

**Consultation**

**Office for  
Students**

The logo for the Office for Students, featuring a dark blue square with a yellow square in the top right corner containing the letters 'OfS' in white.

**OfS**

# **Consultation on OfS strategy for 2025 to 2030**

This consultation runs from **12 December 2024**  
to **20 February 2025**.

**Reference** OfS 2024.62

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The Office for Students is the independent regulator for higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

### **Our four regulatory objectives**

All students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education:

- are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education
- receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure
- are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time
- receive value for money.

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## Foreword

The world around us is changing. Geopolitical shifts, disruptive technology, and demographic and migratory trends are just some of the forces contributing to a global environment that is increasingly volatile, uncertain and complex. Against this backdrop, higher education institutions must navigate a funding landscape shaped by a decline in the real terms value of domestic student fees, record inflation and increasing global competition for international students. Students continue to contend with the rising cost of living and the aftereffects of coronavirus, all while looking to uncertain economic futures.

Within this context, a high-performing higher education sector has never been more important. Universities and colleges are engines of growth and drivers of opportunity, powering our economy and enriching local communities. Our proposed strategy sets out the role that the OfS will play in helping the sector to deliver the diverse and far-reaching benefits of high quality higher education.

Our proposals are driven by the student interest and underpinned by research and engagement designed to help us understand students' priorities and concerns. We polled students and convened student focus groups, consulted our student panel and hosted strategy engagement sessions for students and staff from higher education institutions. Events explored what students want from higher education, and the extent to which they get it. We are grateful to those who shared their views.

Student engagement has been at the heart of our strategy development. It is also core to the strategy itself. The student interest is not fixed, and as students' priorities change it is important we continue to listen and learn, as we embed their perspectives in our work.

To deliver our proposals we must change as a regulator. Having established the OfS, conducted the largest risk assessment in the sector's history through the registration process, and emerged from the other side of a global pandemic, we entered a period of reflection. We considered what was working and what needed to change, informed both by the Public Bodies Review of the OfS and the House of Lords Industry and Regulators Committee report. This reflection – which was not always comfortable – has shaped the strategy on which we are now seeking views.

Our proposed strategy takes forward the four strategic priorities identified by the Public Bodies Review. These align with the findings of our research and engagement. They are quality, the wider student interest, financial sustainability and protecting public money. Our continued commitment to equality of opportunity is integrated throughout these priority areas, ensuring that it remains central to everything that we do.

Organising our work around these clearly defined priorities will support more effective delivery while also helping institutions to understand and anticipate our regulatory approach. Our proposed strategy sets out in more detail the thinking that sits behind these priorities.

We will improve delivery of our core functions as we learn and mature as a regulator. But we are also signalling a more significant programme of transformation. Collectively, our proposals are intended to enable confident, agile regulation in the interests of students, against a backdrop of change. We will transform our approach to regulating quality, developing an integrated approach that drives continuous improvement across the sector, and strengthen our role as a champion of the student interest. We will continue to reshape our relationship with institutions and work

collaboratively with government partners, including to ensure that we are ready as the government's higher education reform agenda takes shape in the coming months. And we will continue working to improve, evaluating our approach and learning from others as we go.

A continued commitment to building a relationship with higher education institutions that is based on respect, confidence, trust and reciprocity underpins this programme of work. We will develop and deliver change in collaboration with the institutions we regulate. That change will need to be realised with ambition and at pace, with the first steps towards our strategic goals starting in early 2025. We will begin to discuss with students and institutions how our new integrated quality model should take shape. We will explain how we plan to secure the more real-time data a modern agile regulator needs to be effective. And we will publish proposals for reforming the approach we take to registering new institutions, smoothing the pathway into the regulated system for those that will offer high quality and innovative education to students.

The strategy that follows sets out our plan for ensuring that students from all backgrounds benefit from high quality higher education, delivered by a diverse, sustainable sector that continues to improve. We invite all those with an interest in higher education to tell us if they think we have got it right.

**Susan Lapworth, Chief Executive of the Office for Students**

## About this consultation

The Office for Students is consulting on a new strategy for 2025 to 2030. We would like to hear your views.

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### Timing

Start: **12 December 2024**

End: **20 February 2025**

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### Who should respond?

We welcome responses from anyone with an interest in higher education in England. We are particularly (but not exclusively) interested in hearing from prospective and current students, recent graduates, higher education institutions, and graduate employers. We welcome the views of institutions of all types and sizes.<sup>1</sup> We are also interested in the views of further education colleges, third sector organisations, policy bodies, and others with an interest in the future strategic direction of the OfS.

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### How to respond

You can submit your response by completing the online response form at

<https://survey.officeforstudents.org.uk/s/strategy-25-30/>

If you require this document in an alternative format, or need assistance with the online form, please contact [digitalpublishing@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:digitalpublishing@officeforstudents.org.uk). Please note: this email address should not be used for submitting your consultation response.

The consultation closes 20 February 2025.

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### How we will treat your response

We will summarise and/or publish the responses to this consultation on the OfS website (and in alternative formats on request). This may include a list of the providers and organisations that respond, but not personal data such as individuals' names, addresses or other contact details.

If you want the information that you provide to be treated as confidential, please tell us but be aware that we cannot guarantee confidentiality in all circumstances. An automatic confidentiality disclaimer generated by your IT system will not be regarded by us as a confidentiality request.

The OfS will process any personal data received in accordance with all applicable data protection laws (see our privacy policy).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'institution' to refer to universities, colleges, and other types of higher education provider.

<sup>2</sup> Available at [OfS privacy](#).

We may need to disclose or publish information that you provide in the performance of our functions, or disclose it to other organisations for the purposes of their functions. Information (including personal data) may also need to be disclosed in accordance with UK legislation (such as the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Data Protection Act 2018 and Environmental Information Regulations 2004).

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## Next steps

We are aiming to publish a summary of responses to this consultation in spring 2025, alongside our 2025 to 2030 strategy. We will explain how and why we have arrived at our decisions, and how we have addressed any concerns raised by respondents.

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## Enquiries

Email [strategyteam@officeforstudents.org.uk](mailto:strategyteam@officeforstudents.org.uk)

Alternatively, call our public enquiry line on 0117 931 7317.

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For more information about our current strategy, please visit [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-strategy/](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/how-we-are-run/our-strategy/).

# Introduction

## Background and context

1. The OfS published its second strategy in 2022 for the period 2022 to 2025. During this period, our focus has been on ensuring higher education institutions comply with our minimum requirements, while continuing to incentivise excellence above those requirements.
2. During the next strategy period, we propose prioritising the student interest in an uncertain environment. We will do this by
  - regulating to deliver continuous improvement in the quality of higher education courses
  - extending our focus to areas of the student interest that affect students' ability to engage with and benefit from high quality higher education
  - supporting a resilient sector that is equipped to meet students' needs, now and in the future.
3. In developing our proposed strategy, we sought the views of prospective students, current students and former students. We conducted polling with students and convened student focus groups, consulted our student panel and hosted students and provider staff at strategy engagement sessions in Bristol, London, Coventry and Sheffield. Events explored what students want from higher education, and the extent to which they get it. We are grateful to those who shared their views and insights.
4. In developing our proposed strategy, we have built on the conclusions of Sir David Behan's Independent Review of the Office for Students,<sup>3</sup> which presents recommendations for ensuring the effective regulation of higher education against a backdrop of change.

## Objectives of these proposals

5. In producing this strategy, our objective has been to create a plan of action that will guide our activities as an effective, agile regulator over the next five years. This strategy will help us prioritise our work effectively and use our resources efficiently. Publishing a strategy helps to ensure that we are transparent and accountable to students, taxpayers, and other stakeholders.
6. In developing these proposals, we have weighed the benefits of regulatory activity against the impact of the burden it creates. As explained under the 'How we will regulate' heading in our strategy proposal, we will use data and intelligence to minimise regulatory burden where possible and work with other regulators and agencies to avoid duplication.
7. All the OfS's powers and functions under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) are relevant to the proposals in this consultation.

