



Developing and delivering the OfS student information, advice and guidance strategy – improving ability to make higher education choices

Summary

1. In this interim report on a strategy for student information, advice and guidance (IAG) we set out a proposed broad approach for OfS, and the need for a new information resource for students to replace Unistats as part of this. We draw on feedback and evidence from students and stakeholders about decision-making needs, the issues and gaps that exist and how OfS could add value in the interests of students. The timing is critical because we have a prior commitment to deliver a new information resource by 2019-20 and we need approval now to proceed to further development stages, but this needs to be considered in the context of our emerging strategy which sets a new, high-profile direction of travel for the OfS. We are therefore asking the board to:
 - a. **Consider and agree** that:
 - a. We have identified the right broad approach for the OfS in relation to IAG.
 - b. We should work up the final overarching strategy in dialogue with stakeholders, to report to the board in early 2019.
 - c. We should take forward the work for a new information resource to support student decision making, including prototyping for testing with students and advisers, to be launched in autumn 2019.
 - b. **Delegate** authority to the chief executive to agree whether to proceed to the development of the new website in February 2019 based on the findings from the prototyping stage.

Further information

2. Available from **Conor Ryan** – director of external relations, at conor.ryan@officeforstudents.org.uk or on 0117 9317393; or **Victoria Holbrook** (for IAG strategy) at victoria.holbrook@officeforstudents.org.uk or on 0117 931 7254; or **Catherine Cameron** (for Unistats and student information provision) at catherine.cameron@officeforstudents.org.uk or on 0117 931 7476.

Members' interests

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

Context: the problems we are addressing

4. There are gaps in the effectiveness of IAG for different groups of students and increasing concern about students' ability to make informed choices about higher education study, either because the information is not available or clear enough, or there is a lack of adequate advice and guidance. In particular, we are concerned that when students, and their teachers and parents, have access to growing amounts of data, they don't have the support to make sense of what they are seeing (and hearing more broadly).
5. There is a lack of coordination across agencies and organisations. Effective IAG underpins informed choice, good experiences and successful outcomes and the current offer isn't reliably good enough. Students, government and the public say that they want impartial, personalised IAG which is too often not currently available. Understanding of the student finance system is low.
6. The OfS provides information to students through Unistats, a website which we manage on behalf of the four UK nations. Research with prospective students shows that much greater explanation and personalisation of information is required to meet their needs effectively. We also need to improve how we present data to this audience either through our own web resources or through other resources, or a combination of both.
7. The OfS Student Panel recently told us that it strongly believes more should be done by OfS to improve the IAG experience of prospective students. In particular, the Panel felt that the emphasis should be placed on personalised, contextual advice and guidance. Research continues to show that decision-making is complex and more information does not necessarily lead to better decisions, unless it is contextualised and ideally personalised with advice and guidance.¹

Who are the current players?

8. Most information, advice and guidance is aimed at school-aged young people, where the Careers Strategy sets out clear requirements which include IAG about higher education. However, there is a particular focus on employer 'encounters', and schools increasingly use the Gatsby Benchmarks of good provision. All schools must appoint Careers Leaders from academic year 2018-19, and regional 'careers hubs' are being established to help with training and development. The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) is supporting this work.
9. Adults are currently supported in the main by the National Careers Service (NCS), with some face to face support as well as telephone advice. The NCS is designed to be the 'one stop shop' for careers advice and its provision is currently undergoing redevelopment.
10. Universities and colleges, as well as many charities in this space, offer outreach, attainment and aspiration activities, but they lack coordination. UCAS offers fairs for

¹ E.g. CFE research 2018, commissioned by HEFCE/OfS to be published shortly.

prospective students and conferences and resources for teachers and careers advisers, as well as its website and telephone support for applicants; it is currently reworking its offer and services to students to ensure greater personalisation, drawing on research about decision-making behaviour and preferences. International students receive much of their initial information from the British Council.

11. There are also a wide range of published and online information sources, some of which offer basic advice including Which University?, the Good University Guide and the league tables provided by newspapers like the Sunday Times and Guardian. The DFE is also awarding contracts to app creators to offer some tailored information and advice.
12. For the first phase of strategy we have had initial conversations with the National Careers Service, UCAS, the Careers and Enterprise Company, Which? University, The Student Room, and the Student Loans Company. We have also presented our initial findings to the Student Panel at their September meeting, where they stressed the importance of the OfS 'brand' for trusted IAG, personalisation, addressing international students' needs, measuring impact and student transfers.

