

# Responsible Futures Audit Guidance

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## Introduction

Partnerships (the institution and students' union/association/student leadership group) work through the Responsible Futures framework over one to three years. Once they indicate they are ready, Partnerships have a two-day student-led audit.\* Partnerships can choose when they would like this to take place, but audits should ideally be booked at least 3 months in advance and are subject to SOS UK availability.

The audit determines the partnership's accreditation – either the full accreditation or a 'working towards' recognition – and provides both the partnership, student auditors and SOS UK with valuable findings resulting from criteria and documentary evidence review, interviews, and student focus groups. This is consolidated into an individualised audit report outlining findings, successes, and opportunities for improvement.

A critical aspect of the audit is the learning and development of the student auditors. The SOS UK staff member is there as a facilitator, but the process is very much led by the students.

We require officers and staff from the institution and students' union/association/student leadership group to be available at different times throughout the audit process – for further detail on this, please refer to the text in bold on the sample schedule included in this guidance.

As you prepare for your audit, a reminder that the [Responsible Futures Resource Bank](#) is full of helpful guidance, examples, and advice.

*\*Reciprocal audits are 2.5 days audits.*

## Room booking

If the audit is held in-person, we request that a suitable room is provided for the audits to be held in, with a projector and screen, flip chart paper, markers, and that lunch and refreshments are provided to students on both days of the audit. If possible, we recommend the room is set up in boardroom style, so that auditors can both comfortably follow the training slides and work together on tasks.

If the audit is held in a hybrid format, you must be able to organise this through hybrid-enabling technology, otherwise it is unlikely we will be able to facilitate the process in a smooth and effective way.

## Student auditors

Responsible Futures auditing provides an excellent student development, learning and leadership opportunity. Partnerships, with support from SOS UK, should aim to recruit 6-10 students to take part in the audit (depending on how many criteria have been completed and how much evidence has been submitted - if the partnership has done the majority of criteria, we would recommend having more auditors!).

We suggest recruiting auditors as early as possible. Guidance to assist with auditor recruitment can be found [on the Responsible Futures Resource Bank here](#). Some partnerships have promoted the opportunity through their careers service, through courses, or through societies. Some have had students apply for the role (with a short, written application and even a short interview), whilst others have had an open sign-up form online. Some promote this under the banner of sustainability, others as auditing, and others as an opportunity to develop employability skills.

There are three key parts of the student auditor role:

- **Documentary evidence review:** auditors will verify evidence and determine scoring, working together to review each criterion.
- **Interviews:** auditors will be trained to lead interviews, take notes and analyse interviews, alongside the support of SOS UK staff.
- **Assessment and reflection:** auditors will identify key themes, reflect on their own learning experiences, and make recommendations to the partnership which form the basis of the follow-up report.

**Auditors should be asked to bring a laptop with them** if they have one (this needs to be a laptop rather than a tablet). Alternatively, the students' union/institution could lend laptops or provide access to desktops for the purpose of the audit. **Internet access is required.**

**Student auditors will need to sign our GDPR disclaimer form ahead of the audit, which SOS UK staff will email to them.**

Following the audit, auditors will receive a digital badge evidencing and celebrating their contribution to progressing sustainability in learning at their institution and students' union. Reference letters are also available upon request. Students will also be invited to join SOS UK's LinkedIn alumni group where SOS UK share opportunities and resources.

## Recruiting student auditors

Some partnerships have offered additional recognition to students through inclusion of Responsible Futures auditing e.g. on their HEAR (higher education achievement report), volunteering record, or by inviting them to be recognised at a local sustainability awards event (if this already exists). Some partnerships have collaborated with their employability teams to run a follow-up workshop on how students can apply the RF audit experience in future applications. Some partnerships have found it useful to offer an incentive for students, for example a £5 gift card to the SU shop, whilst others have no trouble recruiting auditors in an entirely voluntary role.

If possible, we recommend paying student auditors the Real Living Wage for their time conducting the audit.

