If you are affected by any of the issues raised then the Samaritans are open every day of the year. You can phone them on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org. Mind, the mental health charity, offers support by phone at 0300 123 3393 or online at www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines.

Figure 2: Entry rates to high-tariff providers by POLAR4 quintile for 2017 to 2021 UCAS cycles
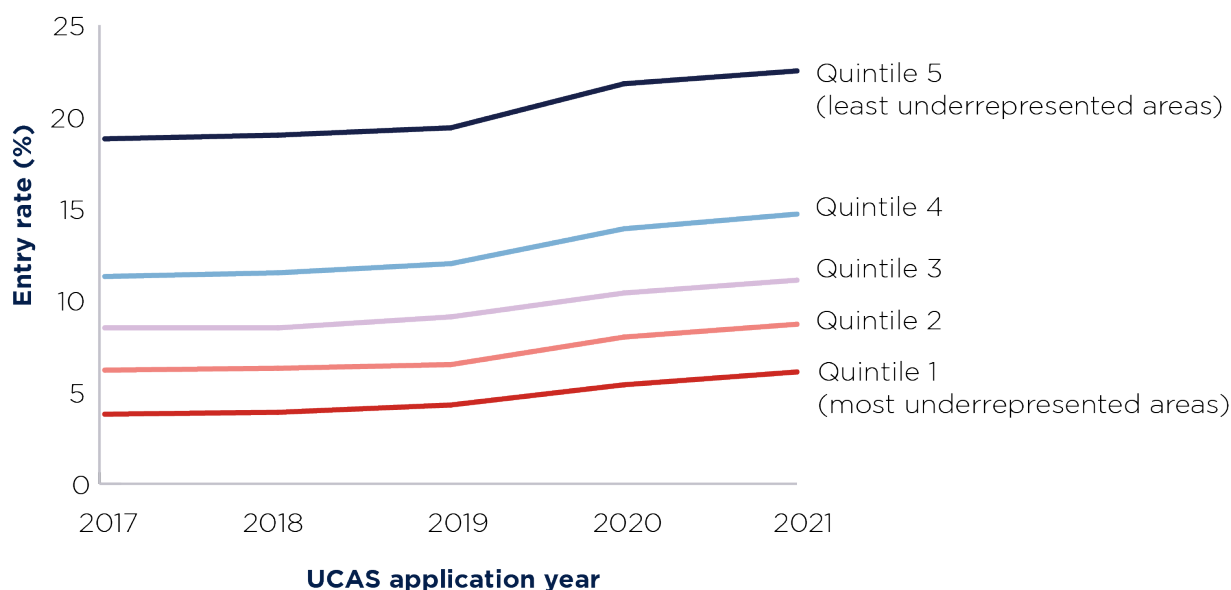
Source: UCAS day 28 release data 2021-22.

representation.[1] Since the former numbers are still small in absolute terms, this means that, while opportunity has improved, equality of opportunity has not. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate these changes.

Applications to study nursing in England were up 24 per cent at the June application deadline. Four weeks after results day there were 27,720 students accepted to study nursing, 4 per cent more than in 2020 and 28 per cent more than in 2019. They represent the largest cohort of nursing students entering higher education in England in the past decade.

These figures attest to the resilience and ambition of students who remain determined to develop their lives and careers. Higher education admissions processes have worked to support them, to make informed choices and during their subsequent applications, and this should continue for the coming cohorts of applicants whose schooling has also been disrupted.

Although our 2020 consultation on university and college admissions was paused to stabilise the admissions system during the pandemic,[2] the OfS responded to concerns about the use of unconditional offers during the pandemic with a temporary condition of registration for 2020 and 2021.[3] This banned 'conditional unconditional' offers – offers which only become unconditional once an applicant accepts them as their firm choice, instead of offers from other institutions – and restricted unconditional offers in other circumstances. This helped to ensure that students were not put under unfair pressure to accept offers that might not have been in their best interests.

Fair admissions have continued to feature prominently in public debate this year, with UCAS and Universities UK putting forward proposals for admissions to take place after exam qualifications are awarded.[4] In January 2021 the government published a consultation on moving to a system of post-qualification admissions.[5] We continue to work with UCAS, Universities UK and the

Figure 3: Comparison of POLAR4 quintile 1 and quintile 5 acceptances for 2019, 2020 and 2021 UCAS cycles
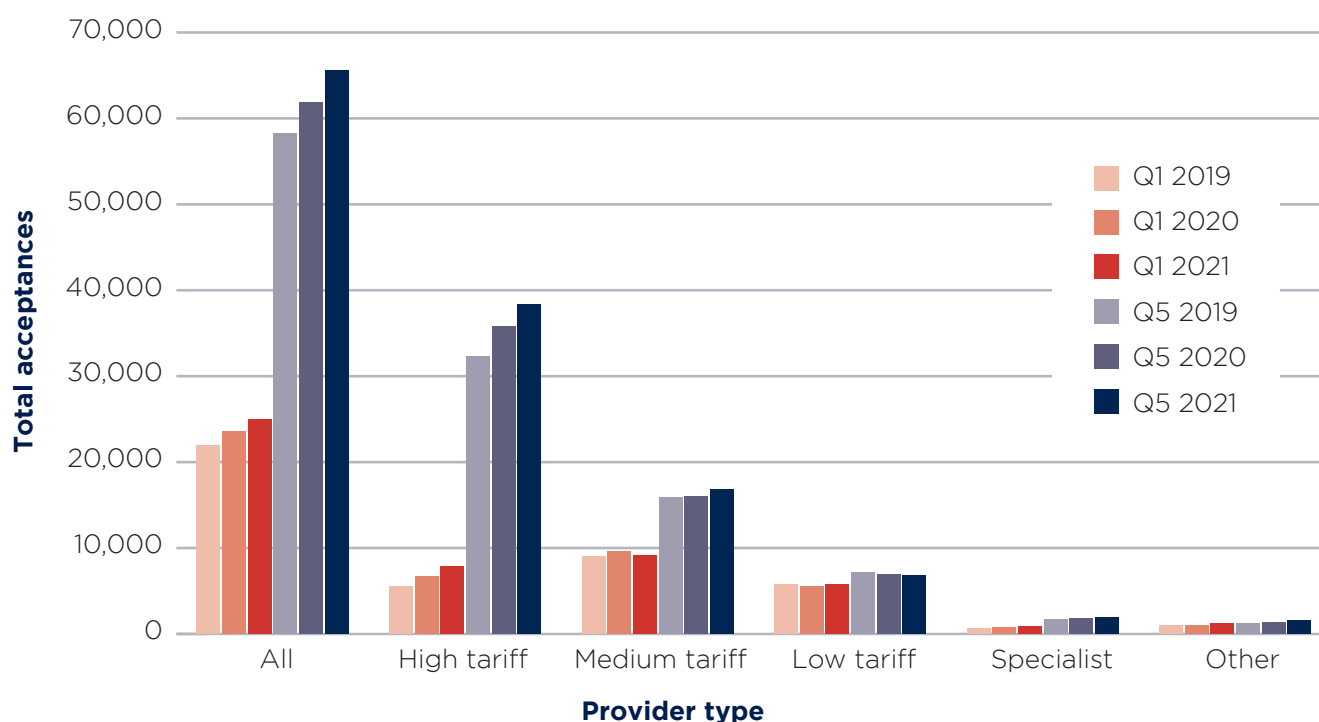
Source: UCAS day 28 release data 2021-22.

