

Summary of responses to the consultation on detailed changes to the Key Information Set data collection for 2017 and approaches to presenting data on the successor to the Unistats website

To	Registrars or higher education managers at higher education institutions and further education colleges in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland, including alternative providers of higher education
Of interest to those responsible for	Student data and information; Planning; Admissions and marketing
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. In July 2016, alongside the outcomes of the 'Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions' (HEFCE 2015/24), we issued a technical consultation document to seek feedback on work the UK higher education funding bodies and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) are carrying out to implement the outcomes of the review of the Unistats and the Key Information Set (KIS). This document presents the analysis of responses to that technical consultation and the outcomes of our consideration of these, along with next steps.

Key points

2. Between 30 June and 26 July 2016 we sought responses to the 'Consultation on detailed changes to the Key Information Set data collection for 2017 and approaches to presenting data on the successor to the Unistats website'. This was carried out jointly by the higher education funding bodies in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), as we work in partnership on the UK-wide KIS data collection. The consultation document can be found on the HEFCE website at

www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/unikis/consultations/.

3. The consultation consisted of three sections:

Section 1 – Proposals for a revised data collection to replace the current KIS collection.

Section 2 – Proposals for aggregation of student-related data on the successor to the Unistats website.

Section 3 – Update on the investigation of possible approaches to presenting survey data on the successor to the Unistats website.

4. We received 131 valid responses to the consultation. These were broadly supportive of our proposed changes to the data collection, and the majority were supportive of retaining the current approach to aggregation of data on Unistats. We suggested a number of options for approaching

the aggregation of National Student Survey (NSS) data in the first year of the new survey, and a comparable number of respondents favoured the first two of these. In section 3 we invited comments on our investigation of different approaches to presenting survey data, and there was significant support for the introduction of benchmarking.

5. We will therefore make the changes to the data collection proposed in the consultation.

Key changes are the removal of data fields associated with the discontinuation of:

- proportion of time spent in scheduled learning and teaching and independent study
 - proportion of assessment by method
- tuition fee information
- accommodation costs

We will also relax the validation of course titles and add the ability to reflect where a course is optionally available by distance learning.

6. HESA will issue a notification of changes to the current KIS data collection, which will reflect the outcomes of this consultation, at the beginning of September, and will work with software suppliers to advise them of the systems implications of these.

7. The funding bodies will take forward further work on aggregation of NSS responses and data presentation. When we complete this work we will seek advice from the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group, which advises the funding bodies on student information. We will also carry out further work on processes around accreditation information, as outlined in the consultation document, prior to release of the manual for the 2017 data collection.

Action required

8. This publication is for information.

Background

9. The UK higher education funding bodies¹ 'Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions' (HEFCE 2015/24)², included proposals to remove the following information from the Key Information Set (KIS):

- proportion of time spent in scheduled learning and teaching and independent study
- proportion of assessment by method
- tuition fee information
- accommodation costs.

10. In their place we proposed asking institutions to publish detailed course-level information and providing them with good practice guidance to enable them to meet students' information needs and which would align with guidance provided by the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) on legal requirements for provision of information about higher education. We suggested adopting this approach to allow students to access detailed, nuanced information which does not lend itself well to presentation on a comparison website.

11. There was broad support for these proposals, so we have been progressing work to consider their impact on the KIS data collection, and to look at the remaining data items and consider where other changes to these might be desirable based on the feedback received from users (students and their advisers) and the higher education (HE) sector. At the same time, we have been considering whether alternative approaches to data aggregation could be adopted where publication thresholds are not met by the current year's course-level data. We have also been investigating approaches to presentation of survey data which attempt to take account of the level of uncertainty around the values displayed.

12. The consultation sought the HE sector's views on:

- where we proposed making no amendments to policy, process or data fields
- proposals for some changes to policy, process or data fields
- a proposal to retain our current data aggregation methodology
- options for aggregation of 2017 National Student Survey (NSS) data
- approaches to presentation of survey data from 2017.

Analysis of responses

13. The consultation included questions with three-point Likert scale responses, a range of options to select from, and open text responses.

14. In addition to quantitative analysis of agreement and disagreement, and where respondents were asked to select from a number of options, we have carried out qualitative analysis of free text responses to identify common themes and understand the rationale for responses. Our analysis follows.

¹ The UK higher education funding bodies are the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Scottish Funding Council.

² The consultation document and the outcomes report are available on the HEFCE website at www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/roiconsult/.

Overview of responses

15. We received 131 valid responses to the consultation. The majority of these (92) were organisational responses from higher education institutions (HEIs). We received 22 from further education colleges (FECs) and eight from alternative providers of higher education (APs). In addition, we received responses from GuildHE, the Association of Colleges and one professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB). There were six responses from individuals: four based at HEIs and two based at FECs.

16. Four-fifths of the responses were from England (104), with significantly lower number of responses from Scotland (6), Wales (5) and Northern Ireland (2) as might be expected given the relative size of HE sectors in those countries. 14 respondents did not indicate a country. There were no noticeable differences in trends identified in the responses between countries.

Section 1: Proposals for a revised data collection to replace the current KIS collection

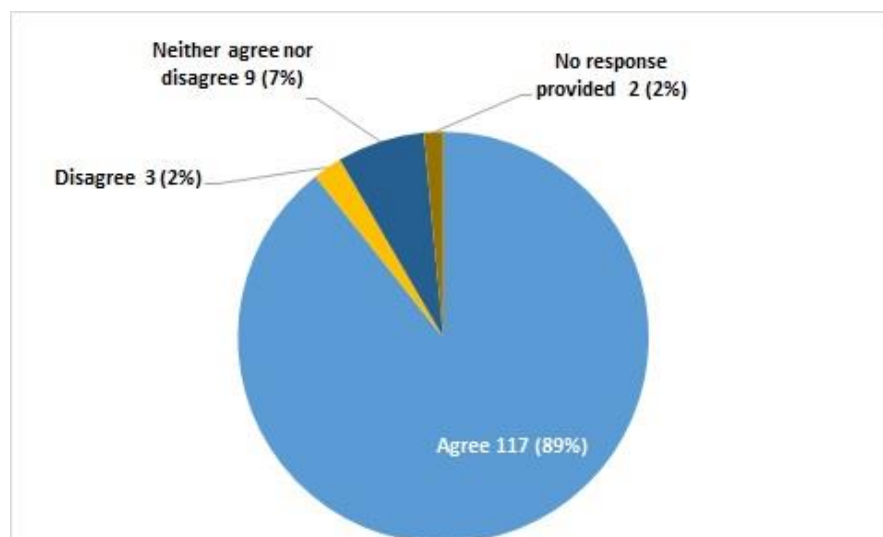
17. In section 1 of the consultation, we outlined our proposed approach to various aspects of the data collection, and sought feedback on each of those areas. A summary of current KIS input fields, and whether we intended to remove or retain them, was provided.

