Office for Students

Student information, advice and guidance strategy

Issue

1. To update the board on our Information, Advice and Guidance strategy aimed at improving students' higher education choices and to seek the board's approval for the next stages of its implementation and delivery.

Summary

2. This paper details the OfS Student information advice and guidance strategy, drawing on our stakeholder consultations to recommend practical next steps. Our work suggests there are gaps in the effectiveness of information, advice and guidance for different groups of students and increasing concern about students' ability to make informed choices, either because the information is not available or clear enough, or there is a lack of adequate advice and guidance. In particular, we are concerned that when students, and their teachers and parents, have access to growing amounts of data, they don't have the support to make sense of what they are seeing.

3. A key activity for the delivery of this strategy will be the new information resource, it will seek to ensure that all prospective students have access to high quality information and support to help them make decisions about higher education.

Recommendation

4. The board is invited to consider and approve the strategy for implementation and delivery.

Further Information

5. From Conor Ryan, Director of External Relations (conor.ryan@officeforstudents.org.uk; 0117 931 7393) or Emma Maskell, Head of Student Engagement and Information (emma.maskell@officeforstudents.org.uk; 0117 931 7169).

Members' Interests

6. None.

Introduction

7. There are gaps in the effectiveness of information, advice and guidance for different groups of students and there is increasing concern about students' ability to make informed choices, either because the information is not available or clear enough, or there is a lack of adequate advice and guidance. In particular, we are concerned that when students, and their teachers and parents, have access to growing amounts of data, they don't have the support to make sense of what they are seeing.

8. The information landscape is also continually changing. So, the OfS will work with students to ensure that the information, advice and guidance offered, and how it is provided, supports students to make the right higher education choices for them in ways that are accessible and personalised. The OfS will also work with partners, to ensure that student choice is well informed and enabled by national and regional skills requirements.

Our approach to IAG

9. The strategy has been informed by the views and needs of students from the outset and throughout its development. We have engaged with students in various ways including having a student member of the working party, using the Student Panel and undertaking polling, focus groups and other research activities. We have also heard from the National Union of Students.

10. We have worked to a set of principles, set out in full at Annex A. Essentially these have meant that we have consulted students and those providing information and advice to them to ensure that what we propose genuinely adds value to existing provision. We have also sought to align our work with the OfS's wider skills and access and participation work.

11. The strategy is intended to complement our work on a replacement for the Unistats website, ensuring that through partners we can maximise its effectiveness as an information resource.

12. We have spoken with – and taken evidence from - key players with a role in providing information and advice to students. These include the Careers and Enterprise Company, UCAS, Which University?, the Complete University Guide, The Times Good University Guide, the Association of School and College Leaders, the Student Room, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services and National Collaborative Outreach Programmes (NCOPs).

13. We have also sought to align our work with the National Careers Service, the Student Loans Company, for a full list of the stakeholders engaged with as part of this Strategy's develop see Annex C.

14. We consider the needs of all students and potential students, at all stages and all forms of higher education provision and provider types.

15. The strategy fits with the OfS regulatory framework and strategy in the interests of students. So, it does not propose to act ultra vires and it will be consistent with other elements of our work such as access and participation and skills. The strategy aligns with the OfS values of; ambition, openness, learning and diversity.

16. The strategy is developed with the input of expertise from organisations and experts in IAG, widening access partners including our NCOP outreach partners and sector organisations. We aim to add value to the IAG landscape and address clear student needs

in making any recommendations or proposals for action in the strategy. Any actions taken forward will be evaluated to inform future work and learning

17. The strategy has been developed in an open-minded way. We have been open to all forms of evidence and ideas to ensure a credible set of actions.

18. The intended benefits of the strategy are clearly articulated in terms of the impact it will have on students, and gaining their buy in.

19. Partners understand and support the OfS strategy as it adds value to the landscape, play their own roles alongside it and relationships are sustained/improved.

