

Office for
Students

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Business plan 2026-27



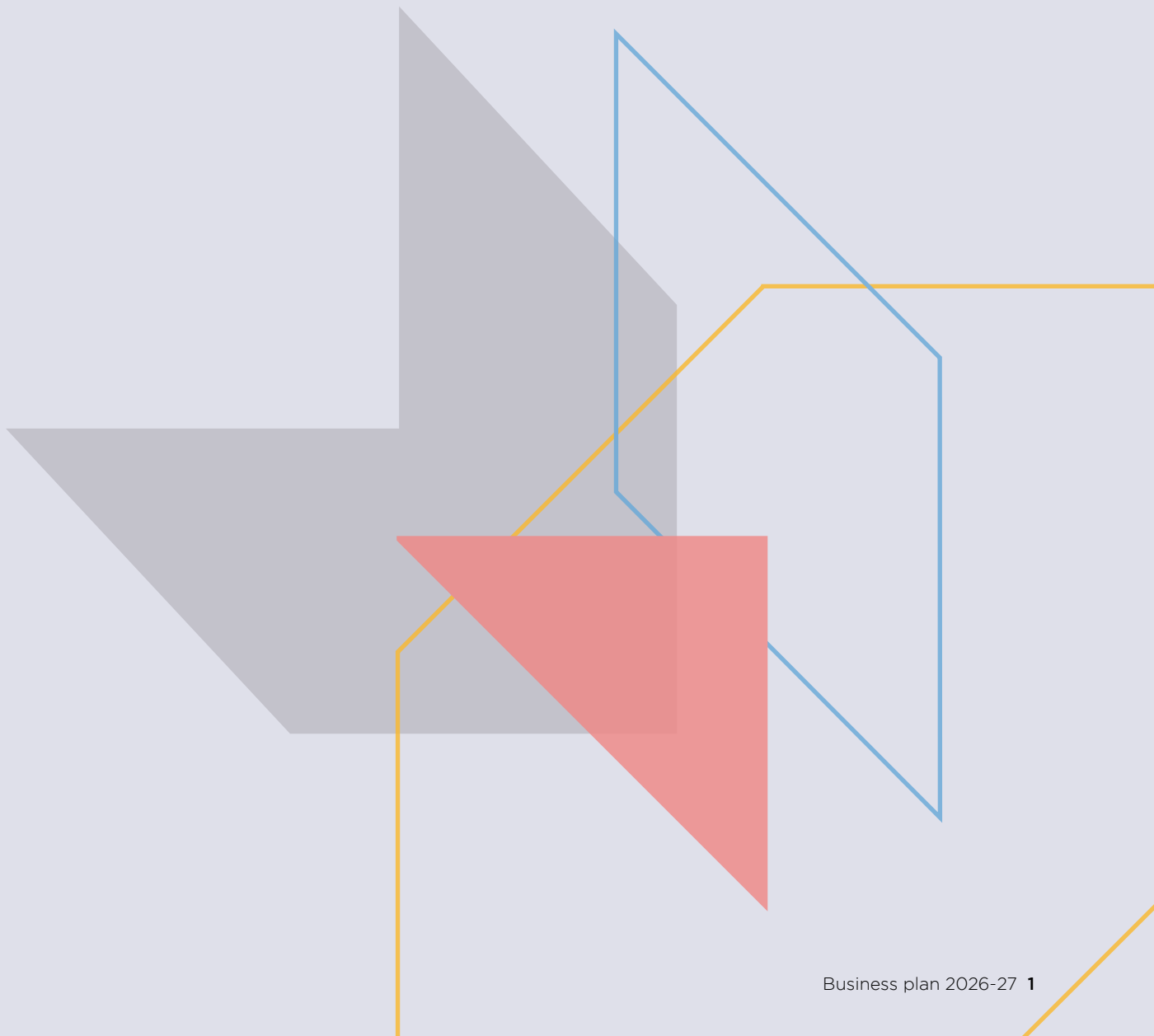
Reference **OfS 2026.31**

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Publication date **22 July 2026**

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Foreword



As we begin our work as chief executives, the Office for Students (OfS) is delivering the first business year of its [Strategy for 2025 to 2030](#), helping to ensure that millions of students from all backgrounds can benefit from high quality higher education.