Q1a: Do you agree with our proposed approach to each of the areas outlined in the consultation document?

Coverage of the record

18. We proposed to retain the current criteria for courses to be included in the record. However, we also noted that if we extend coverage of the NSS, as proposed in the 'Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions', we would likely extend the coverage of this data collection so that it remained consistent with NSS coverage. We also stated that we planned to consider publishing further information about higher and degree apprenticeships. The breakdown of responses is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Responses for 'Coverage of the record'



19. A large majority of respondents (117) agreed with the proposal. Of those, nine provided comments in favour of the future expansion of the record and five provided comments opposing this.

20. Just three respondents disagreed with the proposal, though only one of these provided a relevant comment, which was that they opposed the current exclusion of one-year courses.

Our response

21. Given that the majority supported our proposal, we will retain the current criteria for courses to be included in the record. We will expand this if the coverage of the NSS is extended, and we will explore options for publishing information about higher and degree apprenticeships

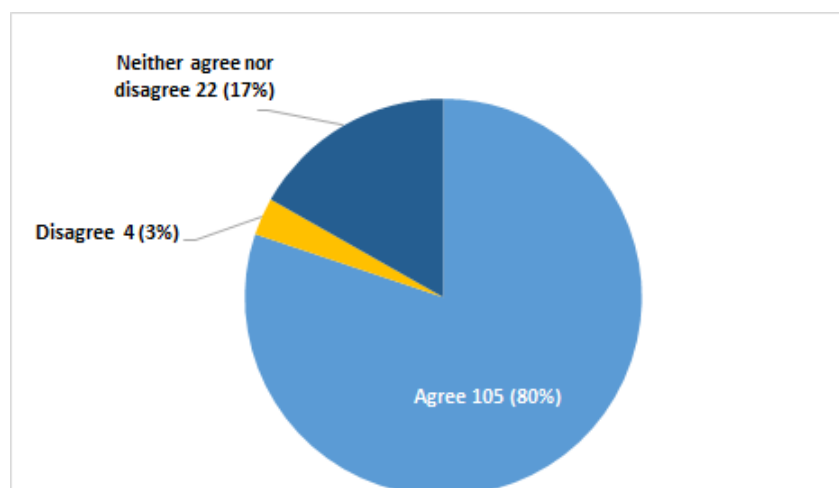
Return of data for sub-contracted provision

22. We proposed retaining the current approach to collection of data for the following sub-contractual arrangements:

- a. Where all of a teaching institution's higher education provision is franchised from one other institution, that other institution should return the data.
- b. Where a teaching institution has provision franchised from multiple institutions, the teaching institution needs to return its own data. (Otherwise it would be difficult for us to identify when there was a complete dataset for that institution, and therefore when to aggregate the data to allow it to be published).
- c. Where students study at two or more institutions as part of the same course, the registering institution completes the return.

This is because we publish data by teaching institution, and we therefore need to have all the data for each institution before attempting to apply any aggregation that is required to meet publication thresholds.

Figure 2: Responses for 'Return of data for sub-contracted provision'



23. The majority of respondents (105) agreed with the proposal. Three of these commented that returning data for sub-contracted provision was not applicable to them. There were relatively few comments in response to this question, but a number of respondents requested that we be clearer in guidance in this area, and one respondent highlighted that this approach was burdensome for FECs with numerous franchise partners.

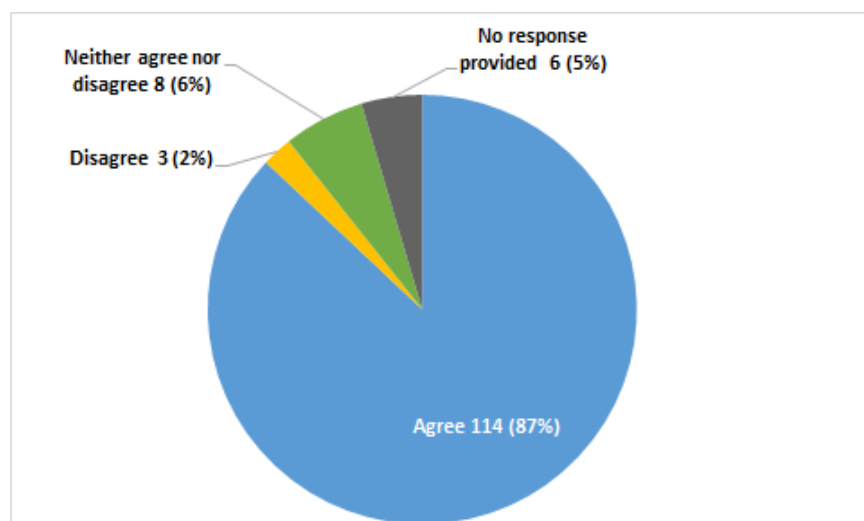
Our response

24. We will continue with the current approach to collecting data where sub-contractual relationships exist. We note the comment about burden where a small college has many such arrangements but, given there is general support for this proposal and we cannot identify another way that we can capture the data to allow for aggregation at an appropriate point, we do not propose making changes at this point.

KISTYPE

25. We proposed discontinuing the KISTYPE³, which allows for return of subject-level data that can be grouped together, and associated fields. Given that we will no longer be gathering learning and teaching and assessment information centrally, it was our view that it should be possible to return all provision under what is currently KISTYPE 1, so KISTYPE would no longer be required.

