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Methodological Review of the Student
Income and Expenditure Survey

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Executive Summary

The Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES) is the most detailed, comprehensive and authoritative assessment undertaken of the income and expenditure of students in Higher Education (HE) in England and Wales. The SIES series has developed over time, since it was first undertaken in the mid 1980s. The most recent waves (2004/05 and 2007/08) have employed a more complex and robust sampling methodology, broadened eligibility to include Open University students, provided alternative options for diary completion, and offered incentives to maximise response rates.

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned a review of the methods used for the last two SIESs and the feasibility of alternative approaches. The review sought to draw on current thinking, knowledge and experience of relevant surveys of students and finance in the UK and beyond; and to make recommendations for the next planned round of SIES (expected in 2011/12). It specifically focused on: sampling and contacting students; response rates; data collection (with particular attention paid to hard-to-reach groups); the mechanism for data linking; and likely implications of any methodological changes on the ability to measure trends over time.

This report summarises the issues raised, the options considered, and the final methodological conclusions that were reached. These conclusions are based on a combination of consultation with stakeholders and research teams involved in relevant surveys, desk research around existing surveys both within and outside of the UK and relevant methodological literature, consultation with staff in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education Colleges (FECs) involved in SIES 2007/08, additional analysis of the SIES 2007/08 data, and a series of meetings with BIS.

Recommended approaches

Sampling

We recommend two approaches to sampling both of which involve a sample design where students are selected in two stages (institutions and then students within institutions) and involve an opt-out rather than opt-in approach (representing a change from the SIES 2007/08 approach). The costs of these sampling options are similar. The options are:

- The survey organisation selecting students from anonymised sets of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Individualised Learner Record (ILR) records, institutions then administering an email opt-out to the selected sample and passing on contact details of those who do not opt out. This approach would need a different sampling approach for first year HEI students and Open University (OU) students. This is our preferred option as it would allow oversampling of sub-groups, is easier to correct for non-response bias, and reduces the burden on institutions.
- Asking institutions to randomly select students using a simple specification provided by the survey organisation, then administering an email opt-out and passing on contact details of those who do not opt-out.

Other approaches explored include: retaining an opt-in approach, identifying students from large scale population surveys, sampling via UCAS records, increasing or reducing the number of institutions in the survey (increasing or decreasing clustering), reducing the overall student sample size, extending the sample to cover a different definition of part-time, and moving to an annual survey series.

We also recommend maintaining the same sample size – both the number of institutions involved (53 English HEIs, 19 English FEIs and 10 Welsh HEIs) and the total number of students (approx 3,500). This will retain statistical precision and allow for sub-group analysis. However, eligibility of part-time students can be extended to include those below 0.5fte within this student total.

Survey methodology

We recommend three approaches to data collection:

- A 60-minute face-to-face interview plus a seven-day spending diary (the SIES 2007/08 approach). This is our preferred approach as it remains the best way of collecting the maximum amount of data and maintains data continuity.
- A 60-minute face-to-face interview with no diary, but with a few additional questions in the interview to capture smaller elements of expenditure. This is an alternative approach with a modest cost saving of approximately 20 per cent but at the expense of less detailed data collected on expenditure.
- A mixed mode approach using a combination of a 30-minute online survey and a follow-up 30-minute telephone survey for initial non-respondents or for particular groups of students. This approach will have more aggregated estimates of income and spending.

This is our preferred low cost approach, allowing for cost savings of between 40 and 50 per cent and a potentially larger sample to be surveyed. However, this comes at the expense of considerably less data collected and a major discontinuity in the data series; which would require a new baseline to be established or a phased introduction with some degree of testing for mode effects through running old and new methods in parallel.

Other approaches explored include: a 60-minute interview with an online diary only, a shorter face-to-face interview (either with or without a diary), an online only survey, and a move towards using respondent estimates (rather than collecting detailed current spending patterns).

Maximising participation

We recommend a variety of approaches to encourage institution buy-in and student response.

For students:

- Individual financial incentives (for long face-to-face interview and diary survey method)

- More effective communication and promotion nationally and within institutions
- Customised advance letter before the initial survey approach to raise the relevance and profile of the survey
- Varied and numerous reminders (these can be targeted and customised)
- Providing support (helpline, website etc. this will be particularly important with an online/telephone survey approach).

For institutions:

- High level initial contact with institutions by a senior member of BIS
- Minimised administrative burden on institutions (moving from opt-in to opt-out)
- Personal support by the research team (and financial support where relevant)
- More relevant and accessible reporting (user-friendly results).

1. Introduction

This report sets out our thinking on the methodological options open for the next and subsequent rounds of SIES, and provides our views of the optimum design options, which are fit-for-purpose and robust, while being cost effective. The conclusions are based on a combination of consultation with stakeholders and research teams involved in relevant surveys (listed in Appendix B), desk research around existing surveys both within and outside of the UK (see Appendix C), consultation with staff in nine institutions (HEIs and FECs) who were involved in SIES 2007/08 (see Appendix D for selected feedback on experience of participating in SIES and using SIES outputs), and consultations with the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS).

1.1 Background to SIES

The Student Income and Expenditure Survey (SIES) provides an authoritative and objective report on the financial circumstances of higher education students in England and Wales. The survey covers a representative sample of student support eligible students and the data collected includes information on income, expenditure, debt and experience of financial hardship. It also examines how finances affect students' experience of higher education. Information from the SIES is used by BIS to provide an evidence base for their policy making on student support and to measure and evaluate the impact of changes that are made to the student support system.

The UK Government has undertaken these surveys at regular intervals since the 1980s. In recent times, SIES has been undertaken every three to four years with the last survey carried out in 2007/08. The latest survey, SIES 2007/08, covered almost 3,500 full-time and part-time students in higher education domiciled and studying in England and Wales across 80 institutions. The survey was conducted using face-to-face interviews and expenditure diaries.

Over time the survey methodology has had to adapt to a range of factors. In particular, the survey series has traditionally used random probability sampling, but issues of student confidentiality and data protection resulted in a combination of random and quota sampling being used for the 1998/99 survey and a new (random sample) methodology adopted for the two most recent surveys in 2004/05 and 2007/08. The survey has also suffered, like most surveys of individuals, with falling response rates.

In preparation for the next planned SIES (expected to run in 2011/12), BIS wish to review various aspects of the sampling strategy and methodology, which has been unchanged for the past two waves of the survey in 2004/05 and 2007/08.

This review is timely. The last external review of the SIES methods (prior to the 2004/05 survey) by the National Statistics Methodology Advisory Committee recommended the continued use of probability sampling (over quota sampling) and face-to-face interviewing. Since then, there have been additional developments in survey technology and experience (most notably in Scotland) of different methods; and a number of potential areas to be reviewed were highlighted in the 2007/08 survey report.

1.2 Aim of review

The review has four key areas.

1. Sampling and contacting students

In the 2007/08 survey a number of institutions were selected (selected randomly, but with probability roughly proportional to their size, and also stratified by region) these institutions then randomly sampled a set number of their full and part-time students. Students were selected by their institutions from their databases and, because consent for names to be passed to research organisations was at the time not routinely collected by institutions, selected students were sent a postal 'opt-in questionnaire' by the institution. Students then returned completed questionnaires direct to the research team, essentially opting in to the survey and providing their contact details for this specific use (the sample for the interview stage was then drawn from these returned questionnaires). Although previously workable, this postal opt-in approach achieved comparatively low response rates; and so a key aim of the review was to reconsider whether this was still optimal.

In addition the review addressed the following sampling issues:

- Whether a two-stage sampling methodology (institution then student) is still the best method for identifying students.
- Whether there is potential for institutions to administer an opt-out, rather than an opt-in procedure when sampling students – a procedure which has been established by National Student Survey.
- Whether there are alternative methods to sampling from student records – as this is heavily dependent on the quality and accuracy of the contact information, and requires a relatively high degree of input from institutions.
- How alternative information can be collected and/or used to strengthen the weighting process.
- What are the implications of extending coverage of hard-to-reach groups, in particular part-time students? The current SIES sampling strategy only considers part-time students if they study at 50 per cent intensity and above.

These questions are addressed in Chapter 2.

2. Data collection (including difficult to reach groups)

In the 2007/08 survey, data was collected through an hour long face-to-face interview. This was supplemented by a seven-day spending diary which provided estimates for selected smaller expenditure items. The diary could be completed on paper, which was then collected by the interviewer, or students could choose to complete the diary online. This follows the method of established population surveys of income and expenditure (e.g. Family Resources Survey); however, there have been a number of advances in survey technology in recent years. A key aim of the review was therefore to consider other options

for the mode of the survey and the expenditure diary to explore whether the current approach is still optimal (as robust and cost-effective as possible), and the most effective way of reaching all students including hard-to-reach groups.

In addition the review addressed the following data collection issues:

- What modes are used on other student surveys, both within the UK and internationally?
- How different approaches might impact on the coverage and response rates of difficult-to-reach groups, particularly part-time students, and whether different groups would benefit from different approaches?
- How a change in approach might impact on comparability with previous surveys?
- Which question approaches are most appropriate/robust when asking about income and expenditure – retrospective data, prospective data or the use of summary questions?

These questions are addressed in Chapter 3.

3. Improving the response rate

In the 2007/08 survey, students had a small up-front (unconditional) incentive at the opt-in stage, and this was coupled with a larger incentive on completion of the interview and diary. They were also provided with information about the survey at opt-in, before any interviewer approach (via an advance letter), and during the interview stage (a helpline number and support website). The participating HEIs and FECs between them generated a total of 22,465 students for the opt-in process. A total of 6,656 returns were received directly by the researchers (30 per cent of the issued total, a decline from 45 per cent in 2004/05); and 5,326 of these consented to be contacted by the researchers. Overall this comprised 24 per cent of the original sample contacted by their institution, lower than in 2004/05 (when 35 per cent of despatched forms resulted in a consenting student). Falling response rates are an industry-wide problem, and therefore a key aim of the review was to consider if alternative methods could be used to improve response rates.

In addition the review specifically addressed the following issues around maximising responses:

- What impact will other potential sampling and contact approaches have on the level of potential response (with a particularly large differential between opt-in and opt-out approaches)?
- Prior to the selection stage, what initial work within institutions might be undertaken to improve response?
- What is the role of incentives in increasing response?

These questions are addressed in Chapter 4.

4. Data linkage

In theory, SIES data on individual students could be linked to other data held by organisations such as HESA and the Student Loans Company (SLC). Such an approach would potentially allow for the data on student debt and attitudes to student finance collected through SIES to be linked to degree outcomes (from HESA), actual Student Loan debt and post-higher education income (from the SLC). In the 2007/08 SIES, students were asked for permission to link their answers to the National Pupil Database, to information about higher education courses and qualification results, and information about applications for financial support. This permission was sought in a question at the end of the face-to-face interview and approximately 90 per cent gave consent for data linking. There are increasing pressures in social research to make greater use of administrative data to provide more accurate data, increase the efficiency of surveys and reduce the burden on individuals, yet data linkage remains a challenging issue particularly in gaining informed consent. Another aim of the review was therefore to explore when and how consent can be asked and the implications of different approaches for the consent rate.

This issue is addressed in Chapter 3.

Cutting across all these areas of investigation is the ability to compare results with previous SIES studies. A key output from the planned survey in 2011/12 will be a comparison with previous years to show the impact of any changes to tuition fee levels and the associated student support package over time. It is therefore important that in considering any changes to the current methodology, that the implications for the comparability with previous SIES data are clear, and actions that can be taken to quantify the scale of (or indeed minimise) the impact on the time-series are explored. The implications of change for time-series analysis are discussed in each of the chapters, alongside the options investigated.

1.3 Summary of methods and approaches

In order to address these key questions and related issues a series of qualitative approaches were used to collect evidence of alternative methodologies and to gain feedback from relevant experts.

1.3.1 Consultation interviews

We consulted with a range of methodological experts, survey funders/commissioners and research teams involved in relevant surveys to examine the methodological approaches taken in related work and to explore how these worked in practice. It provided an opportunity to understand why particular methods were chosen, and what other options may have been considered and discarded as less than optimal or infeasible. These consultation interviews were conducted early on in the review process to seek the views of interviewees on our early thoughts on potential changes to the SIES methodology, and extrapolate from their learning on their surveys for what this means for any future SIES methodology. The list of interviewees (see Appendix B) was agreed in consultation with BIS and included representatives from: the Department for Education, the Scottish Government, the Welsh Assembly, the National Union of Students (NUS), the Higher

Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Scottish Centre for Employment Research at Strathclyde University, Birkbeck University, Open University, Ipsos MORI, and GfK NOP.

1.3.2 Round-up of surveys

A brief review of similar surveys conducted in the UK and in other countries was undertaken to explore the approaches used and the challenges encountered to see what could be learned from their experiences. The surveys included surveys of students, those collecting detailed income and expenditure information from individuals, and/or exploring attitudes to debt. Survey documentation including technical reports was obtained for 19 surveys (see Appendix C). The surveys reviewed included: Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey; National Student Survey; NUS Student Experience Survey; OFFA Survey of Bursaries and Scholarships; Students' Income, Expenditure and Debt in Scotland; Family Resources Survey; Learner Destinations Survey, EuroStudent Project, and Cooperative Institutional Research Programme Surveys.

1.3.3 Short-listing meeting

After the desk review and initial consultation with stakeholders a long list of alternative approaches to sampling, contacting students and data collection was developed. This formed the basis of a meeting between the research team, BIS and other stakeholders to agree on a narrower shortlist of approaches to take forward for further exploration with institutions. The discussion ensured that the shortlist was informed by BIS priorities and concerns, and that reasons for not taking forward some of the approaches were fully explored.

1.3.4 Analysis of SIES

A number of issues and subsequent questions were raised in the short-listing meeting which required the research team to revisit the SIES 2007/08 data to undertake additional analysis. This included exploring the profile of FE respondents, exploring possible differences in quality of response between paper and online diaries, and exploring the pros and cons of sampling from fewer institutions.