## Summary of proposals

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<sup>3</sup> See [Fit for the Future: Independent Review of the Office for Students](#).



8. The main proposal set out in this consultation is a strategy for 2025 to 2030.
9. In the proposed strategy, we first set out the context facing students, the sector and the country.
10. We then identify some of the key public benefits supported by the effective regulation of higher education before turning to the student interest. We summarise the main findings from our work to define the student interest. This work underpins our proposed strategy.
11. We then identify three priority areas which we believe are critical to delivering our mission: quality, the wider student interest, and sector resilience. Equality of opportunity is integral to everything that we do and cannot be advanced in isolation. To recognise and reinforce this, we propose that equality of opportunity should continue to underpin all three priority areas. Throughout the proposed strategy, we explain how our strategic choices promote equality of opportunity to a high quality education that serves students both while they study and into the future.
12. Our strategic goals all sit within a priority area. Strategic goals articulate the outcomes we want to achieve in the next strategy period. In seeking to achieve our goals, we will use a range of regulatory tools.
13. Finally, we explain how we propose to operate as a regulator in order to achieve our strategic goals.
14. Alongside our strategy, we are consulting on draft 'I statements'. 'I statements' articulate what delivery of our strategic objectives will look and feel like for students, institutions, taxpayers and employers. We focus on students, as they will be the primary beneficiaries of effective regulation. 'I statements' are a communications device that describe the future state we will seek to realise over the period 2025 to 2030.

## **Why are we consulting**

15. We are consulting on our strategy for 2025 to 2030 because we want to take account of stakeholders' views in its development and to ensure a fair and transparent process. In developing this strategy, we have considered a broad range of evidence, including but not limited to:
  - a. qualitative student survey data
  - b. internal data and analysis
  - c. Jisc (HESA) data
  - d. insight and input from prospective, current and former students
  - e. the perspectives of higher education professionals
  - f. our experiences as a regulator since our inception.
16. This consultation seeks the views of stakeholders as to whether proposals give rise to any unintended consequences. We are especially interested in the effect proposals will have on

particular types of providers, particular groups of students, or individuals with protected characteristics. We are also seeking views on 'I statements' and our proposal for a five-year strategy period. The complete list of consultation questions is available at Annex C.

17. In this consultation, we are seeking views on the OfS's strategy for 2025 to 2030. We are not seeking views on broader topics such as our role as a regulator, our regulatory framework, or on individual conditions of registration.

## Further information on this proposal

18. To improve the readability of this document, we have placed further information about this proposal in Annex A, which comprises the following sections:

- **Our proposals:** This section provides a rationale for our priority areas and the goals that sit within them.
- **The effect of our proposals:** This section sets out the effect we anticipate our strategy will have on students, providers and society.
- **Alternative approaches:** This section covers the alternatives that we considered in developing our proposals.
- **Proposed implementation:** This section summarises the steps we will take following the closure of the consultation.

## Consultation principles

19. We are running this consultation in accordance with the government's consultation principles.<sup>4</sup>

20. In formulating our proposals, we have had regard to:

- our general duties under section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA)
- the public sector equality duty
- statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State
- the Regulators' Code.

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<sup>4</sup> See [Consultation principles: guidance](#).

# Consultation proposals and questions

## Draft strategy 2025 to 2030

A strategy to ensure that students from all backgrounds benefit from high quality higher education, delivered by a diverse, sustainable sector that continues to improve.

### The current context

English higher education is a national asset that attracts students, staff and partners from across the world. It is a driving force for opportunity that transforms students' life chances. Universities and colleges of all shapes and sizes play a critical role in generating economic growth while also making important contributions to our society and culture, both nationally and locally. We all benefit from educated and open-minded citizens ready to contribute to our national life.

Many students experience excellent provision while they study. They continue to enjoy positive experiences and outcomes, and most leave higher education prepared for the future and equipped with the skills they need for the jobs of today and tomorrow. These benefits are increasingly shared by students from a diverse range of backgrounds.

But good experiences are not universal and where problems arise the risk to students can be great. Students invest heavily in their education and many will face challenges in the coming years. The cost of living continues to rise, their economic futures are uncertain, and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns remain with us. In exchange for their investment, students rightly expect high quality experiences leading to fulfilling lives and careers.

Yet students are studying with institutions that are facing increasing pressure on a number of fronts. They are managing constrained finances against a global backdrop that is increasingly volatile, uncertain and complex. The value of UK undergraduate fees has fallen in real terms. Trends in both UK and international student recruitment and ongoing cost pressures exacerbate funding challenges that are unlikely to abate in the short term.

Global macro-trends introduce further uncertainty for the sector to navigate. Technological change, including rapid developments in artificial intelligence, will facilitate new models of teaching and learning. Demographic and migratory trends, combined with the changing demands of the labour market, will affect demand for higher education as well as the types of higher education people want. At the same time, geopolitical volatility exacerbates institutions' exposure to a range of possible shocks. Together, these forces – and many others – are reshaping the environment in which institutions operate, both in the UK and internationally. The challenge for higher education institutions, and higher education regulation alike, is how to respond to these global and domestic trends in a way that is ambitious for the sector and for students.

It is clear that the resilience of the higher education sector will be tested over the next strategy period. Yet the importance of a high-performing higher education sector, equipped to harness talent and drive economic growth, will continue to increase. Within this context, we need to be an agile, resilient regulator, able both to support and challenge institutions to deliver for students and society more broadly.

Our strategy for 2025 to 2030 will guide our work to protect students' interests in this uncertain environment and sets out the changes we will make to do this effectively. We will continue to make improvements to our core functions as we learn and mature as a regulator. These iterative changes will support more efficient and effective delivery of our regulatory objectives. But recognising the volatility, uncertainty and complexity facing the sector we regulate, we must also enact a programme of more significant change, ensuring our regulation keeps pace with the changing realities of the world around us.

Our agenda for change is set out in Sir David Behan's public bodies review of the OfS. This identifies four interrelated priorities:

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-  **Quality**
  -  **The student interest**
  -  **Financial sustainability**
  -  **Protecting public funds**
- 

These priorities are reflected in the strategy that follows – both in our re-articulated purpose and in each of our strategic goals.

## **Our purpose**

In the context of change, our regulatory focus on students' needs remains steadfast. Over the next strategy period, we will ensure that students from all backgrounds benefit from high quality higher education, delivered by a diverse, sustainable sector that continues to improve.

## **The public interest**

Students' interests are central to our thinking and actions. And while students are and always will be the most direct beneficiaries of our regulation, the impact of higher education on our economy, culture and society means that our work delivers important public benefits.

Beyond the benefits that flow from an educated population and the contribution of individual graduates, universities and colleges produce world-leading research and skilled professionals for public services, such as schools and the NHS. They create opportunities that lead to a more equal society, push the frontiers of scientific discovery and establish partnerships with industry that support local and national growth. Our regulation will support institutions to deliver these wider public benefits by recognising the importance of institutional resilience and sustainability, while also ensuring the proper protection of public money. At the same time, we will ensure that regulation enables the innovation and growth from which we all benefit.

## **The student interest**

We regulate primarily in the interests of students. And as financial pressures bring change to the sector, it is more important than ever that we explicitly identify those interests and place them at

the centre of our work. Engagement, polling and other forms of insight-gathering have sharpened our understanding of what students want and need from higher education, strengthening our ability to do this effectively.

