The impact of the Office for Students' quality assessments on the wider higher education sector

November 2025

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Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all providers that participated in the focus groups and contributed to this evaluation. Your willingness to share your time, expertise, and experiences has been instrumental in informing the development of this report. This evaluation could not have been possible without your valued contributions.

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Executive summary

Purpose and context

This evaluation, commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS) and conducted by York Consulting LLP (YCL), explores the impact of the OfS's public quality assessment activities on higher education (HE) providers that the OfS has not assessed directly. These activities include the publication of assessment reports, compliance judgements, the OfS's 'Insight brief' on the subject, and related communications.

Key evaluation questions

The central questions guiding the evaluation were:

- What impact have the OfS's public quality assessment activities had on non-assessed providers?[1]
- What, if any, changes or actions have the OfS assessment activities led to from providers?
- How have the OfS assessment activities influenced providers' views on quality?
- Have the assessments influenced provider perceptions of the OfS itself?

Methodology

The qualitative methodology was structured around the following key components:

- **Design.** A semi-structured topic guide ensured consistency while allowing flexible, context-specific input.
- **Sampling strategy.** Stratified sampling captured a range of provider types.
- **Focus group delivery.** Five focus groups were conducted online, involving 32 participants from 31 providers. Each focus group was tailored to a specific provider group.
- **Data analysis.** Notes were analysed using NVivo, with transcripts checked for accuracy.

Conclusions

The evaluation highlights a sector that is highly engaged with the OfS's regulatory agenda but often uncertain about its mechanisms and intent. The OfS's published quality assessment activities have fostered valuable reflection and, in many cases, driven operational improvements. However, their broader impact remains shaped by several systemic factors, which continue to influence how these activities are received and implemented:

Reflection, confidence and continuous improvement

- The OfS's publications are widely used for benchmarking and internal validation, contributing meaningfully to a culture of continuous improvement. Their impact is most evident in strengthening existing quality assurance efforts and encouraging thoughtful enhancements. Engagement with the reports affects provider confidence in varied ways. While some institutions feel reassured by comparing their practices to those highlighted in the reports, others remain uncertain about how their quality would be perceived externally. The reports are often used to sense-check provision rather than as definitive measures of

[1] Assessment activities include publishing assessment reports, publishing case reports / compliance judgements, publishing thematic / insight briefs and comms / engagement around these.

quality, meaning they inform reflection but do not always shift perceptions or significantly bolster confidence.

- Across the sector, the reports have prompted internal discussions about quality, risk, and compliance. Many providers have used them to refine governance structures, improve documentation, and adjust monitoring cycles. In several cases, they have supported targeted improvements - such as enhancing student support or strengthening academic regulations - while reinforcing existing priorities and embedding sustainable progress.

High awareness

- Awareness of the OfS's assessment publications is very high across the sector, particularly among senior leaders and governance teams. This is largely due to direct communication from the OfS and internal dissemination within institutions. However, some participants noted a degree of fatigue with the volume and tone of the reports, expressing a preference for concise summaries, like the Insight brief. Some found that over time, the summaries provided sufficient information, reducing the need to read full reports.

Low understanding

- Despite high awareness, understanding of the assessment process – while growing – remains limited. Many participants were unclear about how providers are selected for assessment, how the process unfolds, and how final judgements are made. This lack of clarity among participants contributes to uncertainty and anxiety about whether they would be selected, how to prepare for an assessment, and how their quality would be viewed.
- The distinction between assessment findings and formal regulatory decisions is also unclear to many, making it difficult for providers to assess their own risk or determine appropriate responses.

Institutional responses and impact

- Many providers used the reports for benchmarking and validation, as a catalyst for internal reflection, to support sustainable incremental progress, and for targeted quality improvements. Some variations by provider were evident, in particular the challenge faced by Level 4/5 providers in translating HE regulatory language into a further education (FE) context.
- For some, the reports led to a more cautious, risk-averse approach to their management of quality, to avoid innovations which they perceived might expose them to regulatory risk.
- Responses to assessments appeared to be shaped by institutional capacity, leadership priorities, and perceived risk. Across the board, providers value the opportunity to learn from sector-wide insights and use the reports to strengthen their own provision.

A call for a more constructive regulatory approach

- The reports are often perceived as overly focused on deficiencies, with limited recognition of good practice. The absence of provider responses or contextual narratives contributes to a one-sided portrayal, which can discourage constructive exchange between providers. Several institutions expressed concern about being portrayed without sufficient context, which may reduce their willingness to share challenges openly or engage fully in collaborative improvement efforts. In some cases, this hesitancy is linked to concerns that openness could invite further scrutiny or investigation.

- There was a clear call for a shift towards a more developmental, enhancement-led approach. Many felt that the current compliance-driven model lacks the supportive ethos they felt would be helpful in fostering sector-wide learning and improvement.

1. Introduction

This report presents an evaluation of the OfS's public communications surrounding provider quality assessments. The primary aim is to understand whether and how the OfS's public-facing activities have influenced registered higher education (HE) providers that have not been directly assessed as part of this package of quality assessments. This focus addresses a key evidence gap in the development of the OfS's current approach to regulating quality, where previous evaluation work has looked at the introduction of the revised condition of registration for student outcomes (condition B3) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) 2023.

York Consulting LLP (YCL) was commissioned by the OfS to undertake this study. The findings will inform the OfS's future strategy for assessment design and implementation, as well as decision-making around the publication of assessment outcomes.

1.1 Background

Over the last three years, the OfS has conducted several assessments into the quality conditions of registration ('B conditions') at registered HE providers. These fall into two categories:

- Student outcomes (B3) assessments,[2] with 11 provider assessments having taken place. Providers were selected for assessment where their student outcomes data indicated performance below threshold in one or more of the OfS's published priority areas.
- Quality compliance assessments (QCA), [3] with eight provider assessments focusing on business and management courses and three on computing courses. These 11 assessments were completed by teams of academic expert assessors who assessed quality in relation to academic experience (B1), resources, support and student engagement (B2) and assessment and awards (B4). Providers were selected based on the relevant subject areas, student population size and risk indicators used by the OfS for general monitoring. This included data on student outcomes and National Student Survey data.

The package of public activity around the completion of these assessments has included publishing the assessment reports, the case reports explaining any regulatory judgements, an Insight brief,[4] and engagement with sector-representative groups. This public activity is intended to provide information for non-assessed providers and increase transparency about the OfS's regulatory approach.

1.2 Evaluation objectives and questions

The central evaluation question guiding this work was:

- What impact have the OfS's public quality assessment activities had on non-assessed providers?[5]

[2] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/quality-and-standards/how-we-regulate-student-outcomes/assessment-reports/

[3] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/quality-and-standards/quality-assessment-for-registered-providers/

[4] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/findings-from-ofs-quality-assessments/

[5] Assessment activities include publishing assessment reports, publishing case reports / compliance judgements, publishing thematic / insight briefs and comms / engagement around these.