1.3.5 Consultation with institutions

The final stage of the review involved consultation with a range of institutions (HEIs and FECs) to gather staff feedback on the feasibility and acceptability of the short-listed options and also the perceived benefits and challenges posed by each option. The consultation focused on issues around securing access to student contact details, ability to identify sub-groups of students and provide data on these, ability to select a sample, efforts to maximise response rates, resources required to support the survey and timing of surveys. Institution representatives were also asked about experiences of participating in SIES and the use made of SIES outputs (see Appendix D). In total, feedback was gathered from staff in nine institutions representing the range of institutions across the sector (including two FECs with HE students). All of these institutions had participated in SIES 2007/08. Individuals consulted included representatives of academic registry, student administration or student services, and many of these had been directly involved in the sampling and/or administration of the opt-in survey for SIES 2007/08. Most discussions were face-to-face and involved several members of staff.

1.4 Reporting findings

This final report documents all approaches considered, but presents detailed evidence of the pros and cons of a number of short-listed approaches – including the extent of any piloting, the practicalities of measuring the impact of any changes and general cost and time implications. This will allow BIS to prepare for the next SIES (expected in 2011/12) and decide on the sampling strategy and methodology that will ensure it is fit for purpose, has a robust methodology and is as cost-effective as possible.

2. Sampling Institutions and Students

2.1 Overview of issues raised

BIS asked us to consider the following sampling issues:

- Whether a two stage-sampling methodology is still the best method for identifying students.
- Whether there is potential for institutions to administer an opt-out, rather than an opt-in procedure when sampling students.
- Whether there are alternative methods to sampling from student records.
- How alternative information can be collected and/or used to strengthen the weighting process.

In section 2.2, we discuss the sampling options for the survey that have come out from the consultation, and make a recommendation on what we view to be the best two approaches. In essence, we are recommending retaining the two-stage sampling methodology, but moving from an opt-in to an opt-out approach in order to improve the response rates and representativeness of the sample. The impact on costs (in real terms) is not large.

In section 2.3, we expand on a number of other sampling issues, in particular total sample size and the degree of clustering: we make a recommendation on sample size and the distribution across institutions. We also discuss the feasibility and implications of changing the definition of eligibility for the survey to include part-time students who spend less than 50 per cent of their time studying. We give some thought to suggestions around the advantages of increasing the regularity of SIES. Lastly, we discuss how one might take account of any changes in the sample design, in comparison to the approach taken in previous waves of SIES.

2.2 Sampling options

A starting point of our review about potential sampling methods was that any recommended sample design must be based on a random probability sample, given that SIES is the data source from which key government estimates on student income, expenditure and debt are calculated and, thus, must stand up to close scrutiny¹. During our review, we identified a number of *potential* random probability sampling approaches for

¹ The alternative would be a quota sample whereby fixed numbers of students are recruited to the survey from some convenient source, with the aim of filling 'quotas'. Quota samples are rarely used for key government surveys because of the strong possibility of self-selection bias.

SIES. However, our recommendation is that BIS decide between one of two approaches, both of which involve a sample design where students are selected in two stages (institutions and then students within institutions). In brief, these are:

- **Option 1:** A sample design similar to that used in SIES 2007/08 but with use made of the Fair Processing Notice to allow a move from an opt-in process to an opt-out.
- **Option 2:** A sample design where students are selected in two stages (institutions and then students within institutions) but where the sampling for year 2 students and above is done via HESA and ILR records. A different sampling method would be required for first year students, at least for HEI students.

Before we go on to describe these two designs (how they would work; what their advantages are), we firstly describe the other options/alternative designs considered and explain our rationale for choosing *not* to recommend these:

- **Retaining an opt-in approach:** In previous waves of SIES, this approach was used because data protection issues did not allow for an opt-out approach. Although it was deemed to be the best possible approach in the circumstances, opt-in designs would rarely if ever be recommended where an opt-out approach is an option. In SIES, the opt-in design relied on institutions to administer a short survey following a set of instructions supplied by the research team. Institutional feedback suggests that the instructions were clear but there were some indications that errors may have occurred or that institutions were not able to comply fully (e.g. mailing without address labels, only undertaking one mail-out, mailing later than anticipated). More importantly, this approach resulted in a low aggregate response rate (see below). Moreover, students on part-time courses were less likely than others to opt-in, skewing the achieved sample towards full-time students and resulting in an even lower response rate among part-timers. Men were also less likely to opt in than women. If our review had shown the opt-out approach to be unworkable, we may have recommended that the opt-in method be retained. As it is, given the problems with response rates and representativeness, there are no strong reasons to recommend continuing with the opt-in over the opt-out approach. Although opt-in is a tried and tested method that institutions were willing to work with, their comments suggest that administering the opt-in survey was considered to be somewhat burdensome for them and their students. They had a preference for an approach that would require less of their time and resource (see Appendix D). Moreover, the National Student Survey has shown that institutions accept an opt-out approach when the survey in question is covered with the Fair Processing Notice.

Although this change in approach will lead to some level of incomparability over time (an issue further discussed in section 2.4.4), the advantages of switching to a more robust approach that will generate higher response rates outweigh any arguments to retain the status quo.

- **Identifying a sample of students from large-scale surveys:** We considered a sample design which identified eligible students via a large-scale random probability general population survey, selecting students via their homes rather than via their institutions. This approach had a number of problems that made it either infeasible,

or at least feasible but much more expensive than other sampling methods. The main issues are:

- To identify a large sample of students via another survey, the starting survey would need to be extremely large. Given that around two per cent of adults are HE students at any one time, to generate a survey of 2,000 students would need a starting survey of at least 50,000 households. To our knowledge only ONS's Annual Population Survey is large enough, so if this was not available a number of other smaller surveys would need to be aggregated².
- General household surveys do not cover students in halls of residence. So, even if the screening approach was feasible, some means of including this group would be needed. One option might be to ask parents of students in halls to give their contact details³. However, this would result in a low aggregate response rate among students in halls of residence, given that experience has shown that people (in this case the parents) are generally reticent to pass on contact details of others to survey organisations. Direct sampling of halls of residence would be complex and expensive because it appears that there is no centrally available list⁴. The work involved in negotiating access to students within halls of residence with each 'gatekeeper' (either the selected institution or individuals within it) is likely to be considerable. We are not aware of other surveys which have taken this approach and are therefore unable to estimate the likely aggregate response rate (taking into account both the level of agreement to allow access to the halls and the response rate among contacted students).
- The net response rate to a follow-up survey would probably be fairly low (where by 'net' we mean the response rate to the starting survey multiplied by the response rate to the SIES follow-up).
- The students identified from the starting survey would be distributed all over the country. This would significantly increase the cost of a face-to-face interview relative to the current SIES model. (Note that this would not be an issue if the survey mode for SIES was to change.)

² There is also an issue about how the sample would be accrued over time. Most large surveys are continuous so for a SIES with fieldwork in the spring of any year students would need to be identified for a long period before that. Unless, that is, the starting sample is *extremely* large. Generating a large enough sample of first year students might be particularly challenging because they can only be identified within a relatively narrow window of time.

³ The Labour Force Survey collects data on students in halls of residence from parents, but does not attempt to contact the students directly.

⁴ ONS construct a list of institutions (including halls of residence) each census year but it is unclear whether it could be made available for sampling.

There are modifications of this general approach, such as supplementing a main sample drawn in this way with a fresh sample drawn from small geographical areas where it is known there are high numbers of students. But overall we felt that this approach was not worth pursuing.

- **Identifying a sample of students from other student databases:** We investigated whether there were any databases which would provide (either alone or in combination) a representative sample of HE students, but found none that would provide the robust sample design suggested in our recommended options below. The databases we looked into included UCAS records and Student Loans Records. While UCAS records would provide a sample of first year *applicants*, there are a number of reasons against using them to provide a representative sample of first year *students*, which are further discussed (section 2.3 below). The fact that Student Loans Records do not, by definition, include students who opt not to take up any student support makes it an unsuitable sampling frame for a survey about student income and expenditure.

So, turning to the two preferred options that we do recommend, we discuss first an option which, in large part, mirrors the approach taken in previous waves of SIES.

2.3 Recommended options

Recommended Option 1: The SIES 2007/08 design but with opt-out rather than opt-in

One of the main problems with SIES sampling in the last two rounds was that, in order to comply with data protection legislation, students had to be selected by the institutions in the study and asked (by the institution) to provide their contact details to the survey organisation if they were happy to be approached about the survey. This was achieved by institutions mailing a short, self-completion questionnaire to the selected students together with a £3 incentive, followed by a reminder mailing. Students were encouraged to return the questionnaire, which they could do anonymously if they wished to. But the questionnaire asked for contact details at the end from those willing to provide them. Inevitably the response rate to this 'opt-in' process was not high (30 per cent returning a questionnaire in SIES 2007/08 and 24 per cent also giving consent to be contacted) and the potential for non-response bias was relatively high. And, irrespective of bias, the process was expensive and felt by some institutions to be burdensome because of the numbers of questionnaires that had to be sent to generate a large enough sample size for the main survey⁵.

⁵ Despite this, most institutions that we consulted reported that they were able to administer the opt-in process using the instructions, tools and materials provided by the research team with no real difficulties. However, there was suggestion by *some* that the time and resources involved in the opt-in approach might lead them to be reluctant to be involved again.

The current version of the HESA Fair Processing Notice (which came into effect in autumn 2009 and covers HEIs) covers surveys around income and expenditure so would appear to cover SIES:

'Your contact details may be passed to survey contractors to carry out the National Student Survey and surveys of student finances, on behalf of the education organisations listed below. These organisations and their contractors will use your details only for that purpose, and will then delete them'

Extract from HESA Student Collection Notice which HESA require all HEIs to provide to their students

This means that it is possible to move from the opt-in process described above to the opt-out process. This is an approach that has been used for some time for the National Student Survey (NSS) for which around one per cent of students opt out⁶.

The Information Authority has its own Fair Processing Notice which applies to FECs which, more generically than HESA's Notice, covers a wide range of research. Again, it is written to cater for students opting out, rather than opting in, of being approached for research purposes.

'The Skills Funding Agency processes learner data on behalf of the YPLA [Young People's Learning Agency]. The information you provide may be shared with other organisations for purposes of administration, the provision of career and other guidance and statistical and research purposes, relating to education or training. Other organisations include the Department for Education, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, Local Authorities, Connexions, Higher Education Statistics Agency, Higher Education Funding Council for England, educational institutions and organisations performing research and statistical work on behalf of the Skills Funding Agency, the YPLA, or partners of those organisations.'

Extract from the ILR Data Protection Statement

Students have the option of opting out, in a blanket fashion, of their name being put forward for any research. Our understanding is that this is done as part of the enrolment procedure and those opting out are marked as such on the ILR (and presumably noted by their institution). We understand that the opt-out rate is lower than 10 per cent, and we have had one steer that the rate is generally lower among HE students than among FE students who tend to be subject to a greater number of surveys.

Although our review of the documents and consultation with stakeholders and institutions make us confident of the workability of the opt-out approach, that is not to say that there is not a certain amount of groundwork to be done prior to the next planned wave of SIES to make sure that the necessary data protection procedures are in place in all (selected) institutions. Currently, it would seem that not all HEIs have adopted HESA's recommended wording (e.g. which includes a specific reference to surveys of student finance). There is

⁶ All the institutions consulted take part in the National Student Survey (NSS) without any difficulties or concerns.

no consistent approach in either wording of data protection or Fair Processing Notices, how this is presented to students (on enrolment/registration form, on institution website, in student hand-book, or forms part of the 'student contract'), and how individuals can opt out. As such, not all HEIs are confident that SIES would be covered by their *existing* processes, although they were amenable to making changes that would clarify the situation⁷. BIS may therefore need to contact institutions to request that they ensure (and confirm) that SIES is adequately covered by any Fair Processing Notice⁸. Any changes to these notices would need to take place from May 2011 onwards, to be in place in time for the next planned wave of SIES (expected to run in 2011/12).

At the same time, some checks might be necessary as to whether the updated Fair Processing Notice applied to those students starting their studies before autumn 2009. (Roughly speaking, for a survey taking place in 2011/12, this would apply to students in the fourth or higher year of their studies; based on SIES 2007/08 figures, this was approximately 10 per cent of responding students.) Our consultation with institutions indicates that data protection and/or Fair Processing Notices are given to students each year through the registration/re-registration process, so all students across all years and courses would be covered by the same conditions, but this would need checking with all selected institutions.

Although it could be argued that these notices are sufficient for institutions to pass on the contact details of their students without further notification, we do not feel that we have sufficiently firm evidence that institutions are currently administering this consistently and reliably, and in a way that genuinely makes students aware that they have agreed to have their contact details given out⁹. Because of this, in addition to the Fair Processing Notice, it is our view that an additional opt-out stage should be made a requirement before institutions can pass on any contact details to the survey organisation. This would involve institutions contacting the sampled students and providing them with the opportunity of opting out. We suggest that the survey organisation supports the institutions during this process, providing them with the necessary text for the letter and, potentially, offering to cover the administrative costs involved.

This approach would not apply to Open University students, for whom the existing approach (direct provision by the Open University) would be retained.

⁷ Some raise ethical and practical concerns about operating an opt-out for SIES. However, these appear to centre around not wanting to adversely affect responses to other statutory surveys such as NSS and DLHE. Certainly, they have used the opt-out approach for these other surveys. As such, these issues should be surmountable.

⁸ It would be useful to raise the profile of SIES – among institutions and students – so that it is regarded to be as important as NSS. Institutions are expected to participate in NSS (as part of the Quality Assurance Framework for HE), but they also make use of their own NSS results in their work to monitor, benchmark and improve the student experience. Ensuring staff in institutions are aware of the national importance of SIES, and exploring with them the potential for making greater use of SIES results (in aggregate or some form of localised results) may help in this regard (see section 4.1 and Appendix D).

⁹ The amount of detailed personal information collected in SIES means that it is essential that students have been given the requisite information and opportunity to opt out of having their contact details passed to the survey organisation.

So, in essence the Option 1 approach would involve:

- Asking institutions to randomly select students using a specification provided by the survey organisation.
- Email (or, if institutions prefer, write¹⁰) to students (again using a standard letter provided by BIS and the survey organisation) explaining the survey and providing them with the opportunity of opting out of having their contact details passed to the survey organisation.
- Recording which students opt out during a given (probably two week) period (assumed to be only a very small percentage of those contacted).
- Passing on contact details of those who had not opted out to the survey organisation.

