

**Consultation**

**Office for  
Students**



**OfS**

# **Consultation on constructing student outcome and experience indicators for use in OfS regulation**

This consultation runs from **20 January 2022**  
to **17 March 2022**.

**Reference** OfS 2022.03

**Enquiries to** [ProviderMetrics@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:ProviderMetrics@officeforstudents.org.uk)

**Publication date** 20 January 2022

The Office for Students is the independent regulator for higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

### **Our four regulatory objectives**

All students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education:

- are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education
- receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure
- are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time
- receive value for money.

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## About this consultation

The Office for Students is consulting on its approaches to regulating student outcomes and to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). These approaches involve use of a detailed set of data and analytical evidence to inform our regulatory judgements. This consultation sets out proposals for the construction, presentation and interpretation of the data comprising that evidence base, which will also be used in access and participation data dashboards.

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**Timing**                      Start: **20 January 2022**  
   End: **17 March 2022**

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**Who should respond?**                      Anyone with an interest in the regulation of quality and standards in the higher education sector, in the Teaching Excellence Framework, or in the Office for Students' approach to institutional performance data.

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**How to respond**                      Please respond by **17 March 2022**.  
   Please use the online response form available at <https://survey.officeforstudents.org.uk/s/consultation-on-indicators/>

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**How we will treat your response**                      We will summarise and/or publish the responses to this consultation on the OfS website (and in alternative formats on request). This may include a list of the providers and organisations that respond, but not personal data such as individuals' names, addresses or other contact details.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please tell us but be aware that we cannot guarantee confidentiality in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not be regarded by us as a confidentiality request.

The OfS will process any personal data received in accordance with all applicable data protection laws (see our privacy policy). A privacy notice for this consultation is available to view on our website.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/ofs-privacy/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/ofs-privacy/).

We may need to disclose or publish information that you provide in the performance of our functions, or disclose it to other organisations for the purposes of their functions. Information (including personal data) may also need to be disclosed in accordance with UK legislation (such as the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Data Protection Act 2018 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

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## Next steps

Subject to the representations received as a result of this consultation, we intend to make a decision on whether and how to take forward the proposals.

We expect to publish a summary of responses to this consultation in summer 2022. We will explain how and why we have arrived at our decisions and set out next steps in the policy and implementation process.

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## Supporting documents

This consultation is supported by the publication of a range of documents which provide further detail of data analysis to which our proposals refer, and of the algorithms that allow readers with in-depth knowledge of the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Student, HESA Student Alternative or Individualised Learner Record (ILR) student data to understand our application of these methods and definitions to their own students.

The range of supporting documents released alongside this consultation are available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

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## Enquiries

Email [ProviderMetrics@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:ProviderMetrics@officeforstudents.org.uk)

Alternatively, call our public enquiry line on 0117 931 7317.

We are holding an online consultation event on **17 February 2022**. This event will provide an opportunity for you to ask any questions you may have. See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/consultation-on-constructing-indicators/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/events/consultation-on-constructing-indicators/)

If you require this document in an **alternative format**, or you need assistance with the online form, contact [digitalpublishing@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:digitalpublishing@officeforstudents.org.uk). (**Please note:** this email address should **not** be used for submitting your consultation response.)

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## Related consultations

This consultation is taking place alongside consultations on a revised approach to regulating student outcomes, and a consultation on the future of the TEF.

All consultations can be read at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/outcomes-and-excellence/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/outcomes-and-excellence/)

You may also wish to read our recent consultation on the revised quality and standards higher education providers registered with the Office for Students must meet.

This is available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-quality-and-standards-conditions/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-quality-and-standards-conditions/)

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For more information about the definitions of our institutional performance measures as used to date, see [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/institutional-performance-measures/).

## Documents referred to in this consultation

In this consultation we refer to the following documents:

- November 2020 consultation on regulating quality and standards (phase one consultation) ([www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education/))
- December 2021 consultation on Data Futures and data collection ([www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/))
- January 2022 related consultation on regulating student outcomes ([www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/))
- January 2022 related consultation on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) ([www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/))
- Exploring student outcomes: Differences in continuation, completion and progression between students at English higher education providers ([www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/exploring-student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/exploring-student-outcomes/))
- Supporting information about constructing student outcome and experience indicators for use in OfS regulation ([www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/)):
  - Description and methodology
  - Core algorithms
  - Rebuild instructions
  - Statistical methods
  - Comparison of completion measures
  - Review of the selection and grouping of benchmarking factors.

# Introduction

1. This consultation sets out detailed proposals for the construction, presentation and interpretation of data about different aspects of the student lifecycle which informs our regulatory approaches. It sits alongside related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the future TEF scheme and provides further detail about the technical implementation of those proposals to construct numerical measures of student outcomes and experiences at higher education providers. It is also relevant to regulation of access and participation, where our approach also uses data about student outcomes.

## Our regulatory approach

2. The Office for Students (OfS) seeks to ensure that English higher education is delivering positive outcomes for students – past, present and future. Our regulatory objectives reflect the things that matter most to students: high quality courses, successful outcomes, and the ongoing value of their qualifications. We use the tools in the regulatory framework to mitigate the risk that these regulatory outcomes are not delivered in practice for students from all backgrounds.
3. The conditions of registration contained in the regulatory framework are designed to ensure a minimum baseline of protection for all students and the taxpayer. Beyond this minimum, we encourage choice for students and innovation by autonomous higher education providers free to pursue excellence as they see fit. We seek to incentivise providers to pursue excellence in their chosen way. We do this through in a number of ways, including through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which is subject to a separate consultation. The proposals in this consultation are consistent with this established regulatory approach, within which an evidence base of data indicators plays an important role.
4. Protecting and promoting quality and equality of opportunity are at the heart of our work. When a student embarks on a higher education course, it has the potential to be a life-transforming event – an enriching academic experience that paves the way for a rewarding and fulfilling life. Students pay a significant price for these opportunities, through their time and effort, as well as in financial terms. This is why the OfS is focused on ensuring through our regulation of quality that all students, whatever their background and characteristics, can have confidence that they will receive a high quality higher education and positive outcomes.
5. We work to secure equality of opportunity for all students in many different ways. Through our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the future TEF scheme, we are setting out a way of regulating that would set minimum expectations for all students and incentivise providers to deliver excellent teaching and learning for all their groups of students. At the same time, we continue to take steps through our regulation of access and participation to reduce the gaps in equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups<sup>2</sup> and other students, before, during and beyond their time in higher education. Our

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<sup>2</sup> We use the term ‘students from underrepresented groups’ throughout this consultation. It includes all groups of potential or current students for whom the OfS can identify gaps in equality of opportunity in different parts of the student lifecycle. In determining the groups falling within this definition, the OfS has given due regard to students who share particular characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act 2010 as well as students who are otherwise underrepresented or disadvantaged. When referring to

approach is designed to ensure that our regulation of quality and standards, and of equality of opportunity, are mutually reinforcing for the benefit of students.

6. The OfS constructs data indicators as numerical measures that allow us to understand the outcomes and experiences that a provider delivers for its students at different stages of the student lifecycle in higher education:
  - Application and access to higher education study
  - Continuation in, and completion of, the study of higher education qualifications
  - Student views and perceptions of different aspects of their higher education experience
  - Achievement and the awards made to higher education students at the end of their studies
  - Progression into the labour market and other destinations after leaving higher education.
7. We set out the general principles of our proposed approach to regulating quality and standards in a consultation launched in November 2020. That consultation is hereafter referred to as the 'phase one consultation'. In January 2022 we published further consultations on our approach to regulating students outcomes, and on the future TEF scheme, taking account of the responses to our first quality and standards consultation and of the independent review of the TEF. In places, these consultations describe the approach that the OfS proposes to take to construct data indicators and use these numerical measures to regulate student outcomes and experiences.

## **The reasons for this consultation**

8. The purpose of this consultation is to establish how numerical measures are to be defined and communicated for the purposes of regulating student outcomes through condition B3 or as evidence informing a TEF assessment. In our phase one consultation on quality and standards, we committed to consulting in more detail on the approach we use to construct these measures.
9. This consultation also recognises use of the same measures and data definitions within our regulation of access and participation, and invites views on the application of a single set of definitions across all of our regulatory approaches.
10. As an official statistics producer, the OfS is committed to ensuring that the methods and definitions used in the production of data and statistics are fit for purpose and meet the expectations of the Code of Practice for Statistics.<sup>3</sup> This means that we aim to provide clear

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underrepresented groups, the OfS considers this to include, among others, students from deprived areas, areas of lower higher education participation, or both; some black, Asian and minority ethnic students; mature students; and disabled students (whether or not they are in receipt of Disabled Students Allowance). There are some student groups with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 for whom the OfS has been unable to determine whether they are underrepresented at different points of the student lifecycle, because data is either collected at a national level, but with gaps in disclosure and absence of comprehensive data (for example in relation to religion or belief, sexual orientation and gender reassignment), or not collected at a national level (for example in relation to marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity).

<sup>3</sup> See <https://code.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/>.

explanations of our methods for producing student outcome and experience measures, with details of their limitations and assumptions communicated effectively to users. It also means that we provide opportunities for an open dialogue with users of our data and statistics, so that we can understand their value to users. This consultation seeks to gather feedback from a range of users on our proposed methods and definitions (including feedback which will help us to identify and respond to any methodological issues), and to support development of appropriate resources to aid future user engagement with the outputs we produce.

## Our intentions for constructing student outcome and experience measures

11. The main features of the OfS's current approach to the evidence that informs our regulation of student outcomes through condition B3, as set out in the regulatory framework and which we have proposed to continue, are:
  - a. The use of a range of measures showing student outcomes that are constructed from individualised student data returns submitted by a provider.
  - b. Numerical measures that include student continuation and completion rates, as well as graduate employment rates (in particular, progression to professional and managerial jobs and further study).
  - c. Data indicators that are reported separately for each mode and level of study and are broken down to show outcomes for students with different characteristics.
  - d. Assessment made of a provider's actual performance over time.
12. A number of OfS functions have to date made use of similar measures about different stages of the student lifecycle and, through our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF, we have proposed that this will continue to be the case:
  - a. Assessments of condition B3 will draw upon **student outcomes** indicators (measures of continuation, completion and progression).
  - b. TEF assessments will draw upon **student outcome and experience** indicators (measures of continuation, completion, progression, and student experience).
  - c. Our regulation of access and participation will use data indicators about **higher education access and outcomes** (measures of access, continuation, degree outcomes and progression).<sup>4</sup>
13. Wherever possible, the OfS uses consistent definitions and approaches to data wherever it is used in support of our functions. We expect this consistency to minimise the burden on higher education providers of understanding these definitions, and in using the resulting data outputs to fulfil our regulatory requirements. This means that the student outcome and experience measure definitions we propose to establish as a result of this consultation will be applied

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/).

consistently across our functions for access and participation and quality and standards. We propose that they would be applied to future iterations of the following outputs:

- a. The student outcomes evidence to inform assessments of condition B3.
  - b. The indicators used in the TEF.
  - c. The OfS access and participation data dashboard.<sup>5</sup>
  - d. The student outcomes which are reported on as key performance measures for the OfS<sup>6</sup>, and within sector-level analyses of student outcomes, experiences or underrepresented groups.<sup>7</sup>
14. The OfS would also use these definitions as appropriate to inform the data indicators it uses for risk-based monitoring of quality and standards, as set out in proposal 3 in the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards (issued in November 2020).
15. We would consider the potential to use the same definitions within information published for prospective students, through annual publications of National Student Survey responses and the Discover Uni website. We recognise that these outputs serve a student information purpose and are delivered by the OfS through a national online resource. We therefore expect to work with the other UK higher education funders and regulators to consider the advantages and disadvantages of using the definitions proposed in this consultation in the context of this different application.

## The scope of this consultation

16. This is a technical consultation, making proposals about the detailed construction and implementation of approaches to the analysis of individualised student data returns submitted by higher education providers, and the application and interpretation of advanced statistical methods. It describes the policy intentions associated with construction of student outcome and experience indicators and their corresponding benchmarks where these are used across multiple OfS functions, as well as the technical detail of their construction.
17. The policy intentions associated with key features of the OfS's evidence base for regulating student outcomes and TEF, and with the refinements and expansions of our approach, are discussed within our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF.
18. In particular, proposals which address the following features fall within the scope of the consultation on regulating student outcomes. Readers who wish to comment on these features should do so within responses to the **consultation on regulating student outcomes**:

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/).

<sup>6</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/).

<sup>7</sup> For example, analysis of differences in student outcomes: [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/), and in the construction of classifications such as the associations between characteristics of students (ABCS) measures.

- a. Use of the student outcome measures in determining numerical thresholds, and assessing whether, in the OfS's judgement, a provider's student outcomes data is at or above the relevant numerical thresholds.
  - b. Consideration of a provider's context to ensure that we have properly interpreted its performance, including use of benchmark values to test these assessments.
  - c. Improving further transparency in relation to the data indicators and thresholds used to regulate student outcomes – in particular, through publication of the student outcome indicators calculated for each provider and used to inform assessments of condition B3.
19. Proposals which address the following features fall within the scope of the consultation on the TEF scheme. Readers who wish to comment on these features should do so within responses to the **TEF consultation**:
- a. Consideration of a provider's performance relative to a benchmark, and how this would be interpreted and considered as part of a wider set of evidence about student outcomes and experiences to inform TEF rating decisions.
  - b. Ensuring transparency in relation to TEF rating decisions, including through publication of the student outcome and experience indicators calculated and assessed for each provider.
20. The policy intentions outlined in paragraphs 18 and 19 are **not** within the scope of this consultation on construction of the student outcome and experience measures.
21. In formulating our proposals throughout this consultation, we have considered a substantial body of evidence and advice. This includes taking into account the recommendations of the independent review of the TEF, and, in particular, the 'Evaluation of the statistical elements of TEF' conducted by the Office for National Statistics on behalf of that review.<sup>8</sup> We have had regard to the responses to the first quality and standards consultation we conducted during the winter of 2020-21, and we have considered advice from the TEF metrics peer review group.<sup>9</sup> We have also had regard to our general duties under section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA), statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State, the Regulators' Code, and the public sector equality duty, as set out in Annexes I and J.
22. The current OfS data strategy is built around five principles of which the principles of transparency, robust and innovative analysis and quality are most relevant here. These principles underpin the proposals we make throughout this consultation. We have also had due regard to the remaining data strategy principles of ethical behaviours and compliance, and reducing burden and working with others.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/evaluation-of-the-statistical-elements-of-tef](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/evaluation-of-the-statistical-elements-of-tef).

<sup>9</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/future-of-the-tef/tef-metrics-peer-review-group/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/future-of-the-tef/tef-metrics-peer-review-group/).

<sup>10</sup> We intend to refresh the OfS data strategy in 2022. The current data strategy is at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/office-for-students-data-strategy-2018-to-2021/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/office-for-students-data-strategy-2018-to-2021/).

23. We would like to thank the members of the TEF metrics peer review group for their expertise, insight and challenge, noting that their advice does not constitute endorsement or otherwise of our proposals.

24. The consultation questions are listed in full in Annex G.

## **Further information for data practitioners**

25. The data definitions we include in this document are described in narrative form. We have also published the definitions in algorithm form, which represent the technical implementation of our proposed approach, which we anticipate will be of particular use and interest to data practitioners. For the avoidance of doubt, the OfS expects to implement the proposals given in this consultation on the basis of their formulation as the algorithms we have published.

26. It should be noted that the practical implementation of the proposals made through this consultation may vary according to whether a provider is required to submit individualised student data returns to HESA and/or the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). While the student data collections operated by the two agencies are largely similar in respect of the information collected about higher education students, there are some areas of marked difference between the two, in either structure, coverage or definition of what is collected. Where these differences result in this consultation describing approaches specific to one data collection or the other, or reasoning that responds to differing data reporting practices, this is clearly marked.

27. To support interested stakeholders to understand the practical implementation of the proposals made through this consultation, we have published a series of supporting documents alongside this consultation. It is not anticipated that readers will need to engage with the detail of these supporting documents to fully understand the proposals in this consultation, but they may be of practical or academic interest to data or statistical practitioners. These documents are provided at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/). Any references to the analytical evidence or further definitional detail that they contain is clearly marked through this consultation document.

28. We expect that some readers, particularly those at higher education providers with in-depth knowledge of the Student or Student Alternative records collected by HESA, or the ESFA Individualised Learner Record (ILR) student data, will find these supporting documents useful in considering the impact of these proposals on their own student data.

# Consultation proposals and questions

29. Our 12 proposals are set out in the sections that follow. The consultation questions are listed in full in Annex G. We are interested in the views of respondents on the following general questions that cover all our proposals.

## Question 1

Are there aspects of the proposals you found unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.

## Question 2

Are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation (as set out in paragraphs 8 to 16) could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than proposed here?

## Proposal 1: Common approaches to the construction of student outcome and experience measures

### The student outcome and experience measures we will construct

30. The student outcome and experience measures used by the OfS to date have been constructed slightly differently according to the previous approaches of our different functions. There have been minor differences in the data definitions used across regulation of access and participation, assessment of condition B3 and the previous TEF scheme.
31. Our consultation on regulating student outcomes<sup>11</sup> has proposed that assessment of condition B3 will be informed by a range of numerical student outcome measures:
- The proportion of students continuing on a higher education course
  - The proportion of students completing a higher education qualification
  - The proportion of students progressing to managerial or professional employment, or further study or otherwise achieving positive graduate outcomes.
32. Our consultation on the TEF<sup>12</sup> has also proposed (in proposal 9 of that consultation) that numerical measures will provide one of the evidence sources considered in assessments under the TEF scheme. Specifically, that the scheme will consider student experience indicators based on responses to scales of the National Student Survey (NSS), as well as indicators reporting the same student outcomes measures as proposed for assessment of condition B3 and listed in paragraph 31 above.

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<sup>11</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/).

<sup>12</sup> See proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

33. The access and participation data dashboard currently reports measures of continuation and progression outcomes, as well as measures of access to higher education and degree outcomes. We will continue to construct measures of access and degree outcomes for this purpose, but have not proposed to make use of such measures in assessments of condition B3 or the TEF.
34. We are proposing that the definitions described throughout this consultation will be applied consistently across the data that supports our functions for access and participation and quality and standards. This means that measures that will inform assessment of condition B3 and the TEF, as well as those included in future iterations of the OfS access and participation data dashboard, key performance measures and other sector-level analyses, will all be constructed using the same definitions.
35. Detailed proposals for the construction of each measure are considered in turn through subsequent sections of this consultation document. However, in relation to the proposals we set out, it is worth noting in particular that:
- a. We propose to measure **continuation** outcomes as the percentage of students that were observed to be continuing in the study of a higher education qualification (or have gained a qualification) one year and 15 days after they started their course (two years and 15 days for part-time students).
  - b. We propose to measure **completion** outcomes as the percentage of students that complete a higher education qualification. There are different ways to approach this, and this consultation proposes two possible measures of completion outcomes. We are seeking views on whether we should construct a cohort-tracking measure based on actual but heavily-lagged values, or a compound indicator establishing projected but more timely values.
  - c. We propose to use a measure of **progression** constructed from the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey data that reports progression to managerial or professional employment, or further study, 15 months after a higher education qualification has been awarded.
  - d. We propose to use **student experience** measures constructed from the NSS data that report the level of agreement to the range of statements that comprise each area, or scale, of the survey as indicated among final year undergraduates.
  - e. We do not propose to make any changes to the construction of the measures of **access** to higher education and **degree outcomes** to be reported in the access and participation data dashboard. Access to higher education measures will continue to report on the profile of entrants to higher education, and degree outcomes measures will continue to report the proportion of students awarded a first or upper second classification of a first degree.
36. The definitions we propose throughout this consultation aim to be coherent across different aspects of the student outcome and experience indicators we intend to construct. For example, the census dates we propose for continuation measures are related to the period in which we identify students as starting higher education qualifications for the purposes of defining an entrant population. This means that changes to one aspect of the proposed definitions following conclusion of this consultation would, in some cases, impact on related definitions which rely on a coherent approach.

## Construction of centrally derived measures, using existing data collections

37. In all cases, we are proposing that the numerical measures outlined in paragraph 35 are centrally derived by the OfS and constructed on the same basis for all providers, because it is neither practical, consistent nor transparent to construct bespoke measures at the level of individual students, providers, or points in time.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, we have sought to ensure that our proposed approach is proportionate and minimises the burden of understanding our approach, by basing the measures we are proposing on existing datasets. We take the view that it is not possible to rely on UK Performance Indicators<sup>14</sup> or other existing measures published by HESA or the ESFA, because none of those measures (singularly or collectively) use definitions which are consistent with the OfS's proposed policy priorities for assessment of student outcomes, nor provide complete and consistent coverage of providers registered with the OfS.
38. All of the numerical measures we propose to construct would make use of existing student data sets collected by HESA<sup>15</sup> and the ESFA, which are linked as appropriate to the following data sources:
- a. Responses to the Graduate Outcomes survey, to construct measures of progression outcomes.
  - b. Responses to the National Student Survey, to construct student experience measures.
  - c. Linked datasets which contain information about individuals included in the HESA and ESFA data, and improve our understanding while reducing the data collection burden on students and providers. In particular, the proposals in this consultation explain our use of information drawn from the Department for Education (DfE) national pupil database (NPD) to improve our understanding of student characteristics and achievement during their schooling.<sup>16</sup>
  - d. Classifications produced by the OfS and other bodies. In particular, classifications of employment outcomes and occupations, deprivation measures, higher education participation and outcomes propensity, as explained through the detail of our proposals.
39. The continuation and completion measures we propose to construct can be produced from existing student datasets on an annual basis. Based on the current timings of the existing data collections, this means that the measures will typically reflect student outcomes and experiences of at least one year prior to the current academic year. Our December 2021 consultation on Data Futures and data collections proposes approaches to improve the timeliness of student data, including by collecting it more frequently than once per year. If more frequent collections of student data were to be introduced, we would expect to be able to

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<sup>13</sup> Save that some differences may stem from whether a provider is required to submit individualised student data returns to HESA or the ESFA, as explained above at paragraph 26.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators).

<sup>15</sup> This would include data sets collected by any other body carrying out data functions under sections 64 or 65 of HERA.

<sup>16</sup> The DfE does not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD data by third parties.

significantly improve the timeliness of these measures without material changes to the approaches described in this consultation.<sup>17</sup>

40. While this consultation seeks to establish the construction of student outcome and experience measures based on the current timing and specifications of existing datasets, we acknowledge that the precise definitions (as expressed through our supporting 'Core algorithms' document) will be kept under ongoing review.<sup>18</sup> This will be necessary to ensure that minor changes to the specification of the existing datasets from which they are derived are accommodated, and our methods remain sound and the best available. More fundamental changes to the data landscape, including to the timing or specification of existing datasets (including linked datasets), will require that the OfS provides advance notice about the nature, extent and impact of changes, consulting further where necessary. We may also in future decide to make use of data sets other than those described in paragraph 38, or to discontinue using certain data sets, and we will consult on this where necessary.

### **Construction of binary measures for student outcomes**

41. We propose to construct each of the student outcome measures described in paragraph 35 to report data indicators in binary terms, showing the proportion of students achieving an outcome that is considered 'positive'. That proportion is calculated on the same basis for all providers, as the number of students with an outcome that is considered positive by the definitions proposed through this consultation (the numerator), relative to the number of students with an outcome considered to be either positive or negative (the denominator). Any outcome that we propose to treat as 'neutral' will not contribute to this calculation, in either the numerator or the denominator.
42. As the student outcome measures will apply to all providers, some of our proposed definitions offer benefit of the doubt when considering what should count as 'positive' outcomes. Where it is not clear whether a particular outcome should be viewed as positive (because either interpretation of the outcome is debatable, or existing data does not provide sufficient granularity of information), we have proposed to interpret it as either positive or neutral for the purposes of constructing student outcome measures, rather than treating it negatively. In doing so, we generally prefer to treat outcomes as neutral but recognise that, in some cases, the group for which this is necessary represents a large proportion of the total population, meaning that neutral treatment would compromise the overall utility and robustness of the measure. This means that some aspects of the definitions proposed through this consultation give benefit of the doubt as to what constitutes a positive outcome at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes.
43. However, we acknowledge that outcomes may be interpreted differently in the different circumstances of the individual students, qualifications and providers involved at any given point in time. In our view, regulatory approaches would become unmanageably complex and burdensome if they were attempting to understand and communicate bespoke definitions applicable to different providers and for different years of data, according to these individual circumstances. In particular, we are of the view that bespoke definitions would result in different numerical thresholds being used in the regulation of student outcomes for different providers.

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<sup>17</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/).

<sup>18</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers for whom the circumstances of individual student or course outcomes is likely to be a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>19</sup> In other words, as part of our assessments of condition B3 and TEF, a provider will have an opportunity to demonstrate and evidence why outcomes achieved by particular students, which do not satisfy the OfS's definition of a positive outcome, may nonetheless constitute a positive outcome for those students. The OfS will then consider this evidence when making a regulatory judgment about student outcomes.

44. Throughout this consultation we clearly mark those definitions in which it has been necessary and appropriate that our proposal offers the benefit of the doubt in how student outcomes will be treated within our proposed construction of student outcome measures. Examples include:
- a. Treating any level of further study as a positive outcome when constructing progression measures (rather than requiring study to be at a higher level than the qualification recently obtained).
  - b. Counting as positive outcomes those students who remain active in their study of a higher education qualification when we calculate completion outcomes, and those who have completed a qualification different to the one that they started (rather than requiring that students have definitively completed the same qualification that they began studying).
  - c. Treating the outcomes of students who have ceased studying at one provider and begin studying at another provider as neutral when measuring continuation outcomes, by removing such students from the calculation of the indicator so that they have no influence on the continuation rate reported.
45. We recognise that the student outcomes we are seeking to measure can be considered in greater detail than the binary terms we are proposing. We are aware that more detailed consideration of a fuller profile of student outcomes, beyond categorisation as positive, negative or neutral, may be preferable for supporting provider enhancement activities. For example, continuation outcomes could separately report the detail of how many students continue at different modes or levels of study, as well as how many are awarded different types of qualification.
46. Reporting our proposed measures using a larger number of outcome categories would result in a significant increase to the number of discrete data points that the OfS would be creating as student outcome indicators. We consider that regulatory approaches would become unmanageably complex and burdensome if they were attempting to interpret a more comprehensive profile of student outcomes. In taking this view, we have taken account of our general duties under Section 2 of HERA, which require that we have regard to the principles that our regulatory activities should be transparent, accountable, proportionate and consistent. We consider that the relative simplicity of expressing student outcome and experience

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<sup>19</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

indicators in binary terms would make the process more transparent for providers and the public and reduce regulatory burden.

47. We intend to release individualised student data files to the individual provider who returned the student data. These data files will maximise the transparency of our approaches, and furnish providers with more detail about the student outcomes that we propose to report as binary indicators. As described in our supporting ‘Core algorithms’ document<sup>20</sup>, the construction of data indicators collates information from a wider profile of student outcome categories (which act as a series of building blocks for the binary indicator). For example, to construct the proposed continuation indicators we must separately identify students who gained a qualification, from those who continued in the study of a higher education qualification, or ceased studying at the provider and began studying at another, or became absent from higher education. We recognise the utility of this more granular information, particularly for providers. Subject to compliance with data protection legislation including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), we also intend to explore the potential for making as much of our underlying data as possible available to researchers through the Office for National Statistics (ONS) secure research service.

### **Construction of measures for access and student experience**

48. The proposal described in paragraphs 41 to 44 does not apply to the construction of access measures, nor to student experience measures. Access to higher education measures report on the profile of entrants to higher education, showing the number of students with a given characteristic as a proportion of the total number of entrants. Information relevant to the calculation of these measures will be included in individualised student data files released to higher education providers.

49. Our proposed approach to constructing student experience measures from the NSS data is described in Proposal 8. All responses to the NSS must be anonymised before they are shared with a student’s higher education provider to ensure that they remain confidential, which means that they cannot be included in individualised student data files released to providers.

### **Publication of student outcome and experience measures**

50. It is established OfS policy that the access and participation data dashboard is published on the OfS website each year as a release of official statistics. While we propose to apply many of the definitions described by this consultation to the access and participation data dashboard and associated data resources, we do not propose to change our approach to its routine release and publication.<sup>21</sup> As a designated producer of official statistics, regulated by the UK Statistics Authority, the OfS will continue to comply with the Code of Practice for Statistics and will execute the publication processes consistent with those used in respect of the access and participation data dashboard since 2019.

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<sup>20</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

<sup>21</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/about-the-dashboard-data/get-the-dashboard-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/about-the-dashboard-data/get-the-dashboard-data/).

51. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF each propose publication of the evidence informing those assessments.<sup>22</sup> This consultation proposes the format we will use when publishing that evidence base, and we welcome feedback on the consistency and presentation of published data that we propose. Views on our intention to publish the data informing our regulatory assessments should be included in responses to the relevant related consultation(s).
52. We propose that the data indicators constructed to inform TEF and condition B3 assessments will be represented in a set of interactive data dashboards and data workbooks. Taken together these proposals mean that, for each provider, we would produce and publish the following on an annual basis, as official statistics:
- a. An interactive data dashboard containing the indicators and split indicators assessed in each view of a provider's provision in respect of **condition B3**. The interactive dashboard is intended as the primary route for stakeholders to engage with this data about student outcomes. It would be supported by an Excel data workbook published alongside the dashboard, containing the indicators and split indicators assessed in respect of condition B3, represented in a tabular format.
  - b. An interactive data dashboard containing the **TEF** indicators and split indicators. The interactive dashboard is intended as the primary route for stakeholders to engage with TEF data about student outcomes and experiences. It would be supported by an Excel data workbook published alongside the dashboard, containing the TEF indicators and split indicators, represented in a tabular format.
  - c. Data files covering all of the TEF and condition B3 indicators and split indicators, available in portable formats (such as XML, CSV or similar) to facilitate onward analysis and processing of the data.
53. The separate outputs for TEF and condition B3 would adopt the same definitions for the indicators that are common to both, and consistent presentations and statistical methods throughout. Separate outputs are considered necessary on account of the different scope of the TEF and B3 assessments (for example, indicators and split indicators constructed for use in TEF will only cover undergraduate levels of study). Furthermore, there are different purposes to which the data will be put (in TEF the indicators and split indicators will inform a single overall rating for all undergraduate courses at a provider, and therefore need not be as granular as those used in assessment of condition B3 to inform decisions about individual types of courses or student groups within a provider), as well as differences in the range of indicators used (TEF includes student experience indicators, which are not part of condition B3 assessments).
54. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF describe our reasons for proposing publication of the data indicators those functions will use.<sup>23</sup> They describe one

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<sup>22</sup> See proposal 4 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 1 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>23</sup> In our recent consultation on publication of information about higher education providers, we set out proposals for information that we would normally expect to publish, and information that we would not

such reason as enabling a wide range of stakeholders to easily access information about individual providers' student outcomes and experiences. As a producer of official statistics, we believe that we have a responsibility to use appropriate ways to communicate data and statistics effectively with the widest possible audience, and to support users in identifying relevant statistics to meet their needs. This consultation proposes that we will use consistent presentations and statistical methods when constructing and publishing student outcome and experience indicators to inform assessments of condition B3 and the TEF. We anticipate that this will support our aim to reduce the complexity and burden of understanding multiple data releases based largely on the same underlying data, especially for some providers that may have more limited capacity or expertise to interrogate data, and for students and members of the public.

55. Having consulted – through this and the related consultations – on the indicators that will be constructed, and on our approach to publication of those indicators, we do not expect to run dedicated annual processes within which providers are invited to make representations about whether or not we publish their condition B3 and TEF data for that year. We intend to support providers during the data submission process to understand how we will use their student data returns. Online resources, such as the data checking tool, will include outputs that are intended to help providers check the reliability of their data returns and identify material errors in the data that will be published by the OfS, including within the access and participation data dashboard and in condition B3 and TEF datasets.<sup>24</sup>

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 30 to 55, see the exemplar data dashboards and Excel workbooks, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/).

### Question 3

To what extent do you agree with our proposed approach to **constructing binary measures using existing data collections**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 4

To what extent do you agree with the proposed **annual publication of separate but consistently defined and presented resources** that inform TEF and condition B3 assessments, using the formats that we have indicated (**interactive data dashboards, Excel workbooks, data files**)? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

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normally expect to publish, for registered higher education providers in England, including in regards to the TEF. That consultation is now closed and its outcomes will be announced by the OfS in due course.

<sup>24</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/data-checking-tool/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/data-checking-tool/).

## Proposal 2: A common reporting structure for student outcome and experience indicators

### The reporting structure we will use for student outcome and experience indicators

56. We propose that student outcome and experience measures will be constructed and reported through a hierarchical reporting structure, to form a series of indicators and split indicators. This reporting structure allows the OfS to construct indicators at a more aggregate level, to facilitate a broad view of a provider's performance and minimise the risks of statistical uncertainty, as well as allowing us to break down the information progressively to more granular levels that give a more detailed view. Each subsequent reporting level is nested within the one above it. We consider that this approach supports the construction of an evidence base that will allow us to identify groups or pockets of provision where we see important differences in student outcomes or experiences, without generating indicators in unmanageable volumes.
57. Paragraphs 58 to 68 describe a general, overarching reporting structure for student outcome and experience measures rather than one for any specific use. We take the view that the consistency that such a reporting structure facilitates will allow our regulatory activities to be transparent and consistent for providers and the public to understand. We anticipate that different OfS functions will then use different sections of the general reporting structure to construct the evidence which informs their assessments, selecting the sections that are most applicable to their uses. The sections we propose to use in assessment of condition B3, the TEF and regulation of access and participation are described in paragraphs 69 to 84.

### Views of a provider's student population

58. For any regulatory approach which uses numerical measures of student outcomes or experiences, we consider that selecting a view of the student population that is most aligned with the regulatory objectives of our approach represents an important starting point of the reporting structure for student outcome and experience data indicators.
59. We take the view that there are four views of a provider's student population which, between them, will reflect the main ways in which individual students might engage (directly or indirectly) with the provider, or providers, responsible for different aspects of their higher education experience. We propose to define these four different views of a provider's student population as follows:
- a. **Registered population:** These are students who are registered at the provider in question. They may also be taught at that provider, or they may be taught elsewhere, at another provider, under a subcontractual or partnership arrangement (subcontracted out, or franchised out).
  - b. **Taught population:** These are any students who are taught at the provider in question. This may be the same provider where they are registered (taught and registered) or it may be that the provider in question is teaching the student on behalf of another one, under a subcontractual partnership arrangement (subcontracted in).
  - c. **Taught or registered (TorR) population:** These are students who are either registered or taught at the provider in question, including those who are taught and registered by the same provider, subcontracted in to the provider for teaching, and subcontracted out to another provider for teaching.

d. **Partnership population:** These are students who are either:

- i. Registered by the provider in question and taught elsewhere, at another provider, under a subcontractual partnership arrangement (subcontracted out); or
- ii. Neither taught nor registered by the provider in question, but that provider acts as the awarding body for the qualification that a student is studying (validation-only).

60. Definition of the four views of a provider's student populations described in paragraph 59 aims to allow alignment of the data indicators we report for any given purpose with its regulatory objectives for understanding and assessing student outcomes and experiences. For example, our related consultation on the TEF<sup>25</sup> has proposed that the TorR student population described in paragraph 59 is a more relevant view of a provider's student population than the other views, to inform the assessments that they are making. The scope of our regulation of access and participation follows from regulations made under HERA and, for that reason, a view of the provider's registered student population is considered most relevant for that purpose.

61. The desire for different regulatory functions to be able to select the view (or views) of a provider's student population most appropriate to that purpose means that our proposed definitions of student outcome and experience measures allow for them to be constructed for any of the views of student populations we have described in paragraph 59. When we calculate data indicators for a particular view of student populations, these will be calculated consistently for all providers.

62. The student populations described in paragraph 59 are overlapping rather than mutually exclusive, which means that individual students will be counted in more than one of these views. For example, a student taught and registered at the same provider would contribute to each of the registered, taught and TorR populations described in paragraph 59 a to c. The different views of student populations also refer to teaching arrangements that not all providers will offer. For example, some providers will not be involved in any subcontractual partnership arrangements, meaning that they register and teach all of their students themselves. For these providers, the indicators calculated for each of the populations described in paragraph 59 a to c would report the same figures throughout. This means that selection of the appropriate view will depend on its intended purpose.

#### **Indicators, calculated for the combination of a student's mode and level of study**

63. Having selected one of the views defined in paragraph 59, calculation of an **indicator** involves each measure being reported separately according to students' mode and level of study. This proposal, and the modes and levels of study to be considered, received broad support in responses to the phase 1 consultation on regulating quality and standards. It means, for example, that we will generate indicators which report:

- Continuation outcomes for full-time students on first degree programmes

separately from

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<sup>25</sup> See proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

- Continuation outcomes for part-time students on first degree programmes

separately from

- Continuation outcomes for part-time students on postgraduate research degrees

and so on.

64. Student experience measures are currently reported as the total of students in all modes of study in annual publications of the National Student Survey responses, but are not reported for all levels of study because the scope of the survey is currently limited to undergraduate students. We propose that student experience measures are also constructed to report separately for different modes of study.
65. We do not propose to construct student outcome measures that combine all modes or all levels of study. For example, we will not construct indicators that report a single continuation rate reflecting the outcomes of the totality of a provider's full-time students: we will always differentiate by those full-time students' level of study, because we consider that structural differences in the design and delivery of (and recruitment to) undergraduate and postgraduate courses would not generate meaningful information for users of the indicators data. Nor will student outcome measures report on the totality of provision in a given level of study without also differentiating by mode of study, because we recognise that part-time courses are planned to take place over an extended period, and that this may mean significant life events or challenges are more likely to influence a student's outcomes.

#### **Split indicators, calculated as a further breakdown of each indicator**

66. We propose that the indicators that result from a student outcome or experience measure being reported according to students' mode and level of study, are then broken down further, to generate a series of **split indicators**. These split indicators will relate to various categories of a provider's students and qualifications including: subject studied, student characteristics, year of entry or qualification (as appropriate to the student outcome in question), specific course types and provider partnership arrangements. These categories of split indicators were proposed (and supported) for use in regulation of quality and standards in the phase one consultation. The split indicators will be reported separately for each category of student or qualification and, where relevant, for intersections of these categories.
67. The technical definitions of modes and levels of study are discussed further in Proposal 4 of this consultation. The selection and definitions of the proposed split indicators for subjects, student characteristics, course types, year and partnerships are discussed further in Proposal 9.
68. We consider that the reporting of split indicators supports our policy intent to secure equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students, before, during and beyond their time in higher education. This is because it will enable us to focus our attention on groups of students within providers that risk being left behind, even when the provider itself is generally delivering positive outcomes. Alternative approaches might include reporting on student outcomes and experiences with more or less layering of modes and levels of study, and of the characteristics we are proposing as split indicators. In our view, including less layering would not allow us to identify differences in outcomes and experiences across areas of a provider's provision which are important to all of our regulatory activities. Equally,

more layering would result in large numbers of data points informed by small numbers of students. We consider that the high levels of non-reportability and statistical uncertainty that would result from such an approach would mean that regulatory approaches become unmanageably complex and burdensome. We believe that the reporting structure we have proposed allows us to avoid the clearest issues of performance being masked through aggregations which group together those who systematically experience very different outcomes and experiences.

## **The sections of the proposed reporting structure selected for different regulatory functions**

69. Having proposed the general, overarching reporting structure for student outcome and experience measures described in paragraphs 58 to 68, the sections to be used in assessment of condition B3, the TEF and regulation of access and participation are described in paragraphs 70, 72 and 76.

### **The reporting structure for data indicators to inform condition B3 assessments**

70. The reporting structure that we propose to use for the purposes of assessing condition B3 is shown in Figure 1. Our consultation on regulating student outcomes has proposed that the assessment of condition B3 will look at each of the TorR, taught and partnership views of student populations. Within each view, indicators will be constructed to show continuation, completion and progression outcomes for each combination of the modes and levels of study included in Figure 1.<sup>26</sup>

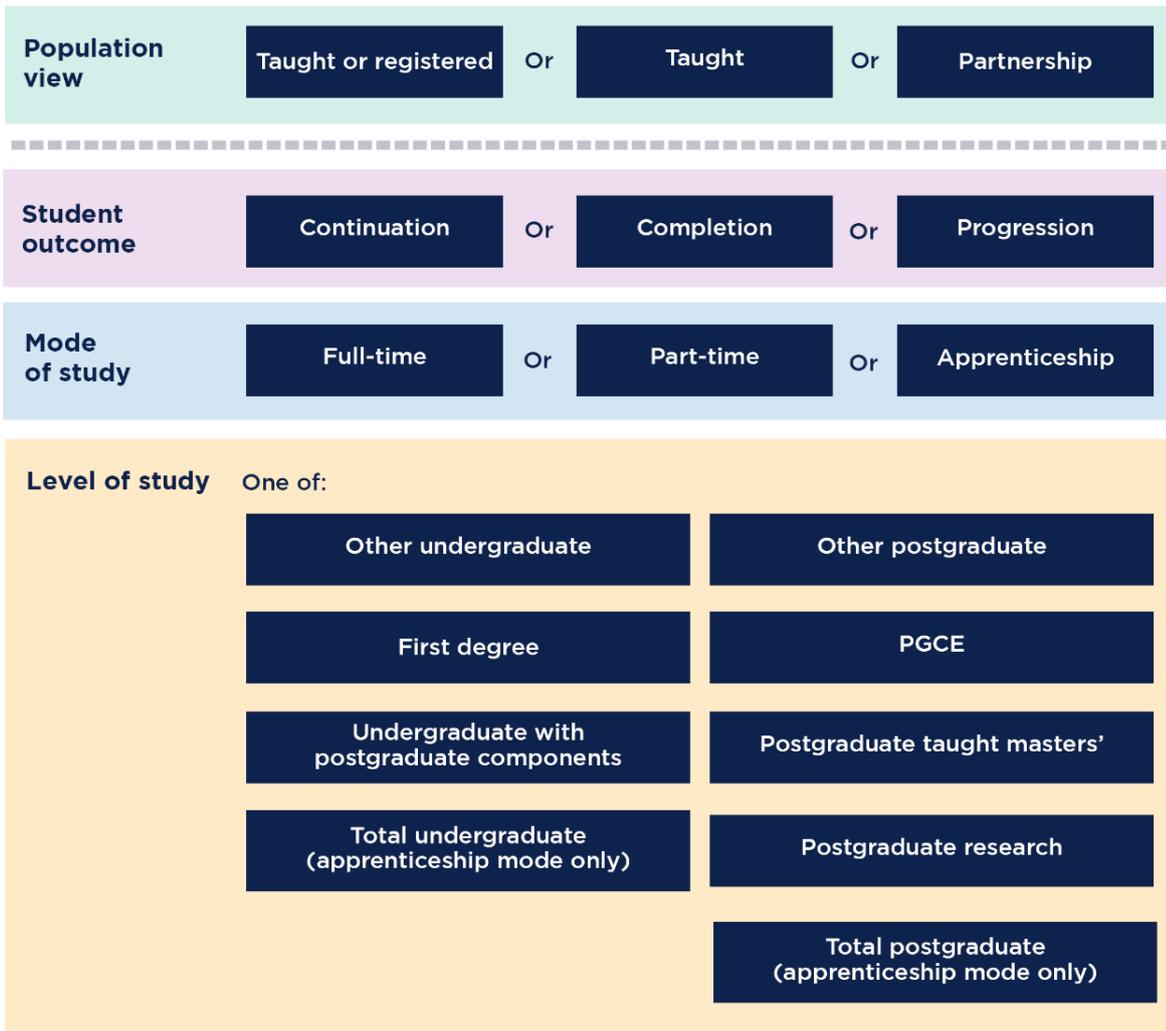
71. The split indicators shown in Figure 1 will all be reported for the taught and TorR views of student populations. We will report only the split indicators showing subject studied, year of entry or qualification (as appropriate to the student outcome in question) and the provider partnership arrangements. In each case the split indicators will be reported in univariate form only.<sup>27</sup>

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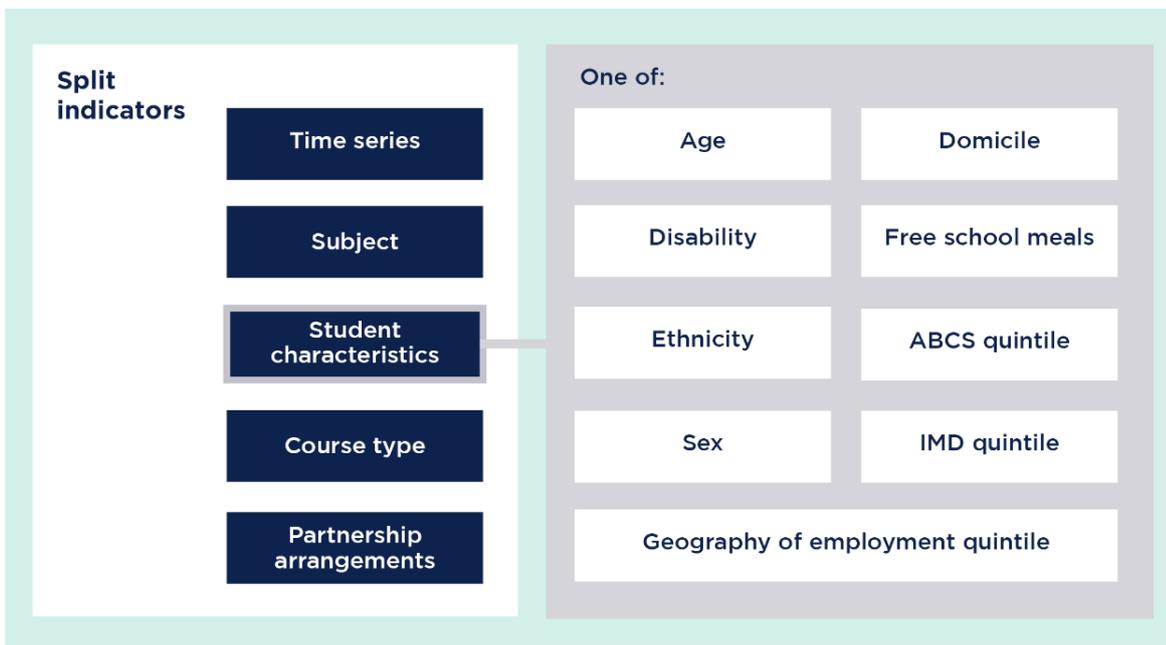
<sup>26</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/).

<sup>27</sup> Univariate form means that each split indicator is one-dimensional and will report the outcomes or experiences of students categorised on the basis of a single characteristic or attribute. For example, we will create split indicators that report on male students and, separately, split indicators that report on disabled students. Split indicators would be multivariate in form if they were calculated at a more granular level to refer to the intersection of various characteristics (in the example given here, if they reported on disabled male students).

