

Office for
Students



Regulatory advice 14:

Guidance for providers for the Annual
Financial Return 2024

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Revision log

Version	Date	Changes
1.0	24 May 2024	Publication date Clarity of wording

Introduction

13. This regulatory advice sets out guidance about the information that a higher education provider is required to submit as part of its Annual Financial Return 2024 to the Office for Students (OfS).
14. It applies to a provider that is registered with the OfS in either the Approved or Approved (fee cap) category of the OfS Register. However, where a provider is a further education college or a sixth form college under the primary regulation of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA), it is not required to submit this financial data to the OfS. For such providers, the OfS works closely with the ESFA to ensure that it is able to undertake appropriate monitoring of financial viability and sustainability.
15. The guidance is intended to help providers to understand:
 - a. The information that providers must submit to the OfS about condition D (financial viability and sustainability) to demonstrate compliance with condition D as an ongoing condition of registration.
 - b. Where to find information about what a provider's financial statements must include and other related requirements.
 - c. Where to find the detailed guidance to support providers in completing the financial return workbook and commentary.
 - d. Whether a provider needs to submit any additional information to the OfS about its financial performance or position or both.
 - e. What data will be published by the designated data body (DDB).
16. The information about financial performance and position enables the OfS to:
 - a. Assess a provider's financial viability and sustainability and make a judgement about the regulatory risk for that provider. This also allows the OfS to provide assurance on financial sustainability to other funding bodies in England where appropriate.
 - b. Assess the patterns and trends in the financial performance and position of registered providers across the sector. This enables the OfS to fulfil its statutory duty under section 68 of Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA).
 - c. Support evidence-based policy making through provision of OfS advice to government, e.g. Department for Education and HM Treasury.
 - d. Provide data relating to the last complete year and prior year (restated where applicable) to the DDB for publication as an official statistic, which supports financial transparency and allows providers and other interested parties to benchmark performance against others.
17. Some of this financial data, specifically relating to the most recently completed year, is also required and used to support the activities of UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) and Research England.

18. In preparing audited financial statements, registered providers must refer to Regulatory advice 9: Accounts direction.¹
19. A newly registered provider will be required to comply with the disclosure requirements in the accounts direction for financial years ending more than 12 months after the date of its first registration with the OfS. All registered providers are required to submit audited financial statements regardless of their date of registration.
20. In preparing the audited financial statements and in completing the financial return workbooks, a provider must refer to the Financial Reporting Standards (FRS102),² or International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS),³ depending on the convention used in the provider's latest audited accounts, to ensure that it follows the correct technical accounting requirements.
21. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the OfS regulatory framework.⁴
22. A provider is required to submit and sign off its finalised Annual Financial Return 2024 within five months and two weeks of its financial year end. An initial Annual Financial Return workbook must be submitted within four months of the financial year end so the OfS can carry out verification before the data is signed off. Exact deadlines have been issued to providers in an F3 notice and a bespoke workbook will be provided through the OfS portal that the provider needs to complete (this means that the workbook that an individual provider receives may not include every table referenced in this guidance).
23. Any general questions about this regulatory advice can be sent to regulation@officeforstudents.org.uk.
24. Technical queries about the completion or submission of the files required for the Annual Financial Return 2024 can be emailed to financedata@officeforstudents.org.uk.

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-9-accounts-direction-accounting-periods-beginning-on-or-after-1-august-2019/.

² See <https://www.frc.org.uk/library/standards-codes-policy/accounting-and-reporting/uk-accounting-standards/frs-102/>.

³ See <https://www.ifrs.org/issued-standards/list-of-standards/>.

⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/.

What evidence must a provider submit and when?

Summary of evidence

26. Providers must submit the following information via the OfS portal:⁵

Requirement	Applicable to	Further information from
<p>Audited full financial statements relating to a provider's Annual Financial Return for 2024</p> <p>Financial statements must be prepared on the basis set out in the OfS accounts direction.</p>	Providers in the Approved or Approved (fee cap) category, excluding further education and sixth form colleges.	Regulatory advice 9: Accounts direction ⁶
<p>Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook, using the template provided by the OfS</p> <p>In addition to the financial information included in the latest audited financial statements, a provider is required to return data relating to the current year, and four subsequent years of forecasts.</p>	Providers in the Approved or Approved (fee cap) category, excluding further education and sixth form colleges.	This guidance document and 'Guidance on completing the Annual Financial Return workbook' ⁷
<p>Commentary in relation to the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook, using the template provided by the OfS</p>	Providers in the Approved or Approved (fee cap) category, excluding further education and sixth form colleges.	See relevant section of 'Guidance on completing the Annual Financial Return workbook' ⁸
<p>The management letter from the provider's external auditor</p> <p>External auditor's management letter is a report issued by the external auditor to those charged with governance, which records audit findings, including</p>	Providers in the Approved or Approved (fee cap) category, excluding further education and sixth form colleges.	International Standards on Auditing 260 and 265

⁵ Further guidance on how to submit the information to the OfS portal is available in Appendix 1, at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-14-guidance-for-annual-financial-returns/.