Current gaps in provision

13. Research by Methods, a digital delivery company with extensive experience of working with relevant audiences and complex data, instructed to develop a new information resource to replace Unistats, has found that many students do not know enough about higher education to make informed decisions and lack the support they would need to do this. While there are many resources available to them, but they often do not know where to start and experience difficulty in navigating what is a complex landscape and knowing what information to trust. Prospective students would benefit from an authoritative, impartial resource which would provide them with a framework for interpreting the available information, signposting to advice and guidance.
14. Mature and part-time students often have very different information priorities owing to work or family commitments and tend to be less mobile than young prospective students. Our own initial assessment suggests that support for other groups of prospective or current students is still patchy, with limited advice for postgraduates largely delivered by providers themselves; and targeted independent IAG for care leavers and estranged students often limited to third sector bodies. Transfer students also find it difficult to get good advice to make the best choices when they want to move courses between providers.
15. There also remain significant challenges for young people from disadvantaged and BME backgrounds. Our new Access and Participation Strategy, on which we are currently consulting, raises expectations on providers charging higher undergraduate fees to demonstrate how they will reduce the gaps in access between these groups and other students, including through outreach and targeted IAG. In support of this, we fund the National Collaborative Outreach programme, which enables consortia of providers locally to collaborate on providing IAG and support to under-represented groups in areas of low participation. As we review our future funding of NCOP, we aim to set new expectations about the quality of this activity, including how it is coherent with activity delivered by

schools. We will ensure our IAG strategy aligns with this work. But there is also a need to ensure that web-based resources complement this work effectively.

How could the OfS address those gaps?

16. As a result of our initial research, scoping and discussions, we believe that we – as the independent regulator of higher education in England working in the interests of students - have an important potential role to play through **convening and working with those already providing IAG** – including UCAS, career leaders in schools (with the CEC), university outreach and careers advisers, the National Careers Service – **to add value and improve the experience for all students**. This is what our strategy should seek to do. We also plan to explore further the potential for partnership with other popular information providers, including the Student Room and Which? University.
17. However, from the interviews that Methods have undertaken with students, it is also clear that there remains a demand for an **impartial, authoritative student resource** that would help students to navigate the complex IAG landscape and understand how to use the data that is increasingly being made available about individual courses and providers.

What are our powers?

18. The basis for the OfS's proposed approach to student information, advice and guidance stems from our remit under HERA 2017 to regulate the activities carried on by registered English higher education providers via functions relating to registration and the imposition of registration conditions. Under the scope of the legislative purpose for those functions, the OfS has supplementary powers to do anything which appears to it to be necessary or expedient (rather than desirable) for that purpose (or connected purposes) and can therefore take different forms of regulatory action in lieu of the imposition of new registration conditions or in support the subject matter of conditions that are already in place.
19. The proposed approach to the provision of certain types of information, advice and guidance to students can be considered to be fundamental for achieving that legislative purpose and is supported by the following general duties under the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017:
 - 1 (b) the need to promote quality, and greater choice and opportunities for students, in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers;
 - 1 (d) the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers; and
 - 1 (e) the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English HE providers.
20. The proposed approach is also supported by paragraphs 49 and 50 of the Regulatory Framework and the 2018-19 Strategic Guidance letter from the Department of Education to OfS. The letter specifically says that the minister “*expect[s] the OfS to work*

with students and DfE to identify and agree what these students need and how it should be presented, including reforming Unistats by September 2019." This work also aligns with several areas of the OfS Business Plan.

21. As we develop our proposals, we will seek to ensure that the approach remains within the scope of our functions and is consistent with our general duties relating to better regulations principles and the protection of institutional autonomy. In particular, we will be mindful not to engage in the provision of bespoke and individualised information which would be beyond our powers and duplicate the roles performed by other bodies and higher education providers.