Universities and colleges make a real difference in people's lives and a significant contribution to our economy and society, but they face many challenges in doing so. As society changes, students' expectations of higher education are always evolving, and understanding what matters to them and what employers need from graduates is crucial. Universities and colleges must innovate and improve, without compromising the quality of their courses. They must treat students fairly and give them the best possible experience of higher education, while contributing to the government's wider skills reform and growth agendas.

This is not easy, and our responsibility as the OfS is to support institutions

constructively and strategically as they focus on the interests of students, society and the economy. We intend to be a best-in-class regulator: ambitious for students, collaborative with institutions and higher education sector agencies, vigilant about the use of public money and vocal about both the strengths and weaknesses of English higher education.

This business plan for 2026-27, endorsed by our board in May 2026, outlines how we will go about this work and our priorities for the current year. As new challenges arise, we may need to agree changes to this plan with our board.

Polly Payne and Ruth Hannant
Office for Students Chief Executives



How the business plan works

This business plan sets out the work we intend to do in 2026-27. It includes the operational activities that support our work and our plans for continuous improvement. As the higher education environment evolves, we will need to respond flexibly when changes are required – for example, if we see risks in a certain area increasing. We will revisit the work in the plan as needed, to ensure effective regulation in the interest of students in line with our 2025 to 2030 strategy and attitudes.

For simplicity, when referring in this document to the information we will publish, we are speaking about our expectations. However, we will take final decisions about whether or not to publish particular information after carefully considering all relevant matters.

The online version of the plan is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-business-plan/.

To provide feedback on the plan, contact info@officeforstudents.org.uk.



Why this is important

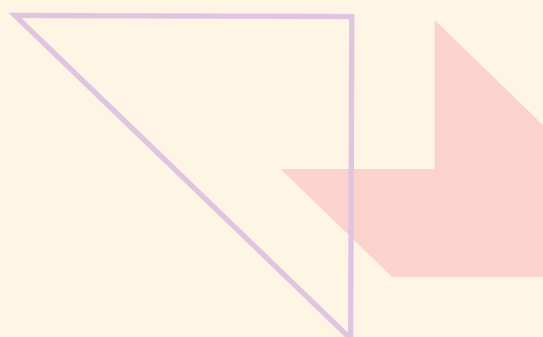
Quality is at the heart of what students expect from higher education. They want high quality teaching and strong academic support that equips them with the knowledge, skills and confidence to thrive in their lives and careers, and contribute to the wider economy and society.

We will continue working with universities and colleges to secure positive higher education experiences for all students, recognising that institutions are navigating a range of concurrent pressures – from financial challenges, to rapidly developing technologies and geopolitical instability. We will progress plans for a more integrated model of quality assessment that drives improvement across the sector and consult on changes to our approach to granting degree awarding powers, ensuring that it continues to support high quality choice for students. Responding to growing demand for flexibility, we will work with government to prepare for the introduction of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement (LLE), including by ensuring that we have the data we need to monitor uptake and completion.

Our commitment to equality of opportunity will be interwoven through all our regulatory activity. Alongside core work to assess and approve access and participation plans, we will support place-based collaboration and encourage widening access to postgraduate research courses.

What we will do in 2026-27

Work area	Description
Quality and standards	• As part of our ongoing work developing a new integrated approach to assessing quality, we will publish the outcomes of our consultation. • We will build on our development of indicators to support our understanding of provider-level risks to quality and standards. • We will continue to assess apprenticeship provision. • We will continue to engage with organisations working in transnational education.



Work area	Description
Registration, degree awarding powers and university title	• We will consult on reforming the approach to granting degree awarding powers. • We will continue to process registration cases, including new registration applications from franchise delivery providers and any new registration applications to access LLE funding. • We will implement fee charging infrastructure and associated reforms, should the Department for Education (DfE) introduce a registration fee. • We will investigate regulatory intelligence to inform decisions on registration cases. • We will be available for university title and name change applications.
Equality of opportunity	• We will continue to assess new or updated access and participation plans from those providers that require them, and consider variation requests from those with existing plans. • We will further integrate the golden thread of equality throughout all regulatory activity. • We will fund Uni Connect for 2026-27. • We will publish plans for a future regional access partnership programme subject to confirmation of funding as part of the strategic priorities grant. • We will publish the final evaluation report on the OfS and UKRI funded programme on widening access to postgraduate research for students from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. • We will continue to fund TASO as the ‘what works’ centre for equality of opportunity in higher education, supporting the sector to develop evaluation practice and to use high quality evidence to inform intervention choice. • We will work with TASO and HEAT to launch the Higher Education Evaluation Library to support the sector to publish and share evaluations to continuously improve work on equality of opportunity.