This encompassed a range of potential impacts, including changes in understanding, perceptions, and internal processes - such as sparking internal discussions or reflections on quality. While direct changes to student-facing activities were considered less likely, the evaluation remained open to identifying additional areas of influence through inductive analysis. This approach allowed for the emergence of unanticipated themes and provider-led insights, ensuring that the findings reflect the diversity of experiences across different provider contexts.

To explore this overarching question, the evaluation addressed the following sub-questions:

1. What, if any, changes or actions have the OfS assessment activities led to from providers?
   - How and why have these changes occurred?
   - If no changes have occurred, what are the reasons?
2. How have the OfS assessment activities influenced providers' views on quality?
   - (a) Within the wider HE sector
   - (b) Within their own institution
3. Have the assessments influenced provider perceptions of the OfS itself?
   - Specifically, perceptions of the OfS's capability to conduct assessments and the perceived necessity of such assessments.

2. Methodology

2.1 Overview

The methodology, further detailed in Annex A, involved five focus groups with different groups of providers. Oversampling, combined with offering two date/time options, was used to maximise provider participation within the timeframe. Focus groups were held in the week of 7th July 2025. Participants were usually the named 'Quality Contact'[6] for the provider, though they were welcome to nominate a relevant colleague in their place.

The design of the qualitative research tool for this study included the development of a semi-structured focus group topic guide, tailored to explore the evaluation questions outlined in the brief, including follow-up prompts (see Annex B). This guide was used to facilitate online focus groups with staff from non-assessed HE providers. It ensured consistency between groups and supported the collection of relevant data that could be compared across different types of providers.

2.2 Sampling and participant characteristics

The five groups were organised around provider characteristics using the OfS's data.

The groups of providers were selected to include those with similar student typologies, while also satisfying additional criteria to ensure representativity among providers delivering postgraduate programmes, providers delivering business and management and computing programmes, providers without degree awarding powers (DAPs), providers offering foundation years, and geographic region.

A total of 429 providers were considered across the range of OfS provider typologies.[7] Providers that had already been assessed were excluded. From the remaining pool, 199 providers were contacted via email, and 31 providers participated in focus groups, meeting the overall target range of 30-40 participants. Table 2.1 summarises the final number of respondents, total population of providers and the sample selected to achieve the final sample numbers.

[6] The Quality Contact is typically the designated individual within a higher education provider who serves as the main point of contact for communications related to quality assurance and regulatory compliance with the OfS.

[7] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/provider-typologies-2022

Table 2.1: Provider sample compared with total provider numbers

Group	Total number of providers	Number of providers emailed	Target number of providers	Total number of providers participating
1 High/medium tariff	62	34	6-8	6
2 & 3 Low/unknown tariff	81	45	12-16	15
4 Specialist and postgraduate only	99	45	6-8	4
5 Majority Level 4/5 – large and small	170	75	6-8	6
Unclassified[8]	17	-	-	-
Total	**429**	**199**	**30-40**	**31**

Participants were initially selected at random within each stratum. However, due to a low response rate within the set timeframe, we adjusted our sampling strategy to ensure adequate representation across typologies. This required some flexibility in group composition. Despite these constraints, the final sample, as detailed in Table 2.2, closely aligned with our target characteristics, enabling us to generate valuable insights across a diverse range of provider types.

Table 2.2: Achieved sample characteristics

Group	Postgraduate delivery	Business and management or computing	Providers without DAPs	Providers offering foundation years
1 High/medium tariff (6)	6	6		6
2 & 3 Low/unknown tariff (15)	10	13	3	10
4 Specialist and postgraduate (4)	4		*9	
5 Majority Level 4/5 – large and small (6)		6	4	

8 These cases were excluded from the sample given their recent entry and limited available data.
9 An asterisk (*) has been used to withhold specific values which may be disclosive.

The regional distribution of participating providers varied across England. The North West and South East had the highest representation, with five providers each. London followed closely with four. The East Midlands, North East, West Midlands, and Yorkshire and The Humber each included three providers. The East of England and South West had the fewest, with two and three providers respectively.

3. Findings: Awareness of the OfS's assessment publications

This section investigates participants' prior awareness of the OfS's assessment publications before attending the focus group. It considers the extent and nature of their familiarity with specific reports - such as B3 assessments, Business and Management Quality Compliance Assessments (QCA), and Computing QCA reports – as well as how they first encountered them. While most providers appeared to understand the distinction between B3 and QCA assessments, they often spoke about them interchangeably during the focus groups, which created some ambiguity around the specific assessments being referenced. The analysis explores how these publications were discussed within institutions, whether they were referenced in sector events or networks, and how participants perceived awareness levels across the wider sector.

3.1 Initial sector awareness

Participants' initial awareness of the OfS's assessment publications varied, shaped by provider type, role, and the perceived relevance of the reports to their context. However, the majority of participants reported at least some prior awareness of the reports before attending the focus group.

High awareness among senior leaders and regulatory leads

Most focus group participants in senior roles - heads of quality, or members of executive teams – reported being **highly aware** of the OfS's assessment publications. These individuals often described the reports as a routine part of their regulatory monitoring responsibilities. In addition, some participants commented on the awareness levels of their senior colleagues, such as academic registrars, noting that engagement with these reports was typically embedded within governance structures.

Some participants described how awareness of OfS publications was embedded through formal structures such as groups set up to monitor OfS developments, quality committees, or governance reporting cycles. These mechanisms ensured that key messages from the reports were disseminated and discussed at senior levels.

While senior staff were generally well-informed, several participants noted that awareness was not evenly distributed across their provider. Academic staff, programme leaders, and those outside of quality or governance roles were thought to be less familiar with the reports.

Selective awareness based on relevance

Some participants reported a more **selective or situational awareness**, often depending on whether the reports addressed subject areas or institutional types similar to their own. For example:

- A participant said, "I was aware that they existed, and I have looked at them in the past, but I haven't used them much recently… there weren't many examples that applied to an institution like ours."
- Another noted, "We cherry-pick reports that are relevant to us. We compare ourselves to similar institutions rather than large universities."

This selective engagement was particularly common among smaller providers, specialist institutions, and those without provision in the subject areas most frequently assessed (e.g. Business and Management, and Computing).

Declining engagement with the detail over time

A few participants described a **decline in engagement over time**, citing ***"report fatigue"*** or a sense that the volume of publications made it difficult to keep up. While volume was a key factor, some participants also noted that the length and density of some reports contributed to this view - making them time consuming to read and interpret.

> *"At the beginning, I would actively read them all. But then there was quite a lot that came out afterwards, and I think there was a little bit of fatigue - now I only read the ones I think could be relevant."*

Others said that they were able to rely increasingly on summaries to give them the key information they needed (e.g. the OfS's Insight brief or Wonkhe articles) rather than always looking to read the full reports.