Figure 3: Responses for 'KISTYPE'



26. Again, a large majority of respondents (114) agreed with the proposal. Of those, seven of the 24 who commented reported they would be unaffected by the proposal of discontinuing KISTYPE, and a smaller number raised concerns that multiple subject courses would not be recognised. Those who disagreed with the proposal did not put forward arguments to support their response and the one respondent who neither agreed nor disagreed and commented was also unaffected by the proposal.

Our response

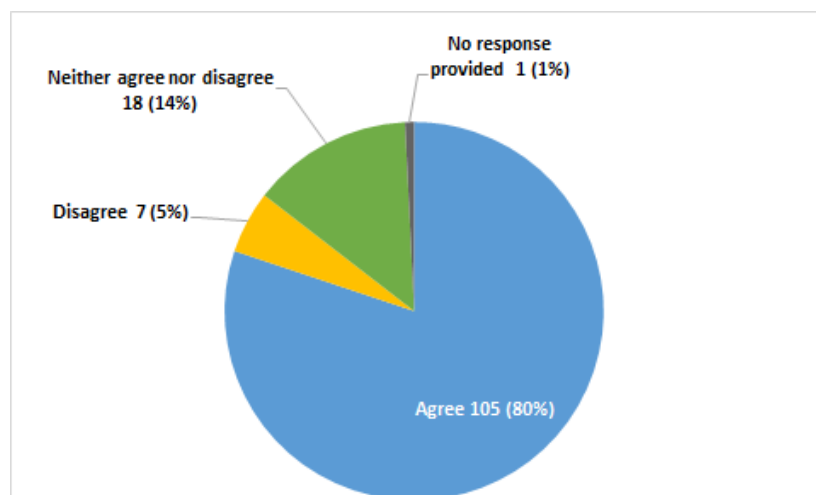
27. As respondents did not identify any unforeseen implications of this change, we will proceed to remove KISTYPE and associated fields. It will still be possible to display information for multiple-subject courses without capturing KISTYPE, as we do currently for KISTYPE 1.

³ Further explanation of types of KIS is available on the HESA website at www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_studrec&task=show_file&mnl=16061&href=KISTYPEs.html.

Sandwich year, year abroad and foundation year

28. It is currently possible to indicate in the KIS whether a course has an optional or compulsory sandwich year, year abroad or foundation year. The current guidance is that this should only be returned where the placement or year abroad equates to a full single course year. We proposed retaining these fields, as they are used widely by students when considering which courses they may be interested in, but also sought views on whether it would be helpful to make prospective students aware of opportunities for shorter placements or periods of study overseas.

Figure 4: Responses for 'Sandwich year, year abroad and foundation year'



29. The majority of respondents (105) agreed to the proposal of retaining the current fields. 23 of those respondents commented that they think it would be helpful if there was the ability to make prospective students aware of shorter placements and study abroad opportunities, with some suggesting it would be helpful to capture and display the length of these.

30. Those who disagreed did not support the introduction of shorter placements or study abroad opportunities. They considered this to be problematic to collect accurately and potentially burdensome, and thought this information would be better contained on institutional web pages.

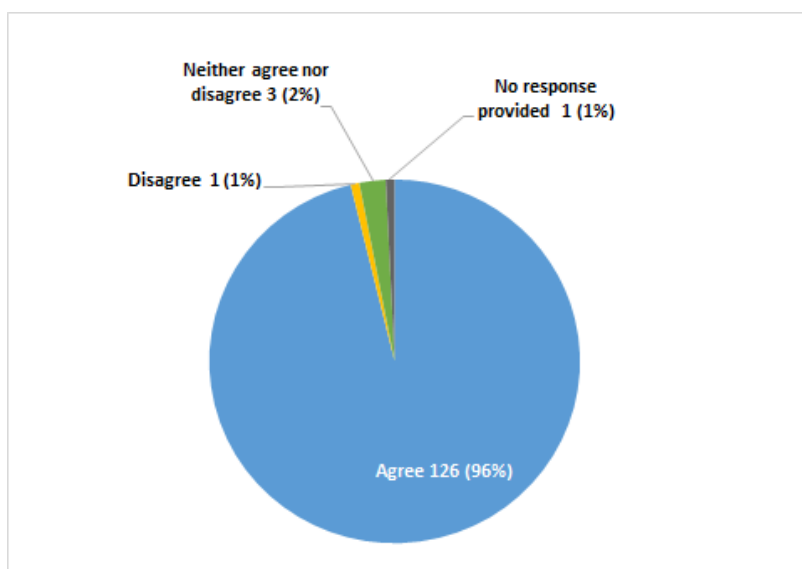
Our response

31. We will retain the current fields as proposed. There were no comments relating to the naming of these, so we will also retain the current terminology. We note that there is support for including shorter periods of placement or study abroad in the collection. We would like to investigate this further with prospective students to ensure that we can present information in this area clearly, given the potential further complexity. We therefore do not plan to introduce new fields for the 2017 collection, but may do so for 2018. In the guidance to institutions on information provision that we are developing as a result of our review of Unistats and the KIS, we will make clear that it is good practice to provide this type of information on their websites.

Course title

32. We proposed amending the guidance for the title field in the collection to allow institutions to return a title which reflects how the course is named on their website, and to remove the data validation which prevents the inclusion of text such as 'year in industry' or 'year abroad' to enable this.

Figure 5: Responses for 'Course title'



33. The number of respondents agreeing to this proposal was the highest for proposals within this section, with very strong support for the ability to return a course title which is consistent with the course name on the institution's website. Comments reiterated support for this, with the one respondent who disagreed commenting that the course title should be the same across UCAS, Unistats and the institutional website.