Department for Education on this agenda, considering the impact of the emerging proposals on different groups of students and helping to develop an evidence base and options.

Mental health

A survey commissioned by the Office for National Statistics showed that 29 per cent of students had engaged with mental health and wellbeing services since the start of the autumn term 2020.[6] Only 42.1 per cent of respondents in England to the covid-related National Student Survey questions agreed that their university or college had taken sufficient steps to support their mental wellbeing during the pandemic.[7]

The Mental Health Challenge Competition, launched in 2018, aims to achieve a step change in mental health outcomes for all students. An interim evaluation report published in August 2021 found evidence

that the programme is helping to strengthen the prioritisation of mental health in the universities and colleges it funds, supporting early intervention and collaboration with external agencies including the NHS, and involving students in co-creating activities to shape and inform universities' strategies and approaches.[8]

Also in August, the OfS (with investment from the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education) announced £3 million for 18 new projects under a new competition to support students with characteristics identified as increasing the risk of poor mental health, and those who may experience barriers to accessing support due to their course, mode of study or other characteristics.

During the course of the year, the OfS extended the duration of the new platform, Student Space, to support students' mental health during the coronavirus pandemic. The

platform offers a range of relevant self-help resources and free access to a dedicated phone, text and web-chat service which is available to all students in England and Wales. We also announced a £12 million premium for student transition and mental health through formula allocation, following the outcomes of the consultation on recurrent funding for 2021-22.[9]

Suicide prevention

In September we published a briefing to assist with suicide prevention at universities and colleges, including examples of approaches by universities and colleges, and links to resources and training materials.

As well as a tragedy for bereaved family and friends, the death of a student by suicide is likely to have a profound impact on a university or college community, as well as on their family and friends. Various factors have been identified that may increase student mental distress, including difficulties with academic studies and key transition points, along with other general risk factors particularly associated with suicide such as serious self-harm, and alcohol and substance misuse.[10] Fewer than one in three people who die by suicide in the general UK population have been in contact with mental health services during the previous 12 months.[11]

Case study: University of Nottingham

The International Student Mental Health project was launched in 2019 as part of the OfS's Mental Health Challenge Competition. The project aims to discover how the UK higher education sector supports international students' mental health and wellbeing. The project hosts a student fund, and has recruited dedicated specialists, established advisory panels to bring stakeholders together and undertaken fact-finding visits to campuses across the UK.

During the pandemic, the project could not engage face-to-face with many international students returning to their home countries rather than to campus. At the same time, travel restrictions prevented visits to partners and institutions across the sector.

The project adapted, for instance, by creating web resources that could be shared globally online. It funded a dedicated mental health adviser and counsellor, working online across time zones, with appointments for students across the globe. Unable to visit other universities, the project worked with organisations hosting workshops and sessions at various sector-wide conferences and events.

Challenge has enhanced the project, prompting innovation and change in its approach to meet the extraordinary circumstances. Pivoting online has increased the interactivity of its resources. E-resources also increased accessibility, allowing students to use online translation tools and access resources across the globe.

The project has been enabled to reach out globally, supporting international students who found themselves studying abroad online without the necessary support structure. Speaking at sector organisations' events increased the project's exposure and will support the dissemination of the final toolkit across the country.

The OfS's suicide prevention briefing recommends taking a whole-provider approach, involving all parts of the institution including students, staff, welfare teams, academic departments and student services. Active and effective leadership at a senior level, partnership work with the wider community, taking an evidence-led approach, centring the needs of students and developing postvention plans and support are all identified as priorities.[12]

Harassment and sexual misconduct

Experiences of harassment and sexual misconduct are disturbingly common in higher education.[13] Full-time students are more likely to experience sexual assault than any other occupational group, nearly a quarter of ethnic minority students experience racial harassment on campus and more than one in five LGBT+ students have said that they would not feel confident reporting any homophobic bullying to university staff.

In April 2021, the OfS published a statement of expectations for preventing and addressing harassment and sexual misconduct affecting students in higher education. The statement provides a consistent set of standards that all universities and colleges should follow to:

- minimise potential barriers to reporting and disclosing instances of harassment and sexual misconduct
- ensure that investigatory procedures are fair and independent
- ensure all students involved receive appropriate support
- clearly set out behavioural expectations for all students.

We expect universities and colleges to comply with the standards set out in the statement.

Over the course of the next months we will review the impact that the statement has had and examine how universities and colleges have responded. If the statement has not had the impact we expect, then we will consider how to deliver the change needed in this area in the most effective way.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism

The OfS has adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA)'s non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism as a guide to interpreting and understanding antisemitism. The definition does not affect the legal definition of racial or religious discrimination, so does not change our approach to performing our regulatory functions, including in the way we regulate registered providers. Nonetheless, we have adopted the definition because we believe that it is a useful tool for understanding how antisemitism manifests itself in the 21st century.

Following guidance the Secretary of State for Education earlier this year, we investigated and compiled a list of providers that have adopted the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, and published the list in November.

Student hardship

Students have faced particular financial challenges over the course of the last year as many lost the ability to undertake part-time work during the pandemic. There were particular challenges in relation to accommodation that they have not been able to access because of national and local lockdowns.

Some students staged rent strikes to secure rebates.[14] Some landlords mitigated this by offering discounts or extending contracts into the summer holidays.[15] We encouraged

universities and colleges to engage with their private accommodation providers to support those of their students not able to access their accommodation.

The OfS has no specific statutory duty in relation to student accommodation. However, in February 2021, we distributed £50 million in hardship funding to help mitigate the challenges of the pandemic, including for students who had not been able to occupy their termtime rented accommodation and had incurred additional costs. Of the £50 million distributed, £40 million was prioritised for rent-related hardship, while £10 million was used to boost the £20 million hardship fund previously announced in December 2020. The funding was targeted towards providers that recruit high numbers of disadvantaged students.

We ensured that the funding for rent-related hardship was allocated so that those students renting student accommodation away from home had the maximum opportunity to benefit.[16]

Student engagement

Throughout the pandemic, we have emphasised the importance of universities and colleges engaging closely with their students to explain how teaching was being adjusted. One of the most frequent complaints we received from students through our system of notifications was that students had not be told or consulted about changes. However, we also saw examples of excellent engagement, with students fully involved and contributing to pandemic responses.

Meanwhile, the members of the OfS student panel have continued to contribute throughout the year, informing significant areas of the OfS's regulatory work, including the quality of courses, information from students and prospective students, and the review of the NSS.

Case study: Birkbeck, University of London

In response to the pandemic, Birkbeck took the strategic decision to redesign its 2020-21 teaching delivery model to enable it to deliver fully online from the autumn. As part of its preparations, the college conducted a survey in May 2020 to assess the extent of digital poverty across the student body. This survey was then used to direct and inform actions to support students with digital access challenges. These actions included the following:

- A new fund was introduced to support home and EU students who were unable to pay for the cost of essential IT resources such as a laptop or internet access. Students were eligible if they had a household income below £25,000.
- Students unable to study from home were able to book a desk with a PC and internet connection.
- A 'Prepare to learn online' section was added to a new online orientation module. This introduced students to the technologies used for digital teaching and learning. It included a quiz for students to assess their digital skills, which directed them to resources and training based on their confidence levels (over 1,600 students have now completed this quiz).

