

OfS student panel meeting

Thursday 24 October 2019

Time: 1500 – 1800

Location: Finlaison House, London

Attendees

Martha Longdon (Chair), Chad Allen, Georgia Bell, Rose Bennett, Sinead Brown, Ruth Carlson, Shraddha Chaudhary, Samuel Dedman, Sabrina Mundtazir, Lizzie Pace, Alice Richardson, Joshua Sanderson-Kirk

OfS: Nicola Dandridge, Edward Davison, Benjamin Hunt, Natasha Slade

Apologies

Cassie Agbehenu (OfS), Zahra Choudhry, Shakira Martin.

Item 1: Chair's update

1. The Chair welcomed the panel members to the third student panel meeting of 2019.
2. Apologies were noted.
3. The Chair highlighted the sessions explored at the last meeting which included access and participation and student protection plans.
4. The Chair provided an update of recent activity involving the panel and thanked the panel members for their contribution outside their formal meetings. A summary of some of the activity below:
 - Shraddha, Shakira and Ruth attended the board away day.
 - Martha and Shraddha participated in interviews which explored experiences of international and postgraduate students and the particular issues that these types of students face. Their input will inform an internal review of how the OfS represents the interests of international and postgraduate students.
 - Sam wrote a blog to encourage students to complete the student engagement survey which formed part of the student engagement consultation. The survey received over 500 responses with a large proportion of those responses from students. The Chair noted that there would be a session on this later on the meeting's agenda.

- Shraddha and Alice participated in interviews with a digital communications consultancy, Pickle Jar. The interviews are informing the OfS social media strategy which will aim to make OfS's social media channels more engaging.
 - Joshua attended the second Horizon Scanning Panel meeting. Lizzie sent her apologies.
 - The Chair updated the panel on work she has been involved with for The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) and asked whether the student panel members would be interested in having an involvement in this work.
 - The Chair congratulated those panel members who received exam results over the summer.
5. The Chair advised that the agenda had been set in response to panellists' request to include the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) in a student panel meeting. The Chair mentioned that forthcoming sessions on Discover Uni and student engagement were an opportunity to see how work has progressed since the panel's input in previous meetings.
 6. It was highlighted that the next meeting would be on Thursday 23 January 2020. The Chair noted that the meeting will be the final meeting for those student panel members who have been on the panel for two years. The Chair advised that there are intentions to extend the meeting to add time for lunch and additional sessions. It was confirmed that the student engagement team will email timings shortly.
 7. The Chair noted that as the January meeting will be the fourth meeting of the year, this would be a good time to reflect and see if any of the panel would be interested in writing a blog to capture reflections. It was advised that the student engagement team would email the panel in relation to this.

Item 2: Chief executive's update

8. The Chair handed over to Nicola Dandridge for the chief executive's update.
9. The chief executive thanked the panel for their work over the past couple of months and in particular to Shraddha, Shakira and Ruth who had attended the board away day. The chief executive noted that the panel had made a significant contribution in terms of challenging the OfS on diversity of its workforce, which is now a priority of the executive team.
10. It was highlighted that two board members (Gurpreet Dehal and Martin Coleman) attended the previous meeting and had expressed how impressed they were with the quality of discussion and how the panel operated. The board members acknowledged how important students' perspectives are and that joining the panel meeting had been a good opportunity to hear students' views on a range of issues. The chief executive confirmed that other board members are keen to join the next panel meeting on 23 January 2020.
11. An update was given to the panel members on progress with the registration process. Nicola thanked panel members for their suggestions and comments on how we could improve our communication with students when we publish a decision to not register a provider.

