

## **Update on our engagement with the media as part of the wider communications strategy**

### **Issue**

1. This paper updates the board on our work with the media as part of our communications strategy which was discussed with the board in September 2018. It explains our approach to the media and its importance to our regulatory role, and suggests further opportunities for the board to engage with our media work

### **Recommendations**

2. The board is invited to:
  - a. Note progress on working with the media as an important part of our delivery of the communications strategy.
  - b. Agree proposed steps to ensure the board is aware of significant planned media stories

### **Further information**

3. Available from Conor Ryan – Director of External Relations, at [conor.ryan@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:conor.ryan@officeforstudents.org.uk) or on 0117 9317393.

### **Members' interests**

4. Individual board members should declare any conflicts of interest in relation to this paper.

## The OfS communications strategy

5. The board discussed the OfS communications strategy in September 2018. The strategy has been reflected in the core objectives for the External Relations Directorate in the current business plan.
6. In that strategy we note that good communications are particularly important for a regulator. The OfS general duties, as set out in its regulatory framework, require us to be “transparent [and] accountable”. We are committed to be “accountable for [our] decisions and subject to public scrutiny.” The framework says that “The OfS is well placed to champion particular issues, themes, and approaches. Although the OfS will not, in general, dictate how autonomous providers should act or what methods they should use, the OfS will be able to help shape sector wide debate and focus. Through its influencing power, the OfS may promote innovation in particular areas, or encourage the dissemination of information about what works best to enhance particular outcomes.”
7. The framework also commits us to “champion issues and share evidence and examples of effective and innovative practice for students. [The OfS] will be unafraid to speak out on behalf of students, and in particular will promote value for money for students and taxpayers, and will highlight inequalities wherever it sees them.”
8. Transparent and clear publication of information is also regulatory tool that can complement legal powers by encouraging better practice and changing provider and student behaviours. Significant and high profile media coverage can have wider and more sustainable impact in pursuing regulatory objectives than formal interventions, and can certainly enhance the impact of more formal guidance and requirements.
9. Good communications can also reassure stakeholders – particularly students and taxpayers in the case of the OfS – that the regulator is acting in their interest. It can improve public confidence in higher education.
10. The communications strategy sets out our approach to the media, an approach that is much more proactive than before with a professional media office focused on engaging with news and social media. It notes the continuing importance of traditional print and broadcast media in shaping the news agenda, even in an age of social media.
11. The strategy notes the importance of stories in helping to shape public perceptions of the OfS’s identity as a regulator. It argues that the OfS must build brand awareness through communication of what we are doing and by influencing public discussion within our regulatory remit.
12. Where we highlight issues proactively or comment on others’ stories has evolved over the last year, and we have developed our lines as they emerge. While it is not possible to identify every issue that may emerge where it may be appropriate to comment, we are developing a framework to help shape our responses and lines that reflects our regulatory responsibilities and we will discuss that with the board.

13. The use of regular content to underpin our narrative is an important part of the strategy. Ways of doing this include regular publication of data, the publication of regulatory decisions, through speeches, articles, blog posts and interview, with a 'state of the sector' annual review (due in November 2019), through policy-focused events, through regular Insight briefs and through our responses to others' activities.

### **Progress in implementing the strategy**

14. We have been implementing this approach successfully:

- We have used data as a way to highlight our access and participation work (through the data dashboards) and on grade inflation and vice-chancellor pay.
- We have had op-eds in the Daily Telegraph, Times Higher and The Times and interviews with Nicola in the I, Times Higher and University Business.
- We produce regular blogs for WonkHE.
- We have held a successful first insight event and published the first three insight briefs, all generating significant media interest.
- We respond regularly where relevant to our regulatory role to others' activities and are comments are widely used.
- We are well advanced in developing plans for our first annual sector review report in November

15. Overall since April 2018 we have had over 700 pieces of national news coverage (over 300 in this calendar year) including front page stories in The Times, The Guardian, The I and the Daily Telegraph. We have been covered on Radio 4's Today programme on 27 occasions, including eight interviews with Michael, Nicola or Chris. Our press work is complemented by a growing social media presence with nearly 10,000 Twitter followers and work beginning to widen our social media presence to support our messaging and our IAG work. Our website now receives 175,000 unique page views each month from nearly 52,000 individual visitors each month.

16. We are not simply interested in column inches, though prominence helps get our message across. We are more interested in impact. Increasingly the OfS is credited with having a positive impact where we have had significant media coverage and doing so in this way both complements and enhances our regulatory capability:

- Significant media coverage has complemented our work on fair access and participation, including the new access data dashboard, and we have been cited internationally (by Associated Press in the New York Times and Washington Post) as well as nationally when Oxford announced its new scholars' programme. The Times declared: "All the elite universities are under pressure from the Office for Students to show they are doing all they can to widen access"
- Our publicity for the chair's Telegraph article on the importance of financial sustainability and this year's report on the financial health of the sector have been widely reported (and cited in the Augar report) and has ensured that our approach to 'value for money' is more widely understood.

- We have used media coverage linked to the challenge competition to highlight our support for innovative approaches to improve the student experience of those with mental ill-health in line with our regulatory framework commitment to “champion issues and share evidence and examples of effective and innovative practice.”
- The Financial Times cited ‘controversy over remuneration’ after our publication of vice-chancellors’ pay as part of our value for money work as contributing to lower pay packages at some of the highest payers.
- The Times linked our highlighting of grade inflation, as part of our regulatory role in ensuring students receive a high quality academic experience, with work in the sector to address the issues.
- Eight universities announced the dropping of conditional unconditional offers shortly after we highlighted the issue, as part of our regulatory role in a fact noted by the Financial Times. Providers are required under Condition B2 of registration to have a ‘reliable, fair and inclusive admissions system’.

We are developing a bespoke media sentiment analysis database to analyse such impacts systematically and we will share that analysis with the board regularly.

### **Keeping the board informed**

17. We currently update the board on media coverage, including press, social media and website engagement, through the chief executive’s report, and we propose to continue doing so linking those activities clearly to our regulatory objectives. We are developing a framework to help inform our key messages and responses that we will share with the board.
18. All press releases are cleared with the chief executive and relevant directors, and significant ones that are expected to gain national mainstream media attention are also cleared with the chair. Copies of significant releases are shared with the board in advance of media publication.
19. The timetable involved in clearing releases would make it impractical to clear releases with the board. However, we propose two additional measures to ensure the board is kept informed:
  - An oral report by the chief executive on significant planned national media activity expected to take place between board meetings, offering board members the opportunity to discuss the likely approach and tone to those stories.
  - A more regular updating of the ‘lines to take’ on key issues, currently shared on request with some board members, and those lines made available to all board members routinely.