Approved minutes of the OfS Board meeting – 15 July 2026

Present members: Professor Edward Peck (Chair)
Dr Arif Ahmed (Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom) (items 1-12)
Evelyn Asante-Mensah
Kirstin Baker (items 1-7)
Verity Hancock
Ruth Hannant (Chief Executive) (items 1-13.1)
Sumita Hutchison
Jane McCall
Professor Chris Millward (Director for Fair Access and Participation)
Dr Julia Mundy
Polly Payne (Chief Executive) (items 1-13.1)
Richard Stables
Caleb Stevens
Neil Swift
Simon Wilde
Andrew Wilson

Attendees: Patrick Curry (Director, Higher Education Oversight, Department for Education) (items 1-12)
Clare Roberts, PA Consulting (observer) (items 1-11)

Apologies: Simon Levine

Officers: Jean Arnold, Director of Quality and Access (items 1-12)
Vanessa Conte, HR Business Partner (item 13)
Matthew Craddock, Deputy General Counsel (items 1-12)
Josh Fleming, Director of Strategy and Delivery (items 1-13.1)
Katherine Jacob, Corporate Governance Senior Officer (items 1-12)
Philippa Pickford, Director of Regulation (items 1-12)
Ariane Robinson, Portfolio and Resource Manager (items 1-12)
Nolan Smith, Director of Resources and Finance (items 1-12)

Item 1. Chair's welcome

1. The Chair welcomed Board members, OfS officers, the Department for Education (DfE) representative, and the observer from PA Consulting for the purposes of supporting the Board development programme. The programme would be concluding after this Board meeting, and the consultants were thanked for their work which supported the Board through a period of substantially refreshed membership. A Board effectiveness review will be carried out later this year.

2. Apologies were received from Simon Levine.

3. Exempt from publication.

4. The Board's attention was drawn to the following papers shared for information:

    a. Market exit update.

    b. Provider Panel report.

    c. Student Interest Board report.

    d. People Committee report.

    e. Financial performance report.

    f. Annual plan for Board business.

Item 2. Minutes of the last meeting

5. The minutes of the Board meeting on 13 May were approved with no amendments.

6. The following points were made about matters arising from the meeting:

    a. The OfS is working with the sector to develop guidance for providers on managing foreign interference and safeguarding freedom of speech and academic freedom in arrangements with foreign states and overseas institutions. It is on track to publish its statement of expectations in autumn 2026.

    b. The Department for Education (DfE) is currently consulting on the OfS's fee charging model. The consultation covers the levels of annual registration fee, as well as potential fees relating to initial registration, change of registration category, applications for university title or university uitle name change, and the introduction of a more comprehensive fee for applications for degree awarding powers (DAPs) and to vary DAPs. It was confirmed that under the current charging model, the OfS is able to charge fees to providers for investigations [exempt from publication].

    c. When the business plan requires adjustment in year, it is proposed that the Board is updated on any substantive changes to the plan at its next meeting. An overview of progress against the plan overall will be brought to the Board twice a year. As discussed at the board planning event on 14 July, the Chief Executives will be undertaking a reprioritisation exercise, which will be reported to the Board in October 2026. The new progress reporting system will be implemented from 2027.

    d. At its last meeting, the Board discussed the publication of provider-level data on sexual misconduct. The Provider Panel, Student Interest Board, and Board will discuss the OfS's approach to transparency and reputational incentives for providers at their meetings in October 2026.

