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for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level“**

**IBAR**

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IBAR Project

Work-Package 11

Quality and Information –  
survey of institutions UK

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## **Introduction**

This report presents data from four UK higher education institutions, three from England and one from Scotland, about the management of their internal quality assurance systems as they relate to the collection, analysis and use of information in higher education. The report was produced between January and March 2013 by the IBAR project team at Durham University

The report focuses on the policy and procedures for the collection, analysis and use of information in UK higher education. It draws on data from four UK institutions and also examines the broader higher education policy and/or legislation and the national quality management environment that influences institutional practice in this area.

This report will form part of the data informing a synthesis report for this work-package of the IBAR project that will make recommendations about future guidelines on the collection, analysis and use of information and opportunities for enhancement in the context of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area Part 1 (ESG1).

Currently, ESG1 includes the following standard and guidelines relevant to the collection, analysis and use of information:

### **1.6 Information systems**

#### **STANDARD:**

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

#### **GUIDELINES:**

Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important that institutions have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Without this they will not know what is working well and what needs attention, or the results of innovative practices. The quality-related information systems required by individual institutions will depend to some extent on local circumstances, but it is at least expected to cover:

- student progression and success rates;
- employability of graduates;
- students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- effectiveness of teachers;
- profile of the student population;
- learning resources available and their costs;
- the institution's own key performance indicators.

There is also value in institutions comparing themselves with other similar organisations within the EHEA and beyond. This allows them to extend the range of their self-knowledge and to access possible ways of improving their own performance.

## 1. National policy context

### Introduction

Over the past twenty years UK institutions of higher education have been met with continuing escalation in the range and scale of expectations, demands and requirements relating to the provision of information about the nature and quality of their academic offerings and related student educational experiences. Whilst it is possible to discern policy threads and identify various drivers behind these trends, it would be stretching matters to claim that they all interconnect and flow from a coherent and sustained policy for higher education. Rather, as Shattock (2012) concludes, by and large policy has been shaped by events and specific priorities, drivers or needs. One might add that a correlate is that policies have not necessarily been prescient about unwanted and unintended consequences.

Of course, institutional provision of information about educational offerings does not commence in the late 1980s/early 1990s, nor is it solely related to various framing factors that have attracted increased attention from that period onwards. What is true however is that, for various reasons, the demands have multiplied and diversified, often with new expectations being quickly superseded by broader and/or more explicit and extensive requirements.

Government, largely through guidance to key quangos<sup>1</sup>, has arguably been the dominant force, but students, employers and other stakeholders have all contributed to the heightening of interest in the quality, accuracy and insightfulness of the information that institutions provide.

The macro-drivers include ramifications of the massive growth in participation in higher education and in the number of HEIs, the growing shift in funding from the public good premise towards the view of HE as, in significant extent, as also a private good (and hence something to which students should make a financial commitment). Further trends include an explosion in the range of degree programmes on offer, concerns to enhance the competitiveness of the UK HE sector, especially internationally, the desire to attract more international students, notwithstanding the recent turbulence over visas, diversification of modes of study and method of assessment, and the challenges of producing accurate meaningful and readily updateable information in an age of electronic communications.

A number of these trends started some decades ago. The founding of The Open University in the 1960s marked a major shift from the prevailing norm of university study being primarily a campus-based full-time experience, a shift which was reinforced as the non-university provision of HE expanded in the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed the enormous expansion of that sector was the main driver for widened participation in higher education.

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<sup>1</sup>Quangos are quasi nongovernmental organisations that are financed by the government yet act independently of the government.

The decision in the 1980s to increase the level of fees for overseas students initiated a trend that spread more widely across postgraduate and the undergraduate provision. Interestingly the 1980s decision did not dampen international demand. On the contrary it grew quite rapidly. However the economic benefits that accrued to institutions and the UK economy helped fuel concerns about the need to safeguard the brand of UK higher education, for example, by assuring academic standards and ensuring that information was accurate.

From the outset of external reviews of institutional and subject-based policies, procedures and practices relating to quality assurance, there was an interest in the nature and validity of the information provided to applicants and students. Not surprisingly since one of the key drivers of the whole process was to provide stakeholders (students, employers, parents etc.) with publicly available reports on the quality of provision which they could use to inform their decisions.

Specific extensions of activities brought heightened understandings and expectations. Thus when audit of offshore provision was introduced in the mid 1990s, teams quickly focused upon explicit and implicit promises made to students, say about equivalence of their experiences to students on the relevant UK campus of the institution or the local support services they would receive such as library, computing or tutorial provision.

Around the same period Government encouraged the development of Student Charters. In the spirit of New Public Management, these were initially intended to define and protect the rights of students of the institution. In practice they primarily became broad definitions of mutual rights and responsibilities doubtless falling short of the level of specificity, which advocates had envisioned. Part of the Bologna processes and procedures involved pressing institutions to provide additional information about students' studies beyond marks, credits passed or level of honours degree achieved. These diploma supplements are intended to provide broader information to assist employers although there is limited evidence that the latter attach high priority to the information.

Now, higher education institutions in the UK are required to make annual statistical returns, on a standard basis, to a national agency, the Higher Education Statistics Agency<sup>2</sup> (HESA). Building upon an approach developed over a decade ago (Cooke 2002), this recent extension of information gathering has included what are described as a wider raft of key statistics on the quality of provision as part of the established annual institutional return to HESA. Producing the data added to the administrative load in institutions, but it is too soon to judge if the information generated intended stakeholder benefits.

Over a decade ago pressure from institutions caused Government to accept that demands should be proportionate and not unduly burdensome. That requirement is still in place. The key dilemmas are threefold. Firstly, it is often difficult to calculate the scale of the burden in advance. Secondly, there has been a long running defence by officials that the costs of specific policy information compliance are only a small percentage of the relevant total budget. That, however, is not the same as measuring

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

attained benefit from the information. Thirdly, views continue to be aired that many indicators need careful interpretation. For example, staff-student ratios may appear to be an insightful measure but concerns are expressed that the figure can misstate reality with some staff scarcely involved in teaching undergraduates.

Whilst the National Student Survey (NSS) is not within the control of institutions, it does provide public information about perceptions of the quality of provision. It is almost inevitable that institutions seek to manage interpretations of the information both for marketing purposes and wider PR. So the provision of information is not a neutral, sanitised domain, but more a territory that can involve competing agendas and interests, in which institutions often weigh the equation differently from other stakeholders. Indeed it can be all too easy for consensus to require agreement on the lowest common denominator. Equally attempting to impose an outcome can be fraught with difficulties too.

Nonetheless the shift towards students bearing a greater share of the costs of their education, coupled with the trend to internationalisation suggests that calls for more information are likely to grow rather than diminish.

Cooke, R (2002) Information on Quality and Standards in Higher Education:Final Report of the Task Group. Report 02/15, Bristol. HEFCE.

Shattock, M (2012) Making Policy in British Higher Education 1945-2011. McGraw Hill/OUP. Maidenhead.

## 2. Methodology

### Institutions surveyed

The four institutions selected represent a sample of the variant types of higher education institution in the UK. After the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, polytechnics in the UK achieved degree-awarding status and became universities. Our sample was selected to demonstrate the diversity of higher education in the UK and to ensure that the data collected offered a rich picture of practice across the sector.

### Our sample includes:

**University A** is a research-intensive, collegiate institution, which dates from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The University has around 11000 undergraduate and 5000 postgraduate students and its main functions are divided between academic departments, which undertake research and provide teaching to students, and a number of colleges, which are responsible for the domestic and pastoral needs of students, researchers and some academic staff. University A features prominently in UK and QS university rankings and is a member of British and international groupings of research-intensive universities. It is consistently rated as one of the top universities in the UK.