The student interest is not fixed. The diversity of higher education students brings a diversity of views about their interests. And we would expect the nature of students' concerns and priorities to evolve across the strategy period and beyond. But the insights we have gained from students have helped us to identify the essential building blocks of positive higher education experiences.

What we heard from students can be grouped into two broad categories:

- **What students want from their day-to-day experiences of higher education while studying.**

Students assume their education will be high quality. They expect fair treatment from institutions that listen to them, respond when things go wrong and set them up to succeed. They want tailored learning experiences that meet their particular needs and access to academic resources and support, delivered in supportive and enriching environments.

- **What students expect from higher education in the longer term.**

Students want to acquire knowledge and develop skills that open doors to well-paid and rewarding employment or other types of future opportunities. They expect higher education to have a positive and enduring impact on their lives and careers.

In other words, students care about choosing and experiencing a high quality education in the short term. And in return for their investment of time, money and hard work they expect that education to continue to provide value into the longer-term, including in ways that they may not be able to anticipate while they study.

These interests are not a surprise, but a deeper understanding of students' priorities and perspectives now sits behind them. They have shaped our goals set out in the section below.

Students have talked less about the need for institutions to be financially resilient and well run. They assume this to be the case. But financial pressures and wider uncertainty facing institutions will interact with the student interest in a range of ways, creating new risks and uncomfortable trade-offs.

Serving the student interest, therefore, means extending our focus beyond the specific factors students identify as important. Our regulation must also support a sustainable, financially resilient and innovative sector equipped to navigate the challenges of today and tomorrow. These considerations have also shaped our goals.

## Our strategic goals



To help us regulate in the interests of students we have identified three strategic priorities: quality, the wider student interest, and sector resilience, which encompasses financial sustainability and effective governance. These reflect what students have told us matter to them and take into account the wider pressures and challenges facing both students and institutions. They give effect to the four strategic priorities identified in Sir David Behan’s review.

### Equality of opportunity

Equality of opportunity is integrated throughout our work, recognising and reinforcing that it is fundamental to our purpose and the way we regulate. Quality and equality of opportunity are mutually reinforcing. Extending equality of opportunity without ensuring quality will not lead to positive student outcomes. Protecting quality without extending equality of opportunity, meanwhile, prevents students who could have benefited from higher education from doing so. Our work to promote the wider student interest will help create environments that support all students to succeed, with our attention focused on those most exposed to risks to equality of opportunity. Within our focus on the sector’s resilience, we will seek to ensure that in the face of financial pressures, choice and opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups continue to expand rather than reduce.

#### Quality

Quality is at the heart of what students want and expect from higher education. The assurance and improvement of the quality of higher education is central to our purpose. From insight-gathering and engagement we know that students expect high quality teaching, academic support and access to the resources they need. They want to obtain credible qualifications that enrich their lives and help them secure and succeed in good jobs. Students emphasised that institutions must serve the students they recruit to a particular course, underlining the importance of choice and of responsive tailored provision, delivered by a heterogenous sector that meets students’ diverse

needs. Students want institutions to listen to them, communicate and adapt their practices as necessary.

Student surveys consistently report that a significant minority of students are dissatisfied with core parts of their academic experiences, with course organisation and assessment feedback often identified as areas of concern.<sup>5</sup> While student outcomes are strong in aggregate, examples of poor continuation and completion rates can be identified across different modes and levels of study, in different subject areas, and for students with different characteristics.<sup>6</sup>

Looking to the future, digital technology and artificial intelligence will precipitate potentially transformative shifts in teaching, learning and assessment, accentuated by a demand for lifelong learning and the changing skills needs of the economy. As these forces reshape higher education, regulatory agility will be needed to manage emerging risks and exploit new opportunities.

Most provision in the higher education sector in England is already excellent. We know this because the highest TEF ratings were awarded to all types of institutions in all parts of the country.<sup>7</sup> But where quality falls short, the risk to students is significant.

Where provision is already high quality, we know that many institutions want to improve further. As they embark on improvement, they will face significant headwinds and difficult decisions in the coming years. We will work with the institutions we regulate to promote high quality education for all students against a backdrop of countervailing pressures, ensuring that:

1. Students receive a high quality education that has a significant and enduring positive impact on their lives and careers, delivered by institutions that continue to improve the quality of their courses.
2. Prospective students have a range of high quality options and are well equipped to exercise informed choice about what, where, when and how they study.



## The student interest

To serve the student interest, we must work with students to understand their priorities and concerns. Most students benefit from high quality experiences, but our research and engagement identified specific features of the higher education system that are not reliably serving students well. Areas of concern extend beyond teaching and learning, underlining the importance of ensuring the wider student experience enables students to thrive.

Students deserve to receive what they are promised by their institution when they choose their course. Many students express this as the most basic condition of fair treatment. The National Student Survey shows that most students have positive experiences of higher education. Overall,

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<sup>5</sup> The National Student Survey 2024 reported that 72.7 per cent of students responded positively when asked about the role of assessment feedback in improving their work, while 74.2 per cent responded positively when asked about the organisation of their course. These are among the lowest student satisfaction scores identified by the survey. See OfS website, [National Student Survey data 2024](#).

<sup>6</sup> See OfS website, [Student outcomes: Data dashboard](#).

<sup>7</sup> See OfS website, [TEF 2023 ratings](#).

students tell us that the teaching they receive is engaging, that they are well supported and that they can access the resources and facilities they need.<sup>8</sup>

However, the growing number of complaints submitted to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator supports evidence from our student insight work that not all students benefit in the ways they expected.<sup>9</sup> Unclear or unfair contractual terms and conditions, extra charges and misleading information can compromise students' experience of, and ability to engage in, higher education. Students invest their time, effort and a significant amount of money in higher education, and when things go wrong, they expect to have their concerns heard and addressed.

Non-academic features of higher education play an important role in shaping students' experiences. Accommodation, the cost of living, mental health and wellbeing, and harassment and sexual misconduct featured prominently in our discussions with students and representatives from institutions. Published research and our engagement with students suggests that across all these domains, the student experience has become more challenging. The effect of these challenges falls disproportionately on those with fewer economic and social resources to draw on in response.

An established trend towards paid employment while studying underlines the impact of cost-of-living pressures on the student experience, with implications for access, participation and progression.

This trend is driven, at least in part, by rising costs of student accommodation, which low-income students are least equipped to absorb.<sup>10</sup> Record levels of mental ill health in the general population are reflected in an increasing proportion of undergraduates disclosing mental health conditions to their institutions.<sup>11</sup> OfS research found that 20 per cent of students have experienced unwanted sexual behaviour, with women more than twice as likely to experience sexual harassment than men.<sup>12</sup>

We heard positive examples of individual institutions seeking to respond to the changing realities of student life. But we also heard from students frustrated by perceived institutional inertia. Institutions, meanwhile, told us that financial constraints limit the support they can offer students. In relation to mental health in particular, many higher education institutions believe they are being asked to fill gaps in the delivery of public services.

Institutions should be innovative and bold in their work to deliver positive student experiences, but we acknowledge that the sector's response to these issues needs to be considered in the context of constrained finances and wider pressures on public services.

To secure positive experiences for students that equip them to succeed, we will work with institutions to ensure that:

3. Students receive the higher education experiences they were promised.

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<sup>8</sup> OfS website, [National Student Survey data: provider-level data for 2024, all modes of study](#).

<sup>9</sup> OIA, [Annual report 2023](#).

<sup>10</sup> HEPI, [Student Accommodation: The State of the Nation in 2024](#), February 2024.

<sup>11</sup> House of Commons Library, [Student mental health in England: Statistics, policy, and guidance](#), May 2023.

<sup>12</sup> OfS, [New OfS condition to address harassment and sexual misconduct](#), July 2024.