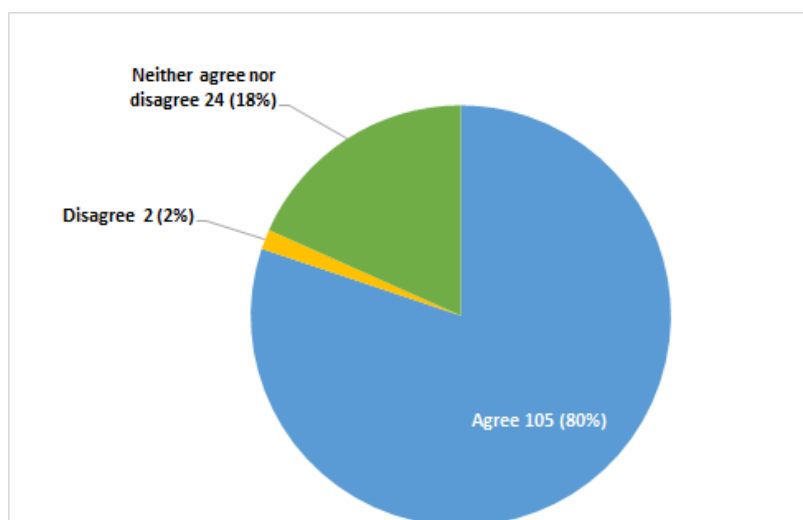
Our response

34. We will relax validation to enable return of a course title which more closely reflects that on the institutional website. We will retain structured fields (qualification aim and honours) to ensure consistency in presentation of these to users of the data.

Distance learning

35. The DISTANCE data item currently records whether a course is only available by distance learning. We proposed to introduce an additional value for this item to indicate that it is possible, but not mandatory, to study a course fully through distance learning as we considered this to be useful information for prospective students.

Figure 6: Responses for 'Distance learning'



36. The majority of respondents (105) agreed with the introduction of an additional value within DISTANCE to indicate that it is possible, but not mandatory, to pursue a course fully by distance learning. There were relatively few comments, some of which supported the additional value while others expressed that this could be a useful addition, but felt that this could be better presented on the institution's website. One respondent commented that this would not be appropriate for full-time provision.

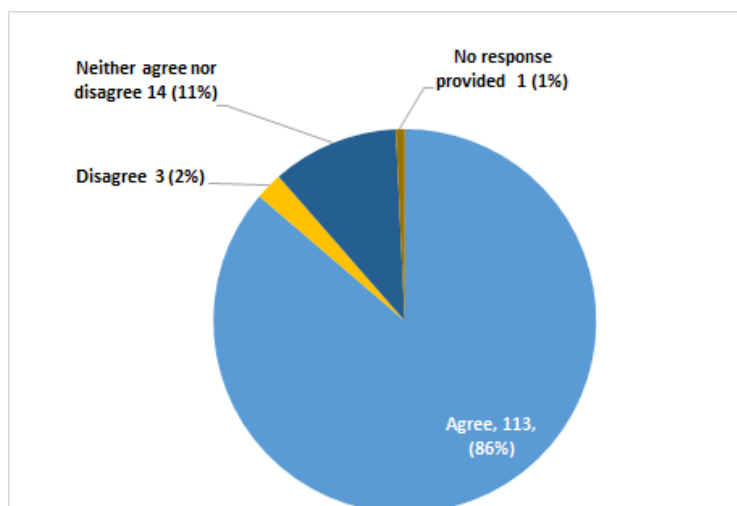
37. Given the general support for the proposal, and the lack of strong arguments against it, we propose to add a value to capture where a course may optionally be studied fully by distance learning. We will include in guidance, however, that we would only expect this to be appropriate for part-time courses. For full-time study, outcomes differ significantly between distance learning and study based at an institution, so we will continue to expect a separate record for each mode of delivery. We will carry out user testing of presentations of this new item to ensure that it is clearly understood.

Accreditation information

38. In the consultation we proposed to continue to capture data in the same way as currently for accreditation, and explained our rationale for this. We also advised that before the release of the manual for the 2017 collection we intend to:

- review processes around accreditation information
- consider ways in which we could ensure its quality
- improve the clarity of the statements displayed to students.

Figure 7: Responses for 'Accreditation information'



39. The majority of respondents agreed with our proposals (113), with 14 neither agreeing nor disagreeing, and only three disagreeing. Comments from eight respondents supported the introduction of the ability to indicate either where accreditation was pending or where it was due for renewal. Other comments suggested that we work more closely with accrediting bodies.

40. The regulatory body which responded disagreed with the proposal and commented that institutions should not be able to make statements that courses have been accredited before accreditation has been confirmed.

Our response

41. In response to the point made by the regulatory body, our existing policy is that accreditation cannot be included if it is pending, but can be included when it is due for renewal.

42. Our rationale is that if we allow institutions to include accreditation which has not yet been granted, this could mislead students given we would not be able to explain what it means in detail on the website. But accreditations due for renewal are a different case: many accreditations are granted on a fixed-term basis and once accreditation has been achieved, a large majority are successfully renewed. Omitting these could disadvantage an institution unduly, as it could be perceived less favourably by prospective students. Similarly, adding a further data item to indicate that an accreditation is due for renewal could introduce a risk that it would be used to filter out courses where it is reasonable to expect the accreditation will be renewed.

43. We do not propose to expand the amount of data that we currently capture, but to provide guidance to institutions on provision of information about accreditations on their websites which would include stating whether an accreditation was due for renewal. In that way, they could contextualise this (for example, by stating whether it had been successfully renewed in the past), and it would allow transparency without the risk that courses which were likely to have their accreditations renewed were filtered out by users of the information. Similarly, we will advise on what is appropriate to include when an institution is part-way through a multi-stage accreditation process.

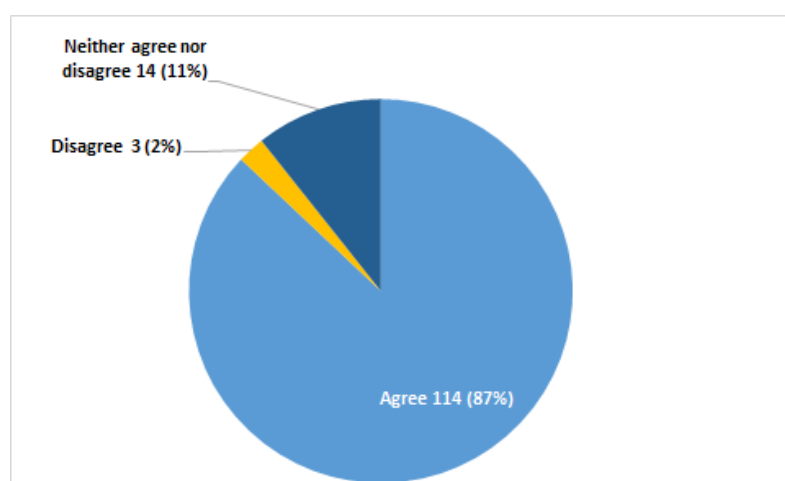
44. We will proceed with plans to review the processes around maintaining the list of accreditations used in the collection and to make improvements to data assurance mechanisms. We will involve accrediting bodies in this work.