**University B** was a former polytechnic that opted to become a university under the powers of the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act. Subsequent mergers with colleges in the region added Nursing and Midwifery to the academic profile and three smaller campuses. The University has around 16000 students spread across five campuses. It also offers foundation awards in conjunction with partner further education colleges. Some 5000 students study in Europe and Asia for University B awards. There is a strong commitment to employment-related provision.

**University C** dates from the late nineteenth century. It became an independent institution in the 1960s. Further academic diversification occurred through growth and, in the 1990s, via merger with higher education colleges. Currently it has some 17000 students and a strong professional orientation. Distance learning students account for almost 20 per cent of the student enrolment. University C has some world-renowned areas of research excellence and has a growing reputation for the quality of its student education.

**University D** is one of the newer universities in the UK, progressing from the status of a higher education college, to that of a University College and then full university status in recent decades. Mergers during that phase also diversified the academic profile. It has around 8000 undergraduate students, of which 1300 are studying for further education qualifications. Almost half of the student population comprises mature students.

## **Conducting the research**

Data collection for WP11 was conducted in four ways: firstly, as a desk study, using documents publicly available on the websites of the four institutions to uncover policies and information about collection, analysis and use of information in UK universities. During this first phase of data collection, a number of key individuals at each institution with particular responsibility for/or interest in the collection, analysis and use of information were identified. These included senior managers at institutional level (for example, Vice-Principals or Pro-Vice Chancellors of Learning and Teaching, Directors of Quality); senior academics with responsibility for overseeing information processes at School/Faculty level (for example, Deans of Faculty, School Directors of Quality); senior administrative staff with responsibility for collection, analysis and use of information (Directors of Registry or their equivalents) and students (in particular Student Presidents and sabbatical officers of the Students Union and/or members of the Student Council). In all, 64 university representatives were approached to participate in this study, 16 from each institution.

A second phase of data collection involved the distribution of a short questionnaire to the aforementioned categories of respondents in each institution.

The third phase of data collection comprised focus groups and semi-structured telephone interviews with those individuals identified in phase one of the data collection processes that were available to speak to the team.

A final phase of data collection comprised desk-based data collection to inform a consideration of the sectoral and/or national policy context of stakeholder engagement in higher education in the UK.



### 3. Responses to the research questions

#### 3.1 *Is there any policy, regulations or practice at national level referring to the provision of information about HEIs and by HEIs to external stakeholders?*

A number of legal and policy measures govern the nature and scope of information collected and published by or about UK universities. Participants in this study noted three particularly influential exogenous policy drivers of institutional-level information creation: the 2010 Equality Act; the datasets required by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), including KIS; and the National Students Survey.

Participants also noted that the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's new Quality Code (published 2012) includes a dedicated section on information provision.

3.1.1 The **2010 Equality Act** streamlined and strengthened equality law by pulling together existing equality legislation into a single Act with common definitions of discrimination, and extends the public sector duty to promote equality. Under the provisions of the Act, equality groups (protected characteristics under the law) are the disabled, ethnic minorities, pregnant students, carers and parents and additional data categories include age, sexual orientation, gender and gender reassignment and religion and belief. In addition the collection of data about social class/ family background have become increasingly important, as successive UK governments have pursued activity in widening participation and fair access. Typically, university-wide data sets and commentaries with a national legal basis fall under the jurisdiction of University Planning Offices or their equivalents (usually including data collected by University Registries).

3.1.2 **HESA Datasets.** University Planning Offices or their equivalents (usually including data collected by University Registries) also take responsibility for creation of the national datasets required by HESA and published by **Unistats**<sup>3</sup>. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) was established following the 1992 Higher and Further Education Acts. It is responsible for the collection, analysis and dissemination of quantitative information about higher education in the United Kingdom.

HESA provides four main administrative datasets. These cover the students, staff and financial aspects of Higher Education institutions, and also the activities of students after they have gained a Higher Education qualification (Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey<sup>4</sup>). The latter is split into two stages. The initial data collection is taken three to four months after student graduation and a follow up study is conducted three years later. A number of other data streams are also gathered by HESA, including data on students studying outside the UK, teachers in training, and information on HE campuses.

HESA publishes its own reports on various aspects of university activity. Reports are

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<sup>3</sup><http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>

<sup>4</sup>[http://www.hesa.ac.uk/%5Cdox%5Cdatacoll%5CC10018%5CJanuary%5CENGLISH\\_HESA\\_Quest\\_4pp\\_Jan\\_12.pdf](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/%5Cdox%5Cdatacoll%5CC10018%5CJanuary%5CENGLISH_HESA_Quest_4pp_Jan_12.pdf)

published annually and also as an aggregation of longitudinal data. Bespoke HESA datasets can be requested by researchers or others either free or for a fee depending on the complexity of the request.

3.1.3 The **UK National Student Survey** is a national survey, which has been conducted by Ipsos MORI annually since 2005. It gathers opinions from mostly final year undergraduates on the quality of their courses. Aimed at current students, the survey asks undergraduates to provide honest feedback on what it has been like to study their course at their institution. The survey runs across all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. Additionally, Further Education Colleges (FECs) in England and Further Education Institutions (FEIs) in Wales with directly funded Higher Education students are eligible to participate. The main purpose of the NSS is to help prospective students, their families and advisors to make study choices. Participating institutions and students' unions also use the data to improve the student learning experience. The data are publically available on the Unistats website and institutions and students' unions have access to more detailed results via the Ipsos MORI NSS Results website.

3.1.4 **KIS (Key Information Set)** In 2012, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has (via HESA) initiated publication of a subset of key indicators on both the Unistats website and via a small advert or widget on university course/programme webpages. Key Information Sets (KIS) are comparable sets of information about full or part time undergraduate courses and are designed to meet the information needs of prospective students. The KIS contains 17 items. Much of the KIS information already exists in a national and comparable form (for example, data drawn from the National Student Survey or the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey, but there are several items of information that do not currently exist in that form and are being supplied by universities and colleges. Much of the focus of KIS data is on the economic benefits of university study: for example the KIS includes data about salaries of graduates from university programmes. KIS has been timed to coincide with the introduction of higher domestic undergraduate fees in England and Wales (2012 intake).

3.1.5 **QAA Code of Practice.** The UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)'s Code of Practice (Section B3) adopted in 2012 includes the following indicator and definition of institutional responsibility for the collection of information to assess teaching quality:

**Higher education providers collect and analyse appropriate information to ensure the continued effectiveness of their strategic approach to, and the enhancement of, learning opportunities and teaching practices.**

Higher education providers use a range of internal and external information and feedback from diverse sources along with examples of sound practice and innovation to enable them to keep their strategic approach to learning and teaching under review, to modify it as appropriate and to facilitate the continuous improvement of the learning opportunities they provide.

Data sources on which they draw may include:

- feedback from students on their learning experience collected through internal mechanisms
- feedback from students through external instruments like the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)
- routine evaluations of modules and programmes incorporating feedback from staff and external examiners
- feedback from alumni and employers and placement providers
- retention statistics
- mark profiles for students, modules and programmes
- availability and quality of teaching and learning spaces for formal and informal learning
- uptake and utilisation of any virtual learning environment and assistive technology
- student academic appeals and complaints
- feedback from external reviews and accreditations, such as those of professional, regulatory and statutory bodies.

Section C of the new QAA Quality Code is entirely dedicated to information provision, reflecting the increased interest in the UK in how information can empower stakeholders (particularly students) to make good choices about universities, programmes and about learning activities and styles. Part C “is concerned with the quality of the information in terms of whether it is fit for purpose, accessible and trustworthy”. It makes clear that each higher education institution is responsible for producing public information for the following purposes:

“to communicate the purposes and value of higher education to the public at large; to help prospective students make informed decisions about where, what, when and how they will study; to enable current students to make the most of their higher education learning opportunities; to confirm the achievements of students on completion of their studies; and to safeguard academic standards and assure and enhance academic quality”.

