



Removing the core aim fix for 2027 to 2028 allocations

As part of the 16-19 funding allocations process for providers who return the school census, DfE look at how schools record the core aim flag against post-16 learning aims in the autumn school census return. In some cases we correct significant errors. We intend to do this for the last time for 2026 to 2027 allocations.

We use the core aim flag returned by providers to determine if a student's programme is academic or vocational. Key elements of the funding formula depend on whether a programme is academic or vocational.

Background

Shortly after the core aim was introduced in 2013, we identified significant issues with recording the core aim correctly. If we had used this erroneous data as it was submitted, it would have had a significant negative effect on the retention and programme cost weighting factors we calculate. The result would have been reduced allocations for a large number of providers. The issues were widespread enough that we decided to make systematic changes to fix this erroneous recording prior to using the data for our calculations. We have been running the 'core aim fix' for allocations every year since.

What is the core aim?

The core aim flag identifies the principal or 'core' activity in a student's programme.

The [Funding rates and formula](#) page on GOV.UK gives advice on selecting which learning aim to apply the flag to:

"The core aim is the most important or central element of the programme, around which the rest of the programme is built. It will usually be the component with the largest amount of timetabled activity associated with it, and will usually reflect the primary focus of the programme in line with the student's intended destination (such as employment or further study) at the end of their programme."

In the school census, institutions must only identify the core aim for students studying vocational programmes, or mixed programmes with a vocational core. This is meant to reduce bureaucracy for institutions, as we expect most students will be on academic programmes, and therefore will not need to have a core aim.

How does the core aim affect allocations?

We use the core aim to determine whether a programme is academic or vocational. We always class a programme with a core aim as vocational, even if the core aim is an

academic type like an A level. You can see the academic qualification types on the [Funding rates and formula](#) page.

Programme type affects retention and programme cost weighting. Having the wrong programme type will usually mean that the student is not retained and often results in a lower programme cost weighting. These will both have a negative effect on the factor we use to calculate the allocation, and therefore will produce a lower level of funding.

You can find more information on the core aim, retention and programme cost weighting on the [Funding rates and formula](#) page. The [school census interactive tool](#) will also help you understand common errors and how they impact on the funding.

How the core aim fix works

When institutions do not select a core aim for students who we believe are undertaking a vocational study programme, we attempt to identify a core aim rather than treating them as doing an academic programme.

We do not alter the data that providers submit in any other circumstances, and the core aim flag has been in use for several years now. We will apply the core aim fix for the final time for 2026 to 2027 allocations, after which we will use the core aim data as returned and will focus on supporting providers to return good quality data.

How you can make sure your data is accurate

Each autumn census return we make [16 to 19 funding reports](#) available that you can use to identify whether or not your core aim recording is accurate. This is a crucial tool to submit accurate data in the autumn census window and avoid an incorrect funding allocation.

The 16 to 19 student detail report shows the programme type (academic or vocational) for every student: you should use this to check that the student's programme type is correct. If not, you should review your core aim recording to ensure it is accurate. The same report will also show calculated retention and programme cost weighting factors using the data you have submitted. Similarly if these are not as expected you should review your core aim recording.

We recommend using the [school census interactive toolkit](#) to understand how your data is used to calculate these elements. It sets out what data is used, why it is used and the impacts of getting this data wrong.

If you want to see how many of your students were affected by the core aim fix, you can check your [allocation calculation toolkit \(ACT\) file](#). In the 'Aims' tab, each learning aim has the type 'component' or 'core' under 'Aim type'. In the next field, 'Aim type fixed', the type will have changed if it was affected by the fix. The ACT files also give individual students' retention statuses and programme cost weightings.