12. It was mentioned that the OfS is being litigated against in relation to some of its registration decisions. The chief executive emphasised that the OfS was prepared to defend its decisions robustly as they had been made in the student interest.
13. The chief executive drew attention to the recent Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) report on racial harassment in higher education and noted that the OfS is focusing on utilising its regulatory role to drive improvements for students. The chief executive referenced 'The OfS Insight event: Improving student lives' on 6 November 2019 and reiterated the panel members would be welcome to attend.
14. A student panel member asked how we can regulate racial harassment. The chief executive explained that there are regulatory conditions which enable the OfS to regulate primarily in terms of ensuring that reporting mechanisms are accessible, transparent and effective. The chief executive emphasised that the OfS is looking closely at developing its role further in this area.
15. The student panel challenged the clarity of rules around reporting harassment.

Item 3: Approval of the minutes

16. The panel approved the minutes of the July meeting.

Item 4: TEF

17. The chair introduced Richard Smith to lead a session on the TEF.
18. Richard Smith ran through the background of the TEF, provider-level TEF and the TEF award ratings.
19. The panel were asked to discuss in what ways the TEF has been helpful to them as students.

The panel summarised their personal experiences of TEF as applicants:

- A panel member commented that they took TEF into account but highlighted that other factors were also important such as the feeling of a campus.
- A panel member who studied at a small institution stated that they had found TEF helpful as it gave security and confidence in the decision to go to that smaller provider knowing that the provider had been through the assessment process. The provider had a TEF gold which had been reassuring.
- It was commented that smaller providers were doing incredible things but would not be recognised in league tables. The TEF was therefore seen as an opportunity for smaller providers to showcase the fantastic work they are doing which helps to create a more level playing field.
- It was mentioned that TEF is for undergraduate courses only and not postgraduate courses, and that this could be communicated more clearly.
- The panel felt that there should be clearer guidance and tighter limitations imposed around where providers can use their award in marketing material.

The panel summarised their personal experiences of the TEF in higher education, feedback included:

- The TEF is helpful for teaching-based institutions as it encourages providers to reflect and focus on the teaching quality.
- The panel questioned what happens to verify that the information in submissions is correct. In response to this, it was communicated that careful consideration is given by the panel members and assessors to the quality of evidence that underpins claims made in submissions. It was noted that future guidance would establish clearer thresholds and principles for the quality of evidence underpinning submissions. It was important to note also that the panel and assessors carefully triangulate evidence across both the submissions and the metrics (e.g. data such as National Student Survey (NSS) scores which reflect student satisfaction).

20. Richard Smith talked through the subject-level pilots and the different models which were piloted. The increased level of student engagement within these pilots was outlined, including the introduction of a student declaration which sets out how students in a provider have engaged in the process.

21. The student panel discussed how student engagement within the TEF could be strengthened. Feedback included:

- The panel emphasised the importance of international students and how the satisfaction of international students can be captured and considered within the TEF assessments.
- The panel welcomed more direct forms of student engagement.
- The panel discussed the purpose of the TEF and how the TEF requires a lot of resource from the sector and providers. The panel questioned whether the purpose of the TEF is for provider recruitment, the enhancement of teaching in higher education or to inform student choice.
- The panel identified that the TEF is burdensome for universities but they get lots of feedback. Providers can reflect on what they are doing well and identify where they can celebrate excellence.

22. Richard Smith explained that there has been an independent review which is due to be published which will advise on the future direction of the TEF.

23. The panel were asked how they would improve the TEF in future. Feedback included:

- Consider including postgraduate taught (PGT) provision in the TEF (if it is not linked to fees), although it was noted that this could be a challenge as a lot of postgraduate courses have under 40 students so the data is limited.
- Having an award below Bronze, such as 'TEF pass' to show that providers who receive bronze are doing well. The panel mentioned that there could be more TEF awards which are in between bronze and silver – e.g. bronze/silver award or silver/bronze.

- Increase the level of student engagement – collecting qualitative feedback which gives insight into the student experience.
- That NSS is currently the only or main set of data which informs about student satisfaction and that a mix of data would be beneficial, both quantitative and qualitative.
- That there was a need to align the TEF and the regulatory framework with strong endorsement for ensuring this is done thoroughly and well. For example, questions like ‘what happens if you fail the TEF’ and the interventions that it would trigger needed to be carefully considered in light of the regulatory framework.