The Code lists a number of indicators of good practice relating to provision of information for a variety of audiences, including the public, students and other stakeholders:

- to publish information that describes the mission, values and overall strategy
- to describe the process for application and admission to the programme of study
- to make available to prospective students information to help them select their programme with an understanding of the academic environment in which they will be studying and the support that will be made available to them
- information for current students on the programme of study made available at the start of their programmes and throughout their studies

- to set out what is expected of current students and what current students can expect of the higher education provider.

The new Code also sets out the expectation that when students leave their programme of study, higher education providers should issue “a detailed record of their studies which provides evidence to others”. The Code does not stipulate the detail of such records, although inclusion of this expectation in the Code reflects growing UK interest in the Higher Education Achievement Award or HEAR<sup>5</sup> which was one of the recommendations of the 2007 Burgess Group<sup>6</sup> report on higher education.

In 2012, Universities UK endorsed the use of HEAR and currently 90 universities across the UK are piloting HEAR. HEAR conforms to the data standard for the European Diploma supplement and includes fields to document both academic attainment and non-academic performance (e.g. volunteering, student union representative roles, representation at national level in sport or training courses run internally, university, professional and departmental prizes).

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.hear.ac.uk/>

<sup>6</sup>[http://www.hear.ac.uk/other\\_sites/resources/detail/hear/Burgess2007](http://www.hear.ac.uk/other_sites/resources/detail/hear/Burgess2007)

### 3.2 Describe institutional policy and practice on collection of information about:

- a) *student progression and success rates*
- b) *employability of graduates*
- c) *students satisfaction with programmes*
- d) *effectiveness of teaching staff*
- e) *profile of the student population*
- f) *learning resources available and their costs*
- g) *institution's own key performance indicators*

All of the institutions surveyed have well-developed mechanisms for the collection of data about a wide variety of aspects of the student experience. In general, the data collection serves two purposes: to satisfy external stakeholders (particularly the UK funding bodies for higher education, HEFCE and SFC) and to inform local decision-making and activities designed to improve the student experience. The extent to which data collection activities are described in a single policy varies: it is most likely that some activities (particularly those concerned with the academic experience) are detailed in institution-wide quality assurance documents and therefore are the responsibility of academic staff and their managers with oversight from academic committees, whilst others are the responsibility of specialised information or service units (for example, Registry, Careers Service) at the university and are overseen by administrative rather than academic management structures.

Specifically, institutions reported activities as follows:

- a) *student progression and success rates*

Typically, regulations on student progression are outlined in institutional documents and at School/Faculty level according to the specific needs of cognate subject areas. Departments are required to monitor student progress (and in some cases student attendance at lectures, tutorials or practical taught sessions) as well as the timely submission of assessed work. Student marks are typically held on a centrally managed database that can be accessed by both departments and student support services.

Student progression is typically determined at examination boards both at departmental and faculty level and this data is shared with individual students after these boards have met and reached decisions about outcomes.

This data is required externally by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and is collected annually. Typically, responsibility for collection of this data rests with the university Registry, working in collaboration with administrative staff in academic departments, although most institutions surveyed also have dedicated central information/statistics/planning units that may have final ownership of core university data. At University A, a member of staff noted that:

“Data that is part of the HESA return in relation to student progression and retention and final award is used by media organisations and others as part of the league tables they produce so it is important we get this right and ensure

that our data is accurate. We need to monitor our performance and look at progression rates to see how we can improve or our position in the league tables could suffer - that is not the only reason to do it of course but it is one.”

At University C, a senior manager described reservations about the process of collating institutional data at national level:

“I look at the data [on the HESA website] and it doesn’t even match my own data. It’s either amalgamated or it is a different level of analysis... immediately there’s a disconnect.”

Another senior manager described the temptation at local level to adopt protocols for data collection in order to show the institution in a good light:

“Anyone with any sense would tweak the data... almost everyone expects that the data is a bit dodgy. There are endless stories [from across the UK] of Registries failing to collect data properly.”

#### *b) employability of graduates*

Information on graduate employability from all UK universities is collected nationally via the UK Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey and published annually. The UK KIS dataset (from 2012) also now includes information about the salaries of graduates from different programmes.

The annual survey asks graduates from the previous summer what they are doing on a specific date (for 2012 graduates, this date was in January 2013). The data collection and reporting process is perceived by participants in this study as an arduous one and begins with a postal mailshot coordinated by universities in November/December asking graduates to complete a paper or online pro-forma.

HESA sets a DLHE target response rate for institutions of 80% and universities are required to take responsibility for securing as many completions as possible. For example, in January each year at University B the Careers Centre runs a call centre employing student ambassadors who telephone non-respondents to the paper survey asking them instead for verbal responses to the questions (a process which takes 3-4 weeks of work in the evening/weekends). Once all possible graduates have been contacted the data collected is coded for occupational type and employer type using the HESA Standard Occupational/Industrial Coding systems. Finally Careers Centre staff input the data from each form onto a special area of the student record. The data is validated/quality checked and submitted to HESA by a set date (usually around the end of March). Administrative staff commented on the considerable expense to their university of creating and validating this data but also acknowledged that: “we have no choice” (University A).

Academic staff noted some anxiety about the extent to which academic programmes were being increasingly judged on purely economic criteria and questioned the extent to which DLHE data captures the reality of graduate employment experiences. However, there seems little doubt that this information is increasingly perceived as a

determinant of student choice in the context of higher domestic undergraduate fees. For university managers, there is no doubt that strong performance in graduate employability statistics is a key weapon in the fight to attract students in an increasingly competitive higher education market.

*c) students' satisfaction with programmes*

All of the universities surveyed collect data on student satisfaction with programmes in a number of ways:

- at a national level via the National Students Survey (final year students only)
- across the whole student body (locally-devised surveys or a subset of the NSS applied to the whole university)
- at module level as part of local annual monitoring
- as part of targeted research examining one aspect of the student experience (for example, work undertaken at University C on student assessment includes focus groups and other data collection undertaken by students who asked their peers about their experience of teaching provision).
- Additional surveys/focus groups/other data collection activities associated with non-academic aspects of the student experience (for example library user surveys).

*d) effectiveness of teaching staff*

Universities are currently unlikely to ask specific questions about the effectiveness of individual teaching staff in any locally-generated student survey or other data collection methodologies. However, there are a wide variety of data sources from which information about the quality of teaching can be gained. These include:

- feedback from students on their learning experience collected through internal mechanisms
- feedback from students through external instruments like the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)
- routine evaluations of modules and programmes incorporating feedback from staff and external examiners
- feedback from alumni and employers and placement providers
- retention statistics
- mark profiles for students, modules and programmes
- availability and quality of teaching and learning spaces for formal and informal learning
- uptake and utilisation of any virtual learning environment and assistive technology
- student academic appeals and complaints
- feedback from external reviews and accreditations, such as those of professional, regulatory and statutory bodies.

Practice described by participants in this study is very closely aligned to the guidelines in the QAA Code of Practice and participants described well-established

methods and systems for data collection at different levels of their institutions drawing on the activities in this list. For example, University D is educating its academic staff to use the evidence base to enhance their teaching. This consists of three datasets: the National Student Survey (although participants report that it can be a challenge to get staff to accept its evidence); the internal survey of university student responses (ISS); and other data relating to the quality of teaching including pass rates, retention, and progression rates.

There is some evidence of concern amongst teaching staff about the implications of these kinds of systematic data collection activities at module level and the possibility of identifying individual performance and perhaps applying sanctions. However, at present, student data (and indeed other data) collected about modules by teachers is made available to heads of department, School/Faculty managers and others with a responsibility for oversight of teaching quality. Senior managers expressed their preference for more systematic data “for developmental purposes”, as a way of identifying good as well as suspect practice.