### Some examples...

The auditors at **Nottingham Trent University** were engaged through sustainability channels. Students came from courses highly related to the subject and/or they were engaged in various voluntary initiatives across the university and students' union. They were largely involved because they wanted to learn more about their institution's sustainability practices and wanted to play a leadership role at the university.



The auditors at **Anglia Ruskin University** were recruited through a combination of methods: from emailing interested and engaged students with direct invitations, to using the employability service, to even posting pamphlets on the door of toilet stalls. Students were asked to submit a short cover letter and CV to apply for the opportunity, at which point they were short-listed, and six students were selected. There was a deliberate choice to mix students' abilities: selecting four stronger applications and two which would not have immediately been the most qualified so as to ensure opportunities for widening participation. This resulted in a balanced group who benefited enormously from the opportunity. The coordinator even planned a short workshop afterwards to review the students' CVs and cover letters and look at how their role as an auditor could be included in future applications.



## Components of auditing

### Pre-audit support

As a standard part of Responsible Futures, all partnerships receive tailored support per year. Many partnerships choose to use this support for a kick-off meeting, training with staff and/or students, or a specific intervention. However, a partnership may also choose to use this support to work with SOS UK to review their submission in advance of the audit and make recommendations for improvements. Some partnerships may set up regular calls ahead of the audit with their SOS UK project manager.

If your partnership wishes to take up this type of support, please book this in with SOS UK well in advance of your submission deadline.

### Documentary evidence

#### Framework submission

Each partnership will submit the completed online framework prior to their audit date (specific date to be agreed on with SOS UK staff) by clicking "**Submit**". Each partnership should already have an active account through which they are logging their actions and uploading relevant evidence throughout the year.

Anyone can join your partnership working group on the online framework. [Please see our guidance for accessing the online framework here.](#)

To achieve the Responsible Futures accreditation, the partnership must **meet or exceed the score threshold of 220 points** if using the pre 2025/26 framework, or **255** if using the new version of the framework, which is around two thirds of the points available.

Up to 71 of these points will be achieved through the 9 mandatory criteria, which must be completed to gain accreditation (you do not need to receive a maximum score for them to be deemed completed). All partnerships are audited to validate their scores. Any partnerships that gain between 100 and 220 points on the old framework, or 150 and 255 on the new framework, will be accredited as 'Working Towards Accreditation'.

Responsible Futures is an accreditation mark, not a league table. We will always ensure we keep your score and report confidential to your partnership. You are, of course, allowed to share your score or report with others if you wish.

## Evidence submission

Criteria-specific evidence suggestions can be found in the "How you will be audited" tab within the framework. A few top tips on evidence:

- **Please try and provide evidence in a concise way.** A smaller amount of more relevant evidence is better for the auditors than loads of less relevant content. You will be provided the opportunity to submit further evidence if deemed necessary by the auditors. We recommend e.g. uploading a single PDF with links to relevant pieces of evidence, and why these links are included, or providing this information in the comments.
- If one piece of evidence fulfils multiple criteria, please **replicate that piece of evidence** for each relevant criterion, or cross-reference in the comments.
- If appropriate, e.g. for large documents, **highlight the relevant section of the evidence** (e.g., noting the page number in the comments).
- A clear comment can really help to provide context to the auditors and direct them to the relevant information within any uploaded evidence (e.g., "We promoted the national survey through Instagram, we gained a response rate of XX, see highlighted section of page two of document.")
- Photos and website links are great evidence!

Bespoke audit reports will be sent out to partnerships, which will include a breakdown of the scores that you have been allocated for each criterion, comments from the auditors and SOS UK, alongside a recommendation list to help support future work in this area.

## Interviews with key individuals

On day two, interviews will take place with (typically) three key individuals (we are also happy for interviews to be done with small groups). Usually, partnerships choose to identify one representative from the students' union/association/student leadership group, one from the institution, and one other individual. For example: this could be someone in senior management, an academic, or an external stakeholder who has been involved directly in the partnership working group or indirectly by helping to feed into other criteria. It will be up to the partnership to decide who is best placed to act as this third interviewee.