It has three very considerable advantages over the opt-in approach:

- The low opt-out rate means that there would be very little cause for concern about bias in the starting sample for the main survey.
- The burden on institutions is potentially less – because they have only to send an opt-out email (or letter) rather than send questionnaires and reminders.
- The lead-time required will be much shorter and so institutions may be able to administer this later in the autumn term, avoiding busy periods. The institutions we consulted supported the idea of being able to do the sampling and opt-out in November/December, not only to avoid busy periods but to allow for greater confidence in the student population (i.e. drop-outs could be excluded).

These benefits, along with the national importance of the survey, are all aspects that need to be explained to institutions selected to take part in any future SIES, in order to ensure buy-in and reduce any possible concerns about operating an opt-out approach.

For costs, the impact (in real terms) is not large. Survey costs associated with the opt-in questionnaire stage and unconditional incentives are removed, although they are offset by increased fieldwork costs. These arise because an opt-out sample will tend to have a lower response than an opt-in sample, requiring a larger issued sample for the same number of achieved interviews¹¹.

¹⁰ Most institutions we spoke to have a preference for email, as this is their main means of communication with students. However, institutions may want to send letters to students known to be less likely to be in regular email contact (e.g. more part-time students).

¹¹ In SIES 2007/08, the response rate to the first stage (opt-in) was 30 per cent, and the response to the second stage (main interview survey) was 72 per cent; with an opt-out approach we have assumed a response rate to the first stage (opt-out) of 95 per cent and a response rate to the second stage (main interview survey) of 60 per cent.

Note that we assume for this Option that the sampling would be done by the institutions, according to a given (relatively simple) specification, as in previous waves of SIES¹².

Feedback from the institutions suggests that they are capable of carrying out the sample selection, as they were able to do under the old opt-in methodology with no real stated difficulties¹³. An alternative option would be for the survey organisation to do the sampling, using an anonymised set of records sent from each institution (and there was a general preference by institutions for this), although we do not advocate this approach. Although this would reduce the burden on the institutions and allow the survey organisation to use more complex procedures for selecting students (e.g. stratifying for a greater number of variables; over sampling particular groups, assuming the institutions could provide the requisite information), if we were to go down an approach whereby the survey organisation did the sampling, we think that Recommendation Option 2 (discussed next) would be a better and more efficient approach¹⁴.

Recommended Option 2: Using HESA and ILR records to select second year and above students

An inherent problem with the current approach to sampling (whether it be opt-in or opt-out) is that very little information is known about the characteristics of the students selected. Furthermore, because the sampling has to be carried out on behalf of the survey organisation by the institutions, the sampling instructions need to be relatively simple. In the past only stratification by full-time/part-time and country of domicile has been deemed feasible¹⁵. The desire for larger than proportionate samples for some groups, such as black and minority ethnic (BME) students, was intended to be met by over-sampling from those opting in¹⁶. In practice, lower than hoped for opt-in rates meant that almost all those who opted in were selected, and there was no room for over-sampling some groups relative to others.

This situation could be improved if students were selected from their HESA (HEI students) or ILR (FEC students) records rather than 'at random' within institutions. The process might be that students are selected from anonymised sets of both HESA and ILR¹⁷ records, but with stratification on a wide range of recorded characteristics. This would allow for over-sampling of a broad range of sub-groups. Those selected would then be

¹² This method would not allow for complex sampling of sub-groups.

¹³ The degree to which they were accurately able to do this is questionable given the numbers of ineligibles responding to the opt-in survey.

¹⁴ Even if the institutions could provide all the same information as is on HESA and the ILR, we assume that the data would be provided in different formats from different places, making the whole procedure much messier than that suggested in Option 2.

¹⁵ Plus accounting for 4+ medics courses.

¹⁶ The opt-in questionnaire included questions that allowed sub-groups of interest to be identified.

¹⁷ The ILR contains a flag which shows if a student has opted out; the sample would be drawn from all those not opting out at variable L27.

approached by the institution¹⁸ for opt-out, the opt-out text making clear that what students are being asked to contribute to is a study where they (a) will be approached for the survey and (b) will have their HESA/ILR records passed to the survey contractor. Institutions should be able to easily identify a student using their unique identifier (HUSID number in the HESA dataset, and ULN in the ILR dataset), as these identifiers are also used in institutions' own data record systems.

A related advantage of this approach is that by selecting students with known characteristics, far more sophisticated non-response weighting could be done at the analysis stage to correct for any observed non-response biases in the survey. In previous SIESs the survey results have been weighted so as to match HESA distributions on a small number of characteristics, but because different datasets are being compared there are limitations. As an example, in SIES 2007/08 the survey was weighted so as to match HESA statistics by full-time/part-time counts. But there was some reason to doubt that those selected as part-time for the survey were equivalent to those recorded on HESA as part-time. So the weighting **may** have introduced bias rather than reducing it. Being able to use a consistent definition of part-time, by using the HESA and ILR records in the sampling and the weighting, would vastly improve matters. In addition, including a sample of part-time students from the <50 per cent full-time group would be relatively straightforward using HESA records.

The main problem with using HESA records, however, is that they would not come on stream quickly enough for first year students to be sampled in this way. HEIs compile a return for HESA at the end of the academic year, with returns on first year students not available until autumn of the following year¹⁹. There is a secondary concern about the currency of the student data (for all year groups) held by HESA. Institutions noted how a number of students change course or mode of study, or drop out altogether. They noted that any given list of students would need to be checked by the institutions, particularly if it was compiled using data from the previous year.

On the latter point, there may be similar issues with the use of ILR records for FEC students. However, the potential to sample first year FEC students via ILR records may be feasible, as FECs are obliged to submit returns about new starters (those enrolled in September and October who, we understand, form the vast majority of starters) in November of that year, with this information publicly available in December.

We are assuming that FEC students would be sampled from the ILR records, and HEI students from HESA records. Although FEC students who are on a course which is affiliated to an HEI appear on HESA records, provided that they are identified as being at

¹⁸ Who have much better contact information than available via HESA or ILR records.

¹⁹ BIS receives student data from HESA in early December in advance of the first statistical release in January. It may be possible to use this advance dataset for sampling, to ensure consistency and avoid duplication of resource and burden. However, the main risk is around the time it takes BIS to convert the data into a format that can be used by the survey contractor. Alternatively it may be possible for HESA to assist in the sample selection which reduces the lead-time required as they know the intricacies of the data and have experience of complex sampling techniques.

an FEC, they can be excluded from the HESA sampling frame. So, within Option 2, all sampling would be via central records, except:

- HEI, and maybe FEC, first year students (who would be sampled via institutions' own record systems, as per Option 1)
- and OU students (who, again, would be sampled as in Option 1).

Having a different sampling approach for first year students is not ideal, as it requires institutions to perform two tasks: (a) a mail-out for all second and subsequent year students based on a list supplied by the contractor (e.g. by HUSID number), and (b) randomly selecting first year students using a random selection tool and performing a mail-out (and providing information about the population of first year students to support any weighting calculations). However, we still believe this is preferable (both in terms of the quality of the sampling and burden on institutions) to asking them to sample all year groups.

An alternative that was suggested to us for full-time (but not part-time) first year students was to select them via UCAS records²⁰. However, this does not appear to be a practical approach. The process would be complex because UCAS would not have a record of the institution that the student was studying at; others may have deferred, not taken up their place, and so on. On the face of it, one option might be to bypass institutions entirely for the survey of full-time first years, and select directly from UCAS. However, we understand that UCAS do not hold up-to-date contact information for students so, without the help of institutions, the response rate to the survey would be compromised (see also section 2.2).

While we think that both Options 1 and 2 are feasible, with the decision between them probably cost-neutral, we would recommend Option 2 over Option 1. This would allow the survey organisation greater control over the selection of the sample, and would reduce the burden on institutions. And being able to do more sophisticated non-weighting is a very great advantage.

2.4 Other sampling issues

In this section, we expand on a number of other sampling issues which we have considered during the review, namely the number of institutions to involve in the survey; the scope and size of the sample; and the regularity of the survey. Lastly, we give some thought to how one might measure the effect of changes in the sampling methodology, in comparison with previous SIES waves.

2.4.1 The number of institutions in the survey

One of the factors that influence the cost of SIES is the number of institutions selected for the survey. In the 2007/08 survey, for instance, 53 English HEIs were included in the survey from a total of 131, and 19 English FECs were included from a total of 252. This

²⁰ This approach was used in FutureTrack.

clustering of the survey within a *relatively* small number of institutions has two advantages: (a) it means that negotiation around samples is not necessary with all institutions so can be handled by a reasonably small survey research team; and (b) the clustering of the sample within institutions means that the final face-to-face interview sample of students is reasonably geographically clustered. This helps to constrain fieldwork costs, because interviewers do not have to travel great distances between interviewees.

However, a legitimate question is whether the survey could be carried out within even fewer institutions than in the previous SIES without a large loss in statistical precision. If so this might help reduce costs. Or, alternatively, whether SIES would benefit from including more institutions so as to reduce the clustering effects on survey estimates.

To assess this we have used the 2007/08 survey data to establish the degree to which the clustering of the survey within institutions affects the standard errors of the survey estimates. Based on this it is then possible to estimate the likely size of standard errors for a survey that is based on different numbers of institutions. The key to the calculation is deriving an estimate of the extent to which SIES survey responses vary between institutions: if this between-institution variance is high then a lot of survey precision would be lost by reducing the number of institutions, and there may be benefits in including more institutions. If, in contrast, SIES survey responses are relatively uniform across institutions (i.e. there is low between-institution variance) then reducing the number of institutions in the survey would not greatly reduce survey precision. The degree of between-institution variance is measured using a statistic 'roh' which equals between-cluster variance as a proportion of total variance.

Once roh is known it is then possible to calculate a crude value for the 'design factor' of survey estimates, where the design factor is the factor by which simple random sample standard errors need to be multiplied because of clustering (or other sample design features such as stratification). The design factor (deft) for clustering is approximated by the formula

$$deft = \sqrt{1 + (m - 1)roh}$$

where m is the average achieved sample size per cluster. (In this instance m is the average number of students per institution interviewed in SIES.)

In practice the 2007/08 data suggests that the between-institution variance (roh) is actually fairly high. The value of roh for the English HEIs is typically about 0.025 (this being the median value of roh across a range of income and expenditure statistics)²¹. This varies somewhat by type of income/expenditure, being particularly high for housing costs – suggesting, as might be expected, that housing costs vary considerably for students of different institutions.

Given that the average number of students in SIES per English HEI is 45, for a value of 0.025 for roh, the deft per statistic is around 1.45. This means that, relative to a simple

²¹ This takes into account the stratification of the institutions in the survey.

random sample of the same size, the standard errors for income and expenditure statistics from SIES are around 1.45 times larger.

Of course, taking a simple random sample of students is not a realistic option so there is no feasible way to avoid a deft of greater than one. The question is whether with fewer or more institutions in the survey a better balance between survey cost and design factors can be established. In the table below we have set out the value of the deft under a number of alternative scenarios for the English HEIs, all of which achieve the same overall sample size of 2,306 (as in 2007/08). These range from reducing the number of HEIs to 30 and increasing the achieved sample size per institution from 45 to 77; to increasing the number of HEIs to 80 and reducing the sample size per institution to 29.

Number of English HEIs	Students per institution	Deft
30	77	1.70
40	58	1.55
50	46	1.46
60	38	1.39
70	33	1.34
80	29	1.30

What the first row of figures in this table imply is that, if the sample size of English HEIs was reduced from the current size of around 50 to, say, 30, then on average the defts for survey estimates would increase from 1.46 to 1.70. This is a very considerable loss in precision – equivalent to the loss in precision associated with a 26 per cent reduction in sample size. Reducing the institution numbers to 40 would be less damaging, but would still be equivalent to a loss of precision associated with an 11 per cent reduction in sample size. And the cost savings associated with using 40 English HEIs rather than 50 would be relatively small²².

Our conclusion is that for a repeat of SIES that has the same target sample size as in 2007/08 the number of HEIs in SIES should not be reduced. If anything there is a stronger case to be made for *increasing* the number of HEIs rather than reducing them. For instance, if the number of English HEIs in the survey was to be increased to 70, then defts would reduce from an average of 1.46 to an average of 1.34. However the fieldwork for the

²² Arguably these calculations should be full-time/part-time (ft/pt) specific because so little analysis is based on these two groups combined, and because within ft/pt group the cluster size is smaller so, for a given roh, the deft is smaller. But the roh for ft students in English HEIs is actually slightly higher than the 'all student' value at around 0.029 rather than 0.025. This higher value of roh almost exactly offsets the lower cluster size, so the defts are the same. As a consequence the arguments about clustering are the same whether one looks at all students or just concentrates on an optimal number of institutions for ft students. The number of institutions needed for part-time students may well be smaller than for full-time students but it is practical to use the same institutions for both samples so the needs of the larger ft sample inevitably drive the decision on the number of institutions.

survey would be slightly less clustered with 70 HEIs rather than 50, and more negotiation with HEIs would be needed so although there would be a gain in precision there would also be a cost increase.

But another way to look at this is that with 70 English HEIs in the survey, the sample size of English HEIs in the survey could potentially be reduced from the 2007/08 level of 2,306 to just 1,760 whilst still maintaining the same 'average' level of precision (because the defts would be lower). This *could* be one means of reducing survey costs (assuming the costs of including 20 extra institutions are more than offset by the reduction in fieldwork costs). There would, however, be some losses to the survey. In particular, with a smaller overall sample size the capacity for sub-group analysis would be reduced. So any decision to cut sample size based on these arguments would need very careful assessment of all the implications.

The arguments for the number of FECs in the survey are very similar to that for HEIs. The 2007/08 sample size of 19 FECs is relatively small (reflecting the fact that less than five per cent of all higher education students are in FECs) and ρ appears to be somewhat larger for FEC students than for HEI students, at around 0.04. (That is, there appears to be greater between-FEC variation than there is between-HEI variance.) But the average sample size of students per FEC is much smaller at 15, giving an 'average' deft of around 1.25. In principle, because this design factor is fairly low a case might be made for slightly reducing the number of FECs (to, say, 15). But the cost savings associated with this would be minimal. Reducing the sample size further to, say, 10 FECs would generate considerably higher design factors without a much greater saving in costs. Increasing the number of FECs is unlikely to prove efficient because the subsequent face-to-face interviews would become less clustered (the FEC sample already being relatively unclustered compared to the HEI sample). On balance, for the current sample size of FEC students, a sample size of around 20 FECs looks to be close to optimal.