Course length

45. As we are no longer collecting information on scheduled learning and teaching, there is no data item we can use to convey the length of the course to students. We proposed retaining the NUMSTAGE field to capture the length of the course in years so that this can be displayed.

46. **Clarification:** Annex B of the consultation document erroneously indicated the intention to remove the NUMSTAGE field, in contradiction to paragraph 50 of the main consultation text which proposed to retain it. To clarify, Annex B should have reflected the proposal in paragraph 50 of the consultation text to retain the field but to use it for a different purpose.

Figure 8: Responses for 'Course length'



47. There was strong support from respondents (87 per cent) to retain the NUMSTAGE field and use it to capture and display the length of course in years. There were six comments from respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed, which all suggested the collection of a link via a URL field directing the prospective student to more information on the institution's website, given that it would be difficult to collect this in a single data item for part-time provision. Two respondents suggested course length information could be derived from other data returns.

Our response

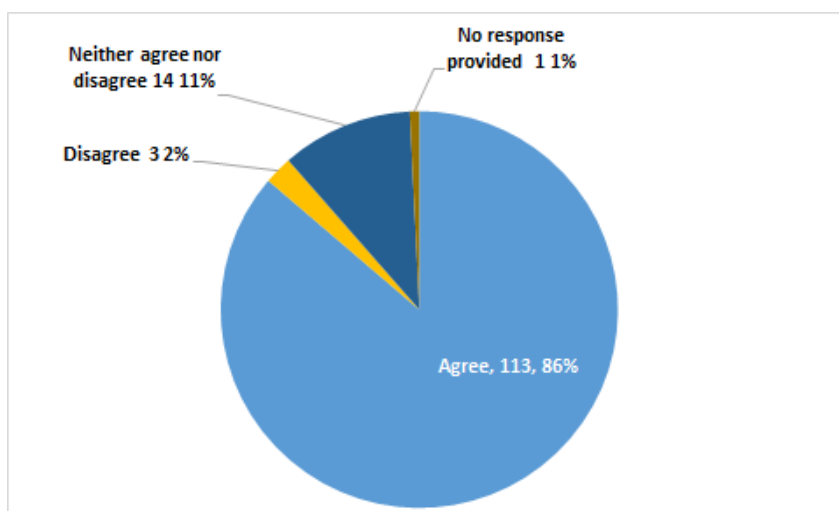
48. Given the broad support for this proposal, we will retain the NUMSTAGE field and use it to capture the length of the course in years. We do not believe it is currently possible to derive this information from other data returns, but will keep this under investigation. If it does become possible to derive it, we will remove the field from the data collection.

49. We accept the arguments about potential complexity for part-time provision and, as suggested in the consultation, we therefore do not propose capturing course length for part-time courses. Instead, we will display a message on the website that for part-time courses prospective students should refer to the course page on the institutional website (to which we will link) to find out the duration of the course.

Accommodation information

50. In the consultation document, we reported on the further consideration that we had given to the proposal included in the 'Consultation on changes to the National Student Survey, Unistats and information provided by institutions' to remove accommodation data from the collection and the responses to this. In that consultation, we had proposed to provide guidance to institutions on supplying information about institutional accommodation on their own websites, which students can easily access through a URL provided in the ACCOMURL field. We concluded that this remained the best approach to providing accurate and easily understandable information and sought the sector's confirmation of this.

Figure 9: Responses for 'Accommodation information'



51. Agreement with this proposal was significantly higher (86 per cent) than disagreement (2 per cent), with respondents who agreed largely echoing the proposal in their comments. Those who disagreed, or neither agreed nor disagreed and provided comments, were concerned about the loss of centrally available, comparable information in this area. One respondent suggested how the data collected could be simplified.

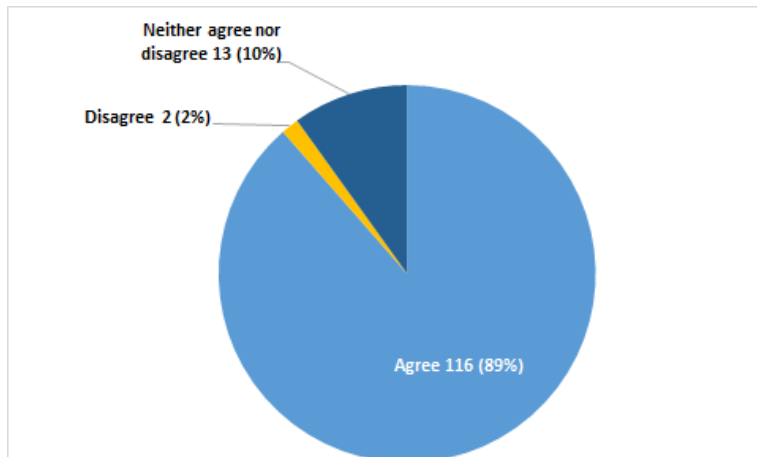
Our response

52. Given the general support for this proposal and the lack of new arguments being made by the small number who disagreed, we will proceed with our proposal to link to accommodation information on institutional websites and provide guidance to institutions on provision of information in this area.

Employability

53. The record currently contains the EMPLOYURL field, which captures a link to employability information on the institution's website. We proposed retaining this, but advised we were reviewing guidance on the information to be provided by institutions

Figure 10: Responses for 'Employability'



54. The majority of respondents agreed to retaining this approach, with just two disagreeing and 13 neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Comments from those who neither agreed nor disagreed said they were unable to provide an opinion without having seen the guidance which is yet to be developed. Nine respondents who agreed, stressed the importance of clear guidance in this area.

