

Students' union guide

This guide aims to help students' unions, associations, guilds, and student representatives explore the role of the Office for Students (OfS). It should help you understand our key functions and what they mean for you, your university or college.

This guide covers:

- what the OfS is, what we do and what we don't do
- how we regulate universities and colleges
- examples of our work in practice
- how you, as a student or student representative, can engage with us.

We recommend using this guide as part of students' union officer, course representative and staff inductions.



What is a regulator?

Put simply, a regulator is a body that oversees a particular sector or industry.

For higher education in England, the regulator is the Office for Students.

Other UK regulators you may be familiar with:

- Ofgem, which regulates gas and electricity suppliers
- Ofcom, which regulates television, streaming services and broadband
- Ofsted, which regulates schools and sixth form colleges

Is your university regulated by the Office for Students?

All the universities we regulate are listed on our Register.

[Search for your university or college on the Register.](#)

What is the Office for Students?

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

This includes prospective and current students who are:

- undergraduates or postgraduates
- UK-based or international
- students studying full-time or part-time
- those based on campus or learning at a distance.

We are not part of central government, but an independent public body that reports to Parliament through the Department for Education.

What we do

We regulate over 400 universities, colleges and other higher education providers, ensuring that each of them is meeting their obligations to students.

This includes maintaining high quality teaching and ensuring the rights of students are protected.

Providers must meet minimum requirements – what we call ‘[conditions of registration](#)’ – to register and stay registered with us.

Our approach to regulation focuses on two areas of work:

- quality and standards
- equality of opportunity.

We also ensure that every university and college has effective governance arrangements in place.

What we don't do

The OfS does not regulate in some areas either because our remit is limited by Parliament or because they are not included in our regulatory framework. Areas we do not regulate include:

- **Student accommodation**

We do not regulate student housing and accommodation, whether this accommodation is owned by a university or college or is privately owned.

- **Research funding**

Research funding is managed by [UK Research and Innovation](#) (UKRI).

- **Admissions decisions**

Individual decisions on whether to accept or decline applicants to higher education are made by the university or college an applicant has applied to.

- **Tuition fees**

Decisions about the levels of student loans and finance are made by the Department for Education (DfE).



How we regulate

We take a 'risk-based' approach to regulation, which means we focus our attention on those universities or colleges that are most likely to breach the conditions of registration.

For example, if your university is not making expected progress with the targets and commitments in its approved [access and participation plan](#), we may consider further regulatory engagement or intervention.

We collect information from the universities and colleges we regulate. This includes routine data collections on financial performance and what graduates do after they finish their course.

We may also request information about a specific issue from a provider, or a student might inform us of an issue using our notifications process. You can find out more about notifications, what they are, and what to do if you have a concern, in our [notifications guide](#).

If a breach of a condition is identified, the OfS will consider the use of formal sanctions – monetary penalties, suspension, or deregistration.

Our [regulatory framework](#) provides a detailed account of our approach to regulation.



Equality of opportunity

The OfS promotes equality of opportunity. This means that all students, from all backgrounds with the ability to study, should be supported to access, succeed and progress in higher education.

Access to higher education is different for different student groups. Some students are less likely to achieve the qualifications they need to study higher education.

There have also been inequalities between groups of students in higher education. Black students have, for example, on average been awarded fewer first-class degrees than their white counterparts. For what we mean by students from underrepresented groups, see our [student engagement strategy](#).

Access and participation plans

We address these issues by making sure the universities or colleges we regulate have an [access and participation plan](#).

If a university or college wants to charge its students over £6,000 in tuition fees, they must agree an access and participation plan with us to help address inequalities. Access and participation

plans set out how universities and colleges will help students from underrepresented groups to access university or college, have a good experience, get a good degree, and progress onto further study or graduate employment.

This plan sets out targets for how students from underrepresented groups are supported to apply to and secure a place at a particular university, participate in their education, and go onto a fulfilling career when they graduate.

The plan covers:

- how students from underrepresented groups can access a particular university or college
- how a particular university or college supports students from underrepresented groups to have a positive experience while they study
- how a university or college supports students from underrepresented groups to progress to have a good career and enter employment.



What can students' unions do?

Universities and colleges should involve students and listen to them when they put together their access and participation plans.

Students' unions have an important role to play here. They can:

1. Work with their university or college on their access and participation plan, collaborating to create and monitor the plan for improvements on a yearly basis. We have a published [searchable list](#) of all plans.
2. Help the student community engage with the university or college's work to address inequalities.
3. Work with the university management to facilitate activities such as outreach projects with schools.

To explore these opportunities, students' unions can begin by contacting the person or team responsible for access and participation at their university or college.



Harassment and sexual misconduct

We also work to help students feel safe on campus.

