

29 January 2026

Dear Accountable Officer

OfS uses of student data for further education colleges

I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you and your colleagues all the best for 2026.

As part of our efforts to tailor our communications and activity for different parts of the sector, I'm writing to you as leaders of further education colleges (FECs) about a handful of topics that may affect you. This includes: an invitation to feedback on the benefits of in-year data, a reminder on data quality for upcoming data submissions, a heads-up on 2024-25 HECoS return amendments, and a reminder about our consultation on our proposals to change how the Office for Students (OfS) regulates further education colleges in England.

In-year data and R04 ILR data returns

Your college already returns Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data multiple times a year. I spend a lot of time talking about in-year data, and I'm always grateful to FECs because you are a live example that in-year collections are already possible today. Thank you and to your teams for all the hard work you put into this work.

We've been speaking with institutions in England about the value of in-year data and the potential for minimising regulatory data burden. I'm pleased to say that from this year you'll see us start to make more use of your fourth collection point (R04) ILR data returns in our work analysing and speaking about the sector. We hope to share more details on this later this year.

We also want to ensure that colleges are as well positioned to realise the same benefits as those providers that return student data to Jisc, once in-year data collection is established across the

sector. We've been working with Jisc and sector representatives to specify the benefits of in-year data. This is important as it will guide the work of Jisc in managing the in-year programme.¹

From our conversations with the sector the benefits include:

- Sharing insights we derive from in-year data, to support your governance, planning and marketing decisions, to increase your capacity to identify areas for enhancement or intervention, and to better equip you to take actions that protect the interests of current as well as future students.
- Considering the earlier insights we will be able to make available to your students through resources such as Discover Uni, to support their choices about what, where and how they will study in higher education.
- Exploring the potential to adjust our funding approach to make use of in-year data, which would likely enable us to remove or reduce the requirement that your teams submit a separate HESES submission.
- Investigating how we can simplify some of our processes and bring about a reduction in the resources you will need to commit to activities such as checking and adjusting the National Student Survey (NSS) target list.

You can see a full list of potential benefits in **Annex A**.

We want to make sure that all parts of the sector, including FECs, have had the opportunity to help shape the definition of these benefits; I'd really welcome your views on other opportunities – or challenges – that our expanded uses of your in-year data may present. You can do this by email to Alison Brunt at data@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Improving the quality of data returns

In next few weeks we will be writing to data teams at colleges where the 2024-25 HECoS return has not been completed correctly. As part of this, we may be in touch with your team if they need to make subject data amendments. These changes will enable onward uses of this data, including in funding allocations, NSS results, student outcome measures and TEF indicators, and for accurate mapping of Discover Uni course listings.

To pre-empt and avoid spending time on an amendments process, please ensure that:

- Your submission of the R04 and the final submission of learner data for the academic year (R14 ILR) data each contain your full higher education student population, and that the data is as accurate as possible.

¹ See [In-year data collection](#) | HESA.

- You are correctly following the ILR HECoS subject return process; a recent OfS exercise highlighted issues with the quality and completeness of subject data submitted alongside the 2023-24 and 2024-25 ILR returns.
- You are allocating sufficient resource as and when it is required to support these activities.

We know that colleges invest a significant amount of time and resource on their data returns. To support future data returns, we'll be reviewing the content and timing of the resources we make available as part of our data checking tool,² as well as the ILR support resources shared by ourselves and the DfE online.

Proposals to change how we regulate FECs in England without degree awarding powers

On a separate note, you may be aware that in December we launched a consultation³ on proposals to change how we regulate FECs in England without degree awarding powers. This includes proposals to disapply some of our initial and ongoing conditions to remove overlap of regulation between the DfE and the OfS. If you haven't done so already, I encourage you to contribute your views as we are especially keen to hear from FECs.

If you have any questions or comments about these matters, please contact Alison Brunt at data@officeforstudents.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Josh Fleming
Director of strategy and delivery

² Available at OfS, [2024-25 ILR data checking tool](#).

³ See OfS, [Consultation on proposals to change how the Office for Students regulates further education colleges in England](#).

Annex A: Potential benefits of the OfS making more use of in-year ILR data

We think expanded use of further education colleges' in-year data will deliver a range of benefits to different stakeholders. The tables below set out our current view of these benefits, over the short or longer term.

We are keen to hear your reflections on these, and which you think should be prioritised. Colleagues can share thoughts by contacting Alison Brunt at HESASStudentData@officeforstudents.org.uk, and we will continue to refine this list with you over the coming months.

Table 1: Benefits of the OfS using in-year data and sharing insights from it

In-year data will enable:	Funders and regulators	Higher education providers	Students	Others including data users and the public
Regulatory, policy and funding decisions informed by more timely data	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Providers' internal funding and planning decisions based on the latest figures to support more effective use of funds		Yes	Yes	
Addressing longstanding concerns about the timeliness of higher education student data	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Support continual improvement aims regarding quality of provision, widening participation and reducing inequality	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Confidence in the effective and appropriate use of public funding invested in higher education	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Removal of other collections that could be satisfied by in-year data, e.g. HESES, thereby reducing burden for providers	Yes	Yes		

Note: HESES = Higher Education Students Early Statistics.

Table 2: Specific activities use of in-year data is expected to support

Specifically, in-year data is expected to support:	Funders and regulators	Higher education providers	Students	Others including data users and the public
More timely information for policy and strategic decision making, including for providers' governance, planning and marketing purposes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
More timely insights on emerging sector data, risks or issues, including for benchmarking against peers and competitive advantage	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
General monitoring of recruitment, access and retention	Yes	Yes		
More timely student outcome measures to inform regulatory assessments, including in TEF	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Better informed financial health monitoring of providers	Yes	Yes		
Better informed funding decisions, including spending reviews	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Informing the distribution and protection of public funding for higher education	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NSS target lists and process simplification	Yes	Yes		
Student survey coverage expansions, including to postgraduate taught students	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Understanding the impacts of exceptional events (e.g. pandemic, industrial action)	Yes	Yes		Yes
Understanding the impacts of change in fees and fee status	Yes	Yes		Yes

Specifically, in-year data is expected to support:	Funders and regulators	Higher education providers	Students	Others including data users and the public
Quicker understanding the delivery and impacts of government policy initiatives (e.g. LLE)	Yes	Yes		Yes
More timely data informing student-facing resources, such as Discover Uni, league tables etc.		Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: TEF = Teaching Excellence Framework. LLE = Lifelong Learning Entitlement.