

## Regulatory case report for the University of Worcester: Ongoing condition B3 investigation outcome

### Summary

This report confirms that the Office for Students (OfS) has found the University of Worcester (the university) compliant with ongoing condition B3 and that it is delivering positive outcomes for students.

### Background

The university was selected for assessment of its compliance with ongoing condition of registration B3 (student outcomes) as part of the OfS's 2022-23 annual prioritisation cycle. As set out in 'Regulatory advice: 20: Regulating student outcomes',<sup>1</sup> each year the OfS decides:

- which student outcome measures, modes and levels of study we wish to prioritise
- whether we should focus on any particular split indicators, such as subject of study or student characteristics, or on any other themes, such as partnership arrangements
- how many cases we will assess in that year.

We published the final prioritised categories for 2022-23 in a statement on the OfS website in November 2022.<sup>2</sup> As part of its assessment cycle for student outcomes in 2022-23, the OfS opened investigations into 12 higher education providers.

In relation to the prioritised categories, we were specifically concerned about the university's performance against the following split indicator in Table 1:

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-20-regulating-student-outcomes/](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-20-regulating-student-outcomes/).

<sup>2</sup> See [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/condition-b3-prioritised-categories-for-the-2023-24-assessment-cycle/](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/condition-b3-prioritised-categories-for-the-2023-24-assessment-cycle/).

**Table 1: Student outcomes dashboard data as of September 2022**

Indicator/split indicator	Numerical threshold	Indicator value	Distance of indicator value from relevant numerical threshold	Proportion of statistical uncertainty distribution below numerical threshold	Denominator
<b>Continuation</b>					
Full-time, first degree, business and management	80%	65.5%	-14.5% points	100%	1,150

This formed the scope of our investigation into the provider’s compliance with the condition.

## Investigation outcomes

In accordance with Regulatory advice 20, we engaged with the university and invited it to submit contextual information relevant to our assessment of its performance. The OfS then considered the extent to which this information satisfied us that the university’s performance in relation to the split indicator in scope was justified, despite being below the relevant numerical threshold.

In its submission, the university asserted the performance of students at a partner institution in 2019-20 was impacting its overall performance in relation to the business and management split indicator in scope of the OfS’s investigation.

The students in question were international foundation year students studying at an embedded college<sup>3</sup> at the university. This embedded college offered International Year 0, Year 1 and pre-masters’ courses to students from abroad intending to progress onto undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes at the university. The provider asserted that removing these embedded college students from its data resulted in performance above the relevant numerical threshold.

In explaining why a large proportion of these students had not achieved positive outcomes, the university’s submission highlighted two aggravating factors, namely:

- a. The coronavirus pandemic, and in particular its impact on international students subject to travel restrictions in their home country.
- b. Severe flooding in Worcestershire and neighbouring areas in early 2020.

While there was insufficient information in the university’s submission to quantify the precise impact of these two events on the university’s performance, we accepted in principle that the disruption caused to international student mobility was likely to have contributed, to some extent, to

<sup>3</sup> An embedded college is a provider, usually part of a network, operating within or near to the main premises of a higher education provider, in partnership or as part of a joint venture, usually delivering pathway courses which prepare students for entry to higher education programmes at that provider, or integrated higher education programmes which students complete at that provider.

the provider's underperformance. We did not, however, place any weight on the impact of flooding in explaining the provider's underperformance – this is because while we recognised this was likely to have impacted students' attendance on campus in the immediate aftermath of the floods, we considered its effects unlikely to have a bearing on student continuation more generally.

The university set out in its submissions to us that a decision to terminate its partnership with the embedded college was taken in early 2021-22, with no students admitted after September 2021 and any continuing students able to complete their studies throughout the 2021-22 academic year. The provider stated that this decision was made as a result of having failed to improve student outcomes to the desired level.

This demonstrated that the provider had identified the cause of its underperformance, and its decision to terminate the partnership was taken in response to that.

In line with Regulatory advice 20, we also interrogated the timing and rationale of these partnership course closures, and concluded they raised no concerns. There was evidence that the provider had supported affected students, for example, by ensuring that continuing students could complete their studies as intended (a process known as 'teach-out'), and the university's decision to terminate the partnership in 2021-22 pre-dated the OfS's current interest in its student outcomes data.

Furthermore, OfS analysis corroborated the university's assertion that removing students studying through this partnership from the university's data resulted in performance above the relevant numerical threshold for the business and management split indicator under investigation, as set out in Table 2:

**Table 2: Full-time first degree continuation outcomes for business and management with and without embedded college students**

Academic year	With embedded college students			Without embedded college students		
	Denominator	Indicator (%)	Statistical uncertainty distribution below threshold (%)	Denominator	Indicator (%)	Statistical uncertainty distribution below threshold (%)
2019-20	530	39.3	100	200	86.6	0.8
4-year aggregate (2016-17 to 2019-20)	1,150	65.5	100	830	87.3	0.0
4-year aggregate (2017-18 to 2020-21)	1,070	63.2	100	750	86.4	0.0

The students in question will remain in the university's data and therefore continue to contribute to the university's aggregate performance for several more years. It is clear from the above analysis, however, that the university's performance against our numerical thresholds will significantly improve once the 2019-20 entry cohort, which includes students studying through the now terminated partnership, falls out of the time series we use to construct student outcomes data. In the meantime, removing the embedded college student data from the university's data results in the university's students achieving above the relevant numerical threshold for the business and management split indicator.

## **Conclusion**

Having considered the contextual information submitted by the university, the OfS concluded that its performance below our numerical threshold was otherwise justified by the context it had submitted in relation to:

- a. The actions it had taken to address underperformance by the termination of its partnership with its embedded college, ceasing delivery of these collaborative courses and ensuring any remaining students were taught out, such that there is no longer an embedded college at the university. Once embedded college student data is removed from the university's data, student outcomes are above threshold in all years.
- b. The likely impact of the coronavirus pandemic on students on these courses in the 2019-20 academic year.

For this reason, we consider the provider to be compliant with ongoing condition of registration B3 and no further regulatory action is necessary at this time.