3.2 Sources of awareness

Participants described a variety of channels through which they became aware of the OfS's assessment publications. These sources shaped not only the extent of their awareness but also the depth of their engagement and the perceived relevance of the reports to their provider context.

OfS communications (email alerts and the OfS's website)

Most participants cited **direct communication from the OfS** - particularly weekly email updates and alerts - as a primary source of awareness. These were seen as reliable and timely, especially for those in regulatory or governance roles.

> *"We are very aware of the reports, I feel the OfS makes it easy to be aware of them through their weekly updates."*

However, some participants noted that while the emails were useful, the structure of the OfS's website made it difficult to navigate and interpret the outcomes of assessments. A small number of participants described the process of accessing report outcomes as time consuming, and involved navigating multiple layers, which impeded their ability to easily comprehend the findings.

Sector press and commentary (especially Wonkhe)

Most participants mentioned **Wonkhe** as a key additional source of awareness. For many, Wonkhe served as a filter or interpreter of the OfS's publications, offering summaries, analysis, and commentary that made the reports more accessible.

This was particularly important for participants who lacked the time to read full reports. Wonkhe was also valued for its critical perspective and sector-wide framing.

The OfS Insight brief

A few participants highlighted the usefulness of the OfS's **Insight brief**, which provided a thematic overview of findings across multiple assessments. This document was seen as a practical tool for distilling key messages and identifying sector-wide trends. Participants described it as a good 'sense checking tool' that helped them map sector concerns to their own institution. Others said it was particularly helpful for briefing senior leaders or identifying areas for internal review.

The Insight brief was especially valued by providers with limited capacity to engage with each individual report in detail.

Internal monitoring and governance structures

Many providers had internal mechanisms for monitoring the OfS's publications and disseminating key messages. Examples given were:

- OfS monitoring groups
- Quality assurance committees
- Academic boards
- Executive briefings
- Risk registers.

These forums were not only cited as channels through which participants became aware of the reports, but also as spaces that have since been used - or in some cases enhanced - to support discussion and interpretation of the findings. In some cases, these structures were highly formalised, though the depth and breadth of engagement varied. In many cases, discussions were concentrated at senior levels - such as executive teams, academic boards, or quality committees. For example, a few providers:

- Had a dedicated OfS monitoring group that summarised key messages for wider dissemination.
- Used the reports to inform their internal audit cycle and had developed an OfS compliance risk register.
- Integrated the reports into their governance reporting, using them to brief their Council and Board of Governors.

> *"We have an OfS monitoring group that looks at everything that comes out and then summarises key messages for the team."*

Sector networks and professional bodies

Some participants noted that both the B3 and QCA reports were discussed through **sector networks and professional associations**, such as:

- QAA (Quality Assurance Agency)
- ARC (Academic Registrars Council)
- IHE (Independent HE)

- Mission groups (e.g. London Higher).

These forums provided opportunities to discuss the reports in context, share interpretations, and compare institutional responses. This peer engagement was particularly valued for sense-checking interpretations and identifying sector-wide trends.

Opportunistic awareness

A few participants, primarily L4/5 and specialist/postgraduate providers, described more opportunistic routes to awareness. For example, they engaged with a particular report when it was flagged by a colleague as having high relevance to their provision.

3.3 Specific publications

Participants generally reported equal levels of awareness across the B3 reports and the subject-specific QCA reports. Business and Management as well as Computing were often seen as high-risk areas and, therefore, of high interest and closely monitored. A small number of providers noted that they had ***"kept a very close eye"*** on reports related to collaborative provision, providers based nearby or those with similar demographic characteristics.

Some participants said they had reviewed reports involving providers with similar profiles, with specific examples given as Leeds Beckett University, Bradford College, and the University of Bedfordshire. These were used to benchmark practices or identify potential risks within their own provider.

3.4 Key differences by typology

The focus group discussions revealed that participants across all provider types engaged with the OfS assessment reports to some extent. Although there was broad awareness of the reports themselves, the depth of understanding was shaped by provider context. The insights, and subsequent typology insights, reflect patterns observed within specific provider groups; however, many of these themes may be indicative of wider sector trends.

- **Specialist and postgraduate providers:** These providers demonstrated moderate awareness of the OfS assessment reports but engaged with them selectively. Awareness was often concentrated at senior or committee level, with limited dissemination beyond those groups. Reports were typically reviewed for benchmarking purposes, though many were seen as only tangentially relevant due to the providers' subject specialism or postgraduate-only provision.
- **Level 4/5 providers:** Awareness of the reports was generally moderate, with engagement driven by practical needs such as compliance and governance. These providers often relied on summaries or filtered insights to inform internal processes. While they kept track of key themes, engagement was typically functional rather than strategic and often limited to a small number of staff with regulatory responsibilities.
- **Low and unknown tariff providers:** These providers showed high awareness of the reports, particularly through sector briefings and insight summaries. Engagement was often selective and focused on relevance to institutional risk or provision. Reports were used to support internal assurance processes, but dissemination was usually targeted at senior teams, with limited engagement at programme or faculty level.

- **Medium and high tariff providers:** These providers demonstrated consistently high awareness and more strategic engagement with the reports. They were often proactive in reviewing findings, integrating insights into governance structures, and using the reports to inform institutional monitoring and planning. Engagement was typically broader, involving multiple layers of leadership and quality assurance teams.

4. Findings: Understanding of the OfS’s assessment process

This section focuses on participants’ understanding of the OfS’s assessment process, including how providers are selected, what the process entails, and how compliance judgements are made. It also examines whether engagement with the assessment publications influenced participants’ understanding. The analysis highlights areas of confidence and confusion and considers how participants believe the process is understood across the sector more broadly.

4.1 The process of how providers are selected

While most participants agreed that **awareness** of the OfS’s assessment reports is relatively high across the sector, participants expressed a wide range of views on how the OfS selects providers for assessment, with many describing the process as unclear, inconsistent, or even arbitrary. While some acknowledged that selection is ostensibly risk-based - for example, linked to B3 metrics such as continuation, completion, and progression - there was a strong sense that the actual criteria and decision-making processes remain opaque.

> *“Everyone’s aware, but not everyone understands what it means.”*

Several participants described the selection process as feeling ***“random”*** or driven by ***“luck”***, particularly when the OfS first started conducting quality assessments. This sense of unpredictability contributed to a broader feeling of regulatory anxiety, particularly among providers with limited capacity to respond to scrutiny. However, as reports were published, providers felt that these gave them a better understanding of the process, helping to reduce some of the initial uncertainty and enabling them to prepare more confidently for future assessments.