4. Students benefit from rich and rewarding wider environments that help them to make the most of their time in higher education.



## Sector resilience

Financial sustainability is the most significant, growing challenge for the sector and an increasing number of institutions will need to make significant changes to their funding models in the near future to avoid a material risk that they can no longer operate. Effective leadership will be critical in navigating this environment and ensuring the proper protection of both public money and student fees.

In response to a continuing decline in the real-terms value of income from UK undergraduates, institutions have increased their reliance on fee income from international students, heightening the sector's exposure to geopolitical uncertainty. While the sector's performance in aggregate does not reflect the picture for all individual institutions, our latest projections show that the number of institutions expecting to report deficits or low operating cash flow is significantly increased.

Financial challenge was the risk most frequently cited by representatives from institutions during our engagement sessions. While students are unlikely to take a direct interest in their institution's financial position day-to-day, the impact of financial pressure on students' higher education experiences could be profound – ranging from reductions in course quality and diminished choice through to the closure of an institution and the disruption that would entail. Signs of unmanaged financial risk could also affect confidence in English higher education more broadly, with potentially wide-ranging consequences for students. Managing financial risks is therefore critical to protecting the student interest. It is also critical in safeguarding the wider public interest that universities and colleges serve.

Effective leadership and accountability mechanisms reduce students' exposure to the consequences of risk. This applies to financial risk and broader strategic risks generated by heightened volatility and uncertainty in the world around us. As risk in their operating environment increases, institutions will need different capabilities to manage challenging circumstances and affect positive change. In an environment of heightened risk, effective governance is therefore critical to serving the student interest, and critical too for ensuring universities and colleges are secure guardians of the public funding they receive.

Recognising that a well-governed and financially sustainable sector necessarily underpins both high quality courses and positive student experiences, we will work with institutions, government and others to ensure that:

5. A financially resilient sector delivers high quality higher education and student choice in the context of constrained finances.
6. Effectively governed institutions successfully navigate an environment of increased financial and strategic risk, enabling students to reap the benefits of higher education while giving taxpayers confidence that public funding is used appropriately.

## What we will do

Our strategic goals set out our priorities. They give life to the driving purpose of our work for the period from 2025 to 2030. They also structure our activities to secure positive experiences of higher education for students that continue to deliver value in the longer term.

Our strategic actions set out improvements to our core work, building on what we have learned, alongside more fundamental changes to how we perform our role. We will transform our approach to regulating quality, developing an integrated approach that drives continuous improvement across the sector, strengthen our role as a champion of the student interest and reshape our relationship with institutions and government partners, enabling more active collaboration across the wider, higher education ecosystem.

This strategy will likely cover a period of significant change for the higher education sector, and so we will need to be agile and flexible in how we progress towards our goals. Each year, we will set out our planned activity in an annual business plan calibrated to reflect the resources we have available. The actions set out below may, therefore, be subject to change, and in delivering them we will retain the ability to adapt as the external environment continues to shift.

The OfS must be driven and directed by what matters to students. But we do not have regulatory levers to intervene in all the areas that students tell us matter to them. As such, successful delivery of our priorities will at times involve working less formally, including by giving an honest and open account to the sector and to government about the state of students' experiences and their likely impact on student outcomes. Delivering our goals will in all cases rely on close working with students and institutions, and in many cases with national and local government.

## Quality

### **1. Students receive a high quality education that has a significant and enduring positive impact on their lives and careers, delivered by institutions that continue to improve the quality of their courses.**

- We will transform our approach to quality assessment, including where we assess quality for degree awarding powers, working with institutions to develop an integrated approach that drives continuous improvement across the higher education sector, benefiting all students.
- Equality will remain central to our approach to regulating quality. Quality assessment will continue to hold institutions to account for the experiences and outcomes of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and those from groups underrepresented in higher education.
- We will continue to incentivise excellence through the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). TEF will be the core of our new integrated approach to quality, with assessment activity becoming more routine and more widespread to ensure that institutions are delivering high quality academic experiences and positive outcomes. Assessment reports will describe features of high quality education, alongside identifying areas for improvement, helping institutions to better meet students' needs. And we will seek opportunities to involve students directly in our quality assessment activities, building on

the important role that engagement with students already plays in our assessment of courses and the student academic experience.

- Where institutions do not address issues, or where we have particular concerns about quality, we will use the full range of our powers to protect students from provision that falls below the requirements set out in our conditions of registration. This enforcement activity will be focused on the small number of institutions with unacceptably weak performance. Predictive and lead indicators, alongside more effective use of qualitative intelligence, will help us anticipate, identify and respond quickly to emerging risks.
- We will publish a Quality Risk Register to orient our regulatory activity around the most significant risks to high quality academic experiences and positive student outcomes. We will update this regularly and ensure that it works in tandem with our Equality of Opportunity Risk Register.
- We will encourage and protect freedom of speech within the law and academic freedom, including by reporting on the outcomes of free speech complaints, to support institutions to safeguard the robust exchange of ideas that provides essential underpinning for a high quality education.<sup>13</sup>
- As higher education delivered outside the UK becomes an increasingly important element of many universities' strategies, we will fold transnational education courses into our integrated approach to quality, ensuring students benefit from high quality courses wherever they study.
- Working with the sector, we will explore options for alignment with European standards for quality, including bringing clarity to the choices and trade-offs that may entail, including in terms of regulatory burden.
- We will work with the sector and with experts to ensure our regulatory approach continues to safeguard quality in the context of rapid technological change, while also giving institutions confidence to take advantage of the opportunities new technologies present.

## **2. Prospective students have a range of high quality options and are well equipped to exercise informed choice about what, where, when and how they study.**

- We will deepen our understanding of the factors that shape student choice and assess how students use the information available to them, ensuring that OfS tools and the information published by institutions support informed decision-making. By promoting TEF outcomes and communicating more routinely on the features of high quality provision, we will help students to understand the range of high quality options available across different modes and levels of study.

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<sup>13</sup> Pending the outcomes of Government's review of the implementation of the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023.

- We will continue to focus institutions on the work needed to reduce risks to equality of opportunity, so that choice is not limited by prospective students' background, location or characteristics. We will encourage continuous improvement in initiatives to widening access through rigorous evaluation of access and participation plans and a focus on activities to raise attainment in schools.
- We will work with government and Skills England to develop a shared understanding of the extent to which the higher education options available to students will deliver the national and regional skills needed to support economic growth.
- We will support the introduction of the lifelong learning entitlement, responding flexibly as skills needs and employment patterns change.
- As institutions take difficult decisions in response to financial challenges, we will work to understand the aggregate impact of these decisions on student choice, across subjects, geographical areas and for different groups of students, sharing our developing understanding of these issues with the sector and with government. We will continue to support validation arrangements where this protects choice for geographically less mobile students.
- Working with the sector we will seek to understand whether regulation presents an inappropriate barrier to institutions gaining OfS registration. We will ensure that our regulatory tests are appropriately calibrated to protect students and taxpayers while facilitating efficient entry to the regulated sector for high quality, sustainable and innovative institutions.

## The wider student interest

### 3. Students receive the higher education experiences they were promised.

- We will gather and analyse data and insights from students, institutions and others to improve our understanding of the extent to which students' reasonable expectations of higher education are being met in relation to their academic and wider experiences.
- We will enhance and protect students' consumer rights, working with the sector to develop a model contract that sets out students' rights and obligations, alongside the obligations of institutions.
- Working with government, we will seek to secure the powers we need to further champion the student interest and intervene as appropriate to ensure that students get what they were promised. In the meantime, we will continue to refer cases to National Trading Standards and the CMA as appropriate, where we identify concerns about an institution's compliance with consumer protection law. We will publish the outcomes of this work to build a bank of case reports to improve understanding across the sector and support all institutions to improve the contractual terms that govern their relationship with students.