20. The strategy will seek to produce tangible outcomes and outputs; this will be achieved in part through the development of ongoing performance measures which can be used to quantify the impact of IAG activity. We recognise the importance of measuring the impact of the strategy given how it relates to the delivery of many of the objectives within the OfS's business plan.

Key aims

21. The key aims of our strategy are:
Aim 1. Identify gaps and opportunities for adding value to the current information available to students.
Aim 2. Ensure that provider websites provide accurate, high quality, accessible information that matters to students.
Aim 3. Create and maintain a partnership approach to the delivery of IAG, working with those providing information and advice to students to improve their impact.
Aim 4. Secure effective information, advice and guidance for all students in relation to career choices.

22. These aims are described in further detail with recommended actions to help achieve them below and in Annex B.

What are our powers?

23. The legal basis for this work lies in the OfS's supplementary powers under paragraph 15 of schedule 1 to the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017, rather than any express statutory power. We are confident that we can rely on supplementary powers for this IAG work because it is connected to the transparency requirements that already apply to providers and the approach we are taking can be considered to be a more proportionate and effective alternative to collectively requiring providers to set up a similar website on their own. We also consider the basis for such work is supported by having regard to the following general duties::

1 (b) the need to promote quality, and greater choice and opportunities for students, in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers;
1 (d) the need to promote value for money in the provision of higher education by English higher education providers;
1 (e) the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education provided by English HE providers; and
1(g) principles of best regulatory practice, including proportionality.

24. While the general duties set out above are the main drivers for this work, we have also had some regard to relevant contents of the OfS's Regulatory Framework (paragraphs 49 and 50) and strategic guidance from ministers in respect of student information, advice and guidance. In both cases, we consider that the work is consistent with and supported by the relevant contents.

Legal issues

25. In writing this strategy we have taken advice internally on legal matters and risks related to the delivery of this strategy. **We will continue to work with our legal team on key issues in the course of implementing the strategy** and consider that the main issues are likely to be as follows:

    a. The potential for disputes about the OfS using its resources (via the registration fee) to provide IAG content relating Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. While we will be pushing the boundaries of our functions, we consider that respectable arguments can be made that broader IAG content is within our powers and consistent with our general duties. This is mainly because information that facilitates informed choice by students within the UK as a whole, will be likely to support the competitive dynamic for English higher education providers. **Our replacement for Unistats will be co-funded by the other nations and we are putting in place new governance arrangements to make decisions on cross-nation IAG and survey work.**

    b. The potential for disputes with businesses engaging in rival websites, e.g. claims that the OfS is distorting competition through the general operation of the website or via the way it permits access to links to other sources of information. **We will mitigate this through content management strategy for the new resource which will include how third party resource links are approved for inclusion.**

    c. Potential financial and reputation risks if inaccurate information is published, e.g. on fees / fee limits and student loan entitlement. Depending on the nature and scope of the information we publish, the provision of information/advice could be tantamount to a form of legal services. If we inadvertently give inaccurate or misleading information, we may potentially risk liability for breaching consumer protecting law and/or compensation claims for negligence. To mitigate these issues we could consider the use of disclaimer, provisions on limitation of liability (where compatible with consumer protection law) and/or insurance policies. **It is however initially proposed that we currently mitigate this through the information we require to be published on provider website rather than publish them ourselves.**

Aim 1. Identify gaps and opportunities for adding value to the current information available to students

26. Feedback from our stakeholder consultation suggests that there is a lot of information available for students but there is a **shortage of advice and guidance available both online and through advisers, schools and colleges to help students navigate the information**. It was felt this would particularly affect first generation students who may not have family experiences or knowledge to draw upon to help navigate the complex information landscape. Research continues to show that decision-making is complex and more information does not necessarily lead to better decisions, unless it is **contextualised and personalised** with advice and guidance. This was identified as the main gap in current provision.

27. Until now, the OfS has provided information to students through Unistats, a website which we manage on behalf of the four UK nations. Research with prospective students shows that **greater explanation and personalisation of information is required** to meet their needs effectively.

