

# Our response to the Office for Students' consultation on Data Futures and data collection

Universities UK (UUK) is the collective voice of 140 universities in England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Its mission is to create the conditions for UK universities to be the best in the world, maximising their positive impact locally, nationally, and globally. Universities UK acts on behalf of universities, represented by their heads of institution.

## **Question 1: Do you have any comments about our preferred Approach 1: Two individualised student data collections a year with reduced data requirements in the first data return?**

We welcome the introduction of a new data collection regime. It is an opportunity to reduce the burden on providers where existing requirements are not proportionate. Changing what data is collected and how it is organised will also support more nuanced analysis of the student experience and operation of higher education in England. Access to more timely data will also support the Office for Students (OfS) in undertaking its duties. However, changes such as those in the preferred approach must ensure that the burden on higher education providers remains proportionate.

We recognise that introducing two student data collections a year creates opportunities to reduce the burden on providers in other areas. For example, if this approach enables the National Student Survey (NSS) additions process to be removed, then this will be of significant benefit to providers. While the differences between the two collections may increase burden compared to other approaches, the potential for reduced burden through the reduction of other data collections is appealing.

Even so, the OfS must recognise that introducing any new system will lead to increased burden, at least in the short term. It should be considered that institutions

have been preparing for the transition to Data Futures, and having to turn to a new approach increases burden. This will be particularly felt by smaller providers, or by providers who do not have the technological infrastructure in place to support quick data returns. We recognise the work institutions have already done to prepare for Data Futures, and Approach 1 allows for some of this preparation to be used. While a reduced data requirement in the first year is welcome, we believe the OfS should also consider other areas of its activity that could be reduced.

Having more timely data presents the opportunity to identify concerns and take regulatory action sooner if needed. However, with the early returns data collected at an earlier point, it is likely this data may not be of the same quality as it would otherwise be. Where regulatory decisions are made based on this data, the OfS and the higher education sector need to be assured that the data is of high reliability. We recommend that the OfS conducts analysis to assess the quality of the data made through the early returns process.

Whichever option is chosen, we would like to note that it would be valuable for institutions to be informed as early as possible, to provide sufficient time to prepare for the new approach.

### **Question 2: Do you have any comments about Approach 2: Cumulative in-year individualised student data collection with differential reporting by provider risk?**

As acknowledged in the consultation, Approach 2 is a more fundamental change to the current proposed model, and would therefore result in greater disruption for providers to prepare for it. It is acknowledged that collecting the same data throughout the year would allow for a single system of data collection, rather than multiple as in Approach 1. However, the built-in redundancy of collecting the same data multiple times across the year makes it less valuable, as it means a higher burden for providers. For these reasons, Approach 2 is not preferred.

### **Question 3: Do you have any comments about Approach 3: Changing the timing of collection?**

Approach 3 proposes gathering data at a different time of year to other data collections, which would make it more difficult to compare data across the sector. Lack of comparability with the standard reporting year presents an unavoidable problem for effective data usage, so Approach 3 is not preferred.

This approach also lacks flexibility for the future, as it would be difficult to amend if it is found not to meet the needs of the OfS and providers. As it does not directly address the need to gather up-to-date, in-year data, it seems likely that it would need revisiting in the future. If adjustments did need to be made, this would likely require a revision of the whole approach, which would be inefficient.

**Question 4: Do you have any comments about our discounted Approach 4: Discrete in-year student data collection three times a year?**

This is the approach for which institutions have been preparing, and so any similarity to this approach will support providers in turning to the new data collection regime.

**Question 5: Please rank the approaches in order of preference. What are the reasons for your preference, particularly the approach you have ranked in first place?**

Approach 1 is our preferred approach. We find it to provide the best balance of data quality and timeliness with burden to providers, and its similarity to Data Futures means that the preparation of providers for this approach can still be used.

Approach 3 is our second-choice approach. It places less immediate burden on providers, and bears some similarities to Data Futures, but it does not meet long-term data needs.