Work area	Description
Freedom of speech	• We will support and promote freedom of speech within higher education. • We will investigate where we have particular concerns in relation to freedom of speech. • We will prepare for the introduction of a new freedom of speech complaints scheme.
Lifelong learning	• We will prepare for measuring the numbers of students studying modules from 2026-27, and for collecting new data about completion of modules in 2027-28. • We will continue to analyse the LLE's implications for our regulatory approach. • We will continue to contribute to the DfE process to determine providers' eligibility to offer LLE fundable modules.
Skills and funding	• We will allocate OfS strategic priorities grant funding to support teaching and infrastructure across the sector, including delivery of capital and other funded competitions. • We will undertake monitoring and assurance of our funding and evaluation of funded programmes. • We will reform strategic priorities grant with changes taking effect from 2027-28 onwards. • We will lead on the development of a market monitoring function that will provide a picture of higher education supply and demand.
Supervision and enforcement	• We will complete all quality assessments currently in progress. • We will open new assessments where we identify potential concerns. • We will continue informal engagement with providers to address risks early where possible. • We will further develop our enforcement guidance and processes to ensure that our approach to regulatory interventions is clear and efficient.

Student experience and support



Why this is important

Higher education should be a rich, rewarding environment that extends beyond lectures, labs and assessments. For many students, feeling part of a community that supports their learning and values their voice is part of what enables them to thrive.

To put students first, we need to understand their experiences, priorities and concerns. We will continue work already underway to embed students' perspectives in our work through regular polling and targeted research projects, increased student engagement and our Student Interest Board. This research and engagement will help us understand where certain groups of students face particular challenges and barriers.

We know that unclear or unfair contractual terms, unexpected additional charges and misleading information can undermine students' experiences of higher education. Research we published last year showed that only half of students felt they understood and could explain their rights and entitlements. Developing a model student contract with the sector will support greater transparency and consistency, helping students to understand their rights while encouraging institutions to adopt best practice. We will also strengthen requirements on institutions to treat students fairly, building on the recent introduction of enhanced fair-treatment expectations for providers seeking registration.

What we will do in 2026-27

Work area	Description
Equality of opportunity	• We will collaborate with the sector to develop and publish a statement of expectation on disability. • We will continue our collaboration with the higher education mental health implementation taskforce.
Student interest	• We will continue to support our new Student Interest Board to strengthen student engagement in our work. • We will continue to gather and share timely insights into students' experiences, through regular polling and targeted research projects that explore key issues affecting students and support our regulatory objectives. • We will continue to engage directly with students, including through our termly online sessions. • We will publish the results of the 2026 National Student Survey, alongside additional analysis and commentary. • We will monitor the way in which the new condition around sexual misconduct is being implemented.

Work area	Description
Consumer protection	• We will consult on and, depending on the outcomes of the consultation, we will introduce a new initial and ongoing condition of registration to ensure students are treated fairly. • We will continue our collaboration with National Trading Standards, including referring relevant cases. • We will work with the sector on a model student contract to support transparency and consistency.

Sector resilience



Why this is important

A resilient higher education sector is essential to delivering high quality education and maintaining meaningful student choice, as well as ensuring long-term value for students and the public.