28. **The OfS will improve the quality of information available to students. We will develop a new website to replace Unistats, drawing on the latest thinking in behavioural science, to consider how best to present this data in a consistent and helpful way to ensure that students have access to an authoritative source of information about higher education that helps them to understand and navigate the information in ways relevant to them.**

29. Linked to the provision of advice and guidance is the **presentation of information.** A lot of current information is in text form which may not be the most effective way to engage students; particularly younger applicants. The YouthSight/OfS survey[1] of students' media habits last year confirmed this, with Instagram and YouTube the most popular social media for potential applicants.

30. **We will ensure students can access reliable and appropriate information – including on costs, course content and outcomes, scholarships and bursaries - to inform their decisions about whether to study for a higher education qualification and, if so, identify which provider and course is most likely to meet their needs and aspirations**.

31. Other gaps were identified in the information, advice and guidance available to **mature students and those wishing to study part time**, in particular financial information including sources of funding, support such as child care and timetable and assessment information to enable them to work alongside their studies. UCAS analysis has shown mature students to have different motivations to schools leavers whereas most current content targets 16-18 year olds.[2]

32. Stakeholders also considered information on the breadth of HE provision and in particular **apprenticeships and postgraduate taught provision**. They felt undergraduate provision would benefit from a more joined up approach to IAG to include all types of undergraduate provision not just the traditional pathways. A need for greater information on postgraduate taught provision was also highlighted.

33. **The new information resource will explore ways to improve the information for mature, part-time and commuter students.**

34. **We will test the potential for a new annual survey to help inform postgraduate choices for taught courses.**

35. **We will ensure the resource content covers the full breadth of higher education provision including degree apprenticeships.**

36. The gaps in information extend into higher education. Our stakeholder feedback found that information available for students wishing to transfer early on is particularly poor. Feedback from students suggests that many have considered changing courses or

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[1] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/better-support-better-decisions-better-outcomes/what-does-the-evidence-tell-us/
[2] https://www.ucas.com/file/175936/download?token=UVSBJLVD

provider at some point during their studies. Results from the Higher Education Policy Institute student experience survey (2018) suggest 32 per cent would have made a different choice knowing what they know now with 9 per cent of **commuter students** indicating they would not have entered higher education knowing what they know now (compared with 5 per cent overall); overall 12 per cent of students surveyed said they would chose the same course but at a different institution, 8 per cent a different course at the same institution and 7 per cent a different course and institution. [3] Feedback from our focus groups and user feedback for the new resource suggests students worry about making the wrong decision or about making such a big life decision.

37. **We will ensure that good information, advice and guidance is available to students wishing to transfer between courses, providers and types of HE provision through information provided on the new information resource and through provider information.**

38. Our research and stakeholder engagement has emphasised the importance of **teachers and advisers, and family** as sources of information, advice and guidance. It has also shown that teachers are not always sufficiently well informed to provide the most appropriate advice to their students. Parents can be hugely influential yet, again, are often advising on the basis of out of date or incomplete information. Finding ways of ensuring both these groups are better informed so that they can provide good quality advice and support to prospective students is therefore a priority.

39. **To ensure that teachers have access to up to date information on the full breadth of HE provision, we will work with the Careers and Enterprise Company and its network of career leaders, as well as through the NCOPs and other school-facing organisations, so that they are using and disseminating high quality and accurate information to schools.**

40. **We will involve teachers and parents in the next stage of the development of the new information resource to ensure that this is also a useful tool for them, and we will apply what has been learnt from outreach to parents carried out by NCOPs and other charities in developing our communications strategy.**

Aim 2. Ensure that provider websites provide accurate, high quality, accessible information that matters to students

41. The responses to our recent consultation highlighted the need to challenge providers on the information they provide. Feedback from HE providers suggests that **Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) compliance** has sharpened the sector's focus, particularly amongst central marketing teams. This is reflected in the findings of the 2016 compliance review by CMA.[4] However, clearer and more specific guidelines would be welcomed by some providers and by most students.