2.4.2 The scope and size of the SIES sample

Traditionally, SIES has been restricted to full-time students and part-time students studying for 50 per cent or more of the full-time equivalent course. The question has now been raised as to whether the survey scope could be extended to include all part-time students. We restrict comments here to the implications for sampling and sample size. (In practice, extending the sample coverage in this way would have ramifications for other aspects such as the questionnaire design and optimal mode of data collection, see Chapter 3).

In terms of sampling, we have not identified any reasons why the sampling approach adopted for part-time students in the 50 per cent plus group cannot simply be extended to include all part-time students²³. It would only be a case of changing the sampling definitions and including the <50 per cent as a separate sub-sample. (Given that for trend analysis the 50 per cent+ group will need to be identifiable in the sample, it would not be a case of just requesting a sample of part-time students – three separate samples per

²³ Current government proposals are to extend Student Loan entitlement to those 'studying for at least 25% of their time'.

institution would be needed: full-time; part-time 50 per cent+; part-time <50 per cent.) This might slightly increase the burden on institutions but not to a considerable degree.

A decision will be needed on the overall target sample size for these three groups (both overall and within type of institution). One option would simply be to add a target sample size of <50 per cent part-time students to the existing target sample size of around 3,400. This would, however, increase the costs of the survey.

An alternative approach would be to set a target sample size for the <50 per cent part-time group and then scale down the target sample sizes for the full-time and 50 per cent+ part-time groups so that the overall total stays roughly the same. This would be closer to cost-neutral. As an example the target for the <50 per cent part-time group might be set at 400 and the targets for the other two groups then set at 2,250 for full-time students (down from 2,595 in 2007/08) and 750 for 50 per cent+ part-time students (down from 835 in 2007/08). An allocation along these lines would give sufficient sample size for at least 'all group' analysis of the <50 per cent group, yet only lead to a modest reduction in sample precision for the other two groups. (Each of these two groups would lose 13 per cent of their sample size. The effect of this will be to increase standard errors by a factor of around 1.07).

There is another, larger, question of course around the total sample size for SIES. Our view is that the existing total sample size of around 3,500 is reasonable and that although some reduction could be tolerated this would be at the expense of sub-group analysis. Furthermore, the ability to detect trends over time would be reduced if the sample size was to be heavily cut. Our recommendation is that the size of the total sample be maintained at the 2007/08 level if at all possible.

2.4.3 Regularity of the SIES series

The question was raised during our consultation as to whether the SIES should be conducted more regularly than currently, the most natural change being to an annual survey. The argument is that with a regular time series trends would be more readily identifiable and, because the survey would generate regular statistics, over time it would become a more recognised and used source of data.

The views of institutions were also sought on this, as well as their more general views on the uses of the survey. Some of the institutions consulted felt that more regular SIES would allow for better tracking of changes in the HE landscape and could be helpful for institutional planning (e.g. bursaries and support arrangements) – particularly with any further changes to the funding system; and so they would be willing to be involved in SIES more regularly. Discussions suggest that currently little use is made of SIES within institutions. Making the outputs of the survey more accessible for HEIs (with perhaps short digests/key findings for particular groups of students), and/or making available to institutions their own results or results by institution type (e.g. competitor groups, regional groups or mission groups) would ensure the research is more useful for their planning, would increase buy-in from HEIs (and within HEIs), and enable them to raise the profile of the survey with staff and students (showing students the impact of the survey on them) (see section 4.1).

Moving to an annual survey series would not be uncomplicated. To accommodate it within budget the sample size would need to be much smaller per year and for most sub-group

analysis data would need to be accumulated over a number of years before reporting. So the survey reporting each year would involve a mixture of single year estimates plus rolling averages.

An annual model would also have implications for the involvement of institutions. Some compromise would be needed between the conveniences of returning to the same institutions each year against the problems of over-burdening those institutions. A possible design would be a rotating panel, where, say, institutions are included for three years running but each year one-third of them are 'rotated out' to be replaced with a fresh one-third.

A side-product of an annual survey is that it would potentially allow for students to be re-selected for interview each year, thus giving a longitudinal element to the survey. This was raised by one consultee as the optimal design for SIES since it would allow for changes in student finances to be tracked over their HE career. However, there are practical problems with this design, not least the problem of cumulative non-response over time, which mean it should probably only be seriously considered if there are strong research questions that require longitudinal data.

2.4.4 Measuring the impact of changes in sampling

Our work on sampling frames does suggest that a fundamental change in the sampling method for SIES (from an opt-in to an opt-out approach) is possible. Given the benefits of this change we strongly recommend it is adopted even though it does mean introducing a discontinuity between 2007/08 and the planned 2011/12 survey. This discontinuity arises not because the population covered by the survey will change, but because we anticipate there being a much higher response rate to the survey²⁴ and less non-response bias.

The implication of this is that if change is observed in SIES statistics between 2007/08 and 2011/12, then it will be very difficult to establish how much of this change is genuine and how much is due to the change in response profile. To a degree it may prove possible to re-weight the 2007/08 survey data to simulate what might have been observed had the opt-out method been used in that survey, but this will be a statistical modelling exercise involving a large number of assumptions about non-response patterns and effects so is unlikely to give definitive answers. (It would involve using far more complex non-response adjustment to HESA/ILR statistics than was done for the survey report.) Realistically, we believe that the discontinuity will have to be accepted and the planned 2011/12 survey taken as something of a new baseline for the survey series.

²⁴ Note that as response rates fall over time (which is the experience on most surveys) there are inevitably discontinuities in surveys with an interval of several years anyhow. It is simply that under the opt-out approach this discontinuity may be greater.

3. Data Collection

3.1 Overview of issues raised

In this chapter we explore the following issues raised by BIS:

- Whether face-to-face interviewing is still the optimal way of collecting income and expenditure data, or whether it is desirable to shift to an alternative mode of data collection.
- How different approaches might impact on the coverage and response rates of difficult-to-reach groups.
- When and how consent for data linking can be asked and the implications of different approaches for the consent rate.
- Whether the current approach to asking questions about income and expenditure is the most robust approach.

In the consultation and review of surveys, we found a range of methods of data collection used in student surveys. We heard about examples of online, postal and telephone surveys and studies combining different methods (e.g. the National Student Survey). These had worked well for the purposes of these particular studies. However, many of these were not specifically focused on income and expenditure or involved far fewer questions than the current SIES. The key exception to this and of most relevance to the current review is the Scottish Income Expenditure and Debt Survey (SIED), which moved from being a face-to-face survey in 2004/05 to an online study in 2007/08. We look at this case in more detail below and what lessons can be learned as part of the discussion of options involving online modes.

It should be noted that the most established population surveys of income and expenditure (such as the Living Costs and Food module of the Integrated Household Survey²⁵ and Family Resources Survey) continue to use face-to-face methods and (frequently) diary elements.

Our consultation with institutions would suggest that both HEIs and FECs collect a wide range of contact information for their students which would provide the survey organisation with a variety of means to contact and survey students²⁶. These contact details include: home address, term address (if different), telephone number (landline), mobile telephone

²⁵ Formerly the Expenditure and Food Survey, which itself had combined the Family Expenditure Survey and National Food Survey.

²⁶ Note that the mode of data collection would have no effect on the burden on institutions in providing initial contact details or thereafter, although some institutions may be more reluctant to supply, for example, mobile phone numbers.

number, personal email address, and university/college email address. Several institutions noted how students frequently changed their mobile numbers and personal email addresses, but all contact information appears to be updated at least on a yearly basis during the registration/enrolment process at the start of the academic year. In some institutions, students can update their records at any time using the institution's online facilities. One institution also talked of using tutors to supply more up-to-date contact details to help improve response rates to a survey.

In drawing up the shortlist of possible modes for any future SIES, two broad groups were identified: those that maintained the continuity of the current survey that is using a face-to-face interview as the primary means of data collection, but with some variants on the diary elements (discussed below in section 3.2); and those involving a more radical change to online and/or telephone methods (discussed in section 3.3)²⁷.

Between these two broad groups there are obvious trade-offs in terms of a number of key criteria, in particular:

- data quality
- the amount and complexity of information that can be collected
- the cost of the study (or, if costs are fixed, the sample size for a given cost)
- response levels (particularly amongst key groups such as part-time students)
- the continuity of time trends.

3.2 Face-to-face options for the mode of the survey

SIES 2007/08 collected information through an hour long face-to-face interview supplemented by a seven-day spending diary (which provided estimates for selected expenditure items i.e. food, personal items, entertainment, household and other living costs). The majority of respondents completed the diary on paper (which was generally picked up by the interviewer); however, they could also choose to complete the diary online.

Our review identified four potential routes for data collection which are explored in detail below. However, at this stage we are only recommending that two (Options 1A and 1B) be considered further for the reasons discussed overleaf.

²⁷ After initial consideration, we are not proposing having any postal options on the shortlist (either as a primary or alternative mode) as the likely length and complexity/routing of any questionnaire could not be accommodated within a postal design.

3.2.1 Recommended options

Option 1A: 60-minute face-to-face interview plus seven-day spending diary (i.e. maintain status quo):

This would provide the same level of detail as the previous rounds of SIES and generate consistent trends – at least in terms of mode and question working/structure. Of course, the data would not be strictly comparable with previous rounds if the changes recommended in Chapter 3 are made to the sample design²⁸.

Option 1B: 60-minute face-to-face interview, but no diary:

One feasible variation of the status quo approach would be to maintain the face-to-face interview broadly as it stands, but drop the diary element. This would require the development of suitable alternative (and necessarily less detailed) measures to include in the main interview/questionnaire.

The **advantages** of this approach would be:

- Respondent burden would be reduced (although a small number of additional questions would be required in the interview).
- There would be reduced costs in several areas: less interviewer time (and cost) involved²⁹; no development and implementation costs for the paper and online diary instruments; no data entry for the paper diary; reduced analysis costs³⁰; possibility of reduced incentives for respondents.
- Simpler analysis with no loss of respondents for income/debt and expenditure analyses³¹.

There are however significant **disadvantages** with this approach, primarily in relation to data quality:

- Relying on summary questions about selected expenditure items rather than the diary would have an impact on the data quality of expenditure estimates. The current SIES approach uses the diary to estimate smaller, day-to-day spending in a number of areas (e.g. as part of food and drink, and entertainment) with recall questions used to elicit information on larger, less frequent purchases. This is

²⁸ Although an opt-out rather than opt-in approach will increase the accuracy of the data.

²⁹ The current approach involves the interviewer picking up the diary if possible, which is necessary to maintain the good return rate currently achieved on the study.

³⁰ Diary data require separate inspection, treatment of outliers and derivation of expenditure variables.

³¹ In the 2007/08 survey, 86 per cent of interviewed respondents completed a diary, and there was no substantial difference in the profiles of students used in the expenditure and income/debt analyses.

generally taken to be the most accurate approach for each type of expenditure (see e.g. Silberstein and Scott (1991)³²³³).

- A number of (non-UK) studies have found that, for the types of expenditure currently collected by diary in SIES, recall and diary estimates do differ in general population surveys. **In general, these found that high-level estimates of spending when measured through interview recall tend to be greater than diary-derived measures, although this does not hold for every sub-category and type of expenditure.** Several studies have found evidence of higher recall measures for certain categories of spending. The Canadian Food Expenditure Survey included a sample of respondents for whom both interview recall and diary measures of spending had been collected (Ahmed et al, 2005)³⁴. The estimate of spending on food and drink at home (in Canadian dollars) was \$4,156 through the interview³⁵, eight per cent higher than the \$3,854 estimate from the (first) week diary. For other categories of spending diary measures can give higher estimates: for example, Battistin³⁶'s 2003 trend analysis of the US Consumer Expenditure Survey showed consistently higher diary estimates for food and drink away from home and non-durable goods and services, in contrast to lower estimates for categories such as food and drink at home and transportation. There was also evidence that diary and interviewer recall estimates exhibited different trends for some categories of spending over the 1980s and 1990s. Silberstein and Scott showed similar variations between spending categories in diary and interviewer recall estimates.

Switching from the diary to an all-recall approach would therefore be expected to result in a discontinuity in expenditure trends, and possibly an increase in overall spending estimates.

3.2.2 Measuring the impact of dropping the diary

As noted above, dropping the diary element of the interview may have adverse effects on data quality and the spending estimates obtained. However, it would be relatively easy to

³² Silberstein, A and Scott, S (1991), *Expenditure Diary Surveys and their Associated Errors*, in *Measurement Errors in Surveys*, John Wiley & Sons.

³³ Although neither method is immune to measurement error. Recall methods may result in expenditure being forgotten, or larger expenditure incorrectly recalled as being within the survey recall period (telescoping). Recall measures are often heavily approximated (e.g. spending being given to the nearest £50 or £100). Diary methods may also be subject to under-reporting or respondent fatigue: an inspection of the 2007/08 SIES diaries showed much higher reported expenditure on the first day (commonly found in diary studies) although expenditure was relatively stable after that. Some diary studies find a general decline in measurement for every day of reporting.

³⁴ Ahmed, N, Brzozowski, M, Crossley, T F (2005), *Measurement Errors in Recall Food Expenditure Data*, SEDAP Research Paper No. 133, Canada.

³⁵ Similar to its American counterpart, the Canadian survey estimated this through two questions asking about 'how much...this household spent on food and other groceries purchased from stores' and deducting answers to the question 'about how much of this amount was for non-food items...'.

