

Office for
Students

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Office for Students notifications

A guide for students, student representatives
and students' unions





This guide aims to support students, student representatives and students' unions to use the Office for Students' (OfS's) notifications process. Notifications are an important part of how we regulate universities and colleges. They allow students, staff members and others to let us know about issues within a university or college that is registered with the OfS.

It is important to remember that we do not have a direct role in dealing with individual complaints or with disputes between students and their university or college. But it is important that we hear from students, student representatives and students' unions about current issues in their university or college that relate to the matters we do regulate. We are particularly interested in issues that might be affecting particular courses or groups of students. We explain a bit more about this throughout this guide.



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Section 1: The OfS and students

The Office for Students is the **regulator** of higher education in England.

Our aim is to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.

Our work covers all students, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, national or international, young or mature, full-time or part-time, studying on a campus or by distance learning.

We regulate universities and colleges based on a **set of conditions**. The conditions are in place to make sure that all students receive a good educational experience.

Universities and colleges are required to meet these conditions as part of their registration with us. However, the OfS may intervene if we have evidence or concerns that a university or college isn't meeting, or is at risk of breaching, one or more of its conditions of registration.

If students, staff or members of the public feel that a university or college is not meeting our requirements, they can let the Office for Students know by submitting a **'notification'**.

We work constructively with universities and colleges. However, we may use our regulatory powers to intervene to prevent or address poor academic quality, or behaviour that isn't in the interests of students or the public.

The role of students' unions and student representatives

We value the experiences and voices of students, student representatives and students' unions. Students' unions and representatives often have a great understanding of students' experiences through their engagement and support.

So, we want to ensure that our processes are clear and open for you to use. We encourage you to work closely with your university or college to raise concerns and develop solutions together where possible. Where your concerns continue and you don't feel that they are being adequately addressed, you can tell us by submitting a notification. This guide should help you do that.

We also recognise that students' unions want to work closely with their universities and colleges. Submitting a notification will be done in the interests of students and should not be seen as compromising those relationships.

If you're a student and unhappy with your experience, we would encourage you to work with a student representative or your students' union if you have one. Before approaching the OfS, where possible, you should follow your university or college's complaints process.

We aim to ensure that...

every student, whatever their background,

has a fulfilling experience of higher education

that enriches their lives and careers.

Participation

Experience

Outcomes

Objective 1

All students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.

Objective 2

All students, from all backgrounds, receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.

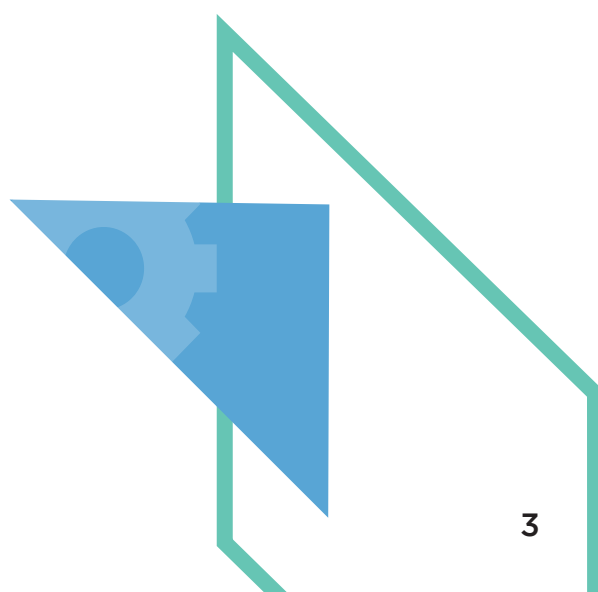
Objective 3

All students, from all backgrounds, are able to progress into employment, further study, and fulfilling lives, and their qualifications hold their value over time.

Value for money

Objective 4

All students, from all backgrounds, receive value for money.





Section 2: What is a ‘notification’?

A **notification** is an important part of how we regulate universities and colleges. It allows students, staff members and others to let us know about an issue within a university or college registered with the OfS, which might not show up in the other data or information we receive.

It is important to remember that we do not have a direct role in dealing with individual complaints or with disputes between students and their university or college. Universities and colleges that are **registered** with us must have a process in place for **resolving student complaints**. If a student uses this process and is not satisfied with the outcome, they can contact the **Office of the Independent Adjudicator**.