We have found that the audit benefits significantly from engaging with senior leaders through the interviews, for example, a PVC Education type role is an ideal choice for one of the three interviews.

The interviews will take place in the audit room and interviewees will normally be required to attend in-person (please let us know in advance if this will not be possible, and we will look into other arrangements).

The interview is facilitated by the student auditors who, with the support of SOS UK, will develop a set of questions. The questions are always open-ended, with no right or wrong answers, and the interviewers do not aim to 'quiz' the interviewees on your submission.

Please arrange for each interviewee to be available at the agreed time (further details can be found in the "Sample schedule" section) and send a meeting invite out to them for this time, so they don't forget.

The interviews will aim to:

- Provide student auditors with a more human perspective on the documents they review on day one.
- Develop a more in-depth understanding of the wider narrative of sustainability and at the institution and students' union.
- Gain feedback on the successes and challenges of participation in Responsible Futures so that SOS UK can make improvements to the programme and shape future years.

## Optional: Student focus group(s)

The student focus group component of the audit aims to better understand students' experiences of social responsibility and sustainability at the institution.

Responsible Futures student focus groups are for the purpose of research to support your efforts in Responsible Futures, however the results do not determine the partnership's accreditation because of variability between different focus groups. The results of this research will be shared with the partnership for their own purposes and will help to shape recommendations in the report (but will not affect scoring).

The aims of the focus groups are to:

- Have students articulate their own attitudes and values around sustainability in a broad sense and within the context of their students' union and institution.
- Have students articulate their own learning around sustainability.
- And understand to what extent the partnership's efforts have impacted students' learning.

Typically, **two focus groups will take place online either a few days or weeks before or after the audit**, each with 8-10 student participants. Sometimes the partnership decides that running just one is more doable, in which case the following distinctions would not be necessary. If two are being run, we would recommend that one is the '**intervention group**' and focuses on students who have experienced or been exposed to a specific intervention relating to sustainability. (For example, they have been involved in a sustainability society, they have been on a particularly sustainability-focused course, etc.) This intervention group can include the student auditors, but ideally they should not comprise the majority of the students. The other focus group is the '**non-intervention group**', and should be an institutionally representative group of students who have not experienced or been exposed to a specific intervention (to the best of your knowledge at time of recruitment). Sometimes the non-intervention group is easiest to recruit from students who are already engaged with other initiatives in some way, but just not sustainability (e.g., sports clubs, societies, etc.).

Partnerships are responsible for recruiting student participants locally with resources and support provided by SOS UK. We recommend that you begin recruitment **at least** 2-3 weeks in advance of the focus group(s) and provide an incentive, if possible. Previous partnerships have provided refreshments or a gift certificate or voucher as an incentive for attendance.

## Sample schedule

**\*Please amend as needed but ensure this is discussed with your SOS UK lead contact\***

### Day one

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
9:00am	SOS UK arrives, set up room, ensure IT is working	SOS UK, <b>one partnership representative</b>
9:30am	Student auditors arrive	SOS UK, student auditors, <b>partnership representative(s)</b> <i>[to introduce self and provide short introduction to partnership's work (optional, max 15 mins)]</i>
9:30am - 12:30pm	Student training (incl. break)	SOS UK, student auditors
12:30 - 1:00pm	Lunch	SOS UK, student auditors
1:00 - 4:00pm	Documentary evidence review (incl. break)	SOS UK, student auditors
4:00 - 4:30pm	Student reflection	SOS UK, student auditors

## Day two

**\*Please note that no interviews should be planned before lunch to ensure the auditors have sufficient time to prepare\***