³⁶ Battistin, E (2003), *Errors in Survey Reports of Consumption Expenditures*, Institute of Fiscal Studies, Working Paper (WP03/07).

incorporate a means of measuring the impact of such a switch into the current design. This could operate in a variety of ways:

- The ideal strategy would be to ask the summary questions of all, with respondents completing the diary as well. This would allow the computation of alternative spending estimates with and without the diary for the whole sample. The size of the impact on all estimates, as well as on other types of analysis that might be undertaken, could be determined. The key advantages of this approach is that it retains the same level of detail and consistent trends³⁷ on income and debt³⁸ while limiting the amount of new question design and testing to the additional summary questions only. However, this would not test other factors which might vary with the use/non-use of a diary (e.g. incentives and their impact on response).
- Alternatively, if a decision was already made to drop the diary, one model would be to ask the summary questions of all but administer the diary to a (heavily incentivised) sub-sample. This would have substantial cost and time savings, but may be problematic if the recall approach was found to be flawed. We would suggest a sub-sample of around 500 would be sufficient to provide an accurate estimate of the size of any impact on spending estimates.
- Variations of this approach could be applied (e.g. a 'split' run approach whereby half the sample receives the diary and the rest answer recall questions). This would have the advantages of testing all aspects of the different approaches (including their impact on spending estimates, use of incentives and levels of response).

Using such approaches an informed decision could be made on whether to proceed with the diary or switch to recall methods. As indicated above, the decision on whether to switch mode will rely primarily on their impact on data estimates and indicators of data quality (e.g. evidence of rounding), but other factors such as cost and burden should also be considered.

3.2.3 Other options considered

Option 1C: 60-minute face-to-face interview, with online diary only:

Another approach that we considered was to maintain the face-to-face interview with use of an online diary only. The **advantages** of this approach are:

- Maintaining continuity and best practice³⁹ in terms of data collection.
- Reducing costs through lower interviewer costs (no pick-up required although some telephone/email/postal chasing should be assumed) and data entry costs. (Although further cost savings would result from no paper diary being used at all, it may be

³⁷ Although see caveat discussed in Option 1.

³⁸ Although some questions may need to be dropped in order to make room for any additional questions on expenditure.

³⁹ Using a diary approach is generally considered more accurate for smaller, day-to-day spending.

advisable to maintain a paper version of the diary which could be handed to respondents at the end of the interview, who are then requested to enter any details online. This could act as a reminder for the online version and some groups may find it easier to fill in their details on paper on a day-to-day basis.) We also believe that the case for an incentive is significantly reduced and have assumed that the incentive be dropped under this scenario.

Possible **disadvantages** of this approach would be:

- A key risk is that there may be a much lower response rate for the diary⁴⁰, given that any reminder strategy will necessarily be less proactive. It would not be effective for interviewers to revisit respondents in order to check on online completion; telephone or email chasing could be used, but these are generally less 'intrusive' approaches which have lower success rates. A low return rate would therefore jeopardise the estimation of certain categories of expenditure, as well as total estimates of spending.
 - For example, the 2002/03 SIES – which used a face-to-face interview but asked respondents to post back their diaries with some limited use of reminders – only had a return rate of 34 per cent. In the 2004/05 survey, students at HEIs and FECs were generally interviewed face-to-face, while OU students were interviewed over the phone. Using the pick-up method, 88 per cent of students interviewed face-to-face had diary data (77 per cent with paper diaries and 11 per cent returning the data online), while the figure for OU students – who mailed back their diaries – was 65 per cent (62 per cent with paper diaries and four per cent with online data).
- In addition, particular groups may be less likely to respond online. In the 2007/08 survey, some differences were observed in relation to the profiles of those returning paper diaries versus those filling them in online⁴¹. Switching to an online-only diary may pose particular challenges to response among those groups less likely to respond online:
 - As might be expected, online completers were less likely to be part-time students (18 per cent) than paper diary returners (24 per cent).
 - Amongst full-time students, online diary completers were more likely to live with their parents (84 per cent) than paper diary returners (75 per cent). Although students living at home generally had lower overall spending, their spending on the sub-category of living costs (to which the diary contributes) was slightly higher than average.

⁴⁰ One way of mitigating this risk would be to include summary questions on expenditure in the interview which could be used if necessary, although these would need development and add to interview length.

⁴¹ All data are unweighted.

- Amongst part-time students, online completers were slightly more likely to be aged under 25 (22 per cent) than those returning paper diaries (17 per cent). (However, age was not strongly associated with living costs for part-time students.)
- The mode of the diary appears to have some small effect on responses and data quality, with particular differences between full-time and part-time students. Analysis of the 2007/08 data was undertaken to see how responses compared between paper and online diaries⁴². Two sets of analyses were undertaken. Firstly, we looked at the amounts of total expenditure given by day and for the week, to see if recorded levels were associated with mode. This analysis included all expenditure recorded in the diary – however, not all diary expenditure counted towards overall survey expenditure estimates. Secondly, we compared the two modes in terms of recorded diary expenditure by category and in particular for those categories feeding forward into the overall SIES expenditure estimates.
 - Both online and paper diaries showed similar patterns of recording expenditure with the highest expenditure recorded on the ‘first day’ and relatively static on the following six days.
 - Amongst full-time students, the daily and weekly totals tended to be higher for those completing the paper diary (£155 weekly) compared to those completing the online diary (£138 weekly), but none of these differences were significant. This was also generally true for individual categories of spending e.g. travel, food and drink, entertainment. (The one exception was the ‘other’ category where online returns were significantly higher – £11 compared to £6 – but the overall amount this contributes to spending estimates is very small.)
- By contrast, amongst part-time students, daily and weekly totals were higher for the online completers, and significantly so for the overall weekly total (£289 for online completers compared to £239 for paper diaries). Analysis of diary expenditure by category showed that this was due to significantly higher child-related costs being recorded in the online diaries (£57 compared to £27). However, for SIES, spending on this category is derived from the interview rather than the diary. When restricting the analysis to that expenditure which contributes to the overall spending estimates, there was no significant difference between modes.
- Although the differences observed above were not substantial, it should be noted that the online completers were a self-selecting (rather than randomly sampled) group from all those completing the diaries: it is likely that those choosing to return their diaries online were more comfortable with this mode or had better access to the internet. This could mean they were better at completing the online diary than all

⁴² All analyses are on unweighted data. The annual expenditure estimates based on the diary were also truncated to account for outliers; this truncation has not been applied to these analyses of daily and weekly expenditure.

students may be in general. If all students were obliged to use online diaries, there could be larger differences than observed in this analysis.

Although there is no strong evidence around data quality issues, the risk to diary return remains high, and for this reason we would not recommend that this approach be taken forward for the next round of SIES.

Option 1D: Shorter face-to-face interview (either with or without diary):

Another option initially considered was to reduce the length of the face-to-face interview. The current interview is at the upper limits in terms of interview length.

This would have some advantages in terms of reducing length and therefore respondent burden (which could increase response rates), as well as savings in interviewer time and costs. A shorter interview could also mean that the analysis is more straightforward, making the SIES dataset more accessible.

However, this option was ruled out for a number of reasons. Firstly, although reducing the interview length would reduce costs, these are likely to be marginal, as the interviewer costs on travel and contacting time would not drop. Secondly, a key advantage of the face-to-face option is that it allows for the collection of detailed and in-depth information. Reducing the interview length would necessitate substantial redesign and piloting of the questionnaire and potentially impact on estimates and trends (assuming that reducing the length would involve replacing some questions with summary measures rather than simply cutting out whole topics⁴³).

3.3 Online and telephone options for the mode of the survey

As stated above, we also considered a more radical departure from the current SIES in terms of the mode of the survey. As part of the consultation, we reviewed experiences on other surveys using postal, telephone and online methods, in particular the Survey of Income Expenditure and Debt in Scotland. This switched from a face-to-face survey in 2004/05 to an online survey in 2007/08.

Appendix A contains details about the 2007/08 survey in Scotland, but the main lessons can be summarised as follows:

- As part of an initial opt-in stage, institutions were asked to email students about a screening survey, but it was difficult to ensure that all institutions prompted students in the same way about the survey, and there was a great deal of variability in the numbers of students included in the survey from different institutions.
- Although a definitive opt-in rate at the screening stage could not be calculated, it is clear that this was generally very low, possibly in the region of five to six per cent.

⁴³ In 2004/05, OU students were interviewed over the telephone in a shorter interview. The main cuts to the questionnaire were to the expenditure sections.

SIED achieved a 58 per cent return rate to the main survey but it should be noted that this was **from those students opting in via the screener survey**.

- Low response amongst FEC students and part-time students was a particular issue. The nature of enrolment and diversity of provision for FEC students also made it difficult to get the necessary information about numbers of students.
- No formal comparison of the data provided by the 2004/05 and 2007/08 studies was undertaken in Scotland, and the switch-over did not include any split runs. It is therefore not possible to disentangle the effects of the mode change on trends from genuine changes in the levels of income and expenditure for Scottish students (or impacts arising from other changes e.g. redesign of questions).

The advantages of a switch away from face-to-face (to online or telephone methods) are clear and as summarised below could give:

- Substantially reduced costs.
- Potential for a larger geographically unclustered sample (although note there may still be advantages – e.g. around liaison – in restricting the sample to a fixed number of institutions).
- Lower respondent burden – although this is in part a restriction of the methods: we do not consider it feasible to carry out a 60-minute online or telephone survey. We think the survey should take no more than 30 minutes to complete (this was the limit adopted in the Scottish survey and in the telephone interviews that were part of the 2004/05 SIES). In principle, data collection could be supplemented through use of a diary, although we think it would be difficult to secure a sufficiently high response rate to make this worthwhile.

In the consultation with institutions, it was felt that online methods were an increasingly common and accepted method of communication with and surveying students. Institutions seem to be moving towards conducting all of their communication with students via email and the student portal, as they felt this was a much easier way to contact students. In some institutions, this communication channel was explicitly recognised in the student contract and students are required to log on regularly. Institutions reported that email and online surveys were more popular among students who could fill them in when it suited them, and many institutions reported running their own online internal surveys (moving away from paper-based surveys).

However, we would itemise the main disadvantages as follows:

- There is a significant risk of obtaining lower response rates, due to the more 'remote' means of approach and potential sensitivity of subject. Using online methods, there is a particular risk of lower response among part-timers and FE students (this was the experience in the Scottish survey, but has also been found in

other surveys of part-time students⁴⁴). This issue was also explored in the consultation with institutions, who felt that some groups of students may have less access/inclination to respond online (whether to opt in, respond to a survey or return an online diary). Specific groups mentioned included nurses and teachers (who may spend less time on campus), those taught in partner institutions (not on the main site) and older students. (Please note that, if for any reason the survey needed to retain an 'opt-in' approach, we would not recommend an online survey, due to the risk of extremely low response rates⁴⁵.) It would be important to provide additional information and support to assure respondents of the survey's authenticity and answer any queries they have about the survey or completing it (e.g. through a website or dedicated email/helpline).

- There are potential risks to data quality. In particular, we think the use of an interviewer is beneficial in maximising the level of completion and quality of answers to questions. Although we could conclude little from the Scottish experience about whether the use of online methods would give different monetary estimates or data of worse/better quality, evidence is available from other studies.
 - In general, differences due to a switch in mode ('mode effects') could arise in a number of ways (see, for example, Jackle et al.⁴⁶). The choice of mode can affect the nature of the survey task, leading to differences in how respondents answer the question, including so-called 'satisficing (or shortcutting) effects' and social desirability bias. The presence/absence of an interviewer can also play a part in how respondents answer the questions. An interviewer can encourage or help the respondent to give their answers, thus reducing the level of shortcutting. They can also be beneficial in communicating the importance of the study and to build up trust and rapport. However, a self-completion online survey may enhance the perceived privacy of the setting and improve responses to questions considered intrusive. In addition, other unavoidable differences between the two modes could affect response. For example, if SIES switched to an online survey, it would necessitate a reduced level of detail and more aggregated estimates, which may lead to differences in estimates (see e.g. Low et al., 2007⁴⁷).
 - A small number of studies have looked at mode differences between online and face-to-face surveys (e.g. Duffy et al., 2005⁴⁸), but these have related mainly to attitudinal questions and we have only found one looking at the

⁴⁴ Using alternative modes for these groups could be an option, building on the design of survey Option 2.

⁴⁵ Online surveys tend to achieve lower response rates than other modes. The issue about the opt-in approach was a key challenge in SIED.

⁴⁶ Jackle, A, Roberts, C and Lynn, P (2008), *Assessing the Effect of Data Collection Mode on Measurement*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, Working Paper 2008-08.

⁴⁷ Low, N, Ellis-Paine, A, Butt, S and Davies-Smith, J (2007), *Helping Out – a national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*, Cabinet Office, URN 07/26.

⁴⁸ Duffy, B, Smith, K, Terhanian, G and Bremer, J (2005), *Comparing data from online and face-to-face surveys*, International Journal of Market Research, Vol 47, Issue 6.

mode effect on monetary estimates (Safir and Goldenberg, 2008⁴⁹). This comparison of telephone and face-to-face modes on the US Consumer Expenditure Survey found that telephone interview data was generally of poorer quality (in relation to factors such as non-completion and insufficient detail) although this reflected differences in the use of recall aids (e.g. consulting documents) rather than mode in itself. Differences in expenditure estimates were also related to the use of recall aids, although the relatively small mode differences in aggregate expenditure masked the fact that telephone interviews tended to yield **fewer** reported items with **higher** expenditure amounts. These findings may be of particular relevance to SIES, where interviewers are specifically instructed to encourage respondents to consult documents and give estimates rather than a 'don't know' answer.

- We think the survey should take no more than 30 minutes to complete, requiring a substantial reduction in the amount of information that could be collected.
- The change in mode would require a considerable amount of redesign and piloting of the current questions. This, in combination with a change in mode including a switch from interviewer administration to self-completion, would affect comparability with previous waves. Some form of split run design would be the only feasible way to measure the effects of the mode change on key estimates.

Given the current scope of the survey to cover part-time and FE students and in the light of other potential difficulties, we have concluded that an online-only survey would not be suitable for SIES.

3.3.1 Recommended option for alternative mode

Option 2: Mixed mode, online with telephone follow-up survey (primary mode: 30-minute online survey; follow-up: 30-minute telephone survey for initial non-responders):

If a more radical departure was taken, we would recommend a mixed mode approach, using an online-telephone combination⁵⁰. This would have the same advantages as noted above over the face-to-face options. However, importantly, we would seek to mitigate the key risk of low response by using more than one survey mode.

However, it is not without its disadvantages as noted above. In addition, there is the potential for mode differences *between* the online and telephone approach; and there would be additional costs involved in the development of parallel telephone/online questionnaires and surveys/infrastructure.