Figure 1: Reporting structure for indicators and split indicators used in assessment of condition B3



**Indicator = Student outcome + Mode + Level**



## The reporting structure for data indicators to inform TEF assessments

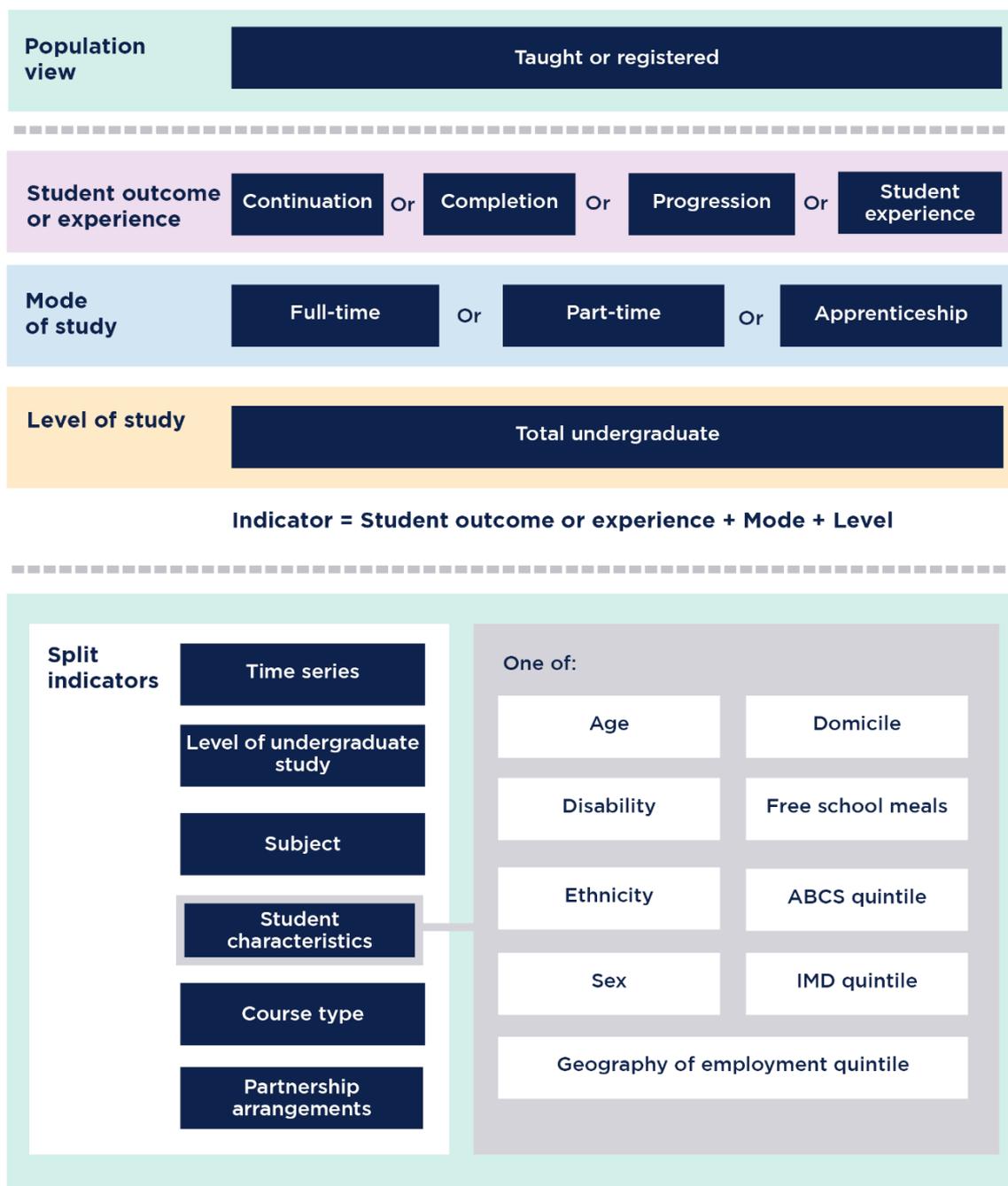
72. Our consultation on the TEF has proposed that TEF assessment will focus on more limited sections of this reporting structure.<sup>28</sup> In particular, the TEF scheme is currently concerned only with those studying at undergraduate levels. Figure 2 shows the reporting structure as it is proposed to apply for TEF purposes. We propose that for TEF assessments, the indicators for each mode of study would combine students at all undergraduate levels of study and look at the TorR view of a provider's student population.<sup>29</sup> The split indicators shown in Figure 2 will be reported in univariate form only.

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<sup>28</sup> See proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>29</sup> The related TEF consultation describes our view that, for TEF purposes, combining students at all undergraduate levels of study is appropriate to inform a single judgement about the student experiences or student outcomes of all of a provider's undergraduate students. It notes that separately reporting indicators for each level of study would be unnecessary for the purposes of the TEF panel's assessments while creating a large volume of additional data. To illustrate the volume of data TEF panels would need to consider if we took an alternative approach more aligned with that used to inform assessments of condition B3, illustrative TEF data released alongside this consultation includes indicators and split indicators reported for the combination of all undergraduate levels of study, as well as those reported for each level of study separately. Users should find that TEF indicators and split indicators reported for the separate undergraduate levels of study are a duplicate of those reported in the TorR view of a provider's student populations in the condition B3 datasets.

Figure 2: Reporting structure for indicators and split indicators used in TEF assessment



### The reporting structure for data indicators to inform access and participation plans

73. It is established OfS policy that an access and participation data dashboard is constructed each year, to provide a sector-level picture of the differences in access and participation across the student lifecycle, as well as information at provider level.<sup>30</sup> The dashboard aims to support a transparent approach to the OfS's regulation of access and participation across the student lifecycle.<sup>31</sup> It can inform the strategies, targets and milestones of providers' access and participation plans, and their monitoring and evaluation; and makes available a comprehensive,

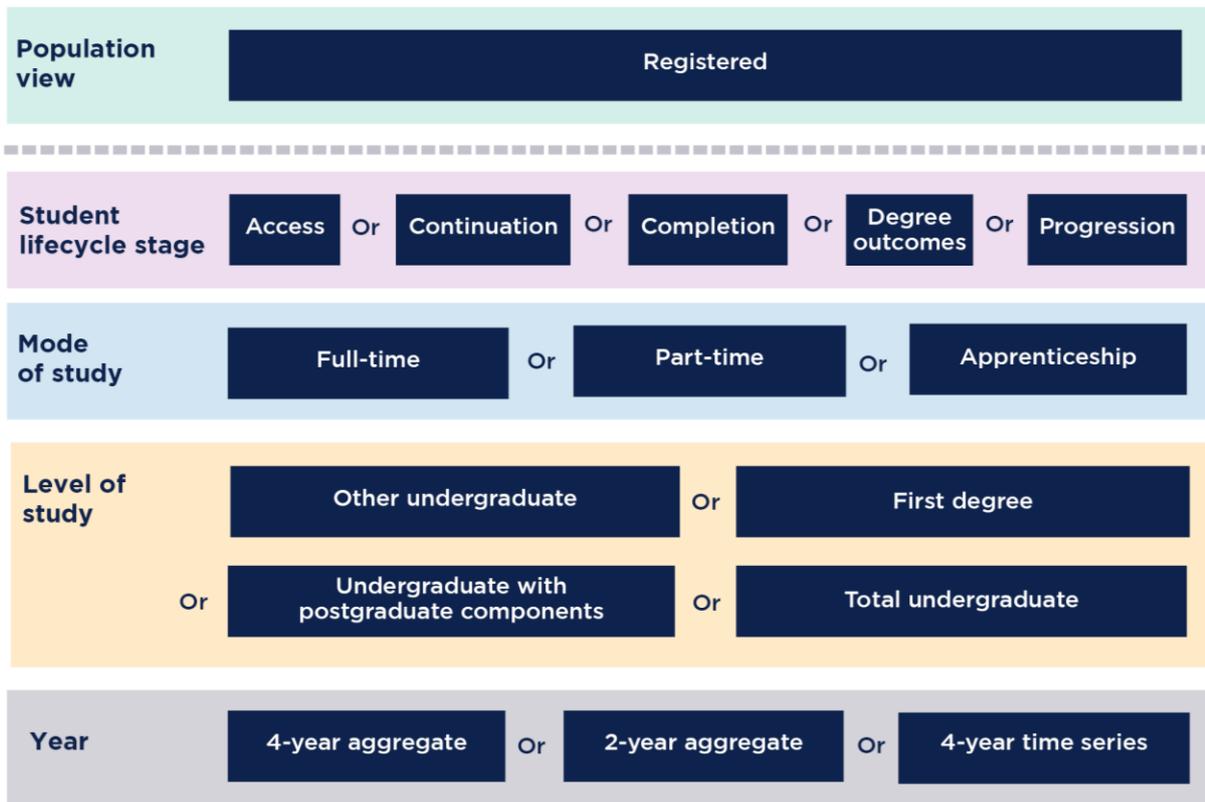
<sup>30</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-new-approach-to-regulating-access-and-participation-in-english-higher-education-consultation-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-new-approach-to-regulating-access-and-participation-in-english-higher-education-consultation-outcomes/).

<sup>31</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/).

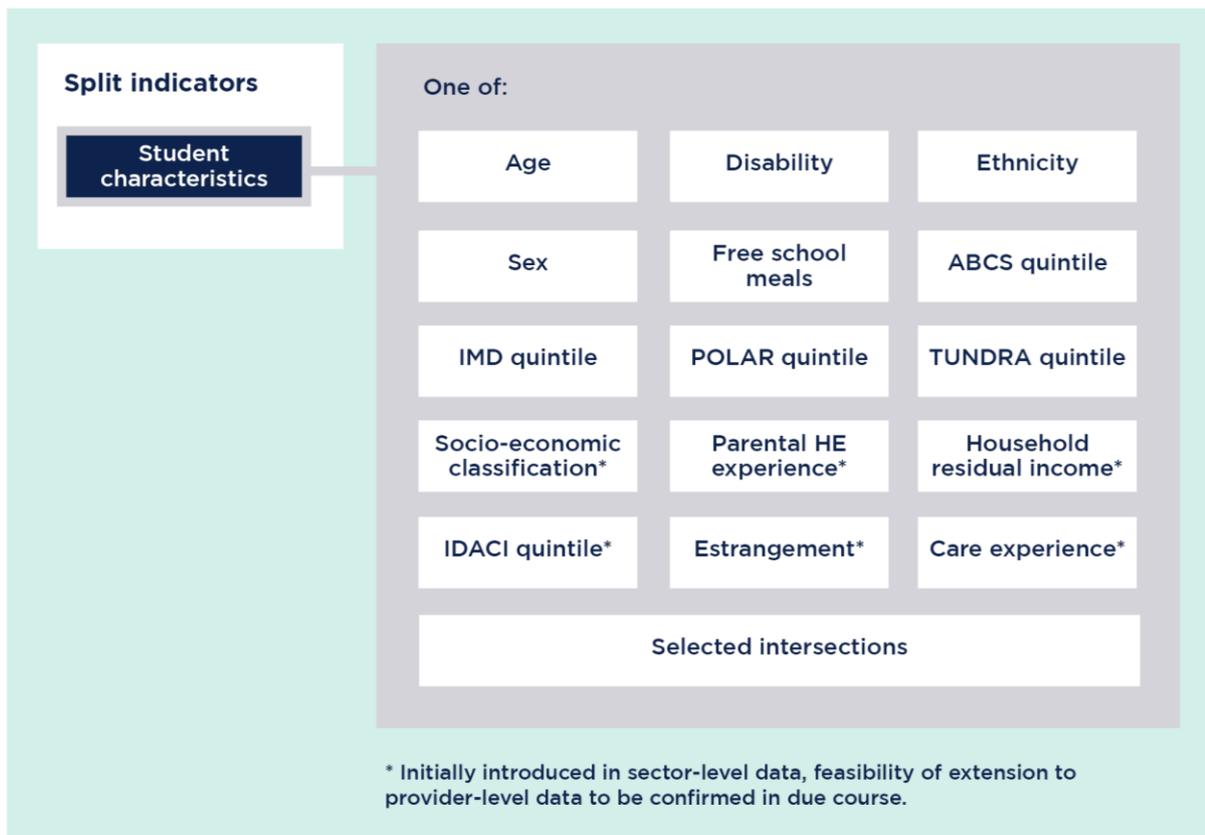
consistent and high quality data source that improves the accessibility of valuable information for providers and other stakeholders.

74. The coverage of the access and participation data dashboard is currently limited to UK-domiciled undergraduates, in order to provide an appropriate degree of alignment with the scope of access and participation plans, as prescribed through regulations made under HERA.
75. Figure 3 shows the reporting structure for student outcome and experience indicators that informs our approach to constructing the access and participation data dashboard. Given that these indicators reflect the regulations made under HERA, we do not at this stage propose to make any changes to the populations of students included in the access and participation data dashboard.
76. The dashboard will continue to look at the registered view of a provider's student populations, within which indicators for undergraduate students will be reported for each combination of the modes and levels of study included in Figure 3. The split indicators shown in Figure 3 will continue to be reported in univariate form, as well as intersected with year of entry or qualification (as appropriate to the student outcome in question).

Figure 3: Reporting structure for indicators and split indicators used in the access and participation data dashboard



**Indicator = Student lifecycle stage + Mode + Level + Year**



## The impact of this consultation on OfS regulation of access and participation

77. We propose that the definitions that result from this consultation exercise will be applied to future publications of the OfS access and participation data dashboard, in order to ensure consistency of the evidence about student outcomes and experiences that inform our regulatory approaches.
78. Applying the outcomes of this consultation to the construction of the access and participation data dashboard would mean that:
- a. Access to higher education measures will adopt the proposed approach to defining a population of entrants to higher education.
  - b. Continuation measures will adopt the revised definitions proposed through this consultation.
  - c. The scope of access and participation data dashboard will be extended to report measures of completion for the first time, in order to align with our intention to consider access and participation issues across the student lifecycle.
  - d. Degree outcomes measures will adopt the proposed approach to defining a population of qualifiers from higher education, insofar as they pertain to qualifiers gaining a first degree qualification.
  - e. The progression measures previously reported on the basis of the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey will be removed from the dashboard and replaced by progression measures reported on the basis of the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey and defined through these consultation proposals. This proposal follows the introduction of the GO survey as the successor to the DLHE following its discontinuation after 2017.
  - f. All measures will be reported separately for full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students.
  - g. The access and participation data dashboard will cover the same time series of student outcome and experience measures as those informing assessments of condition B3.
79. In adopting the definitions that result from this consultation we would continue to restrict the coverage of the access and participation data dashboard to UK-domiciled students studying for undergraduate qualifications.
80. We anticipate that the impact of the changes outlined in paragraphs 78 a, b and d will be marginal in many cases. However, we acknowledge that there may be some marginal impact on the evidence base on which access and participation plan targets and milestones have been historically established and monitored. While an alternative approach would leave definitions underpinning the access and participation data dashboard unchanged, we take the view that this would increase the complexity and burden of understanding of our regulatory approach to student outcome and experience measures. It would also fail to make use of a more complete and up-to-date view of performance in access and participation across the full student lifecycle. We note that the introduction of completion outcomes, and progression measures based on the GO survey, have greater scope to provide new evidence about gaps in equality of opportunity to access and succeed in higher education.

81. To help providers and the OfS manage the proposed transition to updated definitions used within the access and participation data dashboard, we would intend to take the following steps:
- a. Individualised student data files released to providers alongside this consultation will enable providers to understand how their own students have been categorised according to our proposed definitions, and how each student contributes (or not) to the student outcomes and access and participation data indicators we would be constructing for the data dashboard in future.
  - b. Publication of the next iteration of the access and participation data dashboard in spring 2022 will continue to use existing definitions of access, continuation and degree outcomes.
  - c. The OfS will publish an additional iteration of the access and participation data dashboard later in 2022, once outcomes of this consultation have been finalised.
82. We do not at this stage propose to make changes to the broad structure of indicators and split indicators created for the access and participation data dashboard (beyond those that result from the changes described in paragraph 78), nor to its visual presentation (including the use of confidence intervals, ratios and similar). We do though intend to review some of the statistical assumptions informing the calculation of confidence intervals shown in the dashboard (in particular, the approach we are taking to help ensure no more than a five per cent error rate across the multiple comparisons that are being made across the dashboard). Details of any revised assumptions will be communicated alongside the additional iteration of the access and participation data dashboard proposed for publication later in 2022.

### The effect of this proposal

83. The impact of this proposal on the use of student outcome and experience indicators across OfS regulation of quality and standards and access and participation is summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1: Use of student outcome and experience measures, by regulatory function**

Student outcome or experience measure	Access and participation data dashboard	Condition B3	TEF
Access to higher education	Transition to use refined definition of entrants	Not included	Not included
Continuation	Transition to use refined definitions	Include on the basis defined through this consultation	
Completion	Introduce new measures as defined through this consultation		
Degree outcomes	Transition to use refined definition of qualifiers	Not included	Not included
Progression	Introduce new measures based on the GO survey, as defined through this consultation		

Student outcome or experience measure	Access and participation data dashboard	Condition B3	TEF
Student experience	Not included	Not included	Introduce measures as defined through this consultation

84. The impact of this proposal on the structure and format of the evidence base we would publish to inform TEF and assessment of condition B3 is best demonstrated through the exemplar data dashboards and workbooks that we have published alongside this consultation.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 56 to 83, see the exemplar data dashboards and Excel workbooks, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/).

### Question 5

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **reporting structure** for student outcome and experience measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 6

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **application of these consultation outcomes to the access and participation data dashboard**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 3: Common approaches to the populations of students included in student outcome and experience measures

85. Throughout our construction of student outcome and experience indicators we are proposing to implement the approach to data coverage described in paragraphs 87 to 104 below. As outlined in Proposal 1, the approach would be applied to the evidence informing assessment of each of condition B3 and the TEF, as well as in future iterations of the OfS access and participation data dashboard, key performance measures and other sector-level analyses.

86. It should be noted that application of this approach would bring the coverage of student outcome and experience indicators into close alignment with the definitions and coverage of the OfS's calculation of student numbers for regulatory purposes (as used in setting registration fees; assessing applications for degree awarding powers and university title; and determining whether a provider must participate in the TEF).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-number-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-number-data/).

## Students aiming for higher education qualifications

87. Each registered provider needs to satisfy the OfS's regulatory requirements relating to quality and standards for all of its higher education activity. This encompasses any activity defined as higher education by Schedule 6 of the Education Reform Act 1988, which includes any qualification or credit higher than A-level standard, at Level 4 or above.<sup>33</sup> We therefore propose that indicators will be based on students who are reported with a qualification aim for their course which refers to a higher education **qualification**, inclusive of all qualifications at Level 4 and above.
88. This proposal means that the coverage of many of our student outcome and experience indicators will extend to qualifications which are not eligible to be included in the OfS funding calculations for Approved (fee cap) providers, or are regulated by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (listed on the Register of Regulated Qualifications, and for which students may be entitled to Advanced Learner Loans). Such qualifications may elsewhere be referred to as provision which is 'non-recognised' for OfS funding purposes or, previously, as 'non-prescribed' higher education.
89. Some of the data items within the 'Learner HE' and 'Learning Delivery HE' entities of the ILR, which are used to calculate student outcome and experience indicators, have had an optional status in the ESFA's previous collections for higher education student records, referring to qualifications which are not eligible to be funded by the OfS. For example, data items collecting information about a student's mode of study and year of study on the instance of higher education. The coverage of those data items has been extended to all higher education student records in ILR collections for 2021-22 onwards. This means that student records will in future be more complete with respect to all of the data items in these ILR entities, affording an opportunity to use more of these data items within our algorithms. In the meantime, we have reviewed our algorithms and identified ways in which we can reduce reliance of some of these ILR data items, or otherwise approximate the relevant activity associated with the student record. These developments mean that we can be confident in our calculations of student access, continuation, completion and degree awarding rates where they cover students aiming for higher education qualifications which are not eligible to be funded by the OfS. Further details of the algorithms used to do this are described in our supporting 'Core algorithms' document.<sup>34</sup>
90. This proposal also means that the coverage of our student outcome and experience indicators will not include any student reported with a qualification aim for their course which refers to a **module** of higher education provision or, in the case of degree awarding and progression measures, gaining awards of higher education credit. We recognise that the definitions for positive student outcomes and experiences proposed through this consultation may not be appropriate or meaningful for students studying modules for credit only. We anticipate that a

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<sup>33</sup> Our understanding of levels derives from the framework of higher education qualifications of UK degree-awarding bodies published by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (available at [www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/the-existing-uk-quality-code/part-a-setting-and-maintaining-academic-standards](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/the-existing-uk-quality-code/part-a-setting-and-maintaining-academic-standards)) and Ofqual's Regulated qualifications framework (further information about this framework is available at [www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean](http://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean)). We treat the latter as mapping directly to the former: for example, we treat both a certificate of higher education (CertHE) and a Level 4 BTEC as Level 4 qualifications.

<sup>34</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

continuation measure which establishes the percentage of students that continue in higher education study a period of years after commencing their course would need different interpretation when calculated in respect of much shorter instances of module study for higher education credit. We also take the view that what constitutes a positive progression outcome for a student awarded a higher education qualification may not constitute positive outcomes for a student who has completed a single higher education module, and that these outcomes might reasonably be measured at different periods of time after such students leave higher education. Our intention is that over a longer timescale we will develop ways in which we might measure and assess a positive outcome for this type of course – and the data we would need to support measurement of this.

91. Current data limitations mean that we have limited ability to construct alternative measures which would test the feasibility of addressing some of the conceptual challenges of measuring student outcomes from modular higher education provision. We consider that we would need to review future data capture options to address the current data limitations, which may involve a combination of collecting additional data and refining the collection of existing data items. These limitations include but are not limited to:
- a. The current structure and granularity of student data collections in respect of modular provision, in which limited information is collected, for example about credits awarded at the completion of a module or about expected course lengths (through HESA data returns in particular).
  - b. The design and delivery of current student survey instruments, in which the questions asked about student experiences or destinations beyond higher education study would be perhaps less coherent, or not well defined, if they were to be asked of students who have studied or completed modular provision. For example, the OfS's view is that they would not surface a meaningful understanding of positive progression outcomes for a student who has completed a single module on qualitative research methods.
  - c. The current time frames and specifications of student data collections, in which higher education student data is largely collected at the end of the academic year, with limited data on any in-year changes the student has made in respect of the specific course studied or the nature of their engagement with that course. For example, where a student has changed their mode or subject area of study within the reporting period, providers are asked to report only the current or latest position in their submissions of student data to HESA. An inability to see that these sorts of changes have occurred may inhibit our understanding of outcomes from modular provision that can be materially shorter in duration than a full academic year.
92. At present, students on and qualifying from courses of non-recognised higher education remain outside the scope of the survey instruments used to understand student experiences (the National Student Survey – NSS) and graduates' employment and further study destinations (the Graduate Outcomes survey). Similarly, all students reported as aiming for or completing modules, and gaining awards of credit, rather than higher education qualifications, are also outside the scope of these survey instruments. It is therefore not currently possible to calculate student experience measures or progression rates for students, studying modules for credit only, or for a non-recognised higher education qualification.

93. We propose a future consultation on our approach to gathering and interpreting information on student views and outcomes related to modular higher education provision, and how we identify positive student experiences and graduate outcomes in these contexts. Through that consultation, we would also expect to test proposals for appropriate revisions to data collection mechanisms, including extending the coverage of existing survey instruments to include students aiming for non-recognised higher education qualifications. Such consultation could occur alongside a forthcoming consultation on higher technical qualifications (HTQs) or, if the Government implements an approach to student finance that is based on a flexible, modular system, alongside any consultation in that area.
94. Students on Subject Knowledge Enhancement (SKE) courses will be excluded from the coverage of all student outcome and experience indicators. These courses, funded by the Department for Education, are designed to bring a student's knowledge of a subject up to secondary teaching level through study undertaken before or alongside teacher training courses, and do not normally lead to a higher education qualification. Students on SKE courses were not previously included consistently within coverage of the HESA Student record, and as of 2017-18 the requirement to capture information about SKE courses has been removed altogether.

## **Student mobility**

95. We propose the following approach to the inclusion and exclusion of students who undertake some or all of their higher education studies outside of the UK, while having some engagement with the UK higher education providers that are in scope of the regulatory activities covered by this and the related consultations on condition B3 and the TEF.
96. Student outcome and experience indicators will refer to students studying wholly or mainly in the UK for their whole programme of study, or through UK-based distance learning. Students who are studying mainly abroad (as reported in the HESA Student or Student Alternative records with variables EXCHANGE = Z or LOCSDY = S<sup>35</sup>) are excluded from all of the proposed indicators, along with any student reported within the HESA aggregate offshore record.<sup>36</sup>
97. Coverage of students wholly or mainly studying in the UK will include international students where it is possible and meaningful to do so, as summarised in Table 2 below. Specifically:
- a. International students will be excluded from our calculations of student outcome and experience measures where they are reported throughout the access and participation data dashboards, to align with our regulatory remit for access and participation.
  - b. International students will fall within our calculations of student continuation, completion and experience and measures where they are reported for the purposes of assessment through the TEF scheme or in respect of condition B3, to align with our regulatory remit for quality and standards.

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<sup>35</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/a/exchange](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/a/exchange), [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/a/locsdy](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/a/locsdy), and [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19054/a/locsdy](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19054/a/locsdy).

<sup>36</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19052/introduction](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19052/introduction).

- c. For the time being, international students will be excluded from our calculations of progression measures for the purposes of assessment through the TEF scheme or in respect of condition B3. Through work to enhance our understanding of the patterns of response to the reflective questions now included in the Graduate Outcomes survey, we intend to explore the feasibility of developing alternative progression measures covering international students in future.

**Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion of international students, by regulatory function**

<b>Student outcome or experience measure</b>	<b>Access and participation</b>	<b>Condition B3</b>	<b>TEF</b>
<b>Access measures</b>	Excluded	Not applicable	Not applicable
<b>Continuation measures</b>	Excluded	Included	Included
<b>Completion measures</b>	Excluded	Included	Included
<b>Degree outcome measures</b>	Excluded	Not applicable	Not applicable
<b>Progression measures</b>	Excluded	Excluded	Excluded
<b>Student experience measures</b>	Not applicable	Not applicable	Included

98. The OfS has proposed that it will consult in future on our approach to separately measuring outcomes in transnational education, and our timeframe for doing so.<sup>37</sup> To support this, our consultation on regulating student outcomes has also proposed that the aggregate offshore record is phased out, with collection of data about non-UK based students transitioning to an individual-level data collection. This is because it is acknowledged that differences in the coverage and structure of the HESA Student or Student Alternative returns, and the HESA aggregate offshore record, do not currently facilitate consistent recording of students of UK higher education providers studying overseas.

99. At present, a small number of non-UK based international students studying through distance learning are known to be reported within the HESA Student and Student Alternative records, rather than the aggregate offshore record, on the basis that they are fundable by the OfS or other UK higher education funding bodies. These students will be included within the coverage of the proposed student outcome and experience measures on the same basis as other distance learning students.

100. Incoming visiting and exchange students reported in HESA data returns will be excluded throughout all of our measures. Such students are considered to be the primary responsibility of another higher education provider, typically in another country. We will count outgoing exchange students within the coverage of our measures, including those undertaking placement years in industry, whether based in the UK or abroad.

<sup>37</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/).

## Students leaving within two weeks

101. The OfS recognises that the impact of a student leaving a higher education programme is likely to become increasingly negative as the time since course commencement lengthens. We propose that students who leave their programme of study within the 14 days following their commencement date without gaining an award are removed from all of our student outcome and experience indicators. We take the view that this represents the minimum period we can use to identify those students who leave very soon after commencing their course:
- a. A 14-day period aligns with standard 'cooling off' periods for consumer protection purposes.
  - b. It is also often the case that a student becomes liable for repaying student loans for a first term of higher education study once they have remained on that course for more than 14 days.
  - c. Any student starting a course within scope of the ESFA's ILR data collection must be included in that data return, regardless of any instances of leaving very shortly thereafter. However, in order to reduce the burden on providers, within the HESA Student and Student Alternative records there is currently no requirement for providers to include students who study for less than two weeks and either do not have their attendance on the course confirmed to the Student Loans Company (SLC), or do not complete the course they had recently started.
102. The absence of some or all students who studied for 14 days or less from the HESA student data coverage means that unless we take the proposed steps to remove such students, our student outcome and experience indicators would be reporting on different populations for different providers. These differences in coverage would arise depending on a provider's reporting practice, and whether they are required to return data to HESA or the ESFA.
103. We recognise that there are alternative, longer periods of time that we could use as the basis for removing early leaving students from our student outcome and experience indicators. For example, HESA's publication of continuation outcomes in the UK Performance Indicators removed students who left within 50 days of commencing their course. Our approach is intended to make allowance for circumstances in which a student leaves very early in a course which may be for reasons which are unconnected with the course or the provider. In the context of protecting the interests of students and ensuring that providers recruit students able to succeed and achieve successful outcomes from their course, we consider that a longer timeframe (such as six weeks) is likely to have a negative impact on students.

## Exclusions for data reporting practices

104. We propose to exclude the following student records from our calculations of student outcome and experience indicators:
- a. Student records which have been duplicated across different student returns, which are removed to avoid double counting. This mainly affects apprenticeships reported to both HESA and the ESFA, where we will normally use the record submitted to HESA.

- b. Student records in the ILR that refer to an apprenticeship standard ‘wrapper’ programme aim, which are not records of student activity. The individual qualifications being undertaken within the framework of an apprenticeship standard are separately reported in the ILR and included in the coverage of our indicators.
- c. ILR records which have been closed to correct an incorrect learning planned end date are excluded to avoid double counting as the new, corrected record will report the relevant activity.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 87 to 104, see definitions of the variables OFSHE and IPHECAT within the supporting ‘Core algorithms’ document.<sup>38</sup>

### Question 7

To what extent do you agree with the proposed **coverage of student outcome and experience measures**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 4: Common approaches to defining and reporting student populations

- 105. As explained in Proposal 2, we have proposed that student outcome and experience indicators will be reported through a hierarchy which results in separate indicators according to students’ mode and level of study, and through different provider views.
- 106. This proposal applies to our regulation of quality and standards (including through the TEF) and access and participation.

### Defining modes of study

- 107. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that we show performance separately for full-time, part-time and apprenticeship modes of study when reporting measures of student outcomes and experiences.
- 108. When a student is categorised as having either full- or part-time mode of study, the definitions we have adopted are consistent with the HESA derived field specifications<sup>39</sup>, which have been replicated such that they can also be applied to student records sourced from the ILR. This means that students defined as studying part-time include those where their expected course length amounts to a period of less than 24 weeks (during which they are expected to complete all periods of study, tuition, learning in the workplace or sandwich

<sup>38</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

<sup>39</sup> See derived field specifications for XMODE01 within the Student record, at [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/derived/contents](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/derived/contents), and XMODE02 within the Student Alternative record, at [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19054/derived/contents](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19054/derived/contents).

work placements involved in the course), regardless of the intensity of study during those weeks. It also means that students on 'fully flexible' provision contribute to the calculation of part-time student outcome and experience indicators in the same way as other part-time students.<sup>40</sup> Students reported on modes of study that identify them as studying on programmes with sandwich years are counted as full-time students.

109. We take the view that this approach, which is also in broad alignment with the mode of study definitions used for OfS funding purposes, is proportionate through its adoption of long standing and well understood definitions of full- and part-time study. We believe that it achieves an appropriate balance between the number, size and homogeneity of mode of study categories for the purposes of constructing student outcome and experience indicators.
110. Reporting apprenticeship students as a distinct mode of study follows from our view that the design and delivery of apprenticeship programmes include distinctive characteristics (including employment contracts, the volume of work-based training by the student's employer, and students' engagement with the course content) which are materially and structurally different to other types of courses and both full- and part-time modes of study.
111. When reporting our measures to show performance separately for full-time, part-time and apprenticeship modes of study, we propose that students are always attributed to these categories on the basis of the mode of study reported in the first year of their programme of study.
  - a. This means that student outcome and experience indicators which report on entrant cohorts – those measuring access to higher education, and continuation and completion rates – take the mode of study from the year in which we identify a student as an entrant who contributes to calculation of the measure. This is consistent with the OfS's construction of student outcome and experience indicators to date, and with the categorisation of entrants' level and subject of study, as well as their demographic characteristics.
  - b. Student outcome and experience indicators which report on cohorts other than entrants – those measuring student experience, degree outcomes and progression rates – will track students back to the earliest student record submitted by their provider for the programme on which they are a final year student in the year that they contribute to calculation of the measure. The student will be categorised according to the mode of study reported by the provider in the earliest student record located for the student, even if later records for the same student identify that they subsequently changed to a different mode.
112. While we recognise that students might change their mode of study for a variety of reasons, including on account of changes in their personal circumstances, we propose this approach because we take the view that it allows for the most meaningful interpretation of outcomes and experiences across the student lifecycle. It means that a student's outcomes and experiences are measured relative to the student's intentions at the commencement of the

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<sup>40</sup> 'Fully flexible' courses are those where students have applied to complete a full qualification but are able to study this at their own pace rather than during a set timeframe, utilising a high degree of flexibility in the intensity at which they study and the opportunity to take breaks in learning without necessarily notifying the provider.

course, so supports a coherent approach to the construction and interpretation of all of the student outcome and experience measures we propose to report. We consider that students who started in the same mode of study are likely to share more similar motivations for their higher education study, and to demonstrate more similar behaviours when progressing into the labour market, than those who end their studies in the same mode of study, where some students will have changed mode during their course.

113. It also allows our measures to be robust to variations in and consequences of data reporting practice that might otherwise under- or over-state the size of different student populations. For example, students may resit exams or single modules following the end of a course that they have studied on a full-time basis throughout. We consider that reporting such students as a qualifier from a part-time mode of study (on account of the low volume of activity undertaken in the year in which the higher education qualification is awarded and returned in the student's final student data submission to HESA or the ESFA) risks misrepresenting and misinterpreting the student's success or otherwise.
114. We could have addressed this risk by defining a qualifying student's mode of study with reference to the mode on which they had studied the majority of their course. At the point at which we can identify a student as in their final year or gaining a qualification, we have already received information about earlier years of their course through HESA and ILR data submissions. This means that rather than tracking the students back to take information from just their earliest student record, we could take information from all of their student records prior to their final year. Analysis of the mode of study recorded in each year could establish the substantive mode in which the student has studied across the course as a whole. However, attributing students to their substantive mode of study would result in a mismatch between definitions of mode of study for entrant and qualifier populations, and require potentially arbitrary categorisations in the event that students spend equal time in each mode of study. While we therefore consider that a substantive mode of study approach would introduce further complexity into the construction of our student outcome and experience indicators, we would nonetheless be interested to hear views on this option.
115. When a student changes their mode of study during a higher education course, any approach to categorising their mode of study is likely to have limitations when constructing and interpreting a coherent set of outcome and experience measures across multiple different stages of the student lifecycle. We take the view that a simpler definition for mode of study is more transparent for providers and the public, and reduces the burden of understanding our regulatory approach. It is this preference that leads us to propose the definition included in paragraph 111. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers, including those for whom widespread changes to students' mode of study on account of changes in their personal circumstances is likely to represent a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

## Defining levels of study

116. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that we show performance separately for different levels of study when reporting measures of student outcomes and experiences.<sup>42</sup> We propose that students are categorised into the following levels:

### Full-time and part-time modes:

a. Other undergraduate.

Examples of these qualifications include: qualifications such as foundation degrees, diplomas and certificates of higher education at Levels 4 and 5 (including those accredited by professional or statutory bodies, such as the Association of Accounting Technicians or the Chartered Institute of Building), Higher National Diplomas (HND) and Higher National Certificates (HNC).

b. First degree.

Examples of these qualifications include: qualifications such as honours or ordinary degrees, including Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Science (BSc) degrees.

c. Undergraduate with postgraduate components.

Examples of these qualifications include: integrated undergraduate-postgraduate taught masters' degrees on the enhanced or extended pattern (such as MEng, MMath); pre-registration medical degrees regulated by the General Medical Council; and pre-registration dentistry degrees regulated by the General Dental Council.

d. Other postgraduate.

Examples of these qualifications include: graduate or postgraduate diplomas, certificates or degrees at Levels 5 and 6 where a Level 5 or 6 qualification is a prerequisite for course entry; postgraduate certificates and diplomas at Level 7 and above; diplomas in teaching in the lifelong learning sector at Level 7; post-registration health and social care qualifications at Level 7; and taught qualifications at Level 7 leading towards obtaining eligibility to register to practice with a health or social care or veterinary statutory regulatory body.

e. PGCE.

f. Postgraduate taught masters.

g. Postgraduate research.

Examples of these qualifications include: doctoral degrees (such as PhD/DPhil, EdD); masters' degrees by research (such as MPhil, and some MRes).

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<sup>42</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

## **Apprenticeship mode:**

h. Undergraduate.

i. Postgraduate.

117. In defining the levels of study listed in paragraph 116, we propose that students are categorised at postgraduate level if they are studying as postgraduate 'in time'. We consider that a course is postgraduate in time when it is, by design, timed to follow the award of an undergraduate degree. Such courses will normally require at least an undergraduate higher education qualification as a pre-requisite for entry. It is known that while some qualifications may fall at undergraduate academic level according to the framework of higher education qualifications (FHEQ), they normally require an undergraduate higher education qualification as a pre-requisite for entry (examples include qualifications regulated by health and social care bodies studied by registered professionals). Such qualifications can be referred to as postgraduate in time, on the basis that a student starting one of these courses will normally have already experienced undergraduate study.
118. We take the view that the design, recruitment and delivery of programmes with pre-requisites of undergraduate qualifications for entry very likely recognises that students have demonstrated successful prior engagement with higher education study. Students commencing them would also differ in their eligibility for student support via the SLC when compared with others experiencing higher education for the first time. We anticipate that students commencing study of one of these qualifications will engage with their higher education experience in a materially different way to students starting undergraduate programmes for their first experience in higher education. The proposal would expand the 'other postgraduate' category at paragraph 116 f, recategorising some of the students who have been categorised as 'undergraduate with postgraduate components' in previous OfS datasets. It has no impact on the expected standards or naming for awards made at Level 6 of the FHEQ, regardless of whether they fall into an undergraduate or postgraduate in time interpretation based on the categories listed in paragraph 116.

## **Defining teaching provider**

119. Proposal 1 of this consultation describes that all of the splits of student outcome and experience indicators are constructed for a number of different provider views. Many of the provider views proposed at paragraph 59 place reliance on understanding the provider, who is teaching a student, and whether this is the same provider who is responsible for registering the student. We propose to define a student's teaching provider as the provider where they received the majority of their teaching in the year that relates to the calculation of the indicator in question:
- a. For continuation and completion measures, where we report on entrant cohorts, the teaching provider will be the provider that delivered the majority of the teaching in the student's first year of study.
  - b. For student experience measures based on the NSS, the teaching provider will be the provider that delivered the majority of the teaching in the year in which the student is identified for inclusion in the survey target list.

- c. For progression measures, where we report on qualifying cohorts, the teaching provider will be the provider that delivered the majority of the teaching in the student's final year of study.
120. In making this proposal we consider that defining students' teaching providers on this basis means that they will, at each stage of the student outcome and experience, be attributed to the provider that is likely to have had the greatest influence on the outcome or experience being measured, and about which it is most appropriate for us to make a judgement about the quality of the academic experience that has facilitated that outcome. Where there is no majority, and two providers each teach the student for exactly 50 per cent of the time, then if one of those providers is the student's registering provider then teaching provider is set as the registering provider. However, if neither is the registering provider, then the teaching provider will be set as unknown.
121. The majority teaching approach allows us to capture around 90 per cent of students who are taught under subcontractual arrangements (with the remaining 10 per cent taught by a partner provider for a minority of the year in question), and also benefits from alignment with other analyses of student number counts and student outcomes or experiences. For example, it is consistent with the annual reporting of NSS results on the basis of students' teaching provider.
122. Given that students may spend time being taught across different providers at different stages of their course there are several options as to how we define a student's teaching provider. Methods that determine teaching provider for all student outcome and experience measures as the provider which delivers the majority of teaching during the student's first year or first two years of study have encountered numerous challenges of interpretation through their previous uses in TEF. We have not proposed these alternatives because we are aware that they can overemphasise the impact of a provider that delivers a minimal part of a student's overall experience at the very start of their course. For example, a provider who delivers a foundation year, or even part of a foundation year, might be identified as the teaching provider for a student who goes on to complete a three-year degree at their registering provider. Student experience and progression measures for this student, measured at the end of four years of study, would still be attributed to the foundation year provider as their teaching provider.
123. We have also considered defining the teaching provider(s) for a given student as any provider delivering any amount of their teaching in the year of the indicator calculation, rather than only to the provider delivering the majority of teaching. For example, where two or three providers are involved in teaching a student, each for a minority of the year in question (perhaps for one or two modules each), we could identify all of those providers as the student's teaching provider. We do not believe that there is any clear and consistent minimum that could be adopted for the purposes of identifying a student's minority teaching provider(s). Nor do we consider that, in general, identifying a provider as a teaching provider for the purposes of assessments of quality and standards would be proportionate in examples such as a provider being subcontracted to provide a single module on a four-year course. We have not proposed this alternative because we consider that such an approach would make understanding, interpretation and accountability for those student outcomes and experiences disproportionately complex and burdensome for providers and other users to understand.

124. Information collected in 2020-21 HESA student data collections will, for the first time, identify the provider that will deliver the majority of the teaching across the whole course for students at their point of entry to higher education. This information may, in future, allow us to overcome some of the issues described in paragraph 122. However, we are aware that partial coverage (the information will not be available from ILR student records) and challenges of interpretation (the majority teaching provider for the whole course may not be the one exerting the greatest influence on the student lifecycle stage at which the outcome or experience is being measured) may limit the utility of the information for the purposes of condition B3 and TEF assessments. We therefore expect to review the differences, and relative advantages, of this and our proposed current approach, once sufficient years of data have been collected to inform this analysis. We would expect to consult on any resulting changes at a future date.

### **Defining and reporting entrant and qualifier populations**

125. Several of the student outcome and experience indicators we propose to construct refer to populations of higher education entrant cohorts (specifically, continuation and completion measures, as well as the access measures reported through the access and participation data dashboards). Other measures refer to higher education qualifier cohorts (progression measures, as well as the degree outcomes measures reported through the access and participation data dashboards).
126. When counting students – whether for the purposes of defining an entrant, qualifier or other student population, or for the purposes of assessing a student’s higher education outcomes – we propose to consider students in **headcount terms** throughout our student outcome and experience indicators.<sup>43</sup> We take the view that our measures should report on entrants to, and qualifiers from, higher education in person-level terms, reflecting our regulatory objectives to protect the interests of students regarding the quality and standards of provision that they receive.
127. This proposal means that rather than using a volume measure (full-time equivalent, or FTE counts<sup>44</sup>) we report on the numbers of individual people for whom a provider has responsibility for the quality and standards of provision. We propose reporting student numbers in headcount terms, rather than FTE, because we are measuring the transitions that students make to achieve outcomes across the student lifecycle, and each student makes one such transition, regardless of the volume of activity they are undertaking. We also acknowledge that FTE would understate the number of individuals that the provider is supporting, and that it would skew the calculation of our indicators as percentage rates (or proportions).
128. We recognise that an individual person might engage with the same provider in different capacities within the same reporting period. This might occur especially in the event that a student is studying multiple qualifications each of shorter course lengths, or they are studying

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<sup>43</sup> As explained in Proposal 9, to facilitate breakdowns of student populations across different subject areas of study, considering students in headcount terms equates to the use of full-person equivalent, or FPE counts. See paragraphs 340 to 341 for more information.

<sup>44</sup> Full-time equivalent (FTE) is a concept that considers the proportion of a full-time course that a given student is studying. A student studying full-time for a full year of the course would be returned as 1.0 FTE. A part-time student undertaking 60 per cent of the full-time course would be returned as 0.6 FTE.

courses on non-standard academic years which straddle different student data collection reporting periods. We consider that counting student engagements, or instances, risks overstating the size of a provider's student cohorts for the purposes of understanding performance on student outcomes and experiences. Consequently, we propose that a student who was actively studying multiple instances of higher education at the same registering provider, at the same broad level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate) in the same reporting period, will only count towards our indicators once per year.

129. In defining an **entrant** cohort, we propose to identify any student with a course commencement date between 17 July and the following 16 July. Given that the student data collection reporting periods currently span 1 August until the following 31 July, this proposal allows us to check that any student who may be in scope for categorisation as an entrant has not left their programme of study within 14 days of their commencement date without gaining an award and should be removed from the indicator calculation on that basis (see Students leaving within two weeks). For continuation measures, it also allows us to determine the activity of all students on the anniversary of their commencement date in the following data reporting period (see Census points at which continuation outcomes are measured). These interlinked proposals aim to support a coherent approach across related aspects of our data definitions.
130. We propose that postgraduate research students who are engaged in sequential collaborative provision (primarily within doctoral training programmes) are included in the entrant cohort of each provider that they register with, counting as an entrant at the point at which their registration with that provider commences rather than at their point of entry to that higher education course overall. We take this view because of the change in accountability and responsibility for the student's supervision and academic experience that follows from a change to the provider which registers them.
131. We are not proposing a similar approach for concurrent collaborative provision, or sequential collaborative provision at other levels of study, because we do not expect students outside of doctoral training programmes to change registering provider part way through a course. Consequently, we do not collect data about such changes through the HESA student data collections. Because doctoral training programmes were specifically designed to work as sequential collaborative provision, the only information collected that facilitates robust identification of formal sequential collaborative arrangements<sup>45</sup> relates to the supervision of postgraduate research degrees. We note that in the case of concurrent collaborative provision, the data reporting requirement is that the partner(s) which are not registering the student must be identified as a teaching provider within the student data submissions that the registering provider must make. This means that such students will normally contribute to the taught or registered view of a provider's student population we have proposed for each of the collaborating partner providers, as entrants and later as qualifiers.
132. We also propose that when defining an entrant cohort, we should check whether those students were actively studying at the same registering provider, at the same broad level of study (undergraduate or postgraduate), at any point in the previous calendar year. In cases where the same individual is reported by the same provider, at the same broad level of study

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<sup>45</sup> See specifications for the data items COLTOPROV, COLTODATE, COLFROMPROV and COLFROMDATE at [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/index](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/index).

in two successive years, the understanding of provider performance that we take from our measures has already accounted for the outcome and experience of that student as a new entrant to the provider in question. We take the view that students with whom a provider has already had success or failure as either an undergraduate or postgraduate entrant should not skew interpretations of performance in either a positive or negative direction.

133. This proposal means that students would not contribute to the calculation of continuation measures for first degree students if they progress to study at first degree level as a 'top-up' course, in the year immediately following that in which they were observed studying an 'other undergraduate' qualification (typically an HND or foundation degree) at the same provider. Similarly, students who undertake sequential instances of other undergraduate study (such as an HNC, followed immediately by an HND) would only count as an undergraduate entrant for the first course they started. We are aware that students moving between different stages of top-up courses or sequential instances can be inconsistently reported as entrants at each of those stages, depending on a given provider's student data reporting practices and whether or not the student moved between different providers for the different stage of the course. When the student remains at the same provider, they would already have contributed to the calculation of continuation measures for other undergraduate entrants at the point at which they commenced study of the qualification that they would later seek to top up. Students who transition from undergraduate study in one year, to postgraduate study in the next (for example, starting a taught masters' programme within 365 days of studying on an undergraduate first degree) would count as a postgraduate entrant.
134. In defining a cohort of **qualifiers**, we identify students reported to have been awarded a higher education qualification.
135. Progression measures then focus on qualifiers who have been included on the target list for the Graduate Outcomes survey<sup>46</sup> because the target list is an underpinning key infrastructure for the evidence base that gives rise to the calculation of progression measures. There currently exists no viable alternative to relying on the survey's target list to identify those for whom a GO response is expected or available, without a fundamental review of the survey instrument. As described in paragraphs 90 to 93, we expect proposals for extending the coverage of existing survey instruments to be tested within future consultations. We recognise that this proposal means that a student on a top-up course or one that involves sequential instances of other undergraduate study will potentially count more than once among the cohorts of qualifiers included in progression measures. We consider that it is appropriate to capture progression outcomes following the award of any higher education qualification awarded, including where a student has been awarded multiple such qualifications at different stages of their engagement in higher education study, from the same or different providers.
136. When qualifiers are defined for the purposes of the degree outcomes measures reported in the access and participation data dashboard, we currently focus on students awarded undergraduate degree qualifications at Level 6+. In doing so, individuals are only counted once per year per provider. This means that we will select the best classification outcome

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<sup>46</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19071/coverage](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19071/coverage).

reported, in the event that a student is identified as receiving more than one undergraduate degree qualification from the same provider in the same reporting period.

137. We recognise that, as currently defined, the degree outcomes measure is not calculated for populations other than undergraduate degree qualifiers. The definition of degree outcomes measures reflects that, historically, the HESA Student and Student Alternative records have only collected classifications of first degree awards. While the ILR collects information about grades awarded to a wider range of qualifications (including those not eligible to be included in the OfS funding calculations), it is unclear that data quality is currently sufficient to support its use across all of those qualifications. We take the view that the resulting partiality of information cannot currently support construction of a measure based on a wider population of qualifiers. The HESA data reporting requirement, in respect of this information, has been extended for 2020-21 data collections to include all qualification classifications. We therefore intend to review the outcomes that can be reported for other qualifier populations, and any appropriate student outcome and experience measures that can be developed, over a longer timescale.
138. It is known that around 1 per cent of higher education students who are recorded in the ILR as ending their learning aim are reported with an outcome of partial achievement. A similarly small proportion of such students are reported with an outcome of 'learning activities complete but the outcome is not yet known'.
- a. While the ILR does not record the qualification awarded to a student once their learning aim is reported as ending, the guidance for returning the student's outcome as 'partial achievement' advises that this category should only be used when learners "have achieved an award that is at a lower academic level than the qualification they were aiming for as identified by the learning aim reference".<sup>47</sup>
  - b. Following submission of a record reporting 'learning complete but results not yet known', a student will not be returned in later ILR submissions, meaning that at the present time we are unable to ever determine that student's actual outcome.
139. In the longer term, we intend to explore the feasibility of accessing the Learning Records Service to confirm the actual qualification awarded to a student recorded in the ILR with partial or not yet known achievement, and hence whether they should be defined as higher education qualifiers. In the meantime, the low prevalence of these categories within the data leads us to propose to include students in both of these categories as qualifiers being awarded a higher education. This proposal recognises that the existing data reporting does not provide sufficient information to establish whether the outcome should be viewed as positive in some or all cases. As such, it aligns with our approach for offering benefit of the doubt when necessary and appropriate for considering what constitutes a positive outcome at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes.
140. Reporting entrant and qualifier populations using the more consistent definitions proposed at paragraphs 129 to 138 would allow for closer alignment of populations examined across the suite of student outcome and experience indicators, and hence in the regulatory

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<sup>47</sup> See the description of the OUTCOME variable within the ILR specification document at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/ilr-specification-validation-rules-and-appendices-2019-to-2020](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ilr-specification-validation-rules-and-appendices-2019-to-2020).

assessments made by the OfS in relation to provider performance in access and participation and quality and standards. We also consider that close alignment of the students examined through the different measures will benefit other users, through improvements in the accessibility and understanding of our outputs.