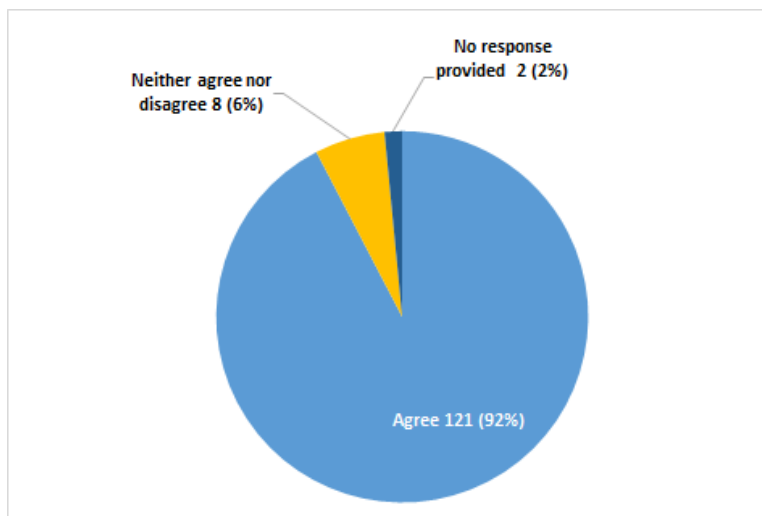
Our response

55. Again, as there is broad agreement in this area we will proceed with our proposed approach to retain the EMPLOYURL field and revise the guidance in this area.

New courses

56. We proposed that we make it clearer to users of the website why aggregated data or no data appears in a KIS record; for example, as a result of a course being new or because a cohort has not yet completed the relevant surveys. We also proposed deriving values to enable us to display the appropriate explanatory message from other available data.

Figure 11: Responses for 'New courses'



57. This was a well-supported proposal: 121 agreed, 8 neither agreed nor disagreed, and no respondents disagreed. Some concerns were raised, however, around courses being flagged as new where it had not been possible to link to previous courses due to a difference in the JACS codes associated with the two course records.

Our response

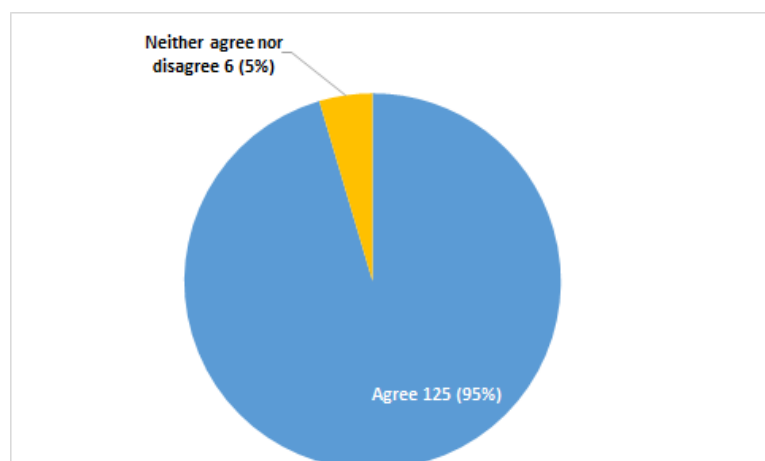
58. Given this proposal was well-supported, we will proceed to implement it. Where it is appropriate to link to a previous version of the course but validation prevents this due to a change in subject coding, it is possible for us to switch off the validation rule within the system to allow it. We will make clear in the guidance where it would be appropriate to request that the validation is not applied to allow for such linking.

Maintaining links to institutional websites

59. In the consultation, we stressed that accuracy of the URL fields used to collect links to information on institutional web pages would be even more important now that institutions will be presenting detailed course-level information and we will not be collecting this.

60. We proposed adding a facility to the successor to the Unistats website so that users can report incorrect links, and asked for suggestions of other steps we could take to facilitate maintenance of the website links included in the return.

Figure 12: Responses for 'Maintaining links to institutional websites'



61. 125 respondents agreed with the proposal to introduce a facility to the new website for users to report incorrect links; six neither agreed nor disagreed, and no respondents disagreed. Some respondents suggested additional, alternative approaches of automatic checking of links and routing to the institutional homepage when links did not work.

Our response

62. We will implement a facility for users to implement broken links on the successor to the Unistats website. We note the comments that notifications should be sent to the existing KIS contact, rather than an additional contact being used for this purpose. We will use reporting to ensure that amendments are made when these have been requested. We will also investigate automated solutions for checking where links do not lead to their intended destination URL.

Question 1b: Do you have comments on any other areas of the data collection?

63. 47 respondents supplied comments in response to this question. The most frequently raised point was that it would be helpful to have the guidance on provision of information on institutional websites as soon as possible. Some respondents also emphasised that this guidance was critical to ensuring some comparability of information was retained.

64. Several respondents queried what was happening to the KIS widget which is currently embedded on course pages.

65. In addition to comments expanding on those made on specific areas of the data collection, such as accreditation and placements, there were various other suggestions, comments and queries. These included:

- use of alternative search terms, such as those supplied to UCAS, and the use of these in revised search functionality
- comments around the timing of collection, sign-off and publication of the dataset, for example noting its relatively short life-span for conservatoires due to the earlier UCAS deadline for their courses
- a query about whether we would retain the statement that a lack of data does not reflect negatively on the quality of the course
- comments about the need to articulate with other developments such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and upcoming changes to the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey to ensure appropriate presentation of information
- the naming of the dataset collection and the implications for documentation if we move away from using Unistats
- concerns about the removal of the percentage of the course where teaching is available in Welsh
- suggested use of the term 'programme' instead of course
- the relationship with CMA compliance; for example, one provider queried whether institutions would be expected to state in their sign-off for the data collection that they complied with CMA guidance in their own information provision.

Our response

66. In order to allow sufficient time for involvement of institutions and students in its development, we intend to publish the guidance on information provision late in 2016 for implementation by September 2017.