⁴⁹ Safir, A and Goldenberg, K L (2008), Mode effects in a survey of consumer expenditures. Available on the Bureau for Labour Statistics website: <http://www.bls.gov/osmr/pdf/st080200.pdf>.

⁵⁰ LDLHE (Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education) uses a mixed mode approach: online, then postal, then telephone. The telephone follow-up is more effective than the postal questionnaire.

3.3.2 Measuring the impact of a switch to an online/telephone survey

The more radical departure in survey mode, a priori might be expected to have a substantial impact on the survey estimates, not just because of the switch in mode (changing the nature of the interview task), but also because of associated and necessary changes, including the redesign of the questionnaire (which would necessarily contain less detail) and possible changes in the level of response and survey profile. The only way that the full impact of such a change could be measured would be through running both methods (existing and new) in parallel for one round of the survey. However, the exact design of this could be varied in a number of ways:

- The ideal strategy would be to carry out a 'split run' of each method, and randomly allocate students to a face-to-face or online/telephone method, with 50 per cent allocated per group. It would be important that students from the same institution or from key groups (e.g. full-time/part-time) were allocated to both methods, so as not to confound mode effects with e.g. institution effects. The key risk to this approach is that if the new approach being trialled is substantially flawed, this has a serious impact on how far the estimates from the face-to-face sub-sample can be used because the sample size will be so much smaller.
- A safer variant may be to carry out the majority of interviews using the existing face-to-face method, but randomly allocate a sub-sample of the students to the online/telephone method. The sub-sample should be large enough to provide information on the size of the difference between the two samples. For this scenario, a sub-sample of around 500-1,000 carried out online/by telephone would be advisable, with the majority sample then being over 2,000. For the 'experimental year', estimates could be based on the majority sample (and possibly including the online/telephone sub-sample if no major differences are found).
- Under both scenarios, it would be necessary to compare overall and sub-group monetary estimates obtained from each method. Where possible, triangulation with external sources (e.g. on student support) for each method would be useful; internal checks could also be built into the questionnaire to provide further information. Other indicators, such as the use of consulting documents, data quality indicators, response rates and costs could also be used as criteria.

3.4 Linking survey data to existing datasets

In the 2007/08 SIES, students were asked for permission to link their answers to the National Pupil Database (held by the Department for Education), information about higher education courses and qualification results (held by HESA), and information about applications for financial support (held by the Student Loans Company). This permission was asked for in a question at the very end of the face-to-face interview, which used a showcard to outline what data would be linked to, who held the data, and the purpose for linking to it. About 90 per cent of students gave their consent for linkage in SIES 2007/08.

The consultation and review of surveys revealed two distinct methods that are used in student surveys for requesting permission to link survey data to other data sources, as well as a third method that involved a combination of the first two.

Method 1: Asking explicit consent at the end of the interview (i.e. maintain status quo)

This was the approach taken in the last SIES. A similar technique was used in the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (LSYPE) to gain permission to link survey data to data held by another government department. This approach led to approximately 80 per cent of LSYPE respondents giving consent to linking data to external data sources. One consideration with this technique is that it involves a relatively lengthy question, which may be suited more to face-to-face interviews than other modes (although LSYPE did adapt this question to web and telephone interviews). Another issue is that the length and complexity of this kind of question may make it unsuitable for interviews with people with language difficulties, although this is less likely to be an issue on SIES than on other surveys.

Previous development work carried out by NatCen suggests that lengthy questions using legal language could deter respondents from giving permission to link data. It was also found that the level of understanding of the request varied amongst respondents. Therefore we recommend simple wording is used to explain the linking. To aid understanding it may also be helpful to provide extra information such as a showcard, a flowchart explaining the linking process, and/or a leaflet explaining the process and withdrawal of consent procedures.

A key consideration with this method of requesting explicit consent is that some respondents may choose to opt out from the linkage. There is also an issue of whether it is better practice to give respondents some prior warning (e.g. in an advance letter) that they will be asked for this consent (see below).

Method 2: Statement in advance letter

The second method is to include a paragraph in an advance letter that explains that data will be linked to various other data sources (in some surveys this is a condition of taking part, in others there is an option for the respondent to opt out of the linkage element). This approach was used on three surveys we reviewed: on two occasions being used to gain permission to link to data already held by the department or organisation for which the survey had been commissioned, and on one occasion to gain permission to link to externally held HESA data. One advantage of this method is that it is likely to result in low levels of respondents refusing permission to link data. It also provides an opportunity to emphasise the benefit to the respondent of linking data, by explaining that linking to data from other sources means that fewer questions have to be asked in the interview (if this is applicable). However, explanations of data linkage must be worded carefully as some respondents may be put off taking part in the study entirely.

The key consideration with this approach is whether or not it satisfies the data security and ethical concerns of all organisations and departments that hold data one might want to link to. Those we consulted seemed satisfied that the advance statement fully complied with the Data Protection Act. However, this approach appears to be used for gaining permission to link with data held by the same department that is commissioning the research. There are suggestions that the advance statement may not fully satisfy the concerns of other departments when attempting to link external data. In particular, the

Department for Work and Pensions was named as a department that seemed to have particular concerns about linking data⁵¹.

Method 3: Advance notification and explicit consent at the end of the interview

The third method involves a combination of the two approaches outlined above: asking for explicit consent only for data held by those organisations and departments that are not satisfied with the implicit consent (advance) approach. This would allow data from a 'core' set of data sources to be linked to survey data for the majority of respondents that do not opt out following the advance letter, while enabling additional data to be linked for those respondents that give consent at the question at the end of the interview. This approach was taken in one of the surveys we reviewed (although it appears that the actual linking of data had not yet been carried out for this survey).

One of the main points emerging from our consultation was the importance of ensuring that all relevant organisations and departments have agreed that the chosen approach is satisfactory for data linking to actually take place, and to set up protocols for sharing data between different organisations before the survey goes into the field. Another key consideration is to ensure that there are no contradictory statements about sharing data (e.g. confidentiality statements) with outside organisations in any of the other survey materials.

3.4.1 Recommended option for data linking

For future rounds of SIES, we would recommend continuing the use of Method 1, given that BIS does not generally hold datasets to which they require linkage. This allows for full details of the linkage to be explained to students, with separate explanations for different datasets as required and flexibility in the future if datasets change. We would recommend a review of the current linkage questions to ensure they are simply worded and fully comprehensive, and of the wording of any advance letters to ensure this is not incompatible with data linking protocols.

3.5 Question techniques

SIES 2007/08 collected information through a mix of (a) retrospective questioning (income/expenditure to date) and combined this with either (b) prospective questioning (asking for estimates of future spending, saving and borrowing) and (c) post-interview estimates of future amounts based on the retrospective questions.

We should note a number of options in terms of question techniques:

⁵¹ A further method would be to include much more information about the data linkage procedure with the advance letter. This could include for example a fuller description (or access to further information e.g. on a web page) about data security and about what information the relevant data sources contain or an opt-out form. However, this approach risks overloading the initial advance letter and is likely to result in substantially lower response or consent rates.

- One option is obviously to maintain the status quo and maintain the questions as they are currently asked.
- Another option might be to move towards using respondent estimates (via prospective questions) or generating estimates after the interview based on their answers to retrospective questions. The former has benefits in terms of using respondent's own knowledge of their circumstances and reduced analysis/coding time, while the latter could result in a shorter, simpler interview for respondents. For some (small) categories of expenditure (e.g. landline, mobile and photocopying costs), it was possible to look at the estimates that would have been derived under both scenarios in 2007/08. Although differences were small, taking into account respondents' estimates of their future costs consistently produced **lower** estimates of expenditure than relying solely on their current spending pattern.
- It should be noted that another direction (which would be required if, for example, the mode switched to online) is to collect more aggregated estimates by combining categories of spending. This would generally be expected to result in **lower** estimates than when individual categories are asked about separately.

4. Maximising response

In this chapter we explore the following issue raised by BIS:

- Methods for maximising response rates when the next SIES is run (including the use of incentives and other promotional activity).

4.1 Strategies to promote SIES to institutions and to increase buy-in

For the 2007/08 SIES, a letter signed by the Minister of State for Education and Lifelong Learning was sent (in May 2007) to the vice-chancellors or principals of all HE institutions in England and Wales and to a small number of selected FE institutions with HE students. This informed them about the study and asked them for their help if they were selected. Selected institutions⁵² were then sent further information about the study in July 2007, and contacted by the research team to explain what would be required of them and to support them through the sampling and survey administration process (this took place between October and December 2007). All materials for the opt-in survey were provided by the research team. Any postage costs incurred in administering the opt-in survey could be recouped by institutions and institutions could also request funds to pay for additional staff support (e.g. temps).

This approach – high level initial contact, personal support and financial support – appeared to be particularly effective as the participation rate for HEIs was very high. Of those selected to take part, only two HEIs declined to take part (due to difficulties with resourcing) and had to be replaced. However, a relatively high number of replacement FECs were needed, primarily because many FECs did not have sufficient numbers of students studying for higher educational qualifications to be eligible for the study⁵³, but also some colleges were in the process of merging with another institution⁵⁴. After confirming participation and some way into the sampling process and setting up the opt-in survey, four further HEI and FEC institutions dropped out when it was too late to replace them – again this was largely due to difficulties with resourcing. In total, 108 institutions were followed up by the research team, and 80 institutions eventually took part in the research.

Feedback from the institutions consulted as part of this methodological review indicated that institutions recognised the importance of SIES and were generally willing to support it especially if the administrative burden could be reduced by moving to an opt-out approach⁵⁵. Some institutions had generally found the process somewhat burdensome,

⁵² 53 English HEIs, 10 Welsh HEIs and 20 English FECs.

⁵³ One FEC also dropped out at a late stage of the study, and could not be replaced.

⁵⁴ For this scenario, an institution was retained if it had merged with a smaller institution, but dropped (and replaced) if it had been absorbed by a larger institution.

⁵⁵ Interviewees in two HEIs said their institution would not want to participate again if it involved the same amount of work, however this may not reflect the views of the senior management team/VC (vice-chancellor).

but all those consulted reported no problems undertaking the sampling and administering the survey, particularly as they had been supported through the process. However, there were concerns raised in the discussion about the general over-surveying/survey fatigue of students – with national surveys, local surveys and institutions' own surveys; and how SIES may impact on the response rates for these other surveys (some of which have set targets that institutions have to achieve).

There was no indication that the SIES outputs had been used to any great extent (beyond being seen by the senior management team, see Appendix D). There was some suggestion that the survey report may be somewhat inaccessible. Institutions could not identify their own types of students in the results and findings. Interviewees commented that presenting the results in a more relevant manner (for example providing data by region or by some kind of university grouping/typology e.g. mission group⁵⁶) would make the results more useable, and could help institutions see a return on their participation in SIES. They expressed a desire to have their own results as they felt it would be particularly helpful in university planning (e.g. setting bursary levels). However, the current sample design – with a relatively small number of students per institution and not all institutions included in the sample – means that it may not be possible to provide this reliably or in a way which protected the anonymity of responding students. From a sampling and interviewing perspective, it might be possible to accommodate boosts for individual institutions who wanted a large sample size, but this would need to be funded and negotiated by particular institutions. It should be noted that this idea was not explored in the current study.

In summary the methods to increase institution participation and retention are:

- High-level initial approach with government endorsement.
- Stress importance and use of the data (and present user-friendly results).
- Use of most appropriate data to select institution (particularly for FECs).
- Reduce institution burden where possible (move to opt-out approach, use email to contact students where possible).
- Provide personal and financial support where appropriate.

⁵⁶ As another example, the Ross-Case survey undertaken by NatCen allows responding institutions to nominate at least six institutions similar to themselves. Each institution then receives their own results as well as anonymised and aggregated averages based on their nominated comparison universities.

4.2 Strategies to promote SIES to students and incentivise their participation

For the 2007/08 SIES, students received two mailings as part of the opt-in stage, the first of which included an unconditional £3 incentive (in the form of a voucher). They then received an advance letter before any interviewer approach, with £12 paid on completion of the diary. Further information about the study was available through phone contacts, as well as with a website at the interview stage. In Table 4.1 we outline our thinking in terms of feasible incentivisation strategies for each of the three survey approaches we are recommending.

Table 4.1: Incentive and promotion strategies for the recommended survey approaches

	Opt out ; face -to-face interview; diary	Opt out; face-to-face interview; no diary	Opt out; online/telephone survey; no diary
Incentives	£15 incentive paid on receipt of the diary. Some consideration could be given to different forms of the incentives e.g. Amazon vouchers, 'credit' cards which can be topped up and so on.	Given the reduction in the task, we would suggest removal of the individual incentive.	
Promotion/publicity within institutions and beyond	Limited use was made of this in 2007/08, but it may be possible to exploit existing avenues of communication more effectively (e.g. NUS websites, university intranets) through providing draft text and information about the study. Other avenues e.g. through Facebook may be worth exploring.		
Advance information	For all modes, we would recommend an advance letter before the initial survey approach. Anecdotal feedback from the 2007/08 survey indicates that groups such as part-time students and distance learners often thought the survey was not relevant to them, so the use of customised approaches for these groups may be important. It will also be important to bear this in mind in drafting contact messages at the opt-out stage.		
Reminder strategies	Varied and sufficient reminders will be important under all the modes. Again, targeted or customised reminder strategies may be helpful for some groups.		
Additional information	Provision of helpline/website was provided in 2007/08 and we would recommend a similar approach. Some consideration could be given to making this more attractive or informative for potential respondents. (For the online option, this may be particularly important so that questions about the authenticity of the survey are answered quickly and convincingly.)		

The institutions consulted had further comments and suggestions around improving response rates among students. They felt it was important to stress in any communication with potential participants the importance of the study and how their participation will make

a difference, this could be helped through endorsement by the university/college and the Students' Union which they were willing to do. It was also felt by some institutions that being able to show results from their own student population would help encourage students to respond to the survey. Institutions suggested that communication with students about the survey would be more effective via email as students were used to receiving information and requests in this manner. However, interviewees acknowledged that this participation still relies on students' goodwill and so they recommend the use of financial incentives – either through individual incentives (as used in SIES 2007/08) or through a series of prize (cash) draws such as winning your fees for a year. They feel the prize draw is used to positive effect in NSS (although there was no hard evidence of this). There was a suggestion that the current SIES incentive rates were not sufficient to encourage participation.