## **Intercalating students**

141. Some students on clinical medical, dental or veterinary science qualifications take an intercalating year and register for this additional year at a different provider than the one at which they are studying their main qualification. Intercalation involves an additional year of study on top of a medical, dental or veterinary degree programme and an opportunity to develop knowledge and skills, and gain a standalone qualification, in a new area which may or may not be related to their main degree study.
142. We propose that students are included in the definition of entrant cohorts for the provider registering the student for their intercalation year, where this differs to the provider registering them for their clinical degree, for purposes of the continuation and completion indicators. We take this view because the provider at which the student intercalates is accountable for the quality of the academic experience of that separate instance of the student's higher education study. Where students intercalate within the same registering provider, that provider is already being assessed for the quality of academic experience for that student through their inclusion in continuation and completion indicator calculations based on their commencement of their main qualification.
143. We expect to exclude intercalating students from the calculations of access to higher education measures, whether the intercalation year is spent at the same provider or different, on the same basis that leads us to categorise qualifications as either undergraduate or postgraduate level 'in time' (see paragraph 117). Because the student will normally have already experienced undergraduate study, we anticipate that their recruitment into and experience of higher education entry has already been recognised through earlier years of the access measures on which providers' access and participation performance has been assessed.
144. Similarly, intercalating students are excluded from the calculation of student experience measures based on the NSS because such students will not currently be surveyed in respect of their intercalation year alone (because either the one-year course length will prohibit their inclusion in the target list of the different provider they study at, or they will not meet the criteria for expecting the student to be in their final year of study) but will be included as a final year student on their main qualification at the appropriate time. Future development of the NSS may consider extensions of its coverage: if any extensions were deemed feasible and appropriate, we would expect to consult on revised approaches at a future point in time.
145. It is also the case that intercalating students will be excluded from the calculation of progression measures because they do not currently fall within the target list for the Graduate Outcomes survey, whether the intercalation year is spent at the same or a different provider. We take the view that this exclusion remains valid given that students' destinations following the award of a qualification from an intercalation year are (by design) a return to study on their main qualification, and that it will normally be the main qualification that the student intends to facilitate their onward progression into professional employment or further study.

146. Intercalating students who gain an award from their intercalation year will otherwise be included in qualifier student counts and calculations for degree outcomes measures. This is on the basis that a qualification being awarded warrants the student contributing to the evidence base to be scrutinised with regard to differential awarding practice or academic standards.

**Table 3: Inclusion and exclusion of intercalating students, by regulatory function**

Student outcome or experience measure	Access and participation	Condition B3	TEF
<b>Access measures</b>	Excluded in all cases	Not applicable	Not applicable
<b>Continuation measures</b>	Included when intercalating at a different provider, excluded otherwise	Included when intercalating at a different provider, excluded otherwise	Included when intercalating at a different provider, excluded otherwise
<b>Completion measures</b>	Included when intercalating at a different provider, excluded otherwise	Included when intercalating at a different provider, excluded otherwise	Included when intercalating at a different provider, excluded otherwise
<b>Degree outcome measures</b>	Included whenever an award is made for an intercalation year	Not applicable	Not applicable
<b>Progression measures</b>	Excluded in all cases	Excluded in all cases	Excluded in all cases
<b>Student experience measures</b>	Not applicable	Not applicable	Excluded in all cases

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 107 to 146, see definitions of the variables IPMODE, IPSTARTMODE, IPLEVEL, IPUKPRNTC, IPENTRANTEXCL and IPQUALIFIER within our supporting 'Core algorithms' document.<sup>48</sup>

### Question 8

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definitions of mode and level of study**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, for example to rely on a student's substantive mode of study across their whole course, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

<sup>48</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

### Question 9

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definitions of teaching provider**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 10

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definitions of entrant and qualifying populations**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 5: Construction of continuation measures

147. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that the proportion of students continuing on a higher education course is reported as one of the numerical measures used in assessments of condition B3 and under the TEF scheme.<sup>49</sup> It is also one of the student outcomes measured through the access and participation data dashboard.
148. In reporting this measure, we propose to measure the percentage of students who continue in the study of a higher education qualification (or have gained a qualification). In doing so, we propose to identify a cohort of entrants to higher education qualifications and follow those students through the early stages of their course. Following the entrants at an individual level allows us to track how many continue or qualify at the same provider in subsequent years.

### Entrants for whom continuation outcomes are measured

149. We propose that continuation measures are constructed with reference to the population of entrants defined through Proposal 4 of this consultation, at paragraphs 129 to 133, and 142.
150. We propose to construct continuation rates with respect to entrant cohorts because the measure is intended to focus on student outcomes in the early stages of a course. Constructing the measure in respect of entrants and continuing students at later stages of their courses would conflate issues of continuation in the early stages of courses with those of completion of the whole course. We believe that this would be unhelpful and ineffective for supporting meaningful interpretation of student outcomes: if continuation rates varied by year of course the measure would be very difficult to interpret. Instead, the separate construction of a completion measure that looks over the whole of a student's engagement with a course will be more effective in providing a balance for the more immediate continuation outcomes. Our approach to completion measures is discussed in Proposal 6.

### Census points at which continuation outcomes are measured

151. For students with a full-time or apprenticeship mode of study reported in their year of entry, we propose that the continuation measure will track students from the date that they commenced their studies to their activity on a census date one year and 15 days later. For

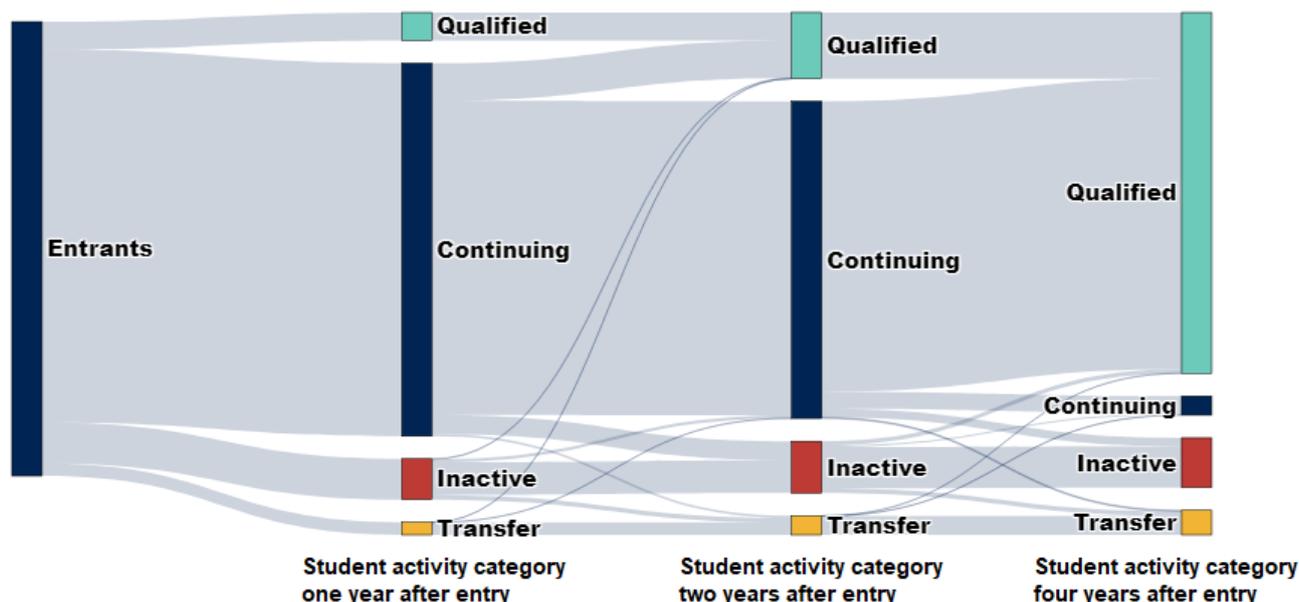
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<sup>49</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

part-time entrants, we propose that students are tracked to a census date two years and 15 days after their commencement date.

152. We know that most students who do not complete their course, leave in or immediately following the first year (as illustrated in Figures 4 and 5 below), and that the cost – in financial and personal terms – of failing to complete may become more significant the longer the time that a student has spent studying. We therefore take the view that the proposed census dates achieve an appropriate balance between timeliness of the measure and a point at which students have had the opportunity to undertake a material part of their course. An outcome at such a point should be meaningful as an indicator that students have not been appropriately supported through the early stages of a course, or were wrongly recruited onto the course in the first place.
153. We also note that census points of around one year after entry to full-time study, and around two years after entry to part-time study, have previously been used in the UK Performance Indicators published by HESA. We therefore consider that proposing census points of around one and two years after entry to full- and part-time study respectively, aligns in broad terms with previous census points, and hence with approaches that we are aware have become embedded within many providers' governance or oversight processes for quality and student outcomes. We consider this an advantage of proposing no significant departure from the established census points, on the basis that it likely minimises the burden of understanding and engaging with our regulatory approach to these student outcomes.
154. Figure 4 represents the transitions that the cohort of full-time undergraduate entrants in 2015-16 made through subsequent years of study, and the volumes who move into (and then, potentially, out of) each of the student activity categories that inform our construction of continuation outcomes. It shows that the biggest transition into inactive categories (the student is not reported as studying a higher education qualification in that year) is evident at one year after entry. It then shows that very few students who became inactive at that point return to active study at a later date, and that smaller numbers of students make the transition into the inactive categories later in their courses.

**Figure 4: Continuation outcomes of undergraduate entrants in 2015-16 in the four years after entry to full-time study**



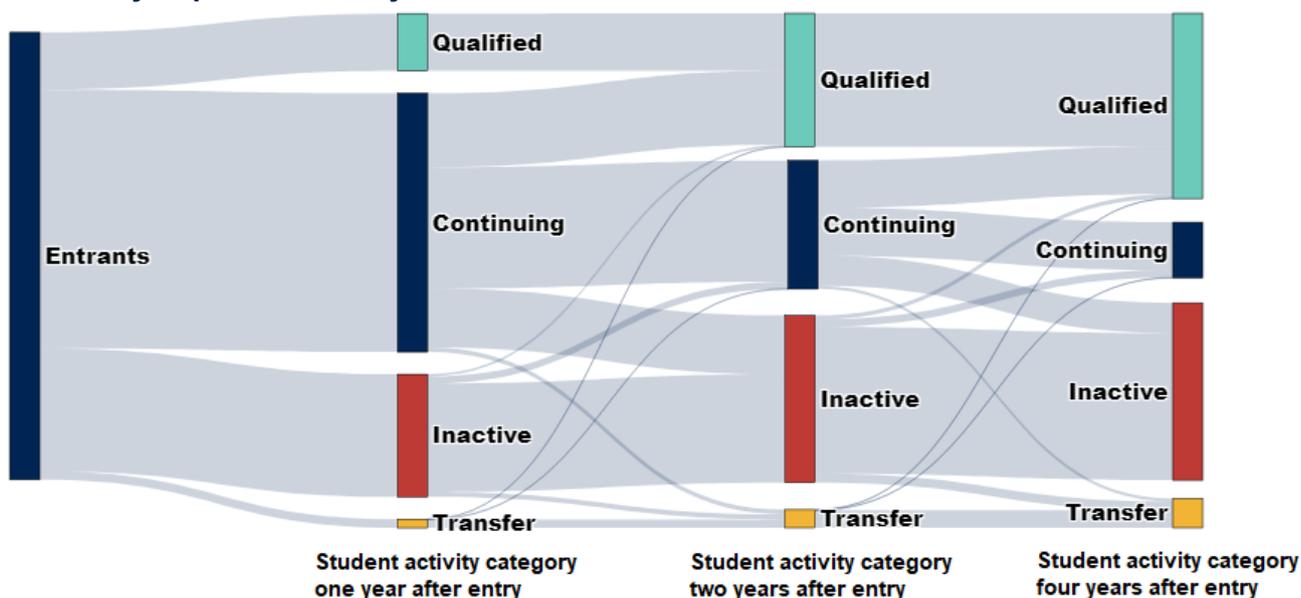
Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data

155. Analysis has shown that the propensity for students who do not complete their qualification to leave their course in their first year is broadly consistent across the different modes and levels of study for which we have proposed to construct student outcome and experience indicators:

- a. For full-time undergraduate entrants in 2013-14, and for full-time other undergraduate entrants in 2015-16, this is shown in Figures B2 and B3 at Annex B respectively. They provide similar information to that shown in Figure 4 above.
- b. For part-time students, this is shown in Figure 5 below (and in Figures B4 and B5 at Annex B).

156. While there is slightly greater variation in the leaving points for part-time students, we consider that there are structural issues that are specific to the design and delivery of part-time courses planned to take place over an extended period (typically double the time that would be needed to complete an equivalent full-time course, but sometimes longer still). Students choosing part-time study are likely to do so because they are not able to commit to full-time study due to professional, domestic or other responsibilities, and we accept that the extended study period for a part-time course may mean significant life events or challenges are more likely to disrupt a student's study. We take the view that the range of part-time provision available across the sector, with varying levels of flexibility and study intensity, requires that we balance the proportionality and effectiveness of capturing the continuation outcomes robustly, against the timeliness of the measure.

**Figure 5: Continuation outcomes of undergraduate entrants in 2014-15 in the four years after entry to part-time study**



Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data

157. Based on all of these considerations, we believe that assessing part-time continuation outcomes two years after entry is a proportionate approach and means that outcomes are captured once students have undertaken a similar amount of study as full-time students assessed at the one-year census point. However, we believe that constructing part-time continuation measures on the basis of a one-year census date represents a viable alternative, which would have the benefit of creating a more timely measure and a more consistent approach with that taken for full-time students. We would be keen to hear feedback on this possibility.
158. We have proposed census points which refer to one or two years and 15 days in order to give us good confidence that the student has entered a subsequent year of study. It means that minor year-on-year changes to term dates can be accommodated, and that a student's activity on and around the anniversary of their commencement date can always be understood from the most recent year of HESA and ILR data returns that are available. This is possible because, when defining an entrant cohort in paragraph 129, we proposed to include students with a course commencement date between 17 July and the following 16 July. This means that the 'and 15 days' component of our census points falls no later in the calendar year than 31 July, which marks the end of each HESA and ILR data reporting period.
159. Application of these census points, and the requirement to track entrant cohorts through subsequent years of HESA and ILR student data returns means that we are not able to report continuation measures for the cohort who started in the most recent academic year for which HESA and ILR data returns are available. For example, at the time of writing, the most recent academic year for which we have student data is 2020-21.<sup>50</sup> If a student started

<sup>50</sup> The 2020-21 HESA and ILR student data became available to the OfS in December 2021, and will be published by HESA as official statistics on 25 January 2022. It has not been available for sufficient time for us to incorporate this year of student data into the illustrative datasets released to providers alongside this consultation.

a full-time course on 1 October 2020 (i.e. during the 2020-21 academic year), our proposed census point would be seeking to determine their continuation outcome as at 16 October 2021. As such, we cannot calculate that student's full-time continuation outcome until such time as the 2021-22 becomes available in winter 2022. If they were instead starting a part-time course, their continuation outcome census date would be 16 October 2022, which we could not observe in the 2022-23 student data until it becomes available in winter 2023.

160. Instead, the most recent cohort that can be reported on are those who started in the year one prior to the most recent year of data returns for full-time and apprenticeship students, and those who started in the year two prior for part-time students. This represents a significant lag in our indicators caused by the current reporting practices; our December 2021 consultation on Data Futures and data collections proposes approaches to improve the timeliness of student data.<sup>51</sup>

### **Definition of positive continuation outcomes**

161. We have proposed that positive continuation outcomes require that we find the student continuing in the study of a higher education qualification registered at the same provider, or having gained a qualification from that provider, as at the relevant census date.
162. In determining that a student has continued at the same provider at which they initially commenced study of a higher education qualification, we propose that the student must be reported in that provider's student data submissions as actively studying, with non-zero FTE activity returned for the reporting period in which the census date falls. We propose that the activity can relate to any instance of study reported with a general qualification aim which refers to a higher education qualification.
163. This proposal means that the student need not be progressing through subsequent years of the same course, nor studying a qualification at the same mode or level of study, to count positively on this measure. Students who reduce their intensity of study in subsequent years of their study will count positively as long as that reduction is not to zero FTE.
164. We are aware that students on shorter courses may not be expected to be active in higher education study as at the relevant census point because the course has already concluded prior to that point. As such, we propose that students who have been awarded a higher education qualification at any point prior to the census date should be counted as a positive outcome for the continuation measure. We propose that such students are identified as qualifiers on the same basis as defined through Proposal 4 of this consultation, at paragraphs 134 to 138, and 144 to 145.
165. Alternative approaches to constructing the measure would involve us taking a narrower view of the progressions described in paragraph 163 and requiring that the student progressed through the same course or continued studying in the same mode or level of study, in order to count as a positive outcome. When a student is reported in student data with a different course title, it is not always clear whether this was a natural progression, specialisation from their original course, or a conscious choice to move to a new course. Our proposed approach recognises that, within the specifications of the existing student data collections, it can be difficult to establish when a student is continuing on the same

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<sup>51</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-data-futures-and-data-collection/).

course that they started. As such, it aligns with our approach for offering benefit of the doubt when necessary and appropriate for considering what constitutes a positive outcome at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes.

166. The proposal means that a student who commenced study of a higher education qualification and was observed to be active at the census date in the study of modules of higher education provision, aiming for awards of higher education credit only, would not count as a positive outcome and instead count as a non-continuer. We take the view that a student who has started higher education study with the expressed intention of gaining a qualification (and has potentially secured access to student loan funding on that basis) is unlikely to view an outcome of higher education credit as positive, and we are keen to avoid any perverse incentives for increased reporting of study or awards of higher education credit, when these are perhaps not warranted, resulting from the definition of these indicators.

### **Students who transfer to another provider**

167. Where a student is reported in HESA or ILR data submissions as actively studying in higher education at the census date, registered at a provider other than the one where they commenced their studies, we deem that they have transferred.
168. Where the student has transferred to another provider and is reported as studying for a higher education qualification, we are aware that such transfers will represent a mix of positive and negative outcomes depending on the individual circumstances of the student. We take the view that these will normally be considered positive when a student transfers through a credit transfer scheme or otherwise carries credit with them, and negative when they do not (requiring that the student starts higher education study afresh, potentially incurring additional costs in doing so).
169. Within the current specifications of HESA and ILR student data information about a higher education student's entry via a credit transfer scheme, or whether they hold any higher education credit, is not collected explicitly. This means that analysis of student transfers tends to be limited to understanding changes in the year of programme<sup>52</sup> reported: if the year of programme increases incrementally following a transfer between providers, this is expected to give a reasonable approximation for the identification of student transfers. As noted in analysis of student transfers by the OfS,<sup>53</sup> this understanding is further limited to providers returning data to HESA student records because the ILR does not record year of programme information.
170. The current absence of comprehensive, sector-wide information about student transfers means that we are unable to differentiate between the transfers that we consider are likely to be positive and negative on the basis described in paragraph 168. Consequently, at this time, we propose that a student transfer involving study for a higher education qualification will be counted as a neutral outcome in our definition of continuation measure. We propose to enact this neutral treatment by removing the student from both the numerator and the denominator used to calculate the continuation rate. This approach aligns with our

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<sup>52</sup> Year of programme is a field included in HESA student data collections which indicates the year number of the course the student is studying in.

<sup>53</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-transfers/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-transfers/).

approach for offering benefit of the doubt when necessary and appropriate for considering what constitutes a positive outcome at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes. The number of students observed to transfer to another provider is normally a small enough group that we can enact neutral treatment (by removing the student from both the numerator and the denominator used to calculate the continuation rate), rather than positive, without detriment to the overall utility and robustness of the measure.

171. In the medium to longer term, if the Government were to implement an approach to student finance that is based on a flexible, modular system, we anticipate that extensions to the specification of the HESA and ILR data collections may be required to support implementation of that system and to understand student transfers occurring within it. In such a circumstance that more sector-wide information is collected about credit transfers, we would intend to review our approach. We would consult as necessary on adoption of the approach described in paragraph 168 and differentiating student transfers as positive and negative outcomes within the definition of future continuation measures.
172. We propose to make an exception to this neutral treatment of student transfers in the circumstances that a postgraduate research student transfers to another provider as part of a sequential collaborative arrangement for the supervision of their programme, which we propose to count as a positive outcome. As described in paragraph 130, we consider that counting postgraduate research students as entrants at each provider involved in a sequential collaboration arrangement is appropriate to the registration and reporting requirements for this provision. We take the view that this extends to the appropriate approach for defining continuation outcomes for such students: we believe that students progressing successfully to the next stage of the collaboration should be recognised as a positive outcome.
173. In line with our view that a student who has started higher education study with the expressed intention of gaining a qualification is unlikely to view an outcome of higher education credit as positive, we propose that a student transfer involving study for higher education credit will not count as a positive outcome.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 147 to 173, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

- Descriptions of the continuation method within the ‘Description and methodology’ document.
- Definitions of the variable IPCONINDFULL\_YX (and contributing variables included within the definition of IPCONINDFULL\_YX) within the ‘Core algorithms’ document.
- Instructions for rebuilding continuation indicators from your individualised student data within the ‘Instructions for rebuilding OfS datasets’ document.

### Question 11

To what extent do you agree with our proposal that **continuation outcomes are measured for entrant cohorts**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 12

To what extent do you agree with the **proposed census dates** for measuring continuation outcomes for full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students? In particular, do you have any comments on the advantages and disadvantages of using a one-year census date for part-time measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer, and the reasons for your view.

### Question 13

To what extent do you agree with the **outcomes we propose to treat as positive outcomes** for this measure? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 14

To what extent do you agree with the proposed **approach to student transfers** in measures of continuation outcomes? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 6: Construction of completion measures

### What are we proposing and why?

174. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that the proportion of students completing a higher education qualification is reported as one of the numerical measures used in assessments of condition B3 and under the TEF scheme.<sup>54</sup> We have also proposed that a completion measure is introduced to access and participation data dashboard.
175. The inclusion of a completion measure, in addition to a measure of continuation focused on the early stages of a course, is intended to tell us whether a provider is recruiting students able to succeed through to the end of its courses. In looking over the whole student engagement with a course (where the cost in financial and personal terms of failing to complete may be even more significant than for students leaving earlier in the course), the measure is intended to provide a balance for the more immediate continuation measure. It is known that students leave study at all stages of a course, and that the extent of withdrawal from later stages of courses can vary. This difference in focus means that there will not be a direct, linear, relationship between a provider's continuation rate and its cohort-tracking completion rate: there will be occasions when the continuation measure is very closely

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<sup>54</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

aligned to the completion rate because the extent of withdrawal at later stages of study is very low, and other occasions where the opposite is true.

## Two potential methods

176. Efforts to measure completion of higher education qualifications need to balance the timeliness of the measure and its precision, and make compromises on these qualities. This consultation proposes two alternative methods for measuring completion outcomes:
- a. A cohort-tracking measure identifies a cohort of entrants to higher education qualifications and follows those students at an individual level to track how many continue or qualify at the same provider in subsequent years. This measure is defined in paragraphs 183 to 200 below. It has the advantage of being a more precise measure of student completion outcomes, but its reliance on tracking students across subsequent years means that it is not a particularly timely measure. Despite the time lags in this measure, it may not be entirely reliable as a measure of outcomes for students on longer courses because of the limits we need to place on the period of time we will track students for.
  - b. A compound indicator which uses the rates at which students withdraw from higher education study in a given year, from different stages of a course, to inform calculation of the proportion of students likely to complete the qualification they started. This measure is defined in paragraphs 201 to 236 below. It has the advantage of being a timelier measure of student completion outcomes, responding to the most recent patterns of outcomes at the provider, but as a projected measure it may be less precise in reflecting the circumstances of individual students.
177. We have summarised the similarities and differences in the outcomes calculated by each of the two proposed completion methods: our supporting evidence indicates that there are generally fairly strong positive correlations between the values calculated by the two alternative methods.<sup>55</sup> To support providers in further understanding the different ways in which their students contribute to each of the two methods, the individualised student data released to providers alongside this consultation includes information about both of the approaches.
178. We consider that however we choose to measure completion outcomes, identifying a higher likelihood of students leaving study from later stages of their courses would contribute important information about student outcomes across the whole course. We recognise that students leave study at all stages of a course, for a variety of reasons, some of which will relate to changes in their personal circumstances. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers, including that changes in the personal circumstances of large numbers

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<sup>55</sup> See our supporting 'Comparison of completion measures' document at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/), and the related data dashboard at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/).

of students, leading them to withdraw from later stages of their course, is likely to represent a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>56</sup>

179. In confirming which, and how, completion measures are incorporated into our regulatory functions, the OfS will need to balance the size, complexity and effectiveness of the evidence base users will need to understand and engage with. We recognise that each of the methods proposed in paragraph 176 has a series of advantages and disadvantages (and these are included within the descriptions of the cohort-tracking and compound indicator approaches that follows), and oftentimes the advantage of one method has an equal and opposite disadvantage in the other. This means that we take the view that the methods are complimentary, and as a result the OfS has no preference for one method over the other. We are particularly keen to hear feedback on any strengths and weaknesses of the two methods proposed that consultees identify. We will use responses to this consultation to inform our decision on which method (or methods) may be the best to move forward with.

### **Alternative completion methods we do not propose to use**

180. We are not proposing use of the projected outcomes method for reporting completion outcomes within Table T5 of HESA's UK Performance Indicators.<sup>57</sup> This method aims to project the proportion of entrants who will go on to achieve a degree, using patterns of progression established from the most recent four years of data to estimate the sequence of movements that a cohort of entrants will make through their programme of study. It relies on having significant numbers of students to inform the projection, moving through structured programmes with defined year structures in patterns that remain stable over time. Consequently, the measure can only be reliably constructed with reference to full-time students studying on highly structured programmes, mainly full-time first degree, meaning that it cannot be calculated for flexible provision. Some of the data required by this method are not collected in the ILR, meaning that the measure can only be calculated for providers who submit HESA student data records. We take the view that a method which cannot construct completion outcomes for other modes and levels of study, or for all English providers registered with the OfS, cannot be a viable candidate for use in our regulatory functions.
181. The use of the HESA Table 5 method for projecting completion outcomes within our publications to date of the projected completion and employment from entrant data ('Proceed') measure, and its associated limitations, is the reason that we do not currently propose to use this measure within the student outcome and experience indicators we construct for regulatory purposes. It is possible that future development of the Proceed measure will take account of the results of this consultation. Once we have established completion and progression measures that can be produced for all providers, whether they are required to return data to HESA or the ESFA, we expect to review whether those definitions can or should be combined to inform future publications and uses of the Proceed measure.

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<sup>56</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>57</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/outcomes/technical](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators/outcomes/technical).

182. We are also not proposing to develop a completion (or continuation) measure based on credit accumulation. We recognise that measures of completion which track the patterns of module credit accumulation over a period of several years seem well suited to effective measurement of outcomes for flexible part-time study which allows pursuit of a higher education qualification through 'step-on, step-off' programme structures. However, data limitations prevent us from proposing such a method for use in the context of condition B3 and TEF assessments:

- a. Module-level data is only collected through the HESA Student record; information at this level of detail is not included in the specifications of the HESA Student Alternative or the ILR records, meaning that any credit accumulation measure constructed would have unacceptably narrow coverage of providers registered with the OfS.
- b. The information collected about modules identifies the credit points available for each module but is not definitive about the number of credits achieved. It therefore requires a level of assumption about the credits achieved in a sizeable minority of outcomes are reported.

### **Cohort-tracking**

183. In reporting a completion measure based on a cohort-tracking method, we propose to measure the percentage of students that have gained a higher education qualification or continue in the study of a qualification as at an appropriate census date after they commenced their studies. In doing so, we will identify a cohort of entrants to higher education qualifications and follow those students through each subsequent year of their course, up to the census date. Following the entrants at an individual level allows us to track how many continue or qualify at the same provider in subsequent years, and to calculate the percentage of students that we observe to have gained a higher education qualification at any point up to the census date, or that we find continuing in the study of a qualification as at the census date.

184. This method is closely aligned to the continuation measure described in Proposal 5 and, unless otherwise stated, makes use of the same definitions of positive outcomes.

### **Entrants tracked within the cohort-tracking method for constructing completion indicators**

185. We propose that completion measures constructed using the cohort-tracking method refer to the same population of entrants as defined through Proposal 4 of this consultation, at paragraphs 129 to 133, and 142.

### **Census points at which completion outcomes are measured**

186. For students with a full-time or apprenticeship mode of study reported in their year of entry, we propose that the cohort-tracking completion measure will track students from the date that they commenced their studies to their activity on a census date four years and 15 days later. For part-time entrants, we propose that students are tracked to a census date six years and 15 days after their commencement date.

187. Given the value we expect from the inclusion of a completion measure in addition to a measure of continuation (as described in paragraph 175), we take the view that it is appropriate to select a census date for measuring completion outcomes that lies some

distance from that used to measure continuation outcomes, and can be taken to represent a reasonable expectation that students will ultimately complete their course.

188. We propose to track students at all levels of study for the same periods of time, up to the census dates that we have proposed for each mode of study. We are aware that the timeframes in which it is reasonable to expect that students will have completed their course can vary markedly across different modes and levels of study. For example, a full-time taught masters can typically be completed in around a year, whereas a full-time first degree student will normally require at least three years to complete, or a part-time first degree student studying at 50 per cent intensity might require around six years to complete.
189. If we were to take the view that a completion outcome can only be reported when all students at that mode and level have had an opportunity to complete their programme, this approach would lead to completion indicators defined according to a large number of different census points. We consider that unique census points for each combination of mode and level of study would introduce unmanageable complexity into the definition. For some modes and levels of study it would also mean that the census date falls more than 10 years following a student's entry to higher education. We take the view that reporting student outcomes lagged by more than a decade would not reflect the recent performance of providers and risks generating misleading results in the event of changes in the provision offered by a provider over time.
190. We consider that differentiation of census dates by mode of study is sufficient to reflect the most significant of the systematic differences in student course lengths. For qualifications with expected course lengths shorter than these census points we consider that waiting too long to report the completion outcome is undesirable. Students on other, longer courses may be expected, by design, to still be studying on that course at the proposed census date. To mitigate the risk that we misrepresent the outcomes of these students and qualifications, we propose to count students who are continuing in the study of a qualification at the census date as a positive outcome. For example, we recognise that courses such as undergraduate degrees in medicine and dentistry, some architecture courses, and PhDs will likely remain ongoing at these census points.
191. We take the view that our proposed census dates of four years and 15 days for full-time and apprenticeship students, and six years and 15 days for part-time students, achieve a reasonable balance of timeliness and completeness. Together with the inclusion of continuing students as a positive outcome as described in paragraph 190, we consider that they represent a reasonable and proportionate approach.
192. As illustrated in Table 4, there are generally only small proportions of full-time entrants who are continuing in the study of a qualification at the proposed four years and 15 days census date, and that a clear majority of these subsequently demonstrated a positive completion outcome. While Table 4 shows higher proportions for the undergraduate with postgraduate component and postgraduate research levels of study, it shows that these reduce substantially over the subsequent two years, such that very few students remained continuing study six years and 15 days after their commencement date.

Table 4: Completion outcomes of full-time entrants in 2013-14, four and six years after commencement of their studies

Level of study	Full-time entrants in 2013-14	Proportion continuing at four years and 15 days census date	Proportion continuing at six years and 15 days	Of those continuing at four years, proportion completed by six years and 15 days	Of those continuing at four years, proportion with negative outcome at six years and 15 days
Other undergraduate	44,000	1.1%	0.1%	79.0%	13.5%
First degree	340,000	3.1%	0.1%	87.8%	7.0%
Undergraduate with postgraduate components	26,000	24.4%	0.7%	95.8%	1.0%
Other postgraduate	11,000	1.2%	0.2%	61.1%	15.3%
PGCE	23,000	0.1%	0.0%	57.9%	15.8%
Postgraduate taught masters	119,000	0.2%	0.0%	67.7%	15.6%
Postgraduate research	23,000	51.6%	6.2%	80.7%	7.0%

Notes: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data. 2013-14 entrants are the most recently available cohort of students that we can track for up to six years. Earlier cohorts demonstrate similar outcomes to those shown here.

193. Table 5 shows the equivalent information for part-time entrants. As might be expected, it shows higher proportions of students who are continuing in the study of a qualification four years and 15 days after course commencement, but relatively few doing so at the proposed six years and 15 days census date. Table 5 shows that the proportions of students who were continuing four years and 15 days after commencement that subsequently demonstrate positive or negative completion outcomes are more mixed.

Table 5: Completion outcomes of part-time entrants in 2013-14, four and six years after commencement of their studies

Level of study	Part-time entrants in 2013-14	Proportion continuing at four years and 15 days census date	Proportion continuing at six years and 15 days	Of those continuing at four years, proportion with positive outcome at six years and 15 days	Of those continuing at four years, proportion with negative outcome at six years and 15 days
Other undergraduate	50,000	2.1%	0.4%	50.6%	27.6%
First degree	41,000	23.9%	7.6%	40.6%	25.7%
Undergraduate with postgraduate components	<1,000	13.6%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Other postgraduate	30,000	2.5%	0.5%	63.2%	15.9%
PGCE	2,000	0.5%	0.0%	83.3%	8.3%
Postgraduate taught masters	34,000	6.7%	0.8%	70.6%	15.8%
Postgraduate research	5,000	52.8%	29.9%	30.8%	11.3%

Notes: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data. 2013-14 entrants are the most recently available cohort of students that we can track for up to six years. Earlier cohorts demonstrate similar outcomes to those shown here.

### Definition of positive completion outcomes within the cohort-tracking method

194. We have proposed that positive completion outcomes require that we find the student has gained a higher education qualification from the same provider at which they started studying or continuing in active study of a qualification registered at that provider, as at the relevant census date. Our reasoning for counting students who were continuing in active study of a qualification as a positive outcome was given in paragraphs 188 to 191, and mitigates the risk that the outcomes of students on longer courses are misrepresented by virtue of study remaining ongoing as at the proposed census date.
195. We propose that the cohort-tracking method will take the same approach to determining that students are actively studying or have gained a qualification as for continuation measures (see paragraphs 162 to 166). Such outcomes will be counted positively, for the same reasons that we propose to count them positively for continuation measures.
196. In doing so, we recognise that the proposed cohort-tracking census dates of four or six years after entry (for full-time, apprenticeship and part-time students respectively) afford a greater opportunity for students to spend periods of time inactive (or dormant) than is the case for

the equivalent continuation measure census dates, which fall much closer to the date at which the student commenced their studies. While any qualifications achieved in the interim period between a student's commencement and census dates will be considered in order that we can count these positively (as described at paragraph 164), we do not propose to consider interim periods of inactivity as negative outcomes. We propose to define students as active or inactive in study of a higher education qualification at the same provider only with reference to the relevant census point. We take the view that this ensures a fair and consistent consideration of all students in the entrant cohort for whom we are measuring this outcome.

197. Alternative approaches to defining positive completion outcomes using the cohort-tracking method would involve taking a narrower view of the outcomes achieved by students within the period leading up to the census date, and of activities at the proposed census date. For example, we could have required progressing through the same qualification, or through a qualification at the same mode and level of study as the one they started, or that continuing in active study (rather than having completed a qualification) was not a positive outcome. We have not proposed to narrow the definition of the measure in these ways.

#### **Students who transfer to another provider**

198. We also propose that the cohort-tracking method will take the same approach to student transfers as for continuation measures, for the reasons given there (see paragraphs 167 to 173). This means that when a student transfers to the study of a higher education qualification registered at another provider at any point in the interim period between a student's commencement and census dates, their outcome will be counted as a neutral outcome. At this time, if the transfer is to study for higher education credit it will be counted as a negative outcome. We again observe that the number of students who transfer to another provider is normally a small enough group that we can enact neutral treatment (by removing the student from both the numerator and the denominator used to calculate the cohort-tracking completion rate), rather than positive, without detriment to the overall utility and robustness of the measure.

#### **Advantages and disadvantages of the cohort-tracking method**

199. We consider that the key advantages of a cohort-tracking method are as follows:
  - a. Conceptually, the measure is relatively simple for stakeholders to understand and, technically, it is relatively straightforward for providers to replicate.
  - b. It allows for outcomes measures which are definitive about the extent to which students have been observed to complete or continue their qualifications. In doing so, it provides clarity about the outcome achieved at the level of the individual student. We consider that this further empowers providers to understand their student outcomes at different levels of granularity.
  - c. It allows for construction of indicators and split indicators across all populations of students, and does not rely on an assumption that structures and patterns of student progression through a programme of study remain stable over time.
200. We consider that the key disadvantages are:

- a. The indicators that result from this method are heavily lagged, meaning that the entrant cohorts that we report on started their higher education experience some time ago. As such, the measure may not accurately reflect more recent changes in patterns of performance or the experiences of students. For example, at the time of writing, the most recent academic year for which we have student data is 2020-21. A full-time student whose four years and 15 days census date falls within 2020-21 would have started their course in 2016-17, making this the most recent entrant cohort that we can report on. A part-time student whose six years and 15 days census date falls within 2020-21 would have started their course in 2014-15.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 183 to 200, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of the cohort-tracking method within the 'Description and methodology' document.
- Definitions of the variable IPCONINDFULL\_YX (and contributing variables included within the definition of IPCONINDFULL\_YX) within the 'Core algorithms' document.
- Instructions for rebuilding cohort-tracking completion indicators from your individualised student data within the 'Instructions for rebuilding OfS datasets' document.

## Compound indicator

201. In reporting a completion measure based on a compound indicator approach, we propose to construct this measure from an understanding of the rate at which students have withdrawn from their higher education study in a given academic year, and the stage of study from which they were withdrawing.
202. This method has been designed as a timelier measure of completion outcomes through its use of the most recent patterns of student withdrawal. These patterns can be understood more immediately than those that result from tracking students over time, as they can be observed from a single year of student data returns.
203. We propose that the compound indicator for a given year is created by identifying all of the students who withdrew from the study of a higher education qualification at the provider in question in that year, without gaining a qualification. This group of withdrawing students will comprise students withdrawing from different stages of their programme: some of this group will be withdrawing from study that they had only recently started, others will be withdrawing from much later stages of their course having already studied for a number of years. We therefore take the view that this group of withdrawing students can provide a snapshot of the propensity for students at the provider to leave their courses without completing a qualification, for a variety of reasons as discussed above, including as a response to the quality of the academic experience that they have encountered in that year.
204. To facilitate this, we propose that the group of withdrawing students is divided into six entry cohorts, each defined by the year in which they started their programme of study. For each of

those possible entry years, we can identify the number of students who started a relevant higher education qualification in that year. The number of withdrawing students in each of the six entry cohorts can then be divided by the number of students who started in the corresponding entry year to calculate a cohort withdrawal proportion. We consider that this calculation would establish the propensity of students to leave their higher education studies without completing a qualification, from different stages of a course, by considering leavers in the year in question relative to the number who started studying at the same point.

205. If we then assume that this withdrawal propensity is representative of the provider's current performance in supporting students at all stages of their course to complete their qualification or not, we can use it to calculate an informed estimate of the number and proportion of entrants who will ultimately complete a qualification. We propose that totalling the cohort withdrawal proportions across all six entry cohorts, and subtracting this total from 100 per cent gives the compound completion indicator. A worked example is included below in paragraphs 208 to 211 and Table 6.
206. While any one of the cohort withdrawal proportions could provide useful information about student outcomes when considered individually, we consider that this will, in broad terms, represent the likelihood that students withdraw from a single stage of a course. For example, the cohort withdrawal proportion calculated for the most recent of the six entry cohorts (the same year as the one for which we are calculating the compound indicator) would, in broad terms, represent the likelihood that a student left during their first year of study. The cohort withdrawal proportion calculated for the most historic of the six entry cohorts would, in broad terms, represent the likelihood that a student withdrew from the provider after five years of study. Because we are seeking to measure completion in respect of the whole student engagement with a course, we are seeking to capture information about the extent to which students leave at various stages of a course, rather than a single one. We take the view that totalling the six successive cohort withdrawal proportions will better represent the likelihood of students leaving at any point during their course, than would be achieved by taking any one of the six cohort withdrawal proportions in isolation.
207. We do though acknowledge that there may be occasions on which totalling the six successive cohort withdrawal proportions may overstate the likelihood of students leaving their course. This can occur when one or more of the six entry cohorts experiences a markedly higher proportions of students withdrawing from study in the year for which we are calculating the indicator than has previously been the case, and which will not be repeated in future.<sup>58</sup> We consider that this contributes to the compound indicator method being effective in identifying anomalous patterns of student withdrawal or changes in a provider's performance, that might not otherwise be evident until a number of years later if we were using a cohort-tracking method.

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<sup>58</sup> In extreme cases, this might occasionally lead to the calculated value of the compound indicator being reported as a negative number, when an anomalous withdrawal proportion is high enough to result in the sum of the six cohort withdrawal proportions exceeding 100 per cent. While our approach guards against a disproportionate impact of small cohort sizes on the calculation of this measure, in some cases large withdrawal proportions that result from a small cohort can contribute to the measure reporting a negative value.

### Worked example of the compound completion indicator calculations

208. Consider a simple example, in which we are seeking to calculate the compound completion indicator for a given provider for the 2019-20 year. Assume that the provider delivers only full-time first degree qualifications, and has 351 students whose HESA and ILR student records indicate that they have withdrawn from their studies during 2019-20.
209. Those 351 withdrawing students can be separated into their entry cohorts between 2014-15 and 2019-20, before we then divide each of these by the corresponding number of starters in that year, as shown in Table 6 below. That is:
- The number of students who withdrew in 2019-20 having started their qualification in 2019-20 (195 students) is divided by the total number of students starting full-time first degree study at the provider in 2019-20 (2,500 starters). This results in the cohort withdrawal proportion of 7.8 per cent (195 divided by 2,500). In broad terms, it represents the likelihood that a student in the first year of their course withdrew from study at the provider.
  - The number of 2019-20 withdrawals who started in 2018-19 (70 students) is divided by the total number starting in 2018-19 (2,000 starters), to give the 2018-19 cohort withdrawal proportion of 3.5 per cent. In broad terms, it represents the likelihood that a student withdraws from study at the provider in the second year of their course.
  - and so on, back to 2014-15.

Table 6: Calculation of cohort withdrawal proportions for the purposes of constructing the 2019-20 compound completion indicator

Year of entry cohort:	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20
Breakdown of the 351 students withdrawing in 2019-20 by year they started	10	20	26	30	70	195
Total entrants in each year	2,500	2,500	2,000	2,000	2,000	2,500
Cohort withdrawal proportion	0.4% (=10/2,500)	0.8% (=20/2,500)	1.3% (=26/2,000)	1.5% (=30/2,000)	3.5% (=70/2,000)	7.8% (=195/2,500)

210. The compound completion indicator for 2019-20 is constructed by subtracting the sum of the cohort withdrawal proportions shown in Table 6 from 100 per cent.
211. In this example, the compound completion indicator value is 84.7 per cent (100% - (0.4% + 0.8% + 1.3% + 1.5% + 3.5% + 7.8%)).

### Students and cohorts used to construct the compound indicator

212. The compound completion indicator refers to entrant cohorts within the calculation of the six entry cohort withdrawal proportions described in paragraph 204. In doing so, we propose that

the compound indicator method refers to the same entrant cohort as defined through Proposal 4 of this consultation, at paragraphs 129 to 133, and 142.

213. We propose that the indicator for a given year will be created as a compound measure which uses information about six entry cohorts to estimate the completion rates for students with a full-time, part-time or apprenticeship mode of study.
214. For the same reasons that we consider a census date six years after entry to achieve a reasonable balance of timeliness and completeness for the purposes of measuring completion outcomes of part-time students using the cohort-tracking method, we consider that information about the six entry cohorts used here will provide similar completeness. We are aware that some providers will observe students withdrawing from study in the year for which we are calculating the compound indicator, having started study at that provider more than six years prior. Including additional years of entry cohorts would provide evidence of student withdrawals from even later stages of courses, but this evidence would serve to influence the indicator with data that is more historic (and potentially less reliable for understanding the current performance of the provider). We take the view that six entry cohorts will provide the method with data and evidence about most of the students who will ultimately go on to have a positive completion outcome in higher education, without calling upon data that is so historic as to be providing the method with misleading information about entrant cohorts and student characteristics. We note that including additional years of entry cohorts would only increase the total of the compounded withdrawal proportions that is subtracted from 100 per cent, thereby calculating a lower compound indicator for any provider.
215. We do not propose to limit the method for full-time and apprenticeships to four entry cohorts to mirror the census dates used in the cohort-tracking equivalents because we note that the four-year census date represents a compromise required to prevent excessive lags in the availability of this measure for these cohorts. The design of the compound method, and its lack of reliance on tracking students over time to provide the information required, means that we do not need to make the same compromise here and can prioritise the completeness of the data and evidence that the method draws upon.
216. We are aware that not all providers will have students withdrawing from study in the year for which we are calculating the compound indicator, having started study at that provider as many as six years prior. For example, if a provider only delivered two-year other undergraduate courses, there may not be students withdrawing from that course more than three or four years after starting it. In such cases, the cohort withdrawal proportions for those most historic entry cohorts would be calculated as zero per cent and have no impact on the compound indicator that we calculate as a subtraction from 100 per cent.

#### **Definition of withdrawal outcomes within the compound indicator method**

217. We propose that the students identified as withdrawing from study at the provider in question, in the year for which we are calculating the indicator, without gaining a qualification, are defined as follows. In each case, the student must be recorded in that year's HESA or ILR student data with a general qualification aim for their course which refers to a higher education qualification.

- a. The student has a date of leaving their programme of study that falls within that year, and all of the following are true:
  - i. The student does not satisfy the definition of a qualifier on the basis as defined at paragraphs 134 to 138, and 144 to 145.
  - ii. They did not change onto another engagement of higher education study for a qualification at the same provider, whether at the same level or different, in that year or the following year (where available).
  - iii. They did not transfer to study for a higher education qualification at another provider in that year or the following year (where available).
- b. The student has been recorded as dormant in that year, and it is the second consecutive year of dormancy in a row.

218. We take the view that there is a material chance that the students who satisfy the criteria described in paragraph 217 will not successfully complete their higher education course and obtain a qualification from the provider at which they started their course and we therefore consider that this represents circumstances of highly likely withdrawal from higher education study which it would be appropriate to take into account when measuring withdrawals for the purposes of the completion indicator. We consider that it is reasonable to determine that these circumstances are counted as negative outcomes in our construction of the compound completion indicator.

219. In the case of students whom we observe to be dormant for two consecutive years, we consider this to be a proportionate approach which balances our intention for this indicator to be as timely as possible, and the completeness of the measure. We also anticipate that it aligns with many providers' academic regulations in respect of the maximum duration of a single break in study. Allowing students to experience longer periods of dormancy before triggering their identification as a withdrawal has the potential to undermine the timeliness and responsiveness of the indicator. OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data indicates that allowing for three or more consecutive years of dormancy would have little, if any, impact on calculation of the measure: for most modes and levels of study, fewer than 0.2 per cent of entrants who experience this length of consecutive dormancy subsequently go on to complete a higher education qualification at the same provider. This proportion is slightly higher (around 0.6 per cent) for part-time students on taught postgraduate programmes of study. We have proposed that assessments of condition B3 and TEF will take into account the context of providers for whom students being dormant for extended periods is likely to be a material issue for making judgements about their performance

#### **Definition of positive student outcomes within the compound indicator method**

220. We propose that students who do not count as withdrawing from higher education study (on the basis that they do not satisfy the criteria listed in paragraph 217) will count as either positive or neutral outcomes in our construction of the compound completion indicator.

221. Students are not counted as withdrawing from higher education study when they are recorded in the relevant year's HESA or ILR student data with a qualification aim which refers to a higher education qualification, in active study at the same provider at which they started studying, with no date of leaving that course recorded in the student data. In such

cases, we take the view that there is sufficient evidence that the students are continuing their studies and therefore have the potential to complete their qualification. We propose to count such students as positive outcomes in our construction of the measure.