⁶ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-9-accounts-direction-accounting-periods-beginning-on-or-after-1-august-2019/.

⁷ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-14-guidance-for-annual-financial-returns/.

⁸ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-14-guidance-for-annual-financial-returns/.

Requirement	Applicable to	Further information from
any significant control deficiencies identified during the audit.		
Business plan	Required in some circumstances (where a provider has a track record but is not able to demonstrate that it is financially viable and sustainable using its audited financial statements). This is optional for other providers.	See paragraphs 35-37 of this guidance document
Audited financial statements from the legal entity , giving a legally binding obligation of financial support	A provider that has a legally binding obligation of financial support in place.	See F3 Notice issued to providers on 24 May 2024 ⁹

27. For some registered providers, the OfS may have imposed enhanced monitoring requirements or a specific condition of registration in relation to a provider’s financial viability or sustainability. In these cases, a provider is likely to need to provide more information than is set out in the table in paragraph 13, or to update information previously submitted to the OfS.

⁹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/deadlines-and-requirements-for-annual-financial-return-2024/.

Technical guidance accompanying this advice

28. The following technical guidance and supporting documentation is published alongside this advice:

Guidance	Description
Guidance on completing the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook	Guidance on what providers should include in the Annual Financial Return workbook.
Annex A: Annual Financial Return 2024 additional guidance	Additional guidance on research income and cost centres.
Annex B: Glossary for Annual Financial Return 2024	Glossary of workbook accounting terms.
Annex C: Sample template – Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook	A sample template of the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook. This should not be used for your submission as you will be provided one through the portal.
Annex D: Sample template – Annual Financial Return 2024 commentary	A sample template of the Annual Financial Return 2024 commentary. This should not be used for your submission as you will be provided one through the portal.
Annex E: Sample template – Annual Financial Return 2024 sign-off form	A sample template of the sign-off form. Please do not try to submit this sample template – A bespoke sign-off form will be available for each provider to download from the Portal once all files have been submitted and all verification queries have been resolved.
Appendix 1: Annual Financial Return 2024 submission process guidance	Detailed information on submitting the Annual Financial Return 2024, covering all stages of the submission process.
Appendix 2: Comparison of AFR24 and AFR23 workbooks	A comparison of the tables in the Annual Financial Return 2024 with those in the previous year's return.
Frequently asked questions about research grants and contracts income	FAQs on returning research income in the Annual Financial Return.

Timing of submissions and action required

29. The final deadline for the Annual Financial Return 2024 is five months and two weeks after a provider's financial year end in the calendar year 2024.

30. The relevant deadlines for a provider relate directly to the timing of that provider's financial year end.

Deadline	Time from year end	Requirements
Deadline 1	Four months	Submit initial valid Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook Return verification process begins
Deadline 2	Five months	All verification queries have been resolved Submit finalised Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook Submit audited financial statements Submit all other required files for Annual Financial Return 2024
Deadline 3	Five months and two weeks	Any additional verification queries have been resolved Return is signed off and sign-off form submitted

31. The Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook should initially be submitted within four months of a provider's year end (by deadline 1) in order for the data to go through the OfS's return verification process. Revisions to the workbook are allowed up until five months after the year end (by deadline 2). It is the responsibility of a provider to ensure the information submitted is accurate and credible.

32. To mitigate the risk of the OfS receiving inaccurate information, the OfS will issue verification queries in relation to the information submitted as part of the Annual Financial Return 2024, to which a provider must respond. This will be an iterative process and a provider may need to correct and resubmit the files required. It is therefore important that a provider responds to verification queries as soon as possible to ensure the verification process concludes before the five month deadline (deadline 2). The OfS may also raise additional queries once all other files have been submitted, and these queries must be responded to and resolved by the provider by the final deadline (by deadline 3).

