

# Communicating our strategy

## Purpose

1. This paper updates the board on our planned approach to communications, particularly with providers, as we implement the OfS strategy and deliver our priorities.

## Recommendations

2. The board is invited to discuss and note our approach to improve our strategic communications with providers.

## Issue

3. The publication of new OfS strategy, and the appointment of a new chief executive and a new Director for Fair Access and Participation provide an opportunity to revisit our strategic approach to communications and ensure our externally-facing activities are well-positioned for the next strategy period, particularly our engagement with providers.
4. We published our strategy for 2022-25 in March. The focus of the strategy is on quality and standards and equality of opportunity. Significant changes have been announced since its publication, including our new approach to the B conditions on quality and student outcomes, with a stronger focus on investigations, which will increasingly be the focus of our media coverage. Other changes include the updated Teaching Excellence Framework, our approach to equality of opportunity (including regulation of access and participation plans), new National Student Survey questions and a strengthening of our approach to sexual misconduct. We have also signalled that we will be undertaking assessments of quality and standards ourselves from 1 April 2023 when we expect the QAA to step down from its current role as the DQB.
5. All these changes have important implications for our relationships with stakeholders, particularly providers. There have also been a significant number of recent consultations which have necessarily been detailed and lengthy. Some consultation periods have been shorter than we would have liked because of other deadlines. The combination of these and other issues has led to some misunderstanding of our role and expectations among providers.

## Our communications approach

6. There are several audiences for our communications strategy – including students, providers, the wider public, government, policy makers and our own staff. Reaching these audiences in the right way is an important part of delivering our strategic goals. While there are different ways to communicate to each group, consistent messaging is vital and mutually reinforcing.
7. Since the introduction of our communications strategy in 2018, we have developed a good relationship with the traditional media and have established our position as a regulator through

regular coverage in the national press, broadcasters and the sector media. We have a growing social media presence, with over 20,000 Twitter followers and a growing presence on LinkedIn. We send a monthly e-newsletter to 5,000 subscribers each month, and regular alerts about additions to the website to nearly 7,000 subscribers. Our website attracts nearly 2.5 million unique visits each year. We organise regular events, now largely online, with around 2,000 mainly provider attendees at web events in September and October.

8. We have made well-received improvements in our communications with providers – such as our regular accountable officer mailings (consolidating all communications with vice-chancellors and other provider heads twice a month). We have monthly meetings with mission groups and other sector bodies where we communicate our activities and listen to feedback.

## **A changing context**

9. However, the context in which we operate has changed since 2018, and it is right we look at what more we can do to meet our communications objectives. With our new approaches to quality and equality, we have stronger expectations of providers underpinned by more investigations and enforcement activity where we have concerns. We have presented this publicly – with significant media coverage – as part of a more interventionist regulatory approach in providers.
10. We also exist in a very different political environment from 2018, with a lot of recent ministerial changes and a general election due by early 2025. The combination of those factors means that we need a new approach in our engagement with key stakeholders, including providers, to ensure that we achieve our strategic goals and students see the benefits of our work.
11. During the summer, we commissioned Shift Learning to conduct 32 in depth interviews with providers on their engagement with the OfS. The key findings and recommendations are in Annex A. We propose to respond to the report early in 2023 with a commitment to introduce the improvements in how we engage and communicate with providers set out in this paper.
12. Shift Learning identified aspects of engagement that drew positive responses from providers that included our accountable officer mailings, issue-focused events, the OfS website, personalised communications, and individual interactions with staff including personal visits. Shift also identified areas for improved engagement, where providers were critical of our approach. The providers interviewed wanted consultations to be staggered more and documents to include executive summaries. Similar points about the volume and response times for consultations have been made by some mission groups too. The Shift respondents wanted more information about the role of the OfS, reduced administrative burden, and a more collaborative and consultative relationship. Providers of different types wanted more tailored communications, reflecting their particular size and circumstances. They also wanted a clearer sense of how we are organised and our relationship with government.

## **Discussion and proposals**

13. While we have many regular interactions with mission groups and individual providers, the Shift research was our first piece of qualitative research with a sample of providers. There are clearly areas identified in the research where improvements could readily be made, as well as some issues that may reflect the difference in approach between OfS and HEFCE, with our

stronger regulatory focus. Nevertheless, it is a valuable barometer of sector perceptions to which it is important we respond positively and practically.

14. We will consider carefully all the recommendations in the Shift Learning research, and publish our response to them when we publish the research. However, drawing on the issues identified in the research and our own engagement with providers and mission groups, we are currently planning over the coming months to:

- Develop regular online sessions for providers, with a different policy or regulatory theme each month and the opportunity to ask questions of the chief executive and other directors.
- Work with sector organisations to create opportunities for roundtables for senior staff to meet with vice-chancellors, pro-vice-chancellors and other accountable officers, to help address concerns and misunderstandings.
- Organise a series of regular provider visits for senior staff with opportunities for interested board members where appropriate.
- Set out a clearer approach to consultations, with clear executive summaries and consultation periods that, where possible and appropriate, provide further time for responses, recognising that some simpler consultations may need to be shorter.
- Make further improvements to the website drawing on new user research, including a digital version of the regulatory framework, more information about the role of OfS including an organogram, and easy access to good practice examples.
- Better promotion of existing contact routes for providers including reminding providers of how to reach their contact through our dedicated regulation line.
- Further engagement through sector media to communicate with providers.

15. We plan to introduce these changes in early 2023 and evaluate their impact through further qualitative research. These changes should help to improve provider understanding of how we work and our expectations, reducing needless misunderstandings. They will not change the wider context in which we operate; there will always be times when those facing regulation are critical of their regulator. Our primary purpose remains regulating in the interests of students and the wider public.

## **Paper publication date**

16. We plan to publish the final version of the Shift Learning research and our response early in 2023. This paper is still policy in development, but can be published after then.

## **Further information**

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