Birkbeck is continuing to survey students on their views about its response to the pandemic. This feedback will be used to make improvements to its support for digital access in the future.

Notes

1   See 'Placed applicants 2021' under 'Applicants by POLAR4' at OfS, 'Young participation by area: Get the area-based measures data' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/get-the-area-based-measures-data/).

2   OfS, 'Consultation on the higher education admissions system in England' (OfS 2020.12, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-the-higher-education-admissions-system-in-england/).

3   OfS, 'Regulatory notice 5: Condition Z3 Temporary provisions for sector stability and integrity' (OfS 2020.33, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-5-condition-z3-temporary-provisions-for-sector-stability-and-integrity/).

4   UCAS, 'UCAS sets out ways to enhance how students make their university choices' (https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-sets-out-ways-enhance-how-students-make-their-university-choices); Universities UK, 'Fair admissions review' (https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/fair-admissions-review).

5   Gov.UK, 'Post-qualification admissions in higher education: Proposed changes' (www.gov.uk/government/consultations/post-qualification-admissions-in-higher-education-proposed-changes).

6   ONS, 'Coronavirus and higher education students: England, 24 May to 2 June 2021' (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandhighereducationstudents/england24mayto2june2021).

7   OfS, 'NSS data: Covid-19 questions' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-covid-19-questions/).

8   Wavehill Social and Economic Research, 'Evaluation of the Mental Health Challenge Competition: Interim report to the Office for Students' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/mental-health-challenge-competition-evaluation-interim-report/).

9   OfS, 'Funding boost to support student mental health' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/funding-boost-to-support-student-mental-health/).

10 OfS, 'Suicide prevention' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/suicide-prevention/). This topic briefing is intended to help universities and colleges develop suicide prevention strategies, and does not constitute regulatory guidance.

11 National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health, 'Annual report 2021: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales' (available at https://sites.manchester.ac.uk/ncish/reports/annual-report-2021-england-northern-ireland-scotland-and-wales/), p14. This study discusses issues relating to suicide. If you are affected by any of the issues raised then you can phone the Samaritans on 116 123.

12 OfS, 'Suicide prevention' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/suicide-prevention/).

13 ONS, 'Nature of sexual assault by rape or penetration, England and Wales: Year ending March 2020' (https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/ssaultbyrapeorpenetrationenglandandwales/yearendingmarch2020); Brook, 'Our new research on sexual harassment and violence at UK universities' (available at https://legacy.brook.org.uk/press-releases/sexual-violence-and-harassment-remains-rife-in-universities-according-to-ne); Equality and Human Rights Commission, 'Tackling racial harassment: Universities challenged' (available at https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/tackling-racial-harassment-universities-challenged), p26; Community Security Trust, 'Campus Antisemitism in Britain 2018-20' (available at https://cst.org.uk/news/blog/2020/12/17/campus-antisemitism-in-britain-2018-2020).

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15 Save the Student, 'National student accommodation survey 2021: Results' (https://www.savethestudent.org/accommodation/national-student-accommodation-survey-2021.html).

16 OfS, 'Further additional funding of £50 million for student hardship for financial year 2020-21' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/further-additional-funding-of-50-million-for-student-hardship-for-2020-21/).
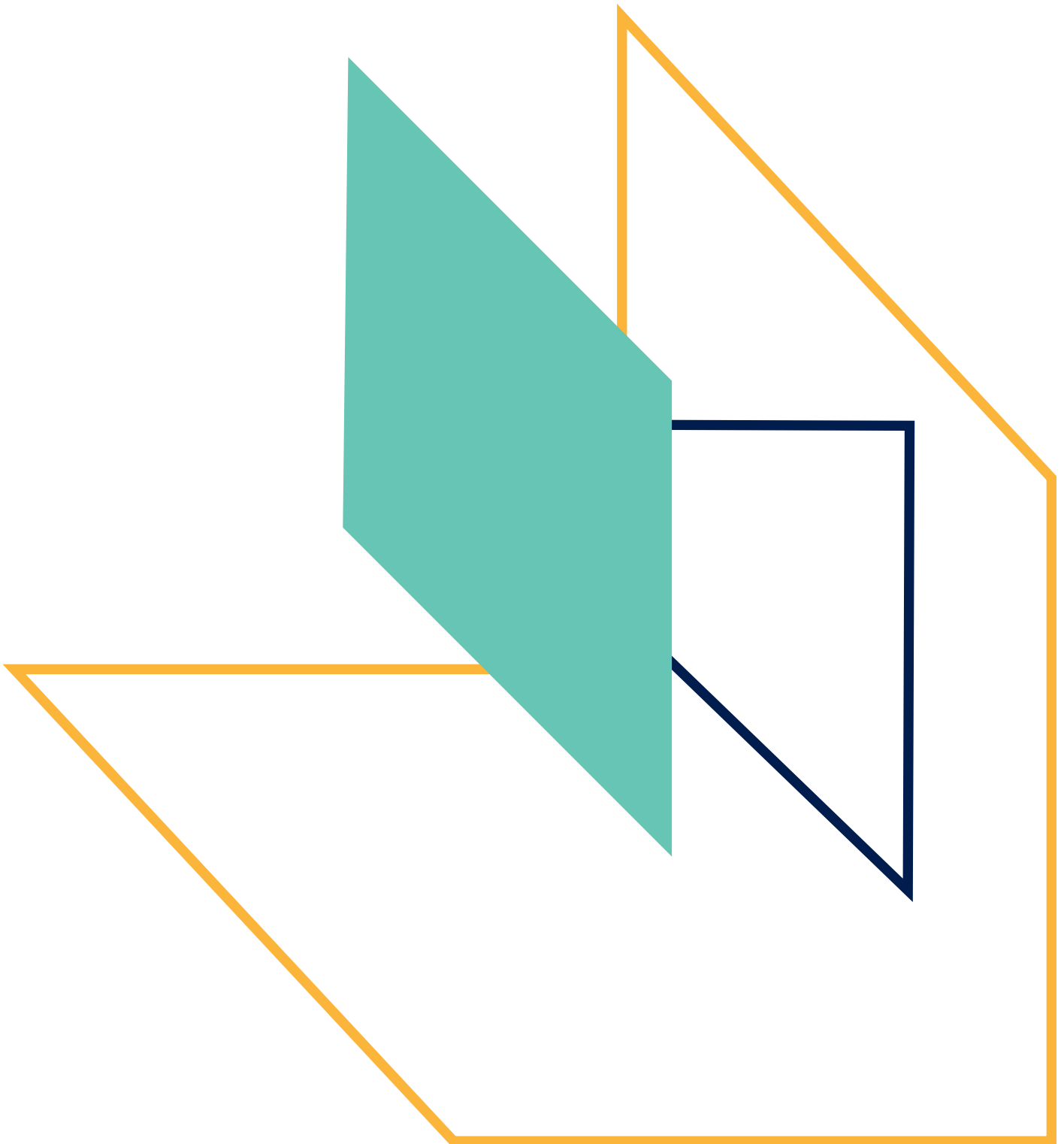
5. Equality of opportunity

In terms of who gets the opportunity to enter higher education, and who is more likely to succeed once there, students from certain backgrounds do better than others. The pandemic has seen those who were already disadvantaged fall further behind.[1] We negotiate and approve universities' and colleges' access and participation plans, then monitor and evaluate their delivery. Where a student comes from, their identity or their life experience should not determine their chances of getting into a course, completing it successfully, and progressing to a successful career or further study.

