

Building a culture of student engagement: our priorities for 2022-23

Office for
Students

ofs



A changing context

In 2020, we published our [first student engagement strategy](#). After a comprehensive process engaging over 700 students, sector experts and OfS staff, we set out an ambitious plan to embed student perspectives across everything we do.

Since the strategy's publication, the priorities of students, the OfS and the sector have changed, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, the OfS continued to deliver student engagement activities, in a different context from when the strategy was published.

We have now published our [strategy for 2022 to 2025](#). This sets out our two focuses: quality and standards and equality of opportunity. It is right that we adapt our student engagement priorities to align with the OfS strategy, so students can effectively contribute to shaping higher education regulation.

As part of the student engagement strategy, we committed to review and collaborate on our approach. In late 2021, the OfS hosted several roundtables to discuss engagement priorities over the next few years with students, students' unions

and sector experts.¹ We also have spoken to other regulators about their approach to stakeholder engagement.

With a changed external context for students and the sector, new OfS priorities and our commitment to evolve our student engagement practice, we have decided to refresh our priorities for 2022-23. We have not changed the goals of the student engagement strategy but reprioritised our activities to deliver them effectively.

¹'Students' unions' is used throughout for brevity to refer to students' unions, associations, guilds, and student representatives at providers without a formal student representative structure.

What is student engagement for the OfS?

We define student engagement as the **strategic and impactful involvement of students or students' perspectives in the OfS's work.**

Strategic: We engage students on the activities in the OfS's strategy to ensure they have impact on higher education regulation.

Impactful: We tailor our engagement to ensure students can shape our work and evaluate our student engagement practice.

Our approach to student engagement is shaped by our principles of student engagement, co-created with our student panel. These are:

- **Purposeful.** We will begin every engagement with a clear understanding of the purpose of our engagement and how this aligns with the role and functions of the OfS.
- **Inclusive.** We will seek out students from a representative range of programmes, backgrounds, modes of study and providers, and make it easy for them to engage.
- **Timely.** We engage students at multiple points in our activities and agree when and how to engage in a way that is meaningful for students.

- **Transparent.** We will be open and honest in our engagement with students and set clear expectations, ensuring that their contributions will be considered in our decisions and that they receive feedback on how their input has been used.
- **Empowering.** We will empower students to engage in a meaningful way by providing them with support to have their perspectives heard.

Types of student engagement

There are two types of engagement the OfS undertakes with students:

- **Student engagement with the OfS.** This includes how any student can interact with the OfS, including through raising a notification, sending an enquiry, or responding to an OfS consultation.
- **OfS engagement with students.** This includes activity through which the OfS engages with students, such as through the student panel or OfS activities for policy development which involves specific groups of students.

Our revised priorities focus on the OfS's engagement with students, rather than how students can engage with the OfS.

What will we be trying to achieve over the next few years?

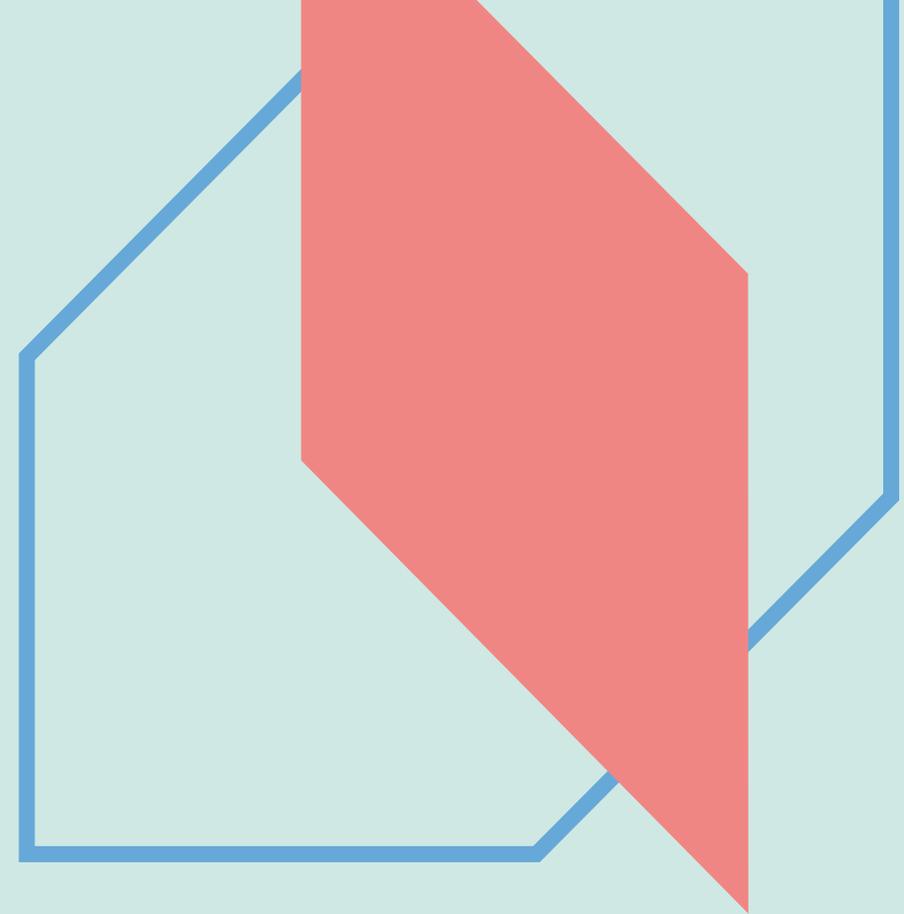
We aim to build a culture of student engagement across the OfS. We will be an organisation where:

- Those students our access and participation work is designed to support engage impactfully with our work.²
- Student voices and views play an integral role in our policy development and implementation.
- Staff engage students across their work, particularly where policy will impact students.