33. For the Annual Financial Return 2024, within five months of a provider's year end (by deadline 2), the following actions must be completed:

- a. All return verification queries have been responded to by a provider.
- b. The Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook has been finalised, including forecast information, with validation checks reviewed and resolved (see paragraphs 43 to 46 for guidance on data accuracy and validation).
- c. The remaining information in the table in paragraph 13 has been submitted.

34. A provider's Annual Financial Return financial forecasts and commentary (and business plan, if applicable) must be considered by its governing body before submission. The governing body must approve these documents or choose to delegate approval of these documents to the accountable officer.
35. Each provider has been informed of its exact deadlines in advance of the submission period. Adjustments have been made to the submission timeframe where deadlines fall in the Christmas or Easter holiday periods.

Signing off the Annual Financial Return 2024

36. When all of the required actions have been completed, the Annual Financial Return 2024 must be signed off by a provider's accountable officer within five months and two weeks of a provider's financial year end. The sign-off form will be issued once the OfS is content with the responses provided as part of the return verification process and will be available to download on the OfS portal, along with the final versions of all of the documents submitted by the provider. The accountable officer must sign this form, which should then be uploaded to the OfS portal.
37. The Annual Financial Return 2024, signed off as correct by a provider's accountable officer, is treated as the final suite of documents that the OfS will use. Amendments will only be accepted after this point in exceptional circumstances, or where errors make a material difference to the use of the information, and will be required to follow the OfS amendment process.¹⁰

Audited financial statements

38. Paragraph 7 of the OfS accounts direction¹¹ states that a provider is required to comply with the relevant accounts direction for financial years ending more than 12 months after the date of its first registration with the OfS. This means that a provider does not need to comply with the disclosures set out in the accounts direction where its financial year ends less than 12 months after the date of its first registration unless it chooses to do so. However, all registered providers are required to provide audited financial statements as set out in the regulatory framework, regardless of the timing of their first registration.
39. A provider's audited financial statements for each year must be prepared on the basis of the Financial Reporting Standard 102 (FRS 102), or the International Reporting Standards (IFRS), if applicable. Where a provider has subsidiaries, it must prepare consolidated financial statements. The financial statements must include all of the following:
- 'Statement of financial position' (balance sheet)
 - 'Statement of comprehensive income' incorporating profit or loss for the period and items of other comprehensive income

¹⁰ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/amendments-to-data/.

¹¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-9-accounts-direction-accounting-periods-beginning-on-or-after-1-august-2019/.

- 'Statement of changes in equity' or a 'Statement of income and retained earnings' or a 'Statement of changes in reserves'
- 'Statement of cash flows'
- 'Statement of principal of accounting policies'
- notes to the financial statements.

40. Some providers may not need to include, for statutory purposes (company law), all of the components set out above in their financial statements due to their size or legal form. However, the OfS requires that a provider's audited financial statements contain all of the components set out above regardless of whether this is a legal requirement for its business or whether it has an exemption from including certain components (such as cash flow statements) in the accounts that it files with Companies House. This is so that the OfS has a full picture of a provider's financial performance and position and can make a reliable assessment of a provider's financial viability and sustainability.

41. Every registered provider must submit financial statements that have been audited by independent external auditors. By 'independent' the OfS means independent of the provider and independent of the preparer of the accounts and the financial statements. The external auditor must also be listed on the Register of Statutory Auditors. The OfS requires financial statements to be audited by an independent external auditor before submission so that the OfS can have confidence in the information that a provider submits. If a registered provider submits unaudited financial statements in its Annual Financial Return, the OfS will be unable to use this information and may consider whether a provider has breached any of its ongoing conditions of registration.

42. The external auditor must provide a report giving an opinion to the provider's governing body. Requirements in relation to this report are set out in the relevant OfS accounts direction.

43. It may be the case that a provider gives a trial balance¹² to its external auditor and the external auditor then places the financial data from the trial balance into a template to produce a provider's financial statements. As long as the provider, and not its external auditor, prepares the trial balance and approves any changes to the numbers in the financial statements that arise as a result of the external audit, the OfS will consider the external auditor to be independent of the preparation of a provider's financial statements.

44. The audited financial statements must be signed by the external auditor, by a provider's accountable officer, and by the chair of the governing body or one other member appointed by that body, as set out in the accounts direction and a provider must submit the signed version to the OfS that includes the external auditor's report. The OfS will accept audited financial statement signatures that are digitally generated, typed directly, scanned or written on to the statements.