A **complaint** is made by a student, former student or another person, about concerns relevant to the university or college. These concerns could include, for instance, its facilities and services. Before contacting the OfS, where possible, you should first raise any concerns you have that are relevant to your university or college using its complaints process, and seek a solution using that process.

A **notification to the OfS** informs us, as the regulator for higher education in England, about concerns or issues you have about your university or college that are relevant to our regulatory remit.

While we can't resolve complaints from individual students, it is important that we hear from students, student representatives and students' unions about current issues in their university or college that relate to the matters we do regulate. In particular we think student representatives and students' unions can play an important role in helping us understand student experiences on the ground and across the sector.

Notifying the OfS of concerns or issues at your university or college should not replace any conversations that you're having directly with its staff. We encourage you to continue to work closely and in partnership with your university or college where possible, to develop solutions together.

What kind of issues could you share with the OfS in a notification?

You can tell us about anything that is relevant to our regulatory remit. We are particularly interested in hearing about issues that are affecting whole courses or particular groups of students. For example, the following may be of interest to us:

- A course not being delivered in the way students had expected – for example, unexpected changes to what is taught, or concerns about the

quality of teaching, the availability of resources, or the fairness of assessment.

- Academic support not being available in the way students had expected – for example, a university or college’s personal tutoring system not working effectively and in the way set out in the course handbook.
- Complaints from students not being considered on an individual basis or according to the university or college’s complaints policy.
- Concerns about the way a university or college is being managed or run – for example, evidence of fraud, or conflicts of interest in decision-making processes.
- Issues about fairness and equality – for example, if all students regardless of **background** are not able to participate and succeed in their courses; or concerns about the university or college failing to deliver the commitments made in its **access and participation plan**.

This is not a full list but will give you an idea of the type of concerns you can tell us about.

Covid-19

Students are experiencing a difficult time during the Covid-19 pandemic. Universities and colleges should be supporting students and continuing to provide a high-quality educational experience, whether or not face-to-face teaching is possible. If you feel that students at your university or college are

not being supported sufficiently, receiving the teaching and assessment they were promised, or receiving a high standard of education, you can tell us about this.

We have heard from some students during the pandemic that they are having particular problems with:

- Not being given adequate support – for example, where IT systems do not support effective online or blended learning and the university or college is not taking appropriate steps to address this.
- A university or college introducing a blanket policy on refunds and refusing to consider refunds for students who wish to leave their course as a result of changes that have been made because of the pandemic.
- Self-isolating students in university- or college-owned accommodation not being provided with the things they need to learn effectively – for example, adequate internet connectivity, access to food, or wellbeing support.
- A university or college stopping face-to-face teaching and providing significantly reduced course content or contact hours through online teaching, without a clear plan to make this up later in the year.

If you are experiencing these or similar difficulties as a result of the pandemic, please tell us about them.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

When submitting a notification to us, students unions and student representatives may wish to ensure they have considered the implications of the notification on all students, whatever their background. This is because we, as the regulator, will need to respond in a way that reflects that broader perspective. Does the issue have an even bigger impact on disabled students, for example? Are students from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds disproportionately affected? Have students who stay on campus during

the holidays – such as **care experienced**, estranged or international students – been considered?

Notifications that affect whole courses or particular groups of students should be developed with those students. You should also consider the diversity of your student community. Actions that may help one group may not be suitable for another.





Section 3: How to submit a notification

If you believe your university or college may not be meeting the OfS's requirements, you can send us a notification. Use this section and our checklist below to help you write your notification.

The email address to send your notification to is: notifications@officeforstudents.org.uk.

If you are not sure whether to submit a notification and would like to discuss your concern, please phone us on 0117 931 7317 or write to notifications@officeforstudents.org.uk outlining the issue and we can arrange to call you back.

If you are submitting a notification on behalf of a student or a group of students, you should explain this so we can understand the extent of the issue you are telling us about.

Submitting a notification will give us information about a particular issue or issues, which may suggest that a university or college is not meeting our requirements, and we may take regulatory action, where necessary and appropriate, to protect the interest of students who study at the university or college.