Institutions also suggested ways to promote the survey, and generally felt it could be better promoted and more could be done to raise the profile internally. Methods included using the university website to promote the survey (e.g. a reminder which pops up when students log in), messages on university notice boards, reminder text messages to mobile phones, and use of tutors to promote the survey and encourage participation. The latter would appear to be a particularly useful method in FECs where the HE population may be relatively small and concentrated, and in smaller HEIs. It may be helpful to provide institutions with a promotion pack about the survey for them to use, and for promotional activity to be timed to coincide with the opt-out stage and again at the start of the fieldwork.

There was mixed opinion about the survey mode, and its potential to affect response rates. Several institutions felt that moving to an online approach would make it easier for students to take part, and students are increasingly used to being surveyed in this way. However, others felt that the face-to-face approach differentiated SIES from other surveys, gave it a certain level of gravitas and made it more personal.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

In this study we have reviewed the current SIES methodology with the aim of ensuring that the next survey is fit for purpose and uses a methodology which is as robust as possible. The review involved examining four main aspects of the survey:

- Sampling and contacting students – including the involvement of higher and further education institutions in helping generate a sample and whether students have to be asked to opt in to the survey or alternatively can be asked whether they want to opt out.
- Data collection – including whether the survey needed to be conducted face-to-face or whether alternative collection methods could be used, including the potential for making linkages with other datasets to extend the reach of the survey or minimise data collection.
- Response rates and how to improve them.
- The coverage of particular groups – particularly part-time students.
- We examined a range of linked options covering each of these aspects and tested their impact on the fitness for purpose and robustness of the survey by taking into account a series of factors:
 - Changes to the practice relating to data protection and the processes adopted by higher and further education institutions to the transfer of personal information provided by students.
 - The burden on institutions to provide a sample and the burden on students to take part in interviews and supply the required data.
 - The reliability of the data collected and the effects of any changes on the statistical validity and representativeness of the achieved survey sample.
 - The range of data and depth of analysis required.
 - The costs of the survey.
 - The timeliness of the survey and the generation of results.
 - The implications for the continuity of the SIES data series.

5.1 Summary of options investigated

The table below summarises the options investigated for this review, setting out the main advantages and disadvantages compared to the methodology adopted for SIES 2007/08 (or the status quo). The options in grey are our preferred approaches, and we would recommend that BIS consider these for any future SIES.

Table 5.1: Advantages and disadvantages of the main options investigated for future Student Income and Expenditure Surveys		
Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Sampling		
Status quo Sampling from institutions' records with opt-in	Maintains continuity Tried and tested	Burden on institutions to administer opt-in – indications that institutions would increasingly drop out Low and differential opt-in rate introduces potential bias into achieved sample No cost savings
Institutional opt-out Sampling from institutions' records with opt-out <i>Alternative preferred option for sampling</i>	Expected low opt-out rate means less chance of bias and higher overall response rate Less burden on institutions Shorter lead-in time Limited impact on cost as reduced opt-in and initial incentive costs offset by higher main fieldwork costs	Fair Processing Notice needs amendment to ensure institutions use the HESA/ Information Authority recommended wording or add SIES to the list of surveys specifically mentioned in their FPN Institutions may need to administer opt-out if FPN not applied consistently Potential discontinuity in data series
HESA/ILR opt-out Sampling from secondary records (HESA/ ILR) with opt-out <i>Preferred option for sampling</i>	Easier to over-sample sub-groups Easier to correct for non-response bias Burden saving for institutions as they do not administer sampling Limited cost savings as reduced opt-in and initial incentive costs balanced by higher main fieldwork costs	Short time for sampling from HESA/ILR records to make sample available in time to conduct survey, procedures untested Need to develop different sampling strategy for first year HEI students Multiple sampling increases complexity for institutions Potential discontinuity in data series
Population sampling Identifying sample of eligible students from general population	Less chance of bias Potential for truly random sampling	Requires large-scale sift survey to identify eligible population (i.e. students) Will need to sample halls of residence directly Likely low response rate introduces potential source of bias

Table 5.1: Advantages and disadvantages of the main options investigated for future Student Income and Expenditure Surveys

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
		Unclustered fieldwork so likely increased cost Potential discontinuity in data series
Use existing student databases (e.g. UCAS/SLC)		Do not offer coverage of all students and therefore not feasible

Interview mode		
Status quo 60-minute interview with additional data collected through a paper/online diary <i>Preferred option for interview mode</i>	Maintains continuity Tried and tested Captures maximum amount of data on income and expenditure Uses best practice methods for capturing regular and occasional/day-to-day expenditure	Relatively high cost
Status quo minus diary 60-minute interview only <i>Alternative preferred option for interview mode</i>	Reduced respondent burden Simpler analysis Costs reduced by 20 per cent due to lower fieldwork and computing costs	Less detailed data on expenditure collected Data collected potentially less accurate for certain types of expenditure Small redesign needed (collect aggregate expenditure)
Status quo with on-line diary only 60-minute interview with additional data collected through a paper/on-line diary	Broadly maintains data continuity Maximises data collection Reduced interviewer costs	Potential lower response rate of diaries introduces possible source of bias and may limit use of expenditure data Potential differential response rate to diaries introduces potential source of bias Possible negative effect on quality of expenditure information
Shorter face-to-face interview 30-minute interview (with or without diary)	Reduced respondent burden Reduced interviewer costs Reduced analysis time	Significantly less data collected Requires questionnaire redesign Little impact on cost (for less data) Discontinuity in data series
30-minute online survey (with or without diary)	Increasingly common/accepted method of surveying students Reduced respondent burden Less need for geographical clustering	Potential lower response rate (remote approach/sensitive subject) introduces possible source of bias Potential differential response rate introduces potential source of bias

Table 5.1: Advantages and disadvantages of the main options investigated for future Student Income and Expenditure Surveys

Option Adv	antages	Disadvantages
	Reduced interviewer costs Potential economies of scale – sample size can increase at minimal cost	Significantly less data collected Possible negative effect on data quality (limited use of recall aids, satisficing) Only works with opt-out sampling Requires significant questionnaire redesign Discontinuity in data series
30-minute mixed mode interview Online survey with telephone follow-up <i>Preferred option for low cost interview mode</i>	Reduced respondent burden Less need for geographical clustering Costs reduce by 40 to 50 per cent due to lower fieldwork and data processing costs which outweighs higher development and other costs Potential lower response rate likely to be significantly reduced by mixed mode	Potential lower response rate introduces possible source of bias Significantly less data collected Requires significant questionnaire redesign – more costly than if single mode Potential for response differences by mode Discontinuity in data series

Notes: In each case the alternative options are compared with status quo (SIES 2007/08 methodology)

5.2 Improving the efficiency of the sampling process

Our examination concludes that there is scope for improving the efficiency of the sampling process which would not impact significantly on the costs of the survey, but would reduce the burden on institutions to help the survey team collect a potential sample without deleteriously affecting the validity of the sample.

We considered carrying on with the current opt-in process which is a tried and tested approach, however, as it is relatively expensive, time consuming, burdensome on institutions and generates relatively low response rates it is our least preferred approach. We also considered identifying a potential sample of students through a general population survey. While this could be seen as having the advantage of more clearly representing all students (rather than just those at the institutions selected for the survey), again it is a less preferable option on the grounds that the chances of finding a suitable survey would be slim, some students (e.g. in halls of residence) may not be adequately covered, data collection costs would be higher and response rates likely to be lower.

We have concluded that there are two preferred options likely to achieve the most representative and robust results (and meet BIS aims for any further SIES), each with their own further advantages and disadvantages:

- Status quo with opt-out.

- Sampling from secondary records, plus opt-out.

Status quo with opt-out

This option takes advantage of the Fair Processing Notice, by which students give their permission to pass on their contact details for the purposes of research into student finance issues. Under this option, institutions would be asked to randomly select students using a simple specification provided by the survey organisation. Students would then be asked by email if they wanted to opt out of SIES and those who did not would have their contact details passed to the survey organisation. This is the sampling method used by the National Student Survey and would be less burdensome on institutions (although still involve them in some work) and likely to generate a more representative sample.

The main question-mark over this method concerns the lack of consistency among institutions about how they are using the Fair Processing Notice and there may be some groundwork to be done by BIS and/or the survey organisation to ensure all institutions are confident that their notice applies to a survey such as SIES.

Sampling from secondary records, plus opt-out

This option involves two stages. First a sample of students would be selected from anonymised sets of HESA and ILR records. Second, institutions then administer an email opt-out to the selected sample and pass on contact details of those who do not opt out. This approach would need a different sampling approach for first year students and OU students.

One of the main advantages of this approach is that as much more information about the potential sample could be available from the student records, a more sophisticated sampling approach could be adopted, e.g. to the selection of sufficient students in the sample from a black or ethnic minority background or changing the definition of part-time students to include less than 0.5fte. In addition, more accurate weighting for non-response biases could be carried out at the analysis stage. However, there may be problems with the accuracy of the data held by HESA and the availability of the information may affect the timing of the survey. Another problem is that a different approach would be needed for first year students, therefore involving institutions in two tasks: administering an opt-out to second years and above to a list supplied by the survey organisation; and contacting a random selection of first years drawn from their own records. Care will need to be taken to collect data on these separately sampled students that is comparable with the information collected on continuing students captured from the HESA/ILR datasets.

Both these options are feasible and involve similar costs but on balance we believe the advantages of sampling from HESA/ILR records are slightly more significant (although we recognise that there is an element of complexity in this approach that brings some risks). **We therefore recommend that the survey sample be selected from HESA/ILR records for second year and above students and from institution records for first years (should HESA or ILR data not be available early enough) with a subsequent opt-out process administered by the institutions.**

5.2.1 Other ways of improving the sampling

We also looked at:

- The number of institutions involved in the survey and whether it could be reduced.
- The scope and size of the sample.

Number of institutions

Both of our proposed sampling options involve selecting a range of institutions and then a sample of students within the institution. Reducing the number of institutions involved could reduce the costs, but we do not think this is a good idea because it would involve a significant loss in statistical precision – indeed there is a case for increasing rather than reducing the number of institutions involved.

We recommend leaving the sample size as it is (i.e. 53 English HEIs, 19 English FEIs and 10 Welsh HEIs)

Scope and size of the sample

One of the specific questions we examined was whether the survey could include more part-time students. Currently, the sample only includes students studying for 50 per cent or more of a full-time equivalent course. There does not appear to be any substantial reason why this threshold could not be reduced to include those on less than half a full-time course, either by increasing the overall sample size (and increasing costs) or keeping the overall size and scaling down the other groups proportionally (at some expense of increasing the standard error). However, the challenges of engaging part-time students with the survey, who may feel it is not relevant to them and have different preferences for mode of participation, are likely to be exacerbated when extending coverage to those on very low intensity courses.

Finally, we also looked at the total sample size for the survey. Our view is that the existing total sample size of around 3,500 is reasonable and that although some reduction could be tolerated this would be at the expense of sub-group analysis. Furthermore, the ability to detect trends over time would be reduced if the sample size was to be heavily cut.

Our recommendation is that the size of the total sample should be maintained at the 2007/08 level if at all possible, but the eligibility of part-time students should be changed to include those on less than half a full-time course.

5.3 Can the data collection be improved?

The other main aspect of our review was to examine the way in which the survey collects data and to see whether there was any scope for changing the mode, changing the way the questions are asked and what the options were for linking the SIES survey data to other relevant datasets.

Data collection mode

Currently, the SIES questionnaire is administered in a 60-minute face-to-face interview with further data collected via a diary which students complete on paper or online. In the review we examined the advantages and disadvantages of less intensive face-to-face options as well as administering the questionnaire (in whole or in part) via telephone or online.

Ultimately, the best route involves a balancing cost of data collection (both monetary and the burden on respondents or institutions) on the one hand against data volume and quality on the other. Essentially, the face-to-face method is more expensive but the data collected are likely to be more detailed and better quality. Telephone or online techniques are cheaper (and online surveys have economies of scale that allow for increasing sample size with little additional cost), but have to be shorter and therefore collect less information and risk lower response rates, and less accurate responses to questions.

Looking first at the options for streamlining the current face-to-face plus diary approach we considered the pros and cons of a shorter interview. The cost reductions were marginal and counter-balanced to an extent by the costs of redesigning the questionnaire. On the other hand the potential loss of data quality (by asking summary questions rather than collecting income or expenditure data line by line) and data volume (by having to exclude some question topics) was relatively high. It was therefore not our preferred option.

The other options considered involved the diary: cutting it out altogether; moving to an online only method or the status quo. Dropping the diary would save money (both in data collection, removing the need for a financial incentive and analysis) and reduce respondent burden. However, the potential for loss of data quality is high as relying on summary estimates based on respondent recall will not produce estimates as accurate as real-time detailed collection through a diary. Just running the diary online would also potentially save costs and maintain some aspects of data continuity but at the likely expense of a lower response rate generally and potentially among some groups (such as part-timers) in particular – so data integrity would be lost.

Therefore, we concluded that the best face-to-face option was the status quo (60-minute face-to-face interview plus diary) as the potential disadvantages of the possible changes to the diary or the interview length outweighed the advantages.

A more radical option would be to change the mode of the survey altogether, abandon the face-to-face approach and conduct the survey by telephone or online. The advantages of such an approach are that costs would be substantially reduced (with lower fieldwork costs partially mitigated by increased design costs), respondents would be less inconvenienced (as the survey would have to be cut to 30 minutes) and sampling would be unclustered. However, the response rate is likely to be much lower (as researchers found in Scotland when they adopted a telephone approach for their student income and expenditure survey). As the interview would be shorter, the amount and therefore accuracy of the data would be less and the data collected is likely to be less accurate than that collected face-to-face. One potential approach would be to use a combined online approach supplemented by a telephone survey for those who did not respond online. While there may be differences in the accuracy of the data collected via the two modes, the dual approach may mitigate the key risk of a low response.

We conclude that the preferable option to maintain the accuracy and continuity of the survey would be to maintain the status quo and therefore **we recommend that the survey continue to be conducted via a 60-minute face-to-face interview, supplemented by a diary.**

One way of saving some costs would be to drop the diary. Although some data integrity may be lost and therefore a discontinuity introduced to the survey series it may be possible to measure the effect of such a switch.