Addressing attainment gaps

Many children have not had consistent teaching and learning in school during lockdown.[2] Exam results have shown substantially higher increases in top grades for independent school pupils.[3] This makes it more important than ever that there is strong support for students when they reach university, and sustained work to cut through the academic, financial and cultural barriers to getting into university and getting on once they get there.

In 2020-21 we received 18 notifications relating to equality issues at universities and colleges. In their access and participation plans, universities and colleges detail their plans to deal with persistent disparities. We continue to draw on the information gathered by our designated data body, currently HESA.

This year, we published an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of our regulatory reforms to the five-year access and participation plans that will run from 2020-21 to 2024-25.[4] This evaluation concluded that OfS engagement has been a driver for change, and that our reforms have accelerated a shift in culture at the sector level, with the five-year plans providing a framework for a more ambitious and strategic approach. It also pointed to areas for improvement, such as engaging more with students and being clearer in our communications.

The plans set out how providers are tackling problems such as degree attainment gaps between black and white students, and between disabled and non-disabled students. Evidence shows that black students receive proportionately fewer 1sts and 2:1s than their white peers. This gap has been closing, as Figure 4 shows, and reduced by almost four percentage points between 2018-19 and 2019-20. If all universities and colleges that have included targets in their plans meet their targets, the gap in degree outcomes between black and white students will reduce from 18.2 percentage points in 2019-20 to 9.5 percentage points in 2024-2025.[5]

Figure 4: Gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students
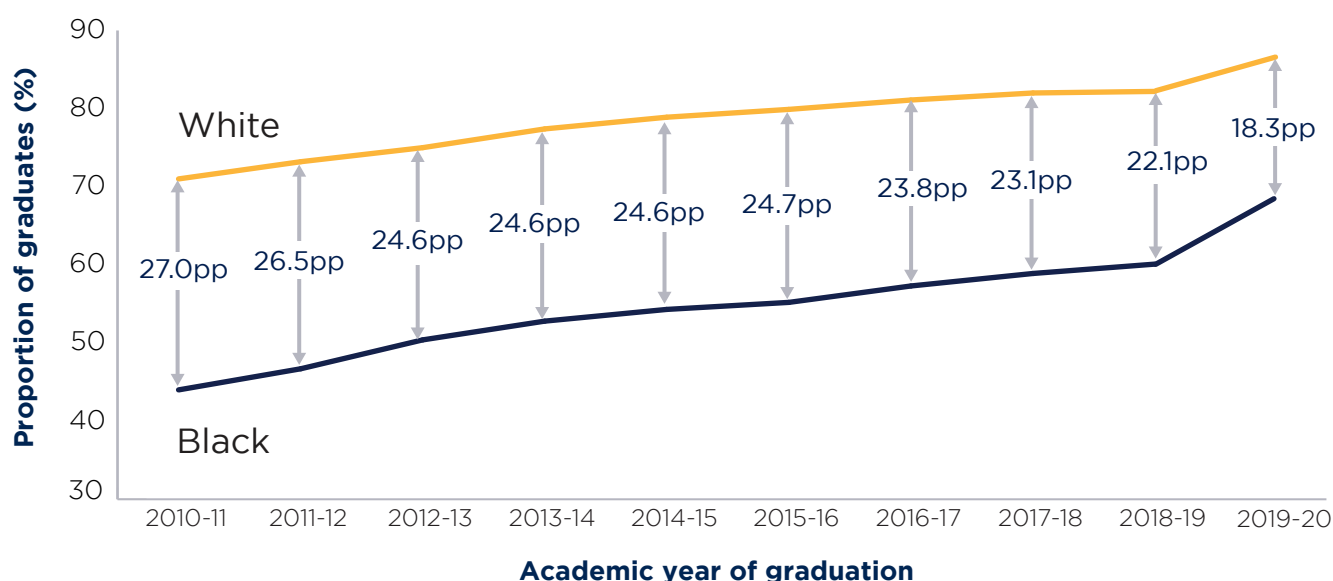
Source: Individual student data from HESA and the individualised learner record from the Education and Skills Funding Agency.[17]

Note: The y-axis does not start from 0.

Many universities and colleges aimed to halve the existing gap by 2024-25. Several will still have large gaps remaining at the end of their plans in 2024-25. These providers included longer-term written objectives indicating the progress they expect to make beyond 2024-25. Some included a commitment to review progress against this target at a midpoint of the plan and engage further with the OfS on their targets and trajectories in this area.

Our monitoring and oversight of access and participation plans will continue to hold universities and colleges to account in meeting their commitments to improve access and reduce attainment gaps.

New equality data

This year, the OfS released sector-level trends in the numbers of students with certain protected characteristics. They show that the demographic of students has shifted considerably over the last decade.

This year we expanded these statistics to cover gender reassignment, religion or belief and sexual orientation, all of which are characteristics protected by law, as well as parental education, which is not. We also published new experimental data on the numbers of students at English higher education providers by care experience, estrangement, household residual income, socioeconomic background, underrepresentation by area, and associations between characteristics of students.[6]

During the last eight years, black students have seen the biggest percentage point increase in postgraduate study, rising from 5.8 per cent of postgraduate entrants in 2010-11 to 8.3 per cent in 2019-20. On taught masters' courses, they have risen from 8.0 to 10.0 per cent of the population, though this is down from a peak of 11.5 per cent in 2016-17. In 2019-20, 7.4 per cent of undergraduate entrants identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual, compared with 4.3 per cent in 2015-16, while 2.1 per cent identified with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, lesbian, gay, or bisexual, slightly more than the 1.8 per cent in 2015-16.[7]

While there has been considerable improvement for most groups, some are still underrepresented in higher education. This includes care leavers, people estranged from their families, and people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. Better understanding is needed of the barriers students from these groups can face in accessing and succeeding in higher education.

Furthermore, we have continued to develop our associations between characteristics of students (ABCS) measure, which identifies groups of students by how likely they are to access or continue in higher education based on a set of characteristics.[8] These include age, sex, disability and ethnicity, but also such indicators as care experience, eligibility for free school meals, parental education and various indices of deprivation.

Care experienced students

Students who spent time in local authority care as children are less likely to continue into the second year of their course. Last year, the OfS published outcomes statistics by care experience for the first time. This analysis showed that the continuation rate of care experienced 2017-18 entrants was 5.6 percentage points lower than the rate of other students – 86.7 per cent as opposed to 92.3 per cent. This gap is reducing year on year, and has fallen by 1.9 percentage points since 2014-15 (see Figure 5).[9] Other studies have shown that care experienced students often take longer to complete their degrees.[10] Such absences, withdrawals, and changes to part-time study are another feature of care experienced people's disrupted education journey.

