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"HESA - the How, What and Why of data for Higher Education stakeholders"

RESUME

As an organization, the High Education Statistics Agency (HESA) has an ambitious vision looking forward. Our mission is to contribute to the advancement of higher education in the UK by providing a truly comprehensive body of reliable statistical information to a very broad spectrum of people (public, prospective and university students, universities themselves, colleges, government organizations, funding agencies, policy makers...). We want to develop that data to the highest standards so that HESA is trusted as an authoritative, useful and cost-effective organization.

We have a staff of 90 people for information and operations, and finance and supportive staff. Our budget is £5.5 million a year, 3.9 million being provided by the High Education Institution Subscriptions. We are a 20-year old independent company that is owned by the higher education institutions (HEI) themselves, represented by Universities UK and Guild HE. Legal and statutory requirements enable us to collect this detailed data for a specific group of people. Our membership has the 165 HE institutions in the UK as well as one private university and an increasing number of independent providers. According to the financial memorandum contracted between the government and the institutions, a HEI receiving government funding is required to provide its data about student numbers, how much they cost, and about the equality of the provision of higher education and information about those undertaking research. Since the British government is determined to "widen the participation" in academic studies, universities are also required to show how many of their students come from poorer backgrounds. Each UK country has a government department responsible for higher education and there are three funding councils. In England, Scotland and Wales the funding goes from the government through the funding council, to the universities. The research councils are also our statutory customers. Over the last five years, expectations have grown that HE institutions are now willing and able to inform the government about what they are doing and why. By virtue of owning HESA, they have ready access to data about themselves, but more importantly about the activities of all the other universities. While they like to remain autonomous and worry about competition, there is also a huge benefit in sharing data for planning and monitoring their policy and strategy.

HESA publishes a set of performance indicators. It is not just raw data as published, we try to ensure that the performance is managed against the profile of the different institutions. We provide information such as the number of PhDs, research grant contracts, staff in different subject areas, specializations, dropout rate, etc., and we look at those as percentages across different benchmarks. The biggest collection is the

student data we collect at the end of each academic year on an individual basis. We also collect data about students that are the responsibility of UK universities but are being taught on campuses abroad. Our “destination of leavers” survey now hits 80% of the students who completed a degree course and will let us know what they are doing six months after they leave. We know how many are employed, unemployed, how many go on to do a master’s degree, and how many become research students. We also carry out a longitudinal survey on a much smaller sample. This includes the number of students carrying out research, and the research council has a unit very closely tracking the outcome of the research student activity. To provide a fuller picture, we have an institution profile record. We ask institutions to put their departments into regular cost centres, which we use to draw comparisons with our other data. We carry out a detailed finance statistics record to collect research funding input, income and expenditure data, which enhances the published accounts. For our HE Business and Community Interaction survey, we collect data about the amount of contract work universities have in the business and social communities. Our staff records are anonymous for now, but as Orchid is adopted in the UK, we will be able to track staff around the system and identify them back with their publications. We also collect data about estates (investment in research and teaching facilities, teaching space, lecture theatres...). In order to manage our collections, we regularly review them. We run a structured change process according to the needs of both our customers (statutory customers, government bodies, funding councils) and suppliers (HE institutions) to achieve a ‘peacefully’ agreed data set, including going out to consultations with the whole sector. The heads of the institutions own the responsibility of the data set they are providing, but to achieve good quality data that is fit for purpose, we have a dialog with the institutions during the gathering of the data, and we check it ourselves.

HESA is very keen to support and communicate and runs training seminars on how to give and use the data, etc. We have a bespoke data service where individuals can ask for all the data available at a certain level (those numerous inquiries are yet another useful dataset to use). We’re putting more and more data online. We have a mobile app, and our traditional annual volumes are now published electronically, except one for the National Office of Statistics. We are also collecting a dataset published on the Unisats website allowing prospective students to look at every course available and compare data in 16 different fields including student satisfaction. The data we make available as public information is being seen as a very vital responsibility for a university to gain public confidence in higher education. For Research funding councils use the data we collect about input funding for example, and the research councils look at our data about staff and post-grads, finance, and about impact and outcomes from the awards they grant. The big change in the Research Excellence Framework is that there will be a serious collection of information about research impact. Other data for the REF will be supplied by HESA and the outcomes of the REF will inform future research grants allocated to the Universities. We have now undertaken to look at the future of data collection across the UK higher education landscape. While HESA collects data, there are other demands for data by other organisations like the Student Loan Company, professional bodies and the UK Borders Agency. There is also a programme to look at the future of data collection across the UK higher education landscape.



People want data, and they want it now. They want to maintain quality, they want the data to be open and accessible, and we need to make sure that it's relevant for diverse sectors. We need to collect once for use many times, to share true standards, and take advantage of the technology that is now available. Likewise, we're working now on a more available common data language and on trying to find out who asks for what data, when and why. We need to make changes and rethink some of what we do, but we've got a system that people trust and engage with.