222. We also propose to count as positive outcomes any student who has a date of leaving their programme of study that falls within the relevant year, where either of the following are true:
- a. the student satisfies the definition of a qualifier given in paragraphs 134 to 138, and 144 to 145.
  - b. the relevant year refers to the single most recent year of student data available and the student is recorded in HESA data with a reason for leaving their studies of 'completion of course – result unknown'.<sup>59</sup>
223. We consider that students who have gained a qualification with a known result in the relevant year have, by definition, completed their studies and treatment as a positive student outcome is in direct alignment with the intent of the measure.
224. When the relevant year refers to the single most recent year of student data available, we propose the following approach to treatment of students recorded with results not known.

#### Treatment of students recorded with results not known

225. When a student is recorded in HESA data returns with results not known, HESA reporting requirements mean that the results actually achieved by that student must be included in the provider's submission of the following year's student data. This means that, for most years of the compound indicator calculation, there is information available to the method from subsequent years of data returns to include the actual student outcome as either positive or negative depending on what was achieved.
226. It is only for the most recent year of the compound indicator calculation that we do not yet hold information about the actual outcome achieved by those reported within HESA data with this reason for leaving. This is because the most recent year of the compound indicator relies on the most recent year of student data available. Without the following year of student data which confirms the results actually achieved, we cannot include the actual student outcome for these students.
227. In the small proportion of cases that the reason for leaving reported in the latest HESA student data return identifies result not known, we therefore propose to include these students as qualifiers being awarded a higher education qualification, rather than withdrawals that would count negatively. This proposal recognises that the existing data reporting does not provide sufficient information to establish whether the outcome should be viewed as positive in some or all cases. As such, it aligns with our approach for offering benefit of the doubt when necessary and appropriate for considering what constitutes a positive outcome at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes.

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<sup>59</sup> See the definition of the HESA variable reason for ending instance (RSNEND) at [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/a/rsnend](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19051/a/rsnend) and [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19054/a/rsnend](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c19054/a/rsnend), where RSNEND = 98 refers to the outcome of 'completion of course – result unknown'.

228. The reporting requirements for the ILR are different. As described at paragraph 138, submission of an ILR record reporting learning complete but results not yet known will mean that a student need not be returned in later ILR submissions and we are unable to ever determine that student's actual outcome. This has led us to propose that such students are included in the definition of higher education qualifiers, and hence count as a positive outcome in each and every year of the compound indicator calculation, on the basis of the criteria at paragraph 222 a.

#### Treatment of students who change course

229. When constructing the compound indicator measure, we also need to consider the case that a student has a date of leaving their programme of study that falls within the year for which we are calculating the indicator, and either of the following statements are true:

- a. The student changed onto another engagement of higher education study for a qualification at the same provider, whether at the same level or different (including restarting their course), in that year or the following year (where available).
- b. The student transferred to study for a higher education qualification at another provider in that year or the following year (where available).

230. In the circumstance defined by paragraph 229 a, we propose to treat these as positive outcomes when constructing the measure for years prior to the most recent year of student data available. We take the view that continuing in higher education study at any level is a positive outcome, for the same reasons that we propose to count this positively for continuation measures (see paragraphs 162 to 166). When constructing the measure for the most recent year of student data, a student with a date of leaving their programme of study that falls within that year would only count positively if they changed onto another engagement, or restarted, in higher education at the same provider within that same year. If they were to change or restart in the following year, this would not be reflected in the measure as a positive outcome until it is recalculated later, once the following year's student data has become available.

231. In the circumstance defined by paragraph 229 b, we propose to treat these as neutral outcomes when constructing the measure for years prior to the most recent year of student data available. We will do this by reducing the numerators and denominators used to calculate the cohort withdrawal proportions by the number of students observed to transfer to another provider in the year of the indicator calculation or the one following. When constructing the measure for the most recent year of student data, a student with a date of leaving their programme of study that falls within that year would only count positively if they transferred to study a higher education qualification at another provider within that same year. If they were to transfer in the following year, this would not be reflected in the measure as a neutral outcome until it is recalculated later, once the following year's student data has become available.

232. We consider that differences in the approach to calculating the measure, for the most recent year and for earlier years, is a necessary and proportionate consequence of prioritising design of the compound indicator method as a timelier measure of completion outcomes. In constructing the measure for the most recent year of student data we are unable to test

whether the student changes, restarts or transfers study of a higher education qualification in the following year because that data is not yet available.

233. Alternative approaches to the treatment of students who change course (described in paragraphs 229 to 231) include not calculating the measure for the single most recent year of student data, and waiting until we could see changes, restarts or transfers in the following year once more data became available. We take the view that making the measure less timely, when it is specifically designed to counter the lagged nature of the cohort-tracking method, would be undesirable, especially in light of the relatively low proportions of students who make these changes (relative to the proportions of students that continue, complete or withdraw altogether).
234. Another alternative, which has been considered by the OfS in detail, would be to use earlier years of data to establish estimates of the rates at which students at each provider will typically change, restart and transfer from various stages of their programmes of study. We could then use this information as a weighting to adjust the calculation of the compound indicator for the most recent year of student data available. This option has proven unworkable without adding significant complexity and discontinuities into calculation of the measure, and without compromising its transparency irrevocably.

#### **Advantages and disadvantages of the compound indicator method**

235. We consider that the key advantages of a compound indicator method are as follows:

- a. The timeliness of the measure, and its ability to respond to more recent changes in patterns of a provider's performance or the experience it delivers for its students.
- b. It allows for construction of indicators and split indicators across all populations of students, and can quickly respond to course structure changes or patterns of student progression through a programme of study which prove unstable over time.

236. We consider that the key disadvantages are:

- a. Conceptually, the measure is potentially less straightforward for stakeholders to understand and, technically, for providers to replicate.
- b. It relies on a sum of cohort-based withdrawal proportions which means that it does not report on the observed completion outcomes of a single cohort of individual students. We acknowledge that this further complicates providers' attempts to replicate the measure at levels of granularity beyond those calculated by the OfS. It also further complicates the calculation of benchmarks and statistical uncertainty presentational tools, which have conventionally relied on methods applicable to individual-level data observations and need to draw on modified or different formulae when applied to this measure.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 201 to 236, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of the compound indicator method within the 'Description and methodology' document.

- Definitions of the variables IPCIENED and IPCIREULT (and contributing variables included within the definition of these) within the 'Core algorithms' document.
- Instructions for rebuilding compound completion indicators from your individualised student data within the 'Instructions for rebuilding OfS datasets' document.

### Question 15

Do you have any preference for one of the proposed approaches to measuring completion outcomes over the other? Please provide an explanation for your answer. In particular, please describe any strengths and weaknesses of the two methods that inform your preference.

### Question 16

To what extent do you agree with the definition of the **cohort-tracking measure** defined within this proposal? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 17

To what extent do you agree with the definition of the **compound indicator measure** defined within this proposal? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 7: Construction of progression measures

237. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that the proportion of students progressing to managerial or professional employment, or further study, is reported as one of the numerical measures used in assessments of condition B3 and under the TEF scheme.<sup>60</sup> It is also one of the student outcomes measured through the access and participation data dashboard.

238. In reporting this measure, we propose to calculate rates of progression on the basis of responses to the Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey, reflecting a student's outcomes approximately 15 months after they have been awarded a higher education qualification. In doing so, we will identify a cohort of higher education qualifiers who responded to the survey and consider the activities they report being engaged in during the survey's census week.

### Data source

239. The GO survey was conducted for the first time for higher education leavers in 2017-18. Prior to this, the development and introduction of the survey was subject to an extended period of sector engagement and consultation<sup>61</sup> which resulted in a survey instrument that is materially

<sup>60</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>61</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes).

different than its predecessor, the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, in timing, structure and operation. These fundamental differences mean that data from the two surveys are not directly comparable, and we therefore propose to make no attempt to combine DLHE and GO responses into a single time series.

240. This position is in line with advice from HESA to data users, which warns against attempting to directly compare data between the two surveys, noting that any such comparisons are likely to generate highly questionable results that are open to misinterpretation.<sup>62</sup> HESA has taken a similar decision, that they will not undertake, publish or otherwise disseminate any comparisons of data between the GO survey and the DLHE survey.
241. As the GO survey is conducted 15 months after the student gained their qualification, this means that there are currently two years of GO survey responses available.<sup>63</sup> The supporting and illustrative data released alongside this consultation uses GO responses of graduates in 2017-18 and 2018-19. The time series that we expect to construct for the first implementation of the new TEF scheme and condition B3 assessments in summer 2022 would also include GO responses of 2019-20 graduates.

### **Qualifiers for whom progression outcomes are measured**

242. We propose that progression measures are constructed with reference to the population of qualifiers defined through Proposal 4 of this consultation, at paragraphs 134 to 140, and 145.
243. We propose that students whose domicile prior to entry is outside of the UK are not included in the coverage of the progression measures we construct. This is because we observe that around half of the employed non-UK domiciled students who responded to the survey reported an employment location outside of the UK. By comparison, only around 2 per cent of UK-domiciled graduates reported their employment location as outside of the UK. We consider that occupations of graduates working abroad will be less meaningful when mapped against the UK occupational classifications by which we propose to use to determine those working in managerial or professional employment (see paragraphs 257 to 272). Including only those non-UK domiciled students who reported working in the UK (where information on their occupational classifications would be more meaningful), while excluding those working abroad, would introduce structural bias to the indicators we calculate so we consider it necessary to remove all non-UK domiciled students from the coverage of the progression measures we construct.
244. We also note that the survey response rates among non-UK domiciled graduates are lower than those of UK-domiciled graduates.<sup>64</sup> It is posited that the responses received from non-UK domiciled graduates, of which half remained in the UK post-graduation rather than returning to their home country or moving elsewhere abroad, may be less representative of

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<sup>62</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/user-guide](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/user-guide).

<sup>63</sup> The GO survey census point was set later than that of the DLHE survey in recognition that it was likely to be more meaningful to survey students 15 months after graduation, when they could be expected to have taken up employment or study opportunities. However, development and implementation of the GO survey also recognised that this extended period may increase the likelihood of lower response rates. Balancing these issues was tested through the period of sector engagement and consultation.

<sup>64</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/survey-response#domicile](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/survey-response#domicile).

the outcomes of international graduates more generally. We consider that visa rules around employment and further study further support this interpretation.<sup>65</sup>

245. We recognise that for some providers, non-UK domiciled graduates represent a sizeable proportion of their total number of qualifiers, particularly in certain modes or levels of study. Our proposed restriction of progression measures to UK-domiciled graduates has no impact on those we propose to report through the access and participation data dashboard, because it reports all measures for UK-domiciled undergraduates only, in order to provide an appropriate degree of alignment with the scope of access and participation plans, as prescribed through regulations made under HERA. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers, including those where students being predominantly non-UK domiciled is likely to represent a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>66</sup>
246. As described in Proposal 3, future development of destination surveys may consider extensions of coverage by comparison with that of the current GO survey: if any extensions were deemed feasible and appropriate, we would expect to consult on revised approaches at a future point in time.

### **Approach to survey non-response**

247. Although all students awarded a higher education qualification are invited to respond to the GO survey, it is inevitable that some students who have been included in the GO target list are uncontactable or decline to respond. This means that GO responses represent a sample of progression outcomes. Statistics constructed from samples of students have the potential to exhibit bias if we do not have a 100 per cent response rate. Such biases will occur if there is a correlation between the propensity to respond to the survey and the true answers to the survey questions. For example, if people are less likely to respond to questions about ill health in a medical questionnaire if they suffer from particular ailments, then any estimate for the extent of poor health derived from respondents only will be too low.
248. The GO survey has, to date, achieved overall response rates of just over 50 per cent. Among UK-domiciled graduates only, the survey achieved response rates of 56 per cent and 57 per cent in 2017-18 and 2018-19 respectively. To ascertain whether the consequences of non-response to the GO survey required mitigation through the application of statistical weighting, HESA commissioned research by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER).<sup>67</sup> Statistical weighting can be applied to survey response data to help ensure that information received from the subset of the population who chose to respond to the survey is representative of the whole population who could have responded to the survey. For example, if we knew from the GO target list that male students should make up 50 per cent of the higher education qualifiers population, but observe that only 40 per cent of the GO responses were submitted by men, then male students would be underrepresented in the responses. To make the responses representative when calculating summary statistics from

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<sup>65</sup> See [www.gov.uk/graduate-visa](http://www.gov.uk/graduate-visa).

<sup>66</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>67</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/files/ISER-Graduate-Outcomes-weighting-report-20210720.pdf](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/files/ISER-Graduate-Outcomes-weighting-report-20210720.pdf) [PDF].

the data in this example, you could weight the responses from male students by 1.25 (as the result of 50 per cent population proportion, divided by 40 per cent survey proportion), and female students by 0.83 (as the result of 50 per cent population proportion, divided by 60 per cent survey population).

249. The ISER research explored a range of alternative weighting models and found that, in all cases, these approaches improved the accuracy of survey results in only a minority of cases, and that this improvement where it occurred was very small. This conclusion, of no material difference between weighted and unweighted results, means that we take assurance that GO responses provide a representative sample of graduates' employment and study destinations. We consider that it indicates that there is no evidence of substantial non-response bias in the survey data, so we do not propose to utilise survey weighting techniques within our construction of these measures. It is likely that adoption of weighting, or imputation, methods would add significant complexity to understanding the construction of measures based on the GO survey, while exerting little, if any, influence over the results reported by the measure.

### **Suppressing results which rely on low response rates**

250. To guard further against non-response bias, we propose to suppress any indicator and split indicator results which rely on response rates below 30 per cent among the population of students informing calculation of that indicator. We would expect to keep under review the response rates that lead to suppression of indicators and split indicators as response rates increase in future: HESA aims to achieve a response rate of at least 60 per cent for UK domiciled students.
251. This proposal differs from the approach used within annual publications of GO results through the Discover Uni website<sup>68</sup>, as well as with our proposals for construction and reporting of student experience indicators based on the NSS, which suppress values on the basis of response rates being lower than 50 per cent. We take the view it is appropriate to be more conservative when reporting data through resources which aim to inform students and prospective students. We also note that the NSS already consistently achieves response rates of around 70 per cent, including for many sub-categories of the students invited to participate in the survey, but the same is not yet true of the GO survey.<sup>69</sup>
252. We consider that the construction of datasets to inform our regulation of quality and standards and access and participation needs to allow expert users to make informed judgements about the evidence that does and does not carry weight. The approach we propose is more conservative than HESA uses when reporting on GO responses, where currently none of the results are suppressed on account of low response rates. While this could be an alternative approach, in our view it would increase the complexity and burden of understanding our regulatory approaches. We could also suppress indicators and split indicators based on different response rates, such as 35 per cent or 40 per cent, but note that this would lead to sizeable increases in the number of suppressions we make, with little

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<sup>68</sup> See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk>.

<sup>69</sup> OfS analysis of the proposed datasets to inform assessments of condition B and the TEF finds that around 2 per cent of indicators and split indicators based on NSS responses, and referring to at least 23 students in the denominator, are suppressed on the basis of response rates under 50 per cent. Applying the same criterion to equivalent indicators and split indicators based on GO responses would suppress 20 per cent of results.

evidence that they make a material difference to how representative those results are of the populations they refer to. Around 1 per cent of indicators and split indicators based on GO responses, and referring to at least 23 students in the denominator, are suppressed on the basis of response rates under 30 per cent.

253. While we have considered alternative requirements for response rates, we take the view that suppressing indicators and split indicators results which rely on response rates below 30 per cent achieves an appropriate balance in respect of:
- a. Being high enough to effectively mitigate the risk that indicators and split indicators calculated from populations with lower response rates could be misrepresentative of the population that they represent, and hence unreliable for the purposes of making regulatory judgements about providers.
  - b. Not being so conservative as to suppress large numbers of indicators and split indicators that are sufficiently representative of the population that they represent to be reliable for the purposes of making regulatory judgements about providers.
  - c. The ability for users to access a clear understanding of the approach we have taken to constructing student outcome measures from the GO survey.

254. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers, including those for whom survey response rates are likely to represent a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>70</sup> To support this, we propose to include the response rate achieved for each indicator population in our reporting of the indicator datasets.

### **Partial responses**

255. The GO survey also receives a number of partial responses, within which graduates may not have provided information on all of the relevant aspects needed to determine whether or not they achieved a positive outcome on our measure. Around 4 per cent of graduates invited to respond to the GO survey submit such a response, with these responses then representing approximately 6 per cent of the total that the survey receives:
- a. In all but a very small number of cases (less than 1 per cent of all responses), a graduate making a partial response has answered the first two questions of the GO questionnaire, which ask about the activities they are engaged in at the census date, and which one they consider to be their most important.<sup>71</sup> These question responses are sufficient to determine whether a graduate is employed, in further study, unemployed or in one of the other destination categories at the survey census date.
  - b. Around half of the partial responses report that the graduate is employed and provide sufficient information about their job titles, job duties, employer name and employer description to determine their occupation. Another 7 per cent of partial responses report

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<sup>70</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>71</sup> See the survey questionnaire at [www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes/survey](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/outcomes/survey).

that the graduate's only activities were further study, unemployment or one of the other destination categories. In all of these cases, the graduate will have provided all of the information needed to inform calculation of the measure we propose here.

- c. The remaining partial responses (less than 3 per cent of all responses) involve the graduate reporting that they were in employment, whether as their only activity, or in combination with others, but not providing all of the information required to determine their occupation.

256. We take the view that disregarding partial responses that are able to furnish an accurate interpretation of a graduate's outcome is undesirable and would have the effect of lowering response rates and increasing suppression of outcomes. The limited number of insufficiently complete responses, and an absence of evidence that their inclusion biases the results we draw from the survey, leads us to propose the same approach as used by HESA, wherein all graduates who completed the first two questions of the survey are counted as responses.<sup>72</sup>

### **Definition of positive progression outcomes**

257. We have proposed that positive progression outcomes require that we find the student progressing to managerial or professional employment, or further study, at the GO survey census date 15 months after they were awarded a higher education qualification.

258. In determining a student's progression outcome, we propose to make use of information provided within a GO response about all of the activities that a graduate is engaged in on the survey census date. When graduates are engaged in multiple activities (for example, a combination of working and further study), the student outcome will count as positive if any part of that combination would individually count as a positive outcome. We take the view that this approach aligns with our overarching one to define outcomes in a way that offers benefit of the doubt when necessary and appropriate when considering what should count as 'positive' at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes.

259. We have considered alternative approaches, in which we could rely on the graduate's own judgement of their main or most important activity,<sup>73</sup> or in which we could require that a graduate spends the majority of their time in a given activity for them to count as a positive outcome. We believe that in each case, this would result in a narrower view of the outcomes counting as positive.

- a. Where use of information about all of a graduate's activities at the census date makes maximum use of the available information, relying instead on the graduate's judgement would mean that two students with the same profile of activities could count as different progression outcomes as a result of the subjectivity the graduate rightly uses in selecting their most important activity. This would risk inconsistent regulatory judgements and reduce the transparency of an assessment approach which was less informed about the full extent of potentially positive outcomes.

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<sup>72</sup> HESA's approach is described in the Graduate Outcomes Survey methodology statement at [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/methodology](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/methodology).

<sup>73</sup> The second question of the GO questionnaire asks graduates which activity they consider to be their most important one at the census date. See the definition of MIMPACT at [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c18072/a/mimpact](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c18072/a/mimpact).

- b. One of the main differences between approaches which consider all of a graduate's activities and only their self-identified most important activity is the categorisation of graduates engaged in multiple activities. In a number of cases, these combinations of activities can include a main activity that would not count as a positive outcome for our proposed progression indicator, and a second (or third) activity that would. These cases are found among graduates of a large number of providers across the sector.

260. Our proposed definition of positive progression outcomes is consistent with those used in the May 2021 publication of projected completion and employment from entrant data (Proceed) and explained in full in paragraphs 261 to 290 below.<sup>74</sup>

### **Defining progression to managerial and professional employment**

261. When defining progression to managerial and professional employment we propose to use the ONS Standard Occupational Classification 2020 (SOC) major groupings, using groups 1 to 3.<sup>75</sup>

262. When a graduate responds to the GO survey that their activities at the census date include employment (whether on a full-time, part-time or self-employed basis, as paid or voluntary work), HESA provides SOC 2020 unit group assignments for that employment within GO response datasets for data users.<sup>76</sup> This means that the SOC 2020 unit groups assigned to graduates in 2017-18 and 2018-19 are readily available for a range of users, supporting a transparent and well understood definition of managerial and professional employment. The definition is consistent with the approach for reporting employment occupations within annual publications of GO results through the HESA and Discover Uni websites.<sup>77</sup>

263. As a common classification of occupational information in the UK, the ONS publishes full and detailed information about the SOC classification. In constructing the SOC 2020 unit groupings, the ONS describes that individual jobs were assigned using one of four skill levels, and the skills specialisation of that job.<sup>78</sup> The skill level is based on the length of time needed for a person to become competent in the tasks the job requires, including the time needed to complete any formal qualifications or work-based training, with skill level 1 requiring the shortest amount of time and skill level 4 requiring the longest. The skills specialisation of a job is the field of knowledge and the type of work that is required to be competent at the job's tasks. Jobs in skill level 4 were considered to "normally require a degree or equivalent period of relevant work experience", while jobs in skill level 3 were considered to be occupations that normally require knowledge associated with a period of post-compulsory education but not normally to degree level. In deciding which groups should

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<sup>74</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/proceed-updated-methodology-and-results/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/proceed-updated-methodology-and-results/).

<sup>75</sup> See

[www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020](http://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020) and [https://onsdigital.github.io/dp-classification-tools/standard-occupational-classification/ONS\\_SOC\\_hierarchy\\_view.html](https://onsdigital.github.io/dp-classification-tools/standard-occupational-classification/ONS_SOC_hierarchy_view.html).

<sup>76</sup> Responses to questions about graduates' job titles, job duties, employer name and employer description are coded to the SOC by Oblong, as described at [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/methodology/data-processing](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates/methodology/data-processing).

<sup>77</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/graduates).

<sup>78</sup> See

[www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020/soc2020volume1structureanddescriptionsofunitgroups](http://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020/soc2020volume1structureanddescriptionsofunitgroups).

be in skill level 4, the ONS notes that work by Peter Elias and Kate Purcell,<sup>79</sup> and by Francis Green and Golo Henseke,<sup>80</sup> was considered, along with DLHE data and a review of online job adverts.

264. Application of any standard classification will be limited in its ability to reflect the nuances of individual occupations in all instances. We acknowledge that there will be occupations which sit outside of the managerial and professional employment which might suit that classification, and vice versa. Equally, there will be occupations which are neither managerial nor professional employment yet represent positive progression outcomes for some of the individual students involved. But we believe that this will be true of any approach that we might use to define progression outcomes, and we consider that the SOC construction approach described in paragraph 263 allows us to construct an inclusive measure that considers whether graduates are achieving outcomes consistent with the higher education qualification they have completed.

### **Alternative definitions of employment outcomes**

265. We are aware that students qualifying from some specific, vocationally orientated courses at a small number of specialist higher education providers will achieve employment in their intended occupation without that occupation being recognised as managerial or professional employment. While we acknowledge that progression into these occupations may be interpreted positively for the individual students and specific providers involved, progression into those occupations by qualifiers from other courses at other providers would not seem to represent progression outcomes that are in the wider student interest. We take the view that regulatory approaches would become unmanageably complex and burdensome if they were attempting to understand and communicate bespoke definitions applicable to different providers and for different years of data, according to specific courses and individual students at any given point in time. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers for whom the circumstances of individual student or course outcomes is likely to be a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>81</sup>

266. We take the view that alternative options for defining progression to managerial and professional, or graduate-level, employment are all more restrictive and less transparent. Methods such as Elias and Purcell's classification of graduate occupations rely at least in part on a qualitative assessment of the expertise required by a given job, which cannot easily be understood or replicated as underlying data sources evolve over time. Similarly, the more data-led methods such as those used by Green and Henseke rely on advanced statistical concepts which can be difficult to understand or critically appraise within the contexts we are proposing to look at progression outcomes.

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<sup>79</sup> See 'Classifying graduate occupations for the knowledge society' at [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/futuretrack/findings/elias\\_purcell\\_soche\\_final.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/futuretrack/findings/elias_purcell_soche_final.pdf) [PDF].

<sup>80</sup> Green, F., Henseke, G. (2016). The changing graduate labour market: analysis using a new indicator of graduate jobs. *IZA Journal of Labor Policy* 5, Article number 14.

<sup>81</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

267. We would welcome feedback on the potential advantages or disadvantages of these alternative options. We would also welcome feedback on the potential to make use of the skill level groupings described in paragraph 263 which contribute to the construction of the SOC. In particular, whether managerial and professional occupations could be defined as any at skill levels 3 and 4.<sup>82</sup>
268. We anticipate that an approach based on skill level groupings 3 and 4 might, in future, have the benefit of being aligned with the design and implementation of HTQs. In our initial consideration of such an approach, we have identified that all of the occupations at skill level 4 map to SOC major groups 1 or 2 and are therefore included in our preferred definition of managerial and professional employment. The ONS then categorise ten sub-major groups of SOC 2020 at skill level 3, with occupations mapping to six of these sub-major groups being included in our preferred definition because they correspond to SOC major groups 1 or 3. However, the remaining four sub-major groups at skill level 3 represent a mix of occupations corresponding to SOC major group 5 which, in our view, comprise some occupations that it might be desirable to include as a positive outcome, and a number which it is not:
- a. Sub-major group 51 – skilled agricultural and related trades (farmers; horticultural trades; gardeners; groundsmen and greenkeepers; and agricultural and fishing trades)
  - b. Sub-major group 52 – skilled metal, electrical and electronic trades (metal forming, welding and related trades; metal machining, fitting and instrument making trades; vehicle trades; electrical and electronic trades; and skilled metal, electrical and electronic trades supervisors)
  - c. Sub-major group 53 – skilled construction and building trades (construction and building trades; building finishing trades; construction and building trades supervisors)
  - d. Sub-major group 54 – textiles, printing and other skilled trades (textiles and garments trades; printing trades; food preparation and hospitality trades; and other skilled trades such as glass makers, furniture and other craft woodworkers, florists).
269. We take the view that including as positive outcomes a number of the SOC major group 5 subcomponent occupations listed in paragraph 268 a to d would not seem to be in the student interest. It is unclear that employment in several of these occupations is consistent with the investment – in financial and personal terms – students make through the completion of a higher education qualification.

### **Defining progression to managerial and professional employment for partial responses**

270. The partial responses submitted to the GO survey mean that a small number of responding graduates (less than 3 per cent of all responses) have not provided information on all of the relevant aspects needed to determine whether or not they achieved a positive outcome on our measure.<sup>83</sup> While approximately 6 per cent of all responses to the GO survey were partial

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<sup>82</sup> See Table 1 at

[www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020/soc2020volume1structureanddescriptionsofunitgroups](http://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/standardoccupationalclassificationsoc/soc2020/soc2020volume1structureanddescriptionsofunitgroups).

<sup>83</sup> While approximately 6 per cent of all responses to the GO survey were partial responses, more than half of these will have provided all of the information needed to inform calculation of the proposed measure.

responses, more than half of these will have provided all of the information needed to inform calculation of the proposed measure, as described in paragraph 255.

271. We have observed that around 40 per cent of partial responses report that a graduate is employed but has not provided information about job or employer names and duties that facilitates coding their occupation to a SOC 2020 code. These responses equate to around 3 per cent of employed graduates. We have considered alternative approaches and would welcome feedback on them, but we consider that it would be undesirable to exclude employed graduates without SOC codes from the indicator calculations, or alternatively, to count them as neutral outcomes. This is because doing so would damage response rates and disregard valuable information about student outcomes. Because there is no equivalent group of 'unknown' responses among those who report progression into further study outcomes or one of the other destination categories, alternative approaches that remove or treat differently only those employed graduates with unknown SOC codes would also potentially skew the measures.
272. We recognise that there will be a variety of circumstances in which the employment reported through a partial response may represent a positive outcome, as well as a variety in which the employment reported may represent a negative outcome. Accordingly, a proposal that counts all such responses as either positive or negative is likely to misrepresent student outcomes. Instead, we consider that calculating the likelihood of an employed graduate without a SOC code being in managerial or professional employment would result in a measure that offers benefit of the doubt when defining what constitutes a 'positive' outcome. Therefore, we propose to maximise the utility of the responses dataset, and apportion the partial response between managerial or professional and non-managerial or professional employment in the same ratio as has been derived for the provider, mode and level of study of the graduate in question.

### **Defining progression to further study**

273. We propose that progression into further study will include any further study that the graduate was engaged in at the GO survey census date 15 months after they were awarded a higher education qualification.
274. We recognise that the categories available to GO survey respondents to self-identify their level of further study do not align directly with those used elsewhere in the student data and may be too broad to capture all progressions precisely. For example, when determining the level of the qualification awarded from the student data it is possible to identify postgraduate taught masters, PGCE or other postgraduate certificates and diplomas as distinct from one another, but this differentiation is not possible in the survey responses about the study they have progressed into. Similarly, it can be difficult to ascertain whether progression to the further study of self-identified professional qualifications supports interpretation as a student outcome consistent with the higher education qualification they have completed.
275. We therefore take the view that alternative options, which might involve requiring that a graduate progresses into further study at a particular level of study, are less reliable, more restrictive and inconsistent with our overarching proposed approach to defining outcomes in a way that offers benefit of the doubt when necessary and appropriate when considering what should count as 'positive' at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes. We propose that all further study will count as a positive progression outcome,

whether full-time or part-time, and whether at the same, lower or higher level than the higher education qualification the graduate recently obtained.

### **Which graduates count as progressing to managerial and professional employment or further study?**

276. We propose that any graduate who identifies employment among the activities that they are engaged in on the survey census date would count as a positive progression outcome if that employment maps to a managerial and professional occupation on the basis proposed in paragraphs 261 to 272. This would include those graduates who are self-employed, and those working in voluntary or unpaid roles, as well as those in paid employment.
277. We also propose that any graduate who identifies further study among the activities that they are engaged in on the survey census date would count as a positive progression outcome, on the basis described in paragraphs 257 to 275.
278. We do not propose to include graduates who report that they are due to start a job or studying in the next month. We consider that this is an appropriate and proportionate approach because this was not their activity on the survey census date, and there is no guarantee that graduates responding in this way will be a comprehensive or reliable representation of the graduates for whom this will actually be their outcome. It cannot be known how many of the graduates who respond that they are due to start work or study subsequently change their plans, and nor is it known how many might very soon after completing the survey secure employment or a place of further study that they are due to start imminently.
279. We also do not propose to include interim activities as positive outcomes. This means that a graduate would not count as having a positive outcome if they reported that they were unemployed at the census date, or not otherwise engaged in activities that we have proposed to count as a positive outcome, but that they were previously employed or had undertaken study since completing their higher education course 15 months prior.
280. We note that the census date approach to categorising progression follows by design of the survey approach, having been fundamental to the design and development of the survey instrument and consulted on therein. This means that an approach which places greater emphasis on interim activities, or those due to start in the following month, contradicts the overall ethos of the survey.

### **Why we don't propose to count interim activities as positive progression outcomes**

281. We recognise that interim study and employment activities might both represent positive outcomes in some circumstances. For example, in the case of progressions to one-year courses such as degree 'top-up' courses and taught masters which mean that the graduate has only very recently qualified with a second qualification when they complete the survey for the first time in relation to the earlier qualification. However, we take the view that the current GO survey infrastructure does not support taking an appropriate, consistent or comprehensive account of these interim activities:
- a. While the survey collects information about whether the respondent studied in the interim 15 months, at what level, and whether it was full-time or part-time, it does not collect information about whether they gained a qualification from that interim study or how long

they studied for. We consider that these may be important attributes for defining an appropriate student outcomes measure.

- b. The survey collects only very limited information about any employment within the interim 15 months, about whether the graduate was employed at any point and how many jobs they have had since qualifying. The survey does not collect any detail about the job and employer names and duties of any interim employment, and without these details, graduates who worked in managerial or professional employment in the interim period could not be differentiated from those whose interim employment was not managerial or professional.

282. We consider that it is undesirable to take a different approach to the inclusion of interim study as opposed to interim employment activities, and that to do so would potentially skew the measures through inequitable treatment of progression into study and employment outcomes. As such, we take the view that it is necessary to count both sorts of interim activities as positive outcomes, or neither.

283. In order to count both sorts of interim activities as positive outcomes, we believe that it would be necessary to extend and revise the GO survey infrastructure to collect more of the information noted as absent in paragraph 281, and code interim employment activities to SOC codes. We would welcome views on this possibility, but we consider that this course of action is undesirable on account of it resulting in a significant increase to the costs involved in operating the survey and to the survey burden for respondents. These increases would follow from the need to ask respondents to provide information on job titles, job duties, employer name and employer description in relation to multiple periods of employment, and for these to be coded to SOC 2020 unit groups in each case. We recognise that the operational costs of the survey, in particular, are borne by providers through the HESA subscription fees.

284. We recognise that there may be compelling evidence that a graduate's interim study and employment activities represented positive student outcomes (for example, when the graduate continued studying at the same provider in the 15 months after gaining the earlier qualification). In some cases, such evidence may be available from HESA and ILR student data records. For example, in addition to their GO responses, for 2017-18 qualifiers we now have access to the 2018-19 and 2019-20 student data which would evidence their progression into further study for a qualification at any of the universities and colleges in the UK who are required to submit that data. While we acknowledge that those datasets could be linked to identify evidence of further study, we do not propose to do this for the following reasons:

- a. Data linking would generate partial evidence of progression into further study and result in potential structural biases in the measures we report. Study at providers for which the OfS does not have access to student data (such as further education providers in some of the devolved administrations, and any providers outside of the UK), or in settings outside of further and higher education providers (such as professional qualifications and training) could not be identified through data linking. Including linked data in this way would increase the effective response rate for students in further study, which would distort the data. To see this, assume that the true managerial and professional employment rate for a provider is 40 per cent, the further study rate is 40 per cent, and 20 per cent of students

are in activities that count negatively in our indicators. If the provider has a 60 per cent GO survey response rate, but 100 per cent of its further study can be captured by data linking, then the reported indicator would be skewed:

- i. Using GO responses alone, the indicator would be 40 per cent in managerial and professional employment + 40 per cent in further study = 80 per cent.
  - ii. Using linked data in addition to GO responses, the indicator would be (40 per cent in managerial and professional employment x 60 per cent response rate) + (40 per cent in further study x 100 per cent identification through data linking) as a proportion of this sum + (20 per cent in other outcomes x 60 per cent response rate) = 84 per cent.
- b. While linking to the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset could identify progression into sustained employment and employment at different earnings levels, there exists no dataset other than GO survey responses which identify the SOC unit groups of an individual's occupation needed to establish progression into managerial or professional employment. Data linking to identify evidence of progression into further study without replicating this in respect of progression into managerial or professional employment would potentially skew the measures we report. To avoid this, it would be necessary to identify within LEO data whether an individual is employed, studying or doing something else, and apply to this the proportion of employed graduates reported in managerial and professional employment as determined from GO survey data. This would mean delaying calculation of the progression outcomes until LEO data for the tax year containing the relevant census date became available, and that accuracy of the measure relies on how representative GO survey responses are of the true rate of managerial and professional employment.
- c. To take consistent account of progression into further study through linking to HESA and ILR student data requires access to student data returns relating to the two years which follow the year in which a graduate was identified as having gained their earlier qualification. This would introduce a delay to the construction of the progression measures we report, and compromise their timeliness. For example, GO responses of 2019-20 qualifiers will become available in spring 2022 and, for many undergraduate qualifiers, report on their activities at a census date in September 2021. HESA student records covering September 2021 will not be available until winter 2022, resulting in a six-month delay to calculation of the most recent progression indicators. Proposals in our December 2021 consultation on Data Futures and data collection would remove this delay.

285. Where providers give compelling evidence that a graduate's interim study and employment activities represented positive student outcomes, and that their treatment in the construction of this measure represents a material issue for making judgements about its performance, our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that they will take into account the context of providers.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

## Other positive outcomes

286. We propose to take the following approach to students whose GO survey response identifies activities of travelling, caring for someone else, retirement or 'doing something else', 15 months after gaining their higher education qualification:
- a. Students who report travelling, caring for someone else or retirement as their **main activity** at the census date will count as positive progression outcomes.
  - b. Students who report their **main activity** as 'doing something else' will count as positive outcomes only if they report this activity in combination with managerial or professional employment or further study.
  - c. Students who report travelling, caring for someone else, retirement or 'doing something else' but **not as their main activity**, will count as positive progression outcomes only if their other activities identify managerial or professional employment or further study.
287. We are aware that graduate destinations of taking time out to travel, caring for someone and retirement are reliant on student choice or changes in circumstances which are beyond a provider's control. In the case of caring for someone and retirement, these outcomes being a graduate's main activity may not represent matters of student choice, but circumstances that are also beyond the graduate's own control. This may be especially true of some mature students, who might be more likely to progress to these outcomes. For example, labour market opportunities for managerial or professional employment may be more limited for those near retirement when they started their higher education study.
288. Graduates reporting destinations of taking time out to travel, caring for someone and retirement form approximately 2.5 per cent of the total GO population, and we consider that counting such outcomes negatively would risk the potential for perverse incentives, especially in relation to mature students. We take the view that these issues are mitigated by our proposal to only count travel, caring and retirement as positive outcomes for the purpose of the measure when they are reported as the graduate's main activity. An alternative approach, in which graduates who report a main activity of travel, caring or retirement are treated neutrally and removed from the calculation of the measure would be in line with other employment statistics which exclude economically inactive individuals. However, we believe that it would not be satisfactory to exclude these students given the potential for this to impact on response rate calculations.
289. We consider that the definition of negative outcomes is tightened through this proposal, to those that are more explicitly negative. This has the consequence of making the measures simpler to understand and communicate for users. We recognise that graduates who are travelling, caring for someone else, retired or 'doing something else' will represent a range of circumstances, motivations and labour market aspirations which are more diverse and personal to the individuals involved (and more difficult to observe through existing data) than other graduate destination activities. We therefore take the view that counting travelling, caring for someone else and retirement as described in paragraph 286 offers benefit of the doubt for considering what constitutes a positive outcome at the point of constructing numerical measures of student outcomes.
290. Graduates reporting 'doing something else' as their main activity (and having no other employment or study that would otherwise count positively) will count as a negative outcome

under this proposal. We propose this approach on the basis that it is wholly unclear what sort of activities graduates selecting this response option might be engaged in, and in particular, whether any of those activities might represent a positive outcome. The GO survey includes a reasonably comprehensive range of alternative response categories for respondents to select. That range of options was designed to provide appropriate alignment with categories of economic status used in national labour market statistics, as well as categories used to characterise participation in education, employment and training. As such, the response options clearly define types of activity that a graduate might be engaged in, and in terms that allow us to take an informed view of whether that represents a positive outcome. We consider that, between them, they allow for the identification and reporting of most graduate outcomes that could be viewed as positive.

291. While an alternative approach might be to treat graduates reporting ‘doing something else’ as a neutral outcome, we are concerned that doing so would misrepresent outcomes and incentivise response behaviours that make more use of this category in future in relation to outcomes that are predominantly negative.<sup>85</sup> We think that it is desirable to minimise the likelihood of a graduate reporting ‘doing something else’ which, for the reasons explained, does not assist in determining whether a graduate has achieved a positive outcome, or give insight into what the graduate is doing after achieving their qualification. We would be keen to hear feedback on whether the GO survey response categories could be refined to draw out any specific activities that graduates might currently be reporting as ‘doing something else’ and which might be interpreted as positive progression outcomes.

### **Graduate reflections on their activities**

292. The measure that we are proposing – one which reports progression into managerial and professional employment and study – is acknowledged as being limited in its ability to define success beyond graduation for individual students in relation to their own goals and motivations. However, we consider that it is important to ensure that graduates are achieving outcomes consistent with the higher education qualification they have completed. Low rates of progression on the measure that we are proposing may suggest that a course has not equipped students with knowledge and skills appropriate to their intended learning aims, or that students were not effectively supported to transition into the workplace.

293. We have considered the potential to develop alternative or complimentary measures which are more qualitative and based on the reflective questions included in the GO survey. These questions ask graduates about their own view of their activities post-graduation, including whether they feel they are utilising what they learned during their studies, whether they consider that their activities are meaningful, and whether they fit with the graduate’s future plans.

294. We take the view that measures based on these graduate reflection questions should not be constructed for use within the OfS’s regulation of quality and standards, and access and participation, at this time for the following reasons:

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<sup>85</sup> At present, graduates reporting ‘doing something else’ as their main activity account for around 2 per cent of total respondents to the survey.

- a. The reflective questions are not currently asked within the set of mandatory survey questions, rather respondents can choose to reply to these questions on an optional basis when they reach them towards the end of the survey. The level of non-response to these questions is high enough that (coupled with the overall survey response rates) it challenges use of these questions for our regulatory functions. Around one in ten GO respondents do not answer one or more of these questions.
- b. Survey respondents who reported being in employment as their only activity at the GO census date were asked variants of the reflective questions which ask specifically whether their work was meaningful, fitting with their future plans, and utilising what they had learned. Similarly, graduates who reported further study as their only activity were asked variants of the questions which only seek reflections on their study specifically. Graduates who identified more than one activity at the census date (as well as those whose only activity was something other than employment or study) were asked to reflect more generally on their activities, through questions that make no specific reference to employment or study. Using these questions would require assumptions about the activities that are influencing the graduate's response in each of these different configurations, and it is also noted that the question routing has been changed for the survey of 2019-20 higher education leavers (within which respondents are asked the set of work, study or activity reflections according to the activity they identify as their most important).
- c. While we acknowledge recent work by HESA to explore whether a composite variable can be calculated from the graduate reflection questions as a measure of the design and nature of work as a component of job quality, we believe that the statistical relationships between responses to these questions and responses to questions that define progression to managerial and professional employment, or further study, need to be better understood.<sup>86</sup> HESA has so far published work on the basis of 2017-18 GO survey responses, and as more years of GO responses become available we anticipate that further analysis of such statistical relationships will be necessary to facilitate construction and use of a reliable student outcomes indicator.

295. While we are not proposing to construct such measures at the current time, we consider that they may have value in future. In particular, we believe that such measures may allow us to consider the graduate outcomes of non-UK domiciled students who are omitted from the coverage of the progression measure proposed through this consultation. The OfS expects analysis of the statistical relationships described at paragraph 294 c above, together with a better understanding of the wider value of the reflective questions, to inform the development of complimentary measures and their potential future uses. In doing so we will consider whether such a role would necessitate the relevant survey questions being made mandatory, with appropriate changes to the survey routing (to avoid assumptions about the activities influencing responses) and associated increases to the operational cost of the GO survey. Noting that the operational costs of the survey are borne by providers through the HESA subscription fees, and by students through the increased survey burden, we welcome feedback on the value that users perceive for the reflective GO questions.

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<sup>86</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/research/statistical-measure-design-nature-work](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/research/statistical-measure-design-nature-work).

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 237 to 295, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of the progression method within the 'Description and methodology' document.
- Definitions of the variable IPEMPINDPOP and IPEMPINDNUM (and contributing variables included within the definition of these) within the 'Core algorithms' document.
- Instructions for rebuilding progression indicators from your individualised student data within the 'Instructions for rebuilding OfS datasets' document.

### Question 18

To what extent do you agree with the proposal to **exclude international students** from the calculation of progression measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 19

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **approach to survey non-response** (including the requirement for a 30 per cent response rate, and not weighting the GO responses)? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 20

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **approach to partial responses to the GO survey**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 21

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definition of positive progression outcomes** and the graduates we propose to count as progressing to managerial and professional employment or further study? In particular, do you have any comments about the approach to caring, retired and travelling activities, or to employed graduates without a SOC code? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 22

To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definition of negative progression outcomes**? In particular, do you have any comments on the definition of 'doing something else' as a negative outcome when it is reported as a graduate's main activity? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 23

Do you have any comments on the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed **definition of managerial and professional employment**? And the alternatives, including using skill levels?

### Question 24

Do you have any comments on our proposed **approach to interim activities**? In particular, on the costs associated with extending the GO survey infrastructure to collect and code more information about interim employment occupations, if we were to pursue an alternative approach?

### Question 25

Do you have any comments or suggestions on the potential **future use of graduate reflective questions**?

## Proposal 8: Construction of student experience measures based on the National Student Survey

### What are we proposing and why?

296. Our consultation on the TEF has proposed that student experience measures will be used in assessments through the TEF scheme, and that these measures are based on responses to the range of statements included in the different question ‘scales’ of the National Student Survey (NSS).<sup>87</sup>
297. In responding to individual questions included in the NSS, students indicate their agreement to each statement on a five-point Likert scale.<sup>88</sup> The range of individual questions which are asked in the NSS are organised into different sets, each representing a different theme. These are known as the NSS question ‘scales’. In constructing student experience measures, we propose to report the extent to which students’ NSS responses indicate that they agree or strongly agree to questions in each of the different scales.
298. The OfS would also use student experience measures within the indicators used for risk-based monitoring of quality and standards, as set out in proposal 3 in the phase 1 consultation on regulation of quality and standards. In doing so, we would expect to take an approach to constructing the indicators that is consistent with that defined through this consultation proposal, but we may choose to also look at the levels of disagreement or neutrality that students indicate in their responses to questions in the different NSS scales.
299. This proposal does not apply to assessments of condition B3, or to our regulation of access and participation.

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<sup>87</sup> See proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>88</sup> See [www.thestudentsurvey.com/faqs/](http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/faqs/).

## NSS review

300. The NSS is currently subject to an ongoing, two-phase review which aims to deliver a reduction in the bureaucratic burden of operating the survey, while ensuring that it remains an important indicator of students' experiences.<sup>89</sup> While phase one of that review has established that the survey will remain an annual census (in order to continue to provide reliable data on student perspectives of their subjects, providers and the wider higher education system), the scope of phase two includes, among others, reviews of the current questions to ensure that they remain fit for purpose, and of the reporting thresholds. The OfS has confirmed that the 2022 NSS will not include any changes to the survey structure or questions.<sup>90</sup> Consequently, we have proposed that TEF assessments conducted through 2022-23 will include indicators based on the 2022 NSS and earlier years of the survey.
301. We propose a future consultation on any revisions or refinements that may prove necessary for the construction of student experience indicators to be used in later TEF exercises, once the NSS review has completed. Through that consultation, which could occur within or alongside consultation about implementation of the NSS review outcomes more generally, we would expect to test proposals for modifying the indicator definitions proposed here, to accommodate any structural or other changes to the NSS questions.

## Construction of scale-based student experience indicators

302. The NSS question scales are known to provide a solid structure for the survey in grouping the individual questions into related sets of questions. By design, the questions in a scale all address a similar theme or area of a higher education experience. Correlation and principal component analyses conducted within earlier reviews of the NSS (which facilitated the most recent updates to the current survey in 2017)<sup>91</sup> determined that the question scales are robust structures capturing meaningful dimensions of students' reflections on their higher education experience.
303. Our consultation on the TEF scheme proposes that student experience indicators will be constructed for a selection of the NSS question scales, but invites feedback on those to be included. For this reason, the illustrative and supporting data that we have released alongside this consultation includes results for all current NSS question scales, which are defined in Table 7 below.

**Table 7: Definition of NSS question scales**

Name of scale	NSS questions used
The teaching on my course	Q1. Staff are good at explaining things. Q2. Staff have made the subject interesting. Q3. The course is intellectually stimulating. Q4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.

<sup>89</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/review-of-the-nss/).

<sup>90</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/).

<sup>91</sup> See <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20180319115047/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/>.

Name of scale	NSS questions used
Learning opportunities	Q5. My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth. Q6. My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics. Q7. My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt.
Assessment and feedback	Q8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance. Q9. Marking and assessment has been fair. Q10. Feedback on my work has been timely. Q11. I have received helpful comments on my work.
Academic support	Q12. I have been able to contact staff when I needed to. Q13. I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course. Q14. Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.
Organisation and management	Q15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly. Q16. The timetable works efficiently for me. Q17. Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively.
Learning resources	Q18. The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well. Q19. The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well. Q20. I have been able to access course-specific resources (e.g. equipment, facilities, software, collections) when I needed to.
Learning community	Q21. I feel part of a community of staff and students. Q22. I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.
Student voice	Q23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course. Q24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course. Q25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.

304. As described in the TEF consultation, we do not consider it appropriate to use responses to the separate question about overall satisfaction (question 27) to inform TEF assessments, as it does not meaningfully inform understanding of the areas of the student experience we are seeking to assess. We have also proposed to exclude question 26, which relates to the effectiveness of students' union representation, when constructing the student voice scale, as this is something outside the direct control of a provider.

