

# HESA Graduate Outcomes Consultation

## Background

In July 2015, HESA commenced a fundamental review of outcomes data for graduates from higher education. The review is examining requirements for information about student and graduate outcomes, to provide data to meet the needs of all users and keep pace with the changing context for graduate employment and information provision for students.

### Scope of the review

The Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Survey, the Longitudinal DLHE Survey and contextual data within other data collections are all within scope of the review. The aim of the review is to gather and deliver improved data at a lower cost, while reducing the burden of data collection. It is also a chance to review the scope of the current survey, which focusses on employment and earnings, taking in a wider definition of graduate outcomes.

This is the first of two consultations on graduate outcomes. It looks at broad principles and high-level topics. These consultations and the review they support, will lead to the replacement of the DLHE survey.

NUS are responding to the consultation and we encourage students' unions to respond also. The consultation document [can be found here](#). We have highlighted in this document some areas that members might find useful to comment on. **The deadline to respond to the HESA consultation is Thursday 14 July.**

This briefing summarises our response to this very broad consultation thematically. As the survey is in two sections, the themes repeat themselves, so drawing major themes out might help you to contextualise your response to the questions. There are over 100 questions in this consultation, but unions don't have to answer all of them. There is plenty of space for additional comment if you wanted to skip questions and focus on what is important to you. **The most important section to answer is Section A** as this sets up the scope for forthcoming proposals from HESA.

### Main Themes

These are the main themes of the consultation in Section A. This is possibly the most important part of the consultation as it deals with the overarching scope of understanding graduate outcomes and how the sector might go about understanding that scope.

### **1. How are the data collected?**

HESA have set out three basic models that could be used for collecting data:

- Relying entirely on linked data (e.g. HMRC tax data and DWP benefit data) with no DLHE survey
- Continuing to use the DLHE survey to collect data by consent - not using linked data at all
- Using a mixed approach – DLHE survey and linked data

A significant part of the review recognises that the sector doesn't know the cost of running the current DLHE, and is asking institutions to return cost and time, which will inform the decisions around centralisation, scope and methodologies.

### **2. What data are collected?**

HESA are proposing to continue collecting data on the following high-level topics:

- Types of activity
- Employment
- Further study
- Questions that identify graduates working in regulated professions
- Questions about the HE experience and preparedness for future activity

The consultation is also proposing additional qualitative measures of graduate outcomes in order to capture data which is self-evaluative by graduates, as the current DLHE does not provide any mechanism to do this. The self-evaluation areas HESA are currently investigating include:

- The application of a skills framework
- The use of the Subjective Wellbeing Framework – the extent to which HE has a positive impact on attitudes, sense of worthwhileness and satisfaction with life
- The Net Promoter score – measuring loyalty
- Linking back to previous surveys or activity (to assess a graduate's journey)
- A new self-evaluative question – measuring outcomes from a graduate's perspective and according to their own success criteria.

They are also interested in understanding if there is anything else which acts as a useful self-evaluative measure.

### **3. When are the data collected?**

HESA are consulting on the timing for collecting data for the DLHE survey in order to understand more about the impact of a change in census date on data requirements. Proposals include a variety of possible timescales including: 6 months, 12 months, 18 months, 24 months, 36 months and 48 months after graduation.

There are also a number of surveying methods proposed to replace the current two-survey approach such as:

- a cohort approach (a sample is identified and traced over time)
- wave approach (rolling coverage that covers a proportion of the overall population)
- a single census survey conducted at a mid-point between the current DLHE and Longitudinal DLHE (18 months)

### **4. How is the survey processed?**

HESA are looking at the prospect of centralising the survey process in order to be more cost-effective and potentially provide more demonstrably robust results. They are also consulting on whether a centralised approach to Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) coding is feasible, while retaining a distributed approach to surveying.

**Section B** of the consultation focuses more on the detail of these main principles and presents some tentative proposals for comment.

## Summary of NUS's response

NUS policy points out a number of problems with the current DLHE – from its narrow scope on jobs, status and earnings, methodological flaws around the timing of the survey being far too early and the reliability of the data, with fears that the survey is easily subject to gaming in order to satisfy league table success. This set of discussions and proposals from HESA cover all of these concerns and more, particularly around the scope of the survey and the very definition of graduate outcomes. Two particular proposals stand out:

**The application of a skills framework** – this could help us understand the extent to which graduates are deploying learned skills at work (or whatever path they are following), and would add the voice of graduates to the debate about the skills (or perhaps attributes or competencies) required for graduates to thrive.