We work with universities and colleges to tackle harassment and sexual misconduct and make sure all students have a positive experience.

We do this in three ways:

1. Statement of expectations

We promote a consistent set of standards through our [statement of expectations](#). This supports universities and colleges to implement effective systems, policies and processes that respond to incidents of harassment and sexual misconduct.

2. Effective practice

Working with a range of partners, we develop and [share sector-wide effective practice, guidance and resources](#).

3. Funding

We also [provide funding](#) for universities and colleges, which helps them develop practical and innovative approaches and solutions.

What can students' unions do?

Students' unions can check with their university or college whether there is a consistent and clear policy on tackling harassment and sexual misconduct, and work with them to ensure a robust approach.

Students' unions can help their student communities by raising awareness of these measures and helping the student community know what to expect.

To find out more about what you can do to tackle harassment on campus, we've published a [student guide to tackling harassment, hate and sexual misconduct](#).

We have published a toolkit of [postcards and short videos](#) which can be shared across social media.

Quality and standards

The quality of education that students receive at their university or college is important so students can go on to achieve fulfilling lives and careers.

While many universities and colleges already offer a high quality education to their students, we work to tackle poor quality courses and ensure that all students from all backgrounds are supported to succeed in their studies.

We also check that the standard of assessment is consistent and that the qualifications students receive are valued in the long term. This ensures that students know that their efforts are accurately reflected in their degrees.

You can read more in our [student guide to quality and standards](#).

Teaching excellence

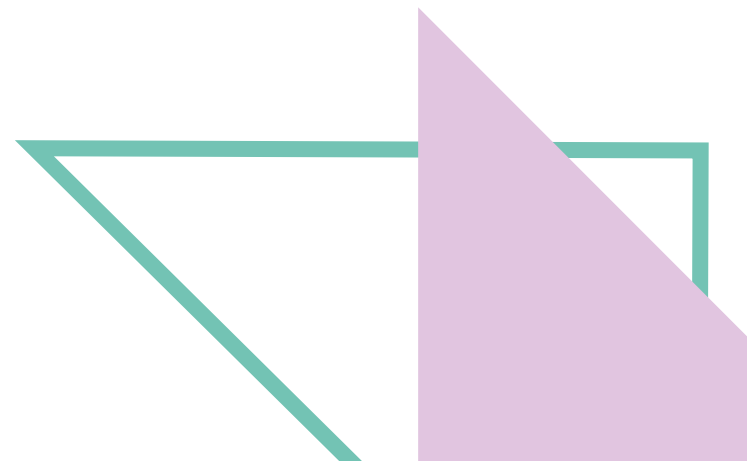
The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework – [the TEF](#) – was introduced to encourage teaching excellence in higher education.

To receive a TEF award, UK universities and colleges must first meet the existing quality requirements. The TEF measures excellence beyond these requirements.

Protecting students

We also protect students if their course, faculty or whole university or college closes. To do this we:

- Make sure that every university or college we regulate has a [student protection plan](#). These plans enable students to continue their education after the closure of a course or institution.
- Monitor whether a university or college has enough money to continue teaching and supporting students.
- Check that there are good governance arrangements in place for a university or college so that it can continue to operate effectively and support students' learning.
- Ensure that universities or colleges comply with consumer law, which protects students' rights.



What can students' unions do?

Notifications

If students believe that a university and college is not meeting the quality and standards requirements we set, they can make a [notification](#). Students' unions are in a good position to help recognise where this is the case and work with their students if a notification is appropriate.

The TEF

We encourage students to [get involved in the TEF](#) and are exploring how we can increase opportunities for this. Students' unions can help their student communities understand the different ways they can take part.

Feeding back to universities and colleges

Students have a role to play in driving up quality and standards at their university or college, and universities and colleges should give students ways to feedback on the quality of their experience.



Get involved

Students are experts in their own experience, so if we're going to regulate in your interests, we think it's important for you to be able to influence our work.

There are a few ways you can get involved with our work:

- To hear about all our student opportunities and news, sign up to our [student spotlight mailing list](#).
- Look out for opportunities to come along to workshops and focus groups on our [get involved webpage](#).
- Apply to be on our [student panel](#). The panel ensures that students' views inform the OfS's decision-making processes and plays a critical role in advising and influencing our activity and policy work. Recruitment typically takes place in the summer.

Continue learning about the OfS

You can find out more about our work by:

- Looking at our [webpages dedicated to students](#).
- Visiting [our blog](#) or taking part in an [upcoming event](#).

- If appropriate, by raising a concern or issue about your university or college. Visit our [guide to submitting a notification to the OfS](#).
- Reading our [student engagement strategy](#) to find out about our priorities for engaging students.



Want to know more about student engagement, or give us some feedback?

Email studentengagement@officeforstudents.org.uk.