> *“It was very much a process that when it started seemed to be near random.”*

Although many participants recognised that B3 metrics inform selection, there was confusion about how these metrics are interpreted and weighted by the OfS. For example, small cohort sizes were seen to distort data, leading to false positives. Others noted that it was not always clear whether assessments were triggered by data anomalies, complaints, or other forms of intelligence. This lack of clarity made it difficult for providers to anticipate or prepare for assessment activity. Although the OfS recognises these concerns, it aims to maintain a degree of flexibility in its approach to selection, encouraging providers to focus on delivering consistently high-quality HE rather than trying to anticipate specific assessment triggers.

4.2 The fairness of the process

Concerns about transparency and fairness were raised across all provider types. Participants expressed frustration at not knowing who the assessors were, what criteria were being applied, or how conclusions were reached. In their opinion, this lack of visibility undermined confidence in the fairness of the process, even when the findings themselves were seen as valid.

Participants questioned the consistency of the selection process and highlighted the reputational risks of being assessed:

- **Specialist and postgraduate providers:** These providers often felt less confident in their understanding of the regulatory process. They cited limited capacity to engage with complex documentation and a lack of clarity around how metrics apply to their specific context. They felt particularly vulnerable due to limited resources, small datasets, and the perceived irrelevance of undergraduate-focused metrics such as the National Student Survey and continuation rates. The process was described as anxiety-inducing and lacking proportionality, with concerns about being unfairly judged against standards that don't reflect their institutional mission.
- **Level 4/5 providers:** These providers highlighted the challenge of translating HE regulatory language into FE contexts. They often had to ***"repackage"*** assessment reports and OfS guidance documents for internal use and expressed concern that their staff lacked the regulatory language to fully understand the implications. They also faced difficulties navigating multiple regulatory frameworks (e.g. OfS and Ofsted), one participant described this experience as being ***"squeezed in the middle,"*** aligning different data expectations, and managing a process perceived as deficit-focused. Concerns included administrative burden and reputational risk.
- **Low and unknown tariff providers:** These providers echoed concerns about inconsistent understanding across roles. While senior leaders were generally well-versed in the process and reports, this understanding did not always extend across the institution. They also raised issues around transparency and fairness, particularly in how assessments are triggered and interpreted.
- **Medium and high tariff providers:** These providers generally felt more confident in their understanding, often due to established governance structures and dedicated regulatory teams. However, even here, participants noted that understanding was uneven across departments and that the perceived lack of transparency in the OfS's process made it difficult to build sector-wide confidence. Despite their confidence, they expressed frustration at the lack of clarity and consistency in how assessments are initiated and judged. Some welcomed the shift to outcomes-based regulation, while others missed the transparency and developmental ethos of the previous QAA-led approach.

4.3 What the assessment process entails

Understanding of the OfS's assessment process varied widely across participants, with some demonstrating a clear grasp of the steps involved, others described the process as vague, inconsistent, or overly complex. However, it was not always clear whether participants were referring specifically to B3 assessments, QCA assessments, or both, and there was limited evidence to suggest that all participants clearly distinguished between the two. This ambiguity may have contributed to the mixed understanding reported, particularly where terminology and processes overlap.

Partial clarity among participants

Participants who were responsible for institutional compliance tended to describe the process in more detail. However, even among this group, there was uncertainty about the full scope and sequence of the process.

Some described the process for both types of assessment as ***"data-led but not data-limited"***, noting that while metrics triggered the assessments, the subsequent investigation often involved qualitative judgements that were harder to anticipate. This suggests that many providers have a broadly accurate understanding of the OfS's approach, which draws on both quantitative indicators and wider contextual evidence to inform its decisions.

Limited engagement until notified

A small number of providers felt they didn't need to engage deeply with the assessment process unless they were directly involved.

> *"We don't really get into the detail of the OfS's assessment process unless we're told we're going to be visited."*

This approach was often attributed to limited capacity, competing priorities, or a perception that the process was too opaque to prepare for meaningfully.

4.4 Compliance judgements

Participants were often unclear about how the OfS arrives at compliance judgements. While many understood that the assessment teams produce findings, there was widespread confusion about the status of those findings and the role of the OfS in making final determinations.

Distinction between findings and judgements

Several participants noted that the reports themselves were framed as recommendations rather than formal regulatory decisions. This created uncertainty about how seriously to take the findings and what actions were required:

> *"It was said clearly that the reports didn't represent regulatory judgements - just conclusions of the assessment team. That caused confusion."*

This ambiguity was particularly problematic for providers trying to assess their own risk or determine whether they needed to make changes.

Lack of transparency in decision-making

Participants expressed frustration at the lack of transparency in how final compliance judgements are made. Some, particularly larger institutions, questioned whether the OfS applied consistent standards across providers, while others noted that the absence of published provider responses made it difficult to understand the full context.

> *"Is there a methodology to these assessment visits? I don't know, but that seems to be a bit of weakness around them from our point of view."*

Impact on institutional behaviour

The uncertainty around how compliance judgements were made, led some institutions to adopt a cautious, more risk-averse stance. For example, adding the OfS references to committee papers, or restructuring periodic review processes to align more closely with B3 metrics. A few providers noted that this uncertainty could inhibit innovation, as there was concern that changes to delivery models or the curriculum, if not immediately reflected in positive metrics, might increase the likelihood of triggering an assessment.

Both smaller providers and larger institutions expressed concerns about the decision to publish in the absence of compliance judgements. While smaller providers were particularly worried about the reputational risks of being named even when compliant, larger institutions were more focused on absence of clear benchmarks or published methodologies.

> *"Everyone's aware [that there are compliance judgements], but not everyone understands what [the compliance judgement] means."*

While many participants welcomed the publication of assessment reports as a positive step toward greater transparency, this appreciation was tempered by ongoing frustration over the lack of clarity surrounding how assessments were conducted. Questions remained about how providers are selected, how assessments are conducted, and what the outcomes truly signify - particularly in cases where reports concluded with no regulatory action. This ambiguity left some providers unsure about the implications of being assessed and how best to respond.

Across all groups, there was a call for **more open dialogue** about the assessment process between the OfS and providers, and for clearer guidance on how to interpret and act on the reports. Some suggested that **regional briefings**, **interactive workshops**, or **case-based learning** could help improve sector-wide understanding.

5. Findings: Views and actions in response to the OfS's assessment findings

This section explores participants' interpretations of the OfS's assessment findings and the extent to which these influenced their perceptions, behaviours, and institutional practices. It considers whether any findings were particularly striking or surprising, and how these shaped views of their own institution's quality. The analysis also looks at whether the reports prompted changes in compliance monitoring, risk perception, or quality improvement initiatives, and how participants' views of the sector and the OfS may have shifted as a result.

5.1 Response to assessment reports

Participants engaged with the OfS's assessment reports in diverse ways, shaped by their institutional role, the nature of their provision, and the perceived relevance of the subject areas under review. However, generally, providers were not surprised by the content of the reports.