67. It is our intention to retain the widget, as we view two-way linking between institution webpages and Unistats to be key to helping prospective students to navigate and compare information for different courses, but to make modifications to it. As widgets will need to link directly to course pages they will still need to be configured with the relevant parameters. They will no longer display data, as we have accepted feedback that uncontextualised data is not helpful and is potentially misleading. We will work closely with the sector when developing a solution for the new widget, and its design will be tested with prospective students.

68. The percentage of the course where teaching is available in Welsh was part of the learning and teaching information which is being removed from the data collection and we will therefore be transferring its publication to institutions; the guidance to institutions will cover this area.

69. We intend to continue to display a message where no data is available to indicate this does not reflect on the quality of the course, but will make clearer the reason why no data appears.

70. We are mindful of the need to consider wider changes which will impact on provision of student information, such as the introduction of the TEF and the changes to the DLHE survey, and the potential for inclusion of new data on the successor to Unistats. We are working closely with relevant bodies, such as the Department for Education and HESA, to ensure complementarity of our activities.

71. We note the rest of the comments made (as summarised in paragraph 63) and, where relevant, will consider these further as we develop the revised collection and new website functionality.

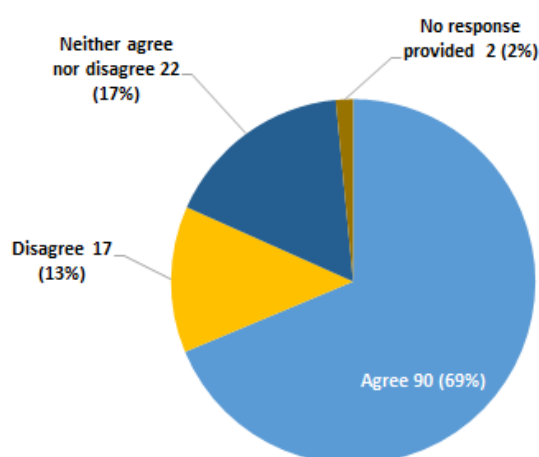
Section 2: Proposals for aggregating student-related data on the successor to Unistats

Approach to data aggregation

72. In the consultation, we proposed continuing to aggregate student-related data – such as NSS and DLHE survey responses – over two years and, where necessary, across subject area where there was insufficient course-level data for the current year to meet publication thresholds.

Q2a: Do you agree that continuing to aggregate data by subject and across two years is the most appropriate approach given the purpose of publishing it?

Figure 13: Responses for 'Data aggregation by subject across two years'



73. There were 129 responses to this question. 90 respondents agreed with our proposal, 22 neither agreed nor disagreed, and 17 disagreed. A large proportion of those who responded to this question provided a rationale for their response (98).

74. 24 respondents who agreed with retaining our current approach provided comments confirming their view that this remained the most appropriate approach. 19 of them explicitly stated either that aggregation over two years was preferable to ensure data was relevant or that three years was too long, as it would reduce the currency of the information and prevent them

from reflecting improvements to NSS scores in a timely way. Conversely, three of those who agreed suggested it might be appropriate to consider alignment with the TEF, which will aggregate across three years.

75. A small number of respondents who agreed with retaining our current approach gave a caveat in their comments around the need to make the way data is aggregated clearer to those using the information. Other comments included suggestions that we should only aggregate at the lowest level of the subject hierarchy; that it would be helpful to show trend data; and that we should allow institutions to suggest course 'clusters', so that aggregation could first be attempted across courses which they had identified as likely to provide representative data. A number of respondents made comments in support of the move to use the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECOS), but a few of these cautioned against the development of a separate aggregation hierarchy for this purpose and urged use of the common aggregation hierarchy which is being developed.

76. Of those who disagreed with retaining our current approach, the most common argument made (by nine respondents) was that it would be preferable to aggregate over three years, as this would be consistent with the proposed approach for the use of the same data in the TEF and taking a different approach was likely to be confusing to users of the information. Seven respondents argued that aggregation across subject area was unlikely to produce meaningful information, with three of these advocating aggregation over three years in preference to this. Three respondents were opposed to any aggregation of data, as they considered this to result in an inaccurate reflection of their provision and, additionally, to be challenging for prospective students to understand.

77. Of those who neither agreed nor disagreed, 17 provided a rationale for their response. The arguments made echoed those by those who agreed and disagreed, with a few expressing concerns about the limitations of aggregated data, a few supporting the proposed approach of remaining with aggregation over two years, and a few suggesting expansion to three years.

Our response

78. We note the arguments made by those who favour moving to aggregating data over three years, either for reasons of consistency for end users in light of TEF proposals or as being more representative than aggregation across subjects. More respondents, however, argued that continuing to aggregate data over no more than two years was preferable and were opposed to an extension to three years, as it would reduce the currency of the data and prevent them from reflecting improvements in NSS scores. We therefore intend to continue with our current approach, of aggregating over two years and then subject area, but to keep this under review. The TEF is currently at institution level, so the data published in 2017 will not be comparable to the information published at course and subject level on the successor to Unistats, We recognise, however, that we will need to give further consideration to our approach to aggregation of data when the approach to publication of subject-level TEF outcomes has been determined, as it would be potentially confusing for students to display two differing sets of subject-level data.

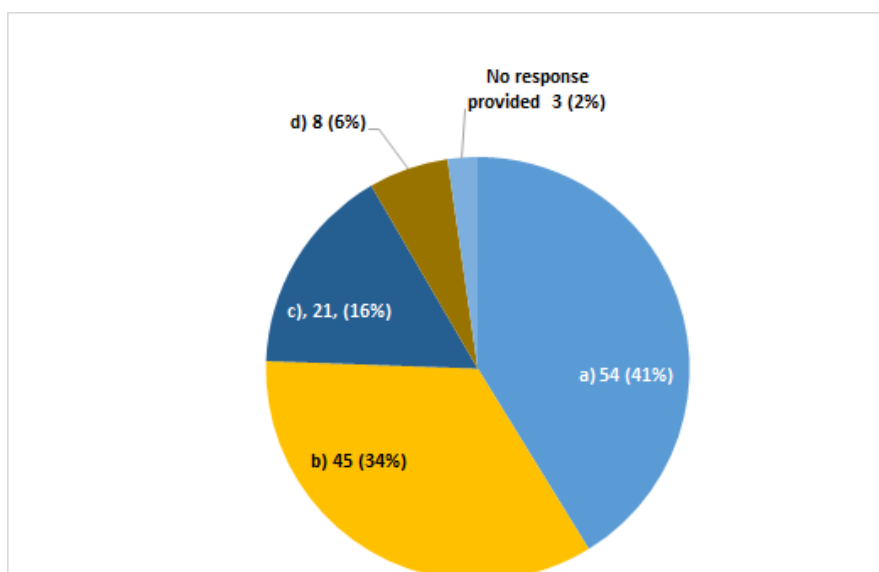
Aggregation of 2017 National Student Survey data

79. Changes to the 2017 NSS will include the addition of new questions, for which we will not have data from previous years to aggregate with, and changes to the wording or placement of other questions in the survey, which will mean that they are not amenable to aggregation.