Where we decide to carry out further investigation of an issue that we have been notified of, we cannot do so 'on behalf of' the notifier (in this case, a student, group of students or students' union) and we can't provide individual redress (for example, compensation to an affected student). If a student is seeking individual **redress**, they should raise their complaint with their university or college directly. If the student is not satisfied, they can raise a complaint with the [**Office of the Independent Adjudicator**](#).

The notifications process

- 1** You (one or more students or a students' union) identify a concern or issue.
- 2** Following discussion with the university or college, you decide that this is something the OfS would like to know about.
- 3** Review this guide and write your notification, including any relevant evidence and context.
- 4** Submit your notification to notifications@officeforstudents.org.uk.
- 5** The OfS writes to you to acknowledge receipt of your notification and a member of the OfS team reviews it. This may involve gathering information from other available sources, including the university or college.
- 6** If we require further information, we will ask you via email. If we think the matter you have raised should be dealt with by another organisation, we will let you know who to contact.

What happens after you send a notification?

If you notify us of an issue, we will acknowledge your notification by email. We will review the information you provide and we may contact you for further information. You can find more information about the way we consider notifications and the action we could take in [Regulatory Advice 18](#).

If we decide to investigate an issue, this will be for the purpose of regulating your university or college. This means that we would not be following up on your behalf, and we would not be able to provide individual redress (such as compensation). We are not able to provide updates about any action we are taking, or may take, as a result of your notification (as this could interfere with our ability to investigate). Where we think a notification raises concerns about a university or college, we may follow up with it, and, if necessary, consider taking regulatory action.

Where we take regulatory action as a result of notifications from students, we would expect to see action from a university or college and improvements in relation to the issues raised. This could help you and future students.

We do carefully consider all the notifications we receive. Where we think a notification raises concerns that a university or college is not meeting, or is at risk of breaching, our requirements, we may intervene and use our regulatory powers to address or prevent poor quality courses, or behaviour that damages students' or public interests.

It may be that we have general feedback, for example on the patterns we see across all notifications, that could help you in submitting notifications in the future. If so, we will share this information with you by email.

It is possible that a single notification will not contain sufficient information to affect our regulatory assessment of a particular university or college. But that notification may be relevant if further information were to come to light, or if we receive several notifications about the same

university or college. This helps us pick up on trends at a particular university or college, or in the sector as a whole.

Confidentiality

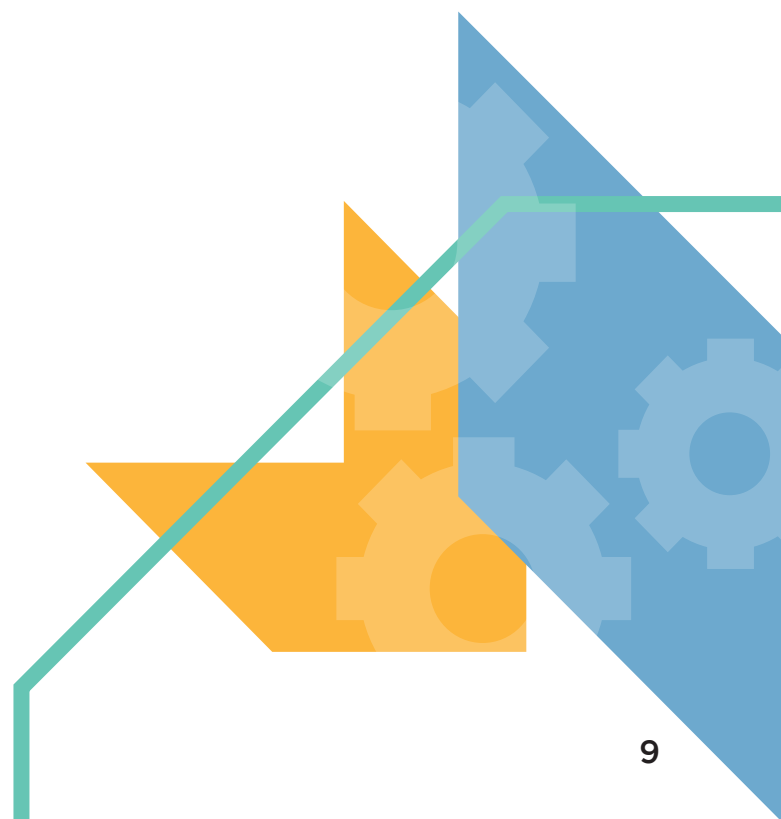
We may share information from a notification with others. For example, we may share information about a potential breach of consumer protection law with the Advertising Standards Agency. Or, if a course is accredited by a professional body, it may need to know about a notification we've received. We are normally able to share information about a notification in a way that does not reveal the identity of the notifier.