305. Across the questions that make up a given NSS scale, we propose that total agreement by each student is calculated as the percentage of responses that are answered as '4 - Agree' or '5 - Strongly agree' on the Likert scale. Questions marked with N/A or not answered will be ignored and omitted from this calculation, to give each student the same weight. A simplified example is shown in Table 8 below for illustrative purposes: it assumes four questions within

the example scale and a total of five students at an example provider responding to the survey.

**Table 8: Worked example of calculating student-level agreement to an NSS scale, and then establishing the level of agreement for a provider**

Student	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Percentage agreement
A	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither	75
B	Strongly agree	Strongly agree	Agree	Not answered	100
C	Strongly agree	Agree	Agree	Disagree	75
D	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Disagree	50
E	Agree	Disagree	Not answered	Not answered	50
Total number of students responding to the survey: 5			Total percentage agreement: 350 (=75 + 100 + 75 + 50 + 50)		
			Observed indicator value for the provider for this scale: 70 per cent (=350 / 5)		

306. Aggregating these student-level agreement rates to form a measure of the level of agreement to the scale for the provider involves calculating the total percentage agreement across all respondents, and dividing this by the total number of respondents. In the example above, the level of agreement to the scale (the indicator value) for the provider would be 70 per cent, as shown in the worked example above.
307. We take the view that this is an appropriate and proportionate means of calculating the level of agreement to an NSS scale. The method we have proposed calculating the level of agreement to an NSS scale benefits from being consistent with that used routinely within annual publications of NSS results to date, and we consider that using established methods with which stakeholders have familiarity (and potentially associated enhancement activities) will provide value for users and limit the burden of understanding our proposed approach.<sup>92</sup> The proposed method also has the benefit of making best use of the individual question response data, taking account of variations in a single student's responses to the questions within each scale, and has the effect of not skewing the data for areas that students do not consider applicable to their course.
308. Alternative approaches would have the opposite effects of the benefits described in paragraph 307. One such alternative would be to simply count the number of agree or strongly agree responses and represent these as a proportion of the total number of question responses. Such an approach would not take any account of variations in a single student's responses to the questions within each scale, not give equal weight to different respondents and would skew the data for areas that students do not consider applicable to their course.
309. Another alternative would be calculating scale mean scores, by summing the numeric values of the Likert scale responses for the questions answered and dividing this by the number of

<sup>92</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/).

questions answered. While such an approach could be interpreted as using all of a student's responses, the validity of this method relies on the Likert scale being a linear one, in which values of 1 to 5 represent meaningful weights to apply, with respondents showing equal propensity to move between different points of the scale. This is not the case for the NSS, where response patterns differ according to the use of '1 - Strongly disagree' and '2 - Disagree'.<sup>93</sup> This means that different students would be given different weight in the calculation of student experience measures according to their propensity to make use of one of the disagree or strongly disagree responses, or both. In our view, an approach which gives different weight to different respondents is not appropriate.

## **Students covered in reporting of student experience indicators**

310. We propose that student experience measures are constructed with reference to the population of predominantly final year undergraduate students defined by the target list for the NSS.<sup>94</sup> This includes the approach to students who take an intercalating year described in Proposal 4 of this consultation, at paragraph 144.
311. We take the view that focusing on undergraduate students who have been included on the NSS target list is proportionate in its recognition that this is an underpinning key infrastructure for the evidence base that gives rise to the calculation of NSS results and indicators. There currently exists no viable alternative to relying on the target list defined for the 2022 NSS and earlier years of the survey.
312. The ongoing review of the NSS described at paragraph 300 is considering alignment of the future NSS target list definition with our proposed uses of NSS data in regulation of quality and standards (including through the TEF). Future development of the NSS may therefore consider extensions of its coverage and hence revisions to the criteria defining the NSS target list. For example, extensions might allow for the surveying of undergraduate students on shorter courses (of 1 FTE or less), or at postgraduate level. If any extensions were deemed feasible and appropriate, we would expect to consult on revised approaches at a future point in time.

## **Approach to survey non-response**

313. As a survey instrument, it is inevitable that some students who have been included in the NSS target list decline to respond to the survey. Statistics constructed from samples of students therefore have the potential to exhibit bias if we do not have a 100 per cent response rate. Such biases will occur if there is a correlation between the propensity to respond to the survey and the true answers to the survey questions. For example, if people are less likely to respond to questions about ill health in a medical questionnaire if they suffer from particular ailments, then any estimate for the extent of poor health derived from respondents only will be too low.
314. To avoid such issues of non-response bias, we monitor the way we collect the NSS responses to ensure it provides a representative sample. Where our analysis shows that it

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<sup>93</sup> See

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20180319115047/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201413/>.

<sup>94</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c18051/nss\\_reports](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/collection/c18051/nss_reports).

will benefit the wider student interest, this may mean we extend the survey timetable or carry out targeted activity to boost the response rate at particular providers.

315. As a consequence, we take assurance that NSS responses provide a representative sample of the final year student population in each year of the survey's operation. We therefore take the view that summarising the NSS response dataset in absolute terms will generate student experience measures that are representative of final year populations and their reflections on higher education, so we do not propose to utilise survey weighting techniques within our construction of these measures. It is likely that adoption of weighting, or imputation, methods would add significant complexity to understanding the construction of measures based on the NSS, and previous analysis has shown that it will exert little, if any, influence over the results reported by the measure. We consider it advantageous that an unweighted approach is consistent with that used routinely within annual publications of NSS results, and one that is embedded within many providers' governance or oversight processes for student experience.
316. To guard further against non-response bias, we propose to suppress any indicator and split indicator results which rely on response rates below 50 per cent among the population of students informing calculation of that indicator. This proposal is again consistent with the approach used within annual publications of NSS results. We also propose to include the response rate achieved for each indicator population in our reporting of the indicator output
317. While alternative thresholds for response rates to invoke suppression of the indicator have been considered, we take the view that a 50 per cent threshold achieves an appropriate balance in respect of:
- a. The number of providers for which the threshold will result in indicators and split indicators that are reportable on that basis.
  - b. The risk that indicators and split indicators calculated from populations with lower response rates would be misrepresentative of the population that they represent.
  - c. The ability for users to access a clear understanding of the approach we have taken to constructing student experience measures from the NSS.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 296 to 317, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

- Descriptions of the student experience measures within the 'Description and methodology' document
- Definitions of the variables used in the generation of student experience indicators within the 'Core algorithms' document.

### Question 26

To what extent do you agree with the proposed **calculation of NSS scale-based student experience measures**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 27

To what extent do you agree with the proposed **approach to NSS survey non-response** (including the requirement for a 50 per cent response rate)? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 9: Definition and coverage of split indicator categories

### What are we proposing and why?

318. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that a series of split indicators are constructed to provide further breakdowns within each combination of student outcome or experience, mode and level of study. As described in Proposal 2 of this consultation, we propose to generate a series of split indicators which will relate to subject studied, student characteristics, year of entry or qualification (as appropriate to the student outcome in question), specific course types and provider partnership arrangements.
319. We have proposed this approach because we consider that it is important that we are able to identify material differences in performance in different aspects of a provider's provision, in order to better understand the outcomes for all students. In particular, we consider that the reporting of split indicators supports our policy intent to secure equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students, before, during and beyond their time in higher education. When used in our regulation of student outcomes, the split indicators will enable us to deliver our policy objective of protecting all students because we would be able to test compliance with numerical thresholds for student outcomes for different types of courses and student groups for every provider. It will enable us to focus our attention on groups of students within providers that risk being left behind, even when the provider itself is generally delivering positive outcomes. When used in TEF assessments, the split indicators support the aim of incentivising providers to improve and deliver excellence for all their student groups, and across their range of subjects and courses. In both cases, our approach is intended to complement our regulation of access and participation, which focuses on reducing the gaps in equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students. The access and participation data dashboard already reports split indicators covering many of the student characteristics we discuss in this proposal.
320. The breakdowns that we propose to report as split indicators build on proposals which received broad support in responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards. They result from efforts to achieve an appropriate balance of the following priorities, in recognition of their proposed use in our regulation of both quality and standards, and access and participation:

- a. The characteristics selected as split indicators should provide meaningful information that is capable of supporting reliable interpretations of any differences in student outcomes or experiences. They should align with the OfS's objectives (especially in relation to access and participation priority groups)<sup>95</sup> and with our obligations in respect of the public sector equality duty.
- b. Data availability and applicability to as wide a population as possible is desirable.
- c. Appropriate data quality for the characteristic in question.
- d. Alignment with standard data reporting approaches in the sector, to minimise the burden of understanding and engaging with our approach.
- e. The selection of split indicators should be aware of, and seek to mitigate, the risks of data sparsity. In particular, the onward risks of breaching data protection principles as a consequence of data sparsity, and of increased statistical uncertainty in the measures we report. Characteristics (or subcategories thereof) that are likely to be widely non-reportable may have limited utility in our approach to regulating student outcomes and the TEF.
- f. The number and range of split indicators should be sufficient to address OfS policy objectives for identifying differences in student outcomes and experiences, without becoming so numerous as to introduce unnecessary challenge for the use and interpretation of the data.

321. In making detailed proposals about the split indicators it should be noted that those proposed through this consultation are those that we would intend to construct and publish for all providers on an annual basis as official statistics. This does not mean that there may not be occasions when it would be useful to understand a provider's performance using different split indicators. We would expect to construct further split indicators if it proved necessary to support the assessment of condition B3. This might include constructing split indicators in respect of any or all of:

- a. Some of the student or course characteristics discussed but not proposed through this consultation to form part of the standard, published evidence base. Examples include student characteristics such as sexual orientation or socio-economic classification, or course types such as sandwich year courses.
- b. Subjects, student characteristics and course types reported at different levels of aggregation or disaggregation (where possible) than those proposed here. Examples include student characteristics such as disability type, or more detailed groupings of subject area of study.
- c. Combinations of split indicators, such as individual years of data for student characteristic splits, or course types for particular subjects of study.

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<sup>95</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/).

- d. Indicators and split indicators which show student outcomes experiences within specific provider partnerships, between named pairs of providers.

### **Approach to constructing split indicators**

322. We consider there are a number of ways in which split indicators could be constructed to identify differences in student outcome and experiences. We recognise the approach we select needs to achieve an appropriate balance of the priorities described in paragraph 320 a and d. We propose this balance is best achieved through the construction of split indicators in univariate form. Univariate form means that each split indicator is one-dimensional and will report the outcomes or experiences of students categorised on the basis of a single characteristic or attribute. For example, we will create split indicators that report on male students and, separately, split indicators that report on disabled students. We consider that construction of univariate split indicators will allow us to identify and respond to the experiences of different groups of students (that might otherwise be hidden) in broad but proportionate regulatory terms, without introducing significant risk of complexity, data sparsity and statistical uncertainty in our regulatory approaches.
323. This proposal means we would not report on student outcomes and experiences at a more micro-level in multivariate form, for intersections of the characteristics we intend to consider as split indicators. For example, we would not produce a split indicator to show outcomes for disabled male students, nor to show outcomes for female students studying in the subject area of business and management in 2018-19. While we acknowledge that such intersectional disaggregation would go some way to reflect the complexities of multi-faceted, individual people, we believe that it constrains our ability to take a holistic view of the provider's overall pattern of performance for certain groups. In multivariate form, patterns of performance would be concealed by both the sheer volume of split indicators and the statistical uncertainty that arises in relation to each of those indicators, meaning it would not be possible to draw reliable conclusions about a provider's performance for the groups of interest. Intersectional disaggregation of this kind would lead to split indicators likely being populated by very small numbers of students, no matter how large the provider.
324. Another alternative to the construction of univariate split indicators would be the use of statistical techniques to build regression models for the purposes of identifying the effects of the different student characteristics within every provider, once relevant characteristics and the provider's underlying performance have been accounted for. These models would be similar to those underpinning the sector-level analysis described in our supporting 'Exploring student outcomes' document<sup>96</sup>, but tailored for each individual provider. While such an approach would deliver a degree of statistical accuracy, our view is that it is not appropriate for the regulatory context for condition B3 given the intentions stated in the regulatory framework. In order for the statistical models to function (in technical terms, to converge) in the case of every individual provider, the model specifications would need to be provider-specific. Such an approach would be severely lacking in terms of the transparency required for split indicators to be effective in the context of our proposed uses, and would fail to show regard for the principles of best regulatory practice, in conflict with our general duty regarding the proportionality, transparency and consistency of our regulatory activities. We believe that the approach would also generate a significant burden of understanding for providers

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<sup>96</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

wanting and needing to engage appropriately with the regulatory actions the OfS would wish to take in response to conclusions drawn from data constructed in this way.

### **Selecting and defining split indicators**

325. The phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards proposed a series of split indicators which relate to subject studied, student characteristics, year of entry or qualification (as appropriate to the student outcome in question), specific course types and provider partnership arrangements.<sup>97</sup> The set of split indicators we listed as examples received broad support in consultation responses and the proposals described in this consultation build on this.
326. In each case, the selection and definition we now propose for split indicators is intended to achieve an appropriate balance of the priorities described in paragraph 320. Our proposals are summarised in Table 9 below.

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<sup>97</sup> See paragraphs 36 to 42 at Annex B of the consultation at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education/).

**Table 9: Proposed definition of split indicators**

<b>Split indicator</b>	<b>Measures applicable to</b>	<b>Constructed for</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>More information</b>
Year of entry	Continuation; Completion (cohort-tracking and compound indicator)	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All students in scope of the measure	Most recent four years of entrant cohorts available for the relevant measure	Paragraphs 328 to 333
Year of qualification	Progression	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All students in scope of the measure	Most recent four years of qualifier cohorts available for the relevant measure	Paragraphs 328 to 333
Year of qualification	Student experience	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All students in scope of the measure	Most recent four years of final year cohorts available for the relevant measure	Paragraphs 328 to 333
Subject studied	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All students in scope of the measure	34 subjects defined by level 2 of the Common Aggregation Hierarchy	Paragraphs 334 to 342
Age on entry to higher education programme	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All students in scope of the measure with known age	For undergraduate levels of study: Under 21; 21 to 30; and 31 and over For postgraduate levels of study: under 25; 25 to 30; 31 and over	Paragraph 349 to 352
Disability	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and	All students in scope of the measure	Disability reported; No disability reported	Paragraph 353 to 355

Split indicator	Measures applicable to	Constructed for	Coverage	Categories	More information
		participation data dashboards		For access and participation data dashboards, different types of disability are also reported separately	
Ethnicity	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All UK-domiciled students in scope of the measure with known ethnicity	Asian; Black; Mixed; Other; White	Paragraph 356 to 358
Sex	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All students in scope of the measure who report their biological sex as female or male	Female; Male	Paragraph 359 to 360
Domicile	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All students in scope of the measure	UK; Non-UK	Paragraph 367
Eligibility for free school meals at key stage 4	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All students aged under 21 on entry to their higher education programme, who attended a state-maintained school in or after 2009-10 for which we are able to locate a linked National Pupil Database (NPD) record	Eligible during their schooling; Not eligible during their schooling	Paragraph 368 to 370

Split indicator	Measures applicable to	Constructed for	Coverage	Categories	More information
English index of multiple deprivations (IMD, 2019) quintile	All measures constructed for English providers	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All English-domiciled students in scope of the measure with a known home postcode	Quintiles 1 or 2; Quintiles 3, 4 or 5 For access and participation data dashboards, individual quintiles are also reported separately	Paragraph 371 to 373
IMD quintile <sup>98</sup>	All measures constructed for providers in the devolved administrations	TEF assessment	All students domiciled in the same country as the provider, with a known home postcode and in scope of the measure	Quintiles 1 or 2; Quintiles 3, 4 or 5	Paragraph 374
Geography of employment quintile <sup>99</sup>	Progression	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All UK-domiciled students in scope of the measure who responded to the GO survey and had a known activity (including unemployed and looking for work) 15 months after graduation	Quintile 1; Quintiles 2 or 3; Quintiles 4 or 5	Paragraph 375 to 379

<sup>98</sup> For students domiciled in Wales at registering providers this will be based on the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019. For students domiciled in Scotland at registering providers in Scotland this will be based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020. For students domicile in Northern Ireland at registering providers in Northern Ireland this will be based on the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017.

<sup>99</sup> Based on the methodology for the GO quintiles described in the November 2021 publication at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/).

<b>Split indicator</b>	<b>Measures applicable to</b>	<b>Constructed for</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>More information</b>
Association between characteristics of students (ABCS) quintile	All measures (when available), with the quintile definition applied being that which corresponds to the measure in question	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment; Access and participation data dashboards	All students in scope of the measure	Currently, for continuation measures: Quintile 1; Quintiles 2 or 3; Quintiles 4 or 5	Paragraph 380 to 384
Other student characteristics: Socio-economic classification; Parental experience of higher education; Household residual income; Income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI); Participation of local areas (POLAR4); Tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA)	All measures	Access and participation data dashboards (where published at sector-level and provider-level)	Various, dependent on the characteristic in question	Various, dependent on the characteristic in question	Paragraph 385 to 388
Other student characteristics: Care experience;	All measures	Access and participation data dashboards (where published at sector-level only)	Various, dependent on the characteristic in question	Various, dependent on the characteristic in question	Paragraph 387

<b>Split indicator</b>	<b>Measures applicable to</b>	<b>Constructed for</b>	<b>Coverage</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>More information</b>
Estrangement from family					
Higher technical qualifications (HTQs)	All measures (when available)	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	To be confirmed after HTQs delivery and associated data collection commences from September 2022	To be confirmed after HTQs delivery and associated data collection commences from September 2022	Paragraph 392
First degrees with integrated foundation years	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All first degree students in scope of the measure	First degree with integrated foundation year	Paragraph 393 to 396
FHEQ level of other undergraduate qualification	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All other undergraduate students in scope of the measure	Other undergraduate course at Level 4, Other undergraduate course at Level 5+	Paragraph 397 to 399
Type of partnership	All measures	Regulation of student outcomes; TEF assessment	All students in scope of the measure	Registered and taught; Registered only (sub-contracted out); Taught only (sub-contracted in); Validation only	Paragraphs 404 to 409

327. Several of the split indicator definitions shown in Table 9 are defined with reference to classifications which are subject to a programme of routine and regular updates, typically every few years. Examples include the national IMDs as well as classifications produced by the OfS (such as ABCS and the geography of employment quintiles). When constructing split indicators, we propose we will always seek to use the most recent classification available. This means we may from time to time restate previously published points of a time series to reference the most recent version of the classification. In doing so, we take the view that using the most up-to-date classifications will support the most meaningful interpretation of student outcomes and experiences and note the impact of these sorts of updates is generally low. In the event of more substantial update to a classification, we would communicate the change as far as possible in advance, and consider running the old and new classifications in parallel (to allow the impact of the change to be well understood).

### **Defining split indicators for year of entry or qualification (as appropriate to the student outcome in question)**

328. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed assessments will consider performance over the most recent four years of available data in relation to each student outcome and experience measure. They propose that this will be represented through the construction of indicators based on an aggregate of the most recent four years of available data, as well as through the inclusion of a time series of the individual years. We propose that when constructing split indicators, all split indicators, other than those for year of entry or qualification, will be reported as the aggregate of the most recent four years.

329. The access and participation data dashboard currently reports a time series of the most recent five years for each measure we construct, as well as aggregates of the most recent three and five years. We propose to align the time series reported in the access and participation data dashboard with that used in our other regulatory functions, to improve the consistency of our approach, and minimise the burden of understanding it. This would result in the construction of indicators that report the aggregates of both the most recent two and four years.

330. Split indicators covering four-years is intended to align with the proposed cycle of TEF assessments.<sup>100</sup> It means that each year of data going forward will only contribute once to each full TEF assessment cycle, such that the impact of any single instance of historical performance is limited to a single TEF outcome, and has limited scope to influence assessment of condition B3 for a protracted period. We also take the view that a four-year time series achieves an appropriate balance of timeliness and sufficient years of data to both establish sustained patterns or trends in a provider's performance, and to form an aggregate which is reportable for as many providers as possible, however small, across as many indicators and split indicators as possible.

331. Table 10 details the four-year time series the OfS proposes to construct for the first implementation of the new TEF scheme and condition B3 assessments in summer 2022. The time series would be rolled forward annually thereafter to pick up a more recent year for each measure. It should be noted that the time series shown in Table 10 includes one more recent

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<sup>100</sup> See proposal 1 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

year for each measure than can currently be constructed and included in the supporting and illustrative data release alongside this consultation.

**Table 10: Four-year time series for each measure**

Measure	Year 1 (least recent)	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4 (most recent)
Continuation: full-time and apprenticeship	2016-17 entrants	2017-18 entrants	2018-19 entrants	2019-20 entrants
Continuation: part-time	2015-16 entrants	2016-17 entrants	2017-18 entrants	2018-19 entrants
Completion (cohort-tracking): full-time and apprenticeship	2013-14 entrants	2014-15 entrants	2015-16 entrants	2016-17 entrants
Completion (cohort-tracking): part-time	2011-12 entrants	2012-13 entrants	2013-14 entrants	2014-15 entrants
Completion (compound indicator): full-time, part-time and apprenticeship	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21
Progression: full-time, part-time and apprenticeship	Not available	2017-18 qualifiers	2018-19 qualifiers	2019-20 qualifiers
Student experience: full-time, part-time and apprenticeship	2019 NSS	2020 NSS	2021 NSS	2022 NSS

332. We recognise that there is potential for the later years of the time series we propose to reflect changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first lockdown in the UK was not declared until late March 2020, which means that there is limited scope for the impact to be evident within currently available data:

- a. There was little chance for the pandemic to impact the number of entrants between September 2019 and August 2020. While some courses may have commenced after March 2020, most standard academic years will have begun in the autumn of 2019 for this data reporting period, well before the pandemic.
- b. Because the continuation outcomes for the cohort of 2019-20 entrants will have been evaluated on the basis of students' activities in autumn 2019 (one year after commencement in 2018-19 for full-time students, and two years after commencement in 2017-18 for part-time students), the pandemic would not have impacted on continuation or completion rates for the majority of those students.
- c. The 2018-19 graduates surveyed through the GO survey were not the students who graduated into the pandemic, but the pandemic will, for many graduates, have set the scene for an important early stage of their careers. The survey was undertaken over four different stages: some were surveyed before the pandemic had been declared, and others when different levels of restrictions were in place. However, it is unclear that the changes

to results compared with the 2017-18 survey results are directly attributable to the pandemic. There was surprisingly little difference between the trends seen in 2017-18 and those in 2018-19 the graduate activities reported.<sup>101</sup>

333. We acknowledge that the impact of the pandemic may increase with respect to the time series we propose to construct for the first implementation of our approaches. We intend to keep the impact under review as later years of data, in which changes may become more apparent than they have proven to date, are added to the time series.

### **Defining split indicators for subjects**

334. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that assessments will consider performance in different subjects. We do not, at this stage, propose to report split indicators at subject level for the access and participation data dashboard.
335. The grouping of higher education subjects is complex. We acknowledge that there is no single subject classification that will accommodate the many and varied internal structures for subjects, faculties and departments across the sector. We consider it inevitable that some mismatch will always remain between the subject groupings used by the OfS and other sector bodies, and provider structures. To avoid this mismatch we would need to create bespoke subject groupings for each provider which would be impractical and unmanageable – for providers, the OfS and for other users of our data.
336. While we recognise the challenges that stem from mismatches between centralised subject classifications and individual provider structures, we anticipate that providers and other data users will benefit from use of established and widely used subject groupings. Those defined by level 2 of the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH2) have previously been used in TEF datasets, and were proposed in the phase one consultation on regulation of quality and standards as the likely starting point for consideration of split indicators showing subject studied. This proposal received broad support in responses to the consultation.<sup>102</sup>
337. In proposing to define split indicators for subject studies using CAH2, the OfS has drawn on its experience of operating two years of TEF subject-level pilots to determine the appropriate balance between granularity and practical utility of the information produced:
- a. A broader categorisation (CAH1 or further groupings thereof) would limit challenges associated with non-reportability and statistical uncertainty that result from subject areas with small student numbers. However, it is likely to exacerbate mismatches to provider structures and arguably provides less meaningful information to users about student outcomes and experiences, with differences across similar courses or subjects masked through their aggregation into the broader grouping.
  - b. More detailed categorisations (CAH3, or further disaggregation thereof) could be provide more granular information that reduces the risks of differences being masked through aggregation. However, small student numbers across approximately 150 CAH3 groupings

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<sup>101</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/20-07-2021/impact-covid-19-graduate-outcomes](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/20-07-2021/impact-covid-19-graduate-outcomes).

<sup>102</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education-analysis-of-responses/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-regulating-quality-and-standards-in-higher-education-analysis-of-responses/).

would challenge assessment and interpretation processes as a result of data volume, non-reportability and increased statistical uncertainty.

338. On account of the very small student populations registered and taught at English higher education providers in the CAH2 subject group of (CAH19-02) Celtic studies, we consider that this grouping is unusable for our purposes and propose that this group is in all uses aggregated with that of (CAH19-04) Languages and area studies.
339. We welcome feedback on whether our proposed use of CAH2 subject groupings achieves an appropriate balance between granularity and practical utility of the information generated. We note that in benchmarking some of the student outcome and experience indicators we have proposed the use of more aggregate subject groupings (typically, in order to preserve the statistical integrity of the benchmarking method, as described in Proposal 10). We recognise that we could define subject split indicators that mirror those benchmarking definitions. We believe that such an approach would add significant complexity, with granularity of the subject split indicators differing across the student outcome and experience measures. But we would be interested to hear views on this option.
340. As described in paragraph 126, we expect to consider students in headcount terms. When reporting data about a student's subject studied, we recognise that joint and interdisciplinary qualifications can span multiple of the CAH2 subject groupings. To preserve an accurate overall headcount of students in these cases, we propose to generate subject-level data as a count of full-person equivalents (FPE).
341. The count of FPE involves apportioning each individual student headcount according to the proportion of their course in each subject. For example, a student who is studying a joint course with equal amounts of mathematics and English is apportioned across the two subjects and represented as 0.5 FPE in each. A student who is studying a course involving mathematics (50 per cent) with English (40 per cent) and history (10 per cent), is apportioned across the three subjects and represented as 0.5 FPE in mathematics, 0.4 FPE in English and 0.1 FPE in history. To do otherwise would involve counting an individual student as a whole person headcount in each subject they are studying, regardless of their balance of activity across those subjects: in the second example above, the student would count as 1 in each of mathematics, English and history. We take the view that this approach risks overstating populations in different subject areas, and risks disproportionate regulatory judgements. Suppose there was a concern about student outcomes for a joint course of the type described in the second example above. By counting every student in each subject this could disproportionately affect those subject areas that make up only a small proportion of the teaching activity bringing those subjects into scope for potentially unwarranted regulatory intervention.
342. Another alternative that has been considered for the purposes of reporting on joint and interdisciplinary qualifications, is one in which joint courses which span multiple CAH2 groups are in all cases mapped to the subject group of 'Combined and general studies', in which the student counts as a headcount of one. This existing CAH2 subject group is already used for very broad higher education programmes spanning multiple subjects (such as Liberal arts), including within it all joint and interdisciplinary qualifications would allow distinct consideration, separate to student outcomes and experiences of other provision in the component subject areas. However, such a subject group would not be homogeneous within

itself – you may be comparing a joint maths and physics course with a joint course in French and Italian. We do not propose this approach on the basis that it would be complex and time consuming to interpret this large, amorphous grouping, with the resulting split indicators lacking transparency and meaning for users.

### **Selecting and defining split indicators for student characteristics**

343. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that assessments will consider performance for different student groups defined by their backgrounds or their personal characteristics. The access and participation data dashboard currently reports a wide range of student characteristics to support our objectives for reducing the gaps in equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students.
344. The student groups that we propose to report as split indicators build on proposals which received broad support in responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards. Our selection of these characteristics also aims to provide continued alignment with the OfS's objectives and priority groups for our regulation of access and participation, as well as our obligations in respect of the public sector equality duty.
345. When defining the student characteristic split indicators we propose, we have sought to harmonise our coverage and groupings with established sector practice where appropriate. We also seek to align these groupings with those used in our definition of benchmarking factors, where relevant.
346. Where categories of a student characteristic are reported in student data as unknown or not reported, our definitions exclude these students from the split indicators. In our view, this approach is appropriate because it is unlikely that students reported with an unknown characteristic will themselves form a homogeneous group about which it is possible to make meaningful interpretations of differences in student outcomes and experiences. In addition, we note that removing students with unknown characteristics is advantageous to limiting the disclosure risks that result from our production and publication of numerous, potentially overlapping, breakdowns of the same population across protected and sensitive personal data items. We believe that this is an important feature of our approach to data rounding and suppression, as discussed in Proposal 11, in the interests of ensuring compliance with our obligations under the UK General Data Protection Regulations.

### **Student characteristics protected under the Equality Act 2010**

347. The OfS's proposed approach to constructing split indicators in respect of student characteristics which are protected under the Equality Act 2010 is heavily influenced by data availability, as shown in Table 11.

Table 11: Data availability for protected characteristics

Characteristic	Included in HESA Student and Student Alternative data returns	Included in ILR data returns	First year included in data sources <sup>103</sup>	Domicile or other restrictions on coverage
Age (on entry to higher education programme)	Yes	Yes	2010-11 and earlier	None
Disability (including different types of disability reported)	Yes	Yes	2010-11 and earlier	None
Ethnicity (broad and detailed)	Yes	Yes	2010-11 and earlier	Mandatory for UK-domiciled only
Sex	Yes	Yes	2010-11 and earlier	None
Gender reassignment	Yes	No	2018-19	None
Religion or belief	Yes	No	2017-18	None
Sexual orientation	Yes	No	2015-16	None
Marriage and civil partnership	No	No	-	-
Pregnancy and maternity	No	No	-	-

Note: HESA returns collect information relevant to gender reassignment by asking whether, according to their own assessment, a student's gender identity is consistent with their sex registered at birth.

348. Table 11 leads us to propose that split indicators are constructed in respect of age on entry, disability, ethnicity and sex. Having had regard to the public sector equality duty and the requirements of the Equality Act 2010, we make this proposal on the basis that differences observed for these characteristics can be identified and understood using data for which collection is well established and complete in its coverage. The OfS routinely includes these

<sup>103</sup> Information about the first year included in data sources has been informed by assessment of the characteristic using the OfS data quality framework (see [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/)), which helps identify the point at which more recently introduced data items cease to suffer from significant issues of disclosure or comprehensive coverage and become useable for OfS analysis.

characteristics in its analyses and, in most cases, they align with priority groups for access and participation.

#### Age on entry

349. When defining split indicators in respect of age on entry to higher education, we consider it is appropriate to establish different categories for undergraduates and postgraduates. This is because postgraduate students will normally be older due to an earlier period of undergraduate study, and we also recognise that numbers of students in each increasing age range tend to diminish.
350. This leads us to consider three age categories for each of undergraduates and postgraduates:
- a. For undergraduates, the categories are under 21, aged 21 to 30, and aged 31 and over, where interpretation of young undergraduates as those aged under 21 aligns with established sector practice. The age categories of 21 to 30, and 31 and over, align with the approach we have taken to calculating split indicators for TEF assessments under the previous scheme.
  - b. For postgraduates, the categories are under 25, aged 25 to 30, and aged 31 and over, where interpretation of young postgraduates as those aged under 25 aligns with established sector practice. The age categories of 25 to 30, and 31 and over, align with concentrations observed in the distribution of postgraduate entrants by age.
351. For the purposes of constructing split indicators to inform TEF assessments, we propose to report the same three age categories for undergraduates as described in paragraph 350 a. The small number of age categories we propose aligns with feedback received in responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards, as it recognises providers whose students are typically older, without creating an unmanageable volume of data to be considered.
352. We do not propose to make any changes to the age categories reported in the access and participation data dashboard. These categories are defined at a more granular level because we are able to tolerate a higher risk of data sparsity in order to support activities that identify and reduce gaps in equality of opportunity between student groups.

#### Disability

353. Responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards included a suggestion that information on students who report a disability could be broken down to show different types of disability. We recognise the importance of considering differences in student outcomes and experiences for students who report different types of disability, and these suggestions reflect the level of granularity at which the access and participation data dashboard currently reports on disability types, which we do not propose to change.
354. While we are able to tolerate a higher risk of data sparsity in data reported through the access and participation data dashboard because it can support activities that identify and reduce gaps in equality of opportunity between student groups, we consider that the resulting volume and sparsity of data would be disproportionate for the purposes of assessments of condition B3 and the TEF. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers,

including those where student disabilities are likely to represent a material issue for making judgements about their performance.<sup>104</sup>

355. Consequently, we propose to define split indicators to inform assessments of condition B3 and the TEF to differentiate those students who report a disability from those who do not. The same definition would be applied in respect of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. We would expect to keep under review the feasibility of extending the granularity reported if numbers were to increase in future.

#### Ethnicity

356. Responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards included a similar suggestion that information on students' ethnicity be reported at a more detailed level than White or not White, and expressed a preference for a mid-level granular split (such as Asian, Black, Mixed, Other and White). These suggestions reflect the level of granularity at which the access and participation data dashboard currently reports on ethnicity, which we do not propose to change. It is also consistent with that used by the OfS to meet the requirements under the Equality Act, including through annual publications of equality and diversity statistics.<sup>105</sup> We therefore propose to construct split indicators to inform assessments of condition B3 and the TEF which look at the five categories of Asian, Black, Mixed, Other and White.
357. The HESA student data collections currently only mandate the recording of a student's ethnicity if that student was domiciled in the UK on entry to their higher education programme, and we recognise that ethnicity will be a perhaps less meaningful concept for a non-UK student if considered distinct from their nationality. As a result, we propose that this split indicator is constructed in respect of UK-domiciled students with known ethnicity, with the same definition applied for both undergraduate and postgraduate students.
358. We recognise that for some providers, the five ethnicity categories we propose to report may be sparsely populated. However, we consider that the volume of data and the concentrations observed in the distribution of students across these groups would be manageable and appropriate for the purposes of assessments of condition B3 and the TEF. We believe that the risks of data sparsity become generally unmanageable only if, for individual providers, we attempt to look at ethnicity information at the detailed levels at which the student data is collected.

#### Sex

359. We take a similar view for the purposes of reporting split indicators which report on the sex of the student. That is, we recognise the importance of considering all categories of sex, but are aware that, at present, the numbers of students who report a sex of 'other' are very small at sector level. We consider that this would create an unmanageable risk of data sparsity if we

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<sup>104</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

<sup>105</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/equality-diversity-and-student-characteristics-data-2010-11-to-2019-20/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/equality-diversity-and-student-characteristics-data-2010-11-to-2019-20/).

were to report the category at provider level and below, and would represent a material risk for data disclosure in breach of the GDPR.

360. We also acknowledge that values of 'other' may be returned to reflect characteristics of a student's biological sex, but previous guidance associated with collection of the underlying data item also permits a degree of ambiguity for use of the value to reflect a student's gender identity. As a result, we propose to define the split indicator to show student outcomes and experiences of male and female students. The same definition would be applied in respect of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, and consistently throughout our construction of split indicators reported in the access and participation data dashboard and to inform our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF. We would expect to keep under review the feasibility of extending the granularity reported if sector-level numbers were to increase in future.

#### Other protected characteristics

361. The OfS is prevented from constructing split indicators for the protected characteristics of marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity because, as shown in Table 11 above, data is not collected at a national level.
362. The remaining protected characteristics – of gender reassignment, religion or belief, and sexual orientation – are currently only collected within HESA student data returns. They are not collected within the ILR. Recent analysis, and application of the OfS data quality framework, has found that data on these characteristics is useable for reporting aggregate data covering all of the providers who returned this information in more recent years of data collection. That analysis indicates that this only applies in respect of entrant cohorts, and that data cannot yet be considered useable to report on qualifiers or final year students. This means that in addition to the partial coverage that results from the absence of data for providers who submit data to the ESFA in the ILR, data would be partial across different stages of the student lifecycle that our proposed measures report on. This is compounded by the different time series covered by each indicator. For example, because completion measures refer to more historical entrant cohorts than the continuation measure, split indicators could be constructed for continuation but not for completion measures.
363. It follows that if these characteristics were to be included as split indicators at this time, the partiality of their availability (they would be available for a limited number of providers, years of the time series, and types of measure) would present a significant challenge for assessment of condition B3 and through the TEF scheme.
364. We recognise the potential value of improving the information about student outcomes and experiences of some of these groups, so we propose that introduction of split indicators for these characteristics is considered further in future. We anticipate these characteristics could be introduced initially via the access and participation data dashboard, where we are able to tolerate more limited data availability in order to support activities that identify and reduce gaps in equality of opportunity between student groups. When sufficient data about these characteristics is available for qualifier cohorts, we will consider constructing split indicators for all of our student outcome and experience measures. This would require the proportions of students for which these characteristics are reported as unknown or not disclosed remain consistent with, or lower than, those observed in recent years of HESA student data

collections. It is not currently clear if or when the relevant data items would be introduced to the ILR data collection, and any changes here may also inform our future approach.

### **Other student characteristics which are not protected under the Equality Act 2010**

365. The OfS routinely includes other characteristics (which are not protected under the Equality Act 2010) in its analyses and breakdowns of student outcome and experience measures. This is because we consider that they provide meaningful information about differences in student outcomes or experiences and are complementary to our wider focus on access and participation priority groups.

366. The phase one consultation on regulation of quality and standards included several such characteristics as examples of split indicators that we might construct to understand differences in student outcomes and experiences for underrepresented groups. Split indicators showing Participation of Local Areas (POLAR) quintile, English Indices of Multiple Deprivations 2019 (IMD)<sup>106</sup> quintile and domicile. Use of these characteristics received broad support in responses to the phase one consultation, though some respondents were critical of the potential use of POLAR (as described in the phase one analysis report).

#### Domicile

367. Following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, and associated changes to home fee eligibility, we propose that split indicators based on student domicile are constructed to show outcomes and experiences of UK and non-UK domiciled students. The same definition would be applied in respect of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

#### Eligibility for free school meals during key stage 4

368. Responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards recognised that information of students' eligibility for free school meals would provide a useful indication of students' disadvantage, and complement other split indicators such as those based on the IMD. Constructing split indicators to show the student outcomes and experiences of those eligible for free school meals is consistent with the existing inclusion of this information in the access and participation data dashboard, which we do not propose to change.

369. Information on a student's eligibility to receive free school meals during their key stage 4 schooling is recorded within the national pupil database, for which the OfS is able to access records dating back to 2009-10.<sup>107</sup> This means that this split indicator can only be constructed with reference to population of students for whom it is normally possible to establish a link to their NPD record: we consider that this results in coverage of young undergraduate students (aged under 21 on entry to higher education) who attended a state-maintained school in or after 2009-10. NPD data identifying eligibility for free school meals of pupils attending other types of school cannot be easily interpreted since government funding

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<sup>106</sup> The indices of multiple deprivations are official measures of the relative deprivation for small geographical areas. The English IMD is based on seven different facets of deprivation, including: income deprivation; employment deprivation; education, skills and training deprivation; health deprivation and disability; crime; barriers to housing and services; and living environment deprivation. See [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019).

<sup>107</sup> Data from the NPD is supplied from the Department for Education (DfE). The DfE does not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD data by third parties.

for free school meals is normally distributed through allocations to state-maintained schools only.

370. When constructing the split indicators, we propose to differentiate between those eligible for free school meals at any stage during their schooling, and those not. This aligns with categorisations used by the Department for Education in publications related to earlier stages of education. In addition, the highly sensitive nature of student information within the NPD means that care is needed to ensure that the categories to be used achieve an appropriate balance of meaningful information and non-reportability.

#### IMD

371. Responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards recognised that IMD quintiles would provide a useful indication of students' disadvantage, which has applicability to postgraduate students as well as undergraduates.
372. As area-based measures of deprivation, IMD measures are available covering the whole of the UK. However, they are separately defined with respect to each of the four nations of the UK and there is clear and repeated advice from the ONS that combination and direct comparison between the indices is not possible.<sup>108</sup> This means it is not possible to generate a single split indicator which refers to all UK-domiciled students. Each national IMD is typically published with individual rankings and domain scores for each geographical area, as well as within the structure of deciles. While this affords a series of options for categorising an IMD-based split indicator, we take the view that aggregating the deciles into quintiles achieves an appropriate balance of the granularity required to provide meaningful information about genuine differences in student outcomes and experiences, with practical utility for use and interpretation.
373. When constructing split indicators from IMD quintiles for use in assessments of condition B3 and the TEF, we propose that they report on two groups of students: those from English IMD quintile 1 and 2 areas, and separately, those from English IMD quintile 3, 4 and 5 areas. This is consistent with previous OfS categorisations of IMD data, including in the access and participation data dashboard where we also report on the quintiles individually and where we do not propose to make any changes. The same definition would be applied in respect of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Constructing indicators which refer to students domiciled in the same nation as the provider would capture a sizeable majority of the students taught or registered at that provider.
374. For the purposes of constructing TEF datasets for providers in the other UK nations, we propose to replace the English IMD quintiles with the equivalent IMD measure corresponding to the country of the provider in question.

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<sup>108</sup> See page 16 of the 'Frequently asked questions' document at [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019). More recently, some progress has been made in establishing the feasibility of combining data for England and Wales, but only across the IMD contributory domains of income and employment and only based on 2015-16 data (see [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/indices-of-deprivation-2019-income-and-employment-domains-combined-for-england-and-wales](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/indices-of-deprivation-2019-income-and-employment-domains-combined-for-england-and-wales)).

## Geography of employment

375. The OfS has recently developed a geography of employment and earnings,<sup>109</sup> which we consider can help contextualise graduate outcomes by capturing some of the labour market differences experienced by graduates living in different parts of the UK. We propose that split indicators constructed for progression outcomes include the quintiles generated by this classification.
376. The geography of employment and earnings analysis classifies travel to work areas<sup>110</sup> based on Graduate Outcomes responses and the proportion of employed undergraduate qualifiers living in that area who are in professional or managerial occupations. The quintiles that report this classification can therefore be derived for UK-domiciled students who responded to the GO survey and had a known destination 15 months after being awarded a higher education qualification, in relation to the progression indicators only. The classification has been developed to organise geographical areas of the UK, in which undergraduate qualifiers are living, working and studying, into quintiles defined in respect of their activities after graduation.
377. When constructing split indicators to reflect the geography of employment for the purposes of regulating student outcomes and the TEF, we propose that they report on progression outcomes for three groups of students: those from quintile 1 areas, those from quintile 2 and 3 areas and those from quintile 4 and 5 areas. The distribution of the rates of progression into managerial or professional employment or further study across the geography of employment quintiles means that we consider that the volume and sparsity of data constructed will be manageable and appropriate for the purposes of assessments of condition B3 and the TEF.
378. The geography of employment and earnings analysis has, to date, only classified areas based on the progression outcomes of undergraduate qualifiers, which means that the illustrative and supporting data released alongside this consultation is limited in the same way. Our November 2021 publication of this analysis described among its next steps the expectation that the OfS would explore the applicability of the existing classification to postgraduate qualifiers, or otherwise the potential to create separate groupings for these students using the same methodology. We therefore propose that, when we implement our regulatory approaches following conclusion of this consultation, the same definition would be applied in respect of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.
379. We do not at this stage propose to include split indicators showing the geography of employment quintiles in the access and participation data dashboard. We would welcome feedback on whether such an extension would support activities that identify and reduce gaps in equality of opportunity between student groups.

## Association between characteristics of students

380. Some responses to the phase one consultation on regulating quality and standards recognised the potential value of intersectional split indicators that could identify differences

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<sup>109</sup> See the methodology for the GO quintiles described in the November 2021 publication at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/).

<sup>110</sup> See [www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/travelto-workareaanalysinggreatbritain/2016](http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/travelto-workareaanalysinggreatbritain/2016).

in student outcomes and experiences based on multiple, rather than single characteristics. Some respondents identified the same challenges for reporting data at more granular levels that we discussed in paragraphs 322 to 324. The OfS recognises the tension between the challenges and opportunities in this regard and has developed the associations between characteristics of students (ABCS) classifications to provide an efficient and effective means for understanding student outcomes in a way that is sensitive to the multi-faceted nature of the gaps in equality of opportunity.

381. We describe the ABCS analysis at Annex F, and welcome feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the approach.<sup>111</sup> In broad terms, ABCS is a set of analyses which aims to improve our understanding of the outcomes that different groups of undergraduates are likely to experience across the student lifecycle. It uses statistical modelling to create student groups defined by a combination of all of the characteristics included in the model.<sup>112</sup> We therefore consider that constructing split indicators for undergraduate student populations based on the ABCS quintiles would support our regulation of access and participation, which focuses on reducing the gaps in equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students. It would allow our regulatory approaches to quality and standards and access and participation to identify differences in student outcomes and experiences in intersectional terms, without creating a disproportionate and unmanageable volume and sparsity of data in the split indicators that inform their approach. We consider that the definition of the ABCS method – which results in quintiles that are specifically defined for each student outcome – means that the quintiles should mainly be used in association with the student outcome used in their construction.
382. The ABCS method currently creates a set of quintiles for access to higher education, and for full- and part-time continuation outcomes. At the present time, this has the consequence that split indicators based on the ABCS quintiles and included in the illustrative and supporting data released alongside this consultation are limited to continuation measures reported for undergraduate students.<sup>113</sup>
383. We expect future extensions of the ABCS method during 2022 to develop further analyses relating to later points in the student life cycle. We therefore propose that when we implement our approaches to regulation of student outcomes and the TEF following conclusion of this consultation, split indicators based on the ABCS method will be constructed for all of the student outcome measures. We also propose to incorporate split indicators based on ABCS within future publications of the access and participation data dashboard. We do not propose to create ABCS analyses in relation to student experience measures until such time as the ongoing NSS review has concluded and any structural or other changes to the NSS questions have been implemented.

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<sup>111</sup> See also [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/).

<sup>112</sup> The characteristics included in the full-time continuation ABCS model are listed in Annex E, and include age, disability, TUNDRA (tracking underrepresentation by area), IMD, ethnicity, sex, free school meals eligibility, parental higher education experience, socio-economic classification, care experience local or distance learner and the income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI).

<sup>113</sup> Illustrative datasets released to providers alongside this consultation make use of the ABCS quintiles defined in the 2020 publication of the method.

384. When constructing these split indicators for the purposes of regulating student outcomes and the TEF, we propose that they report on student outcomes for three groups of students: those in quintile 1, those in quintiles 2 and 3, and those in quintiles 4 and 5. The distribution of the rates of continuation across the ABCS continuation quintiles means that we consider that the volume and sparsity of data constructed will be manageable and appropriate for the purposes of assessments of condition B3 and the TEF. When constructing split indicators to include in the access and participation data dashboard, we propose that they report on the same three groups, as well as the quintiles individually, because we are able to tolerate a higher risk of data sparsity in order to support activities that identify and reduce gaps in equality of opportunity between student groups.

#### Other characteristics

385. In addition to the protected characteristics described in Table 11 above, we have also considered creating split indicators in respect of each of:

- a. Socio-economic classification
- b. Care experience on or after 16th birthday
- c. Parental experience of higher education
- d. Household residual income
- e. People estranged from their families
- f. Income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI)
- g. Participation of local areas (POLAR4)
- h. Tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA).

386. We have chosen not to propose use of these characteristics for the purposes of constructing split indicators to inform our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF. This is because we take the view that our existing proposals achieve an appropriate balance of the principles described at paragraph 320. In particular, we consider that they result in a number and range of student characteristics that is comprehensive in identifying the most pertinent differences, while delivering practical utility for providers and assessments. We also take the view that coverage limitations, coupled with the inclusion of some of these characteristics as contributing factors in the definition of ABCS quintiles (relevant to 385 a, b, c, f and h), mean that they would provide low added value if the split indicators were extended to include them.

387. However, we propose that where these characteristics are not currently included among the split indicators that we construct and publish in the access and participation data dashboard, the dashboard is extended to report on each of these characteristics. Because the characteristics are known to refer to small student populations, we consider it likely that extension of the access and participation data dashboard to report on care experienced students and those estranged from their families would involve reporting these split indicators at sector level only, rather than at provider level. In our view, this will be necessary to avoid data disclosure in breach of the GDPR, at least until such time as numbers increase. In proposing to extend the access and participation data dashboard to report on the remaining

characteristics listed in paragraph 385, we acknowledge that they have known limitations of their coverage.<sup>114</sup> However, we take the view that we are able to tolerate risks related to the larger number of split indicators, partial coverage, and data sparsity, in order to support activities that identify and reduce gaps in equality of opportunity between student groups.