For students' unions this opens up considerable space to explore extra and co-curricular activity, the pursuit of interests and skills which are not necessarily about getting a job, which nevertheless confer a number of benefits and opportunities. Opening the scope from employment to more in-depth understanding of volunteering and entrepreneurship, for example, is one example where the very fabric of the HE experience can be explored and improved.

**The use of a widely-adopted subjective wellbeing** framework – this would help us to understand and demonstrate the extent to which HE has a positive impact on attitudes, sense of worthwhileness and satisfaction with life, comparable to other segments of the population.

This approach would help us to understand whether graduates were where they wanted to be and the extent to which HE was a part of this – rather than making an objective judgement which compares high-salary with success and largely ignores vocations and the arts. Interventions could help reconfigure services, induction, curricula and the relationship between formal and non-formal learning activities.

## The scope of the proposals supports a healthy conversation about the purpose of Higher Education.

### Areas for comment

NUS will comment throughout the consultation, but the following areas may be of interest to students' unions in terms of where opinions will differ across the sector and where we believe it is important to draw attention:

### **The wider scope of the survey - Graduates deciding what success looks like.**

We support HESA's bold approach to widening the definition of graduate outcomes beyond simply paid employment. The scope of the proposals supports a healthy conversation about the purpose of Higher Education; its enthusiasm for reframing this purpose around a wider set of outcomes for graduates begins to touch on HE's outcomes for society itself and its role as a public good.

The consultation has a focus on the resilience of graduates. We are sceptical of approaches to resilience which are reductive and are simply about coping strategies to reduce counselling figures, for example.

However, in the sense of formation and building people as citizens and active, contributing members of society, we support approaches to understand wider post-graduate activities such as volunteering, community service, internships and entrepreneurship.

### **Timing of the survey**

We believe that the current survey point of 6 months does not capture, meaningfully, the destinations of graduates who are, at this point likely taking temporary employment whilst looking at their future careers. We believe that an 18 month survey point would indeed capture graduates at the early stages of their careers and would reflect the impact of higher education on their lives.

There is however the problem that response rates would be significantly lower, and our own experience of graduate surveys suggests that Masters level students are not fairly represented at 18 months, as they are effectively just after the point of graduation. Therefore we favour a fixed survey point of 12 months with a second survey conducted at 24 months, possibly on a cohort basis, to account for the significant increase in Masters level graduates and to accurately reflect the outcomes for those graduates.

An 18 month survey would possibly be too late in producing results which satisfy information requirements for prospective students. Neither these students nor the press are, or should be, patient and the longer it takes data and analyses to come through the system to be reported, the more likely that outlets are to turn to the relatively immediate linked data on earnings. Very quickly we would find that the rich data collected would be largely ignored by both the press and prospective students. This would only feed already flawed league tables and further reward a skewed, marketised agenda for choice in Higher Education. It is vital that these two sources of data are managed carefully and as such early data is better to ensure context and to not reduce Higher Education to earnings.

### **Centralisation of the survey**

NUS has concerns over the consistency and integrity of the current DLHE. Each institution interviews graduates, usually via their careers department or through outsourcing. Not only is this likely an inefficient method of collection (indeed the review seeks to understand the actual cost of the current DLHE, as this is not known) it is also open to coding errors and bias within results – both unintentional and with the intention of improving the results as they contribute to league tables. NUS does not have confidence in the data that are produced under this methodology and believes that centralisation of collection would be both cost-effective and improve the integrity of the data.

An additional factor, though, is that the ONS SOC coding is not up to date with current graduate career paths, and a centralised method would require a review of SOC codes –

particularly 1-3 – to ensure that graduate feedback can be accurately coded, particularly within expanding technical and entrepreneurial roles, many of which now require degree-level qualifications. Amongst other significant issues, this also has an impact on the TEF *highly skilled jobs* metric, which, without refinement of these codes would lead to further gaming in order to increase reported rates, league table position and consequently fee-levels, which we would find unacceptable.

We recognise that the current collection process is a valuable opportunity for careers services to maintain relationships with graduates, to intervene if necessary and of course to immediately reflect on provision of services to current and future students. This benefit could be lost under a centralised collection process. We believe that the benefit gained from having robust data which has the confidence of the sector, students and their families outweighs the potential losses to career service engagement, as we believe that careers professionals should have the support of their institutions in correcting for this gap, in return for time saved in DLHE collection.

### **Barriers to participation and success**

There is a lack of comment around barriers to participation or success in the discussion within the proposals. Of course, demographics will be captured in the expected mixed methodology, and this is clearly possible to explore in any data analysis.

