

Chair's report

Board's primary role in relation to this paper:

- ☐ A. Set strategy
- ☐ B. Set risk appetite
- ☐ C. Oversee performance
- ☒ D. Understand context

Purpose

1. This paper provides an update on the activities of the OfS Chair since the previous board meeting.

Decisions requested

2. The board is invited to note the contents of the paper.

Paper publication

3. To be published externally along with the board papers (subject to appropriate redactions).

For further information, please contact Edward Peck, chair@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Key activities

4. Following our previous meeting, Simon Levine, Susan Lapworth, and I took the final decision to approve our new strategy 2025-30 which was published on 13 November. I was pleased to join an internal launch event in the OfS Bristol office on 12 November. It was encouraging to see staff engaging with its content and considering how it will evolve our work in the future. We are holding an external launch event for parliamentary and sector stakeholders at Westminster Central Hall on the morning of this board meeting; I will update the board verbally on its reception.
5. We have pressed ahead with implementing the changes to the board's committees agreed at our previous meeting.
6. Verity Hancock and I have been involved in interviewing candidates for our new Provider Panel and we will announce its membership shortly.
7. The first meeting of the refreshed People Committee chaired by Jane McCall was held on 24 November. We are expecting to interview for new independent members of the committee in early January.
8. Exempt from publication.
9. On 12 November I wrote to chairs of governing bodies to highlight a number of emerging risks around provider governance that we have observed across the sector.¹ My letter identified five themes that are causing us concern and that should be being considered by institutions' boards. The themes were: financial pressures, significant change programmes, third-party and off-campus delivery, misuse of public funding and free speech duty compliance.
10. We welcome Chris Millward back to the board as Interim Director for Fair Access and Participation (DFAP), following the announcement of his appointment by the secretary of state on 10 November 2025. Chris was previously the first DFAP at the OfS. He has been appointed on an interim basis to approve access and participation plans and provide policy leadership for our access and participation work. We expect the Department for Education to run a recruitment process for a longer-term appointment in the new year.
11. I continue to work closely with the department on our live non-executive board member recruitment campaign. The campaign closed for applications on 12 November and we expect to hold interviews throughout January 2026. I will give brief details at the meeting.
12. At our previous meeting in October, the board considered a revised scheme of delegation and agreed to adopt the revised scheme subject to minor amendments to be agreed by the chair. Having consulted Neil Swift and Simon Wilde, I approved the inclusion of the paragraph below and agreed that this would take effect on and from 24 November 2025. The revised scheme is available on our website.²

¹ See: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/emerging-governance-risks/>

² See: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/who-we-are/>

‘The board will be informed at each meeting of any decisions taken under this scheme of delegation that the chief executive considers particularly contentious (including because of material risks to the continuity of study for students, public controversy, or a legal challenge against the OfS). The Risk and Audit Committee will periodically review the operation of these arrangements to provide assurance that delegated decision-making remains consistent with the terms of the scheme of delegation and with the board’s statutory responsibilities.’

Media and speaking engagements

13. I spoke to the Financial Times in October, where I discussed current topics in higher education, including financial sustainability, governance, and the OfS’s approach to regulation.³ I was also interviewed by Times Higher Education to discuss the publication of our new strategy, as well as franchising, grade inflation, and the OfS’s relationship with the sector.⁴
14. I had the pleasure of speaking at the Wonkhe Festival of Higher Education on 11 November, and at Independent HE’s annual conference on 26 November. Just prior to this meeting, on 9 December, I will also be addressing the Advance HE Governance conference and contributing to the Higher Education Policy Institute’s Partner Roundtable.

Meetings and visits

15. The Chief Executive and I met with the Secretary of State for Education on 25 November. I was pleased to be able to share reflections on my time in post so far, brief the minister on the contents of our new strategy, and discuss the OfS’s role in delivering the ambitions of the government’s skills white paper. We also discussed issues pertaining to freedom of speech.
16. On 5 November, Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom Arif Ahmed and I met with the Minister for Skills to discuss recent reports of incidents of harassment of Jewish students and staff. The minister noted our approach and guidance on these matters and agreed that contributions by the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom have been helpful. Arif has since written to the sector to remind them of the steps they can take to protect Jewish students and staff.⁵
17. It has been a pleasure to continue to travel the country and visit a number of institutions that we regulate. I have visited the London Interdisciplinary School, TEDI-London, and the New Model Institute for Technology and Engineering in Hereford and learned a lot about the rewards and challenges of setting up new, smaller providers with innovative teaching models. I know that since we last met, other board members have been on campus at Southampton Solent University, London Business School and LAMDA.
18. I spent 2 and 3 December visiting providers in Greater Manchester and having productive discussion with leaders of institutions from the region. Thank you to staff and students at Manchester Metropolitan University, University of Manchester, Royal Northern College of

³ See: <https://www.ft.com/content/8afaacc8-4970-48af-b67b-dcff3be39a1a>

⁴ See: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/edward-peck-golden-age-over-im-not-so-sure>

⁵ See: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/harassment-and-intimidation-of-jewish-students-and-staff/>

Music, University Academy 92 and University of Salford for putting together such an interesting programme of visits and discussion.