Approach 2 is our third-choice approach. Its lack of similarity to Data Futures will result in considerable burden for providers in the short term, and the built-in redundancy of data will constitute an ongoing burden.

As Approach 4 has been discounted, this has been placed in fourth.

**Question 6: Do you have any comments about our proposals on student data content?**

The English higher education system is currently going through a major series of reforms on modular study through the introduction of the Lifelong Loan Entitlement (LLE). The success of these reforms depends on an appropriate regulatory

infrastructure and data collection process. Therefore, we are concerned that the OfS intends to remove reporting requirements at the module level.

While the design of the LLE is currently uncertain, we believe that the proposals in this consultation are an opportunity to future-proof the higher education data collection environment. Module data is also used in Welsh funding allocations from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), so maintaining modular data would provide greater consistency of practice across the UK. We therefore recommend that the OfS maintains its current modular collection process and, going forward, works with the Department for Education (DfE) to identify where data collection may be necessary.

Universities are accountable to several regulators. It may be useful to identify where collaboration between regulators can reduce the burden on providers. This is particularly the case for data collected through the Individualised Learner Record. Collaborative data sharing such as with the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) for higher apprenticeships would mark a meaningful step in reducing the burden on providers. Similarly, it is indicated that Approach 1 may allow for certain Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) collections to be removed. This increases the appeal of this approach, and such a change would greatly reduce burden.

It is also proposed that some items of student data will be removed, including entry qualifications. As entry qualifications are a very large data set, removal of this item would reduce burden for the providers which choose not to replace it. However, by removing this data from the OfS return, universities may no longer have access to a national database of entry qualifications at the individual level. This data is widely used by practitioners across the sector, particularly access and participation teams. Its removal would prevent practitioners from evaluating student outcomes, monitoring progression, and shaping student support where needed. For these reasons, and to satisfy Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements, many universities would likely continue to gather this data. This means removing this data would not necessarily reduce burden for these providers.

Providers also note that having this data validated by HESA has a positive impact on their own data quality. While some providers may benefit from a reduced burden if they choose not to replace this data internally, this would result in fragmented data across the sector, holding back consistent progress on social mobility across the sector. The loss of a consistent data set would prevent providers from being able to benchmark, which is a valuable tool in monitoring performance across the sector and identifying providers with good practice.

There are also some limitations to consider in replacing entry qualification data with the National Pupil Database. Access to this database is not guaranteed for providers, meaning universities would be more likely to gather their own data for the reasons discussed above, which reduces the likelihood of reducing burden on providers. As it only contains data on English students, equivalent data sharing arrangements for students from devolved administrations must be arranged. While the consultation hints at this, it would be important to have a clear plan for accessing this data to ensure alignment across the UK.

The National Pupil Database also does not contain data on all qualifications which may be useful to the sector. There is limited availability of data on mature learners and learners with non-traditional qualifications, and no data on international students. This makes it less useful to government priorities on the LLE, and on social mobility for people from diverse backgrounds entering higher education. It should particularly be noted that, if there will be a need for data on these students in the future, it would be preferable to have a continuous record. A special collection for these students in the future would result in uneven distribution of burden for institutions with many mature and international learners, or those with non-traditional qualifications. Similarly, we understand the incentive for removing data on students who do not receive student support, but the OfS should carefully consider if these student populations will be of interest at a later stage.

The OfS has also proposed removing data on students' term-time accommodation and postcode, and financial support offered to individual students. In these cases, universities gather this data for reasons other than regulation. Universities have internal needs for this data, and it is quality checked to a high standard to support these uses. For this reason, submitting this data to the OfS does not constitute a substantial additional burden. However, removing the requirement to submit the data to the OfS would mean that providers and other users would no longer have access to a consistent, high-quality data set with national reach. For example, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has interest in students as the largest transient population in the country, and having a national data set containing term-time postcodes is valuable for these purposes. For these data items, there is an undesirable trade-off between minimal reduction of burden on providers and the loss of a consistent data set for users.