388. We do not expect the POLAR methodology to be updated and are therefore concerned about the longevity of split indicators based on this classification for the purposes of condition B3 and TEF assessments.<sup>115</sup> POLAR4 was derived using data about UK-domiciled students who began their higher education studies aged 18 or 19 between 2009-10 and 2013-14, so will become increasingly out of date in the event of changes in the UK demographics or propensity to study higher education. While we do not at this stage propose to remove split indicators based on POLAR4 quintiles from the access and participation data dashboard, in light of these constraints it is anticipated that the OfS's regulation of access and participation will promote greater use of the TUNDRA and ABCS methods in future. Our recent update of the ABCS classification transitioned to the use of TUNDRA as a contributing area-based measure of underrepresentation in higher education participation, in place of the POLAR4 classification used in earlier versions.

389. We are prevented from including other student characteristics (such as information about those who are carers, refugees or children of military families, or those for whom English is a second language) because data is not collected at a national level, within HESA or ILR student data collections or any alternative data sources.

### **Selecting and defining split indicators for course types**

390. Our consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed that their assessments will consider split indicators to show performance for different course types. We do not, at this stage, propose to report on student outcomes and experiences for different course types within our split indicators for the access and participation data dashboard.

391. The course type split indicators that we propose to use in our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF are aligned with provision that is distinct in its design and delivery, and for which there is a policy imperative for identifying differences in student outcomes. When defining these split indicators, we place particular emphasis on the availability and coverage of the data we rely on to construct it.

### **HTQ provision**

392. Delivery of HTQs is expected to commence from September 2022. We consider that an ability to identify differences in student outcomes for newly developed provision, designed and delivered to meet employer demand for skills at Levels 4 and 5, through alignment to employer-led occupational standards, will be important for the future assurance that approved HTQs are high quality. We would intend to introduce a split indicator for HTQ

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<sup>114</sup> The characteristics included in paragraph 385 are only available in respect of entrants in recent years who are either: UK-domiciled and studying at providers which return HESA student records (relevant to 385 a); undergraduates and studying at providers which return HESA student records (relevant to 385 b and c); UK-domiciled undergraduates who were accessing student finance through the Student Loans Company (relevant to 385 d and e); or English domiciled 18- and 19-year-olds (relevant to 385 f).

<sup>115</sup> The method will not be updated on account of changes in the availability and applicability of the information from which the population estimates key to the methodology have previously been sourced.

provision once delivery of HTQs has commenced and students on these qualifications are reported in student data returns.

### **Integrated foundation years**

393. A course that includes an integrated foundation year is intended to facilitate entry onto a specific degree programme, often as an option for students who would not otherwise meet the entry requirements for the course. The inclusion of a foundation year means a student signs up to study an undergraduate degree over an extended course length by comparison with other students who do not study the foundation year. In doing so, the student secures access to taxpayer-backed student support through the Student Loans Company and we consider that it is important that outcomes from these extended courses can be identified.
394. Student level data is known to be incomplete in respect of courses that involve foundation years:
- a. Within HESA Student and Student Alternative record specifications, providers are asked to identify students on courses with integrated foundation years with a year of programme of zero. We have observed inconsistent data reporting practices and variable data quality in respect of part-time, other undergraduate and postgraduate courses which incorporate foundation years
  - b. For providers who return student data to the ESFA through the ILR, there is no data item currently collected which explicitly records year of programme information, or otherwise identifies foundation years explicitly.
395. However, we believe that we can make reasonable approximations in order to identify foundation years integrated into full-time first degree programmes. This is because we have observed more consistent reporting of year of programme information within HESA student data related to students on these courses, and we believe it is sufficiently reliable to construct split indicators for the purposes of TEF and condition B3 assessment. In the case of the ILR, we have observed that providers returning foundation years integrated into full-time first degree programmes will often identify them within course titles. We therefore propose to construct split indicators for this provision foundation years integrated into full-time first degree programmes.
396. While an alternative approach might include construction of a foundation year split indicator for a wider range of provision beyond full-time first degree qualifications, we consider use of data which is known to be incomplete and potentially unreliable would be disproportionate and ineffective for our purposes. We could also have constructed this split indicator for a more limited range of providers, for only those providers which submit student data to HESA. We consider that failure to use data that we believe to be reliable, and introducing differences in the evidence available for different providers, would be unhelpful for users of the data. We also take the view that disparity in the range of split indicators that we construct for different providers would introduce burden and complexity to assessments of condition B3 and the TEF, and would place some providers in a more favourable position than others. The same would be true for some views of a given provider's student population, where looking at a combination of taught and registered students might involve the collation of data sourced from both the HESA and ILR returns.

### Other undergraduate levels of study

397. Feedback received through the phase one consultation on regulation of quality and standards suggested that the 'other undergraduate' level of study should be disaggregated to show Level 4 qualifications separately from those at Level 5.
398. We have proposed a definition of the level of study categories to be used in our data reporting hierarchy (see paragraphs 116 to 120) which retains the other undergraduate level of study in aggregate. This is because disaggregating level of study further (and constructing a full series of split indicators separately for each of other undergraduate at Level 4 and other undergraduate at Level 5) would generate large volumes of sparsely populated indicators and split indicators which would be prone to high levels of non-reportability and statistical uncertainty.
399. Instead, we propose to differentiate other undergraduate at Level 4 and other undergraduate at Level 5 as split indicators. The academic level of an other undergraduate qualification can be derived from the FHEQ, allowing us to map each qualification to either Level 4, Level 5 or higher. We propose to use this mapping in the construction of these split indicators. We take the view that this is a proportionate approach which recognises differences in course lengths, study intentions and progression routes within the other undergraduate category, but achieves an appropriate balance of the granularity and utility of the resulting data.

### Other course types

400. The phase one consultation on regulation of quality and standards identified several other examples of course types for which we were interested in views about whether there are distinctive characteristics to the extent that student outcomes might vary from other provision with the same qualification aim. We noted in that consultation that the construction of any additional split indicators related to these examples would be dependent on data quality and reliability.
401. Several of the examples received broad support in responses to the phase one consultation, and feedback identified a number of ways in which the provision could be distinctive. While we agree with various aspects of the feedback regarding distinctive features of these types of course and that they may merit separation in the future, we consider that there are a number of challenges of data quality and reliability that would need to be addressed to support this. This includes split indicators looking at courses with a sandwich year, as well as those offered on an accelerated or top-up basis. In all of these cases, either HESA or ILR data is incomplete, meaning that we could not be comprehensive in constructing split indicators for all providers registered with the OfS:
- a. Courses that include **sandwich years** can be identified within existing HESA and ILR data returns, but reporting requirements differ. HESA guidance directs that a course should be returned as 'sandwich' throughout its duration including the year(s) spent on placement, allowing the identification of sandwich year as a course attribute for each of entrant, qualifying and continuing student populations. However, we are aware that many of the students who start a sandwich course will not in fact take a placement year, so we would need a more considered approach to determine when a student should contribute to any split indicator. Students reported in ILR data will normally only be reported on a sandwich course in the year that they spend time on placement, meaning that entrants to courses that include sandwich years cannot be identified. This means that any split indicators

constructed for sandwich year courses cannot be appropriately or consistently defined for the stages of the student lifecycle.

- b. Student-level data that identifies **accelerated** provision was collected for the first time in 2019-20 HESA data returns so is very partial with respect to both the time series of data available and providers (in particular, until any such time as the ILR specification were extended to collect this information).
- c. **Top-up** courses are not identified distinctly through the existing specification of the HESA and ILR data returns, and approximations based on course titles, year of programme and expected course length information have found it difficult to distinguish top-up years from accelerated provision and are less effective in ILR data because the data collection does not include information about the year of programme on which a student is studying.

402. While the feedback received to date will help us to prioritise activities to improve the data collection, quality or reliability in regard to these course types, we take the view that disparity in the range and definition of split indicators we construct from current data would introduce burden and complexity into assessments, and would place some providers in a more favourable position than others. The same would be true for some views of a given provider's student population, where looking at a combination of taught and registered students might involve the collation of data sourced from both the HESA and ILR returns. The current barriers to comprehensive coverage of split indicators for the characteristics listed in paragraph 400 lead us to propose that, at this stage, split indicators are not constructed for any of those course types.

403. We also do not propose to construct split indicators for **distance learning** courses. While we recognise that these courses may have distinctive features, we take the view that the COVID-19 pandemic has blurred the distinction between distance and blended learning and is likely to continue to do so into the future. Whereas distance learning courses can be identified within student data returns, blended learning courses currently cannot. This means use and interpretation of split indicators for distance learning courses would be difficult and unreliable, and would be increasingly so as distance learning becomes less distinct from blended learning. Until such time as both distance and blended learning can be separately identified in student data, allowing differences between the two to be established and assessed, we do not believe that increasing the burden and complexity of interpreting a larger number of split indicators would be warranted. Our related consultations on regulating student outcomes and the TEF have proposed how assessments will take into account the context of providers, including those where distance learning is likely to represent a material issue for making judgements about their performance.

### **Defining split indicators for provider partnership arrangements**

404. The reporting structure that we have proposed for the construction of indicators and split indicators, as described in Proposal 2, includes an intention to report student outcome and experience indicators for a number of different views of a provider's student population. Within each view described at paragraph 59 b to d, we recognise that there are sub-categories of students experiencing different teaching arrangements.

405. The **taught view**, which includes all students taught at the provider in question, can be sub-divided to:

Taught and registered – those for whom the provider both registers and teaches the student.

- a. Taught only – those taught by the provider, on behalf of another provider who registers the student (subcontracted in).

406. The **taught or registered view**, which includes students either registered or taught at the provider in question, can be sub-divided to:

- a. Taught and registered.
- b. Taught only.
- c. Registered only – those registered by the provider, taught elsewhere by another provider (subcontracted out).

407. The **partnership view**, which includes subcontracted out students and those for whom the provider is acting in a validation-only capacity, can be sub-divided to:

- a. Registered only.
- b. Validation only – those neither taught nor registered by the provider, but studying for an award of that provider.

408. The sub-categories of different teaching arrangements listed in paragraphs 405 to 407 are observed to overlap, with the same category contributing to various of the different views of a provider's student population. In these cases, we take the view that including split indicators which show the sub-categories of different teaching arrangements is helpful to provide a line of sight to help understand which pockets of performance may be impacting most on the different views of a provider's student population.

409. An alternative approach could involve reporting a full set of student outcome and experience indicators and split indicators for a wider range of provider views, each defined at a lower level of granularity: whether those described in paragraphs 405 to 407, or lower still, to look at named pairs of providers. While such an approach would result in a more comprehensive understanding of differences in student outcomes and experiences across each of a provider's partnerships, we consider that this level of detail is unnecessary and disproportionate for the purposes of TEF and initial assessments of compliance with condition B3. As described at paragraph 321, we would expect to construct further split indicators at these levels of detail if it proved necessary to support the assessment of condition B3.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 326 to 409, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of the split indicators within the 'Description and methodology' document

- Definitions of all relevant variables named through the rebuilding instructions within the 'Core algorithms' document
- Instructions for rebuilding split indicators from your individualised student data within the 'Instructions for rebuilding OfS datasets' document
- The exemplar data dashboards and Excel workbooks, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/).

### Question 28

To what extent do you agree with our proposed definition of **split indicators showing year of entry or qualification**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 29

To what extent do you agree with our proposed definition of **split indicators showing subject studied using CAH2 subject groups**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 30

To what extent do you agree with the selection and proposed definitions of **split indicators for student characteristics**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 31

To what extent do you agree with the selection and proposed definitions of **split indicators for course types**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 32

To what extent do you agree with our proposed definition of **split indicators showing provider partnership arrangements**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Proposal 10: Definition and coverage of benchmarking factors

### What are we proposing and why?

410. Our related consultations, on regulation of student outcomes and the TEF, propose the use of benchmarking.<sup>116</sup> The purpose and uses of benchmarking specific to each application are explained in the related consultation documents, but in each case, benchmarks are used to help interpret a provider's actual performance relative to that of the sector overall once we have taken into account the mix of students at the provider or the provision being offered.
411. At the present time, we propose to include benchmarking of provision at undergraduate levels of study. We expect to introduce benchmarking of provision at postgraduate levels of study to inform our regulation of student outcomes in future and would consult before doing so on the characteristics to be taken account of. This is because a number of the student characteristics which represent those experiencing disadvantage or underrepresented in higher education are not available, or otherwise not meaningful, in respect of postgraduate students. We take the view that further work is required to enhance the evidence base from which we identify the characteristics of the postgraduate students or provision that should be taken account of through benchmarking.
412. This proposal does not apply to our regulation of access and participation.

### What is a benchmark and how does the OfS construct one?

413. Paragraphs 414 to 429 describe the methodology that the OfS uses to calculate benchmarks. The OfS has used its judgement to establish that this method remains the most appropriate for our proposed uses. We have described the approach to allow readers to better understand the priorities and application of the proposals that follow regarding our selection of benchmarking factors.
414. In calculating student outcome and experience measures as data indicators, each indicator that the OfS calculates represents the outcomes that we have observed for the students at a particular provider at a particular point in time. The calculation of a benchmark gives us a counterfactual for the observed outcomes, which we intend can be used in two ways:
- a. to understand a provider's performance in relation to the higher education sector as a whole
  - b. to assess similarities between individual providers.
415. In making these comparisons, we aim to take account of factors which describe the profile of students and provision delivered by higher education providers and which are correlated with the outcomes we are measuring. The benchmarking methodology used by the OfS involves consideration of unique combinations of the student and course characteristics that we have selected to act as benchmarking factors: we refer to these unique combinations as benchmarking groups.

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<sup>116</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

416. The methodology allows us to ask the question: 'What would the observed student outcome have been at this provider if its distribution of students across benchmarking factor groups had been what it was, but its outcomes across those same benchmarking groups were replaced by the sector-overall rates?'
417. When there are known differences between the outcomes and experiences of some groups of students or providers, observed average values for the whole of the higher education sector are not necessarily helpful when forming this expectation. Instead, we calculate the benchmark as a weighted sector average reflecting the number of students in that group at the provider. As such, benchmarks give information about the values that the sector overall might have achieved for the indicator if the characteristics included in the benchmarking factors are the only ones that are important. Where differences exist between an indicator and its corresponding benchmark, these may be due to the provider's performance, or they may be due to some other characteristic which is not included in the weighting.
418. To create benchmarks, we calculate the student outcome or experience measure in question for all students in the higher education sector with each unique combination of the benchmarking factors. The benchmark for each provider is then calculated by taking a weighted average of the overall sector outcomes for each benchmarking group, taking account of the particular mix of students across those groups at the provider in question. A worked example is provided at Annex C. This method applies to the calculation of benchmarks for continuation, cohort-tracking completion, progression and student experience indicators for which the outcome is observed at an individual level before being aggregated to report on a provider.
419. To construct benchmarks for the compound completion measure (for which outcomes are observed at cohort, rather than individual, level), we modify our approach. We calculate the withdrawal rates for the higher education sector for each benchmarking group for each of the six entry cohorts that are used to construct the measure. The benchmark for each provider can then be calculated by taking a weighted average of the overall sector outcomes for each benchmarking group for each entry cohort, taking account of the particular mix of students across those groups at the provider in question.
420. The benchmarking methodology used by the OfS means that a provider is not being compared with a pre-set group of providers, but rather the outcomes for a provider's students are compared with the outcomes of similar students across the entirety of the higher education sector. For the purpose of calculating these benchmarks, we propose that the higher education sector within which we are making comparisons of the outcomes for similar students is made up of:
- a. For OfS registered providers in England: all English higher education providers registered with the OfS at the time that we produce the indicators, which have returned HESA or ILR student data. We take the view that benchmarking providers which are subject to OfS regulation, against those which are not, would not be appropriate because of the proposed use of benchmarks to inform assessments of condition B3. We also take the view that benchmarks used in regulation of student outcomes and in the TEF (for English providers) should be consistent.

- b. For providers in the devolved administrations: all English higher education providers registered with the OfS which have returned HESA or ILR student data, and all providers which are funded or regulated by one of the devolved administrations at the time that we produce the indicators.

421. The benchmarking methodology used by the OfS is well established, and has been used in the UK Performance Indicators since 1997.<sup>117</sup> We do though review the way we benchmark data, to improve the uses and application of our approach and to ensure public confidence in the data and evidence we use to take decisions. In 2018, we commissioned Alma Economics to look at alternative benchmarking methodologies that make effective use of largescale datasets which could be used in a higher education context.<sup>118</sup> Their report presents an assessment of a broad range of alternative benchmarking methods, many of which involve the construction of advanced statistical models, and recognises that different approaches may be beneficial for different applications and audiences of benchmarks. The work concluded that “benchmarking is not a purely academic exercise in the sense that there is no objectively optimal benchmark... the most appropriate benchmarking methodology may not be theoretically elegant or difficult. In the HE context with a wide set of users with varying degrees of statistical knowledge, a simple approach may be more useful and achieve a greater impact on improving the sector.”
422. We take the view that, in the context of informing our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF, the benchmarking method used by the OfS achieves an appropriate balance of statistical sophistication (in order to facilitate robust decisions and a genuine impact on improving the sector), with relative simplicity and transparency for users. Some of the alternative methods (stochastic and frontier methodologies) are technically demanding for users to understand or interpret, with significant knowledge and effort required to grasp how the statistical models work and what drives the results they generate. In contrast, the deterministic method we are using can more easily be understood and recalculated by users. Through publication of the sector averages, our benchmark calculations can be reproduced by providers using only their own data: model results could not be reproduced without access to data about all students in English or UK higher education.

### **The statistical integrity of the benchmarking approach**

423. The basis on which we define the benchmarking groups is key to the integrity and robustness of the benchmark values calculated and used in our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF.
424. When constructing the benchmark for an individual provider, the students at that provider contribute to the sector averages we calculate. We recognise that where the characteristics of students at the provider in question do not frequently occur among student populations in the wider sector, these sector averages may be heavily influenced by that provider. This is referred to as the risk of ‘self-benchmarking’. In such a scenario, the provider’s own students would be making a substantial contribution to the calculation of its benchmark making the calculation less robust and the resulting benchmark value less meaningful. The benchmark value will become more similar to the indicator value as the provider’s

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<sup>117</sup> See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/performance-indicators>.

<sup>118</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/benchmarking/review-of-benchmarking/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/benchmarking/review-of-benchmarking/).

contribution increases, because there is little other sector data that can provide information to make the benchmark a reliable estimate of the values that might have been expected for the provider.

425. The risk of self-benchmarking becomes more acute when benchmarking groups are defined at such a detailed level that only very small numbers of students possess each unique combination of the student and course characteristics that we have selected to act as benchmarking factors. When many benchmarking groups are populated by only one or two students, the sector averages calculated for those groups will tend to a small range of values. If the sector average is calculated in reference to a single student, it can only result in an 'average' of either 0 per cent or 100 per cent. If it refers to only two students, the average can only be 0 per cent, 50 per cent or 100 per cent. Sector averages that include large numbers of 0 per cent and 100 per cent values can lead to an ineffectual weighting which will skew the resulting benchmark and increase the standard errors of the calculated difference between indicator and benchmark values.<sup>119</sup>
426. A selection of benchmarking factors which gives rise to a very large number of benchmarking groups, many of which contain very small numbers of students or students from a single provider, therefore compromises the statistical integrity of the benchmarking method. If providers' benchmarks become very similar to their indicator values as a result of widespread self-benchmarking, it becomes difficult for those providers to demonstrably exceed or drop below their benchmark. The calculation of benchmarks would therefore prove ineffectual in helping to interpret a provider's actual performance relative to that of the sector.
427. We have considered an alternative approach to minimising the risks of self-benchmarking, suggested by the ONS in its 'Evaluation of the statistical elements of TEF'.<sup>120</sup> 'Studentisation' is an approach in which a given provider's benchmark is informed by sector averages calculated from all other providers' data except its own. The phenomenon of self-benchmarking can be avoided because a provider's own students do not contribute towards its benchmark calculation. However, implementation of studentisation would, by design, have a series of important risks and disadvantages, and we take the view that such an approach would not be proportionate:
- a. Significant assumptions would be required within the calculations to deal with the eventuality that the provider for which we are calculating the benchmark is the only one with students in a benchmarking group. One solution would be to assume the outcomes observed among the provider's own students, but that would seem to reintroduce the problem that a studentisation approach was seeking to resolve.
  - b. Similar assumptions might be required in the event that the provider for which we are calculating the benchmark is contributing a very large proportion of the students in a benchmarking group. Studentisation would create benchmarking groups populated by smaller numbers of students, and more groups with smaller populations exacerbates the risks of unreliable benchmarking calculations and increased standard errors described in

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<sup>119</sup> The standard errors of a statistic represent the amount by which one would expect that statistic to change, based solely on random sampling.

<sup>120</sup> See [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/evaluation-of-the-statistical-elements-of-tef](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/evaluation-of-the-statistical-elements-of-tef).

paragraph 425. It also heightens the risk that a single provider dominates the benchmarks calculated for other providers.

- c. The set of sector averages which are calculated and then weighted to take account of the mix of students at the provider in question would need to be unique to each provider, compromising the transparency and reproducibility of our calculations, and increasing the burden of understanding and quality assuring our approach for providers and for the OfS.

428. Instead, our proposed selection of benchmarking factors has sought to minimise the occasions on which we might encounter self-benchmarking, by selecting and grouping factors in such a way as to ensure as far as possible that reasonable numbers of students from multiple providers are contributing to each sector average that we calculate. We are aware that the diversity of the higher education sector means that we cannot mitigate this risk entirely and our proposed benchmarking factors tolerate a risk of self-benchmarking on a small scale.

429. Where the self-benchmarking risk presents a material issue for a given provider, we anticipate that the provider will normally be sufficiently distinctive that any alternative benchmarking approach would be limited in its effectiveness. Our proposed approaches to taking account of the context of the provider would mean that assessments of such providers place less weight on the evidence drawn from student outcome and experience data indicators.<sup>121</sup> We consider that this is more appropriate than implementing an alternative method requiring greater complexity and reduced transparency for all providers. To facilitate an understanding of where this situation may occur, we propose to include information about the provider's own contribution to that benchmark within the datasets we construct. This will also support users of the information in the public domain to understand and respond to the risk that the benchmark is of limited use.

### Selecting benchmarking factors

430. For the reasons described in paragraphs 423 to 429, our selection and definition of benchmarking factors is key to the integrity and robustness of the benchmark values calculated and assessed. It is important that users have confidence in the construction of these components of the data indicators evidence base. We are proposing that our selection and application of benchmarking factors is underpinned by a set of guiding principles, against which a range of candidate factors is considered in turn in order to identify both the credible and then the preferred factors.

431. The proposed guiding principles are included in Annex D. They establish a series of expectations for benchmarking factors, in relation to their scope and policy influences, availability and data quality, and statistical properties. Once benchmarking factors have been selected, the proposed principles also set expectations for defining groupings of the attributes within each benchmarking factor. The principles we are proposing build on those

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<sup>121</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

previously used and published by the OfS,<sup>122</sup> which were reviewed by the ONS in its 'Evaluation of the statistical elements of TEF' and deemed reasonable from a statistical viewpoint.<sup>123</sup> They have been reviewed and refreshed to be clearer in their alignment with the current policy uses and priorities for which benchmarking is proposed.

### The factors we propose to use

432. Application of the proposed guiding principles results in a proposal that student outcome and experience indicators are benchmarked using the factors listed in Tables 12 to 15. We propose these factors as a result of the combination of detailed statistical modelling and policy consideration undertaken by the OfS and reported in our supporting 'Review of the selection and grouping of benchmarking factors' document.<sup>124</sup> Where we refer to groupings of entry qualifications and subject areas of study in Tables 12 to 15, the groupings we propose using are listed in Annex E.

Table 12: Proposed benchmarking factors for continuation measures

Benchmarking factor	Continuation: full-time	Continuation: part-time	Continuation: apprenticeship
Level of study (First degree, other undergraduate, undergraduate with postgraduate components)	✓ (Other undergraduate separated into those at Level 4 and those at Level 5+)	✓	✓
Subject of study (CAH level 1 groups)	✓	✓	✓
Entry qualifications	✓ (11 groupings)	✓ (5 groupings)	✓ (5 groupings)
Expected course length (Expected course length of less than a year, or otherwise)	✗	✓	✗
ABCS quintile (Continuation ABCS Quintiles 1 to 5 for the	✓	✓	✓

<sup>122</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/benchmarking/guiding-principles-for-benchmarking-factors/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/benchmarking/guiding-principles-for-benchmarking-factors/).

<sup>123</sup> See [www.gov.uk/government/statistics/evaluation-of-the-statistical-elements-of-tef](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/evaluation-of-the-statistical-elements-of-tef).

<sup>124</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

Benchmarking factor	Continuation: full-time	Continuation: part-time	Continuation: apprenticeship
relevant mode of study, non-UK domiciled) <sup>125</sup>			
<b>Total distinct benchmarking groups</b>	5,544	3,780	1,890

Table 13: Proposed benchmarking factors for completion measures

Benchmarking factor	Completion: full-time	Completion: part-time	Completion: apprenticeship
Level of study (First degree, other undergraduate, undergraduate with postgraduate components)	✓ (Other undergraduate separated into that at Level 4 and that at Level 5+)	✓	✓
Subject of study (CAH level 1 groups)	✓	✓	✓
Entry qualifications	✓ (11 groupings)	✓ (5 groupings)	✓ (5 groupings)
Expected course length	✓ (Expected course length of less than two years, two years, or at least three years)	✓ (Expected course length of less than a year, or otherwise)	✗
ABCS group <sup>126</sup> (Completion ABCS groups, or non-UK domiciled)	✓	✓	✓

<sup>125</sup> The ABCS method, described in Annex E, constructs separate quintiles relevant to each student outcome measure, where necessary differentiating by mode of study. The ABCS analysis for continuation outcomes considers full- and part-time students separately at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/). Full-time continuation ABCS quintiles are used in respect of apprenticeship students.

<sup>126</sup> The total number of completion benchmarking groups is a maximum, which assumes five Completion ABCS quintiles plus a sixth group for non-UK domiciled students. The number of Completion ABCS groups we use will depend on development of these during 2022.

Benchmarking factor	Completion: full-time	Completion: part-time	Completion: apprenticeship
<b>Total distinct benchmarking groups</b>	16,632 (2,772 without ABCS quintiles)	3,780 (630 without ABCS quintiles)	1,890 (315 without ABCS quintiles)

Table 14: Proposed benchmarking factors for progression measures

Benchmarking factor	Progression: full-time	Progression: part-time	Progression: apprenticeship
Year qualification obtained	✓	✓	✓
Level of study (First degree, other undergraduate, undergraduate with postgraduate components)	✓	✓	✓
Subject of study	✓ (CAH level 2 groups <sup>127</sup> )	✓ (Broadly defined subject groups)	✓ (Broadly defined subject groups)
Entry qualifications	✓ (11 groupings)	✓ (5 groupings)	✓ (5 groupings)
ABCS group <sup>128</sup> (Progression ABCS group)	✓	✓	✓
Geography of employment quintile (Quintile 1, Quintiles 2 and 3, Quintiles 4, 5 and unknown)	✓	✓	✓

<sup>127</sup> For benchmarking purposes, the CAH level 2 group for Celtic studies (CAH19-02) has been combined into the Languages and area studies group (CAH19-04).

<sup>128</sup> The total number of progression benchmarking groups is a maximum, which assumes five Progression ABCS quintiles. The number of Progression ABCS groups we use will depend on development of these during 2022.

Benchmarking factor	Progression: full-time	Progression: part-time	Progression: apprenticeship
<b>Total distinct benchmarking groups<sup>129</sup></b>	80,784 (13,464 without ABCS quintiles)	10,800 (1,800 without ABCS quintiles)	10,800 (1,800 without ABCS quintiles)

Table 15: Proposed benchmarking factors for student experience measures

Benchmarking factor	Student experience: full-time	Student experience: part-time	Student experience: apprenticeship
Year of survey	✓	✓	✓
Level of study (First degree, other undergraduate, undergraduate with postgraduate components)	✓	✓	✓
Subject of study	✓ (CAH level 2 groups <sup>130</sup> )	✓ (Broadly defined subject groups)	✓ (Broadly defined subject groups)
Age on entry (Under 21 or unknown, 21 to 30, 31 and over)	✓	✓	✓
Disability (Disability reported, no disability reported)	✓	✓	✓
Ethnicity (Asian, Black, Mixed, Other, Unknown or White, non-UK domiciled)	✓	✓	✓

<sup>129</sup> The total number of benchmarking groups for progression measures reflects the four years of GO survey responses that will be used in the construction of student outcomes indicators in steady state. Illustrative data released alongside this consultation makes use of the two years of GO survey responses that are currently available, for the first implementation of our new approaches to assessment of condition B3 and the TEF we will make use of the three years of responses that will be available at that point.

<sup>130</sup> For benchmarking purposes, the CAH level 2 group for Celtic studies (CAH19-02) has been combined into the Languages and area studies group (CAH19-04).

Benchmarking factor	Student experience: full-time	Student experience: part-time	Student experience: apprenticeship
Sex (Female or other, Male)	✓	✗	✗
<b>Total distinct benchmarking groups</b>	29,376	4,320	4,320

### The evidence we have considered in making these proposals

433. The models used to understand the effects of numerous factors on each of the student outcome and experience measures have examined the most recent data available, using the definitions proposed throughout this consultation. They examine current evidence and articulate differences in the effects of different candidate factors on each of the measures we intend to construct.
434. When taken together with our policy aims and principles for benchmarking, this means that the benchmarking factors we propose for each measure differ, in acknowledgement that some of the factors which have strong effects on some measures, have a weak or no effect on other measures. We have adopted consistent approaches to the inclusion of factors wherever possible and appropriate, but we do not consider it appropriate to do so at the expense of the statistical integrity of the method or its ability to calculate meaningful sector-adjusted benchmarks. Prioritising the consistent application of the same factors would mean including factors which we have found to have little effect on the outcome being measured, making the benchmarking of that measure ineffectual.
435. Rather, we have prioritised those factors which demonstrate the largest effects on the outcomes, where these also satisfy our principles for benchmarking. The use of factors which identify material differences in student outcomes and experiences across the higher education sector will help to ensure that the benchmarks we construct are effective in providing meaningful information for the purposes of interpreting individual providers' performance.
436. We take the view that the proposed factors therefore balance the need to protect the statistical integrity of the benchmarking approach – by limiting the number of factors included to those with the largest effects on the outcomes we are measuring and the clearest policy drivers – against the desire to ensure that benchmarks are fit for purpose and as comprehensive possible in accounting for relevant factors.

### Operationalising our proposed benchmarking factors for student outcome measures

437. Our proposed benchmarking factors for the three student outcomes measures all include the use of ABCS quintiles. ABCS is a set of analyses that seeks to better understand how higher education outcomes vary for groups of students holding different sets of characteristics. We define ABCS quintiles which represent groups of students on the basis of a set of characteristics so that we can determine the effect of not just one characteristic on an outcome, but the effect of multiple characteristics.

438. In respect of continuation outcomes, we are able to operationalise use of ABCS quintiles as benchmarking factors immediately, using the analysis published on this methodology each year since 2019.<sup>131</sup> The illustrative datasets released to providers alongside this consultation, and published distributions of the student outcomes across the sector<sup>132</sup>, therefore generate benchmarks for continuation outcomes which take account of a student's ABCS continuation quintile as we have proposed.
439. However, we are not able to include ABCS completion or progression quintiles within the construction of the illustrative data released in respect of completion or progression outcomes. The OfS expects to extend the ABCS method to produce and publish quintiles defined in respect of these later points of the student lifecycle during 2022. Subject to the outcomes of this consultation, those quintiles would be incorporated within the benchmarking of completion and progression outcomes for the first implementation of our new approaches to assessment of condition B3 and the TEF. The method we use to create ABCS quintiles was first published in a 2019 release of experimental statistics, wherein we invited feedback on the methodologies for our modelling and for our creation of the quintiles. We welcome further feedback on the ABCS method in responses to this consultation.
440. Our proposed use of ABCS quintiles for all three of the student outcomes measures, despite their current availability being limited to continuation outcomes, stems from a recognition that statistical modelling has shown that a range of individual student characteristics demonstrate material effects on the student outcomes we are measuring. While they are material effects, they tend to be substantially weaker than the material effects seen in relation to the students' level and subject of study, and the qualifications they held on entry to higher education.
441. We take the view that it is not possible for us to include all of the student characteristic factors which demonstrate material effects, in addition to factors which account for level and subject of study, and entry qualifications. To do so would generate large numbers of sparsely populated benchmarking groups and introduce widespread self-benchmarking that significantly compromises the integrity of the method. It would mean that the resulting benchmarks could not be considered meaningful or reliable for use in our regulation of student outcomes or in the TEF:
- a. We would see up to a third of providers contributing at least 20 per cent of the students in their completion outcomes benchmark calculation, and around three quarters of providers contributing at least 5 per cent. Several providers would contribute more than 50 per cent of the students in their own benchmark.
  - b. Contributions to benchmark would be higher again for progression outcome benchmarks, where up to a third of providers would contribute more than 50 per cent of the students in the calculation of own progression benchmark. Typically, more than 70 per cent of providers would be contributing at least 20 per cent of the students, and for most modes and levels of study almost 100 per cent of providers contribute at least 5 per cent of the students in their own benchmark.

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<sup>131</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/).

<sup>132</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/).

442. In light of our position that it is not possible to accommodate all of the individual student characteristics alongside the other proposed factors with stronger effects, we consider that the inclusion of ABCS quintiles offer a series of benefits. As an intersectional measure, which is designed to differentiate those individuals with combinations of student and background characteristics that identify them as being least likely to achieve the higher education outcome in question, we consider that it is a valuable and effective means of accounting for the material differences that our benchmarking method seeks to adjust for. That it allows us to do so via inclusion of a single factor, rather than five or more separate factors, helps to preserve the statistical integrity of our benchmarking method. It also avoids the alternative approaches in which we make an arbitrary selection of a single student characteristic to use in benchmarking, or else take no account of student characteristics at all.
443. Statistical modelling of continuation outcomes supports our interpretation that ABCS quintiles act as effective substitutes for individual student characteristics when the latter are omitted from the analysis. We are confident that the same will be true of ABCS quintiles developed in respect of completion and progression outcomes.

### **Operationalising our proposed benchmarking factors for providers in the devolved administrations**

444. We propose to use the same benchmarking factors for the student outcome and experience measures for providers in the devolved administrations as for those proposed for benchmarking English providers. In respect of the three student outcomes measures in particular, we have taken advice from the organisations responsible for the funding and regulation of providers in the devolved administrations. It is recognised that the need to balance the statistical integrity of the approach against the desire for comprehensive benchmarking factors remains no different to that which influences the proposals we have described.
445. We take the view that the value and effectiveness of benchmarking by ABCS quintiles as an intersectional measure would apply equally to providers in the devolved administrations, and it therefore represents the best candidate for accounting for student characteristics in the benchmarking of these providers. Although we have not been able to include ABCS quintiles within the construction of the illustrative data released to providers in the devolved administrations, the OfS's further development of ABCS during 2022 is expected to provide mechanisms for assigning ABCS quintiles at all stages of the student lifecycle to students at those providers. Subject to the outcomes of this consultation, those quintiles would be incorporated within the benchmarking of continuation, completion and progression outcomes for providers in the devolved administrations for the first implementation of our new approaches to the TEF.
446. We are aware that measures of disadvantaged students and underrepresented groups are not readily available on a UK-wide basis, and expect that ABCS quintiles applied for students at providers in the devolved administrations may consequently be more broadly defined than those applied in England. Where identification of ABCS quintiles relies on analysis of classifications or characteristics only available for students in England, the methodology will be developed to draw more heavily on those characteristics which apply UK-wide in order to assign quintiles for students at providers in the devolved administrations.

447. We consider that the only alternatives to the approach we are proposing for providers in the devolved administrations would be:
- a. To use the relevant IMD for the devolved administration of the provider as a benchmarking factor, in place of ABCS quintiles in our proposed factors. We take the view that this is undesirable on account of its consequence that the sector within which benchmarking is making comparisons of the outcomes for similar students is only made up of providers from the same devolved administration as the provider in question. Such an approach would be likely to experience unmanageable levels of self-benchmarking unless significant compromises were made in respect of factors that account for the levels and subjects of study, and students' qualifications on entry.
  - b. To use 2011 census data to generate an area-based measure of socio-economic disadvantage that has UK-wide applicability. Such a measure has been considered by HESA, based on the proportions of UK residents in local areas aged 16 and over with qualifications below Level 4, and the proportions of UK residents in those areas aged 16 to 74 in given socio-economic classifications.<sup>133</sup> While use of this measure would allow more consistent benchmarking comparisons across providers in all of the devolved administrations, it has a number of drawbacks. It is not clear why these measures are appropriate measures of disadvantage for our purposes as it only measures disadvantage through a single dimension using a more limited range of factors than is possible using the ABCS method. It also relies on more historical characterisations of areas than those informing the construction of ABCS quintiles.
  - c. To take no account of student backgrounds and characteristics within the benchmarking of providers in the devolved administrations. We take the view that this is undesirable on the basis of differences in outcomes for these students that would not be accounted for through benchmarking for these providers.

### **Operationalising our proposed benchmarking factors for student experience indicators**

448. We take the view that it may not be necessary to develop and use ABCS quintiles in the benchmarking of student experience measures, and we have proposed instead to include all of the individual student characteristics for which we have observed material effects in the statistical modelling underpinning our review of benchmarking factors. This is because we have not proposed to include entry qualifications as a benchmarking factor for student experience measures, on the basis of the relative lack of effects shown in statistical modelling, together with a concern that there is no clear link between entry qualifications and NSS responses that would be a priority to account for through benchmarking. We take the view that any association that does exist may be a proxy for provider performance, which it is undesirable to control for. The absence of entry qualifications means that, when including all of the individual student characteristics, we continue to generate manageable numbers of more fully populated benchmarking groups, with less risk of introducing widespread self-benchmarking and unreliable benchmarks.
449. The benchmarking factors that we have proposed for the student experience measures are broadly consistent with those currently used routinely within annual publications of NSS results. Statistical modelling of the current NSS responses evidence confirms that many of

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<sup>133</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/05-10-2021/new-measure-disadvantage](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/05-10-2021/new-measure-disadvantage).

the factors that have been used in annual publications remain the most relevant and appropriate to account for in benchmarking these measures.

450. Specifically, the only differences are that we have proposed the use of level of study and cohort year as benchmarking factors for the purposes of constructing these measures for use in TEF assessments, and we only propose to use sex as a benchmarking factor for the measures constructed in respect of full-time students. These proposals follow from the material differences identified for these characteristics within the latest modelling. Because NSS result publications are annual, each typically reporting a single year's responses, our proposed inclusion of cohort year as a benchmarking factor for TEF purposes would have limited effect in its application to the annual NSS results publications. Based on the evidence that leads us to propose inclusion of level of study as a benchmarking factor, and the use of sex in full-time benchmarks only, we would expect to incorporate these approaches into the benchmarking of annual NSS results in future publications.<sup>134</sup> We would include such a proposal within the future consultation we anticipate about implementation of the NSS review outcomes more generally.

### **Alternative factor selections**

451. The benchmarking factors that we have proposed in Tables 12 to 15 represent the configuration of factors that we consider achieve the most appropriate balance between accounting for the factors that demonstrate the largest effects on student outcomes and experiences, with our wider principles and policy considerations for benchmarking, and the need to preserve the statistical integrity of the benchmarking method. A large number of alternative factors have been considered, and these are described in our supporting 'Review of the selection and grouping of benchmarking factors' document.<sup>135</sup> We discuss the most pertinent points here.

### **Year of entry or qualification**

452. We are aware that responses to the phase one quality and standards consultation highlighted a general concern about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student outcomes and our measurement of them.

453. While we acknowledge that the concern holds merit, the current data and modelling have not yet provided any evidence of this concern materialising in respect of continuation and completion outcomes. At this stage, the absence of a year effect means that we do not propose to include this as a benchmarking factor for continuation and completion outcomes. To do so would risk compromising the integrity of the benchmarking method by creating larger numbers of sparsely populated benchmarking groups, unless we were to exclude one of the other factors that we have proposed to include because it has a material effect on these outcomes. We consider that such a step cannot be justified at this time, but would be interested to hear well-evidenced arguments regarding effects yet to be borne out in the data. We intend to keep the impact of the pandemic under review and would refine our approach to benchmarking continuation and completion outcomes in future if it proved

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<sup>134</sup> This evidence is provided within our supporting 'Review of the selection and grouping of benchmarking factors' document, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

<sup>135</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

necessary and appropriate. More generally, the OfS would expect to repeat the analysis that informs selection of benchmarking factor at regular intervals to ensure that the benchmarking process remains fit for purpose over the longer term and makes best use of the data we have available at the time.

454. We have proposed to include year as a benchmarking factor for progression and student experience measures, on the basis that the statistical modelling already identifies an observable effect on Graduate Outcomes and NSS data which could relate to the impact of the pandemic. More generally, our proposal also recognises that benchmarking these measures by year allows us to account for structural and operational changes to the survey instruments that underpin them, as well as for external influences on progression outcomes which are related to short-term changes in the labour market. We take the view that accounting for effects related to changes in the labour market in this way is an appropriate and proportionate approach.

### **Courses with integrated foundation years**

455. While the statistical modelling results show some sizeable effects for courses with integrated foundation years – for continuation and completion indicators in particular, and for progression to a lesser extent – we propose not to include this as a benchmarking factor for any of the measures. This is because we take the view that there is an interaction between entry qualifications and foundation years, and while we consider it appropriate to take some account of students who are less well prepared for higher education, we believe that including both entry qualifications and foundation years as benchmarking factors would represent an over-adjustment for this. Once we have taken account of entry qualifications, it is unclear that any remaining effect we see for foundation years is still accounting for preparedness for higher education as opposed to acting as a proxy for provider performance. Our preference is to include entry qualifications rather than foundation years as a benchmarking factor, as it has a greater effect and wider applicability. We have proposed that foundation years will be identified within the split indicators we construct, allowing any differences in student outcomes to be apparent for users, even if not accounted for via benchmarking.

### **Geographical differences in employment outcomes**

456. Accounting for the geographical differences in students' propensity to achieve managerial or professional employment after leaving higher education represents a significant challenge. However, we recognise that understanding how these outcomes are linked to the area where the graduates are living and working provides important context for their interpretation.
457. Taking account of individual geographic areas is not considered feasible for the purposes of defining benchmarking factors. To avoid significant risks of creating large numbers of sparsely populated benchmarking groups leading to self-benchmarking, we would need to consider large areas (such as Government Office regions) which would hide substantial variation. For instance, areas on the East Anglian coast would be counted in the same region as areas just outside London, masking significant differences in these labour markets. We take the view that geography of employment quintiles, classifying areas across the UK based on graduates who responded to the GO survey, provides a way to account for the differences between relatively small geographic areas without compromising the integrity of the benchmarking approach.

458. The approach to constructing classifications of local variations in graduate opportunities in this way was introduced through a June 2021 publication of experimental statistics, wherein we invited feedback on the methodology for our creation of the quintiles.<sup>136</sup> We welcome further feedback on the geography of employment quintiles method in responses to this consultation.

### **Apprenticeships**

459. The benchmarking factors that we have proposed in Tables 12 to 15 show that, in most cases, we propose using the same benchmarking factors for indicators constructed for apprenticeship students as for part-time students. This is because the potential for conducting the appropriate statistical modelling is more limited on account of the more limited spread and characteristics of apprenticeship students across the sector. When considered at the level of detail necessary within the models, there are insufficient student numbers for those models to be robust.<sup>137</sup>

### **Defining benchmarking groups**

460. Having established that a given factor is a strong candidate for inclusion as a benchmarking factor, we must determine appropriate groupings of the attributes within each benchmarking factor. There are often numerous groupings that could be chosen because the characteristic being used as a benchmarking factor will typically be reported at a low level of granularity in the underlying student data.

461. For example, having established that a student's age on entry to their higher education study is an appropriate benchmarking factor, we must define the age groups that should be included. The HESA and ILR student data collections do not collect information about a student's age directly, but rather report an individual student's date of birth. This means that we can calculate the student's age on the basis of students' individual year of age (for example, 18-year-olds, 19-year-olds, 20-year-olds and so on), banded age groups (for example, under 21, aged between 21 and 30, between 31 and 40 and so on), or a more binary categorisation (young and mature).

462. The proposed principles in Annex D describe the expectations we have followed in establishing definitions for groupings of the attributes within each benchmarking factor we have proposed. As with the selection of benchmarking factors, we place particular weight on the need to conserve the statistical integrity of the benchmarking method. This means that we have balanced the need to limit the granularity at which the benchmarking groups are defined – in order that each benchmarking group will be populated by sufficient numbers of students to generate sector-averages which do not suffer from extreme statistical uncertainty – against the desire to ensure that benchmarks are fit for purpose and as comprehensive possible in accounting for relevant factors.

463. We have sought to avoid the scenario that the number of benchmarking factors, taken together with the number of groupings within that factor, would create an unmanageably large number of the unique combinations to form the benchmarking groups. We take the

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<sup>136</sup> See the June 2021 report, alongside the updated and extended analysis reported in November 2021, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-geography-of-employment-and-earnings/).

<sup>137</sup> In technical terms, the statistical models do not converge when constructed for apprenticeship students only.

view that including a factor grouped at a more aggregate level than might otherwise be desirable, is preferred to either omitting that factor altogether in order to conserve the statistical integrity of the method, or including it at a level of granularity that is known to compromise the effectiveness of the resulting benchmark.

464. The definitions and groupings of the proposed benchmarking factors is detailed in Tables 12 to 15 above and, in the case of entry qualifications and subject of study, in Annex E. In proposing these groupings, we have prioritised the creation of groups within which there is a similarity in the size of the effect on the student outcome or experience in question, and which retain a coherence by making practical sense and avoiding groupings akin to combinations of apples and pears. The use of groupings which identify similar differences in student outcomes and experiences across the higher education sector will help to ensure that the benchmarks we construct are effective in providing meaningful information for the purposes of interpreting individual providers' performance.
465. Wherever possible, the groupings we have proposed rely on established categorisations or classifications of the factor in question, including those used to define the split indicators constructed for the student outcome and experience measures proposed in this consultation. We believe it is advantageous that we make use of classifications that have previously proven to form coherent groupings, or are otherwise grounded in the design and definitional priorities identified by subject-matter experts external to the OfS who were involved in their construction. It is expected to simplify the benchmarking process, making our methods more transparent and accessible for stakeholders who may already have familiarity and an awareness of strengths and limitations of the groupings proposed.
466. For example, having established that subject area of study is an appropriate benchmarking factor, we have sought to define the benchmarking subject groups with reference to single levels of the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH).<sup>138</sup> The CAH has been developed in collaboration with the sector, other data users and stakeholders with relevant expertise, with the specific intention of providing a standard, hierarchical aggregation of higher education subjects suitable for the majority of uses.
467. The results of our statistical modelling, covering benchmarking factor attributes considered at different levels of granularity to form alternative benchmarking factor groupings is reported in our supporting 'Review of the selection and grouping of benchmarking factors' document.<sup>139</sup> We welcome feedback on whether the benchmarking factor groupings achieve an acceptable balance of the priorities and issues described in paragraphs 462 to 465.

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<sup>138</sup> See [www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos/cah-about](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/hecos/cah-about).

<sup>139</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 410 to 467, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of our statistical methods and benchmarking formulae within the 'Description of statistical methods' document
- Definitions of all relevant variables named as proposed benchmarking characteristics within the 'Core algorithms' document.

### Question 33

To what extent do you agree with the proposed **definitions of the sector against which English and devolved administration providers will be benchmarked**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 34

To what extent do you agree with the **benchmarking factors and groups** we have proposed for each of the student outcome and experience measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

### Question 35

Do you have any comments on the **methodology we use to calculate the ABCS quintiles** we propose to use in the benchmarking of student outcome measures?

### Question 36

Do you have any comments on the **methodology we use to calculate the geography of employment quintiles** we propose to use in the benchmarking of progression measures?

### Question 37

Do you wish to make any well-evidenced arguments regarding **effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on continuation and completion outcomes**, yet to be borne out in the data?