“It is less a statement about teaching quality and more about student satisfaction which is not the same thing”.  
(Academic Manager at University B)

“We have an approach to the use of questionnaires which isn’t as thought-through and rigorous as it should be. I know this sounds slightly instrumentalist and quantitative but I don’t think we’ve ever sat down as an institution and thought to ourselves; ‘what are the genuine indicators of good performance related to teaching?’ I think there are some implicit views on this – and you can see them in the promotion criteria – questionnaire scores and student feedback and so I don’t think we’ve ever sat down and had a systematic think about it... I think there’s still a strong element of student satisfaction in the information we gather rather than trying to gather information about the student learning experience, which obviously is different.” (Senior Manager at University C)

Student surveys, particularly the NSS are widely perceived as “blunt instruments” but the qualitative aspects of the survey data can be locally useful. One senior manager noted:

“They alert you to that fact that something is wrong, but they don’t always tell you what is wrong, or what to do about it... we spend more time reading the comments box than we do worrying about the scores”. (University B)

#### *e) profile of the student population*

As part of institutional responsibilities under the requirements of the 2010 Equalities Act, universities are expected to collect and publish data about the demographic profile of students. Typically this data is collected on enrollment. For example, University B’s mandatory E-Enrolment process captures:

- Personal Information



- Contact Information
- Course Information
- Other Information (Ethnic Origin, Disability, Disability Student Allowances (DSAs), Parents)
- Higher Education Qualifications, University Attendance by Family, Legal Care Status, Childcare Arrangements, Parental Occupation, Religion (not mandatory), Sexual Orientation (not mandatory)
- Students Union LifeStyle Questions
- Payment of Tuition Fees
- Image Upload/Confirmation (for Student Photocard)

From September 2009 all new staff and students have been asked to complete details concerning their religion or belief and sexual orientation (although both are optional). This is the first step in getting a more complete picture of the diversity of University B's community and provides an opportunity for the University to monitor any potential discrimination and manage more effectively and fairly its systems and policies. Other universities (for example, University A) do not currently collect data on religious beliefs or sexual orientation, although participants in this study believed that this data would be helpful in properly planning university services.

*f) learning resources available and their costs*

The QAA Quality Code Part C stipulates that UK universities should:

“Give indicative information about teaching/research/supervisory staff; learning support staff; learning and teaching spaces; libraries; specialist learning environments such as laboratories and studios; and communication and information technologies, including Virtual Learning Environments.”

Typically, this information is provided to students as part of the information they receive on enrollment, and/or at the beginning of successive academic years. Information on costs is not typically circulated/published because the costs of the majority of learning resources/services are included in any student fees. Some additional costs (for example, the costs of textbooks, photocopying) are typically indicated in student handbooks but are not perceived as “fixed” costs because (for example) textbooks can be borrowed from the library or purchased secondhand.

The QAA Quality Code also requires that universities inform prospective students about advisory services; student participation in the student union, association or guild where applicable; arrangements for pastoral care; living accommodation available to students; and social and leisure facilities. Of these, living costs/accommodation costs and availability are recognised as a key determinant of student choice of learning destination and the KIS dataset includes a requirement for each university to provide data on institution owned/sponsored accommodation including average annual costs and number of units (to which students can reasonably expect to have access) and average annual costs of local private rental accommodation.

Commonly, UK universities conduct regular internal information-gathering about student-facing services (for example, at University B the library recently held a series

of user focus groups to find out more about user experience of the service and to determine areas for improvement).

*g) institution's own key performance indicators*

Each of the universities surveyed also collects data on its own strategic priorities, at both university level and at School/Faculty/Department levels. Wide variation in the nature of institutionally-defined strategic targets means, inevitably, variation in practice on data collection.

University A sets a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) as part of its annual planning activities. All of the institutional KPIs are published in the strategic plan for University A as published in 2010 and these are monitored regularly to assess progress against pre-defined targets. One participant described a typical example:

“We set a target that by 2020 all academic departments should have graduate employability scores in the top 5 of the nationally published data and we can monitor ourselves against this internally set indicator annually. Based on this, departments can set action plans for improving employability skills in students.”

At University B the new strategic plan for 2012-2017 includes multiple targets under the following main headings:

- **Students** (key targets include: exceeding national average for overall satisfaction in NSS, securing 85% graduate employment within six months of graduation, securing 90% student retention etc.)
- **Staff** (key targets include: all new staff to gain the PGCHPE within two years of employment, improved performance in the national Research Excellence Framework, increase in number of National Teaching Fellows etc.)
- **Educational providers** (establish up to six overseas bases by 2017, secure 50% increase in number of students studying for university awards at partner colleges etc.)
- **Business** (key targets include: at least 250 members of staff participating in business/employer related activity, 200 new commercial/social enterprises started by staff/students etc.)
- **Sustainability** (key targets include: growth in student population, 10% revenue surplus by 2017, growth in international student numbers, reduction in floor-space by 20%, carbon reduction of 26% etc.)

The details of implementation activities associated with these targets are described in separate strategy documents and each School/Faculty is required to describe how it will work to achieve local targets in its annual strategic planning documentation and to report annually on progress.

At University C a new strategic plan and performance management framework are both currently in development. The previous plan (to 2012) included 30 performance indicators, of which 17 were linked to quantified targets. From this large set of indicators, a smaller subset of KPIs was identified and used as the basis of reporting to the institution's governing body.

At University D, the university-wide strategic plan lists key performance indicators (KPIs) to be used to 2015. The four main headings are student experience, financial sustainability, intellectual capital, and strategic partnerships. Data is collected on performance at School/Department level on each of these indicators (for example, under “intellectual capital” data is collected on research and enterprise income, the percentage of academics with doctorates, the percentage of academics with formal or accredited teaching qualifications, and the academic staff-to-student ratio).

3. Describe institutional policy and practice on use (e.g. for improvement, for reporting, other purposes) of information about:

- a. student progression and success rates
- b. employability of graduates
- c. students satisfaction with programmes
- d. effectiveness of teaching staff
- e. profile of the student population
- f. learning resources available and their costs
- g. institution's own key performance indicators

*a) student progression and success rates*

Typically, data on student progression is used as part of programme monitoring and review processes. As one academic noted: “how students perform on programmes is important and needs to be examined... progression data is important... as this can have a direct link to funding”. Poor progression rates are widely recognised as a key indicator of local difficulties at module or programme level and form part of discussions with external examiners and part of the reports that are submitted to the University’s Learning and Teaching Committee (or equivalent) and to the institutional governing body. University B and University D track the progression of specific demographic groups or individuals and offer targeted specific and tailored interventions to students from non traditional backgrounds to support their academic progression and success as part of their widening participation arrangements.

*b) employability of graduates*

Data on the destinations of graduates have been collected for many years, but most participants strongly agreed that this information has assumed more importance recently as it is being published as part of the Key Information Set (KIS). The KIS enables potential students to compare university performance at course level as part of their decision-making. Typically, this data is used (as, for example, at University B) by the Careers Centre and University management to understand the state of the graduate labour market, and helps the University to market, plan and review its course portfolio.

A number of participants noted the increasing reputational importance of employability data. For example at University A, a staff member from the University Careers Service reported:

“This data is important. It tells us where our graduates end up and what they are doing. We [the Careers Service] spend a lot of time looking at this data to see what kinds of things our students do and how we can enhance the service to support them... This started as an external driver so we need to collect data on what our students are doing, but it has huge implications for our reputation and with the introduction of fees the internal drivers to collect and monitor this data

are important. We need to be able to say to future students: ‘look, this is what a degree from [University A] can do for you and here is where you could end up’.”

*c) students satisfaction with programmes*

Typically, all programmes both undergraduate and postgraduate are required to gather data about student satisfaction both at a module and global level according to the national QAA Quality Code and the UK-wide commitment to participation in the National Students Survey (although the survey only includes final year students and some institutions also choose additionally to survey other years).