Delivering a new information resource

22. The current Unistats website was launched in 2012 to ensure that prospective students and their advisers had access to robust, authoritative and comparable information to help them make informed decisions about their course of study. It includes data from the National Student Survey (NSS), the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) dataset and other information such as continuation rates for undergraduate courses across the UK. It also displays Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) outcomes on provider pages. In addition, Unistats includes direct links to detailed course information on provider websites and provider-specific information on fees and financial support. All the data on the site is available to third party users on an open access basis. The Office for Students manages Unistats on behalf of all the UK funding bodies, which contribute to its funding. Around one in five students say they use the site currently which compares with three in five who consult the UCAS site.
23. The UK funding bodies undertook a major review of Unistats in 2015 which resulted in some immediate improvements to the site in 2016, but also recommended a fundamental redevelopment of the website, to better reflect the diversity of students' information needs and help users understand and navigate information more effectively. Full implementation has awaited OfS's decisions on the future of the site.
24. We have updated our literature review and our research with students to inform our approach: specifically to understand whether there are currently unmet needs for information and the rationale for a resource to be developed by OfS. This user driven approach to developing a business case is required by Government Digital Service (GDS) who must ultimately approve investment in creating a replacement site.
25. The original literature review on decision making has been updated by the original consultants CFE and to update these where appropriate including to reflect developments in technology and use of social media. Methods have carried out interview research with our target audience (both prospective students and advisers) to examine whether there remains a need for a new resource to support decision-making. (The summary of their findings and of the student decision making journey and how we might improve this is attached at Annex B.)

26. The outcome of this 'discovery' stage – the work by Methods – is that a clear student/adviser need has been identified and Methods recommend that we should progress to the next stage of the project, known as the 'alpha' stage. This stage tests different approaches to meet the student/adviser needs leading to building prototypes to test with our intended audiences.
27. Depending on the success of the alpha stage with users, we will seek a decision on whether to progress to developing a beta website. We propose this decision, due in early 2019, should be taken by the chief executive under delegated authority.

Vision for a new information resource

28. More information doesn't always mean better-informed decisions; it can lead to information overload and disengagement. So, we envisage a more radical approach than simply updating and extending Unistats. We propose to explore **options for a fundamentally different resource**, or linked resources, that would guide those considering higher education through the decision-making process, taking account of their own starting points and information needs.
29. To engage and inspire prospective students, we would **make use of the latest technology and personalisation approaches** to create a resource which was engaging and easy to use, employing innovative ways to present data, utilising data visualisation to make it easy for prospective students to take away key messages, such as which NSS scores are significantly higher or lower than the majority, but without oversimplifying complex data. We will work with DfE, which will hold the licence for solutions developed through the open data app competition, to build on successful approaches developed.
30. This new resource would be recognised by students and those who advise them **as the official source of information about higher education – impartial and authoritative** - helping raise aspirations of those who are unsure if it is achievable or affordable for them and ensuring that those who have decided to pursue higher education can find and understand information that is salient for them. Our aim would be to facilitate a journey through the information an individual needed to make their decision, be that provided by us or linked to from elsewhere, taking account of their level of prior knowledge and the point in the process from which they were starting.
31. Good communications will be vital to its success. We will need to ensure the new resource is **well-promoted and embedded with those who advise students**. We would expect a new resource, supported by promotion and engagement with schools and others, to have a much wider reach and stronger levels of engagement than Unistats.
32. The initial phases of the project are being jointly developed and funded with the UK funding bodies. We currently envisage maintaining a UK wide site, as students are mobile across the UK, but final decisions on involvement will be made by respective Boards alongside OfS decisions. If we add more information to the site, it will be important that students get an experience relevant to their national circumstances.

Why should the OfS develop and deliver such a resource?

33. Ensuring the availability of high-quality information supports the OfS meet its objectives around competition, choice, and student access and success. Our research shows that the information needs of prospective students are not currently being met and there is potential to improve outcomes if students are better informed. Students question the impartiality and trustworthiness of current sources. Disadvantaged students are particularly poorly served by what is currently available.
34. Moreover, existing resources are generally limited to only a subset of types of provision and/or modes of study. An OfS resource would be truly **comprehensive**, covering all types of provision, part-time and full-time, initially at undergraduate level, and covering providers which teach higher education in the UK. It could provide the kind of authoritative and impartial resource that research has identified is needed to provide support to students given the deficits in the advice and guidance available to many of them.
35. Deciding whether or not to enter higher education and which courses to apply for can be an extremely stressful experience. Methods research highlights how students often feel unqualified to make such an important decision and how worried they are about making the 'wrong' choice. We need to **empower students** by helping them to understand their full range of options and even enable them to challenge the advice that they receive from others, where that advice may be the product of an outdated or narrow understanding of higher education. We also need to help them understand what their options might be if they decide that the course they have chosen is not for them.
36. In the next stage of the project, we would consider the best way of meeting complex information needs, taking a holistic view of the landscape. This might involve collecting more data, but it could also involve linking as seamlessly as possible to other authoritative sources of information. Additionally, it could also result in recommendations to make greater use of our regulatory powers to ensure that providers are not only having regard to their obligations under consumer law but are publishing information in a clear and consistent way; this information could then both be accessed directly and linked to from a central resource.