45. The external auditor's report and opinion must cover all components of the audited financial statements and not be limited to a sub-set of the pages included in the audited financial statements. This is so that the OfS can have confidence that the external auditor's opinion

¹² The trial balance is a list of all the closing balances of all of the accounts in the general ledger.

applies to all of the information and data in the financial statements (as set out in the external auditor's opinion) and that the external auditor has seen the final version of the financial statements that a provider is submitting to the OfS.

46. Where a provider has subsidiaries it must prepare consolidated financial statements. For the avoidance of doubt this includes all subsidiaries, whether or not their purpose is related to the provision of higher education.

Business plan

47. A business plan that sets out a provider's plans for the same period as the financial return workbook:

- a. Must be submitted where a provider has delivered higher education for fewer than three years (track record) prior to the date of its Annual Financial Return 2024.
- b. May be submitted where a provider has a track record but wants to demonstrate further that it is financially viable and sustainable.

48. If a provider submits a business plan, the OfS will consider this alongside the financial return workbook and commentary. The business plan must include robust and well-evidenced assumptions that underpin the financial forecasts in the financial return workbook. The business plan underpinning the forecast must be credible and show:

- how a provider will ensure it is financially viable and sustainable over the period covered by the forecasts and the actions it will take to achieve this
- how a provider will manage its finances during the period to ensure it is viable and sustainable and any sources of financial support during the period
- how a provider will use its resources over the period to deliver a high quality student experience
- the contingency plans a provider has in place should unexpected financial challenges arise during the period.

49. A provider can submit a business plan in any format as long as it includes the information set out above.

Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook

50. The workbook requires historical and forecast information about a provider's financial performance and position, along with student number information. This enables the OfS to assess financial viability and sustainability and make a judgement about a provider's financial risks. The forecast data must reflect the provider's agreed strategy and the provider's best estimate of the financial expectations.

51. Providers must complete the workbook in full.

52. A provider must submit historical financial data consistent with its audited financial statements and forecasts to the OfS in the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook. Where a provider's financial statements are consolidated this should also be reflected in the forecast years.

53. The OfS has published an example template workbook on its website together with detailed guidance explaining how to complete the tables.¹³ The tables collected as part of the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook are summarised below (see the 'Use and publication of financial data' section). A provider must download its bespoke workbook from the OfS portal and upload the workbook using the portal once completed.
54. The information in the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook guidance is intended to help providers to understand what they should include in each row of the tables. In completing the workbook, a provider should refer to FRS102 or IFRS, depending on the convention used in its latest audited financial statements, to ensure that it follows the correct and consistent technical accounting requirements.
55. The workbook has been designed to ensure that the OfS can collect consistent data from a diverse range of providers with differing levels of organisational complexity. This means that some elements of the workbook (for example those relating to research income and expenditure) will not be relevant to the specific activities of some providers. Where possible, the workbook has been adapted for different categories of providers, to show only relevant areas of the return.

Information accuracy and validation

56. The accuracy of submitted information is the responsibility of each provider. The return of inaccurate information may affect the OfS's judgement about a provider's ability to continue to comply with its conditions of registration.
57. A provider will be able to download a return verification file from the OfS portal which contains a list of checks that it should carry out on the information it has submitted. A provider must review and carry out each of the checks and highlight any issues to the OfS by providing responses and submitting these to the portal. The OfS will then review the responses and send any further queries to the provider.
58. A provider must check that it has entered the data into the workbook tables correctly to ensure that it is returning accurate data. This should include a check to ensure that data is consistent with the provider's audited financial statements (the checks that should be carried out are highlighted in the return verification queries file). The Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook contains a number of validation checks below each table to help identify errors or discrepancies. A provider should review these validation checks once it has populated its workbook. Further details of how to review errors and warnings are available in the submission process guidance.¹⁴
59. When an Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook is uploaded to the portal, the return verification file will be updated with queries that are automatically generated according to the data the provider has returned. A provider must review each of the automated verification queries and submit its responses to the portal. The OfS will then review the responses and

¹³ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-14-guidance-for-annual-financial-returns/.

¹⁴ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-14-guidance-for-annual-financial-returns/.

send any further queries to the provider. In order to carry out this process, a provider is required to submit its initial Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook within four months of its financial year end (by deadline 1). Return verification will then be carried out over the following month until the five-month final submission deadline (by deadline 2). As the process is iterative, in order to ensure the final submission deadline is met, providers should respond to return verification queries as soon as possible. Further details of the return verification process are available in the submission process guidance.¹⁵

¹⁵ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-14-guidance-for-annual-financial-returns/.