Student evaluation data is used internally by Schools/Faculties/Departments and individual teaching staff to make local improvements to teaching and to address local concerns. Annual reports for each programme include a summary of satisfaction data in relation to each module that is offered on the programme. Programme reports are typically reviewed by local teaching and learning committees and inform annual reviews of teaching, which include plans for enhancement. Practice is relatively uniform at UK universities because of the well-established normative influence of the QAA Quality Code.

Typically, student organisations are routinely involved in aspects of data collection and use. For example, at University A annual monitoring reports and student satisfaction results are discussed with student programme representatives. Participants reported a strong sense from both departments and faculty that this system works well, however student response rates can vary and the move from paper-based evaluations to online evaluations at University A has led to a reduction in response rates:

“when we used to give them paper-based ones they filled them out in the classroom but now they have to go and do it in their own time we don’t always get all of the students responding”

Some participants noted that online surveys can attract a biased sample:

“because they have to go and log on to do it I wonder if we now get the extremes - those that are very happy or those with something to grumble about.”

At University C, the students union has taken an active role in the collection and analysis of student satisfaction data. Findings from the National Student Survey are used to inform additional data collection in the form of focus groups conducted by students, which investigate in more detail student experiences of assessment and feedback. Participants in the IBAR study described how student-generated and student-led data collection can carry more “weight” with academic staff than surveys conducted nationally or by university management:

“it’s harder to ignore students when they present their own views... they have to listen to us” (University C).

*d) effectiveness of teaching staff*

Universities are currently unlikely to ask specific questions about the effectiveness of individual teaching staff in any locally-generated student survey or other data collection methodologies. However, there are a wide variety of data sources from which informed about the quality of teaching can be gained. These include:

- feedback from students on their learning experience collected through internal mechanisms
- feedback from students through external instruments like the National Student Survey (NSS), the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) and the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)
- routine evaluations of modules and programmes incorporating feedback from staff and external examiners
- feedback from alumni and employers and placement providers
- retention statistics
- mark profiles for students, modules and programmes
- availability and quality of teaching and learning spaces for formal and informal learning
- uptake and utilisation of any virtual learning environment and assistive technology
- student academic appeals and complaints
- feedback from external reviews and accreditations, such as those of professional, regulatory and statutory bodies.

Typically, module and programme evaluations are used by teaching staff as part of both the development planning for individual modules or programmes and also to provide personal feedback on the quality of their own teaching. One academic from University A noted: “the module evaluations are a good way for staff to look at their own teaching”

Information on student satisfaction is typically shared across the Department/School/Faculty but data specifically focusing on teaching quality is not actively extracted for individual staff:

“Modules are often taught by more than one person and we don’t ask about specific staff. I know there are people who would argue we should, and I believe the QAA might be going down the route of publishing individual staff satisfaction scores but I am not sure this is useful...just publishing teaching scores without any contextual information could be dangerous.”

(Academic at University A)

Sources of data external to the university (for example, the website [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com)) are not widely perceived either as a threat or as a valid tool for university enhancement.

### *e) profile of the student population*

Participants reported that demographic data on the student population is used in three main ways:

- To determine performance against targets for widening participation as part of institutional commitment set down in agreements with OFFA<sup>7</sup>
- To determine the number and cost of bursaries and other financial measures to support access to education from lower socio-demographic groups
- To plan and determine funding for university services

Two of the universities surveyed (B and D) describe themselves explicitly as "widening participation institutions" and their access arrangements reflect a strategic commitment to provision of higher education opportunities to groups who may otherwise be excluded (HEFCE identifies the following groups: people from low-income backgrounds; people from lower socio-economic groups; people from low participation neighbourhoods; certain minority ethnic groups; disabled people).

Both of these institutions received degree-awarding powers under the 1992 Higher and Further Education Act, which require new universities to recruit from under-represented groups. Typically, therefore, demographic data is used at these universities to monitor strategic progress in admission and retention of students from HEFCE defined target socio-economic groups. For example, University D's most recent (February 2010) publicly available overview of enrolments by equality variables analyses 5 years of data (2005-9) to identify trends and areas for development. The executive summary of these documents provides a good snapshot of the kinds of data collected and how this data is analysed and used across the institution:

#### ***Executive Summary***

- *The proportion of Black and minority ethnic students in their first year of study (note: all ethnicity data excludes International Students) has risen to 25% of all students in 2009, compared with 18% in 2005. There has been a percentage fall in the number of White students (from 2005 to 2009), but a significant percentage rise in the number and proportion of students of Black/African origin, from 7% in 2005 to 13.5% in 2009. The proportion of students of Asian origin appears to be relatively stable (2005-9): hovering between 6% and 8%.*
- *The University has a disproportionately high proportion of female students (62% in 2009) compared to the national average of male to female in the*

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<sup>7</sup> Universities in England wishing to charge tuition fees above the basic level set by the government are required to commit to an Access Agreement approved by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA)<sup>7</sup>, which is an independent public body that helps safeguard and promote fair access to higher education. At present, OFFA Access Agreements only cover full-time undergraduate courses and PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) and ITT (Initial Teacher Training) courses for home/EU students at English universities and colleges. In future, subject to Parliamentary approval, they will also cover part-time students. Access Agreements do not cover postgraduate courses or apply to overseas students.

*population as a whole. However, in 2009 the percentage of male students was 4% higher than in 2005 (with a proportionate fall in the percentage of female students). The general trend appears to a consistent rise in the proportion of male students over time.*

- *Following a rise in the percentage of mature students (to 45% in 2006 from 41% in 2005 and 2004) there was a fall in the percentage to 38% in 2007. However, this rose to 43% in 2008 and 42% in 2009. From 2005-2009 the overall trend appears to be an increasing proportion of mature students.*
- *The proportion of disclosed disabled students in 2009 was 6%, a drop from 7% the previous year, which itself was a drop from a high of 8% in 2007. The trend appears to downward (from 9% in 2005). The numbers of disclosed disabled students has increased over the past 4 years but the rate of increase has not kept pace with the general rise in student numbers – hence a falling proportion of the total student population. The fall in the proportion of disclosed disabled students 2005-9 is of concern.*

In pre-1992 universities the focus on student demographic data is also driven substantially by OFFA requirements. For these institutions, the focus of access activities is to remove barriers to potential learners who may not otherwise aspire to a university education rather than to achieve pre-defined quotas. Although the details of access policies and/or OFFA Access Agreements differ, commonly institutions will be required to demonstrate how widening participation activities are supporting the admission and retention of students from target groups.

At University D, institutional Equality Analysis (EqA) involves gathering and using evidence to make a judgement about how a particular policy or practice or procedure affects, or is likely to affect, different groups of people, or when it is implemented. It is about taking action to ensure that the university provides high quality services/facilities/education to all staff, students and visitors on an equitable and lawful basis and to ensure that all staff are aware of their responsibilities for doing this. In University D's statement of legal compliance under the Equality Act 2010 the institution has given a commitment to undertake Equality Analysis for policies, practices and procedures, or other significant courses of action. Guidance support has been produced to help staff undertake these analyses. Similar arrangements are in place at other institutions.

#### *f) learning resources available and their costs*

Internal information about learning resources and their costs tends to focus on library and technology provision. Participants noted a number of different activities that relate to learning resource cost data, including:

- Cost-sharing of resources between institutional partners (for example, when institutions have relationships with e.g. local colleges)
- Commercialisation of resources (for example, individual or corporate access to the library or to other services or facilities)
- Resource planning, investment/divestment decision-making



*g) institution's own key performance indicators*

All of the institutions participating in this study have university-wide strategic plans that include key performance indicators. For example, at University B, the new strategic plan for 2012-2017 includes multiple targets under the following main headings:

- **Students** (key targets include: exceeding national average for overall satisfaction in NSS, securing 85% graduate employment within six months of graduation, securing 90% student retention etc.)
- **Staff** (key targets include: all new staff to gain the PGCHPE within two years of employment, improved performance in the national Research Excellence Framework, increase in number of National Teaching Fellows etc.)
- **Educational providers** (establish up to six overseas bases by 2017, secure 50% increase in number of students studying for university awards at partner colleges etc.)
- **Business** (key targets include: at least 250 members of staff participating in business/employer related activity, 200 new commercial/social enterprises started by staff/students etc.)
- **Sustainability** (key targets include: growth in student population, 10% revenue surplus by 2017, growth in international student numbers, reduction in floor-space by 20%, carbon reduction of 26% etc.)