Recommendations and next steps

37. The evidence we have amassed through Methods and through our initial work on the IAG strategy demonstrates that the OfS has an important role to play both as a convenor and as a trusted independent source of reliable information provided in a personalised way for potential students. We therefore seek the board's agreement for this strategy and to continue development work on a radically improved independent information resource to replace Unistats.
38. For the IAG strategy in the next phase, we propose to:
 - a. Explore with the Careers and Enterprise Company how we can improve the advice and information available to Career Leaders in schools, and link appropriately to the new information resource.

- b. Explore with UCAS how we can develop a seamless experience for potential students using their website and our new information resource, one that enables personalisation and read across to application-making.
 - c. Explore with other popular information providers ways in which we can work together to improve the quality of presentation of their data and provide links that make it easier for students to understand their choices and the information they are seeing.
 - d. Explore with the National Careers Service how their website and advisers reference accurate information about higher education choices and remain up to date, particularly for mature and part-time students.
 - e. Working in partnership and using our convening power, consider what might make up the features of high-quality IAG delivered to prospective students, undergraduates and graduates by universities, colleges and other HE providers, including the potential for benchmarking good practice.
 - f. Investigate how to improve IAG for students who want to transfer from their initial course early on, or want to decide on the best postgraduate or apprenticeship options, particularly where this involves changing provider.
39. To take the overarching strategy forward into a next stage of work between October 2018 and spring 2019, we propose to publish outline proposals before Christmas. We will use these proposals to develop an approach that is credible with partners and students, engaging them through soft consultation meetings or roundtables.
40. The work on the information resource is an integral part of the IAG strategy and is being developed with a complementary timetable. However, there is also significant time pressure to develop a new resource for autumn 2019 in line with ministerial expectations, which will mean some critical decisions being taken between board meetings. Our timetable for the resource is as follows:

Business case to GDS to progress to alpha	September 2018
Alpha stage	October – January 2019
Decision to progress to Beta phase	February 2019
Beta phase	February – August 2019
Public Beta/launch of site	Autumn 2019

41. We recognise the importance of measuring the broad impact of the strategy given the range of related strategic outcomes. We plan to do this by:
- a. Baseline polling/surveying of prospective students and students in 2018-19 and repeated in future years, targeting particular groups as necessary and using focus groups where they can provide additional insights.

- b. Engagement of parents, teachers and advisers with aspects of our work and their stated confidence to apply their learning in support of students.
- c. Analysis of Access and Participation Plans for appropriate targeting of IAG-related activities.
- d. Measurable usage through analytics tools of the new information resource, split by student characteristics as required.
- e. Feedback from partner organisations and their delivery of agreed actions.

42. We now ask the Board to **consider and agree** that:

- a. We have identified the right broad approach for the OfS in relation to IAG.
- b. We should work up the final overarching strategy in dialogue with stakeholders, to report to the board in early 2019.
- c. We should take forward the work for a new information resource to support student decision making, including prototyping for testing with students and advisers, to be launched in autumn 2019.
- d. **Delegate** authority to the chief executive to agree whether to proceed to the development of the new website in February 2019 based on the findings from the prototyping stage.

Resource implications

43. The activity identified in this paper extends across all directorates, but is co-ordinated within the External Relations directorate.

Communications and engagement

- 44. We will use the CfE report and associated student polling to help highlight this work and the needs that we are trying to address in the national and student media, and develop a communications plan, including publication on the OfS website of our approach. There will be a consultation phase.
- 45. We will consider a public information campaign around higher education and to promote the information resource, including targeted social media strategies.
- 46. We will advertise any new activity related to the strategy and development of the new resource through our mailing lists, our new e-newsletter and social media, and we will use blogs and social media to highlight results, dissemination activities, impacts and outcomes.