The coronavirus pandemic and its rapidly changing implications for higher education have thrown these inequalities into stark relief. While many students have been able to return to their family home during national lockdowns, this option is often not open to care experienced students. Many universities and colleges responded by distributing hardship funds, providing essential supplies, running online events, strengthening student networks, and extending accommodation leases. Much

Figure 5: Continuation rate by care experience
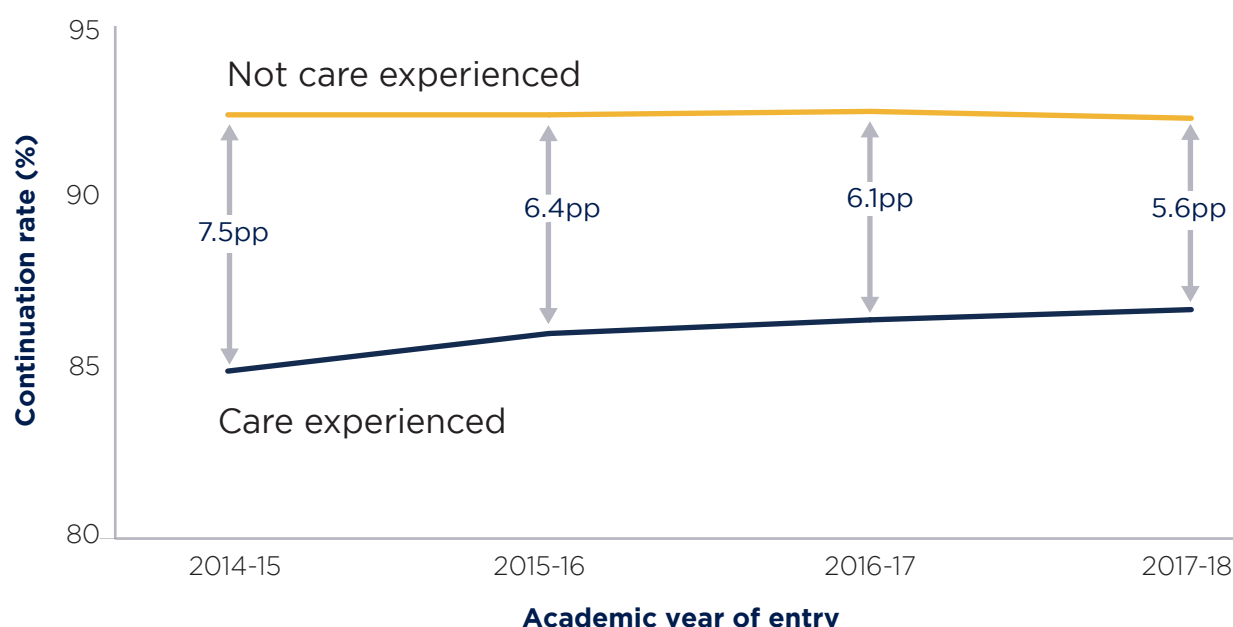
Data population: Full-time UK-domiciled undergraduate students.

Source: OfS, 'Differences in student outcomes: Further characteristics', Annex B.[18]

of this support has been valuable, and its best examples should not be lost after the pandemic is over. It will be all the more important in the light of reports of increasing numbers of children at risk of abuse and entering care over the past year.

It seems that care experienced students still need a smoother transition into higher education. This could include tuition support to help plug any educational gaps caused by school disruption. Access to mental health services is often important to ensure continuity of care. In a 2019 survey of care experienced students, 68 per cent of participants reported mental health difficulties while at university.[11] Such difficulties could well have been exacerbated by the pandemic, since a high proportion of students in general have reported worsening levels of mental health and wellbeing.

The OfS aims to help improve outcomes for care experienced students through changes in culture and practice, and we are working to achieve this by a combination of regulatory pressure through access and participation plans and sharing of effective practice.

Funding for access and participation

Funding is a core part of the OfS's work. It helps us to meet our regulatory objectives by driving improvements in student access, experience and outcomes. Student premium funding contributes towards the aims and objectives set out in providers' access and participation plans or statements.

For the academic year 2021-22 we provided funding totalling £313 million for access and participation activity in providers across England, as follows:

- £40 million for the Uni Connect programme
- £40 million for the disabled students premium

- £67 million for the premium to support successful student outcomes for part-time undergraduates
- £154 million for the premium to support successful student outcomes for full-time undergraduates
- £23 million for the premium for student transitions and mental health.

The impact of deprivation and place

With the government's 'levelling up' agenda, the importance of place and regional recovery are once again in the spotlight. Unemployment and productivity have long been recognised as regionally uneven, and the pandemic has exacerbated this trend.

Local lockdowns during the pandemic have impacted some areas more than others. Not all areas benefit equally from higher education. Coverage remains geographically uneven in England, and rural and seaside areas have limited access to higher education provision. We are learning from the ABCS data that 90 per cent of the most underrepresented population quintile consists of white students entitled to free school meals or living in low-participation neighbourhoods.[12]

We have also commissioned a dataset and interactive maps to support higher education providers, Uni Connect partnerships and other outreach providers in improving how they target their outreach interventions. The OfS contributed funding to the Higher Education Access Tracker to work with Aimhigher West Midlands and the East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership to produce data on outreach activities delivered at schools and further education colleges in England, and the number, type, contact hours and provider type of the outreach delivered at each school, between 2017-18 and 2019-20.[13]

Case study: Go Higher West Yorkshire

Go Higher West Yorkshire is a partnership of 13 diverse higher education providers that seeks to reduce inequalities in higher education access, success and progression. The partnership considers local authorities to be key partners in widening participation; it is vital that providers work with them to develop evidence-based practice in the interests of care experienced young people.

As part of its 'Care to Go Higher' work strand, Go Higher West Yorkshire delivers an innovative training programme to equip adults to support the care experienced young people they live or work with to make informed choices about their educational progression. Foster carers, children's home support workers and personal advisers across West Yorkshire are invited to attend six training sessions held on university and college campuses over six months.

The programme design is informed by several strategic principles:

- Equipping key influencers with high aspirations for care experienced young people alongside knowledge and experience to support them on the path to higher education.
- A contextualised approach to help key influencers understand the impact of experience of care on young people's circumstances, needs and identity during their transition to higher education.
- Immersive outreach, welcoming community influencers into local higher education campuses to help establish a feeling of belonging and situate these spaces within communities' sense of place.

Participants are introduced to the different types of higher education available on their doorstep and beyond, including college-based higher education and specialist providers as well as more traditional universities. The programme combines bespoke classroom-based learning with on-campus experience to inform first-hand perceptions and perspectives about the higher education experience and its value.