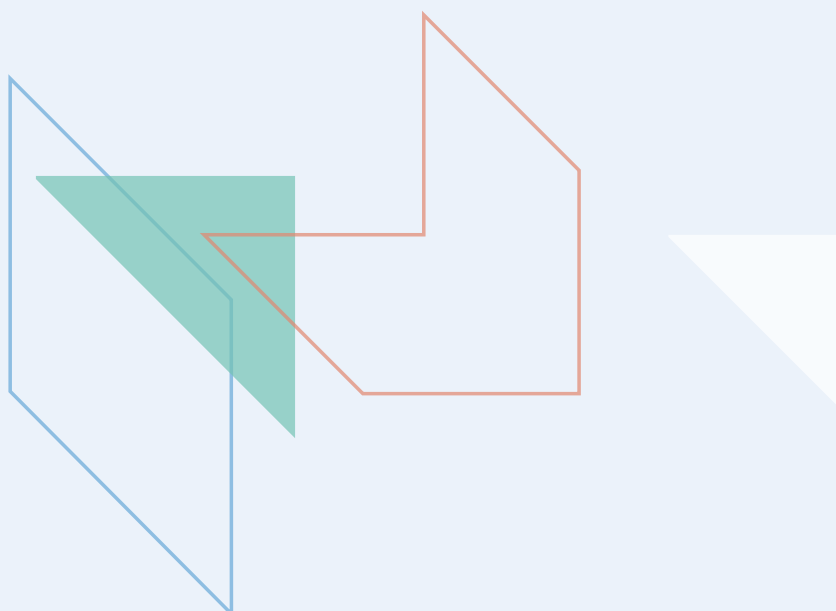
Universities and colleges continue to face significant financial pressures. Our latest analysis shows that 43 per cent of institutions forecast a deficit in 2025-26. As risks in the operating environment increase, providers will need the capability and resilience to navigate increasingly challenging conditions. Ensuring effective oversight is essential both to safeguarding positive experiences for students and to maintaining public confidence in the higher education system more broadly.

Over the coming year, we will continue to strengthen our understanding of financial risk, enabling us to identify emerging concerns early and respond effectively. We will scrutinise providers' transformation plans to secure the best outcomes for students, and we will work to minimise harm to students where institutions face a material risk of closure. We will also consult on our wider approach to improving governance standards, continuing to work closely with institutions and the sector to ensure that providers remain accountable, public funding is used appropriately, and students can have confidence in the higher education they receive.

What we will do in 2026-27

Work area	Description
Financial sustainability	• We will maintain an up-to-date understanding of the financial landscape and provider risk. • We will continue to monitor where providers perform less well against key indicators. • We will continue in-year data collections and publish updates on sector resilience. • Where necessary, we will increase our scrutiny of providers' transformation plans and develop and implement early intervention tools to secure the best outcomes for students. • Where necessary, we will promote good financial management practice in providers, and across the sector, where we find it is weak.

Work area	Description
Institutional closure	• We will oversee cases where there is a significant risk of institutional closure, using a risk-based approach. • We will, where necessary, put in place Student Protection Directions for individual providers at risk of institutional closure.
Management and governance	• We will consult on our wider approach to improving governance standards, for example developing potential new ongoing governance conditions, including through collaborative working with the Committee of University Chairs. • We will undertake our functions relating to: - the regulation of exempt charities - Privy Council obligations - monitoring of relevant providers' compliance with the Prevent duty.
Supervision and enforcement	• We will complete investigations currently in progress. • We will initiate additional investigations into governance and protecting public funding matters where we identify potential concerns. • We will continue informal engagement with providers to address risks early where possible. • We will further develop our enforcement guidance and processes, to ensure that our approach to regulatory interventions is clear and efficient.





Why this is important

As we strive to deliver exemplary regulation in the interests of students, we will seek to continually improve and develop.

We will continue to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our systems and processes, strengthen our communications and engagement through close collaboration with students and institutions, minimise data burden wherever possible, and work with the sector and Jisc to support the transition to in-year collection of student data.

What we will do in 2026-27

Work area	Description
Communications and sector engagement	• We will continue our engagement programme with students and providers through events such as webinars, sector engagement sessions and provider visits. • We continue to develop new ways to receive advice and challenge on the OfS's work, for example the Provider Panel and the Public Affairs Committee. • We will continue to develop key stakeholders' understanding of our work by publishing Insight briefs on topical regulatory issues and running our 2026 stakeholder survey to gather feedback from across the sector. • We will continue to improve how we communicate with students to ensure they are driving everything we do by improving our student-facing communications and growing our connections with student representatives.
Data	• We will continue to work with the sector and Jisc on our transition to in-year collection of student data. • We will continue work to demonstrably minimise data burden. • We will continue to improve our new provider portal. • We will meet our transparency obligations by publishing regulatory datasets and helping to reduce information gaps across the sector. • We will continue to work on the accessibility of published data. • We will continue to explore and implement the use of AI and wider process innovation for OfS operations.



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