The details of implementation activities associated with these targets are described in separate strategy documents and each School/Faculty is required to describe how it will work to achieve local targets in its annual strategic planning documentation and to report annually on progress.

#### 4. How effective are collection, analysis and use of information within the institution?

The majority of participants in the study reported that their institutional mechanisms for collection of data are “good” or “reasonably good”, although a number of participants identified challenges associated with local variation in practice across schools or faculties. Senior managers in particular described the challenge of maintaining local ownership of data whilst at the same time creating datasets that are comparable across the institution and support university-wide monitoring and benchmarking. A number of senior managers noted a generalised trajectory away from solely locally owned information collection (for example, individual teachers collecting bespoke data about their own students’ experience of learning to implement local changes to practice) towards more strategically-positioned data collection protocols including institution-wide surveys and standardised online forms for the collection of student data about modules. One policy-maker at University B described his plan to introduce a single online survey for the collection of student data about modules and his hope that this could provide valuable comparative data about high and low-performing modules (and, by association, teachers). Standardised evaluation/survey software is already in place across University D and is used for cross-institutional analysis and comparison.

Participants suggested that in part this institution-wide focus on standardised datasets has been driven by the “overwhelming” influence of national instruments like the National Student Survey but also reported (usually in negative terms) a national culture of “bean counting” that is also driving university self-measurement.

Many participants reported considerable investment in bespoke software to collect, store and analyse datasets and in website design and online information publishing tools to publish timely and consistent information to prospective and current students. VLEs and some less formal ways of sharing information (Facebook and Twitter, amongst other tools) are gaining in currency as legitimate sources of information about university activities. Some universities boast multiple Facebook and Twitter identities (for example, for each university service, for departments, for programmes, for student societies). There appears to be a relatively high level of tolerance for these new channels of information and little anxiety about their use or potential misuse.

Participants noted a disparity between the effectiveness of data *collection* and effective *use* of data to inform enhancement. Commonly, participants reported that their institution created a “huge amount of information on all sorts of things” (Senior Manager at University C) but did not always have the resources or in some cases the skills to use information in the most effective way(s). Similarly, staff at University D reported what they perceive as the “huge challenge of shaping a mass of data” into useful information to aid enhancement. A number of participants described the considerable financial costs and costs in terms of staff time and stress associated with the creation of annual datasets to satisfy external requirements.

5. *What is the institutional policy and practice regarding publication of information on:*

- a) study programmes offered*
- b) intended learning outcomes*
- c) awarded qualification*
- d) teaching, learning and assessment procedures*
- e) learning opportunities available to students*
- f) views and employment destinations of past students*
- g) profile of the student population*

The primary sources of published information on sections *a, b, d and e* at all the institutions participating in this study are:

- University website
- University prospectus
- Student handbooks (produced at department level and available to enrolled students)

Student handbooks are typically fairly lengthy printed documents that describe the components of modules and/or programmes, including the content and timing of lectures, tutorials and other taught activities, reading lists, information about departmental administration and the timing, weighting and criteria for assessment. Handbooks also typically include information about certain aspects of the quality management of assessment, including arrangements for marking, for managing late submissions, and for dealing with exceptional circumstances including appeals.

The provision of student handbooks is mandatory in all the institutions surveyed. Responsibility for the development of handbooks is devolved to academic staff in departments but all the institutions surveyed offer institution-wide guidance on how to develop good quality student information. For example, at University C, guidance to academic staff developing module handbooks includes exemplars and templates that can be customised for local use; work is currently underway to enhance this guidance. Specifically, there is recognition that students could benefit from more explicit information about the timing and content of assessment and, in particular, feedback activities. One challenge that is common to universities across the UK is the management of students' expectations around learning and in particular about the amount, timing and purpose of feedback. University C hopes that the publication of more detailed and explicit information about feedback activities will help students to recognise the variety of feedback opportunities available to them and to reflect on how they might use this feedback to help them to improve their performance.

Handbooks are usually distributed to students just prior to the start of the academic year, although they are also increasingly available online through departmental websites or student/staff intranets.

Some interviewees commented that students do not always read information provided to them as carefully as academic staff might wish. Although one interviewee commented that students need to take responsibility for their learning - which

includes reading the information provided - there is recognition that staff have a role to play in reinforcing messages about assessment and other aspects of learning.

Student handbooks are increasingly used as vehicles for communicating expectations about good learning behaviours. In particular, offering clear information about plagiarism and other forms of cheating is seen as increasingly important. However, other forms of dissemination are also being prioritised. For example, at University D an interactive website offers students the opportunity to explore different issues around plagiarism. At the same institution, a video has been created to explain how assessment is managed at the university, including information about procedures that are often “invisible” to the majority of students, such as moderation and other quality-related activities.

At University B, students are currently being encouraged to create their own artifacts and dissemination channels to communicate messages about learning activities (particularly assessment and feedback) in a way that is relevant to their peers. The university has appointed a student to manage a competition and offered prize money for the idea that best communicates to students the importance of seeking and using feedback. The competition is seen as a high-profile way of encouraging discussion about assessment across the institution.

Information on *c) awarded qualification* is typically published in national newspapers at the time of graduation. Individual students are also provided with paper-based confirmation of qualifications (degree transcript) and details of their attainment are held in central university databases that can be accessed by students, academic staff and relevant university services.

In 2012, Universities UK endorsed the use of HEAR and currently 90 universities across the UK are piloting HEAR. HEAR conforms to the data standard for the European Diploma supplement and includes fields to document both academic attainment and non-academic performance (e.g. volunteering, student union representative roles, representation at national level in sport or training courses run internally, university, professional and departmental prizes). None of the universities participating in IBAR are currently piloting HEAR.

#### *f) views and employment destinations of past students*

All UK universities are now required to display the KIS dataset online as part of published information about programmes (a “widget” is available which presents relevant data automatically on university sites). The KIS data includes fields from the National Students Survey detailing previous student satisfaction with aspects of the programme and data from the Destination of Leavers From Higher Education Survey which details graduate employment and median salaries from previous intakes.

The increasing prominence of employment data means that many institutions are keen to offer enhanced access to information about graduate destinations. For example, at University B a publicly-available database provides reports to analyse DLHE data. It includes a report generating tool to build bespoke reports, as well as several ready

made common and detailed reports. There are also reports that allow users to compare data against other institutions.

Typically, university programme web pages will now include detailed information about the kinds of employment and employability opportunities students on the programme can expect. For example, at University C, students on an Environmental Sciences programme are alerted to multiple employment possibilities and to case studies and testimonies from employers and former graduates.

*g) profile of the student population*

All of the institutions surveyed, in common with every university in the UK, are bound by equality legislation. Of particular relevance is the new draft code of conduct for Higher and Further Education published in October 2010 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission<sup>8</sup>. University D's published statement on compliance illustrates a typical institutional response:

"The University is subject to the public sector equality duty which is intended to promote equality for all. The University is required to have 'due regard' to the need to:

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act;
- advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it; and
- foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

To advance equality and foster good relations between people, the University aims to:

- remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- meet the needs of people who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it;
- encourage people who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such people is disproportionately low; and
- tackle prejudice and promote understanding between people from different groups."

