

Improving students' ability to make the right choices about higher education for them

Information, advice and guidance: The OfS's proposed strategic approach

Context

There are gaps in the effectiveness of information, advice and guidance (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).

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 available. Understanding of the student finance system is low.

The OfS provides information to students through Unistats¹, 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 the content and how we present it to this audience either through our own web resources or through other resources, or a combination of both.

The OfS student panel recently told us that it strongly believes more should be done by the 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.

Who are the current players?

Most information, advice and guidance is aimed at school-aged young people, where the Government's careers strategy² sets out clear requirements which include IAG about higher education. There is a particular focus on employer 'encounters', and schools increasingly use the Gatsby Benchmarks³ 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)⁴ is supporting this work.

¹ <https://unistats.ac.uk/>

² www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-strategy-making-the-most-of-everyones-skills-and-talents

³ www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/schools-colleges/understand-gatsby-benchmarks

⁴ www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/

Adults are currently supported in the main by the National Careers Service (NCS)⁵, 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.

Universities and colleges, as well as many charities in this space, offer outreach, attainment and aspiration-raising activities, but they lack coordination. UCAS offers fairs for 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 Council⁶.

There are also a wide range of published and online information sources, some of which offer basic advice, including Which University?, the Complete University Guide and the league tables provided by newspapers such as the Sunday Times and Guardian. The Department for Education has also funded a small number of companies to develop 'app' prototypes that demonstrate innovative ways of presenting higher education data to prospective students.

We presented our initial findings to the student panel at their September 2018 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

Research conducted by the UK funding bodies in recent years – large scale surveys, mapping work and literature reviews – 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 this⁷.

Methods Digital, who are working on creating a new resource to support decision making, have conducted recent in-depth user research that supports these findings, from their extensive experience of working with relevant audiences and complex data. While there are many resources available to students and their advisers, 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.

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.

⁵ <https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/>

⁶ www.britishcouncil.org/

⁷ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/next-steps-for-information-advice-and-guidance/our-research/

There also remain significant challenges for young people from disadvantaged and BME backgrounds. Our new Access and Participation approach⁸ 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 (NCOP)⁹, which enables partnerships of providers to collaborate locally on providing IAG and support to underrepresented groups in areas of low participation. Following our review of NCOP, our intention is to continue to invest in targeted outreach within the areas we can have the most impact, whilst also expanding our support to enable other schools and colleges to access the higher education outreach and IAG they need. 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?

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 collaborating** 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.

Furthermore, 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 decision-making landscape and understand how to use the data that is increasingly being made available about individual courses and providers.

Currently, our strategy is focused on helping people to make the right choices about higher education for them – whether, what and where to study. We are not making proposals at this point about improving broader ‘careers guidance’, although we recognise how important this is and much of what we do will overlap with this agenda.

Actions we should take

We propose that the OfS:

- explores with the Careers and Enterprise Company how we can improve the advice and information about higher education available to Career Leaders in schools, and link appropriately to the new information resource
- explores 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

⁸ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-new-approach-to-regulating-access-and-participation-in-english-higher-education-consultation-outcomes/

⁹ www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/

- explores 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
- explores 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
- working in partnership and using our convening power, considers what might make up the features of high-quality IAG delivered to prospective students, undergraduates and graduates by universities, colleges and other higher education providers, including the potential for benchmarking good practice
- investigates 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.

Next steps

We are seeking feedback throughout December 2018 and January 2019, in order to ensure that this approach and the actions outlined above will best meet the needs of students.

If you would like to comment, please complete a short survey here:
https://survey.officeforstudents.org.uk/s/IAG_approach/.

We will review this feedback as we receive it during January 2019 and it will be used to inform our discussions with key delivery partners and the final strategy. We will publish a summary of key points when we publish our final strategy.

We will report to the OfS student panel and Board in spring 2019 in order to have our approved strategy – and programme of work to deliver it – in place for the 2019-20 academic year.

The work on the new information resource to replace Unistats is an integral part of this approach and is already being developed to a complementary timetable in order to deliver a new resource for autumn 2019. This work was previously consulted upon as part of our predecessor HEFCE's approach, with its UK counterparts, to student information.

How we will measure our success

We recognise the importance of measuring the impact of the strategy given how it relates to the delivery of many of the objectives within the OfS's business plan. We will do this by:

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