

Positive outcomes for students studying on a modular basis

The call for evidence closes at **1700 on 2 November 2023**.

Please submit your response by completing the online form at <https://survey.officeforstudents.org.uk/s/call-for-evidence-modular-provision/>

If you require this document in an alternative format, or need assistance with the online form, please contact regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Please note: this email address should **not** be used for submitting your consultation response.

The government is introducing the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) from the 2025-26 academic year. This will result in significant changes to the way students are able to access loans to fund their studies. In particular, it will introduce a new approach that means students can access loans for individual modules.

The Office for Students (OfS) is considering how we might develop our regulation to respond to any changes to the delivery of higher education courses that may result from the implementation of the LLE. We are progressing policy work to understand how we should regulate in the context of the potential impact, risks and opportunities that the LLE will bring.

This document is a call for evidence. It seeks views about how the OfS could measure student outcomes resulting from modular study. We anticipate that the approach we take will be consistent with our current regulatory framework, including condition B3 (student outcomes). We are also seeking views about how we can ensure taxpayers' contribution to higher education is protected and value for money delivered under the LLE.

Who should respond to this call for evidence?

We welcome responses from anyone with an interest in the regulation of quality and outcomes in higher education. We are interested in hearing from students (past, present and future), parents and carers, professional and academic staff and leaders of higher education providers.

Although this call for evidence is focused on future changes in the English higher education sector, we would also like to hear from those with experience of modular delivery in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Why are we issuing this call for evidence?

In September 2020, the government announced plans to introduce a Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE) as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee. The Department for Education (DfE) consulted on how this would operate in practice and the outcomes were published in early 2023. It announced that the LLE would provide individuals with a loan entitlement to the equivalent of four years' of post-18 education to use over their lifetime. The intention of the LLE is to give people the opportunity to study, train, retrain and upskill throughout their lives and to respond to changing skills needs and employment patterns.

The entitlement will be available to eligible students to pay for full- or part-time study, for a variety of courses – from degrees to Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs), and including modules. Maintenance loans will also be available for students, including on modules of courses for the first time. The LLE will replace the previous student finance system from the start of the 2025-26 academic year.

The government has announced that access to student support for modules will be introduced in stages: first for HTQs and some technical Level 4 and 5 qualifications from 2025, before expanding to further Level 4, 5 and 6 qualifications from 2027.

The government has decided that for a module to be eligible for a student loan it must:

- a. Be part of a full course.
- b. Have at least 30 credits.
- c. Be assigned a single qualification level.
- d. Result in an assessment and transcript.

We recently introduced changes to how we regulate quality and standards in higher education. Our approach to measuring positive student outcomes is set out in condition B3 and is based on indicators and split indicators that are defined at course level.¹ Annex A of Regulatory advice 20 describes the reporting structure for the data that we use for regulating student outcomes, including a description of indicators and split indicators.²

In our response to the consultation on regulating student outcomes in January 2022, we acknowledged that we would need to consider the impact of the introduction of the LLE on measures of quality, particularly the shift to modular provision. We said that we expected to review our approach and would engage with the higher education sector on appropriate measures of student outcomes when we knew more about the government's plans.

This call for evidence forms part of that engagement. We also said that we would consider lessons from the OfS-led trial of higher education short courses (HESC).³ We will consider the evaluation

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/student-outcomes-and-teaching-excellence-consultations/student-outcomes/.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-20-regulating-student-outcomes/.

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/skills-and-employment/higher-education-short-course-trial/.

we commissioned of the trial and our engagement with practitioners at the participating providers to inform possible approaches to regulating outcomes for students studying on a modular basis.

What changes do we anticipate in higher education as a result of the LLE?

The changes being introduced by the government mean that, from 2025-26, certain Level 4-6 courses that are currently eligible for funding through Advanced Learner Loans (ALLs) and all HTQs will become eligible for higher education student finance, including on a modular basis.

We expect all approved HTQs and a number of other Level 4 and 5 courses identified by the DfE to be the first courses with modules eligible for LLE funding. While some of these courses are delivered by providers already registered with the OfS, some are not. The government has said that any provider that wishes to access LLE funding for its students would have to be registered with the OfS. Providers will not be obliged to offer these courses under the new system, and we do not yet have any indication of how many intend to do so.

All courses designated under the current student finance system will remain eligible for student support when delivered on a full course basis – in other words students will continue to be able to access student loans for courses not offered on a modular basis.

The government has indicated that it will decide which other Level 4-6 courses will be eligible for student support on a modular basis from 2027-28. We anticipate that the DfE will consult on the government's intended approach.

The government's decisions about how to implement the LLE means that some providers will be delivering modular provision that is not eligible for student support, for example modules that are less than 30 credits. We are also considering how we should regulate student outcomes for these modules.

Potential impact

The changes described above have the potential to significantly alter how higher education is delivered in England. This call for evidence is focused on how we might take account of any increase in the number of students who will approach their study on a modular basis, rather than through whole courses.