Universities must publish information to demonstrate compliance with legislation. University D's statement of compliance is as follows:

"The University is committed to comply with its legal requirements and accordingly it will publish sufficient information to demonstrate its compliance

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<sup>8</sup> Available from: <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/equality-act/equality-act-consultations/closed-consultations/>

with the General Public Sector Equality Duty in line with the timescales set out in legislation. In particular it will prepare and publish information on:

- the effect of policies and practices;
- equality analyses undertaken;
- equality objectives;
- details of engagement undertaken.

*6. What barriers and effective practices are identified with the collection, use and publication of information in the institution? What can be done to enhance the current policy and practice in this area?*

### *6.1 Barriers*

Participants report a significant expansion in the amount and scope of data required by external agencies and increasing requirements to make data explicit to students, parents and others (most particularly, through publication of KIS data on each programme). Participants noted the extent to which internal strategies are perceived as increasingly “external data-led”. This phenomenon has been particularly apparent since the UK-wide adoption of the National Student Survey, although the ubiquity of higher education league tables over the past decade has meant that this process has been underway for some time.

It is too early to assess the extent to which the new QAA Quality Code (published 2012) will transform practice, although its enhanced emphasis on data publication is likely to focus institutional attention in that direction.

Participants in this study reported that their institutions have well-developed systems for the collection, use and publication of information and that these activities were a priority:

“We take it seriously because we have to and it matters”  
(Senior Managers at University A).

Indeed, the reputational risks of failing to create data effectively are such that a number of participants were either very keen to demonstrate the effectiveness of systems (at University B and D) or in some cases unwilling to discuss the detail of such systems (at University A) in case they misrepresented data collection activities. Evidence such as the appointment of a senior manager with specific oversight for information provision (as at University A) points to the enhanced importance of data collection, analysis and publication.

However, some senior managers expressed discomfort with the validity of the data created for external audiences. They pointed to low levels of local trust, especially in quantitative data, and anxieties about the messages that data can communicate about complex educational practices:

“If we trusted the data, we’d use it much more. There’s a lot of discomfort about reducing things to a small set of numbers... it’s not always clear what the relationship is between the numbers that the Finance Department get exercised about and what we [academics] actually do.” (University C)

One difficulty is a perceived mismatch between the short reporting cycles required by external agencies (generally annual) and the longer planning cycles that are required to make measurable change in modules, programmes or in other aspects of the student experience. At least one senior manager lamented the lack of “sensible

conversations” between institutions and government, suggesting that numerical targets were increasingly replacing dialogue.

Participants identified some anxieties about the difficulties institutions face in gaining a balanced view of the value and quality of educational provision. For example, the recent pre-eminence of student satisfaction data tools, particularly the UK National Students Survey (NSS), which feed into national league tables on university performance is sometimes perceived as unhelpful. A number of senior managers noted that if universities have got the relationship with their students “right”, then good performance in the NSS should be a given. However, there is considerable temptation for universities to allocate resource to activities that may improve NSS scores but not necessarily offer innovation or real improvement in quality management.



The following barriers were commonly identified:

#### 6.1.1 Amount, validity and complexity of data

A number of participants commented on the “masses” (Senior Manager at University B) of data created in different parts of the university, to satisfy different audiences. Most of the managers participating in this study reported attempts to streamline data collection (for example, by creating standardised forms or university-wide online systems). A number of participants commented on the extent to which data may be subject to manipulation (for example, by using collection or analysis techniques that are most likely to create favourable outcomes). A number of participants commented on the complexity of data and challenges to understand what some data really means in terms of university practice.

A number of participants reported a multiplicity of different databases and systems at their institutions, which makes the process of data analysis, collation or comparison complex:

“We collect the data but the systems don’t always work as well as they might. The databases don’t always talk to each other so departments collect data twice” (University A)

“We (the departments) can’t always access the same data as the central services and some parts of the system are locked so we can’t get in so we need to collect our own data.”. (University A)

“Departments collect data [on quality assurance] in all sorts of different formats, so we can’t compare them. We really need to standardise.” (University B).

Departmental administrators at University A, who participated in this study felt quite strongly that the way departments deal with data could be more efficient if they had better access and more flexible databases. Similarly, staff responsible for some central services (Educational Development, Careers) reported that they sometimes needed to access data “owned” by different parts of the university’s administration that was sometimes difficult to secure in useful formats.

#### 6.1.2 Local utility of data created for external stakeholders

A number of senior managers with responsibility for oversight of data collection and use expressed concerns about the extent to which information required by external stakeholders offers local benefit or is, in fact, detrimental to university practices. Commonly, managers reported that the data required by, for example, HESA is collected and published in formats that are either not recognisable at local level or not useful as a tool for local improvement. Some senior managers reported spending time “taking figures from the university system and trying to re-format them manually” to fit national requirements or “not recognising our own data when it is published

nationally because I don't know how they have collated it" (Manager at University C).

Some data created for external stakeholders does not seem to be widely recognised by academic participants in this study as part of the process for enhancement. Data created as part of annual quality assurance monitoring and some university-wide and/or national data (particularly the results of the National Student Survey) is generally perceived as a basis for enhancement, but other data does not always enjoy the same status, particularly if it is perceived as being "owned" by administrative staff rather than the academic community. However, senior managers reported a generalised trend towards increasing visibility of what might be termed "business information" and increasing expectation that academic staff are involved in university-wide strategic responses to this data. Common examples include employability of graduates and attempts to enhance employment prospects through curriculum re-design (at University D) and responses to data on student experiences of assessment and feedback (at University B and University C).

Although many participants reported reservations about the questions in the National Student Survey and some of the ways in which survey data is used nationally, this tool seems to be generally perceived as a useful starting point for further institutional discussions about the student experience and further action (including local data collection) to understand more about student concerns (for example, additional work at University B and University C on student assessment). A number of participants reported that it could sometimes be challenging to get academic staff to take data on the student experience seriously.

### 6.1.3 Cost

Administrative staff with responsibility for data collection, validation and publication described the high costs associated with the creation of datasets for HESA and other stakeholders, often involving a large number of full-time staff and short-term "helpers" (often students). A Senior Manager at University C reported particular concern with what he described as the "treadmill" of annual reporting at every level of the institution: "it's always arduous and you can never get off". One challenge commonly cited by participants is that of short planning and reporting cycles:

"We are so busy collecting and reporting data that we never get the chance to do much about what it tells us. We don't get the chance to stop and think because it never stops... it's an onslaught, it's a cycle of frustration for administrators and for academics." (Participant at University C)

Many participants commented on the regularity with which the data fields and/or formats required by HESA or other external stakeholders change, requiring regular overhauls of university systems and processes. For example, University D has invested in software data management systems which are in themselves far from cheap, but it takes a long time to make these fit for the particular purposes the university requires and each change required by external stakeholders adds additional resource burdens. Similar information management systems are ubiquitous across the

universities participating in this study and there are similar data management and cost concerns at each institution.

A number of participants commented on the high levels of investment in university websites and the increasingly complex and expensive task of ensuring that public information is accurate, well-presented and timely. At University D, the institutional website is currently being rebuilt, and has been outsourced to a professional team. It will contain many more open platforms. The university has made a policy decision to invest in its website to support recruitment, so much of the information presented is aimed at potential students. Progress is being made, and perhaps an indicator of some measure of success is that the university over-recruited for the current year.

#### 6.1.4 Lack of skills and resources for analysis

A number of participants commented that more could be done to use institutional data more effectively. One area of practice identified in ESG Part 1, but under-developed in UK universities seems to be that of benchmarking. There is evidence of some internal benchmarking activity (for example, at University D where differing schools are required to report on key internal indicators annually and performance is compared) but little evidence of comprehensive institution-led external activity apart from the national comparisons that are a natural component of the league tables created from HESA and other data.