- We will work with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator to secure reciprocal sharing of intelligence, ensuring prioritisation of our work is informed by a robust understanding of where students' experiences of higher education are falling short.

#### **4. Students benefit from rich and rewarding wider environments that help them to make the most of their time in higher education.**

- A strengthened understanding of students' experiences and concerns will underpin all our activity. We will seek student's perspectives to develop our understanding of the changing barriers students face as they seek to make the most of their education, and share what we learn with institutions, government and others.
- We will continue to work with institutions to reduce risks to equality of opportunity, recognising that the overall experience of higher education is becoming more challenging and many of those challenges are concentrated among particular student groups. We will expect institutions to continue to improve the support they offer to ensure that students from all backgrounds are able to succeed in higher education where they have the ability and the desire to do so.
- We will use a range of approaches to promote positive wider experiences for students, recognising the diversity of issues that students tell us affect their ability to benefit from higher education. We will consider carefully where we can achieve change by working less formally, particularly where we do not have the levers to generate change directly. This may include drawing attention to the issues that matter to students, publishing information and supporting effective practice, rather than using our more formal powers to set and enforce requirements.
- We will work collaboratively with the sector to improve students' experiences, leveraging our platform and our expertise to drive positive change. For example, to improve support for students' mental health and wellbeing, we will work through sector networks to embed evidence-led practice and encourage robust evaluation of support for students experiencing mental ill health.
- We will regulate to prevent harassment and sexual misconduct in higher education and ensure that institutions respond effectively when incidents do occur. We will continue to collect and publish data that shows the prevalence of sexual misconduct to ensure continued focus on this issue and to measure the impact of our regulation and the steps institutions are taking.
- We will consider an enhanced focus on good governance as a means of ensuring that institutions effectively discharge their responsibilities to students, including in relation to the issues that matter most to students.

## Sector resilience

### **5. A financially resilient sector delivers high quality higher education and student choice in the context of constrained finances.**

- We will continue to work with institutions to ensure our understanding of the financial challenges they, and the sector, are facing is accurate and up-to-date.
- We will improve our approach to data collection, enabling us to collect financial data more frequently and flexibly while minimising regulatory burden for institutions. To support robust planning and effective student protection, we will work with the sector to improve financial management, including the approach taken to understanding and assessing risk, the credibility of institutions' forecasts, and the scenarios they plan for in their forecasts.
- The financial challenges facing the sector mean that we will need to increase our engagement with an increasing number of institutions on their financial position. We will aim to build trust and encourage institutions to be open and transparent as we work together in the interests of students.
- We will maintain an up-to-date assessment of market exit risk for individual institutions and require those facing material risks to have credible and deliverable plans to minimise disruption and protect outcomes for students, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will continue to work with government to address the gaps in the system that mean that students cannot be adequately protected if their institution can no longer operate.
- We will help to build capability across the sector, signposting institutions to sources of information and support. We will share intelligence with government, UK Research and Innovation and other relevant partners to support a joined-up approach and effective decision-making across the whole higher education system.
- We will monitor and communicate the impact of financial pressures on student choice, as institutions make difficult decisions about the size and shape of their provision. As part of this, we will identify potential risks to the supply of critical skills at a regional and national level.

### **6. Effectively governed institutions successfully navigate an environment of increased financial and strategic risk, enabling students to reap the benefits of higher education while giving taxpayers confidence that public funding is used appropriately.**

- We will ensure that our initial and ongoing regulatory tests are appropriately calibrated to protect students and taxpayers, recognising the level of risk inherent in different business models. We will ensure that tests for institutions seeking registration effectively identify those not yet ready to enter the regulated system, and that our regulation of established institutions can facilitate swift action wherever management and governance issues arise.

- We will work with the sector to support a stronger understanding of our management and governance requirements, equipping institutions to assess and improve their own capabilities to the benefit both of students and taxpayers.
- We will adopt a focused approach to monitoring and compliance where management and governance risks are most acute and work with institutions to identify and address barriers to strengthened governance more broadly, supporting improved governance across the sector at a time of increased financial and strategic risk.
- We will increase the regulatory requirements placed on institutions engaged in significant partnership activity and continue to work with the Department for Education and Student Loans Company (SLC) to mitigate risks to SLC funding where possible. We will work with government on legislative solutions where these are needed to allow more rapid intervention where public money is at risk.
- We will expand our data audit programme to identify and address areas of concern, shaping our guidance to institutions and informing our assessment of risk.
- Working with government, we will seek to become a prescribed body for whistleblowing, enabling us to give whistleblowers the same assurance and protection as other regulators.

## How we will regulate

Throughout the strategy period we will need to continually adapt how we work if we are to deliver our strategic goals. This section sets out the core elements of our approach.

The significant challenges facing the higher education sector mean that we will need to work with ambition and pace over the coming months to ensure our approach to regulation remains effective. The early phase of this strategy will therefore see us setting out in more detail how we plan to take forward our strategic goals. For example, in early 2025 we will begin to discuss with students and institutions how our new integrated quality model should take shape. We will explain how we plan to secure the more real-time data a modern, agile regulator needs to be effective. And we will publish proposals for reforming the approach we take to registering new institutions, smoothing the pathway into the regulated system for those that will offer high quality and innovative education to students.

With students' interests driving our strategy, now more than ever we need to make sure our systems and approaches to student engagement are working well. We will deepen our understanding of students' perspectives, building on the engagement that has underpinned the development of this strategy. We are transforming our interactions with current, former, and prospective students to embed their perspectives in our work. Throughout the next strategy period, student insight will inform the prioritisation and delivery of our regulatory work; student input will shape our understanding of the breadth of issues that matter to students. We will develop and share more frequently better insight on how well students' interests are being served in different parts of the sector and explain where we think improvements need to be made to reduce the risks to quality and equality that students are facing. We will create a student interest board as a formal committee of the OfS board, putting the student voice at the centre of our strategic thinking.

Similarly, our ability to regulate effectively in the interests of students depends on having a robust, two-way dialogue with the institutions we regulate. We will continue to improve our relationships with institutions and with the sector more broadly, increasing opportunities for discussion, debate, and feedback. We are aiming for relationships based on respect, confidence, trust and reciprocity, accepting there will be issues on which we disagree, but that we all want the same thing: high quality education delivered in the interests of students and the country more broadly. We will publish information that helps institutions understand and improve their own performance, recognising that there will be common challenges in the coming years, while also supporting a shared understanding of issues beyond the remit of the OfS.

In an uncertain environment, we will routinely engage with the sector on the major risks we see in the system. We will do this through our annual financial sustainability report, setting out our independent view of the financial condition of the higher education sector and its resilience to financial challenge. We will do this through our Equality of Opportunity Risk Register, ensuring access and participation plans are informed by the latest intelligence on risks to access, participation and completion. And we will do this through a new Quality Risk Register, developed with the sector and students, which will orient our activity towards the most significant risks to high quality academic experiences and positive student outcomes for all students.

Against a backdrop of change, we must have access to timely data that tells us what is happening today and what may happen tomorrow. We will develop predictive and lead indicators that allow us to regulate boldly and confidently, anticipating, identifying, and then responding rapidly to areas of emerging risk. Recognising that data will only ever provide a partial picture, however, we will simultaneously increase our engagement with the universities and colleges we regulate, to establish a more rounded picture of the changing sector landscape informed by those who know it best. Our renewed focus on effective governance in institutions will be an important conduit for developing this insight.

Heightened uncertainty underlines the importance of partnership working, not only with students and institutions, but across the wider system – with government departments, government agencies and other regulators. We recognise that successful delivery of our strategic objectives relies on these relationships working well, and effective collaboration is a theme that runs throughout this strategy. We will become a more active collaborator with our strategic partners, sharing our insight and expertise while learning from the experiences of others.

