



## **Draft minutes of the extraordinary OfS board meeting, 21 August 2020**

**Timings: 09:00-11:00**

- Present members:
- Sir Michael Barber (chair)
  - Martin Coleman (deputy chair)
  - Nicola Dandridge (chief executive)
  - Gurpreet Dehal
  - Elizabeth Fagan
  - Katja Hall
  - Kate Lander
  - Martha Longdon
  - Kathryn King
  - Steve West
  - David Palfreyman
  - Monisha Shah
- Attendees:
- Ian Coates, Department for Education representative
- Apologies:
- Verity Hancock
  - Simon Levine
  - Chris Millward (Director for Fair Access and Participation)
- Officers:
- Ed Davison
  - Josh Fleming
  - Paul Huffer, Head of Legal
  - Susan Lapworth, Director of Competition and Registration
  - Richard Puttock, Director of Data, Foresight and Analysis
  - Conor Ryan, Director of External Relations
  - Ben Whitestone, Head of Governance

## Chair's welcome

1. The chair welcomed members to the meeting. Simon Levine, Verity Hancock and Chris Millward had sent their apologies.
2. The meeting had been convened to consider several significant issues which had arisen during a challenging period for the higher education sector, the Government and the OfS. [Exempt from publication].
3. The chair outlined that even before these specific issues the OfS and the higher education sector faced significant challenges. Access and participation remained a priority for the OfS and the impact of the coronavirus crisis and knock-on impact on admissions made the OfS's focus on social mobility even more important, and even more challenging. There were also ongoing discussions with Government about a need to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy across the higher education sector. Whilst the OfS supported this in principle, and was already taking steps to ensure that its regulatory approach was risk-based in practice, it was important that the OfS's ability to regulate was not damaged.
4. The chair paid tribute to the executive team and the OfS staff for their hard work and professionalism during a challenging time.

### Section exempt from publication

5. Exempt from publication.
6. Exempt from publication.
7. Exempt from publication.
8. Exempt from publication.
9. Exempt from publication.
10. Exempt from publication.

## Update on A-Level results and autumn admissions, and implications for the OfS

11. The chief executive outlined the impact the 2020 A-level results process was having on students, which was an extremely full and fast-moving agenda. Although it was too early to determine the longer-term impact it was clear the volatility in the process and the impact on students had been challenging. For students who had seen their grades increase following the move away from the use of the Ofqual algorithm, there were approximately 15,000 who since met their first choice offers. 10,000 – 12,000 of these students were therefore looking to change their place. The risk was that there would be a disproportional negative impact on students from disadvantaged

backgrounds. A taskforce had been set up by the Department for Education to address these challenges and the OfS was playing an active role.

12. The main concerns for the OfS related to the impact on students if some courses and providers were significantly over-subscribed leading to risks to quality and potential higher levels of non-continuation, and also the risk that disadvantaged students slip through the net due to having less support and less effective IAG. There were also significant risks for higher education providers including financial implications which may arise from choices students make about where to study, given the removal of student number controls.
13. Exempt from publication.
14. The Director of External Relations outlined the communication and engagement the OfS had delivered through this challenging period. This included published statements which recognised the issues, provided support to students, and sign-posted to useful information. Another statement on social mobility was due to be published on 21 August 2020 [later published].
15. The following points were made in discussion:
  - a. There were significant challenges posed to OfS by the wider political context. It was important for OfS to remain politically impartial and act in the interests of students.
  - b. The board needed to consider the implication of 2021/22 admissions sooner rather than later as there was likely to be a significant impact from what was happening now on future years.
  - c. There was an opportunity to consider the quality of digital learning, which was largely untested. The chair's recently announced review of digital teaching and learning would be a key part of this.
  - d. It was important for the board and the rest of the OfS to decide how to navigate these challenges and assert its policy position.
  - e. The OfS should not lose momentum in pursuing its priorities and it was important for the organisation to come through the period with a reputation for competence in getting things right for the benefit of students.
  - f. The reintroduction of the requirements that had been paused at the beginning of the pandemic and the pending review of the OfS's strategy would provide opportunities for the board and others to consider the political environment and the impact of the COVID19 crisis, and how the organisation can address these challenges.
16. The board welcomed the update and thanked the OfS staff for their hard work during a challenging time.

## Closing remarks

17. In closing the meeting the chair thanked the board for their contributions and the executive for producing a good set of papers at short notice.

18. The board would meet next at its meeting on 22 September 2020, unless circumstances required an additional meeting. The meeting concluded at 11:00.

## **Annex A: Exempt from publication**