Work with target groups and areas

The OfS funds and oversees a number of interventions to help ensure that where a person grows up does not limit their opportunities. These include Uni Connect, which involves 522 member organisations including colleges, universities, local organising bodies, charities, and employers, in 29 partnerships across England. Between August 2019 and July 2020, 186,000 target learners took part in at least one Uni Connect funded outreach activity, while

2,480 schools and colleges engaged in Uni Connect activity.[14]

Although it is still too early to assess the longer-term impact in terms of learners' progression to higher education, evaluation of the programme has attested to the positive impact of this sustained and progressive approach to outreach on the most disadvantaged pupils, including on their confidence in making decisions about their course of study. In summer 2020,

partnerships reported that 293,000 unique Uni Connect learners had engaged in sustained and progressive outreach activity since the launch of the programme in January 2017.[15]

The evidence from the Uni Connect evaluation increasingly indicates that approaches involving multiple interventions have a positive impact on short-, medium- and long-term outcomes for learners. Emerging evidence suggests more positive outcomes for those who participated in three to six hours per academic year, or seven or eight engagements over Years 12 and 13. These improve learners' knowledge of higher education and contribute to higher levels of confidence. Sustained engagement in multiple-intervention programmes is found to have a positive impact on long-term outcomes, including the likelihood that a learner will successfully progress to higher education.[16]

A new approach to Uni Connect

This year we agreed to support the Uni Connect programme into a third phase, with a lower level of funding at £40 million. This will ensure that outreach with schools and colleges continues to be joined up, efficient and targeted, and delivered in a way that meets local priorities, equipping young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make informed choices about higher education and helping to minimise the barriers they face. Phase three of the OfS-funded Uni Connect programme started in August 2021. It aims to:

- Contribute to reducing the gaps in higher education participation, by equipping young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make informed choices about their options in terms of the full range of routes into and through higher education.

- Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.
- Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach, and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.

Phase three of the programme is scheduled to run through to the end of July 2025. Its funding is subject to confirmation and consultation on an annual basis.

As well as the various streams of data available through ABCS, the Higher Education Access Tracker and our new equality data, we will share our evaluations of success in this area through the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO).

All of these initiatives, including Uni Connect, will be reviewed and taken forward by the new Director for Fair Access and Participation when he joins us in the new year.

Notes

1   The Sutton Trust, 'A-levels and university access' (available at https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-levels-and-university-access-2021/).

2   The Sutton Trust, 'A-levels and university access' (available at https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/a-levels-and-university-access-2021/).

3   Education Policy Institute, 'Analysis: A-level results 2021' (https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/analysis-a-level-results-2021/).

4   OfS, 'Evaluation of access and participation plan reforms' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/evaluation-of-access-and-participation-plan-reforms/).

5   For the purposes of this analysis, we have assumed that the proportion of white students will remain constant, and so closing the gap will have been achieved by increasing the attainment rate of black students from 68.6 per cent to 77.3 per cent. An update to 'Analysis of access and participation plan targets in relation to OfS key performance measures' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/transforming-opportunity-in-higher-education/) will be published in early 2022.

6   OfS, 'Equality, diversity and student characteristics data: Experimental statistics' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-diversity-and-student-characteristics-data/experimental-statistics/).

7   OfS, 'Equality, diversity and student characteristics data' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/equality-diversity-and-student-characteristics-data/).

8   OfS, 'Associations between characteristics of students' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students).

9   OfS, 'Differences in student outcomes: Further characteristics', (OfS 2020.30, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/), Annex B, p3.

10   National Network for the Education of Care Leavers, 'Moving on up: Pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education', November 2017 (available at https://www.nnecl.org/resources/23-nnecl-moving-on-up-report), pp27-28.

11   The University of Sheffield, The Leverhulme Trust, Economic and Social Research Council, 'Pathways to university from care' (available at https://figshare.shef.ac.uk/articles/report/Pathways_to_University_from_Care_Recommendations_for_Universities/9578930), p 6.

12   OfS, 'Associations between characteristics of students' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students).

13   OfS, 'National outreach coverage project: targeting' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/national-outreach-coverage-project-targeting-tool/).

14   OfS, 'Uni Connect annual report: Phase two (August 2019 to July 2020)' (OfS 2021.22, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-annual-report-phase-two/).

15 OfS, 'Uni Connect annual report: Phase two (August 2019 to July 2020)' (OfS 2021.22, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-annual-report-phase-two/).

16 OfS, 'Uni Connect annual report: Phase two (August 2019 to July 2020)' (OfS 2021.22, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-annual-report-phase-two/); OfS, 'Uni Connect national evaluation: An analysis of young participation in higher education in England in the areas targeted by Uni Connect' (OfS 2021.11, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-national-evaluation/).

17 Figures in this graph may differ from those given in the text, because the OfS analysis used data for a slightly different population. For further details see OfS 2020.06 and its accompanying technical analysis report.

18 OfS, 'Differences in student outcomes: Further characteristics', Annex B, (OfS 2020.30, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/).
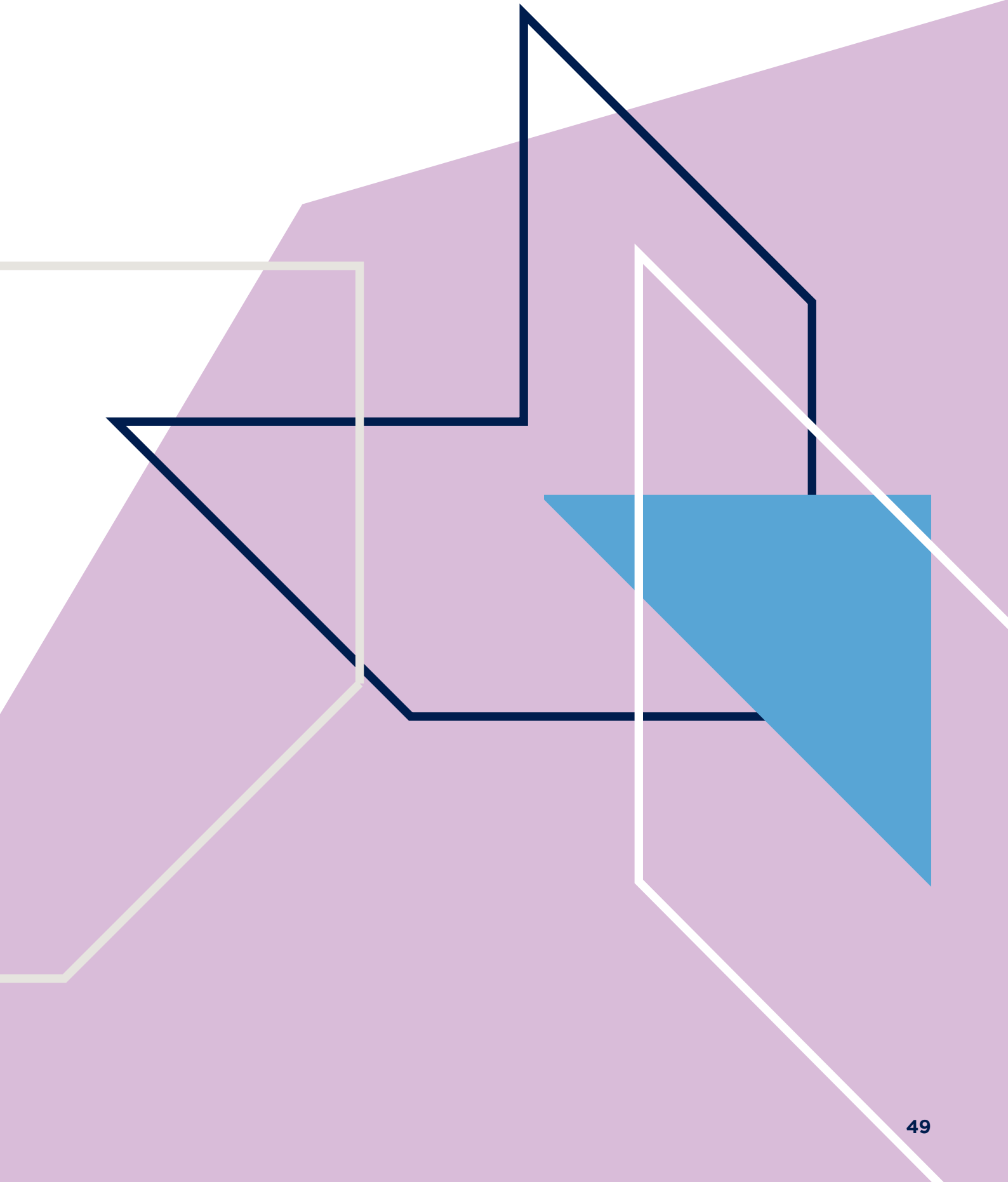
6. Skills and the economy