Use and publication of financial data

60. The OfS collects and manages financial data from providers and will use it in accordance with purposes set out in the regulatory framework and HERA.
61. The OfS is committed to protecting personal information and being clear about the information it holds and the way it is used. The OfS has published a privacy notice describing this on its website.¹⁶
62. Specifically in relation to financial data, the collection, processing and publication of information on senior pay and severance payments is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the Controller (see GDPR Article 6(1)(e)); for statistical and research purposes, see GDPR Article 89).
63. The OfS also recognises that providers' financial forecast data, student number forecast data, financial assumptions and commentary information are commercially sensitive. Ordinarily, this data will not be published or shared outside the OfS at a provider level. The OfS may share appropriately aggregated data with other bodies, but in doing so it will ensure that the identity of individual providers is not ordinarily disclosed. However, the OfS may need to share data in a way consistent with its legal powers and duties. The Freedom of Information Act (FOI Act) 2000 allows everyone the right to request access to all types of information held by public bodies, such as the OfS. If the OfS receives a freedom of information request relating to the data of an individual provider, it will always seek the views of a provider before deciding to disclose that information.
64. The functions of the designated data body (DDB) include the publication of appropriate higher education information (section 65 of HERA). The OfS has determined that some financial data is information the DDB should publish. This is consistent with the DDB's annual publication of financial data for education providers across the UK and other stakeholders as an official statistic.
65. The OfS will transfer some financial data from the Annual Financial Return 2024 relating to the audited financial years (Years 1 and 2) to the DDB for the purpose of publication as official statistics and consolidation and comparison with other UK-wide financial data. Details of exactly which data will be transferred are set out in the table below.
66. The OfS's accounts direction requires a provider to publish (in its financial statements) certain information about the head of provider and the salary and benefits they received and any other information about highly paid staff and compensation or severance payments made for loss of office. This information is collected by the OfS and will be shared with the DDB, which will publish it as open data, alongside other financial information about higher education providers. The DDB is responsible for setting out the legal basis for processing financial information about staff pay, compensation and benefits. At the time of publication this was set

¹⁶ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/ofs-privacy/.

out by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in its staff collection notice under purpose 6.¹⁷

67. Table 1 below sets out the data **for Years 1 and 2 only** that will be transferred to the DDB for publication as open data, at an individual provider level. (Note that no data relating to forecast Years 3 to 7 will be transferred.)

Table 1: Data transferred to the designated data body (DDB) for publication

Table number in the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook	Table description	Which elements will be transferred to the DDB for publication as open data?
Assumptions	Assumptions and backlog maintenance	Not transferred to the DDB.
Table 1	Consolidated statement of comprehensive income and expenditure	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication, except for section 19.
Table 2	Consolidated statement of financial position	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication.
Table 3	Consolidated statement of cash flows	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication, except for sections 13 and 14.
Table 4	Analysis of income	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication.
Table 5	Analysis of income – Research grants and contracts – breakdown by source of income and cost centre	All data transferred to the DDB for publication.
Table 6	Analysis of income – Course fees and education contracts analysed by domicile, mode, level and source	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication.
Table 7	Higher education student full-time equivalents (FTEs)	Not transferred to the DDB.
Table 7a	Higher education student full-time equivalents (FTEs) from non-UK domiciles	Not transferred to the DDB
Table 8	Analysis of expenditure – breakdown by activity and cost centre	All data transferred to the DDB for publication.

¹⁷ See <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/about/regulation/data-protection/notices>.

Table number in the Annual Financial Return 2024 workbook	Table description	Which elements will be transferred to the DDB for publication as open data?
Table 9	Analysis of expenditure – staff costs	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication.
Table 10	Analysis of expenditure – severance payments	All numerical data transferred to the DDB for publication. No textual data is transferred to the DDB.
Table 11	Head of provider remuneration	All numerical data and dates transferred to the DDB for publication. No textual data is transferred to the DDB.
Table 12	Analysis of capital expenditure	All data transferred to the DDB for publication.
Table 13	Financial commitments	Not transferred to the DDB.
Table 14	Access and participation investment	All year 1 and 2 data transferred to the DDB for publication.

68. Where a provider has not returned individualised student data to the DDB or ESFA, which is normally the case for newly registered providers, the data collected in year 2 of Table 7 of the Annual Financial Return workbook may be used to determine initial OfS registration fees.



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