# Universities Face Growing Pressure for Ofsted-Style Accountability



The UK higher education sector is undergoing major change amid financial strain, shifting government skills priorities and institutional restructuring. A key development arrived in September 2025 with the launch of Ofsted’s new Report Card for Further Education and Skills, a simplified five-point grading system aimed at increasing accountability in skills provision.

The report card assesses providers across leadership, governance, inclusion, safeguarding and responsiveness to skills shortages, with additional ratings at programme level. Though designed for further education, the model’s clarity has drawn attention from policymakers and raised the question of whether a similar framework could be introduced for universities.

Dr Ismini Vasileiou of De Montfort University notes the current patchwork of university oversight—including the Office for Students, the Teaching Excellence Framework and the National Student Survey—creates public confusion. A concise, accessible grading system could improve transparency and public trust, potentially evaluating universities on leadership, financial resilience, student wellbeing, and alignment with workforce needs in sectors such as AI and cybersecurity.

However, critics caution against applying a school-style model to a sector as diverse as higher education. Universities range from specialist institutions to large research centres, and a one-size-fits-all report card risks being reductive. There are also concerns that such ratings could distort institutional behaviour and undermine autonomy.

Still, the potential benefits are significant. Clearer accountability could strengthen public confidence in the value of higher education and support government efforts to bridge further and higher education. The recent transfer of skills policy to the Department for Work and Pensions reflects the growing link between education and economic strategy, underlining the need for universities to demonstrate their role in regional growth and workforce development.

Institutional restructuring is already underway. Last September’s announcement of the merger between the University of Kent and the University of Greenwich to form the London and South East University Group, launching in 2026, illustrates the sector’s response to financial pressures including flat domestic fees and falling international student numbers. The new university will serve around 28,000 undergraduates, preserving both institutions’ identities while consolidating governance under Greenwich Vice-Chancellor Professor Jane Harrington.

The University and College Union has criticised the merger as a takeover, raising concerns over jobs and student support. If a future report card-style assessment is introduced, the merger’s success will likely be judged not just on financial grounds but also governance, inclusion and skills alignment—offering transparency that could address stakeholder concerns.

National initiatives such as Skills England and the Digital Skills Partnership highlight the sector’s growing role in regional upskilling and economic resilience. Projects like CyberLocal show how universities are increasingly part of the national workforce development strategy, a core theme of Ofsted’s new framework.

As these shifts continue, the higher education sector faces a choice: shape a balanced accountability model that supports innovation and reflects universities’ broad contributions, or risk having an ill-fitting framework imposed. Proactive engagement will be essential to ensuring any future system enhances the sector’s autonomy and ability to lead in education and innovation both nationally and globally.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/10/16/report-cards-reshuffles-and-resilience-what-ofsteds-new-model-could-mean-for-higher-education/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ofsted-confirms-changes-to-education-inspection-and-unveils-new-look-report-cards> - In September 2025, Ofsted announced a renewed approach to education inspection, introducing new-look report cards for schools, early years, and further education and skills. The new 5-point grading scale, including the 'exceptional' grade, aims to provide parents with better and more detailed information, ensuring fairness for professionals and raising standards for all children. The revised inspection framework and methodology were published in September, with inspections under the new approach beginning in November 2025. This initiative follows a consultation that showed strong parental support for the new report cards, though sector feedback revealed the need for further refinement.
3. <https://www.kent.ac.uk/news/statements/37128/kent-announces-trailblazing-collaboration-with-the-university-of-greenwich> - On 10 September 2025, the University of Kent and the University of Greenwich announced their intention to formally collaborate, leading to the creation of the London and South East University Group. This 'super-university' model aims to combine the strengths of both institutions while allowing each to retain its name, identity, and local presence. The collaboration is expected to become one of the largest higher education institutions in the UK and the largest in the South of England, serving around 28,000 undergraduates. The merged entity will be led by Greenwich Vice-Chancellor Professor Jane Harrington and is anticipated to be established for the 2026/2027 academic year.
4. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/kent-and-greenwich-join-forces-new-super-university> - The University of Kent and the University of Greenwich have announced plans to form a multi-university group, the London and South East University Group, marking the first collaboration of its type in the UK sector since the start of the financial crisis. Both universities will be brought under one structure, led by current Greenwich Vice-Chancellor Jane Harrington, but each institution will retain its own name and identity. The new entity is set to be called the London and South East University Group, subject to consultation, and is being labelled a 'superuniversity'. It hopes to start operating ready for the start of the 2026-27 academic year and will instantly become one of the largest institutions in the UK and the largest in south-east England.
5. <https://www.greenwichsu.co.uk/news/article/6001/Statement-regarding-the-new-collaboration-between-the-University-of-Greenwich-and-the-University-of/> - The University of Greenwich has announced its intention to formally collaborate with the University of Kent to create a new 'super-university'. This collaboration is described as a trailblazing model, establishing a first-of-its-kind multi-university group that will create a blueprint for other institutions to follow. The new university group will become one of the largest higher education institutions in the UK and the largest in the South of England. Greenwich Students’ Union welcomes this exciting move and plans to work closely with students and the University to build a high-quality student experience that continues to deliver sector-leading support for students.
6. <https://www.kentinvictachamber.co.uk/news/uks-first-regional-super-university-announced-merger-of-university-of-kent-and-university-of-greenwich/> - In a landmark development for higher education in the UK, the University of Kent and the University of Greenwich have announced plans to merge into a single institution: the London and South East University Group. The new organisation, which will officially launch in Autumn 2026, will be the UK’s first regional 'super-university', serving nearly 50,000 students across London and the South East. The new group will be led by Professor Jane Harrington, current Vice-Chancellor of the University of Greenwich. The universities emphasised that the merger is designed to strengthen financial resilience amid sector-wide economic challenges, expand teaching and research opportunities across four main campuses, and enhance regional and international impact while retaining the unique names, identities, and degrees of both Kent and Greenwich.
7. <https://www.upday.com/uk/uknews/union-slams-university-merger-as-takeover-not-partnership/tkvbfnd> - The University and College Union (UCU) has raised concerns about the proposed merger between the University of Kent and the University of Greenwich, describing it as a 'takeover' rather than a partnership. UCU General Secretary Jo Grady responded: 'Staff and students at both institutions will be alarmed by today’s announcement, especially as many have heard about the plans through the news. It is clear this is the result of severe financial pressure – anyone attempting to say otherwise is deceiving the public – and urgent reassurance that jobs and student provision will be protected is now needed.'