We will continue to ensure that our regulatory requirements are appropriate given the risks posed to students and taxpayers, mindful of the need to weigh the benefits of regulation against the impact of the burden it creates. We will use data and intelligence to minimise regulatory burden where possible, recognising that the institutions we regulate are often subject to multiple regulatory regimes. We will prioritise work with other regulators and agencies to synthesise data and avoid duplication, embedding the principle ‘collect once, use many times.’ Developing stronger relationships with regulators across tertiary education will support a regulatory environment which is easier for institutions for navigate.

We will consider our approach and our impact in the context of the wider economy. Our focus on continuous improvement will encourage excellence and innovation beyond minimum standards, supporting institutions and the sector more broadly to deliver the private and public good of higher education, for individuals, the economy and society.



We will improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our systems and processes, with a focus on ensuring we deliver our core regulatory activities in a timely and rigorous way.

And finally, we need to keep learning as we go. We will continually evaluate our progress and look to other regulators, both at home and abroad, to inform our thinking as we seek ways to improve. An agile workforce, equipped with the right tools and technology, and the mechanisms and mindset to learn and improve, will enable us to respond and adapt as circumstances change while delivering the value that students, taxpayers and institutions rightly expect.

## **‘I statements’**

‘I statements’ are a vehicle for communicating the future we want to bring about. They are intended to describe what achieving our strategic objectives will look and feel like for students, institutions, taxpayers and employers in a clear and accessible way. They do not track individual goals but instead describe the aggregate impact of our strategy from the perspective of our key stakeholders.

‘I statements’ are weighted towards students, as the primary beneficiaries of our proposed strategy.

### **If we achieve our strategic objectives, we would expect students to agree with the below statements:**

- My course is well organised and delivered, enabling me to acquire knowledge and develop skills relevant to my subject area.
- I benefit from high quality resources and decent study spaces, and can access the equipment I need to participate fully in my course.
- I get timely, constructive feedback and the academic support I need to improve.
- I am fairly and effectively assessed, and confident that prospective employers will recognise the value of the qualification that I achieve.
- I have access to the information and support I need to make an informed decision about which route into higher education is right for me.
- I can choose from a range of high quality courses that suit my needs.
- I understand my rights as a student and I know what to do if I feel I am not getting what I was promised from my institution.
- I am treated fairly by my institution and my views are listened to and acted on appropriately by those in positions of power.
- I’m getting what I was promised when I signed up for my course – my hopes and expectations when I chose it are being met.
- If I see or experience harassment or sexual misconduct at my institution, I know what to do and am confident my institution will respond compassionately and effectively to protect students.

- My institution recognises my needs outside of the classroom and takes reasonable steps to ensure I benefit from higher education in the round.

**If we achieve our strategic objectives, we would expect institutions to agree with the below statements:**

- I can engage constructively and transparently with the OfS and am confident I won't be taken by surprise.
- I am confident my institution would be treated fairly should it encounter challenges.
- I understand the OfS's regulatory priorities and requirements and am confident its regulatory approach is driven by the interests of students and informed by the expertise in the higher education sector.

**If we achieve our strategic objectives, we would expect taxpayers to agree with the below statements:**

- I am confident that public money is being put to good use in higher education.
- I am proud of England's higher education sector.

**If we achieve our strategic objectives, we would expect employers to agree with the below statement:**

- I know that when I employ a graduate I am gaining a highly qualified employee who is well prepared for the world of work.

#### **Question 1**

Do you have any comments to make on the OfS's proposed strategy for 2025 to 2030 or the priorities set out within it?

#### **Question 2**

Do you have any comments about any unintended consequences of the proposed strategy or the priorities set out within it, for example for particular types of providers, particular groups of students, or for individuals on the basis of their protected characteristics?

#### **Question 3**

Are there aspects of the proposals you found unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.

#### **Question 4**

Our previous strategies have covered periods of three years. For this strategy, we are proposing an extended strategy period of five years. Do you have comments on this proposal?

#### **Question 5**

5a) Do you think that our proposed 'I statements' appropriately and clearly describe the impact that delivery of our strategic objectives should have on our key stakeholders?

5b) Do you think that the strategic objectives distilled in our proposed 'I statements' are the right ones? Do you propose any additional 'I statements'?

# Annex A: Further information on our proposals (OfS strategy for 2025 to 2030)

## Our proposals

1. We set out our proposed strategy for the OfS from 2025 to 2030 above.

## The current context

2. Our proposed strategy is grounded in the current context and reflects the challenges and opportunities we anticipate that institutions and students will encounter in the coming years. This section describes some of the features of the current context which are pertinent to our strategic choices. These include the funding environment, technological change, cost of living pressures and changing labour market patterns.

## Purpose

3. In place of the 'mission' included in our previous strategy, we propose a re-articulated purpose that more clearly sets out priority areas of work for the next strategy period. This remains aligned with the OfS's functions set out in HERA.

## Priority areas

4. We propose three priority areas to help us focus our regulatory activity where we can most effectively serve the interests of students. These are quality, the wider student interest, and sector resilience.
5. Equality of opportunity remains a priority for the OfS and is integral to everything we do. To reflect this, we have integrated work to promote equality of opportunity throughout priority areas, rather than constructing equality of opportunity as a standalone priority area or goal. We believe this approach will ensure equality of opportunity objectives shape our work in the round and mitigate the risk that work to promote equality of opportunity becomes isolated and detached from core activity.
6. In proposing to focus our activities in these areas, we have had regard to our general duties under section 2 of HERA. In particular we have had regard to: (1) the need to promote quality and greater choice and opportunities for students (under section 2(1)(b)); (2) the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education (under section 2(1)(e)); and (3) the duty to monitor and report on financial sustainability (under section 68). In addition, we have noted that HERA requires the OfS to have in place a mandatory access and participation plan condition for certain institutions (section 12) and that it identifies quality and standards as an area we may in particular regulate using our conditions (section 13). HERA further sets out our duties and powers, and other provisions, in respect of quality and standards (sections 23 to 28) and access and participation (sections 29 to 37).
7. In developing this strategy, we conducted a programme of engagement and insight gathering to help us understand the student interest. We heard that a quality education is core to what students want and expect from higher education. While most provision in the higher education sector in England is already excellent, this is not universal, and where quality falls short the risk

to students can be significant. For example, students who do not benefit from high quality provision are less likely to complete their course and progress to graduate level employment. These risks are exacerbated by the financial challenges much of the higher education sector will face in the coming years, which are likely to require institutions to make difficult decisions about their offer to students. We believe that in this context, working with the sector to protect the right of all students from all backgrounds to a high quality education is especially important.

8. We also heard that students' expectations of higher education extend beyond their academic experiences and outcomes. Their wider experiences of higher education are affected by the way they are treated by their institutions and the non-academic services and support they have access to. Our proposed strategy seeks to promote positive experiences for students through a focus both on the contractual relationship between students and institutions and the non-academic features of higher education that shape a students' ability to benefit from higher education.
9. Beyond activity designed to improve the contractual relationship between students and institutions, we propose exploratory activity to help us understand the extent to which students' reasonable expectations of higher education are being met. We believe that students' reasonable expectations reflect their contractual entitlements, the informal promises and impressions communicated by institutions, and wider, societal expectations of what higher education should deliver.
10. Evidence suggests that the wider student experience is becoming more challenging and that disadvantaged students and students from underrepresented groups feel these challenges most acutely. In our proposed strategy, we identify accommodation, mental health, harassment and sexual misconduct, and cost of living pressures as features of higher education which are pertinent to the wider student interest. This list reflects what we heard during pre-consultation engagement but does not represent a definitive set of priorities.
11. Our proposed strategy sets out an approach to exploring some of the ways we might serve the wider student interest in these areas, including ways that do not require direct regulation. There may also be times when we take direct regulatory action, where possible and appropriate (for example, in relation to harassment and sexual misconduct).
12. OfS analysis and engagement with sector representatives has made clear that the resilience of the higher education sector will be tested over the next strategy period. 'Sector resilience', our third priority area, is a prerequisite to delivering high quality higher education and positive wider experiences for students. Within this priority area we consider financial sustainability and effective management and governance.
13. These priority areas connect to our primary regulatory objectives in the following ways. This is a non-exhaustive list.
  - Objective 1 – Promoting high quality higher education and equality of opportunity will support students from all backgrounds to access, succeed in and progress from higher education.
  - Objective 2 – Promoting high quality higher education while prioritising the wider student interest will enable more students to receive – and benefit from – quality academic experiences.