Item 3. Chair's report

7. The Board received the Chair's report.

Item 4. Chief Executives' report

8. Since the papers had been circulated, the following matters had arisen:

    a. The National Student Survey (NSS) results have been published. These show a high level of satisfaction overall, although disabled students report a significantly worse experience of higher education. There are high levels of satisfaction at many large franchised providers, including those where we have concerns over quality. [Exempt from publication]

    b. We have published the outcomes of our consultation on the regulation of further education colleges. We have reduced regulatory burden for further education colleges by removing some of our conditions of registration where the DfE already has robust oversight in place.

    c. We received 35 applications for registration from franchise providers, with a target date for completion of assessments by August 2027. This was more than expected. We are now triaging these and looking at how to allocate additional resources to maximise protection of public funding.

    d. Three individuals at the University of Greater Manchester have been arrested on suspicion of money laundering. The OfS is also carrying out an investigation into this provider [exempt from publication].

    e. The DfE has published its response to its consultation on an international student levy on higher education providers. The OfS will be responsible for collecting the levy from 2028-29, through powers delegated by the Secretary of State.

    f. We have decided to postpone our consultation on management and governance conditions of registration until late 2027, to ensure that our consultations are spread more evenly.

9. The Board discussed the draft independent report of the OfS's lessons learned from the Sussex judicial review at its planning meeting on 14 July. The Board was supportive of the three focus areas identified and the three major programmes of work proposed, and noted that their pursuit would delay delivery of elements of this year's business plan. The work will include:

    a. Undertaking a project comparing the OfS against other regulators in the UK, and against higher education regulators in other countries.

    b. Undertaking a broad review of the OfS's structure and governance to ensure we are optimally structured to be an exemplary regulator.

    c. A programme looking at the culture of the organisation, focused on building willingness to challenge and analytic confidence and agility.

10. We will consider our approach to communications with the sector before publication of our plans.

11. Exempt from publication.

12. Exempt from publication.

13. The DfE recently announced a reduction of £50 million in the Strategic Priorities Grant (SPG). The lateness of this year's announcement created challenges for providers. We have given indicative numbers to providers to support their financial planning. This is the first time we have taken this approach. We are now working to finalise the precise amounts before the end of the current academic year.

14. Exempt from publication.

15. Exempt from publication.

16. The Chief Executives confirmed that since the last board meeting, no contentious decisions have been made which meet the threshold for reporting to the Board under the arrangements in the scheme of delegation.

17. The following comments were made:

    a. The OfS will be responsible for resolving disputes in relation to the calculation and application of the international student levy. We are running two trial calculations to test our methodology.

    b. Exempt from publication.

    c. The OfS's annual financial sustainability report published in May 2026 indicated a modest improvement in the sector's financial projections. However, this anticipated recovery is heavily dependent on the higher education sector's expectations of a significant increase in student recruitment, which remains unpredictable.

    d. Our proposed approach to informing providers of our view of their financial sustainability, in response to feedback we have received from sector representatives, is initially to inform providers in categories 3 and 4. We will consider whether to expand this to all providers in the future, once we have seen how the publication of the scheme has been received. It was noted that the Provider Panel had advised that, in the interests of transparency, every provider should be informed of our view of its financial sustainability.

18. Exempt from publication.

Item 5. OfS operating environment

19. The Board received an overview of recent political, sector and student developments that shape the OfS's operating environment.

20. The following comments were made:

    a. The Board discussed emerging trends in mergers, acquisitions and alliance structures across the sector, noting that larger organisations are not necessarily more efficient and that mergers do not always deliver the anticipated benefits. The Board emphasised the need for the OfS to be equipped to assess increasingly

complex group structures with appropriate nuance and expertise although this will require a reprioritisation of resource. It was noted that growth in mergers and innovative operating models is likely to continue, driven by financial pressures. There may be a risk that group structures could create organisational opacity in some cases, and we need to ensure that our regulation is flexible to address risks proactively. It was suggested that the Executive bring a paper on the implications of increasing private equity investment in the sector to the Board in the coming months.

b. There has been an increase of students citing race, sex and religion or belief as barriers to progression in higher education since last year. The Board noted the Chief Executives' observation that the NSS results show a consistent pattern of less positive responses from disabled students. We are taking targeted action through the work of our Disability in Higher Education Advisory Panel and we are developing a statement of expectations on what universities and colleges should do to ensure disabled students can access, participate in, and achieve positive outcomes in higher education.