Our general approach to the notifications we receive from individual students is that we make every attempt to protect their identity from a university or college where requested. Where we receive a notification from students' unions or student representatives on behalf of a student or group of students, we will make every attempt to protect the identity of the students to whom the concerns relate from the university or college where requested. This is particularly the case for notifications of a sensitive nature, for example relating to harassment and discrimination. In these circumstances, we will usually only reveal the identity of the students when we are legally required to, or where the students have provided consent.

Where a notification is being made by a students' union or a group of students, we find it particularly helpful to know the identity of the notifier because it is likely to make it easier for us to understand whether the issues raised are affecting a number of students and to take further action where this is appropriate.

Where students' unions or representatives submit a notification on behalf of a group of students, you should ensure you have express permission from the students concerned confirming that they consent to the sharing of any sensitive or personal data with the OfS.

It is important to note that sometimes the nature of a notification reveals the notifier's identity, or the identity of the students to whom the concerns relate, especially if the issue has been raised with the university or college directly. If you are worried that an identity could be revealed if we contact a university or college about your notification, then please let us know so that we can consider how best to proceed. We wouldn't expect submitting a notification to negatively impact your studies.



A checklist for your notification

Using this checklist will help you make sure you've included all the right information to help us understand your concern.



1 Who is submitting the notification?
A student, a group of students, a students' union?

2 Which university or college is the notification about?
Please provide the name of the university or college. We are only able to consider concerns about universities and colleges on our register.

3 Who does the concern affect?
Is the notification about something that affects all the students on a particular course, or in a particular department? Or is it a concern raised about the university or college as a whole?

4 What is the concern, and do you have any examples or evidence that will help us understand how it is affecting students?
If you are submitting a notification on behalf of a group, you should not send us information that identifies individual students or sensitive, personal student data.

5 Are particular groups of students affected more than others?
How has your university or college engaged in solving this issue, either independently or in collaboration with students? If you have not engaged with the university or college directly in respect of this issue, please explain why. As explained above, before approaching the OfS, where possible, you should follow your university or college's complaints process.

Glossary of key words and phrases

Background – refers to a students’ individual circumstances. An important part of our regulatory role is to make sure all students have fair access to higher education, including underrepresented groups. Underrepresented groups include students from Black and minority ethnic groups, those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or of other minority sexualities or sexual identities, disabled students, mature students, and students from lower socio-economic groups. We believe that all students should have equal opportunity and be treated fairly regardless of their background and identity.

Care experienced – refers to anyone who has been, or is currently, in care. This care may have been provided in many different settings, including: living with foster carers; living in a residential children’s home; being looked after at home under a supervision order; living with friends or relatives in kinship care.

Governance – refers to the structures, processes and practices that are in place to direct the activity and decisions made within an organisation.

Notification – a way for students, staff members or others to let us know about an issue at a university or college. Notifications are sent to us by email. When we receive a notification, we will review it and we may decide to investigate further, to take regulatory action, or both. Notifications help us to regulate universities and colleges that are registered with the OfS in the interest of students.

Redress – in the context of this guidance, redress refers to any action taken by a university or college to adequately address or remedy concerns (for example, payment of compensation).

Regulator – the Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. This means that we regulate universities and colleges to make sure that they meet our requirements, which are set out in our conditions of registration.

Set of conditions – when universities and colleges apply for registration as a higher education provider with the Office for Students, they are required to satisfy a set of conditions, known as the ‘conditions of registration’. These conditions are the minimum requirements that universities and colleges must meet in order to be and stay registered with us, because they demonstrate that the university or college is able to offer high quality higher education to students. These conditions are the main tool that the OfS uses to regulate universities and colleges and they are in place to make sure that all students have a fulfilling experience.