While there are similar concerns regarding Disabled Students' Allowance, we recognise that the Student Loans Company (SLC) can provide an appropriate

alternative to access this data. For this reason, we support the view that it is not necessary to collect this data in the OfS return.

**Question 7: Do you have any comments about our proposals on data quality?**

No further comments.

**Question 8: Do you have any comments about our proposals on changes to staff data content?**

We think it is important that universities record the characteristics of their governing bodies, to ensure sufficient diversity and inclusive representation. We expect that our members will continue to consider this data internally, and therefore are likely to hold this information. However, since this data does not play a role in regulation, we support the view that it is not necessary to have this included in the staff data return. This will enable universities to collect data in formats that best meet their needs.

With regards to reviewing other items on the staff record, we recommend that the OfS explores how data is currently used by the research community. It is important that any changes to the collection of data do not, for example, reduce the ability of its users to monitor equality, diversity and inclusion. Where there are plans to review the HESA staff record, we advise that this is undertaken in consultation with its users, to ensure that its key datasets are maintained.

**Question 9: Do you have any comments about our proposals on changes to provider profile data?**

No further comments.

**Question 10: Are there any other data items where the collection does not appear to be justified?**

No further comments.

## **Question 11: Do you have any other comments on our proposals to make changes to data collection?**

Consultations are a vital tool in ensuring the sector can comment on and shape the regulatory framework and associated requirements, which is important in ensuring they are workable and do not require regular updates and future changes. However, if the regulator is to be low burden as described in its strategy for 2022–25, it needs to reassess how it presents proposals and manages its consultations. The sector is currently handling multiple long and complex consultations with very short timeframes, which is holding back meaningful engagement, creating huge demands on the time and resources of staff in providers, and detracting from the education and experience they want to deliver for their students.

We would also note the importance of alignment across the UK in data-gathering approaches. As institutions have diverse domestic intakes, it is important to be mindful of consistency across the nations where possible, and to consider any unintended consequences of differences in collecting data. This can create additional burden for institutions operating under multiple systems, and generate difficulties in making comparisons across the sector.

## **Question 12: Do you have any comments about our proposals to make use of linked and third-party data?**

This is something that we have previously recommended, and we recognise the value of this approach in reducing burden. However, the proposal is relatively open, and we would recommend some form of proportionate consultation with the sector to determine where this is appropriate and any potential trade-offs. This would not require a full consultation such as this, but there needs to be sector engagement to understand the implications. The process must also consider the long-term picture, such as whether there are any likely changes to those third-party datasets in the future.

It is positive that the OfS is recognising the importance of social media as a way that universities communicate with their students and share content on issues, but, in many cases, email remains the primary mode of communication between universities and students. For example, in the context of student information, we would not want a judgement on a university to be based solely on what was communicated (and when) through social media.

**Question 13: Are there aspects of the proposals you found unclear? If so, please specify which, and tell us why.**

It is unclear how social media would be used to record reportable events processes. This was also not flagged in the updated reportable events guidance that was subject to consultation. Paragraph 119 notes that the OfS may 'systematically review providers' social media accounts to monitor the timely reporting of reportable events'.

- a. While issues may come to a provider's attention through social media, the OfS must be clear on the official channels of complaint and reporting. This may include directly reporting issues to the university or through an OfS student notification.
- b. The size and breadth of the sector mean that a provider's ability to monitor social media will vary.
- c. Social media is susceptible to unreliable content and there can be difficulty verifying information.
- d. It is likely that students would not be aware that their social media posts were being used and monitored in this way.

We would welcome further OfS guidance on how social media may be used in relation to reportable events.

We would also like to raise that this consultation has not provided the sector with very long to respond. The window has not only been short, but included the Christmas period, when many colleagues across the higher education sector are likely to have been on leave. Moreover, it refers to related consultations with only two weeks' overlap. From the perspective of clarity, the OfS needs to provide potential respondents with sufficient time to meaningfully engage in their consultations and to understand the wider context in which the proposals will be adopted.

**Question 14: In your view, are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation (as set out in paragraph 2) could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than proposed here?**

No further comments.