Getting a degree gives people more choice in the careers they can pursue, and enhances their ability to contribute to society both culturally and economically. People with degrees have higher average salaries, greater job security and less likelihood of unemployment. A highly skilled workforce is crucial to the success of businesses and public services.

These benefits largely held up through the pandemic. Graduates on average still earned more, and were less likely to experience unemployment, than non-graduates.[1] However, for new graduates, employment prospects were more uncertain. Many students graduating during the pandemic found it difficult to find jobs. Some universities have reported an increase in postgraduate applicants. Hiring figures are beginning to improve but are still well below 2019 rates. The impact of the pandemic is likely to be geographically uneven and long-lasting.

This chapter explores the locally variable nature of the job market and examines a number of the more persistent employment gaps for certain groups of graduates. It looks at some of the steps being taken by the OfS and the government to identify and address these skills gaps.

Proceed

There is substantial difference in the likelihood of graduates from particular universities and colleges, and from different parts of the country, going on to a graduate job or further study.

In May this year the OfS published the Projected completion and employment from entrant data (Proceed) measure. Its findings show substantial differences between individual universities and other higher education providers, in different subjects, and in different subjects at individual universities. This provides prospective students with an indication, based on recent patterns, of how likely new entrants on a particular course will be to achieve the successful outcomes of achieving a degree and gaining graduate employment.

Proceed identifies 22 universities and colleges where it projects that over 75 per cent of entrants will go on to find professional employment or further study shortly after graduation. At 25 universities and colleges, however, it finds that less than half of students who begin a degree can expect to finish that degree and find professional employment or further study within 15 months of graduation.

Meanwhile, while 95.5 per cent of medicine and dentistry entrants are projected to find professional employment or further study, in six other subjects the rates are below 55 per cent.[2]

Employment and unemployment: Regional issues

Not everyone has an equal chance of getting a graduate job or going onto further study. 76.1 per cent of those from areas in the least deprived Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile – which again are not uniformly distributed across the country – found a job

or further study, compared with only 69.1 per cent from the most deprived quintile. 74.0 per cent of white students went on to a graduate job or further study in 2018-19; only 69.3 per cent of black students did likewise.[3]

The pandemic has increased regional inequalities in employment and productivity, with tourism, service industries and retail particularly badly affected.[4] Graduate jobs remain most prevalent in London and the south east, meaning that those who cannot move have less opportunities. Splitting the graduate population into earnings quintiles reveals that the areas with the most graduates in well paid jobs are virtually all in London and the greater south east. All graduates in London live in the highest quintile areas, all graduates in the north east live in the bottom two quintiles, and this applies also to most of the graduates living elsewhere across the north of England.

There are also local differences in employment outcomes between black and white graduates. 60 per cent of white graduates earned above the threshold (around £23,000) or were in higher-level study, compared with 57.5 per cent of black graduates. However, in the areas with the highest graduate opportunity rates (where black graduates are almost four times more likely to live), the figures become 73.5 per cent of white and 59.9 per cent of black graduates. Among black and white graduates living in the areas with the lowest rates, the proportions are far closer to one another (52.1 per cent and 51.9 per cent).[5]

Local graduates and the OfS

The OfS has invested £5.6 million in funding to create more opportunities for graduates who seek highly skilled employment in their home region. We continue to evaluate and share emerging practice from these funded programmes on our local graduate webpages.

These projects have continued despite the pandemic, and include initiatives such as virtual career fairs in Bradford, reverse mentoring in the West Midlands, networks between graduates and small and medium-sized enterprises in Norfolk and Lincoln, virtual internships in the Tees Valley and leadership courses in Leicester. We will continue to evaluate and share emerging practice from these initiatives, and to explore innovative approaches to recruiting and retaining students.

Postgraduate upskilling

Universities and colleges have reported an increase in people applying for postgraduate degrees. Many are seeking out new job opportunities because of the pandemic.

In partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Office for Artificial Intelligence, the Office for Students has funded 18 universities across England to deliver postgraduate conversion courses in artificial intelligence and data science. These courses aim to equip students with the skills they need to join the UK's digital transformation and begin a career in an industry that has the potential to address some of the most significant global problems.

Health professions

In response to guidance from the Secretary of State highlighting professional shortages in such areas as science, engineering, medicine, dentistry, nursing and midwifery, in March 2021 we published a consultation on the funding of courses in this area, and changed our funding method in response.

The changes include increasing the proportion of funding provided through the main high-cost subject funding allocation; reducing this funding stream by 50 per cent for high-cost subjects in the performing and creative arts and media studies; removing the targeted allocation for students attending courses in London and the London weighting in our student premium funding; and increasing the targeted allocation for specialist institutions.[6]

Case Study: Gateway to Growth, University of East Anglia

'Gateway to Growth' is an innovative project designed to unlock the talents of graduates and Norfolk's small and medium enterprises. It provides additional support for graduates of the University of East Anglia who have decided to stay in the region but who are struggling to find the right opportunity for them.

The project aims to boost engagement between graduates and these enterprises, through enhanced skills training and internships linked to Norfolk's Enterprise Hubs. The project addresses some of the problems faced by the economy of Norwich and Norfolk and the university's graduates, many of whom want to remain in Norfolk after completing their studies but struggle to secure graduate-level employment.

The support provided includes tailored career advice and an internship programme linking graduates with local businesses. Through interlinked and interdependent schemes the project has developed a dedicated recruitment service for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which in recent months has seen increased numbers of Norfolk SME graduate opportunities advertised, a pilot innovation hub internship scheme, and enhanced professional support for finalists and graduates. Shifting some of the delivery online has enabled more graduates to participate in these activities, which include various skills development modules.

Since its inception the project has become the university's Kickstart Gateway agency, which has proved to be successful. The Gateway to Growth project has now supported Norfolk SMEs to apply for 152 Kickstart placements, and several participants have been successful in securing a permanent full-time opportunity with the employer.

