

Office for
Students



Annual Financial Return 2026

Appendix 1: Submission process guidance

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Overview

1. This document provides detailed guidance on how to submit your Annual Financial Return 2026 (AFR26). It covers all stages of the submission process including:
 - Downloading templates
 - Submitting all required files
 - Undergoing the return verification process.
2. Before reading this document, please ensure you have read our Regulatory advice 14 for the Annual Financial Return,¹ which gives an overview of the AFR26.
3. On 9 April 2026, we issued a notice to providers under general ongoing condition of registration F3, provision of information to the Office for Students (OfS), which set out the requirements and providers' individual deadlines for the AFR26.² The deadline for submitting AFR26 is five months after your provider's financial year end in the 2026 calendar year.
4. We will collect the AFR26 via the OfS portal, which was also used for the Annual Financial Return 2025. Please ensure you have read the guidance for using the OfS portal.³
5. If you have questions:
 - about using the OfS portal, contact: portal@officeforstudents.org.uk
 - about anything else about the submission process, contact: FinanceData@officeforstudents.org.uk.
6. Throughout the AFR26 process, we will send emails to relevant contacts at your provider. These will typically come from regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk or FinanceData@officeforstudents.org.uk.
7. If an action is required to complete the return:
 - emails will be sent to your provider's nominated strategic finance contact
 - if we do not have a strategic finance contact, we will email the accountable officer.

¹ See [Regulatory advice 14: Guidance for providers for the Annual Financial Return](#).

² The actual letter was issued directly to the accountable officer. The generic letter is available at [Deadlines and requirements for Annual Financial Return 2026: enclosing F3 Notice - Office for Students](#).

³ See the guidance on the 'Useful Links' section on the [OfS portal](#).

Details of the submission process

Submission timeline

8. The deadline for submitting AFR26 is five months after your provider's financial year end in the 2026 calendar year.
 - Unless you have notified us, we will assume your financial year end is equivalent to that used for the AFR25.
 - If this is incorrect, please alert the OfS as soon as possible by contacting Regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk.
9. We do not routinely offer extensions to deadlines for information requirements made under condition F3. We will consider granting an extension to a provider in exceptional circumstances. Our guidance for late submissions and extension requests is published at: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/supplying-data/late-submissions-and-extension-requests/.

Using the OfS portal

Accessing the portal

10. You can access the OfS portal at: <https://ofsproviderportal.officeforstudents.org.uk>.
11. All providers should have one or more portal administrators (including the accountable officer and any delegated portal administrators) who can onboard additional users to access particular collections. Portal administrators can access guidance on how to add and manage users from the 'User management' page.⁴
12. All users can access guidance from the 'Your data returns' page, which gives instructions on downloading and submitting files, and signing off the return.⁵

Navigating the AFR26 portal area

13. Once logged in to the OfS portal, under 'Your data returns' you will see the Annual Financial Return 2026 area, which has been pre-assigned to your provider. If you don't see this area, please request access from one of your portal administrators, available from the portal home page.
14. This area contains separate upload sections for each required file.
15. Some sections may not apply to all providers. For example, a business plan is only required where a provider has delivered higher education for fewer than three years before the deadline of its Annual Financial Return 2026.

⁴ This guidance is available at [How to manage your portal users - Office for Students](#).

⁵ This guidance is available at [How to submit your data returns - Office for Students](#).

Upload confirmation

16. After uploading a file, you will receive an email confirmation of receipt.
17. If an AFR26 workbook is uploaded, then a results workbook will be created and made available for download on the following working day. The results workbook reflects your data as held in our database. You should review this file to make sure the numbers look as expected. You may also use this file for further uploads, if any are required.

Sign-off process

18. Once you have submitted all required files, the accountable officer will be able to sign off the AFR26 submission directly through the portal, thereby completing the submission. This is a separate action to submitting the files. There is no separate sign off form; instead the accountable officer will need to confirm that they agree with the sign off statement on the OfS portal sign off page and click the 'confirm' button. An email will be sent to this account confirming sign off.
19. A submission will only be considered complete and eligible for onward use once it has been signed off by the accountable officer. This means that if further files are submitted (e.g. in response to verification queries), then the return will need to be signed off again by the accountable officer.