## Proposal 11: Presentation of student outcome and experience data indicators and approach to statistical uncertainty

### What is statistical uncertainty?

468. When calculating student outcome and experience measures as data indicators, each indicator that the OfS calculates is a factual representation of the outcomes or experiences of students observed at a particular provider at a particular point in time. If one is interested only in the actual population of students present at a particular provider at a particular time, then it would be appropriate to rely solely on this value.
469. Within the OfS's regulatory uses of student outcome and experience indicators, we want to think about indicator values as representing something about the performance of the provider in relation to a whole population of students who could have attended that provider, or may do so in the future. This whole population is known as a superpopulation. We recognise that it is not possible to say exactly what a provider's underlying performance looks like for that superpopulation, because students who could have attended the provider in question but did not do so, and students who may attend the provider in future, cannot be known to us.
470. The group of students which actually did attend are just one realisation of many other populations of students who could have attended that provider or may do so in the future. It is – in various respects – a random realisation of the superpopulation. If that realisation had been different, a slight difference in the observed population could give rise to slightly different indicator values being calculated, even though the underlying performance of the provider and their course delivery remained the same. This potential for random variation in the indicator values we calculate and interpret as the provider's performance, is known as statistical uncertainty. Statistical uncertainty is unavoidable in the calculation of any statistic that is unable to identify and refer to its superpopulation: it cannot be rectified through adjustments to the underlying data or the calculations we are performing. The concept is discussed further in our supporting 'Description of statistical methods' document.<sup>140</sup>
471. Assessments of indicator values for the OfS's regulatory purposes, in which a judgement about performance is a judgement about the superpopulation, should therefore be aware of the potential extent of this statistical uncertainty. There will always be a question as to how exact any calculated indicator value is as an estimate for the superpopulation.
472. As a producer of official statistics, the OfS is committed to effectively communicating its statistics, to allow users to assess and have confidence in the value of the statistics and avoid misinterpretation of them. This, together with the use of these indicators to inform our regulation of student outcomes and in TEF, as well as in regulation of access and participation, means that we take the view that it is essential to identify meaningful and effective ways to provide an awareness of the potential extent of statistical uncertainty. This view is supported by the ONS in its 'Evaluation of the statistical elements of TEF'.

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<sup>140</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/).

## Presenting statistical uncertainty to inform our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF

473. When presenting student outcome and experience indicators to inform our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF, we have chosen to use 'shaded bars' to represent the statistical uncertainty associated with observed values. The shaded bars that we are showing are illustrated below. They aim to represent the continuous spread (or distribution) of statistical uncertainty around the point estimates that we have calculated as the observed value of the indicator (shown as a green shaded bar), and as the observed value of the difference between the indicator and its associated benchmark (shown as a blue shaded bar).
474. The shading of the bars indicates the changing likelihood that underlying provider performance takes different values, with the darkest shading representing the range in which there is the greatest likelihood that true underlying provider performance might lie. Much like the bell curve of a normal distribution, as the shading lightens in both directions it represents a lower likelihood that true underlying performance falls at that point. Wider shaded bars mean that we become less confident in the observed point estimate.
475. In broad terms, each shaded bar can be thought of as representing a series of discrete confidence intervals around the point estimate we have observed, where each confidence interval in the series corresponds to a different confidence (or significance) level. For example, when we construct a 95 per cent confidence interval this means that 95 per cent of confidence intervals computed at the 95 per cent confidence level would contain the true value of performance in the superpopulation, and likewise for other confidence levels.
476. In designing the shaded bars, we have sought to avoid selecting a single confidence interval significance level. To do so would create a 'cliff edge' at a single significance level pre-determined by the OfS for our specific use, which would facilitate a binary interpretation of performance as definitively above or below a given threshold by most users. Instead, we illustrate the distribution of statistical uncertainty up to a maximum of a 99.7 per cent confidence interval and have proposed that our assessments of a provider's performance will establish the statistical confidence we have in relation to its performance by considering the uncertainty distribution relative to our proposed numerical thresholds.<sup>141</sup>
477. This approach means that we maximise the chance that the shaded bars encapsulate the true underlying performance, and that users are empowered to better understand the confidence in which they can hold their own judgements of student outcomes and experiences by making their own choice of confidence intervals. The approach also means that we do not propose to make any adjustments for multiple comparisons within our construction of student outcome and experience indicators to inform assessments of condition B3 or in the TEF.<sup>142</sup> Instead, we intend to guide users that they should be more

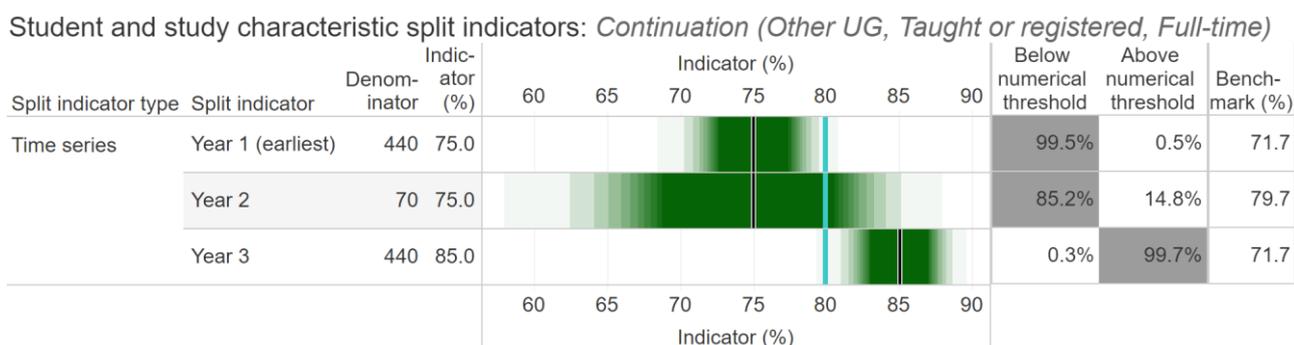
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<sup>141</sup> See proposal 5 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 10 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

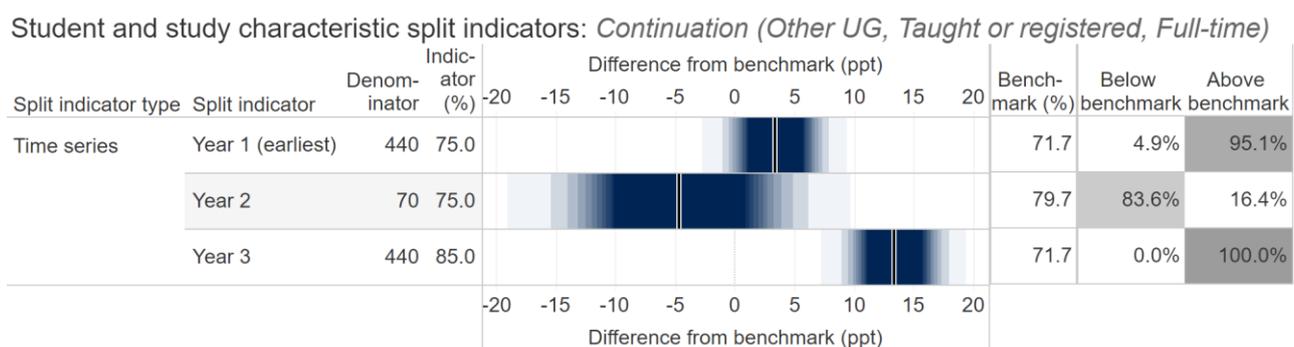
<sup>142</sup> Adjustments can be made to the calculations of confidence intervals to control the error or false discovery rates, which can be heightened when multiple statistics are calculated on a given topic and users make comparisons between these. Uncertainty can be underestimated depending on the nature of the multiple

conservative in their interpretation of statistical uncertainty the more comparisons they are making.

**Figure 6: Example of green shaded bars, showing spread of statistical uncertainty around indicator values**



**Figure 7: Example of blue shaded bars, showing spread of statistical uncertainty around difference between indicator and benchmark**



478. To facilitate consistent interpretations of this confidence, we have summarised the proportion of the distribution represented by the shaded bar that falls above or below those thresholds. These summary figures are reported in a supplementary table alongside the shaded bars, with the intention that the two are used together to inform an accurate and consistent interpretation of statistical confidence, related to the thresholds that the OfS has proposed to make use of.

479. We have considered a range of alternative presentations and approaches to communicating the statistical uncertainty associated with the indicators we propose to construct. The approach described here has been developed with advice from members of the TEF metrics peer review group, and we take the view that it achieves an appropriate balance between effective communication of statistical uncertainty and utility for a range of potential users. We consider that alternatives, in which the OfS pre-determined a single level or levels of statistical uncertainty that could be tolerated and communicated to users, would facilitate cliff edge effects that disempower users of the data in recognising similarities in the performance

comparisons are being made, because the likelihood that the computed confidence interval includes the true value of underlying performance may be substantially lower than that intended. Adjusting for multiple comparisons systematically requires a pre-determined set of assumptions about how users will interact with the data.

of two providers, one of which was 'flagged' as above a given threshold and one which was not.

480. For example, suppose that providers were considered to deliver performance below a numerical threshold of 85 per cent in any scenario that the upper limit of a 95 per cent confidence interval fell strictly below this value. If the upper limit of the confidence interval for one provider fell at 84.9 per cent, and the equivalent limit for a second provider fell at 85.1 per cent, both based on the same indicator value, one of these would be considered to deliver performance below the numerical threshold and the other would not. We take the view that interpretation of the performance of these two providers would require greater nuance to recognise the similarities and differences between them.
481. We do though acknowledge that the presentation of student outcome and experience indicators impacts on a wide range of users, and the resources required to understand and engage with the information we have constructed. We would be interested to hear feedback on the opportunities and challenges users might anticipate as a consequence of this presentation, and on the effectiveness of the guidance we have provided for users of our data dashboards.

### **Information included in our reporting of student outcome and experience indicators**

482. Proposal 1 of this consultation Proposal 1: Common approaches to the construction of student outcome and experience describes the reporting structure that we propose to adopt in our construction and publication of student outcome and experience data indicators. We have also proposed to publish the resulting datasets in both interactive data dashboards and supporting excel data workbooks.
483. We will include the following information in respect of each data point that our proposed reporting structure produces to inform assessment of condition B3 and the TEF:
- a. Denominator of the indicator: The total number of students in the population for which we are measuring outcomes or experiences.
  - b. Indicator value (as a proportion): Calculated in percentage terms as the numerator (the number of students who achieve the outcome or experience in question) divided by the denominator. This is the rate at which students have achieved the outcome or experience in question, expressed as a point estimate providing a factual representation of the actual population of students present at a particular provider at a particular time.
  - c. Benchmark value (as a proportion): Calculated in percentage terms for each provider as the weighted sector average which takes account of that provider's particular mix of undergraduate students. This is an estimate of what we might expect the provider's undergraduate student outcomes to be if its performance was the same as that of the sector overall, given the provider's specific mix of students and provision.
  - d. Difference between indicator and benchmark: This is a point estimate of the difference between the indicator and benchmark (expressed as indicator minus benchmark).
  - e. Response rates (for progression outcomes and student experience measures): Calculated in percentage terms as the number of students who responded to the relevant survey, divided by the total numbers of students eligible to be surveyed.

f. Confidence intervals: Aiming to communicate the statistical uncertainty associated with the point estimates, confidence intervals are calculated at a range of different significance levels, ranging from 75 per cent upwards in 2.5 percentage point increments. These are reported in tabular form in the excel workbooks, and as shaded bars in the interactive data dashboards.

484. For the purposes of the access and participation data dashboard, we will continue to include all of the information described in paragraph 483 a to e, as well as the numerator of the indicator and the percentage point gap and ratio between the indicators we calculate for a given set of characteristics. We do not at this stage propose to make changes to the presentation of the access and participation data dashboard. To provide information about the statistical uncertainty associated with the observed values used in our regulation of access and participation, we report the statistical significance and upper and lower confidence interval limits related to that gap (each calculated at the 95 per cent significance level).

### **Rounding and suppression of indicators data for data protection reasons**

485. The OfS has a duty to comply with the GDPR, and a responsibility to comply with the disclosure requirements associated with sensitive personal data items sourced from restricted access data collections (specifically, the NPD). These requirements lead us to implement a comprehensive approach to the rounding and suppression of the proposed student outcome and experience data indicators.

486. The data has been rounded as follows:

- a. Denominators have been rounded to the nearest 10.
- b. Indicators and their confidence intervals have been rounded to the nearest 1 decimal place.

487. The OfS has used its judgement to establish the steps that we must take to ensure our compliance with the GDPR. We have described the approach only for the purpose of allowing responses to this consultation to comment on the challenges that result from its application, in terms of onward use and interpretation of the data in different contexts and in terms of the effectiveness of guidance we issue on this matter.

488. While we recognise indicators suppressed on the basis of data protection considerations are likely to be among those that experience the highest levels of statistical uncertainty, this is not our motivation for implementing these suppression thresholds. We take the view that statistics constructed from very small populations can still provide users with important information, even if the full extent of that information is that you cannot learn anything about the provider's performance other than that it is uncertain. There will also be occasions on which a student outcome calculated in respect of a small population of students has lower levels of statistical uncertainty and would be capable of furnishing users with a meaningful interpretation of the data (such as some cases where the outcome is calculated as 0 per cent or 100 per cent). We do though acknowledge that the suppression criteria we use will impact on the volume of reportable data available for some providers, especially those that are smaller in size. We would be interested to hear feedback on the challenges that such providers might anticipate as a consequence of these data protection thresholds.

### **Suppression for small denominator populations**

489. Data will be suppressed and removed from publication in any scenario that the denominator for the indicator refers to fewer than 23 students (with suppression applied prior to rounding the denominator to the nearest 10). The number and range of split indicators that we propose to produce, in addition to more aggregate data in different modes and levels of study, for different views of a provider's student population, provides overlapping and intersecting information about various personal and sensitive characteristics. Without a comprehensive and conservative approach to suppression of small student populations, the opportunities to deduce information about individuals by comparing different breakdowns of the same student populations would represent a material data disclosure risk.
490. We take the view that a threshold of 23 students is necessary and sufficient to mitigate the risk of disclosing information about individuals within the extent of the data that we propose to share and publish to inform our regulatory approaches. While lower thresholds might mitigate this risk if we were only reporting a small number of non-overlapping data points, we take the view that they would not mitigate this risk effectively within the proposed extent of the data involved here. We consider that higher thresholds (for example, we could have proposed to suppress data when the denominator refers to fewer than 53 students) would remove too much of the data that is capable of providing meaningful information about student outcomes and experiences, without demonstrably lowering the data disclosure risk.
491. In the case of the compound indicator proposed as a potential completion measure (which does not have a denominator in the conventional sense), data will be suppressed where there are fewer than 23 students in any of the most recent three entry cohorts informing calculation of the measure. While our motivation for this approach remains one of mitigating the risk of disclosing information about individuals, we consider that it has the added benefit that providers without any entrants in the most recent year of available student data would not have a compound indicator reported for that year. This is likely to improve the reliability of the information we report on this measure: most students who withdraw from higher education are known to do so in their first year of study, meaning that there is less information available to inform the measure.
492. If an indicator has been suppressed for data protection reasons, this would normally mean that most, if not all, of the associated split indicators (which represent further breakdowns of that population) would also be suppressed for data protection reasons. If a split indicator has been suppressed for data protection reasons, this does not necessarily result in the suppression of the more aggregate indicator (unless that indicator also satisfied the criteria to be suppressed in its own right). Data suppression for data protection reasons extends to all aspects of the information provided alongside the indicator value itself: denominators, indicator, benchmark and difference values, response rates and confidence intervals will all be suppressed for any single indicator or split indicator that satisfies the data protection criteria described here. We take the view that this is necessary to fully mitigate the risks of data disclosure.

### **Suppression for other data protection considerations**

493. Data will also be suppressed for data protection reasons if the indicator has a numerator of fewer than three students, or the numerator differs from the denominator by fewer than three students (where that denominator refers to at least 23 students). To do otherwise risks

disclosing information on student outcomes and experiences for individual students within the cohort.

494. However, we recognise that these cases will, by definition, be referring to indicator values that identify the very lowest (numerator of fewer than three students) and very highest (numerator differs from the denominator by fewer than three students) performance possible. Obfuscating this performance from the view of assessment functions which are specifically trying to identify providers with very high (the TEF) and very low (condition B3) student outcomes and experiences is undesirable and may disadvantage some providers included in those assessments. This leads us to implement data suppression for these cases in a different way to that explained in paragraph 492.
495. Unless the indicator would already be suppressed on account of the denominator referring to fewer than 23 students, when implementing this data suppression, we would continue to report the denominator, response rate (where applicable) and benchmark values associated with that indicator. This will allow sufficient information to be available for assessment purposes, without compromising data protection priorities. To further support this, we will also differentiate in the labelling of these suppressions:
- a. 'DPL' will identify cases where the data protection is needed on account of a numerator of fewer than three students, meaning that the indicator will take on a value close to 0 per cent.
  - b. 'DPH' will identify cases where the data protection is needed on account of a numerator differing from the denominator by fewer than three students, meaning that the indicator will take on a value close to 100 per cent.
496. When reporting split indicators which report on students who were or were not eligible for free school meals, the sensitivity of this information at an individual student level means that it is appropriate for us to take further steps for data protection reasons. If one of the data protection reasons we have already described causes us to suppress one of the free school meals split indicators reported for a given provider, the OfS will also select one other free school meals split indicator calculated for that provider to be suppressed. In selecting another free school meals split for secondary suppression, we will normally select the indicator which refers to the smallest population, working across the different undergraduate levels of study and different views of a provider's student population to limit the impact of this suppression. We take the view that this is necessary to fully mitigate the risks of data disclosure.

### **Rounding and suppression of data about the size and shape of provision for data protection reasons**

497. As described in Proposal 12, we have proposed the construction of data about the size and shape of a provider's provision in terms of its size, the types of qualifications it offers and its mix of subjects, and the characteristics of its students. This data will be reported as a series of student number counts and proportions and represents similar risks of disclosing information about individuals. As such, we will apply the same rounding and suppression as we do for the data indicators, as described in paragraphs 485 to 496.

## **Suppression of indicators data for response rates**

498. As described in Proposal 7, we have proposed to suppress any progression indicator and split indicator results which rely on response rates below 7 among the population of students informing calculation of that indicator. Similarly, a proposal to suppress any student experience indicator or split indicator which relies on a response rate lower than 50 per cent is described in Proposal 8. These suppressions help us to guard against non-response bias in the indicators we report, and which inform our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF.

## **Suppression of benchmarking data for unknown benchmarking factors**

499. Some of the factors that we have proposed as benchmarking factors are known to include attributes identifying the characteristic or information as unknown, not required or not applicable. This occurs where student data has not been returned for the OfS to be able to classify students appropriately, whether because this information was not shared with a provider, so it has been unable to include it in its HESA or ILR data submissions, or because those data returns do not currently require the collection of that information.

500. The reporting of a student's ethnicity can provide an example in each case. The information can be returned to HESA as 'information refused' when a student prefers not to disclose it to their provider, or as 'not known' when a student genuinely does not know their ethnicity (for example, individuals who were adopted). It can also be returned as not known if the student is not UK-domiciled and hence optional within the collection of this HESA data item.

501. A large number of students being reported with unknown attributes reported for a benchmarking factor can impact on the reliability of the benchmarking calculations. Our benchmarking method is effective in taking account of the mix of a provider's students and provision when the grouping of attributes within benchmarking factors forms coherent groups which share a consistency of student backgrounds, outcomes, or behaviours with respect to the indicator to which they refer. By virtue of the attribute being reported as unknown, we cannot know the extent to which students reported in this way actually do form coherent, homogeneous groups, nor the extent to which weighting the sector average for the size of this group becomes akin to comparing apples and pears. We therefore take the view that a large number of students being reported with unknown attributes dilutes the effect of that characteristic on the efficiency of the calculated benchmark.

502. Our proposed definitions of the benchmarking factors have sought to mitigate this risk through our adoption of the proposed guiding principles for the selection and application of benchmarking factors. However, an individual provider's benchmark will still be impacted by this risk if significant numbers of unknown attributes are returned for those factors in their student data. We therefore propose to suppress a benchmark value where a provider's student data reports at least 50 per cent of the students with unknown information for one or more of the factors proposed for that benchmark calculation. This is because we consider that there is insufficient data to form reliable benchmarks when a majority of students at the provider have unknown information for at least one of the benchmarking factors.

503. For example, where entry qualifications are proposed as a benchmarking factor, we propose to suppress the benchmark value (and the calculated difference between the indicator and

benchmark value) if at least 50 per cent of the provider's students have unknown entry qualifications.

504. If a benchmark value has been suppressed because of unknown information in the benchmarking factor, this may or may not mean that some or all of the associated split indicators (which represent further breakdowns of that population) would also be suppressed. The extent of suppression in the split indicators would depend on how concentrated the students with the unknown benchmarking factor are across the characteristics which define the split indicator populations.

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 468 to 504, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of our rounding and suppression approaches within the 'Description and methodology' document
- Descriptions of our statistical methods within the 'Description of statistical methods' document.

### Question 38

Do you have any comments about the opportunities and challenges that result from our **presentation of the student outcomes and experiences indicators**, and on the effectiveness of the guidance we have provided for users of our data dashboards?

### Question 39

Do you have any comments about the challenges that might result from **application of the data protection requirements**, suppressing indicators when the denominator contains fewer than 23 students, and when the numerator and denominator differ by fewer than three students?

## Proposal 12: Definition and coverage of data about the size and shape of provision

### What are we proposing and why?

505. We have proposed to include data about the size and shape of a provider's provision, alongside the student outcome and experience indicators informing our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF.<sup>143</sup> It is intended that the information will equip assessors, and TEF

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<sup>143</sup> See proposal 2 of the consultation on regulating student outcomes, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/) and proposal 9 of the consultation on the TEF, at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/the-tef/).

panellists with an understanding of the provider's context in terms of its size, the types of courses it offers and its mix of subjects, and the characteristics of its students.

506. The OfS would also use data about the size and shape of provision within our risk-based monitoring of quality and standards, as set out in proposal 3 in the phase 1 consultation on regulation of quality and standards. In doing so, we would expect to take an approach to constructing such data consistent with that defined through this consultation proposal.
507. This proposal does not apply to our regulation of access and participation.
508. We propose to construct data about the size and shape of provision for a time series of the last four years of available student data individually, as well as the total of these years. Solely relying on the total, or alternatively calculating an annual average across the four years, is likely to obfuscate any recent changes in the types of students or courses that a provider teaches, and can under or overstate the volumes of students in particular categories when provision is newly introduced or being phased out. We take the view that providing users with a time series for each category will allow them to understand students and provision that is newly introduced, established, or in a period of growth or contraction.
509. To provide further clarity on changes in the size and shape of provision, we propose to construct the data in respect of different student populations. We take the view that reporting information about the volume of students in each category according to whether those students are entrants or qualifiers will help to identify changes in the provider's context when they relate specifically to different stages of the student lifecycle. For example, changes in a provider's recruitment or strategy often become evident for the first time in respect of entrant cohorts. For each of an entrant, qualifiers and 'all students' population, we propose to report student numbers in headcount terms, and as both a count and a proportion of that student population. The 'all students' population would reflect the total of entrants, qualifiers and continuing students.
510. We also recognise that entrant cohorts are intended as the basis for continuation and completion measures, and that qualifier cohorts are intended as the basis for progression measures. It is expected that read-across between the data about the size and shape of provision and the indicators and split indicators is helpful for the purposes of contextualising our regulation of student outcomes and the TEF.
511. The data that we propose to construct about the size and shape of provision will be broken down into three summaries:
  - a. Overall student numbers split by mode and level of study.
  - b. Numbers of students in each type of teaching partnership arrangement, split by mode and broad level of study. Full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students, at each of the undergraduate and postgraduate broad levels of study, are shown broken down by the various teaching arrangements that a provider might be involved in. The summary is based on the taught or registered view of a provider's students, meaning that it includes all students taught or registered by the provider in question, and differentiates between those subcontracted in to, or out from, the provider in question. It also reports the numbers of students whose awards are validated by the provider. See Table 17.

- c. Numbers of students by study and student characteristics, split by mode and broad level of study. Full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students, at each of the undergraduate and postgraduate broad levels of study, are shown broken down by various student and course characteristics. See Table 18.

### Overall student numbers split by mode and level of study

512. In constructing the overall student numbers summary described in paragraph 511 a, full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students studying mainly in the UK for higher education qualifications are shown broken down by the same levels of study as we report student outcome and experience indicators. Those students mainly abroad for their study of higher education qualifications, studying in transnational education arrangements, and studying for credits or modules, are also shown broken down by similar levels of study.
513. We take the view that providing information on the volume of credit-based, module-only study, and on the volume of students whose study with the provider is not mainly in the UK, is useful to help understand the overall volume of students to whom the provider is responsible for the quality of the academic experience. Because we do not propose to include either of these groups of students in the coverage of our data indicators (see paragraphs 90 to 93, and 95 to 100), information about the volume of module-based and overseas study would not otherwise be readily available to users of the data.
514. Table 16 summarises the construction of the overall student numbers summary data. We propose that the summary is based on the taught or registered view of a provider's students, meaning that it includes all students taught or registered by the provider in question, to the extent this is possible from the relevant underlying data source. While information about full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students studying mainly in the UK is collected consistently through the HESA and ILR data collections, information about students mainly abroad is more limited and only collected in respect of those providers who submit data to HESA. We take the view that reporting data about student populations as comprehensively as possible is important to help build an overall picture of the size and shape of the provider.

**Table 16: Construction of data about the size and shape of provision: overall student numbers**

	Full-time and part-time modes of study	Apprenticeship mode of study	Students mainly abroad	Offshore transnational education
Data source and availability	HESA and ILR student records: available for all providers		Available for all providers submitting HESA student records	Available for all providers submitting the aggregate offshore record (AOR) to HESA
Provider view	Taught or registered			Registered (teaching providers not collected in the AOR)

	Full-time and part-time modes of study	Apprenticeship mode of study	Students mainly abroad	Offshore transnational education
Student populations	All students, entrants and qualifiers			All students (information about entrants and qualifiers not collected in the AOR)
Level of study	All undergraduate Other undergraduate Other undergraduate Level 4 Other undergraduate Level 5+ First degree Undergraduate with postgraduate components All postgraduate Other postgraduate PGCE Postgraduate taught masters' Postgraduate research Unspecified qualification aim Credits or modules		All undergraduate All postgraduate Unspecified qualification aim Credits or modules	All undergraduate Other undergraduate First degree All postgraduate Postgraduate taught masters' Postgraduate taught doctorates Postgraduate research
Years included	Four-year time series of the most recent data available, plus a four-year aggregate			

### Numbers of students in each type of teaching partnership arrangement, split by mode and broad level of study

515. The summary of the student numbers in each type of teaching partnership arrangement we propose in paragraph 511 b is summarised in Table 17. We propose that full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students at each of the undergraduate and postgraduate broad levels of study, are shown broken down by the various teaching arrangements that a provider might be involved in.

516. We take the view that providing information on the volume of students with whom the provider engages and has a responsibility for the quality of the academic experience, is important to help build an overall picture of the size and shape of the provider. We do not propose to include students in credit-based, module-only study, or whose study is not mainly in the UK, within this summary because data is not currently collected in sufficient detail to facilitate this.

**Table 17: Construction of data about the size and shape of provision: numbers of students in each type of teaching partnership arrangement**

	<b>Full-time and part-time modes of study</b>	<b>Apprenticeship mode of study</b>	<b>Students mainly abroad, and offshore transnational education</b>
Data source and availability	HESA and ILR student records: available for all providers		Not included
Provider view	Taught or registered		
Student populations	All students, entrants and qualifiers		
Level of study	All undergraduates All postgraduates		
Types of teaching partnership arrangement	Overall taught or registered population Registered and taught Registered only (subcontracted out) Taught only (subcontracted in) Validated only		
Years included	Four-year time series of the most recent data available, plus a four-year aggregate		

### **Numbers of students by study and student characteristics, split by mode and broad level of study**

517. The summary of the student numbers by study and student characteristics that we propose in paragraph 511 c is summarised in Table 18. We propose that full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students at each of the undergraduate and postgraduate broad levels of study, are shown broken down by the various characteristics defined in Table 19.
518. We do not propose to include students in credit-based, module-only study, or whose study is not mainly in the UK, within this summary because data is not currently collected in sufficient detail to facilitate this.
519. We take the view that the data we construct about the size and shape of provision will provide the most useful context for assessment when the characteristics included overlap with those defining split indicators and used as benchmarking factors. However, as described in Proposal 9, we recognise that there are a range of student and course characteristics that may merit separation but suffer from an incompleteness of either HESA or ILR data. While this prevents us from proposing these characteristics as split indicators, at least until such time as data collection is refined or expanded, we anticipate that there is value to their inclusion in summaries about the size and shape of provision for providers where this is possible. We take the view that this is particularly the case in respect of student characteristics which are protected under the Equality Act 2010.

**Table 18: Construction of data about the size and shape of provision: numbers of students by characteristics of students or study**

	<b>Full-time and part-time modes of study</b>	<b>Apprenticeship mode of study</b>	<b>Students mainly abroad, and offshore transnational education</b>
Data source and availability	HESA and ILR student records: available for all providers		Not included
Provider view	Taught or registered		
Student populations	All students, entrants and qualifiers		
Level of study	All undergraduates All postgraduates		
Student and study characteristics included	Course length Course type Subject studied Type of programme year Age on entry Disability type Ethnicity Sex Sexual orientation ABCS (continuation) quintile Deprivation quintile (IMD) Domicile Eligibility for free school meals Entry qualifications Socio-economic background Study location Tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA) quintile Geography of employment quintile		
Years included	Four-year time series of the most recent data available, plus a four-year aggregate		

520. The student and study characteristics included in this summary data are defined in Table 9.

**Table 19: Definitions of student and study characteristics included in data about the size and shape of provision**

<b>Student or study characteristic</b>	<b>Student population</b>	<b>Basis for inclusion</b>	<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Key definitional points</b>
Course length	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Benchmarking factor	Less than 1 year; 1 year; 2 years; 3 years or more	None
Course type	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Split indicator	First degree with foundation year	Reported in respect of full-time first degree students
Subject studied	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Benchmarking factor and split indicator	CAH level 2 subject groups	None
Type of programme year	All students	Acknowledged as meriting separate consideration but suffers from an incompleteness of either HESA or ILR data	Sandwich year	Reported in respect of students on a sandwich placement in the year in question
Age on entry	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Protected characteristic and benchmarking factor	For undergraduates: Under 21; 21 to 30 years; 31 and over; Unknown For postgraduates: Under 25; 25 to 30 years; 31 and over; Unknown	None
Disability type	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Protected characteristic	Cognitive or learning difficulties; Mental health condition; Multiple or other impairments; No disability reported or unknown disability type; Sensory, medical or physical impairments; Social or communication impairment	None

<b>Student or study characteristic</b>	<b>Student population</b>	<b>Basis for inclusion</b>	<b>Attributes</b>	<b>Key definitional points</b>
Ethnicity	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Protected characteristic and benchmarking factor	Asian; Black; Mixed; Other; White; Unknown or not applicable	All non-UK domiciled students mapped to unknown or not applicable
Sex	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Protected characteristic	Female; Male; Other sex	None
Sexual orientation	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Protected characteristic	Lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB); Not heterosexual or LGB; Heterosexual; Information refused, unknown or not applicable	Only available for providers submitting data to HESA
ABCS (continuation) quintile	Entrants	Benchmarking factor and split indicator	Quintile 1; Quintile 2; Quintile 3; Quintile 4; Quintile 5; Unknown or not applicable; Total of quintile 1 or 2; Total of quintile 4 or 5	Reported in respect of UK domiciled full-time undergraduate students at English higher education providers
Deprivation quintile (IMD)	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Benchmarking factor and split indicator	Quintile 1; Quintile 2; Quintile 3; Quintile 4; Quintile 5; Unknown or not applicable; Total of quintile 1 or 2; Total of quintile 3, 4 or 5	Reported in respect of England domiciled students at English higher education providers, or Wales domiciled students at Welsh higher education providers, or Scotland domiciled students at Scottish higher education providers, or Northern Ireland domiciled students at Northern Ireland providers

Student or study characteristic	Student population	Basis for inclusion	Attributes	Key definitional points
Domicile	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Split indicator	UK; EU; Other international; Unknown	None
Eligibility for free school meals	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Split indicator	Eligible; Not eligible	Reported in respect of UK domiciled undergraduate students aged under 21 on entry to higher education having attended state funded mainstream schools in England
Entry qualifications	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Benchmarking factor	A-levels: AAA or higher; ABB or higher; BCC or higher; CDD or higher; DDD or lower at A-level, 105 tariff points or higher at other Level 3, or two A-levels and one BTEC; DDM or higher at BTEC, or one A-level and two BTECs; Lower than DDM at BTEC; HE-level qualifications; Unspecified qualifications held by non-UK domiciled students; Access or foundation courses, or 65 tariff points or higher at other Level 3; None, unknown or other qualifications	Reported in respect of undergraduate students only
Socio-economic background	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Acknowledged as meriting separate consideration but suffers from an incompleteness of	Higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations; Intermediate occupations; Routine and manual occupations; Never worked and long-term unemployed; Unknown or not applicable	Reported in respect of UK domiciled undergraduate students at providers submitting data to HESA

Student or study characteristic	Student population	Basis for inclusion	Attributes	Key definitional points
		either HESA or ILR data		
Study location	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Acknowledged as meriting separate consideration but limited additionality as a split indicator	Distance learning; Local to address prior to entry; Not local to address prior to entry; Unknown	None
Tracking underrepresentation by area (TUNDRA, MSOA) quintile	All students, entrants and qualifiers	Acknowledged as meriting separate consideration but limited additionality as a split indicator	Quintile 1; Quintile 2; Quintile 3; Quintile 4; Quintile 5; Unknown or not applicable; Total of quintile 1 or 2; Total of quintile 3, 4 or 5	Reported in respect of undergraduate students only
Geography of employment quintile	Qualifiers	Benchmarking factor and split indicator	Quintile 1; Quintile 2; Quintile 3; Quintile 4; Quintile 5; Unknown or not applicable; Total of quintile 2 or 3; Total of quintile 4 or 5	Reported in respect of UK domiciled graduates who responded to the GO survey only

**Further information for data practitioners and interested stakeholders:** For more information about the practical implementation of the proposals described in paragraphs 505 to 520, see our supporting documents at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/outcome-and-experience-data/):

- Descriptions of data about the size and shape of provision within the ‘Description and methodology’ document
- Instructions for rebuilding data about the size and shape of provision from your individualised student data within the ‘Instructions for rebuilding OfS datasets’ document
- The exemplar data dashboards and Excel workbooks, available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-outcomes-and-experiences-data-dashboards/).

#### Question 40

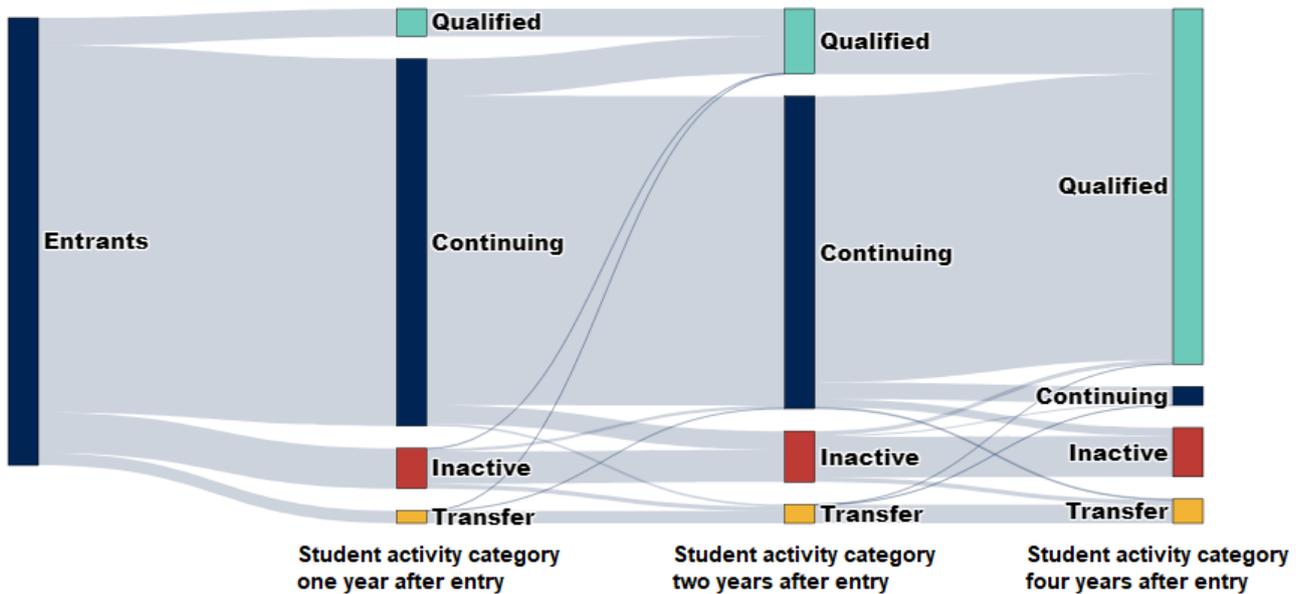
To what extent do you agree with the proposed **construction of data about the size and shape of provision**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Annex A: List of abbreviations used in this document

Abbreviation	Meaning
ABCS	Associations between characteristics of students (analyses)
DfE	Department for Education
DLHE	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (survey)
ESFA	Education and Skills Funding Agency
FHEQ	Framework for higher education qualifications
FPE	Full-person equivalent
GDPR	General data protection regulation
GO	Graduate Outcomes (survey)
HERA	Higher Education and Research Act 2017
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HTQs	Higher technical qualifications
ILR	Individualised Learner Record
IDACI	Income deprivation affecting children index
IMD	Indices of Multiple Deprivations 2019
KS4	Key stage 4
NPD	National Pupil Database
NSS	National Student Survey
OfS	Office for Students
ONS	Office for National Statistics
POLAR	Participation of local areas (classification)
PSED	Public sector equality duty
SLC	Student Loans Company
SKE	Subject knowledge enhancement (courses)
SOC	Standard Occupational Classification
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
TorR	Taught or registered
TUNDRA	Tracking underrepresentation of areas

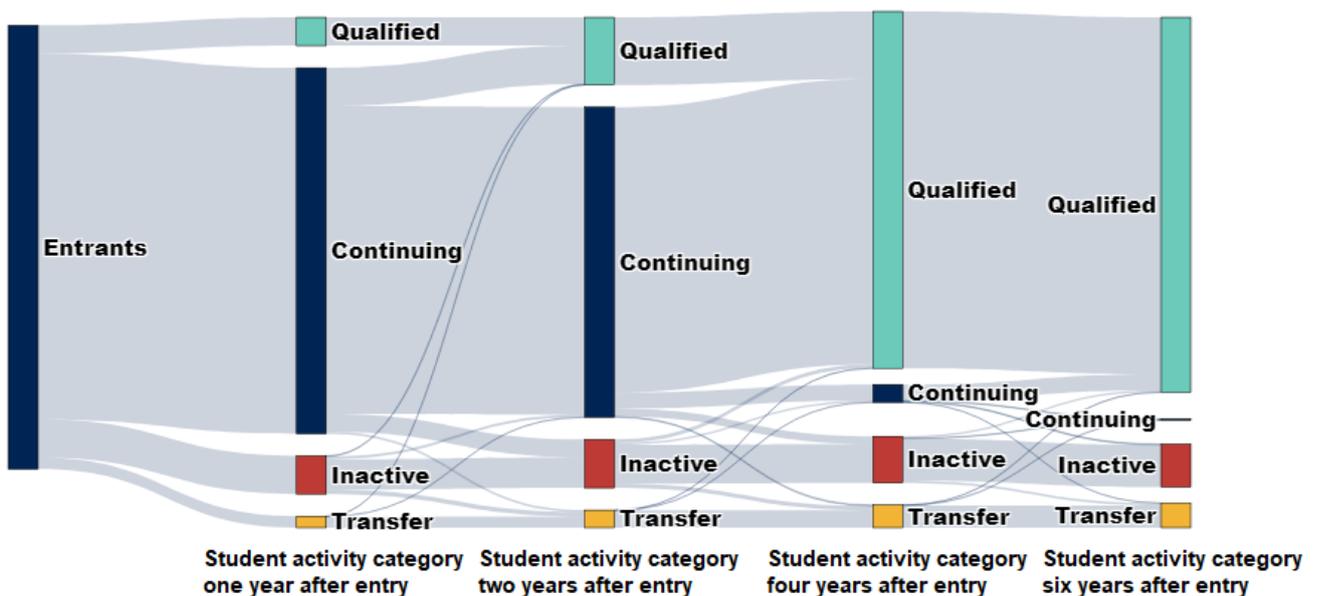
# Annex B: Transitions of entrants through subsequent years of study

Figure B1: Four-year continuation outcomes for all undergraduate full-time entrants in 2015-16



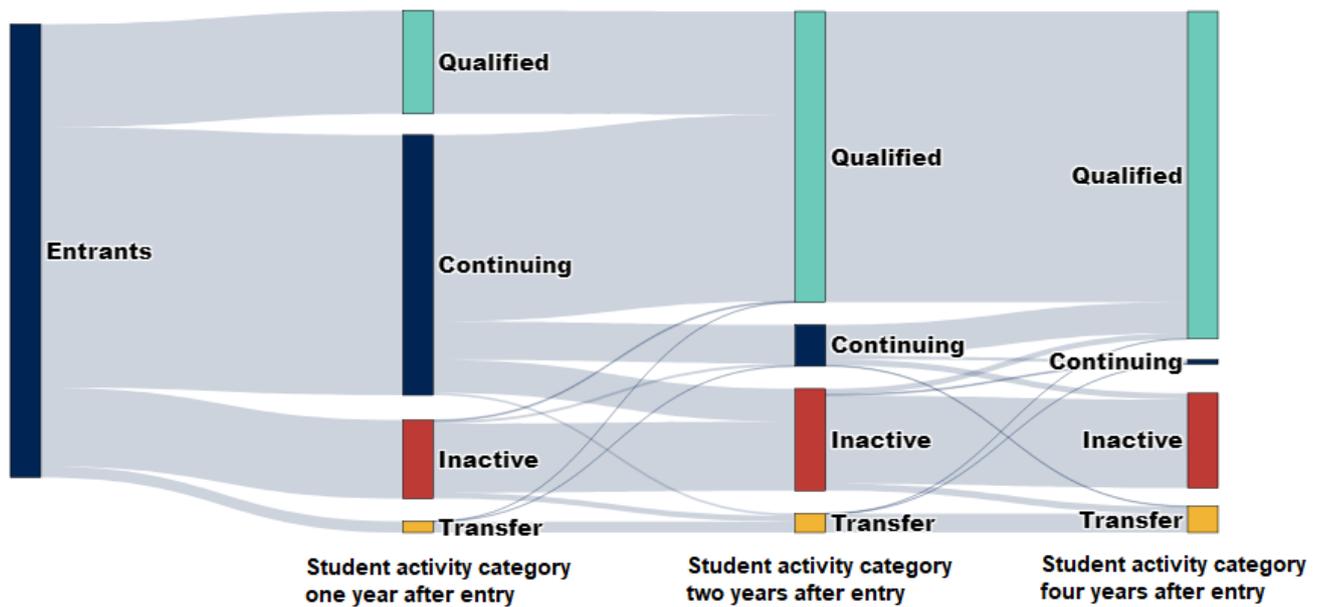
Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data. Note: This chart is also included as Figure 4 in the main body of this consultation document.

Figure B2: Six-year continuation outcomes for all undergraduate full-time entrants in 2013-14



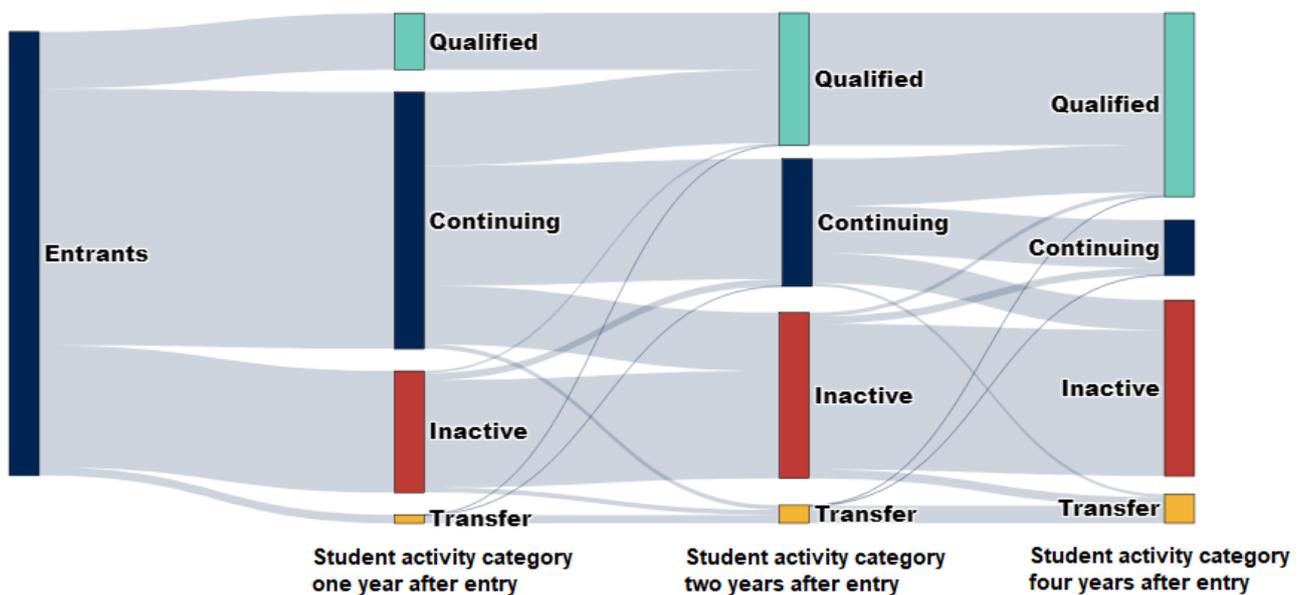
Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data.

**Figure B3: Four-year continuation outcomes for full-time other undergraduate entrants in 2015-16**



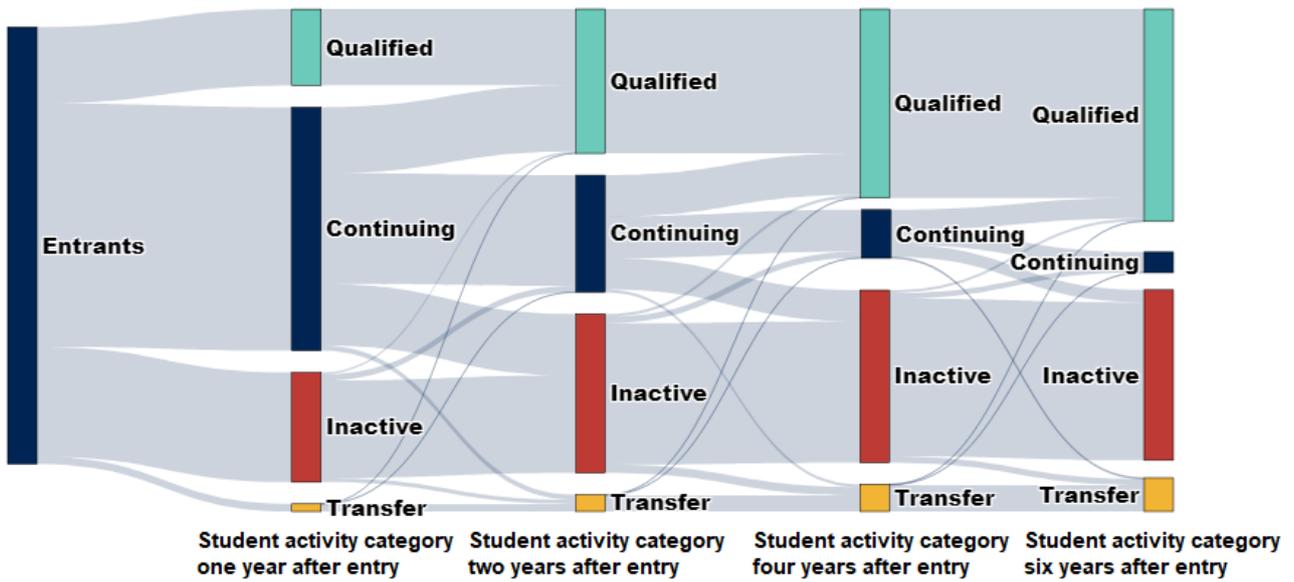
Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data.