Perceived depth and rigour

A notable theme across the focus groups was the perception that the OfS's assessments are thorough and detailed, often delving into operational and pedagogical aspects of provision that had not previously been subject to such scrutiny. Participants described the reports as ***"surprisingly granular"***, with some likening the level of detail to the QAA audit reports.

> *"The level of detail in the reports was surprising - things like evening and weekend delivery being flagged. It made us realise just how deep OfS is willing to go."*

This depth was, in some cases, reassuring. The reports offered a window into the kinds of evidence and practices that might be examined. For others, the rigour of the process validated their own internal quality assurance mechanisms. However, there was also a sense that the rigour was not always matched by methodological transparency.

A small number of providers noted that while the reports were data-led, the language used - phrases like ***"we consider"*** - introduced a degree of subjectivity that felt at odds with the evidence-based framing.

Perceptions of risk and confidence

Conversely, other participants described a heightened sense of vulnerability. Even when confident in their own provision, they worried about how their data or practices might be interpreted by the regulator. From the provider's perspective, the reports served as a reminder that compliance can feel as much about perception and presentation as it is about quality.

> *"It's a time of anxiety. Even if you're doing well, you worry about how it might be interpreted."*

Some noted that the reports had made them more cautious, especially in areas like curriculum innovation, delivery models, or partnership development. The fear of being misinterpreted or publicly criticised led some to adopt a more conservative approach to risk.

At the same time, others described a more contextual form of confidence - feeling assured in their own quality, but uncertain about how that quality would be judged externally. This was particularly true for providers with non-traditional student populations or delivery models, who felt that standard metrics like the National Student Survey or continuation rates did not fully capture the value of their provision.

> *"We're confident in what we do, but we've become more careful about how we document and present it."*

In these cases, confidence was often tied to internal validation, using the reports to sense-check institutional practices.

5.2 Approach to publication

Participants widely welcomed the transparency of the OfS's assessment reports, recognising their potential to support sector-wide improvement. While some noted that the framing of findings tended to emphasise areas for development, there was a shared sense that greater recognition of good practice could further enhance the reports' value. Many saw this as an opportunity for the OfS to build on its strengths by adopting a more balanced approach that celebrates success alongside identifying improvement.

Enhancing sector improvement through constructive reporting

Participants noted that the reports often emphasised what had gone wrong, rather than offering a balanced view that included examples of effective or innovative practice. This approach was seen as discouraging open dialogue and learning, especially among providers who might otherwise be willing to share their experiences. The lack of a developmental objective was viewed as a missed opportunity to support sector-wide improvement; however, there was a sense that providers were able to learn 'what wasn't good enough', which was useful for identifying areas of concern but offered limited insight into the strategies or practices that had successfully addressed those challenges. This distinction between identifying shortcomings and showcasing successful interventions was seen as critical to fostering meaningful sector-wide learning.

> *"The tone is unnecessarily harsh. It makes people defensive rather than reflective."*

There was a strong appetite for the OfS to adopt a more **balanced and developmental stance.** Participants suggested that future reports should include examples of good practice, thematic summaries of sector-wide issues, and opportunities for providers to respond publicly. Many compared the current approach unfavourably to the former QAA model, which was seen as more holistic and enhancement-led, and better positioned to support improvement through shared learning and collaboration.

> *"If we're going to learn from this as a sector, we need to see what's working - not just what's broken."*

Some also proposed anonymising reports where no concerns were found, or at least distinguishing more clearly between different levels of regulatory concern, to avoid reputational harm by association.

Reputational risk and lasting impact

Even in cases where no regulatory concerns were identified, the act of being assessed and publicly named was seen as potentially damaging. Participants highlighted that inclusion in the list of assessed providers creates a perception of failure, regardless of the outcome. There was also concern that once a negative report is published, it remains in the public domain even if conditions are later removed, leaving a lasting impression. The reports were described as creating a sense of anxiety, particularly among smaller providers who felt more vulnerable to reputational damage – whether with sector peers, students or prospective students - and less able to absorb the organisational impacts, in particular the resource requirements, of regulatory scrutiny.

> *"Even if the outcome is positive, just being on the list makes people think something went wrong."*

Lack of institutional voice

Several participants expressed frustration at the absence of a provider response or contextual narrative alongside the published reports. Without the opportunity to explain mitigating factors or actions already taken, participants felt the reports presented a one-sided view that could misrepresent the complexity of the issues involved.

There was also a call for the OfS to close the feedback loop more effectively, allowing providers to respond to findings and share their own narratives.

Concerns about timing of publication

Finally, a few participants questioned whether it was appropriate to publish reports before regulatory decisions had been finalised. There was concern that premature publication could lead to misinterpretation or reputational harm based on assessment findings, rather than regulatory outcomes.

5.3 Institutional impact

Respondents identified a range of institutional impacts, from the practical application of the reports to broader changes in provider practices. Some participants noted that the reports had informed specific initiatives, while others indicated they had triggered internal reviews or contributed to strategic planning processes.

Benchmarking, validation and reassurance

For many providers, the OfS's assessment reports served as **benchmarking tools**, allowing them to compare their own practices against sector expectations and peer institutions. This was particularly valuable for providers having not been assessed, as the reports offered a window into the kinds of issues the OfS was prioritising. Several participants described using the reports to **validate existing approaches**, especially in relation to B3 metrics.

> *"We've modelled our processes against the B3 metrics and risk register. We're not changing everything, but we're definitely using them [quality reports] to validate what we're already doing."*

Engaging with the reports also provided a sense of reassurance for some institutions, particularly those that had recently invested in strengthening their quality assurance frameworks. By reviewing issues raised in the reports - such as gaps in governance, inconsistencies in delivery, or failures in student support - participants were able to reflect on their own systems and, in many cases, feel confident that they were not at similar risk. This comparative lens helped contextualise their performance and reinforced the belief that their efforts were aligned with broader sector expectations.

> *"They have been particularly useful in helping us to reevaluate some of our initial ideas. So for example, we were thinking of moving from a risk-based approach to periodic programme review. From reading the assessment reports to date, we've decided to maintain as we are."*

A small number of providers also used the reports to reassure staff and governors that their institution was not exposed to the kinds of vulnerabilities highlighted elsewhere. This sense of reassurance was not universal, but where it did occur, it was often linked to proactive engagement with the reports - reading them in detail, mapping findings against internal processes, and using them as part of strategic planning or governance discussions. In these contexts, the reports were seen not only as tools for validation but also for reflection and affirmation.

Targeted internal reviews

In some cases, the reports prompted **targeted reviews of specific areas or to inform specific initiatives**, such as collaborative provision, timetabling, or student support. Institutions used the findings to identify potential risks and pre-emptively strengthen their internal processes and support strategic planning.