Templates and file submission requirements

Accessing templates

20. You must complete the AFR26 workbook and commentary in relation to the AFR26 workbook in the OfS template. Those templates are available from the portal:
 - **AFR26 workbook:** Available within the AFR26 workbook deliverable area on the portal. This template is bespoke to your provider and must be used. It is prepopulated with previous audited data from the AFR25 (where applicable); this data can be amended if necessary. Please do not use the sample workbook published on the OfS website.
 - **Commentary template:** Available within the AFR26 commentary deliverable area on the portal.
21. Please note that it can sometimes be necessary for the OfS to update these templates. The OfS will notify the strategic finance contacts at your provider if the templates are updated. If this occurs and you have already started completing your workbook, then you may upload your existing workbook to have the data automatically transferred to the new template by the OfS. This will then be made available as a results file on the following day (see paragraph 17). You can then continue completing the updated file and submit it as normal. You can upload draft workbooks as many times as necessary, but you should **not** sign off the submission until it is complete.
22. When you submit your completed templates, they are read into OfS systems that expect the format to be fully preserved. We recommend opening the workbook using Microsoft Excel, which will apply the correct security settings and prevent accidental modification of the workbook. Please do not modify the templates in any way. This includes:

- editing, adding or removing questions from the commentary template
- adding or removing rows, columns, or sheets in the workbook
- adjusting formulas in the workbook
- attempting to bypass validation checks in the workbook.

23. Any such modifications can prevent the workbook from being brought into OfS systems and can result in delays to your submission being completed. If you believe that changes are required to any aspects of the AFR26 workbook to account for your provider’s circumstances, then please contact financedata@officeforstudents.org.uk for advice.

File format requirements

24. While there is no enforced file naming convention, each file name must adhere to the instructions on the portal upload tool.

25. Where possible please ensure that any PDF files are not scanned images. They should contain selectable and copyable text as this will aid our analysis and assessment processes.

26. The OfS portal is configured to accept the following file types per file. If you need to upload a file that does not meet this format, please contact the OfS at FinanceData@officeforstudents.org.uk:

Table 1: File format requirements

Document	File type
Audited full financial statements	.docx, .pdf
AFR26 workbook	.xlsx (mandatory)
Commentary in relation to the AFR26 workbook	.docx (mandatory)
Management letter from the provider’s external auditor	.docx, .pdf, .pptx
Business plan (if applicable)	.docx, .pdf, .pptx, .xlsx
Signed legally binding obligation of financial support (where applicable)	.docx, .pdf
Audited financial statements from the legal entity giving a legally binding obligation of financial support (if applicable)	.docx, .pdf

External auditor’s management letter

27. The external auditor’s management letter is a report from the external auditor, addressed to the provider, and would typically include recommendations to management. Please do not submit

the following, as they do not contain the same information and will not be accepted during verification:

- letters of representation
- independent auditor's report to the board of governors (as found in the audited financial statements)
- other files or documents that are not letters from the external auditors as described above.

If you have any questions about this then please contact us at FinanceData@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Validation and verification process

Workbook validation checks

28. Each table of the AFR26 workbook includes a suite of validation errors and warnings to support the submission of accurate information. After entering all the required data, you must review these checks:
29. Validation errors must be corrected before submission. They highlight data that is unlikely to be correct.
30. Validation warnings must be reviewed and explained where necessary. They highlight data that is atypical but may be correct for your provider.
31. If a validation error is triggered:
 - The cell above the table will turn red and display: **'Validation errors: see below table. All errors must be resolved before sign-off'**.
 - The cell below the table corresponding to the failed validation check will show: **'ERROR'** in red, next to a description of it.
 - If no errors are present the table will show **'No validation errors'**, and the cells below the table will show **'Pass'**.
32. Once all required data has been entered into the workbook, you must complete the 'Financial checks' sheet. This sheet pulls specific figures from the workbook and asks you to:
 - confirm whether they match values in your audited financial statements, or
 - provide an explanation if they do not.
33. If this sheet is not completed, a validation error will be triggered.
34. If validation errors have been triggered but you believe the data is valid, please contact FinanceData@officeforstudents.org.uk. The OfS will review this and, if appropriate, arrange to bypass the affected validation errors.
35. If a validation warning is triggered:

- The cell above the table will turn yellow and display: **‘Validation warnings: see below table. [Number of warnings] require(s) a response from you. All warnings should be reviewed before sign-off’**
- The cell below the table corresponding to the failed validation check will show: **‘WARNING’** in yellow, next to a description of the warning
- If no warnings are present, the table will show **‘No validation warnings’**, and the cells below the table will show **‘Pass’**.