Item 6. Integrated approach to quality – stage two consultation

21. Exempt from publication.

22. Exempt from publication.

23. Exempt from publication.

24. Exempt from publication.

25. Exempt from publication.

26. Exempt from publication.

27. Exempt from publication.

28. Exempt from publication.

Item 7. Future approach to access and participation

29. The Board received a paper setting out early thinking on proposed changes to the OfS's approach to the regulation and funding of access and participation.

30. The English higher education sector has a strong reputation for good practice around access and participation, and the OfS is actively working in this area. A different approach is needed because of emerging risks to provider ambition and delivery due to financial pressures. The intention is to align assessment of access and participation with the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) model, to increase our focus on participation, and to build pathways towards regulatory intervention so that providers are supported to strengthen their approach before any regulatory intervention is needed. Finally, our approach to access and participation will align with the broader policy focus on regional collaboration.

31. Exempt from publication.

32. Exempt from publication.

Item 8. Risk and Audit Committee report

33. The Board received the report of the June meeting of the Risk and Audit Committee.

34. Exempt from publication.

35. The committee advised that the risk mitigating actions should clearly flow from the agreed appetite and tolerance for each risk and reduce the rating of the risk, rather than describing work which would take place in any case.

36. Exempt from publication.

37. The committee welcomed the annual report on value for money assurance and had requested further data in the next iteration of the report.

38. The committee reviewed the annual report and accounts 2025-26, which has now been approved and published. The committee gave feedback on improvements which can be made to the report for next year. [Exempt from publication].

Item 9. Risk report

39. The Board received a report on the status of the OfS strategic risks.

40. The Board had discussed revisions to the strategic risks and appetite at its planning event, including a proposal to introduce a new strategic risk. [Exempt from publication].

41. Exempt from publication.

42. The Board approved the revised risk management policy and noted that the wider approach to risk management will be revisited at the September RAC meeting and the October Board meeting.

Item 10. Public Affairs Committee report

43. The committee met for the first time on 20 May 2026.

44. There was a robust discussion about the OfS's current approach.

Item 11. Financial Sustainability Advisory Panel report

45. The panel met for the first time on 9 June 2026. The Chair of the panel invited the Board to suggest areas in which the panel could add value to the discussions of the Board.

46. The panel carried out a deep dive into a case study of a provider to assess the effectiveness of our measures of risk. The panel supported proposals put forward by the OfS team that the OfS should focus more of its regulatory approach on supporting the medium-term viability and sustainability of providers, rather than concentrating primarily on short-term insolvency risks.

Item 12. Free speech complaints scheme

47. The Board received a paper summarising key aspects of the free speech complaints scheme, which launches on 1 September 2026. The paper also reflected updates to the decision making process, following the Sussex lessons learned exercise, with appropriate separation between operational and policy decision making.

48. Exempt from publication.

49. Exempt from publication.

50. The following comments were made:

    a. The OfS will need to be open to unpredictable demand in this area of work and to be ready to adapt flexibly as needed.

    b. Communications would benefit from testing with users before wider publication.

51. The paper also recommended changes to the OfS's scheme of delegation which will be necessary to operationalise the scheme.

52. The Board:

    a. Noted the proposed approach to the implementation of the complaints scheme.

    b. Approved the changes to the OfS's scheme of delegation to take effect from 15 July 2026.

Item 13. Restricted People Committee report

53. The Board discussed the performance and remuneration of directors and the former Chief Executive in 2025-26.

54. There is a separate restricted minute of this item.

Any other business

55. The Board was reminded of the following upcoming meetings:

    a. A briefing on the new free speech condition of registration on 10 August 2026.

    b. A Board learning session with John Russell, CEO of the Single Source Regulations Office and CEO of the UK Regulators Network on 8 September 2026.

    c. The Board planning session and board meeting on 7 October 2026.

56. The Board planning session and board meeting on 9 December 2026, [exempt from publication].