Catalyst for reflection and dialogue

The reports also acted as a **catalyst for internal reflection**. Some providers often used the reports to initiate conversations about quality assurance, risk, and regulatory preparedness. In some cases, this led to new documentation practices, revised committee reporting structures, or more frequent monitoring cycles. Even where no immediate changes were made, the reports helped to **raise awareness** and **embed regulatory thinking** more deeply across teams.

Incremental improvements

While the reports were widely seen as useful, their impact was often described as **incremental rather than transformational**. Many participants noted that the reports did not lead to major overhauls but instead supported ongoing improvement efforts. They were used to **sense-check institutional direction**, reinforce existing priorities, and ensure alignment with external expectations. For some, the reports helped to build confidence in their current approach; for others, they served as a reminder to remain vigilant.

> *"We used it as a sense check… but it didn't fundamentally change what we were doing."*

Quality improvement initiatives

In several cases, the reports triggered **new quality enhancement initiatives**. These included revising academic regulations and enhancing data monitoring systems. Some providers moved from **annual to continuous monitoring**, aligning more closely with the B3 thresholds and using the reports to identify areas for improvement.

> *"We've moved from annual monitoring to a continuous monitoring system… very entwined with the B3 thresholds."*

Others used the reports to support internal business cases for investment in quality-related infrastructure, such as timetabling systems, student engagement analytics, or academic governance reforms.

Risk perception and decision-making

The reports also influenced **strategic risk appetite**. Institutions became more cautious, often reassessing the viability of ventures that might expose them to regulatory risk.

Motivation to improve practice

For some, the reports served as a motivator to strengthen quality assurance frameworks. These providers often integrated B3 metrics and the OfS conditions more explicitly into their monitoring and review processes. The reports were seen as a reminder of the regulatory expectations and a prompt to ensure that internal systems could withstand external scrutiny.

> *"We're probably as good as some of the best… but it still feels like we're under the microscope."*

This shift often included embedding the OfS conditions into committee papers, programme approval templates, and periodic review documentation.

Typology-specific patterns

- **Specialist and postgraduate providers:** These providers were more likely to use the reports as a strategic tool, ensuring they were not inadvertently exposed to regulatory risk. They often lacked the capacity for large-scale change but used the reports to fine-tune existing processes.
- **Level 4/5 providers:** These providers described using the reports to translate HE regulatory expectations into their own contexts, often adapting language and frameworks to suit their structures.
- **Low and unknown tariff providers:** These providers tended to use the reports as practical reference points, often within senior leadership or governance settings. While they rarely made sweeping changes, they used the findings to validate existing practices, support internal audits, and guide incremental improvements - particularly in areas like student support, delivery models, and partnership oversight.
- **Medium and high tariff providers:** These providers were more likely to integrate the reports into strategic planning and governance, using them to inform risk-based periodic reviews and continuous monitoring systems.

Sector confidence and cohesion

Underlying these reflections was a broader concern about **sector morale and cohesion.** Participants warned that the current approach risks undermining confidence in UK HE, both domestically and internationally. There was a sense that the sector needed to be supported, not just scrutinised.

> *"We need to be careful not to undermine confidence in the sector. Yes, there are areas for improvement, but overall, UK higher education is strong."*

In this context, many called for the OfS to act not only as a regulator but also as a steward of the sector - one that fosters improvement through partnership, transparency, and trust.

5.4 Perceptions of regulatory expectations

Stakeholder views on the OfS were diverse. While some participants acknowledged the value of the assessment reports, many raised concerns about the regulator's approach, communication, and impact on the sector.

Transparency valued, but methodology questioned

Many participants welcomed the publication of assessment reports as a step toward greater transparency. However, this appreciation was often accompanied by frustration over the **lack of clarity in how assessments are conducted**, how providers are selected, and what the outcomes signify.

This lack of transparency led to confusion about the implications of being assessed, especially when reports concluded with no regulatory action.

Challenges of contextual relevance

Several participants expressed concern that the OfS's framework does not adequately account for **provider diversity or context**. Providers with non-traditional student populations, specialist provision, or smaller scale operations felt that the regulatory model was not designed with them in mind. This rigidity was also seen as a barrier to innovation within the sector.

Reports as regulatory reference points

Despite these concerns, some participants found the reports useful as **tools for interpreting regulatory expectations**, particularly the conditions of registration. They were seen as helpful for internal audits, risk registers, and compliance planning.

> *"The reports are helpful for interpreting the conditions of registration, but in terms of improving quality, it's a little bit on the margins."*

However, even those who found value in the reports noted that their impact on actual quality enhancement was limited.

Desire for more constructive engagement

Across the board, there was a strong call for the OfS to **engage more directly and constructively with providers**. Participants wanted clearer guidance on how they could prepare for an assessment, including any data that could support the assessment process, more opportunities for dialogue with the OfS to ask questions, and a regulatory approach that balances accountability with support.

Many suggested that the OfS could rebuild trust by co-producing guidance, clarifying assessment criteria, and showcasing examples of effective practice alongside areas for improvement. Reflecting on the future of the assessment process, some expressed hope that it could evolve into a more constructive and collaborative endeavour. While scepticism remained, there was a clear appetite for a regulatory approach that balances scrutiny with trust and accountability with meaningful support.

6. Conclusions

Conclusions

The evaluation highlights a sector that is highly engaged with the OfS’s regulatory agenda but often uncertain about its mechanisms and intent. The OfS’s published quality assessment activities have fostered valuable reflection and, in many cases, driven operational improvements. However, their broader impact remains shaped by several systemic factors, which continue to influence how these activities are received and implemented:

Reflection, confidence and continuous improvement

- The OfS’s publications are widely used for benchmarking and internal validation, contributing meaningfully to a culture of continuous improvement. Their impact is most evident in strengthening existing quality assurance efforts and encouraging thoughtful enhancements. Engagement with the reports affects provider confidence in varied ways. While some institutions feel reassured by comparing their practices to those highlighted in the reports, others remain uncertain about how their quality would be perceived externally. The reports are often used to sense-check provision rather than as definitive measures of quality, meaning they inform reflection but do not always shift perceptions or significantly bolster confidence.
- Across the sector, the reports have prompted internal discussions about quality, risk, and compliance. Many providers have used them to refine governance structures, improve documentation, and adjust monitoring cycles. In several cases, they have supported targeted improvements - such as enhancing student support or strengthening academic regulations - while reinforcing existing priorities and embedding sustainable progress.

High awareness

- Awareness of the OfS’s assessment publications is very high across the sector, particularly among senior leaders and governance teams. This is largely due to direct communication from the OfS and internal dissemination within institutions. However, some participants noted a degree of fatigue with the volume and tone of the reports, expressing a preference for concise summaries, like the Insight Brief. Some found that over time, the summaries provided sufficient information, reducing the need to read full reports.