36. The workbook can be submitted and signed off with warnings. We have configured the template to present you with one of the following options depending on the warning:

- i. Warnings that **do not** require confirmation that the information is correct. We still expect providers to assure themselves that the information triggering the warning is correct.
- ii. Warnings that **do** require confirmation that the information is correct. This will either be in the form of:
 - A. A dropdown to either confirm the information is correct using **‘Submitted information relating to this validation warning is correct’**, or if you are unsure, use the option **‘Further guidance required. Refer to OfS for verification’**.
 - B. A written explanation describing why the information is correct.

37. Once warnings that do require confirmation are addressed:

- The cell will change from ‘WARNING’ to
 - **‘Confirmed’**, if it relates to a dropdown
 - **‘Explained’**, if it relates to a written explanation.
- The cell above the table will show: **‘All validation warnings confirmed’**.

38. The ‘Information’ sheet in the workbook lists tables that contain errors or unexplained warnings.

Verification process

39. Once the accountable officer signs off the AFR26, the OfS will treat it as the final submission for use in our regulatory monitoring. However, after sign-off, the OfS will conduct verification checks to ensure your files meet the requirements outlined in our guidance.⁶ You are expected to respond promptly to any queries we raise. We may require you to:

- review and correct previously submitted information
- resubmit corrected files.

⁶ See [Regulatory advice 14: Guidance for providers for the Annual Financial Return](#).

40. If changes are required because of verification, the updated submission **must be signed off** again to be considered complete.
41. If resubmission and re-sign off are required for amended returns, you can use the OfS portal in the same way as before. No action is needed from the OfS to enable this functionality.
42. Providers are responsible for submitting data that is accurate (i.e. where relevant, agrees with audited figures) and high quality. OfS verification checks are not a substitute for your own thorough review of the return before sign-off. Our verification typically includes:
- Confirming all required files have been submitted and signed off where applicable. These files are:
 - i. AFR26 workbook (using the template provided by the OfS)
 - ii. Audited financial statements
 - iii. Management letter from the external auditor
 - iv. Commentary file (using the template provided by the OfS)
 - v. Business plan (if applicable)
 - vi. Audited financial statements from the legal entity giving a legally binding obligation of financial support (if applicable).
 - Reviewing any outstanding validation errors or warnings within the workbook.
 - Using analytics to undertake a sense check of the workbook.
 - Checking consistency between the financial statements and the workbook.
43. Depending on the information submitted, you may not hear from us during the AFR26 verification process. If we do need to contact you, we will send queries via email to relevant contacts at your provider.

Frequently asked questions

Common issues with the templates

Formulas occasionally cause unexpected results when brought into OfS systems.

44. When completing the workbook please ensure that all formulas have been set to automatic. This can be found in the Ribbon under "Formulas" => "Calculation options" => "Automatic". In addition, we ask that you do a total refresh of the workbook by pressing "Ctrl" + "Alt" + "F9". This will ensure that the data we receive is what you expect and reduces complications down the line.

My workbook does not contain prefilled data or contains incorrect prefilled data.

45. Your workbook has been populated with the latest data signed off for the AFR25. If you were not required to complete this return or have not yet signed off the return (or an updated return), the prefilled data will not be populated (or may reference a previously signed-off return).
46. If any of the 'Year 1' data in your latest audited financial statements have been restated from the previous year's financial statements, then you should overwrite the prefilled figures in the workbook. These figures will be verified against your financial statements.

My workbook contains the incorrect financial year ends.

47. Please alert the OfS as soon as possible by contacting Regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk. We will need to reissue your workbook template with the correct financial year ends. Your deadlines for the return may also be revised.

I cannot edit my workbook or commentary template.

48. You may need to click on 'Enable editing' on the yellow banner if it appears on your screen to edit your templates.
49. Some elements of the workbook template are locked, and you should not try to edit these.

I am using Google Sheets and I can see unformatted sheets.

50. We recommend using Microsoft Excel for the most consistent experience in completing the workbook. Using software such as Google Sheets can remove workbook formatting, allow you to edit cells that you wouldn't be able to edit with Microsoft Excel, and unhide sheets that the OfS had hidden that contain the formulae used to calculate validation errors and warnings. If no

other software is available to you, please take care when completing the workbook. Please do not edit cells that contain formulae and contact FinanceData@officeforstudents.org.uk if you are concerned that you have edited areas of the workbook that you shouldn't have.

Common issues with workbook validation

My workbook contains validation errors, but I believe the data is valid.

51. See paragraph 34.

My workbook contains validation warnings, but I believe the data is valid.

52. See paragraph 35.



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