How does the OfS engage with students?

The OfS engages students:

- Through our student panel, a group of potential, current and recent students.
- In our policy development, through stakeholder activity, surveys and student-facing communications.
- In the National Student Survey (NSS), one of the largest census surveys of students about their experiences in the world.
- Through regular polling and user testing to inform policy and service development.
- Through supporting students' unions to understand and engage with the OfS's processes.



² These student groups are defined on page 9.

Priority engagement projects

We will embed student engagement within our strategic priorities as outlined in the OfS's strategy for 2022 to 2025. Specifically, we will:

- Help students and students' union officers enhance the quality and outcomes of their education.
- Engage students to understand the issues we should focus on to protect their interests effectively.
- Involve students and students' unions in shaping our regulatory approach to freedom of speech.
- Continue to work with students to ensure universities and colleges act to prevent and respond to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct.
- Support the work of groups funded by the OfS on student issues relating to equality, diversity, and inclusion, such as the disabled student's commission.
- Engage students in our work to understand and share what works in supporting student mental health and wellbeing.
- Develop a training package for student representatives to effectively engage and shape our regulatory processes.





The OfS will learn about the experiences of students

Where students are directly affected by our policy decisions, we will understand their perspectives and apply this to our work. We will do this by:

- Engaging students across our strategic activities and demonstrate how students have shaped our decisions.
- Continuing to undertake and analyse the NSS to provide insight across higher education on the undergraduate student experience.
- Facilitating more opportunities for students to engage with our policy development, including through regular polling, workshops, roundtables and focus groups.
- Publishing how our consultation and policy outcomes have been shaped by students.

The OfS will work in partnership with students

Where students are directly affected by our policy decisions, we will partner with them to understand their priorities through our student panel and students' unions. We will do this by:

- Collaborating with our student panel to research the experiences of students and apply this to our work.
- Maintaining our student panel, ensuring it is an effective and strategic student voice at the heart of the OfS.
- Publishing and promoting the impact the student panel has on our work.
- Continuing to work in direct partnership with students and their representatives and showing how they have had an impact on our decisions.
- Continuing our collaborative and strategic relationship with the National Union of Students (NUS).





The OfS will communicate with students in an accessible way

Where students are directly affected by our policy decisions, we will communicate clearly with them. We will do this by:

- Clearly communicating opportunities and events so that students can have an impact on regulation nationally.
- Tailoring our communications to students, including considering further development of our social media channels and content to raise student awareness of the OfS.
- Publishing student stories about how student engagement has had an impact on our work.
- Tailoring training on our regulation and processes so that student representatives can effectively engage with the OfS in the student interest, including through publishing student focused guides.

Enabling principles

Students whose voices go unheard

In the student engagement strategy, we committed to work in the interests of all students, regardless of their background, characteristics, what or where they study.

To achieve our goals for 2022-23, we will seek the views, experiences, and perspectives of students whose voices go unheard in higher education and from underrepresented groups across our policy areas. We will do this by:

- Engaging students from underrepresented groups throughout the OfS's strategic goals, particularly where a group of students are most affected by a policy decision.
- Maintaining comprehensive equality monitoring plans and data collection for our consultations and policy development, so we understand the views of underrepresented groups of students.
- Working in collaboration with stakeholders and experts who engage directly with students from underrepresented groups.

Who do we mean?

Those students our access and participation work is designed to support are those where the OfS has identified gaps in equality of opportunity in different parts of the student lifecycle. They include:

- Disabled students
- Mature students
- Students from areas of lower higher education participation
- Students from deprived areas
- Students from black and minority ethnic groups.

Unheard students are those whose experiences and perspectives are sometimes missed or 'under the radar'. Sometimes they will be students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in higher education, but not always. They include:

- Commuting students
- Distance learners
- International students
- LGBT+ students
- Students at universities or colleges without students' unions
- Student parents/carers
- Students who have been in care.

Collaboration

We have tried to learn from our approach to student engagement so that we can improve what we do and embed our work as an organisation. We will continue to collaborate with students and the sector.

Evaluation

To be impactful, it will be vital for us to continue to evidence, evaluate and enhance our approach. With our new strategic priorities as outlined in the OfS strategy for 2022 to 2025, we will seek to embed student views into the way we evaluate our regulation as an organisation. We will do this by:

- Involving students in the way we evaluate the impact of our strategy and regulation.
- Evaluating this strategy by the depth and impact of student engagement in our projects, and how embedded student engagement is across the organisation.