42. Moreover, a recent OfS review found that **information on fees and additional course costs** could be improved at many of the providers audited. **Terms and conditions** were not always easy to understand or find. Recent stakeholder engagement activity has also highlighted issues with the **consistency and clarity of course information on provider websites** including the typical amount of time students can expect to spend in lectures,

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[3] https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/STRICTLY-EMBARGOED-UNTIL-THURSDAY-7-JUNE-2018-Student-Academic-Experience-Survey-report-2018.pdf

[4] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5791e595e5274a0da300019f/compliance-review-findings-higher-education-undergraduate-sector.pdf

tutorials or research and on essays and projects. Stakeholder feedback suggests that clear, accessible information on **scholarships and bursaries** is also required. This also reflects findings from the CMA 2016 compliance review.

43. **We will work with the CMA to create clear, specific expectations for the information from providers, to include course information, scholarships and bursaries which facilitates comparison between providers. We will engage with provider marketing departments to ensure the practicality of our guidance.**

44. **We will explore potential mechanisms both internally and with relevant external partners such as the CMA and the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA) to ensure providers are giving accurate, high quality, accessible information that matters to all students. This will include identifying areas of concern or non-compliance through monitoring or information sharing and appropriate interventions to address these.**

Aim 3. Create and maintain a partnership approach to the delivery of IAG, working with those providing information and advice to students to improve their impact

45. Research and feedback from stakeholders suggest that students want to hear from their peers and to be able to discuss and engage on the topics relevant to them. They would particularly benefit from connecting with and talking to current students. Focus groups with school age students suggest they want to find out what going to university is really like. **The new IAG resource will explore links with the Student Room to enable students to gain insights from existing students linked to the factual information on our site.**

46. Feedback from stakeholders and members of our Student Panel suggests that OfS as the HE regulator evokes a sense of credibility and impartiality with students and that third party sources - including providers - can be viewed with cynicism either from a hard sell perspective or through the fear sites are selling on or using their personal data.

47. **Using our convening power, we will consider what constitutes high-quality IAG delivered to prospective students, undergraduates and graduates by all higher education providers, including benchmarking good practice through the creation of an IAG advisory group.**

48. Feedback from our consultation suggests that information sources such as league tables do not always fully reflect the diversity of the sector. We will seek to ensure that IAG provision reflects the full diversity of the regulated sector and students.

49. **We will explore with other popular information providers ways in which we can work together to improve the quality of presentation of their data and provide links that make it easier for students to understand their choices and the information they are seeing.**

50. **We will explore with UCAS how we can develop a seamless experience for potential students using their website and our new information resource, including enabling links to application-making.**

Aim 4. Secure effective information, advice and guidance for all students in relation to career choices

51. There is evidence of skills gaps in the country, both nationally and regionally. Employers report not having the flow of highly skilled graduates that they need. Many students choose to go into higher education in order to enhance their career prospects, yet graduate outcomes for some students (and some providers) are sub-optimal. There is a strong and continuing correlation between graduate outcomes and socio-economic background.[5]

52. **We will ensure there is coherent information, advice and guidance provided between schools, FE and HE, and in relation to all post-18 education and training options.**

53. **We will ensure current and (so far as possible) future employer needs, nationally and locally and in identified industries with skills shortages linking up with work across OfS and potentially more widely as appropriate to inform IAG provision.**

54. **We will ensure that all our IAG work including on career choices takes account of all students - young and mature, from disadvantaged backgrounds, non-mobile, and with different equality characteristics (especially race and disability).**

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[5] Taken from Addressing current and future skills needs PPF, 13_02_19, OfS

Annex A: Principles underpinning our IAG Strategy

Internal

a. The strategy is informed by the views and needs of students from the outset and throughout its life. We engage with students in various ways including having a student member of the working party, using the Student Panel and undertaking polling, focus groups and other research activities.

b. We consider the needs of all students and potential students, at all stages and all forms of higher education provision and provider types, so that the strategy is comprehensive and coherent.

c. The strategy fits with the OfS regulatory framework and strategy in the interests of students. So, it does not propose to act ultra vires and it will be consistent with other elements of our work such as access and participation.

d. The strategy is developed in collaboration with the input of expertise from around the OfS and – in due course – external partners, to ensure its buy-in.

e. The strategy is developed in an open-minded way so that all forms of evidence and ideas can be considered and tested and the resulting output is high quality and credible.

f. We add value to the IAG landscape and address clear student needs in making any recommendations or proposals for action in the strategy. Any actions taken forward are evaluated to inform future work and learning.

g. The intended benefits of the strategy are clearly articulated in terms of the impact it will have on students.