- Objective 3 – As a result of promoting high quality higher education and enabling more students to engage and benefit from this, more students will progress into further study or employment.
- Objective 4 – Promoting sector resilience will support the ability of higher education providers to deliver high quality academic experiences and positive wider experiences, leading to positive outcomes and value for money for students.

## Strategic goals

14. Within priority areas, we set out our goals for this strategy period. These goals are the specific outcomes we will seek to achieve from 2025 to 2030. Across goals, we will work with students, institutions, government and other partners as necessary to achieve our aims.
15. In the category of quality, we propose two goals. The first is to ensure that ‘students receive a high quality education that has a significant and enduring positive impact on their lives and careers, delivered by institutions that continue to improve the quality of their courses.’ This conveys our strategic focus on continuous improvement as the most effective means of ensuring the greatest number of students, from all backgrounds, benefit from high quality higher education. It signals our commitment to ensuring students benefit from quality academic experiences while they study and continue to derive value from their experiences of higher education into the future.
16. The second is to ensure that ‘prospective students have a range of high quality options and are well equipped to exercise informed choice about what, when, where and how they study.’ This advances equality of opportunity because innovative and flexible provision, together with diversity of choice, enables students to choose and access higher education that meets their needs. It signals our commitment to supporting innovative approaches and fostering a dynamic sector that adapts as the wider environment and students’ needs change.
17. To support delivery of this strategic goal we commit to ensuring our regulatory tests are appropriately calibrated to protect students and taxpayers while facilitating efficient entry to the regulated sector for high quality institutions. In activity described under strategic goal six, we commit to ensuring that initial and ongoing regulatory tests are appropriately calibrated to protect students and taxpayers, recognising the level of risk inherent in different business models. In both cases, our commitment is to ensure that our regulation enables innovation without exposing students and taxpayers to risks arising from low quality or unsustainable provision.
18. In the category of the wider student interest, we propose two goals. The first is to work with institutions and students to ensure that ‘students receive the higher education experiences they were promised.’ This recognises the importance of students’ rights as consumers and identifies consumer rights as a mechanism for improving students’ experiences of higher education, both academically and more broadly.
19. The second is to work with institutions and students to ensure that ‘students benefit from rich and rewarding wider environments that help them to make the most of their time in higher education.’ This recognises that experiences beyond the classroom can have a significant effect on students’ ability to engage with and benefit from higher education. It will help advance

equality of opportunity by drawing attention to the importance of promoting environments that support all students to succeed.

20. In the category of sector resilience, we propose two goals. The first is to work with institutions, government and others to ensure that ‘a financially resilient sector delivers high quality higher education and student choice in the context of constrained finances.’ This recognises that the financial challenges many higher education institutions are facing will interact with the student interest in a range of ways. Market exits not only compromise the experiences of directly affected students but also erode student choice, while financial challenges are also likely to affect the courses institutions offer and how provision is delivered. This goal therefore recognises that a financially resilient sector is a prerequisite to high quality higher education and positive wider experiences for all students.
21. The second is to work with institutions, government and others to ensure that ‘effectively governed institutions successfully navigate an environment of increased financial and strategic risk, enabling students to reap the benefits of higher education while giving taxpayers confidence that public funding is used appropriately.’ This identifies the importance of effective management and governance as a means of minimising institutions’ exposure to financial risk in a challenging environment. By ensuring institutions are equipped to manage financial risks and other risks that may emerge, our approach will protect students’ interests and ensure the appropriate use of public funds.

## **What would be the effect of this proposal?**

22. Our proposals are intended to benefit students by promoting and protecting high quality higher education while also serving the wider student interest and supporting a resilient sector that is equipped to deliver high quality higher education now and in the longer term. Our focus on continuous improvement in the quality of higher education will benefit students at a wide range of higher education institutions, studying on a wide range of courses. Our commitment to protecting students from provision that falls below the requirements set out in our conditions of registration will benefit those studying at the small number of institutions with unacceptably weak performance. It will also benefit prospective students who will be protected from provision that fails to adhere to our regulatory requirements.
23. Our proposals are intended to help the institutions we regulate to improve their own performance, including by extending the reach of our regulatory activity beyond institutions in breach – or potential breach – of our minimum requirements. By communicating more routinely on features of quality provision, we will support institutions’ understanding of quality and contribute to a culture of continuous improvement. We will use a quality risk register to support our strategic goals which relate to quality and provide a clear and publicly evidenced basis for regulatory action, supported by input from students and the sector, helping institutions to understand, anticipate and mitigate areas of concern. The small number of institutions with unacceptably weak performance will be the focus of enforcement activity.
24. We expect our proposals to benefit society as a whole in a range of ways. They will support a higher education system equipped to cultivate the skills the country needs and increase employer confidence in the value of English higher education qualifications. High quality higher education will be accessible to more people, and students from all backgrounds will be better able to engage with and benefit from high quality higher education, supporting a more equal

society which makes better use of untapped talent and latent potential. The supply of skilled graduates will support local and national economies alike, while the ‘public goods’ associated with high quality higher education will accrue to a wide range of individuals and communities. Public goods include economic growth, a more equal society and greater knowledge and understanding.

## **Alternative approaches**

25. Strategy documents reflect a series of choices that articulate an organisation’s priorities. As such, many alternatives to the approach proposed in our strategy are possible. It would not be instructive to seek to identify all of those here.
26. In developing our proposed strategy, we considered extending the existing strategy or having no strategy for the next five years. In our view, neither would be a credible course of action. Both bring similar, marginal benefits: there would be no new information for stakeholders, including OfS staff, to spend time and effort understanding; and in the case of extending the existing strategy, there would be greater stability in the system as the regulator would operate in the same way.
27. However, significant changes pertinent to the way that higher education operates mean the benefits of continuity would be limited. It is our view that the merits of a new strategy, developed in response to the challenges facing students and institutions today, outweigh the benefits of continuity. Furthermore, by keeping the same regulatory objectives, we balance the need for stability with the need to respond to a changing context that brings new opportunities and risks. The brevity of the strategy document will limit the time and effort stakeholders are required to put into understanding our proposed approach.
28. We also considered extending the approach to baseline regulation articulated in our current strategy. Again, this would have the benefit of providing greater continuity for institutions. Focusing on the regulatory baseline, however, would mean focusing resource on a small number of institutions with unacceptably weak performance. We believe this was the right approach as we established ourselves as a regulator. Now, and in the context of difficult headwinds for the sector as a whole, we believe that a broader approach that drives continuous improvement above our minimum requirements will maximise the positive benefits of regulation, benefiting a greater number of students.
29. Subject to consultation responses, we have therefore provisionally discounted these alternatives as credible options.

