Office for Students **OfS**

Terms of reference – Horizon Scanning Panel

Purpose

Horizon scanning at the Office for Students (OfS) will be focused on seeking to understand how the higher education sector (and the environment in which it operates) may change in the future and the implications for the OfS's regulatory approach.

The ultimate aim of any horizon scanning activity will be to support the OfS's four regulatory objectives. Horizon scanning serves a specific purpose with the OfS's ecosystem of activity by mitigating the risk that the OfS's regulatory approach becomes:

a.   ineffective (due to changes to the OfS's external environment) or

b.   obsolete (because of new technologies, techniques and processes that can be applied by a regulator)

These two components - external and internal - are necessarily interrelated.

Membership

The panel will be made up of seven to ten members:

*   up to two board members

*   four to seven members of staff

*   three to four 'external members' from outside the organisation.

The panel will meet four times a year and will be supported by a small OfS team (the 'support team'). External members will be expected to commit to the equivalent of eight days' work for every four panel meetings.

Board members – these slots can be taken by any two board members.

Members of staff – these staff should be as diverse a group as possible: different levels of seniority, different backgrounds, and covering the breadth of the organisation's work. They will typically join the panel for between one and three years.

External members – external members are there to provide an external perspective when the panel filters and prioritises signals. They will be co-opted onto the panel on a short-term basis (six to eight meetings), with the possibility of extension. External appointments will be made to cover specific areas of expertise. In the first instance, these will be determined by the chair of the OfS and will likely cover the following:

- An education futures expert

- A (future) labour market expert

- A learning expert

These areas may change in the future, with the panel informing the changes.

The weighting towards internal members of the panel is a direct result of the desire to make sure that the panel influences the behaviour of the organisation. For the panel to be a worthwhile exercise, it must lead to tangible changes to the operation of the OfS. External views are important to challenge convention and expose blind spots; internal views are necessary if those challenges are to lead to action.

Role and functions of the panel

Functionally, the horizon scanning activity forms part of the OfS's efforts to become and remain an efficient and effective regulator – it will enable to OfS to improve its approach over the long run.

Horizon scanning at the OfS will mitigate this risk of becoming ineffective and/or obsolete by doing three things:

- Search - identifying emerging trends that may be relevant to students, the sector and the OfS

- Filter and prioritise - exploring the potential relevance of these trends to the OfS's objectives and regulatory approach

- Action - working with the organisation to make sure that once identified, the highest priority signals lead to tangible changes to the OfS's approach.

In order to properly make sure the OfS remains a cutting edge regulator, these activities need to occur at three levels:

1. Horizon scanning in the short run, identifying present threats and opportunities and learning from what others are already doing, seeking to learn from 'known knowns'. For example, learning about processes and technologies being developed in other sectors with relevance to our own ['horizon 1']

2. Horizon scanning within existing structures, making forecasts using existing data sets, seeking to understand 'known unknowns'. For example, predicting demand for individual skills over the next three to five years ['horizon 2']

3. Horizon scanning beyond existing structures, looking for trends that don't yet show up in data sets that we use or could feasibly use, seeking to uncover 'unknown unknowns'. For example, predicting how new technologies, an aging workforce, and trends in AI might reshape demand for higher education ['horizon 3']

The horizon scanning panel will primarily look at horizon 3, subject to discussion with the panel, and will be connected to other horizon scanning activity within the OfS through the support team. Within these horizons, the panel will examine signals in defined categories, which the panel itself will determine. Once the panel is fully established, it will scan in four to seven areas, which might

be structured by signal type (categories such as the future of work, education, technology, regulation and student demographics), by function of the higher education system (categories could include learning, citizenship and employability), or by some other framework. During the set up phase, which will last at least four meetings, the panel will scan in just two categories in order to trial the approach taken.

The role of the panel can be divided into the three tasks identified above:

- Search – anyone can identify potential signals, and the more diverse the network of people identifying them, the better. This includes the panel itself. Signal search will happen outside of meetings; anyone can submit a signal to the support team. The support team will also scan for signals in a systematic way, to supplement the submissions from others.

- Filter and prioritise – the support team will conduct an initial filter of signals, producing a list of no more than 20 for the panel to consider. During their meetings, the panel will then further filter the list before prioritising it, based on the potential to mitigate the risk of the OfS becoming ineffective or obsolete.

- Action – during the prioritisation process, the panel will also recommend what action the organisation should take in response to the signal. For example, this might be to do more research on the signal and bring it back to the panel, or for a specific team in the OfS to adopt a new technology, or to produce new regulatory guidance. These prioritised recommendations will then be taken to the directors' group and the board as appropriate, who will then decide which recommendations to adopt.

The success of the panel rests primarily on its ability to generate action within the organisation in response to signals, earlier than would have happened otherwise. In measuring its success, we will look at the extent to which it was able to influence behaviour in the organisation, the extent to which that behaviour was appropriate given the signal, and how much earlier the panel allowed the organisation to act (compared with the counterfactual of no panel).

There are secondary success criteria, too. The panel's existence and operation will contribute towards a forward looking, outcomes focused culture within the OfS. A successful panel will help build networks across the organisation as signals are generated from different groups, cross-directorate challenges are identified, and staff rotate in and off the panel. The panel could also bring external credibility.

Lastly, the panel will have a sunset clause, whereby if it fails to meet certain objectives, it will be abolished and alternative approaches will be explored.

Meetings

The first meeting will be 11 February 2019.