Low understanding

- Despite high awareness, understanding of the assessment process – while growing – remains limited. Many participants were unclear about how providers are selected for assessment, how the process unfolds, and how final judgements are made. This lack of clarity among participants contributes to uncertainty and anxiety about whether they would be selected, how to prepare for an assessment, and how their quality would be viewed.
- The distinction between assessment findings and formal regulatory decisions is also unclear to many, making it difficult for providers to assess their own risk or determine appropriate responses.

Institutional responses and impact

- Many providers used the reports for benchmarking and validation, as a catalyst for internal reflection, to support sustainable incremental progress, and for targeted quality improvements. Some variations by provider were evident, in particular the challenge faced by Level 4/5 providers in translating HE regulatory language into a FE context.

- For some, the reports led to a more cautious, risk-averse approach to their management of quality, to avoid innovations which they perceived might expose them to regulatory risk.
- Responses to assessments appeared to be shaped by institutional capacity, leadership priorities, and perceived risk. Across the board, providers value the opportunity to learn from sector-wide insights and use the reports to strengthen their own provision.

A call for a more constructive regulatory approach

- The reports are often perceived as overly focused on deficiencies, with limited recognition of good practice. The absence of provider responses or contextual narratives contributes to a one-sided portrayal, which can discourage constructive exchange between providers. Several institutions expressed concern about being portrayed without sufficient context, which may reduce their willingness to share challenges openly or engage fully in collaborative improvement efforts. In some cases, this hesitancy is linked to concerns that openness could invite further scrutiny or investigation.
- There was a clear call for a shift towards a more developmental, enhancement-led approach. Many felt that the current compliance-driven model lacks the supportive ethos they felt would be helpful in fostering sector-wide learning and improvement.

Appendix A: Detailed methodology

Preparation and research design tools

The preparation phase of the evaluation involved several key activities. A scoping exercise was undertaken to review a selection of existing quality assessment reports, which helped to inform the design of the research and ensure alignment with the context of previous OfS assessment activity. To support provider engagement, an introductory email was drafted to invite participants to take part in the focus groups. Participants were offered two date and time options to maximise attendance and accommodate different schedules, and they were able to express interest in either or both sessions. Based on the responses received, the most viable date and time options were selected.

In line with data protection requirements, an OfS project privacy notice was prepared, reviewed, and approved in consultation with internal data protection colleagues. Additionally, an information sheet was developed to accompany the Microsoft Teams invitation. This document outlined the purpose of the research, what participation would involve, and how participant data would be handled.

Topic guide

The topic guide, included as an annex item, aimed to gather in-depth qualitative insights into how HE providers perceive, understand, and respond to the OfS's assessment activity and associated reports.

The focus groups were designed to explore participants' awareness and understanding of the OfS's assessment process, their interpretations of the published findings, and the extent to which these have influenced institutional practices and perceptions of quality. A short PowerPoint presentation was used at the beginning of the focus groups to familiarise the participants with the documents that were the subject of this study. In addition, the topic guide sought to capture views on the broader implications of the assessments for the sector and for the role of the OfS as a regulator.

To ensure a comprehensive exploration of these themes, the topic guide was structured around five key areas:

1. **Awareness:** Examining prior knowledge of the OfS assessment publications and how this awareness was developed.
2. **Understanding:** Exploring participants' grasp of the assessment process and any changes in understanding resulting from engagement with the reports.
3. **Views and actions:** Investigating how the findings have been interpreted and whether they have prompted changes in institutional behaviour or attitudes toward quality.
4. **Final reflections:** Capturing any additional impacts or perspectives not previously covered.
5. **Role of the OfS in evaluation:** Assessing how the presence or absence of OfS staff influenced participants' willingness to engage openly in the research.

This guide was used consistently across all focus groups to ensure comparability of responses while allowing flexibility for participants to raise issues of relevance to their context.

Sampling

To ensure a diverse and representative range of perspectives, a stratified sampling approach was used to select participants for the focus groups. This method involved dividing the population of eligible providers into distinct subgroups, or strata, based on key characteristics relevant to the research objectives.

The strata were defined using the OfS's data and included the following provider characteristics:

- Provider typology.
- Delivery of specific programme types (e.g. postgraduate, business and management, computing).
- DAPs (including providers without such powers).
- Provision of foundation years.
- Geographic region.

Within each stratum, providers were sampled to ensure that the final composition of the focus groups reflected a broad cross-section of the sector. This approach was designed to enhance the validity of the findings by capturing variation across provider types and contexts.

Across the five provider groups, the sampling aimed to achieve the minimum numbers set out in Table 0.1 below.

Table 0.1: Target sample characteristics

Group	Postgraduate delivery	B&M or computing	Providers without DAPs	Providers offering foundation years
1 High/medium tariff (6)	3+	3+		3+
2 & 3 Low/ unknown tariff (15)	3+	6+	6+	6+
4 Specialist and postgraduate (4)	3+		3+	
5 Majority Level 4/5 – large and small (6)		3+	4+	

The final sample across the five provider groups reflects a diverse mix of provider characteristics. Most providers in Groups 1, 2 & 3, and 4 deliver postgraduate programmes, with several offering research or taught degrees. Business and management or computing programmes are widely represented, particularly in Groups 1, 2 & 3, and 5. Providers without DAPs are present across Groups 2 & 3, 4, and 5, with Group 5 having the highest proportion. Foundation year provision is most common in Groups 1 and 2 & 3, with some presence in Group 5. Overall, the sample captures a broad cross-section of provider types and programme delivery.

While the intention was to randomly select participants within each stratum, the final sample was constrained by a relatively low number of responses, within the timeframe. As a result, some flexibility was required in the composition of the groups. Despite these limitations, the achieved sample (as detailed in Table 2.2), largely met the target characteristics, allowing for meaningful insights across a range of provider types.

Scheduling focus group delivery

The scheduling involved inviting one Quality Contact per provider to select their availability on two different dates (at different times in different weeks), as outlined in Table 0.2. This ensured a degree of choice for participants while maximising the chance of finding a date when 6-8 providers (within each subsample) were available to participate.

All focus groups were ultimately scheduled on the later of the two proposed dates. This decision was based on participant availability data collected via Calendly, which indicated higher levels of availability and interest for the later options. Selecting the later dates also allowed additional time for reminders and follow-up communications, helping to maximise attendance and ensure a more representative sample across provider types.

Table 0.2: Dates for focus groups

Group	Option 1	Option 2
Focus group 1: Low/unknown tariff	Tuesday 24th June 2pm-3:30pm	Thursday 26th June 11am-12:30pm
Focus group 2: Low/unknown tariff	Tuesday 8th July 10am-11:30am	Wednesday 9th July 2pm-3:30pm
Focus group 3: High/medium tariff	Wednesday 25th June 9:30am-11am	Tuesday 8th July 2pm-3:30pm
Focus group 4: Specialist and postgraduate	Wednesday 25th June 2pm-3:30pm	Thursday 10th July 2pm-3:30pm
Focus group 5: Majority Level 4/5 – large and small	Thursday 26th June 2pm-3:30pm	Wednesday 9th July 10am-11:30am

YCL oversampled, sending a formal email invitation to 199 selected providers, inviting one contact responsible for quality per provider to participate in a focus group using contact information and provider characteristics data provided by the OfS. This approach resulted in a response rate of 22%, providing a sufficient pool of participants to populate the scheduled focus groups. An email bounce-back rate of between 18–25% was observed across the mailouts. This was one of the key reasons for increasing the initial sample size - to mitigate the risk of low reach and ensure adequate representation across provider types.