80. We therefore sought views on the approach we should take to publication of NSS data in 2017 where publication thresholds cannot be met with response data for the current year only. We asked respondents to indicate which of the following options they favoured, or to suggest an alternative approach:

- a. **Not to aggregate any NSS response data over two years where aggregation is necessary to meet thresholds, and only aggregate across subjects.** This would mean we would publish less course-level data, but responses would be aggregated in the same way for all questions for each course. This would be easier to explain to users than a mixture of aggregation approaches. We would also publish less data overall, as responses that could be publishable if aggregated at the highest level of the subject hierarchy and also over two years would not be published.
- b. **To aggregate some response data over two years (where questions are suitable for aggregation and we have last year's data) but not to attempt to aggregate responses to questions which could not be aggregated over two years across subjects.** This would mean that for some courses we were only able to publish responses to a subset of the NSS questions (those which could be aggregated over two years).
- c. **To aggregate questions over two years where questions are suitable for aggregation and we have last year's data, and to attempt to aggregate responses to other questions across subjects.** This would mean that for some courses the data displayed would result from aggregating responses over two years for some questions, and from aggregating across subject areas for other questions. We would publish more data than with other options, but it would be challenging to ensure that users understood they were being presented with a mixture of course-level and subject-level data.

Figure 14: Responses for 'Aggregation of NSS data in 2017'



81. There were 128 responses to this question: 54 respondents favoured option A; 45 respondents favoured option B; 21 respondents favoured option C; and eight respondents selected 'Other'.

82. The most common argument made in support of option A was that it was the most straightforward to explain to students and the least open to misinterpretation. Some respondents who selected this option also argued that it was the only statistically robust option, as changing the ordering of questions within the survey could invalidate aggregation of any of the responses. A few respondents also reiterated the view they had expressed in response to the previous question that any aggregation across years was undesirable.

83. Those who selected option B generally did so because they thought it the best balance of publishing data where we could while still being relatively easy to explain and therefore unlikely to be confusing to students. Many of this group commented that option C would be confusing. A few also repeated views stated in response to the previous question that aggregation across subject areas was undesirable.

84. Many of the respondents who selected options A or B stressed the importance of explaining clearly the method of aggregation and any omissions or inconsistencies as a result of the survey changes to users of the data.

85. Respondents who selected option C did so either because they thought publishing as much data as possible met students' needs better or because they had noted the argument about an absence of data being viewed negatively.

86. Suggestions made by the eight respondents who selected 'Other' included:

- aggregating data over three years for those questions amenable to aggregation
- where there is not enough data to meet thresholds at course level, using institutional-level benchmarked data.

87. A number did not suggest an alternative, and the Association of Colleges commented that it could not select a preferred option unless it had seen the impact of each of these on the amount of publishable data for colleges.

Our response

88. Given there were a comparable number of respondents who favoured options A and B, and noting the arguments made for their preferences, we propose to do the following:

- a. Once we have determined which questions will be amenable to aggregation, to model the impact of options A and B on the amount of publishable data.
- b. To work with prospective students to test their preference in terms of approach, and to test whether the presentation of a subset of aggregated questions is easily understood.

We will then seek advice from the Higher Education Public Information Steering Group (HEPISG) on which model to adopt.

Section 3: Update on the investigation of possible approaches to presenting survey data on the successor to the Unistats website.

89. In section 3 of the consultation document, we updated the sector on our work to investigate different ways of presenting survey data. The aim of this work is to prevent prospective students from taking into account variations in outcomes which are not statistically significant, when making decisions about courses.

90. Specifically, we have been testing:

- display of confidence intervals around data values
- indication of a score's position relative to a benchmarked value (above or below benchmark, or typical)
- display of distribution of responses to each NSS question.

91. We summarised our findings to date, indicated our intention to undertake further testing in this area, and invited comments on the work we had been carrying out on data presentation.

Q3: Do you have any comments on the approaches we are exploring for presenting survey data, for example the use of benchmarking?

92. We received 104 responses to this question. 62 of these explicitly supported the introduction of benchmarking, with only seven opposing its use. Many respondents who supported benchmarks emphasised the need to ensure both that these are clearly explained to users of the data and that the benchmarking methodology is appropriate and takes account of differences, particularly between FECs and HEIs. A few respondents specifically requested that benchmarking took account of location, and seven encouraged alignment with the TEF. Five of those who supported the use of benchmarking also recommended displaying percentage values in addition to this.

93. Three respondents suggested further testing of presentation of confidence intervals, but many more considered the use of confidence intervals to be inappropriate for the student audience. 29 respondents were supportive of displaying sample sizes, with a small number suggesting we could flag results where sample sizes or response rates were particularly low. Respondents had mixed views on showing the distribution of responses for NSS questions, with 12 commenting that they thought this would be helpful, but four considering it to be unhelpful or potentially confusing to students.

94. Other suggestions made included to use a score based on the mean rather than the

Our response

95. As indicated in the consultation document, we intend to carry out further testing of visual representations with students and advisers. Consultation responses indicate strong support for benchmarking, so we will focus on the development and implementation of a benchmarking approach consistent with that used for the TEF and testing of representations of this. We will also continue to investigate what additional data it would be helpful to display in conjunction with position relative to a benchmark (for example, sample sizes) and how we explain benchmarking to users of the data.