**Figure B4: Four-year continuation outcomes for all undergraduate part-time entrants in 2015-16**



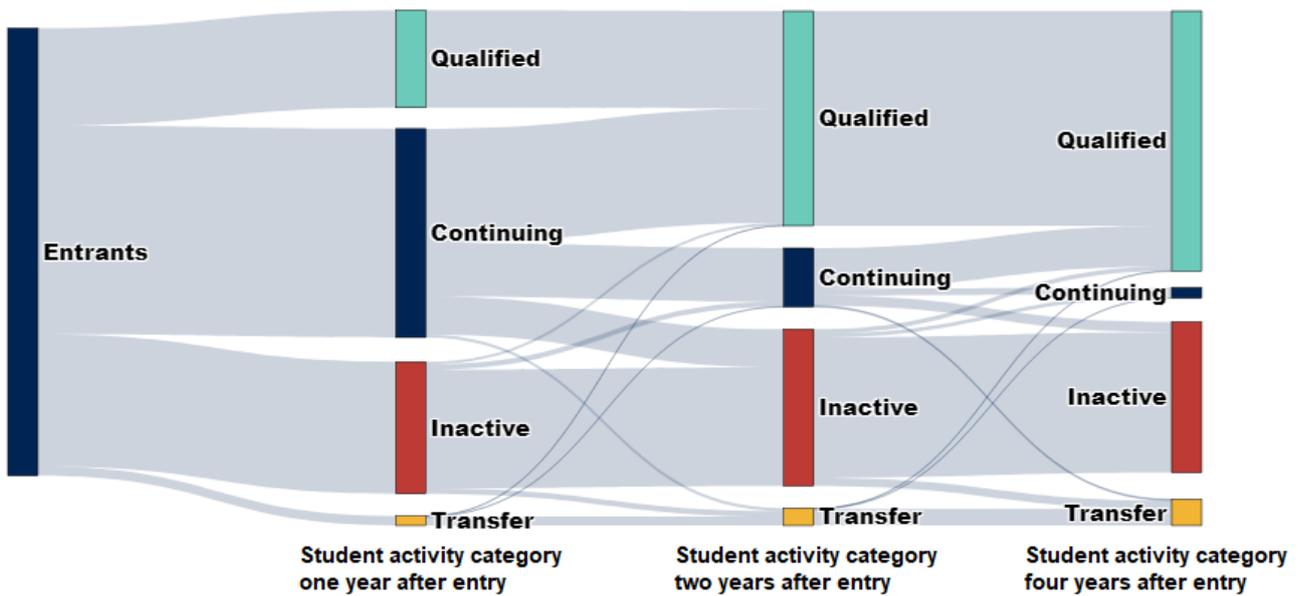
Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data. Note: This chart is also included as Figure 5 in the main body of this consultation document.

**Figure B5: Six-year continuation outcomes for all undergraduate part-time entrants in 2013-14**



Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data.

**Figure B6: Four-year continuation outcomes for part-time other undergraduate entrants in 2015-16**



Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data.

## Annex C: Worked example of benchmarking calculations

1. In this fictional, simplified example, assume that we are seeking to calculate benchmarks for continuation measures using only two benchmarking factors which affect the outcomes we are measuring. Specifically, we want to take account of students' age on entry to higher education, and the subject that they are studying. Suppose that students' age is defined as either 'young' or 'not young' and that the higher education sector delivers provision in only three subject areas (agriculture, maths and history).
2. That means that for this measure there are six possible distinct benchmarking groups, set out in the table below.

### Step one: the provider

3. The provider for which we are calculating a benchmark has 1,090 students studying agriculture and maths. Table C1 shows the provider's students, split across the six benchmarking groups, and the continuation rate that we observe for each of these groups.
4. Overall, the provider has a continuation rate of 94.3 per cent. This is effectively a weighted average of the rates for each group.
5. Note that the provider's observed continuation rate for young maths students is particularly low (92.0 per cent) in comparison to the observed rate for other groups at the provider. This low continuation rate is outweighed by the larger number of students in groups with higher observed continuation rates, such as young agriculture students.

**Table C1: Distribution of the provider's observed continuation rates across benchmarking groups**

Age group	Subject group	Number of students	Students in the benchmarking group as a proportion of total students	Observed continuation rate
Young	Agriculture	500	45.9%	95.0%
Young	History	0	0.0%	N/A
Young	Maths	150	13.8%	92.0%
Not young	Agriculture	400	36.7%	94.0%
Not young	History	0	0.0%	N/A
Not young	Maths	40	3.7%	98.0%
Total		1,090	100%	94.3%

## Step two: the sector

6. There are 210,500 full-time students across the whole sector, studying agriculture, maths and history. Table C2 shows the sector's students, split across the six benchmarking groups, and the continuation rate that we observe for each of these groups across the sector as a whole.
7. Overall, the sector has a continuation rate of 96.6 per cent.
8. Note that the sector's overall continuation rate is driven by high continuation rates observed for young history students (99.0 per cent), and the small student numbers for agriculture subjects, for which we observe relatively low rates for both young (95.0 per cent) and not young (94.0 per cent) students.

**Table C2: Distribution of the sector's observed continuation rates across benchmarking groups**

Age group	Subject group	Number of students	Observed continuation rate
Young	Agriculture	20,000	95.0%
Young	History	80,000	99.0%
Young	Maths	95,000	95.0%
Not young	Agriculture	5,000	94.0%
Not young	History	6,500	98.0%
Not young	Maths	4,000	98.0%
Total		210,500	96.6%

## Step three: calculating the provider specific benchmark

9. So far, in Table C2, the sector's continuation rates are weighted against the numbers of students in the **sector** in each of the six distinct benchmarking groups. In Table C3 below, the sector's continuation rates are instead weighted to reflect the students in the **provider**.
10. Table C3 shows that weighting the sector's continuation rates by the proportion of students in each benchmarking group at the provider results in a weighted sector benchmark of 94.7 per cent for this provider.
11. This weighted sector rate is lower than the original sector rate shown in Table C2 since it no longer reflects the (relatively high) rates for history students (because the provider has no history students), and because the agriculture groups have a much higher weighting, reflecting that the provider has a higher proportion of agriculture students than the sector as a whole.
12. The provider's indicator (94.3 per cent) can now be compared with the weighted sector benchmark (94.7 per cent). The provider's rate is still lower than the rate observed for students with similar characteristics across the sector.

**Table C3: Calculation of the provider benchmark using the sector's observed continuation rates across benchmarking groups**

Age group	Subject group	Students in the benchmarking group as a proportion of total students at the provider (a)	Sector observed continuation rate (b)	Weighted sector continuation numbers (= a x b)
Young	Agriculture	45.9%	95.0%	43.6%
Young	History	0.0%	99.0%	0.0%
Young	Maths	13.8%	95.0%	13.1%
Not young	Agriculture	36.7%	94.0%	34.5%
Not young	History	0.0%	98.0%	0.0%
Not young	Maths	3.7%	98.0%	3.6%
Total		100%	Sector indicator 96.6%	<b>Provider benchmark</b> <b>94.7%</b> (= 43.6% + 0.0% + 13.1% + 34.5% + 0.0% + 3.6%)

# Annex D: Proposed principles for the selection and application of benchmarking factors

1. The principles below are intended to inform the approach taken by the Office for Students (OfS) in selecting and applying the factors used in benchmarking calculations.
2. These principles will be guiding rather than binding, but they are intended to provide an effective mechanism to build public trust and confidence in the benchmarks that the OfS creates and uses in its student outcome and experience indicators.
3. When selecting benchmarking factors, the intention is that each principle would be considered in turn, and where appropriate, evidence of its applicability would be sought from statistical analysis or modelling. We are aware that the principles may sometimes sit in tension with one another, and that in most cases a value-based judgement will be required to confirm fit or applicability with the principle.
4. The proposed **core principles** relating to the factors being considered for benchmarking are:
  - a. The selection of benchmarking factors should be fit for purpose, evidence-based and robust, conforming to recognised best practice in the production of statistical information. In particular:
    - i. Details of the selection process should be published for the benefit of providers and other users or interested parties.
    - ii. The selection of benchmarking factors should vary across different student outcome and experience indicators only when there is a clear and valid rationale.
    - iii. The number and definition of benchmarking factors selected should not compromise the statistical integrity of the broader benchmarking approach.
  - b. Benchmarking factors should be applicable to, and available for, all types of providers across England that are delivering the higher education provision for which the indicator is measuring students' outcomes or experience.
  - c. Benchmarking factors should contribute to an overall benchmarking approach which supports fair comparison of indicators across the higher education sector. A candidate benchmarking factor should therefore have relevance to help explain the context or differing characteristics of a provider's students or provision.
  - d. The benchmarking approach should neutralise the effect of characteristics on a provider's performance where this is consistent with policy objectives. This approach guards against inadvertently creating incentives for providers to change their behaviour in terms of the students they recruit or the range of provision they offer in ways that could undermine our ability to meet our duties around access and participation, and competition. It does not imply that it is acceptable for some student groups to receive lower quality provision, but recognises that this is currently the case, and the risks of not controlling for it. The benchmarking approach should only neutralise the effect of characteristics where there is

such a risk of negative unintended consequences, as otherwise it risks creating perverse incentives.

- e. Benchmarking factors should primarily reflect structural factors that contribute to variations in student outcomes or experience which are outside of a provider's control, or undesirable for it to control for. This means that characteristics of the provider will not normally act as benchmarking factors.
  - f. In selecting the range of benchmarking factors to apply for a given indicator, the need to preserve the statistical integrity of the broader benchmarking approach requires that consideration should be given to limit the number of factors on the basis of:
    - i. The size of the population for which the effect occurs: it is unlikely that a factor where the effect is limited to a small population will be selected where there are other factors with similar effects that have broad applicability.
    - ii. The distribution of the population for which the effect occurs: it is unlikely that a factor where the effect is limited to a population concentrated in a small subsection of providers will be selected where there are other factors with similar effects that have applicability to a wider cross-section of provision.
    - iii. The nature of the other candidate factors: where there are a number of similar candidate factors (for example, measures of disadvantage), it will normally be the case that only the one that has the greatest effect should be selected so that a balance of factors is achieved.
  - g. The factors used in benchmarking should be reviewed at regular intervals, to check that the evidence for and applicability of the approach remains current and fit for purpose, and to consider the impact achieved by previous benchmarking exercises.
5. The **availability and data quality** of candidate benchmarking factors should be considered in relation to the principles proposed as follows:
- a. The quality of data items considered as candidate benchmarking factors should be understood and judged to be of sufficiently high quality for use in a benchmarking exercise. The data items should normally be collected in a consistent and fair way across the sector; it should have a good sample base and use transparent definitions.
  - b. Where possible, benchmarking factors should be drawn from existing data sources. Any proposal to collect further data for the purpose of a benchmarking factor should be carefully considered against the principles for data burden included within the OfS data strategy.
6. The proposed principles for the **statistical properties** that candidate benchmarking factors should demonstrate are:
- a. Statistical models that seek to account for a range of characteristics should identify a remaining correlation between the benchmarking factor and the student outcome or experience that is being measured.

- b. Once other factors have been accounted for, statistical modelling should identify that the performance being measured is not uniformly distributed across the attributes within a benchmarking factor, and that differences between these attributes are non-trivial.
  - c. A benchmarking factor should not be uniformly distributed across providers or performance units; rather, the factor should differentially affect the benchmarks that are calculated, meaning that factors which are distributed unevenly across providers or performance units should be considered as stronger candidates to be used as benchmarking factors.
  - d. Where possible, a benchmarking factor should be a direct measure, rather than a proxy.
  - e. As far as possible, the selection of benchmarking factors should limit the extent to which a benchmark value can be determined by a single provider. The selection of a benchmarking factor (and the subsequent grouping of attributes within it) should not compromise the statistical integrity of the broader benchmarking approach.
  - f. Benchmarking factors (and the data sources from which they are derived) should normally have longevity, with these statistical properties observed to continue over time.
7. Once benchmarking factors have been selected, the proposed principles for **defining groupings of the attributes within the benchmarking factor** are:
- a. The grouping of attributes within benchmarking factors should be fit for purpose and determined through consideration of sound evidence.
  - b. The number of categories formed when grouping attributes within benchmarking factors should be the minimum for the benchmarking factor to be effective. The number and definition of the groupings should not compromise the statistical integrity of the broader benchmarking approach.
  - c. The grouping of attributes within benchmarking factors should avoid creating groups in which numbers of students possessing those attributes are either very small or very large in the sector overall. The effect of creating groups that are known to be very small or very large at individual provider level should be acknowledged where they cannot be avoided.
  - d. The attributes that form a grouping should share a consistency of student backgrounds, outcomes or behaviours with respect to the indicator to which they refer. The consistency of attributes should be understood from the evidence of statistical analysis.
  - e. The grouping of attributes within benchmarking factors should make practical sense, to form coherent groups which share a qualitative similarity.
  - f. The grouping of attributes within benchmarking factors should vary across indicators only when there is a clear and valid rationale. Where variations are necessary, those deviations should use other groupings that exist elsewhere in a sector-wide hierarchical view of the benchmarking factor in question, at a more aggregated or disaggregated level according to need.
  - g. The grouping of attributes within benchmarking factors should be reviewed periodically to ensure that it continues to comply with these principles.

## Annex E: Groupings of entry qualifications and subject areas of study used as benchmarking factors

- Table E1 shows the groupings of subject areas of study that we propose to use as benchmarking factors. We have proposed to use these groupings as follows:
  - Broadly defined subject groups as benchmarking factors for the part-time and apprenticeship progression and student experience indicators.
  - CAH level 1 groups as benchmarking factors for the full-time, part-time and apprenticeship continuation and completion measures.
  - CAH level 2 groups as benchmarking factors for the full-time progression and student experience indicators.

**Table E1: Groupings of subject areas used as benchmarking factors**

Broadly defined subject group	CAH level 1 group	CAH level 2 group
Medicine, dentistry and veterinary sciences	CAH01: Medicine and dentistry	CAH01-01: Medicine and dentistry
	CAH05: Veterinary sciences	CAH05-01: Veterinary sciences
Nursing, allied health and psychology	CAH02: Subjects allied to medicine	CAH02-02: Pharmacology, toxicology and pharmacy
		CAH02-04: Nursing and midwifery
		CAH02-05: Medical sciences
	CAH02-06: Allied health	
	CAH04: Psychology	CAH04-01: Psychology
Natural and mathematical sciences	CAH03: Biological and sport sciences	CAH03-01: Biosciences
		CAH03-02: Sport and exercise sciences
	CAH07: Physical sciences	CAH07-01: Physics and astronomy
		CAH07-02: Chemistry
		CAH07-04: General, applied and forensic sciences

Broadly defined subject group	CAH level 1 group	CAH level 2 group
	CAH09: Mathematical sciences	CAH09-01: Mathematical sciences
Engineering, technology and computing	CAH10: Engineering and technology	CAH10-01: Engineering
		CAH10-03: Materials and technology
	CAH11: Computing	CAH11-01: Computing
Law and social sciences	CAH15: Social sciences	CAH15-01: Sociology, social policy and anthropology
		CAH15-02: Economics
		CAH15-03: Politics
	CAH15-04: Health and social care	
	CAH16: Law	CAH16-01: Law
Business and management	CAH17: Business and management	CAH17-01: Business and management
Humanities and languages	CAH19: Language and area studies	CAH19-01: English studies
		CAH19-04, CAH19-02: Languages and area studies
	CAH20: Historical, philosophical and religious studies	CAH20-01: History and archaeology
		CAH20-02: Philosophy and religious studies
CAH23: Combined and general studies	CAH23-01: Combined and general studies	
CAH24: Media, journalism and communications	CAH24-01: Media, journalism and communications	
Education and teaching	CAH22: Education and teaching	CAH22-01: Education and teaching
Design, and creative and performing arts	CAH25: Design, and creative and performing arts	CAH25-01: Creative arts and design
		CAH25-02: Performing arts

Broadly defined subject group	CAH level 1 group	CAH level 2 group
Natural and built environment	CAH06: Agriculture, food and related studies	CAH06-01: Agriculture, food and related studies
	CAH13: Architecture, building and planning	CAH13-01: Architecture, building and planning
	CAH26: Geography, earth and environmental studies	CAH26-01: Geography, earth and environmental studies

2. Table E2 shows the groupings of entry qualifications that we propose to use as benchmarking factors. We have proposed to use these groupings as follows:

- 11 entry qualification groups as benchmarking factors for the full-time continuation, completion and progression measures.
- 5 entry qualification groups as benchmarking factors for the part-time and apprenticeship continuation, completion and progression measures.

**Table E2: Groupings of entry qualifications used as benchmarking factors**

5 groups of entry qualifications	11 groups of entry qualifications	Detailed entry qualification group
Higher education qualifications, and other qualifications reported by non-UK domiciled students	Higher education level qualifications on entry	Higher education qualification: first degree
		Higher education qualification: other undergraduate
		Higher education qualification: postgraduate
	Other qualifications reported by non-UK domiciled students	Other qualifications reported by non-UK domiciled students
A-levels, international baccalaureate, BTECs (DDM or higher) and other Level 3 qualifications at 105 tariff points or higher	A-levels (AAA or higher)	A-level: A*A*A*A*
		A-level: A*A*A*A
		A-level: A*A*AA
		A-level: A*AAA
		A-level: AAAA
		A-level: A*A*A*
		A-level: A*A*A
		A-level: A*AA
	A-levels (ABB or higher)	A-level: AAA
		A-level: AAB
		A-level: AAC
		A-level: ABB
		A-level: ABB

5 groups of entry qualifications	11 groups of entry qualifications	Detailed entry qualification group
	A-levels (BCC or higher) or international baccalaureate	A-level: ABC
		A-level: ACC
		A-level: BBB
		A-level: BBC
		A-level: BCC
		International baccalaureate
	A-levels (CDD or higher)	A-level: CCC
		A-level: CCD
		A-level: CDD
	A-levels (DDD or lower, other Level 3 at 105 tariff points or higher, or 2 A-levels and 1 BTEC	A-level: DDD
		A-level: Below DDD
		2 A-levels and 1 BTEC
		>115 tariff points
		>105 tariff points
	BTECs (at least DDM), or 1 A-level and 2 BTECs	1 A-level and 2 BTECs
		BTEC: D*D*D*
		BTEC: D*D*D
		BTEC: D*DD
		BTEC: DDD
BTEC: DDM		
BTECs (lower than DDM)	BTECs (lower than DDM)	BTEC: DMM
		BTEC: MMM and below
		BTEC: unknown grades
Access and foundation courses, or other Level 3 at 65 tariff points or higher	Access and foundation courses, or other Level 3 at 65 tariff points or higher	Access to higher education course
		Foundation course
		>90 tariff points
		>80 tariff points
		>65 tariff points
None, unknown or other entry qualifications	None, unknown or other entry qualifications	>40 tariff points
		>0 tariff points
		Other qualifications
		No qualifications on entry

## Annex F: ABCS methodology

1. 'Association between characteristics of students' (ABCS) is a set of analyses that seeks to better understand how higher education outcomes vary for groups of students holding different sets of characteristics. We define groups of students by looking at a set of characteristics so that we can determine the effect of not just one characteristic on an outcome, but the effect of multiple characteristics.
2. We have created the ABCS methodology to be applicable to a range of student outcomes. For each outcome, the method is applied independently, creating a separate set of outcome groups in each case.
3. For each group of students, defined by every possible combination of the characteristics we are using, we calculate the modelled outcome rate. This is likelihood of that group of students achieving an outcome based on statistical modelling. For the statistical model, we use data for five previous cohorts of students most relevant to the student outcome we are modelling, in order to ensure that there are enough students in each group to be able to carry out statistical modelling. In the case of continuation outcomes, this is five previous cohorts of first degree students. For these models, we use individualised data from the Department for Education's (DfE's) National Pupil Database (NPD),<sup>144</sup> the Education and Skills Funding Agency's (ESFA's) Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and the Higher Education Statistics Authority's (HESA's) Student record and Student Alternative record.
4. For each student outcome, the modelled rates are used to create a set of outcome groups that indicate how likely it is for a group of students to achieve that outcome, where students in the lowest outcome groups are the least likely to achieve that student outcome and those in the highest group are the most likely to achieve that outcome. We define group membership by the modelled rate of achieving that outcome for a group of students with a specific set of characteristics. For example, if a group of students has a very low modelled rate of continuing in higher education, they will be in continuation group 1.
5. We have also taken a statistical approach to define the outcome groups. Groups are created in such a way that there is as clear a differentiation between each group as possible, while also trying to keep the number of students in each group as similar as possible. This means that there is assurance that the modelled rate for a group of students in one outcome group really is different from that of a group of students in the outcome group above or below. Details of how we have done this are in the 'Creating outcome groups' section below.

### Modelling approach

6. In order to calculate the modelled rates for groups of students, we employ a statistical modelling approach. Use of statistical modelling allows for assessment of whether there is a statistically significant relationship between the characteristics used and the student outcome in question. Additionally, in the case of smaller student groups, it is not always safe to assume that the recorded behaviour of people in that group would reflect the behaviour of a larger group of people holding those same characteristics. The use of statistical modelling gives us a

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<sup>144</sup> The DfE does not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from the NPD data by third parties.

'best estimate' of the likely student outcome of people holding those characteristics, based not only on the observed outcomes, but also accounting for the behaviour of those holding some of the same characteristics.

7. Since the student outcomes we are modelling are binary (that is, they have two possible values: achieving the outcome or not achieving it), we use a binary logistic regression model. The models calculate the modelled rate of achieving the student outcome using the characteristics we have chosen to use (known as the factors). A stepwise selection method is used with an entry and stay criteria of  $\alpha=0.05$ . All main effects are kept in the model.

## Choosing the factors

8. In selecting the factors for use in these models we are looking for characteristics that should not (in theory) influence the outcome in question, but where there is evidence that the outcomes for groups within these characteristics differ. For example, there is no causal reason that a student's ethnicity should have an impact on the likelihood of them continuing into the second year of their course. However, our analysis of continuation rates shows that black students have lower continuation rates than students from any other ethnic background. Conversely, whilst we know that prior attainment will have an impact on the likelihood of a young person entering higher education, this will not be included in the model because this is a justifiable – or valid – relationship.
9. As well as looking at characteristics that we have included in previous OfS analysis of differences in student outcomes, for this model we have also considered other personal characteristics and area-based measures. In each case, we have explored the relationship between that characteristic and the outcome in question before including it in the model. The final models only contain those factors that have been found to be statistically significant.
10. The statistical models for the different student outcomes will not necessarily contain the same factors. It is likely that there will be significant overlap between the different models, since there are many characteristics which are related to all of the student outcomes that we seek to measure, but equally there are some characteristics which have a relationship to some student outcomes, but not others. For this reason, we have undertaken exploratory analysis to determine factor selection separately for each outcome.

## The factors chosen for modelling continuation outcomes to create ABCS groups

11. Previous analysis<sup>145</sup> we have undertaken has found differences in continuation rates for student groups within the following characteristics: age, disability, TUNDRA (tracking underrepresentation by area), IMD, ethnicity and sex. Therefore, we have included all of these characteristics in the initial modelling of both full- and part-time continuation outcomes. Free school meals eligibility, parental higher education experience, socio-economic classification and care experience, have been included in the initial modelling of full-time continuation outcomes on the basis that there is sufficient availability of data on these characteristics among

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<sup>145</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/continuation-and-transfer-rates/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/continuation-and-transfer-rates/), and [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics/).

full-time student populations, but not part-time. Details of the groupings of these factors within the models can be found in our latest published ABCS report.<sup>146</sup>

12. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are differences in continuation rates between local or distance learners and those who are neither local nor distance learners. Because of this, we investigated the relationship between the locality of a student and continuation, and included the local or distance learner groups in the initial model.
13. Alongside TUNDRA and IMD, we have considered a third area-based measure: the income deprivation affecting children index (IDACI).<sup>147</sup> This measures the proportion of children under the age of 16 in low income households for an area. It is calculated at lower-layer super output area (LSOA) level and is a supplementary measure to IMD. For young people entering higher education, the inclusion of IDACI allows us to further understand the area they come from.

## Allowing for interactions

14. In order to allow the model to calculate the best estimates of the student outcome rates, we test both main effects and interaction effects. Interactions are included for all possible values within a characteristic. As a result, the final model will contain interactions between categories which are not statistically significant, but the overall interaction between the two characteristics will have been found to be statistically significant.
15. Only two-way interactions are included in the model. We considered higher order interactions as part of the preliminary analysis, but the number of possible factors created led to the model becoming unstable. This means that the estimates that are calculated become unreliable.

## Creating outcome groups

16. We have chosen to create the outcome groups as quintiles, which we have created in such a way that students with the same predicted rates cannot be split across quintiles (which means the quintiles do not always contain exactly 20 per cent of the population, but it is always very close to that). This approach enables us to identify those students most at risk from poor outcomes, and provides a level of stability in the groupings which will make the measures more useful as we continue to develop them further and include new years of data. Quintiles have also been chosen to align with the presentation of other measures, such as TUNDRA. However, we have the flexibility to create other groupings, such as deciles, as and when we discover uses for ABCS that require slightly different groupings.
17. As we continue to develop the ABCS measures, we will use consider a grouping methodology where we can identify groups based on data about where predicted rates are sufficiently different to identify clear ABCS groups. In such an approach we would design the outcome groups with the following principles in mind:
  - a. Groups should only be split where there is a clear differentiation between the modelled outcome rates of the groups.

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<sup>146</sup> Available at [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/associations-between-characteristics-of-students/).

<sup>147</sup> See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2015>.

- b. Groups should be kept as similar in size as possible. Groups should not represent less than five per cent of the student population.
- c. The preference is for there to be five risk groups.

These principles are hierarchical in that part a. is the most important and part c. the least.

18. It is possible that the alternative grouping methodology approach would lead to very unequal outcome groups in terms of the number of students captured in groups, but we will consider using that grouping provided we are able to clearly identify those in the lowest outcome group. Groups of students with a combination of characteristics that are held by fewer than 50 students would not be used in the creation of the outcome groups, although they would be put into the outcome groups once they have been defined. This is because small groups are likely to have high levels of statistical uncertainty around their modelled outcome rate. This means that where two groups' modelled rates are very different, they might, in fact, be very similar when accounting for uncertainty. Removing these small groups of students prevents the choice of boundaries for the outcome groups being unduly influenced by these small groups.
19. The remaining groups would be ordered by the size of their modelled rates of achieving the student outcome before calculating the difference between each modelled rate. We would select the largest differences as potential 'breakpoints' – that is, a point at which to split the data to create a group. Depending on the number of outcome groups we are choosing to create, we would use statistical methods to select the required number of breakpoints which maximise the equality of the group sizes. Since these are the differences between two modelled rates, we use the student group with the largest modelled rate of the two to define the lower boundary of the outcome group. Where the modelled rates are very close it can be difficult to find breakpoints which give outcome groups that meet the first principle. In this case, we may choose to create fewer groups to ensure that there are clear differences in the modelled rates between the outcome groups.
20. Once we have defined the boundaries, we would put the small student groups into the outcome groups based on their modelled rates. Where the modelled access rate for a small group of students is between the group boundaries, we would put them into the lower group (apart from rates that are below the lower boundary for group 1 – which we include in outcome group 1; or rates that exceed the upper boundary of group 5 – which we include in outcome group 5).

## **Sensitivity analyses**

21. Because the analysis uses five cohorts combined, it is important for us to understand whether there are any big changes in continuation rates in any groups between the cohorts, and how this might impact our ABCS groups. Looking individually at each of the factors we have included in the models, we conclude there are no single cohorts that have atypical student outcomes, and we are happy that the five cohorts can be combined without worry that any year will have an undue influence of the results.
22. As well as looking at the relationship between the student outcome and the factors included in the model, it is also necessary to consider the relationships between the factors (i.e. test for multicollinearity). This is because strong relationships between factors can lead to instability in the model coefficients, causing us to question the modelled outcome rates. In particular, we consider it important to understand the relationships between the different area-based

measures we include as factors. To test for multicollinearity, we have looked at correlations between the factors. In the case of continuation outcomes, this showed that there is a strong correlation between IDACI and IMD ( $\rho=0.883$ ). However, when looking at the variance inflation factor (VIF) and tolerance for IDACI and IMD, having run a regression model including all these factors, there is no evidence of multicollinearity between these two factors.<sup>148</sup>

23. In developing the statistical model, we have looked at two different selection methods: forward selection and stepwise selection. In each case, we have tried a variety of entry criteria, including  $\alpha=0.1$ ,  $\alpha=0.05$ ,  $\alpha=0.01$  and  $\alpha=0.001$ . Both selection methods resulted in similar outputs with similar model fit statistics, although the stepwise selection method resulted in fewer two-way interactions being included, and the forward selection method resulted in some interactions being included that were not statistically significant and did not have meaningful estimated coefficients. For this reason, we have chosen to use the stepwise selection method.
24. Having tested various entry and stay criteria, both have been set at  $\alpha=0.05$ . For a dataset as large as this, we felt that a value of 0.10 was too liberal and ran a high risk of leading to overfit<sup>149</sup> in the model. Whilst the size of the dataset might usually lead us to conclude that smaller entry and stay criteria would be more appropriate, this is not the case here. This is because we had hoped to include much higher order interaction terms in the model in order to give the model the best chance of robust estimation of the underlying continuation rate, but have not been able to do so due to the very high number of possible higher level interaction terms. We have mitigated this, in part, by selecting more generous entry and stay criteria:  $\alpha=0.05$ . Allowing these less significant terms into the model means they are likely to be acting as proxies for some of the higher-level interactions.

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<sup>148</sup> The VIF for IMD is 4.64 and for IDACI is 4.69.

<sup>149</sup> Overfit occurs when a model is too complex and begins to explain random error in the data rather than the relationship between factors.

# Annex G: Consultation questions

## General questions regarding this consultation

**Question 1:** Are there aspects of the proposals you found unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.

**Question 2:** In your view, are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation (as set out in paragraphs 8 to 16) could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than proposed here?

## Questions relating to proposal 1: Common approaches to the construction of student outcome and experience measures

**Question 3:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed approach to **constructing binary measures using existing data collections**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 4:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **annual publication of separate but consistently defined and presented resources** that inform TEF and condition B3 assessments, using the formats that we have indicated (**interactive data dashboards, Excel workbooks, data files**)? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Questions relating to proposal 2: A common reporting structure for student outcome and experience indicators

**Question 5:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **reporting structure** for student outcome and experience measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 6:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **application of these consultation outcomes to the access and participation data dashboard**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Question relating to proposal 3: Common approaches to the populations of students included in student outcome and experience measures

**Question 7:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **coverage of student outcome and experience measures**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Questions relating to proposal 4: Common approaches to defining and reporting student populations

**Question 8:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definitions of mode and level of study**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ,

for example to rely on a student's substantive mode of study across their whole course, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 9:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definitions of teaching provider**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 10:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definitions of entrant and qualifying populations**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## **Questions relating to proposal 5: Construction of continuation measures**

**Question 11:** To what extent do you agree with our proposal that **continuation outcomes are measured for entrant cohorts**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 12:** To what extent do you agree with the **proposed census dates** for measuring continuation outcomes for full-time, part-time and apprenticeship students? In particular, do you have any comments on the advantages and disadvantages of using a one-year census date for part-time measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer, and the reasons for your view.

**Question 13:** To what extent do you agree with the **outcomes we propose to treat as positive outcomes** for this measure? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 14:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **approach to student transfers** in measures of continuation outcomes? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## **Questions relating to proposal 6: Construction of completion measures**

**Question 15:** Do you have any preference for one of the proposed approaches to measuring completion outcomes over the other? Please provide an explanation for your answer. In particular, please describe any strengths and weaknesses of the two methods that inform your preference.

**Question 16:** To what extent do you agree with the definition of the **cohort-tracking measure** defined within this proposal? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 17:** To what extent do you agree with the definition of the **compound indicator measure** defined within this proposal? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Questions relating to proposal 7: Construction of progression measures

**Question 18:** To what extent do you agree with the proposal to **exclude international students** from the calculation of progression measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 19:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **approaches to survey non-response** (including the requirement for a 30 per cent response rate, and not weighting the GO responses)? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 20:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **approach to partial responses to the GO survey**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 21:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definition of positive progression outcomes** and the graduates we propose to count as progressing to managerial and professional employment or further study? In particular, do you have any comments about the approach to caring, retired and travelling activities, or to employed graduates without a SOC code? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 22:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed **definition of negative progression outcomes**? In particular, do you have any comments on the definition of 'doing something else' as a negative outcome when it is reported as a graduate's main activity? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 23:** Do you have any comments on the advantages and disadvantages of the **proposed definition of managerial and professional employment**? And the alternatives, including using skill levels?

**Question 24:** Do you have any comments on our proposed **approach to interim activities**, and the costs associated with extending the GO survey infrastructure to collect and code more information about interim employment occupations, if we were to pursue an alternative approach?

**Question 25:** Do you have any comments or suggestions on the potential **future use of graduate reflective questions**?

## Questions relating to proposal 8: Construction of student experience measures based on the National Student Survey

**Question 26:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **calculation of NSS scale-based student experience measures**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 27:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **approach to NSS survey non-response** (including the requirement for a 50 per cent response rate)? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Questions relating to proposal 9: Definition and coverage of split indicator categories

**Question 28:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed definition of **split indicators showing year of entry or qualification**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 29:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed definition of **split indicators showing subject studied using CAH2 subject groups**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 30:** To what extent do you agree with the selection and proposed definitions of **split indicators for student characteristics**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 31:** To what extent do you agree with the selection and proposed definitions of **split indicators for course types**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 32:** To what extent do you agree with our proposed definition of **split indicators showing provider partnership arrangements**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## Questions relating to proposal 10: Definition and coverage of benchmarking factors

**Question 33:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **definitions of the sector against which English and devolved administration providers will be benchmarked**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 34:** To what extent do you agree with the **benchmarking factors and groups** we have proposed for each of the student outcome and experience measures? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

**Question 35:** Do you have any comments on the **methodology we use to calculate the ABCS quintiles** we propose to use in the benchmarking of student outcome measures?

**Question 36:** Do you have any comments on the **methodology we use to calculate the geography of employment quintiles** we propose to use in the benchmarking of progression measures?

**Question 37:** Do you wish to make any well-evidenced arguments regarding **effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on continuation and completion outcomes**, yet to be borne out in the data?

## Questions relating to proposal 11: Presentation of student outcome and experience data indicators and approach to statistical uncertainty

**Question 38:** Do you have any comments about the opportunities and challenges that result from our **presentation of the student outcomes and experiences indicators**, and on the effectiveness of the guidance we have provided for users of our data dashboards?

**Question 39:** Do you have any comments about the challenges that might result from **application of the data protection requirements**, suppressing indicators when the denominator contains fewer than 23 students, and when the numerator and denominator differ by fewer than three students?

## Questions relating to proposal 12: Definition and coverage of data about the size and shape of provision

**Question 40:** To what extent do you agree with the proposed **construction of data about the size and shape of provision**? Please provide an explanation for your answer. If you believe our approach should differ, please explain how and the reasons for your view.

## **Annex H: Consideration of alternative proposals**

1. In formulating the proposals in this consultation, we have considered alternative approaches. These are summarised in this annex.

### **Adopt existing definitions of student outcome and experience measures**

2. We considered whether we should adopt student outcome and experience measures that have been defined or produced for other purposes or by other organisations. This would mean that definitions were less aligned with our regulatory objectives. It would lead to approaches for regulating quality and access and participation which were less consistently defined across all providers (depending on whether they were required to return student data to HESA or the ESFA). They would also potentially be more partial in their coverage of student populations (in particular, several of the more established measures only report on undergraduate students on qualifications eligible to receive OfS funding). There are no currently established definitions of progression measures covering all levels of study. We discounted this approach because we take the view that the measures used in our regulatory approaches need to be consistent and comprehensive in their coverage, and fit for their intended purposes.

### **Establish different definitions for the purposes of different regulatory functions**

3. We considered whether we should define student outcome and experience measures specific to each function. This would mean, for example, that definitions of continuation measures were bespoke for the purpose of regulating quality and standards, distinct from bespoke definitions of the same student outcome when used for regulation of access and participation. While this might lead to definitions that are slightly more aligned to the context of their uses, we discounted this approach because such differences are likely trivial. We consider that minor differences in the statistics we report would create a significantly higher burden and complexity of understanding our regulatory approach, and may lead to incoherent judgements about providers' performance in respect of the same student outcomes.

### **Publish a single set of indicators and split indicators for use in all regulatory functions**

4. We considered whether we should produce and publish a single set of indicators and split indicators for use in regulation of student outcomes and access and participation and in the TEF. Indicators and split indicators would be reported for all modes and levels of study, and views of a provider's student populations in a single data presentation, with the same coverage of all students aiming for higher education qualifications applied consistently for each purpose, regardless of the scope of that purpose. This would mean that the same, single data resource would be made available to inform each regulatory process. We discounted this approach because we do not consider it to represent an efficient, effective or economic use of the OfS's resources, nor those of the providers we regulate. For example, we consider that needing to engage with a resource that includes large volumes of data about postgraduate students, for functions that cover undergraduates only, would create a significant burden for TEF assessment panels and OfS staff supporting approval and monitoring of access and participation plans, as well as for staff in providers responsible for drafting TEF submission or access and participation plan content.

## **Construct student outcome and experience measures at lower levels of granularity**

5. We considered whether we should construct indicators and split indicators at lower levels of granularity, to facilitate identification of weak student outcomes (or excellence in the delivery of learning and teaching) in more narrowly defined pockets of provision. This could mean reporting on student outcomes and experiences through more granular breakdowns, such as subjects at CAH3 group level, or student characteristics in intersectional terms. We discounted this approach because of the large volume of data indicators that would be produced, each based on smaller populations that carry greater statistical uncertainty, making the conclusions needed to support regulatory judgements harder to draw. This would lead to a significant increase in the burden of understanding and responding to our regulatory approach, and compromise the efficiency and effectiveness with which the OfS and providers use their resources.

## **Construct student outcome and experience measures at higher levels of aggregation**

6. We considered whether we should construct indicators and split indicators at higher levels of aggregation, to limit the volume of data indicators that would be produced and reduce the likelihood that indicators and split indicators are based on smaller populations that carry greater statistical uncertainty. This could mean reporting on student outcomes through less granular breakdowns, such as subjects at CAH1 group level, or student characteristics in strictly binary groupings. We discounted this approach because it risks differences in student outcomes and experiences being hidden from view, with weak student outcomes and smaller pockets of excellence in the delivery of learning and teaching going undetected. We consider that this would fail to ensure that current and future students are not exposed to courses of low quality, and would not support providers to identify opportunities for enhancement. The likelihood of masking differential performance in respect of student outcomes and experiences would likely make the conclusions needed to support regulatory judgements harder to draw, ultimately (if indirectly) leading to an increase in the burden of understanding and responding to our regulatory approach.

# Annex I: Matters to which we have had regard in reaching our proposals

## The OfS's general duties

7. In formulating these proposals, the OfS has had regard to its general duties as set out in section 2 of HERA – these are reproduced in Annex J. We consider that the proposals in this consultation are particularly relevant to the following general duties:
  - (a) institutional autonomy
  - (b) quality, choice and opportunities for students
  - (d) value for money
  - (e) equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education
  - (g) best regulatory practice.
8. In formulating these proposals, we have given particular weight to (b) quality, choice and opportunities for students; (e) equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education; and (g) best regulatory practice to ensure that are activities are appropriately transparent, accountable, proportionate and consistent.
9. The OfS's regulatory objectives reflect the things that are of significant importance to all students: high quality courses, successful outcomes, and the ongoing value of their qualifications. In the circumstances where a provider is not meeting these objectives for its students, it is important that the OfS can intervene to ensure that current and future students are not exposed to courses of low quality. Opportunities for study are not meaningful if students are able to choose low quality courses delivering weak outcomes, or to continue on such courses, because the regulatory system has endorsed such performance. Measures of student outcomes and experiences that support the identification of providers, or pockets of their provision, delivering weak outcomes make an important contribution to our regulatory approach.
10. The OfS's approach to regulation is designed to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to, and participation in, higher education. This means that we are concerned with ensuring that students from underrepresented groups are able to access higher education, and also to succeed on and beyond their courses. Our proposed approach to constructing measures of student outcomes and experiences is designed to support the identification and monitoring of priority groups' access to, and successful participation in, higher education in a way that is appropriately aligned to and consistent with that used to inform our regulatory approach to quality and standards.
11. We have considered the principles of best regulatory practice and, in particular, considerations of the transparency and consistency of our regulatory activities. We consider the proposed approach set out in this consultation to be appropriate in ensuring that the OfS can construct data to inform our approaches which are proportionate and consistent. We have proposed data definitions which we intend to apply in the same way for all providers, and for the purposes of

both quality and standards and access and participation regulation. We have given particular consideration to the transparency of our proposals, to ensure that providers and other stakeholders can understand the evidence we will use to inform our regulatory activities.

12. In formulating these proposals, we consider general duties (a) and (d) important, but have given less weight to these.
13. The OfS is required to have regard to the need to protect institutional autonomy. It does not, however, have an absolute obligation to protect the autonomy of providers. Our related consultation proposals for regulating student outcomes and the TEF take a principles- and outcomes-based approach to focus regulatory attention where it is needed most and so we expect that the majority of providers, in particular those comfortably meeting our numerical thresholds for student outcomes, will have a significant amount of autonomy in relation to the delivery and quality of their higher education courses.
14. Value for money in the provision of higher education is important for both students and the taxpayer. Students normally pay significant sums for their higher education and incur debt for tuition fees and maintenance costs. Similarly, the taxpayer contributes significantly to higher education through the provision of government-backed student loans and, for some providers, public grant funding. These investments are unlikely to represent value for money if, for example, continuation rates are low and students do not proceed to managerial and professional employment or further study. We consider that defining student outcome and experience measures in ways that provide appropriate support our regulation of quality and access and participation is important to protect the interests of students and taxpayers. It ensures that student and taxpayer investment is focused on providers and courses that deliver successful outcomes and equality of opportunity.

## **The public sector equality duty**

15. We have had regard to Schedule 1, paragraph 21 of HERA, which extends the Equality Act 2010, and therefore the public sector equality duty, to the OfS. This requires the OfS to have due regard to eliminating unlawful discrimination, to foster good relations between different groups and to take steps to advance equality of opportunity.
16. Protecting and promoting quality and equality of opportunity is at the heart of our work. When a student embarks on a higher education course it has the potential to be a life-transforming event – an enriching academic experience that paves the way for rewarding options in the labour market and a fulfilling life. Students pay a significant price for these opportunities, through their time and effort, as well as in financial terms. This is why the OfS is focused on ensuring through our regulation of quality and standards that all students, whatever their background and characteristics, can have confidence that they will receive a high quality higher education and successful outcomes. At the same time, we are taking steps through our regulation of access and participation to reduce the gaps in equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students, before, during and beyond their time in higher education.

17. In developing these consultation proposals we have had regard to our published equality and diversity objectives and action plan,<sup>150</sup> in particular the following objectives:
- a. Objective 1, which states that the OfS will develop, implement and consult on our equality, diversity and inclusion objectives, evidence base, impact assessments and action plan to ensure successful implementation of our public sector equality duty.
  - b. Objective 3, which states that the OfS will challenge the sector to significantly reduce gaps in access, success and progression for students from all backgrounds and identities and across all disciplines.
  - c. Objective 4, which states that the OfS will work to address the risk of some students not receiving a high quality higher education experience. It lists as a priority ‘implementing the initial and ongoing conditions of registration for quality to drive a high quality academic experience for all students, giving explicit attention to the outcomes for students from underrepresented groups.’
  - d. Objective 5, which states that the OfS will work to reduce the risk that some students are prevented from maximising their outcomes through their higher education experience and therefore do not maximise their potential in terms of employment or further study.
18. These consultation proposals are intended to apply consistently, unless otherwise stated, to the indicators and split indicators constructed to inform our regulatory approaches to quality and standards and access and participation. The consistency of our approach to data, as proposed through this consultation, is intended to help reduce any tensions between equality of opportunity and our related consultation proposals in relation to student outcomes. Our view is that meaningfully extending equality of opportunity means providing all students irrespective of their characteristics with the opportunity to benefit from their higher education. The potential to achieve this is enhanced if, through the data that informs our approaches, there is consistency in the evidence that helps to determine whether all students are able to have successful outcomes that meet rigorous requirements set by the regulator. If our datasets do not support the identification of any subsets of students, particularly those who share protected characteristics, who are not provided with sufficient support to achieve such outcomes, we will not have identified those who have not had a genuine opportunity to benefit from higher education, and therefore have not experienced meaningful equality of opportunity.
19. Through this consultation we are seeking views on any unintended consequences of our proposals, for example for particular types of provider or student. Responses to this consultation will inform our assessment of the impact of our proposals on different groups. We will continue to have due regard for our obligations under the Equality Act 2010, as we consider responses to this consultation.

## **Guidance issued by the Secretary of State**

20. The proposals we make through this consultation have been developed in alignment with, and in support of, those made through our related consultations on regulation of student outcomes and the TEF. The regard that we have had for strategic guidance issued to the OfS by the Secretary of State is described in Annex H of the TEF consultation, and Annex I of the

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<sup>150</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/equality-and-diversity/objectives-for-student-equality/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/equality-and-diversity/objectives-for-student-equality/).

regulation of student outcomes consultation. The same regard has influenced the proposals we make for constructing the indicators and split indicators to support our regulatory approaches.

## **The Regulators' Code**

21. The Regulators' Code requires us, in paragraphs 1.1 and 1.2, to consider the burdens that our activities place on regulated entities. As noted throughout these consultation proposals, this has been central to our considerations throughout their formulation. We consider that our proposals particularly encapsulate these aspects of the code.

## **Code of Practice for Statistics**

22. We have taken account of the Code of Practice for Statistics in preparing our proposals for the creation and publication of information about student outcomes and experiences. We have committed to compliance with the Code of Practice through:

- a. Trustworthiness – We have set out in these proposals our approach to producing statistics that describe student outcomes and experiences. In doing so, we have had regard to the need to explain what judgements we have made about the data and methods we have used, and their strengths and limitations. We have described our approach and, wherever possible, made available our underpinning evidence and calculations to ensure transparency and support understanding of the proposals.
- b. Quality – Throughout this consultation we are transparent about the data sources our approach relies upon, and how features or limitations of those data sources contribute to the definitions we propose for student outcome and experience measures. We have had regard to the need to use sound methods that are fit for the purposes we intend for the statistics we produce, and the reasons that we have selected these methods. We also propose compiling measures that use recognised standards and classifications where available and appropriate.
- c. Value – Throughout this consultation we have indicated how our proposals will interact coherently with our approach to the regulation of quality and standards (including through the TEF) and access and participation. Our intention is that data about student outcomes and experiences should be published as official statistics to ensure accountability and accessibility of the information informing our approaches, through clear communication of information about student outcomes and experiences. We have made commitments in these proposals to appropriately communicate the statistical uncertainty associated with our interpretation of the underlying performance of a provider, and our views of that performance, in ways that the public can understand our data.

# Annex J: Section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017

## 2. General duties

1. In performing its functions, the OfS must have regard to –
  - a. the need to protect the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers,
  - b. the need to promote quality, and greater choice and opportunities for students, in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers,
  - c. the need to encourage competition between English higher education providers in connection with the provision of higher education where that competition is in the interests of students and employers, while also having regard to the benefits for students and employers resulting from collaboration between such providers,
  - d. the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers,
  - e. the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English higher education providers,
  - f. the need to use the OfS's resources in an efficient, effective and economic way, and
  - g. so far as relevant, the principles of best regulatory practice, including the principles that regulatory activities should be –
    - i. transparent, accountable, proportionate and consistent, and
    - ii. targeted only at cases in which action is needed.
2. The reference in subsection (1)(b) to choice in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers includes choice amongst a diverse range of—
  - a. types of provider,
  - b. higher education courses, and
  - c. means by which they are provided (for example, full-time or part-time study, distance learning or accelerated courses).
3. In performing its functions, including its duties under subsection (1), the OfS must have regard to guidance given to it by the Secretary of State.
4. In giving such guidance, the Secretary of State must have regard to the need to protect the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers.
5. The guidance may, in particular, be framed by reference to particular courses of study but, whether or not the guidance is framed in that way, it must not relate to—

- a. particular parts of courses of study,
  - b. the content of such courses,
  - c. the manner in which they are taught, supervised or assessed,
  - d. the criteria for the selection, appointment or dismissal of academic staff, or how they are applied, or
  - e. the criteria for the admission of students, or how they are applied.
6. Guidance framed by reference to a particular course of study must not guide the OfS to perform a function in a way which prohibits or requires the provision of a particular course of study.
7. Guidance given by the Secretary of State to the OfS which relates to English higher education providers must apply to such providers generally or to a description of such providers.
8. In this Part, 'the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers' means –
- a. the freedom of English higher education providers within the law to conduct their day to day management in an effective and competent way,
  - b. the freedom of English higher education providers –
    - i. to determine the content of particular courses and the manner in which they are taught, supervised and assessed,
    - ii. to determine the criteria for the selection, appointment and dismissal of academic staff and apply those criteria in particular cases, and
    - iii. to determine the criteria for the admission of students and apply those criteria in particular cases, and
  - c. the freedom within the law of academic staff at English higher education providers –
    - i. to question and test received wisdom, and
    - ii. to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions,
- without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges they may have at the providers.



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