<b>Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
9:00am	SOS UK arrives, set up room, ensure IT is working	SOS UK
9:30am	Student auditors arrive	SOS UK, student auditors
9:30 - 11:30am	Student training (incl. break)	SOS UK, student auditors
11:30am - 12:30pm	Lunch	SOS UK, student auditors, partnership representative(s)
12:30 - 12:45pm	Final preparation before interviews	SOS UK, student auditors
12:45 - 1:30pm	Interview 1	SOS UK, student auditors, first interviewee
1:45 - 2:30pm	Interview 2	SOS UK, student auditors, second interviewee
2:45 - 3:30pm	Interview 3	SOS UK, student auditors, third interviewee
3:30 - 4:00pm	Student reflection	SOS UK, student auditors
4:00 - 4:30pm	Debrief with partnership leads	SOS UK, partnership representatives - one from institution, one from students' union/student leadership

## Scoring matrix

In the framework, each criterion has a maximum score between 2 and 10. Four criteria in the 'Impact and outcomes' section have a maximum score of 20 points per criterion to reflect the importance, impact, and challenging nature of measuring outcomes.

The following outlines the guide by which auditors will determine if the maximum score can be applied for a particular criterion, or if a lower score is more appropriate due to resulting impact or difficulty.

		<b>DIFFICULTY</b>				
<b>Scoring Matrix</b>		1 - achieved quickly and with ease, no major obstacles overcome	2 - achieved simply and with relative ease, only minor obstacles overcome	3 - achieved through moderate effort	4 - achieved over a significant period of time through major effort, multiple obstacles or challenges overcome	5 - achieved only through long term planning, significant effort and overcoming major obstacles or challenges
<b>IMPACT</b>	1 - minimal impact and/or major lack of evidence provided	<i>Score: 2</i>	<i>Score: 3</i>	<i>Score: 4</i>	<i>Score: 5</i>	<i>Score: 6</i>
	2 - low impact and/or minimal evidence	<i>Score: 3</i>	<i>Score: 4</i>	<i>Score: 5</i>	<i>Score: 6</i>	<i>Score: 7</i>
	3 - medium impact and/or satisfactory evidence provided	<i>Score: 4</i>	<i>Score: 5</i>	<i>Score: 6</i>	<i>Score: 7</i>	<i>Score: 8</i>
	4 - high impact and/or good evidence provided	<i>Score: 5</i>	<i>Score: 6</i>	<i>Score: 7</i>	<i>Score: 8</i>	<i>Score: 9</i>
	5 - maximum impact and/or excellent evidence provided	<i>Score: 6</i>	<i>Score: 7</i>	<i>Score: 8</i>	<i>Score: 9</i>	<i>Score: 10</i>

## What happens after the audit?

### What does the accreditation mean?

The "Responsible Futures Accreditation" means that you have gained the full accreditation by meeting or exceeding the score threshold of 220 (out of 355, if using the pre 2025/26 framework) or 255 (out of 390 (UK) or 397 (Int) if using the new version of the framework) and have demonstrated and evidenced your partnership's commitment and progress for embedding sustainability and social responsibility across the whole institution.

The "Responsible Futures – Working Towards Accreditation" recognises your commitment and progress when you have not met the score threshold to be awarded the full accreditation. Through being awarded the "Working Towards Accreditation", your partnership should request a follow-up audit when you feel that you are prepared to go for accreditation.

Each institution will be given the appropriate logo – please use this widely to recognise your accomplishments and your partnership's commitment to sustainability and social responsibility. If you would like to provide further information about the programme, please link to the [Responsible Futures website](#).

### How long will the accreditation last?

Accreditation is valid for two years, at which time another audit will be required to re-validate your accreditation.

### What's next?

Partnerships are welcome to celebrate their accreditation however they see fit. Please feel free to share any communications over social media channels with SOS UK so we can also celebrate your achievement over our social media. [Please see our media guidance](#) for more information on how you can share your achievement. Speak to SOS UK if you would like to use a template.

After achieving accreditation, the annual membership fee will cover all future audits to maintain accreditation as well as ongoing support. The current fees can be found [on the Responsible Futures website](#).

### **Thank you for all of your efforts to plan and coordinate a successful audit!**

Please contact your lead contact, or [responsiblefutures@sos-uk.org](mailto:responsiblefutures@sos-uk.org), should you have any further questions, and do [visit the Responsible Futures Resource Bank available here](#) which is full of helpful guidance, examples, and advice.