The OfS also funded a programme of strategic interventions in health education disciplines. It started in January 2018 and ran until March 2021, with a budget of £1 million per year. The programme aimed to increase understanding of, and demand for, higher education courses in the small specialist allied health disciplines of therapeutic radiography, podiatry, orthoptics, prosthetics and orthotics.

The programme funded digital approaches to respond to the challenges raised by the pandemic, outreach events, and 15 Challenge Fund projects where universities identified innovative approaches to recruitment and retention of students. Of the 13 respondents to a January 2021 survey, the majority of course leaders for the small and specialist professions considered their course to be less vulnerable than in 2018. There are now plans to run two new postgraduate level preregistration courses in 2021-22, two new degree apprenticeship routes for podiatry, and foundation courses for therapeutic radiography and orthoptics.

Lifelong learning and the new entitlement

In line with its manifesto commitments, the government is committed to upskilling the workforce and ensuring that individuals have the opportunity to learn at all stages of their lives. This need to improve access for all adults is especially important as the number of mature students studying part time has fallen dramatically over the last decade (see Figure 6).[7] In addition, the pandemic and resulting economic downturn are likely to lead to an increase in people looking to retrain and upskill. Applications for nursing courses, for example, have begun to rebound after recent decline.

Figure 6: Number of mature UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants at English higher education providers by mode of study from 2010-11 to 2019-20
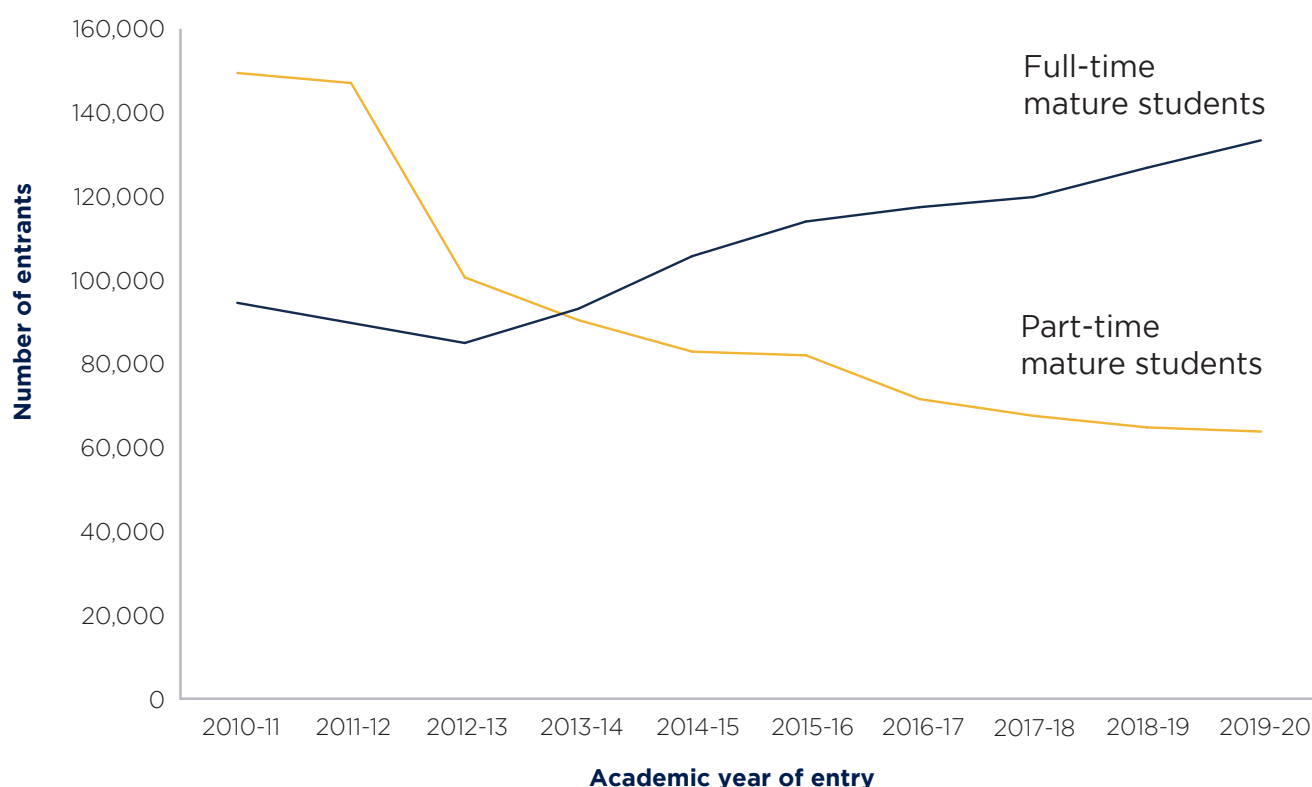
Source: OfS mature students datafile.

Shorter modular courses could allow people to study while fulfilling work, family and caring commitments. This will require a diversification of the pathways into further and higher education.

In the Skills for Jobs white paper, the government has committed to introduce the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) to make it easier for people to access training throughout their lives, and prioritise the skills employers need. The LLE will be introduced from 2025, providing individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years of post-18 education, to use over their lifetime. It will be available for studies extending from individual modules to full years and programmes of study at higher technical and degree levels (Levels 4 to 6), regardless of the type of further or higher education provider. Under this flexible system, the intention is for people to be able to build up learning over their lifetime and choose how and when they study to acquire new skills.

In preparation for LLE delivery from 2025, the OfS is running a Challenge Competition that will trial the distribution of funding up to £2 million to around 20 universities and colleges for the development of new, short courses at Levels 4 to 6. The trial is part of the government's piloting of access to a new student finance scheme especially designed for learners studying shorter, flexible provision in support of the development of the LLE.

Students studying on short courses developed through these projects may be able to access tuition fee loans from the start of academic year 2022-23. Over the next year we will evaluate the findings from the trial, so that the design of the LLE can be refined in the best interests of students and employers.

Notes

1   ONS, 'Graduates' labour market outcomes during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: Occupational switches and skill mismatch' (available at https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduates-labour-market-outcomes-during-covid-19-occupational-switches-and-skill-mismatch).

2   OfS, 'Projected completion and employment from entrant data (Proceed): Updated methodology and results' (OfS 2021.12, available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/proceed-updated-methodology-and-results/).

3   OfS, 'Access and participation data dashboard' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/).

4   London School of Economics, 'The unevenness in the local economic impact of COVID-19 presents a serious challenge to the government's "levelling up" agenda' (https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/local-economic-impact-covid19/).

5   OfS, 'A geography of employment and earnings' (www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/).

6   OfS, 'Notification to the OfS by the Secretary of State for Education to set terms and conditions for the allocation by OfS of funding for world-leading specialist providers in the 2021-22 academic year (March 2021)' (available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/guidance-from-government/).

7   Note that this analysis is restricted to courses leading to a qualification. This aligns with data we publish on access and participation, but means a significant number of mature students will not be included. For an indication of the decrease in mature students studying on courses for institutional credit rather than a qualification, see Callender, Claire, and John Thomson, 'The lost part-timers: The decline of part-time undergraduate higher education in England', 2018 (available at https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10066734/), p20, Figure 4. Some providers were not required to report data until 2014-15, and so some higher education provision before this date is not reported.