Risk implications

47. The major risks to delivery of the strategy and resource include:

- a. Failure to ensure that the strategy meets its principles and therefore the needs of students – this has reputational impacts for OfS. We will mitigate this by testing and refining our proposals with the Student Panel and other stakeholders during the next phase of work. We will also conduct an Impact Assessment.

- b. Relationships with partners do not lead to the intended joint working and delivery of the vision. Given that political and policy change is inevitable, there will always be times when partnership working is more challenging. We will attempt to mitigate this by using our convening power regularly to build trust and shared objectives; ensuring that relationships are managed effectively at all levels from chief executive to officer with stakeholder management plans in place; and ensuring that dependencies are understood.

- c. Failure to deliver the new information resource on time for 2019-20 due to issues with GDS approval, contractors, suppliers or other partners, or a lack of resources. We will ensure those leading the work are experienced in managing contractors, are supported by procurement specialists and that project management is effective through regular review. Resources will be prioritised as necessary.

Annex A: Principles underpinning our IAG strategy

Internal

- a. The strategy is informed by the views and needs of students from the outset and throughout its life. We engage with students in various ways including having a student member of the working party, using the Student Panel and undertaking polling, focus groups and other research activities.
- b. We consider the needs of all students and potential students, at all stages and all forms of higher education provision and provider types, so that the strategy is comprehensive and coherent.
- c. The strategy fits with the OfS regulatory framework and strategy in the interests of students. So, it does not propose to act ultra vires and it will be consistent with other elements of our work such as access and participation.
- d. The strategy is developed in collaboration with the input of expertise from around the OfS and – in due course – external partners, to ensure its buy-in.
- e. The strategy is developed in an open-minded way so that all forms of evidence and ideas can be considered and tested and the resulting output is high quality and credible.
- f. We add value to the IAG landscape and address clear student needs in making any recommendations or proposals for action in the strategy. Any actions taken forward are evaluated to inform future work and learning.
- g. The intended benefits of the strategy are clearly articulated in terms of the impact it will have on students.

External

- h. Students should understand why the OfS is engaging with them on this area and contribute to the strategy's development.
- i. The strategy fits with our independence as an NDPB, regulatory context, strategic aims for working in the interests of students and other drivers.
- j. The intended benefits of the strategy are clearly articulated in terms of the impact it will have on students, and gaining their buy in.
- k. Partners understand and support the OfS strategy as it adds value to the landscape, play their own roles alongside it and relationships are sustained/improved.

Annex B: The Methods interview research

Methods' interview research with prospective students and their advisers has reinforced the conclusions from the 2015 review:

- a. Many students do not know enough about higher education to make informed decisions and lack the support they would need to do this.
- b. There are many resources available to them, but they often do not know where to start and experience difficulty in navigating what is a complex landscape and knowing what information to trust. Prospective students would benefit from an authoritative, impartial resource which would provide them with a framework for interpreting the available information.
- c. Mature and part-time students often have very different information priorities owing to work or family commitments and tend to be less mobile than young prospective students
- d. There are a multitude of factors that affect the decisions made by prospective students, these vary by individual, and data is likely to play only a small part in many decisions.

The research has also uncovered wider needs:

- e. Students experience anxiety about their decisions. They do not feel well-qualified to make what they see as a very significant decision and are concerned about making the 'wrong' choice.
- f. Students with specific needs, for example those with disabilities, do not know how to find out what support is available to them or how to approach a conversation with a provider about this.
- g. Interviews with young people who decided not to pursue HE indicate limited understanding of the student finance system and aversion to the perceived debt that would be incurred as a result of completing a HE course; this is currently acting as a deterrent to participation for students from poorer backgrounds. (This is consistent with the view of the Student Loans Company: there is a need to ensure that both prospective students and their families understand the costs involved, the support available and more about the student loan system.)
- h. Impartiality of advice in schools may be under pressure from competing requirements: Interviews with teachers and advisers have highlighted the pressure that they may be under to advise students in particular ways for example, to encourage applications to Russell Group institutions.