Despite investment in new data collection systems, there is still some frustration about the ready availability of useful data at some institutions. One interviewee pointed out that “there is lots of it, but reports are hard to generate from the student database and the data collected for HESA is sometimes difficult to mine for our own purposes.” (University C). A number of interviewees identified the need for “a really good data analyst” (University D) to create meaningful and timely data reports for a variety of university audiences, but recognised that these skills are not always available: “the technical expertise and support is not always there and this is limiting” (University A). In other cases, data is available, but there is a recognition that it not always easy to know how to act on the information provided.

One interviewee at University C, who was particularly passionate about the role of data as a formative tool at her institution, argues that data should only be generated if it can be used by the university to make improvements. She described a scenario in which data about patterns of admissions was used at her institution to challenge the preconceptions of admissions tutors. In one faculty, there had been a widespread, but largely unspoken belief that female students from a particular demographic group were most likely to achieve good results. Admissions processes over a number of years had therefore tended to favour this group. However, data from student records showed that male students and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds were just as likely to do well. As a result of discussions based on this data admissions criteria were adjusted to ensure a wider demographic reach.

In some cases, these kinds of discussions about adjustments to practice might be harder to initiate. Interpretation and control of data can be political and freighted with personal or corporate agendas. In newer universities, where managerialist structures

are more common, there may be more immediate pressure on academic staff to respond to statistical data. The danger in this kind of situation is that speedy responses might not be educationally sound or well planned and might deliver unhelpful unintended outcomes. In universities with less rigid management cultures, academic staff might be more likely to question the validity of the data, or the validity of suggested approaches to perceived problems, particularly if the message is coming from outside the department.

## 6.2 Examples of good practice

One example of good practice highlighted by University A is internal data collection in relation to the student experience. Data is gathered about the demographic and social make-up of student residences so that they can try to create residences that are as diverse as possible within the student population:

“I doubt many other Universities survey the social make-up of their residences but I think it is an important part of our University community.”  
(University A)

This information is gathered from students across the whole University and focuses on the non-academic experiences of students and their social demographics this information is then used in allocating students to residences but also in relation to planning services and facilities.

At University C, the student union has taken an active role in the collection and analysis of student satisfaction data. Findings from the National Student Survey are used to inform additional data collection in the form of focus groups conducted by students, which investigate in more detail student experiences of assessment and feedback. Participants in the IBAR study described how student-generated and student-led data collection can carry more “weight” with academic staff than surveys conducted nationally or by university management:

“It’s harder to ignore students when they present their own views... they have to listen to us.”  
(University C).

## 4. Major findings and policy recommendations

### 7.1. Identification of barriers to the quality of *the collection, use and publication of information with relevance to supranational level*

UK universities have well-established, and improving, systems for the collection, analysis and publication of data on the student experience and on other performance indicators either mandated by external agencies or identified as core to organisational strategy. In many ways, the UK university sector may have much to offer other national sectors in terms of its data handling expertise and its concern for data publication to inform applicant choice and student achievement. There is considerable evidence to suggest that university activities are informed by robust data collection and by a concern for the reality of lived experience by students.

However, ENQA and other pan-national bodies may wish to consider whether the balance between UK national reporting requirements and national KPIs and internally-driven data collection activities currently facilitates optimisation of enhancement strategies. Indeed, there may be cause to question whether national arrangements for reporting constitute a threat to institutional autonomy and distinctiveness.

Although there have been some national efforts to encourage benchmarking across European universities<sup>9</sup> there is little evidence of systematic comparison of practice between UK universities and their European counterparts, except for the national comparisons that are a function of world university rankings or league tables. ESG Part 1 encourages the practice of benchmarking, but it is unclear at present whether UK universities see much value in comparison of practice across the EHEA. ENQA may wish to consider whether opportunities for encouraging European benchmarking may stimulate useful practice.

#### **Recommendations:**

- ENQA might wish to consider what opportunities exist to encourage national approaches to data collection that support institutional enhancement
- ENQA might wish to consider opportunities to encourage and/or incentivise benchmarking and/or comparisons of practice across the EHEA

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/International-benchmarking.aspx>

## 7.2 Identification of barriers to the quality of *the collection, use and publication of information* with **relevance to national level**

A significant difficulty or barrier identified by a number of participants is the multiplicity of external ideas, policies, targets and performance measures that “crowd” the UK higher education sector and create “unhelpful complexity”. Institutions report considerable costs in creating, validating and reporting nationally determined datasets, particularly when the data required at national level is subject to frequent change.

There is some concern that national requirements for (usually) annual data collection are time-consuming, are costly, do not always generate data that is locally useful, can be presented in ways that may misrepresent institutional practice and that short reporting cycles are a poor match for the longer planning cycles needed to effect meaningful educational change.

A number of participants noted the lack of local skills in data analysis, presentation and interpretation and there may be some value in considering the extent to which national support for skills development may be valid in the higher education sector.

Some evidence of locally led benchmarking is evident in this study, but this appears to be an area that is as yet underdeveloped in the UK sector. There may be advantage in considering national support and incentives for benchmarking, perhaps with a pan-national scope.

A number of examples of good practice were identified by institutions, particularly in the production and use of locally generated data to enhance both academic and pastoral experiences for students. National opportunities to share examples of good practice in information creation and use should be welcomed.

### **Recommendations:**

- The higher education sector/government in the UK may wish to consider whether further work to develop national reporting requirements that support local enhancement may be beneficial.
- The higher education sector/government in the UK may wish to consider arrangements for data analysis, presentation and interpretation skills training.
- The higher education sector/government in the UK may wish to consider opportunities for encouraging and/or incentivising benchmarking activities.

### 5.3 Identification of barriers to the quality of *the collection, use and publication of information* with **relevance to institutional level**

In some institutions, participants reported a mismatch between the data collected for external audiences and the data collected to support local improvements. Some of this mismatch seems to be associated with perceptions of ownership: data for external use tends to be generated and validated by administrative services and data for local improvement by academic staff. The same broad binary division is evident when academics were asked which data they found most useful for enhancement. Overwhelmingly, qualitative data is perceived as valuable and much of the quantitative data generated is “ignored” by academic staff.

Some institutions reported low levels of trust in university datasets. Two main reasons emerged: firstly, there is widespread anxiety about the reductive nature of quantitative data. Many academic staff, and indeed many senior managers, do not recognise the complexity (or indeed the value) of the educational experiences they offer in the datasets presented by external agencies. A second, but related problem is low levels of trust in the veracity of data. Although there is considerable cynicism about some of the data presented externally, because staff are aware of the possibility of manipulation of data (for example, in calculation of staff/student ratios or teaching hours) there is also evidence of cynicism about other forms of data (including student satisfaction data).

A number of senior managers and many academic staff noted that low levels of trust in data created very significant problems in securing staff participation in change activities. Some institutions (notably University C) have been creative in their use of students to create, analyse and present data on the student experience to staff, with the assumption that messages will be much harder to dismiss.

A dilemma for university managers emerges from this study: locally-generated and “owned” data seems to be more likely to result in staff attention, lead to real change and encourage academic staff and students to work together towards improvement. However, the trajectory of much of the data collection described, in this study is towards increased centralisation, increased standardisation and increased oversight of data by managers and others.

Some evidence of locally-led benchmarking is evident in this study, but this appears to be an area that is as yet underdeveloped in the UK sector. There may be advantage in further considering whether UK universities might wish to use benchmarking as part of enhancement strategies.

#### **Recommendations:**

- UK universities may wish to consider the extent to which the balance between standardisation of data and local ownership best offers opportunities for enhancement.

- UK universities may wish to consider innovation in the methods used for data collection, particularly in opportunities for staff and students to work together to collect and use meaningful and purposeful data.
- UK universities may wish to consider opportunities for encouraging and/or incentivising benchmarking activities to support enhancement.

### **Institutional Case Studies**

See additional attachment.