We think that higher education delivery could change in a number of broad ways:

- Providers using the flexibility offered by the LLE to change currently full-time courses into more modular delivery
- Providers using the flexibility offered by the LLE to reshape their current part-time courses
- Providers offering their modules from full courses on a standalone basis funded by the LLE
- Providers increasingly offering modules that include many that are not fundable under the LLE

- Students increasingly studying at more than one provider at the same time
- Students increasingly choosing to transfer between providers to build their modular study into whole qualifications
- Students increasingly studying in different departments, or subject areas, within the same provider
- Students increasingly studying on a modular basis with reduced focus on gaining complete qualifications.

This call for evidence focuses on how we should regulate student outcomes in the context of these potential changes to the delivery of higher education.

We are separately considering the extent to which the LLE may affect other aspects of our regulation, including its impact on the information we provide through Discover Uni to students choosing what, where and how to study, and our approach to access and participation plans, funding and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Question 1

Do you agree with our list of potential changes to the delivery of higher education in England as a result of the implementation of the LLE? Are there other changes that could arise that you think we should consider when developing our approach? Please explain your answer.

How should our regulatory approach adapt in the context of the LLE?

What should our general policy aims be?

We are considering how our approach to the regulation of higher education in England might need to adapt in the context of the changes described above. We want to ensure that our approach continues to provide appropriate protection for students and taxpayers in the changed landscape that the LLE will bring.

We think this will involve appropriate regulation of student outcomes. Our approach will also be influenced by the risk presented by new loan products. We can learn from other countries and our own experiences in England when thinking about how rapid growth in new areas can result in poor outcomes for students and increased risk to the financial contribution made by taxpayers.

We will also want to remain mindful of the impact of administrative and regulatory burden on the opportunities for innovation and equality of opportunity that the LLE brings.

As we develop our approach in this area, we think that our policy aims for the implementation of the LLE should be:

- Protecting students by ensuring positive outcomes from study on a modular basis

- Protecting taxpayers' investment by ensuring a minimum level of quality, including outcomes, and minimising the potential for the mis-use of public funding by providers and students
- Protecting the reputation of higher education in England during a period of change and growth in new approaches to delivery
- Providing clarity and transparency about our regulatory approach such that registered providers can comply, innovate and grow
- Ensuring we can take regulatory action where appropriate for individual providers that do not meet our minimum expectations.

These aims would help frame our decisions about any changes to our regulatory approach following the implementation of the LLE. As we consider these issues further we will also have regard to our general duties, the Public Sector Equality Duty, the Regulators' Code, statutory guidance from the Secretary of State, and any other relevant factors.

Question 2

Do you agree that these are appropriate policy aims for the OfS in relation to the implementation of the LLE? Are there other aims that we should consider? Please explain your answer.

Measuring student outcomes for modular provision

In addition to the general issues set out above, we are interested in views about how we should measure the outcomes of students on modular courses.

The government has decided that for a module to be eligible for the LLE it must be part of a 'parent course'. This means that all modules that are eligible to receive student support must come from an existing course.

Our existing approach to regulating student outcomes means that we will already routinely collect data on these 'parent courses'. We publish information, through [student outcome dashboards](#), that shows whether a provider is delivering positive outcomes above our minimum numerical thresholds for its students. The thresholds are set for:

- a. Continuation: the proportion of students continuing on a higher education course.
- b. Completion: the proportion of students completing a higher education qualification.
- c. Progression: the proportion of students progressing to managerial or professional employment, or further study or other positive outcomes.

In the context of the LLE, we think that 'completion' is likely to be the most appropriate measure of whether a student completes the module on which they registered. However, our current definitions of completion are based on course lengths longer than modules. We think that we will need to

develop a different approach to understanding ‘completion’ for students studying on a modular basis.

We might also be interested in a measure of ‘progression’ – for example, whether a student goes on to study another module, to complete a qualification, and what happens to them after their study. Some of these questions are similar to those we explored through our recent consultation on regulating student outcomes, but modular study raises different questions when we think about students’ potential journeys through different modules and providers, and over different time periods.

We are also interested in understanding better the data universities and colleges already use to understand student outcomes for modules and how that might change with the introduction of the LLE.

Questions 3, 4, 5

Do you agree that a measure of ‘completion’ would be an appropriate part of delivering our general policy aims for the implementation of the LLE?

How should we approach measures of ‘progression’ for students undertaking one or more modules? For example, when should we seek to measure the outcomes of modular study for a student?

Are there other measures that we should consider as we think about how to deliver our policy aims? What measures do providers currently use to understand outcomes for students studying modules?

Next steps

We plan to publish our analysis of the responses to this call for evidence and the evaluation of the OfS-led HESC trial.

We intend to engage further with providers, students and other stakeholders through a series of workshops and other meetings, including with individual providers and their representative bodies.

We expect to publish a formal consultation in 2024 which will set out proposals for any changes that we think are appropriate to regulate outcomes for students studying on modular basis.

Annex A: How to respond

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How we will treat your response

The OfS will summarise and publish the responses to this call for evidence on the OfS's website. This may include a list of the providers and organisations that respond. We are not collecting any identifiable personal data as part of this call for evidence, including through the online survey. Please avoid including any personal data that can be traced back to you, for example your name or email address, in your response. If you send your response to us by email or by post, we will anonymise your response to remove any identifiable personal data. We will permanently and securely delete any identifiable personal data that you send to us.

The OfS will process any personal data received as part of this call for evidence in accordance with all applicable data protection laws (see our [privacy notice](#)).

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