However, we recognise the structural barriers to success which exist in society in everything from access to success, with the attainment gap for BME students, ableist approaches to resilience, workload and participation, and the gender pay gap. These are significant problems which we face as a society and we would expect that an holistic approach to defining and understanding the outcomes of higher education should include, as a core component, the benefits of higher education as it improves society itself. Representing this concern would represent one way which the sector could hold itself accountable for the inequality of which it is a part.

## **Subjective Wellbeing**

We strongly support the adoption of the Subjective Well-being (SWB) metrics. For too long, the focus of success in Higher Education has been reduced to job status and income. SWB allows us to understand broader outcomes such as sense of worthwhileness, connectedness, and agency. This will be comparable with other demographics in society, as the metric is widely used by ONS and will be an opportunity to demonstrate broader, life-wide impacts of HE, particularly around vocational and creative graduate careers, where salary is only one part of a graduate's definition of "success".

We are keen that this metric links back to interventions on campus in approaches to wellbeing and welfare as well as in rounded curricula which enable students to explore their own personal routes through their graduate career.

The research from Plymouth and Huddersfield universities, referenced in the consultation document, reflects the benefits of extra and co-curricular activity:

*"Many students are more interested in the prospect of **fulfilment, satisfaction, excitement, happiness, and friendship today**, than in working towards graduate-level employment in three years' time. **Curriculum-based employability interventions** promoted extracurricular life as an opportunity for students to find out by trial and error what feels personally **worthwhile** to them. Attitudes that emerge in **worthwhile** activity (such as curiosity, initiative, risk taking, ingenuity, resilience and drive for results) eclipse skills as determinants of early career performance."*

*(HESA Graduate outcomes consultation 2016)*

We believe that this presents an exciting opportunity to explore how these activities are supported and developed in partnership with students' unions. Linking these metrics with those proposed around student engagement could transform the very character of provision within our universities.

## **PGR evaluation**

We believe that there should be a PGR supplement to any graduate outcomes survey as employment metrics are not suited to the way that research students work during and after their doctorate. Assessing the outcomes of PGR degrees would better take place 3-5 years after graduation and we would support a supplement and cohort studies on this group.

## **International students**

We share institutions' fears about losing feedback from students who either return to or go overseas after graduation. Whilst recognising that assessing outcomes internationally brings a multitude of difficulties in terms of context, it does not diminish the importance of continually reflecting and improving provision to better equip these graduates in their careers. We believe that HESA should focus studies in this area, perhaps focusing on major migratory patterns, and that institutions be supported to focus their efforts on this group of students.

## **Net Promoter Score**

The Net Promoter Score (NPS) is used as a measure of loyalty as opposed to satisfaction. It is a scalar question which asks graduates to what extent they would recommend their course to friends and family. In the context of the graduate outcomes survey, it would be able to link to the rest of the data.

We support the use of NPS as it is an opportunity to reflect relative impact of wellbeing, skills development and engagement. On its own, we don't believe it's valuable, but as a single question it would yield significant benefits in understanding drivers and motivations for students, particularly on analysis of free-text comments. We would be guarded against its use as a singular satisfaction score however, and believe that this question should only be used for context.

## **Student Engagement**

We support the adoption of student engagement measures as long as they take a holistic view to engagement and do not simply talk to the idea of satisfaction. We believe that there is also value to negative engagement and indeed dissatisfaction:

Table I: Examples of positive and negative engagement

	Positive engagement	Non-engagement	Negative engagement
Behavioural	Attends lectures, participates with enthusiasm	Skips lectures without excuse	Boycotts, pickets or disrupts lectures
Emotional	Interest	Boredom	Rejection
Cognitive	Meets or exceeds assignment requirements	Assignments late, rushed or absent	Redefines parameters for assignments

*"It would be perfectly conceivable for a student to engage positively along one or more dimensions while engaging negatively along one or more, or to engage positively or negatively along one or more while not engaging along another/others. An example might be a feminist student who attends all lectures and complies positively with all behavioural engagement norms, while engaging cognitively in a negative fashion by rejecting a 'phallogocentric' social science and submitting assignments on a topic she defined according to her own epistemology."*

HEA [Student engagement literature review](#) Vicki Trowler, Lancaster University. November 2010

NUS & The Student Engagement Partnership have already [responded](#) to the NSS consultation saying that the current proposals with respect to student engagement questions don't go far enough.

Neither negative engagement nor dissatisfaction necessarily detract from the contribution that the HE experience makes to graduate outcomes. We are supportive to both linking to existing HEA UK Experience Survey data, if possible, and if necessary incorporating engagement questions into any data collection.

## Further information

For more information, please contact [alan.roberts@nus.org.uk](mailto:alan.roberts@nus.org.uk) The consultation document [can be found here](#). The deadline to respond to the HESA consultation is Thursday 14 July.