## **Proposed implementation**

30. Throughout the consultation period we will create engagement opportunities for students, sector staff and sector representative groups, ensuring a wide range of views shape our finalised strategy.
31. We will take into account consultation responses and engagement outcomes when finalising our strategy. We will also take into account any other developments that may impact the efficacy of our proposals. We intend to publish the strategy in spring 2025.



32. Our proposed strategy covers the period from 2025 to 2030, deviating from past strategies that cover periods of three years. This is intended to provide greater stability and a clearer sense of direction to the sector over a period of change.
33. Each year of the strategy period, we will set out our planned activity in an annual business plan. Delivery of our strategy is subject to a sustainable resourcing model being in place for the OfS through the strategy period.
34. In the coming months we will set out in more detail how we plan to take forward our strategic goals. For example, in early 2025 we will begin to discuss with students and institutions how our new integrated quality model should take shape. We will explain how we plan to secure the more real-time data a modern, agile regulator needs to be effective. And we will publish proposals for reforming the approach we take to registering new institutions, smoothing the pathway into the regulated system for those that will offer high quality and innovative education to students.

## **Annex B: Matters to which we have had regard in reaching our proposals**

### **The OfS's general duties**

1. In formulating these proposals, the OfS has had regard to its general duties as set out in section 2 of HERA. The proposals in this document are relevant to all the OfS's activity over the next five years, and we therefore consider all general duties to be highly relevant.
2. Our risk-based regulatory approach recognises the importance of general duty (2)(1)(a), the need to have regard to protect the institutional autonomy of providers, and the weight we place on this duty varies with the risk posed to students and taxpayers. We place less weight on the need to protect institutional autonomy the greater the risk, with a significant inflection point moving from above, to at and below, our minimum regulatory requirements. Our approach to prioritising regulatory intervention according to the risk posed will minimise interference with institutional autonomy and regulatory burden.
3. The general duty under section 2(1)(b) requires the OfS to have regard to the need to promote quality, and greater choice and opportunities for students, in the provision of higher education. Promoting quality has been central to the OfS's development of the proposed strategy and this is reflected in our focus on quality, with two goals and much of our strategic activity designed to promote quality, including by encouraging greater student choice. For example, ensuring that 'students have a range of high quality options and are well equipped to exercise informed choice about what, where and how they study' will promote a diverse range of quality options, meaning students with different needs and aspirations benefit from quality provision. The OfS's regard to this duty is also reflected in our proposal to integrate equality of opportunity throughout all our goals, demonstrating the centrality of efforts to extend opportunities through access and participation.
4. We have considered our general duty under section 2(1)(c) to have regard to the need to encourage competition in the interests of students and employers, and the benefits to students and employers from collaboration between providers, in developing the proposed strategy. The need to encourage competition is most clearly reflected in activity designed to drive improvement above the baseline, including the Teaching Excellence Framework.
5. Similarly, we have had regard to the benefits that collaboration can bring when identifying our proposed strategic actions. Across goals, we propose engagement and communication strategies that will help institutions to learn from one another, building a shared evidence base that equips institutions to improve their own performance.
6. We have had regard to the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education as per our section 2(1)(d) duty. Value for money in the provision of higher education is important for both students and the taxpayer. By enforcing a regulatory baseline of minimum requirements, we will secure a system whereby stakeholders (including current students) derive value from high quality higher education, which prospective students have equal opportunity to benefit from. The value students derive from higher education will be further increased by our focus on continuous improvement. If successful, students will benefit from a better and more accessible higher education experience, while taxpayers will benefit from a better educated workforce.

7. We have had regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education. This is the focal point of our general duty under section 2(1)(e) and a commitment to equality of opportunity is woven throughout our proposed strategy. It is also reflected in our focus on quality: for equality of opportunity to be meaningful, the higher education provision in question must be high quality. Access to and participation in low quality provision would not constitute a meaningful opportunity to succeed in, and progress from, higher education with successful outcomes.
8. We have had regard to the need to use the OfS's resources in an efficient, effective and economic way under our section 2(1)(f) general duty. We have sought to design these proposals so that, if enacted, the OfS would use its resources in the most efficient, effective, and economic way, by focusing on what we believe is the most impactful combination and sequence of strategic and regulatory activity possible with our available resources. Once a final decision has been reached on the outcome of the consultation proposals, work will be carried out internally to make sure our staff are best equipped to deliver the proposed strategy if taken forward.
9. Under these proposals, our regulatory approach will focus on driving continuous improvement above our baseline, with enforcement resource focused on a smaller group of providers demonstrating unacceptably weak performance. In proposing this approach, we have had regard to our general duties. In particular, we have had regard to: (1) the need to protect institutional autonomy (under section 2(1)(a)); (2) the need to use the OfS's resources in an efficient, effective and economic way (under section 2(1)(f)); and (3) principles of best regulatory practice – including the principles that regulatory activities should be – (i) transparent, accountable, proportionate and consistent, and (ii) targeted only at cases in which action is needed (under section 2(1)(g)).

## **The Regulators' Code**

10. We have had regard to the Regulators' Code when formulating our consultation proposals and our view is that the following sections are particularly relevant:
  - a. Section 1 which says that regulators should carry out their activities in a way that supports those they regulate to comply and grow, including using proportionate approaches and avoiding unnecessary burdens.
  - b. Section 3 which discusses the need to base regulatory activities on risk, including when choosing the most appropriate type of intervention.
  - c. Section 6 which states the need for regulators to ensure that their approach to their regulatory activities is transparent.

## **Guidance issued by the Secretary of State**

11. We have had regard to guidance issued to the OfS by the Secretary of State under section 2(3) of HERA.
12. We will have regard to any further guidance from the Secretary of State once issued.

## **The Public Sector Equality Duty**

13. We have had regard to Schedule 1, paragraph 21 of HERA, which extends the Equality Act 2010, and therefore the Public Sector Equality Duty, to the OfS. This requires the OfS to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and foster good relations between and advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
14. Through this consultation we are seeking views on any unintended consequences of our proposals, for example on particular types of provider or student. We are also seeking views about the potential impact of our proposals on individuals on the basis of their protected characteristics. Responses to this consultation will inform our assessment of the impact of our proposals on different groups.
15. In considering our strategic priorities, we have had regard to equality considerations. We are taking steps through our regulation of access and participation to reduce the gaps in equality of opportunity between students from underrepresented groups and other students, before, during and beyond their time in higher education. Work to support equality of opportunity is integral to our work and is integrated throughout our strategic priorities.
16. In relation to our work on quality, our proposals focus on ensuring that all students, whatever their background and characteristics, receive a high quality higher education and achieve successful outcomes. Meaningfully extending equality of opportunity means ensuring all students with the ability and desire to do so can attain the successful outcomes associated with higher education provision that meets rigorous quality standards.
17. In relation to our work on wider student experiences, our proposals focus on ensuring that all students can benefit from high quality higher education. This will support equality of opportunity by addressing barriers to participation disproportionately experienced by students from disadvantaged backgrounds and underrepresented groups.

## Annex C: Consultation questions

### Question 1

Do you have any comments to make on the OfS's proposed strategy for 2025 to 2030 or the priorities set out within it?

### Question 2

Do you have any comments about any unintended consequences of the proposed strategy or the priorities set out within it, for example for particular types of providers, particular groups of students, or for individuals on the basis of their protected characteristics?

### Question 3

Are there aspects of the proposals you found unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.

### Question 4

Our previous strategies have covered periods of three years. For this strategy, we are proposing an extended strategy period of five years. Do you have comments on this proposal?

### Question 5

5a) Do you think that our proposed 'I statements' appropriately and clearly describe the impact that delivery of our strategic objectives should have on our key stakeholders?

5b) Do you think that the strategic objectives distilled in our proposed 'I statements' are the right ones? Do you propose any additional 'I statements'?



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