The approach used the ‘Calendly’ software, which enabled respondents to indicate their preferred dates and times. This proved effective in maximising response rates and reducing time spent coordinating calendars. Calendly inserted calendar invites into respondents' electronic diaries once they expressed interest in a date and time.

YCL sent up to three follow-up reminders to those who hadn't responded, and a pre-focus group reminder one day before the scheduled focus group to help increase participation and clearly communicate the value and impact of the focus groups. These communications emphasised how participant insights would contribute to improving quality assessments and benefiting the HE sector.

YCL discussed suggestions for improving the topic guide and/or focus group format on an ongoing basis with the OfS research team between early focus groups, this resulted in the addition of one question and further prompts to explore specific assessment areas.

Analysis approach

The analysis framework design involved developing a structured approach to systematically analyse the qualitative data collected from focus groups. Using NVivo software, we created a coding scheme that categorised data into key themes and sub-themes based on the evaluation questions. This framework enabled the identification of patterns and insights across different provider types. The analysis was iterative, allowing for the refinement of codes and themes as new data emerged.

We conducted qualitative analysis on the NVivo outputs resulting from the coding of focus group notes, synthesising the findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the OfS's quality assessments on non-assessed providers.

This structured approach ensured that the analysis was thorough, transparent, and aligned with the study's objectives, facilitating the generation of high-quality insights.

Appendix B: Focus group topic guide

Introduction

Self-introduction: Introduce facilitator and note-taker

Evaluation activity focusing on OfS public communications around OfS provider quality assessments. The purpose is to learn if and how the package of public activity has had an impact on non-assessed registered providers. This was identified as the main remaining evidence gap around the OfS current approach to regulating quality (given the earlier work in evaluating the implementation of Condition B3, and the evaluation of TEF 2023).

Your participation in this evaluation will help to identify the impact of these activities and whether / to what extent the OfS should publish similar reports in the future.

Focus group notes will be processed and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). York Consulting is a member of the Market Research Society and abides by its Code of Conduct. See the project privacy notice.

We will record the discussion and take notes during the conversation. The notes and focus group recording will be used to prepare a report for the OfS in August 2025. You will not be named in the report, any quotes will be carefully selected such that the provider will not be identifiable. None of the information gathered during the interview that could identify you will be passed on to any third parties without your consent.

You are free to withdraw from the focus group at any time without giving a reason.

Before we begin, just a few quick reminders to help us all get the most out of today's session. Please keep your cameras on if you're comfortable - this helps make the discussion more engaging and interactive. For the best experience, we recommend using the grid view in Microsoft Teams so you can see everyone equally.

If you experience any technical issues, please use the chatbox to let us know - but otherwise, we encourage everyone to contribute verbally to keep the conversation flowing.

We'll take a short 5-minute break about halfway through the session so you can stretch or grab a drink.

Lastly, we ask that everyone respects each other's confidentiality - what's shared in this group should stay within this group. Please also be mindful and respectful of everyone's contributions so we can create a safe and supportive space for open discussion.

Intros from participants: Please could we go around the room and introduce ourselves to the group. State your name, institution and job role. As an icebreaker, could you also say how long you have been involved in quality in the higher education sector?

Themes	Questions
Preparation	• *Pre-focus group:* ○ Share *email with links to example documents and attach* information *sheet in advance of the focus group [see email text below].* • *During the focus group:* ○ *I'm now going to share a few slides just to help familiarise the topic we're talking about [share slides].*
Awareness	• To what extent were you already aware of the OfS published assessment reports before seeing the links shared in advance of this focus group? ○ [Do others share this view?] • What were you aware of? PROMPTS: ○ All aspects ○ Specific examples? Please describe, for example: ○ B3 reports ○ Business and Management QCA reports ○ Computing QCA reports ○ Insight brief • How did you become aware of these before this focus group? PROMPTS: ○ Directly ○ Through colleagues ○ Through discussion in sector press ○ Through sector networking • How (if at all) have these been discussed within your institution? ○ [Do others share this view?] • To what extent do you think this would be true across other providers? • Have you attended any events where the assessment publications were discussed? ○ [Have others present done similar?]
Understanding	• What's your understanding of the OfS assessment process? PROMPTS: ○ Who it chooses to assess, why? ○ What an assessment involves in order to come to a compliance judgement? ○ How well do you think other providers are aware of the OfS assessment process?

<table>
<tr><th>Themes</th><th>Questions</th></tr>
<tr><td></td><td>Did the assessment publications and engagement change that understanding?
In what ways?
To what extent has this been beneficial for quality management in your institution?
Is there confusion about the OfS assessment process?
What aspects are you confused about?
How do you think other providers see this?</td></tr>
<tr><td>BREAK</td><td>Thanks everyone for the great discussion so far. We’re going to take a short 5-minute break now - feel free to stretch, grab a drink, or step away for a moment. We’ll reconvene at [suggest time] so please be back promptly so we can continue the conversation.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Views and actions</td><td>What are your perspectives on the reports?
How do you interpret the findings in the reports?
How do you feel about the publication of reports and judgements?
Were there any particular findings that stood out for you? What were these?
Did anything surprise you, coming out of the assessment activity? PROMPTS:
The way assessments were conducted?
The compliance judgements made?
Have the assessment findings impacted your views on your own institution’s quality?
In what ways?
How have colleagues responded to the assessment findings?
Have you noticed changes in how quality is perceived by your colleagues?
Do you feel more confident about your institution’s quality standards after learning about the assessments?
Have you seen any changes at your provider due to the assessment findings?
How you assess your own compliance and actions you might take?
Your self-assessed risk of non-compliance?
Your motivation to make changes to your current practice?
Triggered any new conversations or initiatives around quality improvement within your institution?</td></tr>
</table>

Themes	Questions
	• Have the assessment findings impacted your views on the status of quality across the sector? • Have the assessments changed your views about the OfS at all, and if so in what ways?
Final questions	• Has the OfS assessment process led to any other changes for you? PROMPTS: ○ Your views on the regulation? • How do you think other providers perceive the OfS assessment process? • Anything else you would like to mention related to assessment activity?
	• Thank you for attending and participating in today's focus group. The results will be analysed, along with four other focus groups, and findings will be shared with OfS to inform future public communications around OfS provider quality assessments.