24. Richard Smith thanked the panel for their input.

25. The Chair thanked the panel for their contribution and advised that their comments will be noted at the board meeting in November 2019.

Item 5: Discover Uni

26. The Chair handed over to Catherine Cameron to lead a session on the new information, advice and guidance resource, Discover Uni.

27. Catherine Cameron ran through a demonstration of the website. Catherine explained that Discover Uni was launched in September 2019 and was now in a beta phase which meant that the team were collecting feedback which will inform the development of the site.

28. Catherine specified that the team were keen to receive the panel’s input on the site and potential changes to data and its presentation, design enhancements, discoverability of content, transition and transfer and course level links with UCAS.

29. Feedback from the panel included the below points:

The panel liked:

- The simple design.
- Consideration of accessibility and that the website had been through an accessibility audit.
- That the TEF rating was not located on specific subject pages and instead on the provider page.

The panel discussed:

- Communicating more clearly that the website is for courses across the UK.
- Communicating that the website is for undergraduate study only and not postgraduate.
- Adding support for students which helps them to decide what course to apply for, for example having a search engine which takes into account the courses you enjoy which then gives suggestions for higher education courses. It was explained that this is not a function on the website because we link out to other sites who are already doing this well.

- Having more information to guide graduates on what they can do with their degree, it was advised that the website links out to Prospects who already have this information.
- That it would be useful to include gender splits on courses displayed
- The panel noted that not all students know that the OfS exists and that we should increase the awareness of the OfS among students and also focus on communicating that Discover Uni is managed by the OfS to emphasise that it is a credible source. The panel mentioned that the website could have OfS branding so it is recognisable to students. It was explained that it is jointly owned by four countries so the website cannot have OfS branding only.
- The panel recommended that we should link to student protection plans.
- The panel recommended that our regulatory work should be communicated in some way through Discover Uni.

Development:

- The panel commented that the Discover Uni logo looked very corporate.
- The panel asked about how people are getting to the website. It was explained that the website is currently '.org.uk' and will be moving to '.gov.uk' and once domain changes, traffic will come from widgets in addition to users coming through searches. Information about Discover Uni will also be going into training materials for advisers and OfS will be promoting through social media.
- The panel questioned the number of times it takes to click through the site. Catherine Cameron shared that this aspect had tested well with users.
- The panel questioned whether you can compare institutions – it was advised that there is a shortlisting feature and a compare functionality for the site will be implemented shortly.

30. The panel expressed an interest in sharing more comments and views on Discover Uni. This was encouraged and any members wanting to share feedback can do so via OfS colleagues.

31. Catherine Cameron thanked the panel for the feedback.

Item 6: Student engagement

32. The Chair invited Ed Davison and Ben Hunt to lead a session on the student engagement strategy.

33. An update on the student engagement consultation was given which included insight into the recommendations which would be included in the student engagement strategy.

34. The student panel were asked for their feedback on the direction of the strategy:

- The student panel members questioned whether there could be oversight of the board's interaction with students and whether the board should be set a certain amount of time to spend with students each year. It was highlighted that board members come to the student panel meetings, students go to the board away day and there is interaction with the student

experience board member, Martha Longdon and Kathryn King who is also a board member and current PhD doctoral research student. It was emphasised that the interaction and the purpose of the interaction is important and not only the amount of time spent interacting with students.

- The student panel emphasised the importance of communication and that the OfS needed to focus more on building awareness of the OfS among students. Drawing a link between the TEF, the NSS, building an understanding of students' rights and Discover Uni under one umbrella or campaign was explored.
- It was highlighted that the panel could play more of an ambassador role, and that the panel could promote what they do more, which would also help to increase awareness.
- The panel asked when the strategy will be reviewed and emphasised that updates on the ways in which students are having an impact on the OfS would be useful.

35. The Chair of the panel thanked the panel for their questions and comments.

Item 7: Closed session

36. OfS staff left the room for the student panel to feed in any thoughts and comments to the Chair.