External

h. Students should understand why the OfS is engaging with them on this area and contribute to the strategy's development.

i. The strategy fits with our independence as an NDPB, regulatory context, strategic aims for working in the interests of students and other drivers.

j. The intended benefits of the strategy are clearly articulated in terms of the impact it will have on students, and gaining their buy in.

k. Partners understand and support the OfS strategy as it adds value to the landscape, play their own roles alongside it and relationships are sustained/improved.

Annex B – OfS Information Advice and Guidance Strategy Plan

Recommended actions	How	Success criteria/impact
Aim 1. Identify gaps and opportunities for adding value to the current information available to students		
The OfS will improve the quality of information available to students. We will revisit the operation and design of Unistats, taking the latest thinking on behavioural science into account, to consider how best to present this data in a consistent and helpful way to ensure that students have access to an authoritative source of information about higher education.	Inclusion of information, advice and content and or links to relevant sources of information within the new information resource	Baseline polling/surveying of prospective students and students in 2018-19 and repeated in future years, targeting particular groups as necessary and using focus groups where they can provide additional insights
We will ensure students can access reliable and appropriate information to inform their decisions about whether to study for a higher education qualification and, if so, identify which provider and course is most likely to meet their needs and aspirations.	Working with UCAS, SLC and other relevant parties ensure the new IAG tool provides and or link to key information for students wishing to transfer provision	Retention rates?
Working with relevant partners we will ensure good quality, impartial, up to date information advice and guidance reflecting the full breadth of HE provision is available to those advising students about their HE options.	Creation of an IAG working party with key partners and stakeholders	Engagement of parents, teachers and advisers with aspects of our work and their stated confidence to apply their learning in support of students
The new information resource will explore ways to improve the information for mature, part-time and commuter students	Inclusion of information advice and content and or links to relevant sources of information within the new information resource	Content live, analytics, student polling
We will test the potential for a new PGT annual survey to help inform postgraduate choices	Feasibility testing/piloting	Feasibility study completed, pilot activity planned. Clear purpose of survey established.
We will ensure students can access reliable and appropriate information – including on costs, course content and outcomes, scholarships and bursaries - to inform their decisions about whether to study for a higher education qualification and, if so, identify which provider and course is most likely to meet their needs and aspirations.	Inclusion of information advice and content and or links to relevant sources of information within the new information resource	Content live, analytics, student polling

We will ensure that good information, advice and guidance is available to students wishing to transfer between courses, providers and types of HE provision through information provided on the new information resource and through provider information	Inclusion of the following high level areas at product launch. What HE is and how to get there, how to choose a course and find and compare courses.	Content live, analytics, student polling
Working with the Careers and Enterprise Company and its network of career leaders, as well as through other school-facing organisations, and NCOP's we will ensure good quality, impartial, up to date information advice and guidance reflecting the full breadth of HE provision is available to those advising students about their HE options.	Sharing of modules and training opportunities	Analytics and feedback on modules and training, polling
Aim 2. Ensure that provider websites provide accurate, high quality, accessible information that matters to students		
We will work with the CMA to create clear, specific expectations for the information from providers, to include course information, scholarships and bursaries which facilitates comparison between providers. We will engage with provider marketing departments to ensure the practicality of our guidance.	Co-production of resource designed for use by providers which outlines minimum expectations and a self-assessment tool	Follow up spot check of provider websites using self-assessment tool
We will explore potential mechanisms both internally and with relevant external partners such as CMA and OIA to ensure providers are giving accurate, high quality, accessible information that matters to all students.	Working with colleagues in APP and CAR in the OfS and CMA to produce a process by which we are able to monitor, where necessary advise and intervene the information from providers	Identification of mechanisms and embedding of processes by which we could potentially advise and or intervene where necessary.
Aim 3. Create and maintain a partnership approach to the delivery of IAG, working with those providing information and advice to students to improve their impact		
Using our convening power, we will considers what constitutes high-quality IAG delivered to prospective students, undergraduates and graduates by all higher education providers, including benchmarking good practice through the creation of an IAG advisory group	Creation of an IAG advisory group with key partners and stakeholders	Feedback from partner organisations and their delivery of agreed actions
We will explore with other popular information providers ways in which we can work together to improve the quality		

of presentation of their data and provide links that make it easier for students to understand their choices and the information they are seeing.		
The new IAG resource will include links with the Student Room to enable students to gain insights from existing students linked to the factual information on our site	Links embedded within resource to relevant pages	Analytics link clicks, user testing
Aim 4. Secure effective information, advice and guidance for all students in relation to career choices		
We will ensure there is coherent information, advice and guidance provided between schools, FE and HE, and in relation to all post-18 education and training options.	ICF call, to be developed with AGCAS, on innovative and effective models of careers advice, with a regional focus and linking up with NCOPs	Link to work across OfS
We will ensure current and (so far as possible) future employer needs, nationally and locally and in identified industries with skills shortages linking up with work across OfS and potentially more widely as appropriate to inform IAG provision.		
We will ensure that all IAG including in relation to career choices take account of all students - young and mature, from disadvantaged backgrounds, non-mobile, and with different equality characteristics (especially race and disability).	Working with colleagues in APP, CAR and CMA to produce a process by which we are able to monitor, where necessary advise and intervene the information from providers	Analysis of Access and Participation Plans for appropriate targeting of IAG-related activities

Key benefits for students

By September 2019	• A new information resource that meets the needs of those not well served by existing resources and helps all students make confident, well-informed decisions • A better integrated network of information resources and easy transitions to the next step of their journey • Better informed teachers through our work with the Careers and Enterprise Company and the NCOPs • Better information on transfers
By September 2020	• More consistent and helpful information on providers' websites as a result of the guidance we will issue in 2019 including potentially improved information on what to expect with course teaching and study time, additional costs and available bursaries • Better information on graduate outcomes

Annex C- Stakeholder consultation

As part of the stakeholder engagement in the development of the OfS Information, Advice and Guidance Strategy we undertook a range of activities to gather feedback and input into our proposals.

Student Poll July 2018

Over 2000 current, prospective and previous higher education students polled by YouthSight, who run and manage The Opinion Panel Community, on behalf of the OfS.

Roundtable discussion, 4 February

UCAS	NEON
The Student Room	Careers & Enterprise Company
Which? University	National Union of Students
The Times Good University Guide	Student panel member, Office for Students
HEPI	AGCAS
Brightside	HELOA
Student Loans Company	NE NCOP consortium

Public Consultation n=129 – names not gathered as part of the consultation

Please note respondents were able to check multiple response options therefore numbers do not necessarily equal total responses.

91 work for a provider of HE. Of this group:

- 18 provide IAG about HE or careers
- 2 also work for policy, HE sector body or government organisation
- 4 work at a school or college
- 4 are current HE students
- 3 are parents/ carers of someone considering or already studying at HE level

11 work for a policy, HE sector or government organisation. We received 3 separate responses directly from sector groups (RBS-ABG, UCAS and GuildHE) after the survey closed.

36 provide IAG about HE or careers

11 work at a school or college

9 current HE students

0 responses from potential HE students

11 are parents of someone considering or already studying at HE level

9 other

Student Focus groups at IntoUniversity Centre Bristol, February

2 x groups of 5/6, all female, mostly year 11, predominantly from Somali families with strong aspirations of going to university, free school meals, local schools.