More significant cost savings could be achieved by changing the survey mode and if this was thought to be necessary **we recommend adopting a mixed mode approach involving a combination of online and telephone survey**, although this will introduce a major discontinuity into the data series.

5.4 How to maintain the data series

If the survey sampling or data collection method is changed, any differences in the findings between the 2007/08 and the planned 2011/12 surveys may be wholly or partly genuine or wholly or partly due to the response profile and/or data quality. Depending on the nature of the changes introduced it may be possible to estimate the extent that any differences are due to changes in the design.

The best way of estimating the effect is to conduct some form of 'split run' i.e. using the old method with part of the sample and the new method with the rest of the sample, running the old and new method in parallel and then comparing the two sets of results. While it may not be feasible to adjust the results (of past surveys) to take account of any discontinuity found, it would be very useful to have an estimate of any 'mode effects' to at least inform comparisons with previous surveys. However, it may well be found that the changes introduced are too significant to be able to estimate their effect and a new data series will have to be established.

Appendix A: Lessons from the SIED

In Scotland, the Survey of Income Expenditure and Debt (SIED) switched from a face-to-face survey in 2004/05 to an online survey in 2007/08. This appendix contains further details of the experiences in Scotland (see also Appendix C for more details of this and other surveys).

The following methods were used for 2007/08 SIED:

- Forty-eight institutions (19 HEIs and 29 FECs) disseminated an email containing a link to a web-based screening survey to all their eligible students⁵⁷. Institutions were not asked to sub-sample students (as it was thought this would simplify their task) although exclusions did apply (e.g. to post-graduate or foreign students and part-time students studying less than 50 per cent of the full-time equivalent).
- The screening survey consisted of 11 questions. Introductory and reminder emails, other publicity on campuses and prize draws were used to encourage response.
- 22,000 students accessed the screening survey, of which 9,181 students were eligible and agreed to be re-contacted⁵⁸. The researchers were unable to calculate the exact opt-in rate to the screening survey, due to difficulties in estimating the proportion of FEC students who were contactable and contacted. However, the main report provides an estimate of 160,000 students who were eligible and contactable for the survey. This would imply an opt-in rate of around five to six per cent.
- All responding students were invited to take part in the main survey. This was a half-hour online survey asking about all aspects of income, debt and spending, along with background, attitudes and aspirations.
- 5,314 students completed the survey, giving a response rate of 58 per cent from those invited to take part. Reminder emails and prize draws were used to encourage response.
- The 2007/08 Scottish survey thus provided a much larger sample than was previously available allowing for more detailed analysis. An additional qualitative component was also felt to work well and enhance the quantitative findings.

⁵⁷ The original design involved institutions providing samples of students to the researchers, but this was not possible due to data protection considerations.

⁵⁸ Nearly 4,000 students were ineligible, 8,600 did not complete the study and a small number (under 100) were eligible but did not give permission to be re-contacted.

However, there were a number of difficulties in the execution of the survey, which are particularly relevant to the use of online methods of contact and surveying:

- Firstly, it was difficult to ensure that all institutions prompted students in the same way about the survey. Some institutions may only have posted details of the survey on an institutional intranet. This could explain the variability in the numbers of students included in the survey from different institutions⁵⁹ (which we see also in the England and Wales survey).
- In general, online contact achieves a lower return rate than face-to-face methods. Although a definitive opt-in rate at the screening stage could not be calculated, it is clear that this was generally very low, possibly in the region of five to six per cent. This has implications for the representativeness of any opt-in study, heightening the possibility of bias and the sensitivity of study results to the choice of weighting scheme. SIED achieved a 58 per cent return rate to the main survey **from those students opting in via the screener survey**; under an opt-out scenario (which would approach a wider but potentially less interested audience), return rates would be expected to be somewhat lower than this.
- For FEC students, the Scottish survey had a wider eligibility criteria than SIES: both those studying for higher and further education qualifications were included (unlike SIES which includes only the former). However, given the low response amongst this group, the report concluded that a web-based survey of FEC students is 'currently not feasible'. (Only 114 full-time FEC students completed the survey and the number of part-time FEC students (36) was deemed too low to be useable.) This low response was put down to the fact that 'not every FE college in Scotland communicates directly and regularly with its students via email'. Another issue with FEC students was the nature of enrolment and diversity in provision making it sometimes impossible to calculate the size of the target population in FECs, with implications for the calculation of response rates and the generation of appropriate sample sizes.
- Only 520 part-time HEI students took part in the survey, which implies a low response rate for this group too. (The original target was for 1,000 part-time HEI students.) This is consistent with the views of other participants in the consultation who indicated that online studies do not work well for part-time students.
- The previous Scottish survey in 2004/05 used a face-to-face survey (without a diary), so there is obvious interest in what Scottish trends show over this period and what this might tell us about the impact of the mode change. However, no formal comparison of the data provided by the two studies was undertaken in Scotland, and the switch-over did not include any split runs. It is therefore not possible to disentangle the effects of the mode change on trends from genuine changes in the

⁵⁹ For example, half the students responding to the screening survey came from four institutions: the Universities of Strathclyde, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. According to 2007/08 population statistics (<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/03/18144043/7>), these institutions accounted for 38 per cent of students.

levels of income and expenditure for Scottish students (or impacts arising from other changes e.g. redesign of questions).

Nor can much be gleaned from a comparison of the Scottish trends with those in England and Wales. This is partly because of definitional differences between the two surveys (in who is surveyed and how income, expenditure and debt are categorised). However, there have also been substantial divergences in the student support system (principally the simultaneous introduction of top-up fees and withdrawal of grants for fees in England, which was not mirrored elsewhere) between the countries, in ways which could plausibly lead to different trends in student finances.

We can, therefore, conclude little from the Scottish experience about whether the use of online methods would give different monetary estimates or data of worse/better quality (including whether estimates gained from the survey corresponded with or differed greatly from statistics available from other administrative sources).

Appendix B: List of those Consulted

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Appendix C: Review of Student Surveys

1. *Student Income & Expenditure Survey 2007/08 (SIES)*

Overview

The 2007/08 SIES was a large-scale comprehensive survey set up to collect detailed income and expenditure information on higher education (HE) students. Associated issues such as student debt and hardship were also investigated through the survey. It was conducted on behalf of the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) and the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG).

The SIES survey is carried out at approximately three-year intervals and the 2007/08 round was the latest in the series. The methods and design draw heavily on those that were used in the baseline study that took place in 2004/05. The methods and interview content were kept consistent for the two surveys so that trend comparisons could be as robust as possible. It was necessary however to update the interview content so that it reflected the 2006 changes in the student support system.

Topics

Questions were asked in relation to a number of topics including: main and additional sources of student support, paid work income and tuition fee, social security benefits and living and housing costs.

Methodology & Data Collection

A number of English and Welsh institutions were selected by NatCen based on Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) figures about each of their student populations. Letters were sent from DIUS and WAG to senior members of staff at selected institutions containing information about the research and an invitation to take part. After their agreement to take part had been secured, institutions were then instructed about the numbers of students to sample using a random selection process. Institutions then produced a list of sampled students. Data from the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) were used to provide information for FECs.

The data for the survey were collected between January and March 2008. Students were mailed packs by their institutions that included letters explaining the survey as well as opt-in questionnaires. These questionnaires were used to collect information on key characteristics and contact details where students could give their consent to be re-contacted for the main survey. The packs mailed to students also included £3 Love2Shop vouchers to thank them for their time and also to encourage participation.

Face-to-face interviews were carried out with students using a Computer Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI). All students that participated in the interviews were asked to complete a seven-day diary of expenditure after the interview (either on paper or via the Internet). Expenditure diaries were used to gain insight into the day-to-day expenses

students incurred over the course of seven days. Students that completed and returned their diaries were sent thank you letters and Love2Shop vouchers to the value of £12.

Sample & Response Rate

The 2007/08 survey covered both full-time and part-time students participating in undergraduate courses at higher education institutions (HEI) and further education colleges (FEC). This is inclusive of the Open University (OU). The sample size of randomly selected full-time and part-time English-domiciled students participating in face-to-face interviews was 2,686. The corresponding sample size for Welsh-domiciled students was 744.

The response rate to the first 'opt-in' stage was 30 per cent (varying from 8 to 45 per cent). The response rate to the second 'main survey' stage was 72 per cent (varying from 74 per cent among Welsh HEIs to 62 per cent among OU students). This gives an overall response rate of 24 per cent (of the original sample contacted by their institution). Of those students that took part in the survey, 86 per cent completed expenditure diaries. This is close to the target rate that was set of 88 per cent. The 86 per cent included 2,335 English-domiciled and 621 Welsh-domiciled students⁶⁰.

2. The Longitudinal Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE)

Overview

The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) is the main source for the collection and dissemination of statistics about publicly funded higher education in the UK. They are responsible for conducting the DLHE survey, the aim of which is to collect information on the activities of graduates approximately three and a half years after they have left Higher Education (HE).

This survey is carried out among the cohort of students who completed a Higher Education course at an institution in the UK. There are two stages to the survey. The primary stage (the Early Survey) is carried out six months after the courses end (or a longer period for a minority of eligible leavers). It is a census of individuals who have completed HE courses in the UK. The secondary stage of the survey (the Longitudinal Survey) is conducted on a sample of approximately 60,000 leavers who responded at the first stage. It takes the form of a follow-up at around three and a half years after their course had ended⁶¹.

Topics

All leavers were asked about what their main activity was on 24 November 2008, other qualifications obtained since 2004/05, details of all activities since 2004/05 and satisfaction with the course taken in 2004/05 and career to date. Leavers in employment were asked

⁶⁰ Johnson, C, Pollard, E, Hunt, W, Munro, M, Hillage, J, Parfremment, J and Low, N A (2009), 'Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2007/08 English-domiciled Students', DIUS Research Report 09 05, DIUS. Available at: <http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pdflibrary/rr0905.pdf>. Accessed: 20/05/2010.

⁶¹ HESA (2009), 'Destinations of leavers from Higher Education Institutions Longitudinal Survey of the 2004/05 cohort, Key Findings Report', HESA. Available at: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/dlhe_longitudinal/0405/Long_DLHE_0405_WEB.pdf. Accessed: 11/05/2010.

for details about their current employment and those participating in further study were asked for details of course and qualification aims. Additional questions were asked of those who had completed a research degree.

Sample & Response Rate

Early Survey

All students who graduated from full-time and part-time programmes from UK Higher Education Institutions (HEI) who were also domiciled in the UK, Channel Islands, Isle of Man or other EU countries prior to joining their HEI and were not known to have died. Students domiciled outside the EU were not included in the survey. In terms of the 2004/05 cohort, the Early Survey was issued to all 430,290 graduates. There was a response rate of 74 per cent where responses were received from 319,260 graduates⁶².

The Early Survey involves asking leavers about their activities six months after they completed their HE course. This stage of the survey is conducted by HEIs and institutions returned to HESA the data they have collected. These data are then used to collate statistics about the destinations of qualifiers by institution.

Longitudinal Survey

Universities passed contact details to IFF, the company that collected the data on behalf of HESA. In total, 160 HEIs were approached to participate in the survey and 158 agreed to do so. Of the two HEIs that chose not to participate, one had data protection concerns while the other did not have the resources available to them to extract contact details from their records. Four of the participating HEIs took the decision to conduct an opt-out exercise amongst their graduates⁶³.

The starting sample for the Longitudinal Survey was selected from the respondents of the Early Survey. All HEIs were asked to participate. The Longitudinal Survey is based on two sub-samples of the leavers who responded to the Early Survey. In terms of the 2004/05 cohort, 71,390 leavers were selected from across all institutions in order to make up sample A. This sample was a purposive sample. Some groups of leavers are over-sampled relative to other groups so that the sample is intentionally skewed towards foundation degree leavers, those who completed a Masters or Doctoral degree and non-white leavers. These groups were over-sampled to ensure that there would be sufficient numbers of graduates in key sub-groups to allow for separate statistical analyses of these groups. The responding students from the Early Survey were split into a large number of groups (strata). Different sampling fractions were then applied across the groups (see Table A1).

⁶² HESA (2009), op.cit.

⁶³ IFF (2009), 'Technical Report Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) Longitudinal Survey 2004/05', HESA. Available at: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/dlhe_longitudinal/Second_survey/Longitudinal_DLHE_0809_Technical_Report_FINAL_280709.pdf. Accessed: 11/05/2010.

Table A1: Sample Strata⁶⁴

Strata	Sampling fraction (%)
Foundation degree and RC taught students	100
Doctorate degree and Masters degree mainly by research	100
Black, Mixed and Other ethnic group students	100
Asian students	35
Students in receipt of Disability Student Allowance (DSA)	35
NI domiciled students	60
Students who studied at an NI HEI	60
Welsh domiciled students	40
Non-Welsh domiciled students	25
Scottish domiciled	25
Students at Scottish HEIs	25
Training and Development Agency (TDA) funded students	5
All other students	5

In 2004/05, Sample A was made up of a total of 26,245 responses. An additional 89,605 of the remaining 247,870 graduates for whom an email address was available were contacted. The extra 15,155 responses to the survey made up a non-purposive, additional sample B. Samples A and B were then combined and the total number of responses was 41,395.

The response rates for Sample A by method used are as follows: Online Survey (19 per cent), Postal Survey (11 per cent) and Telephone Survey (29 per cent). The overall response rate for Sample A was 39 per cent. In terms of the Online Survey for Sample B, the response rate was 17 per cent.

Methodology & Data Collection

Longitudinal Survey

A mixed methods approach of postal, telephone and online questionnaires was used for data collection. The method/s used depended on the contact details provided by HE institutions and were used sequentially:

All email addresses that were supplied underwent a cleaning process prior to being used. The purpose of this was to identify emails which were incorrect in their format or had typing errors. These errors were corrected wherever it was possible to do so. However, not all emails reached their intended destination. Reasons for this include emails being undeliverable because for example their address was not known or the recipient's mail

⁶⁴ IFF (2009), op.cit.

servers were blocking the emails due to a full inbox. In total, 6,528 emails (25 per cent of all emails sent) failed to reach their destination⁶⁵.

All leavers in Sample A with an email address received email invites to complete an online questionnaire. Emails were sent out to graduates on 25 November 2008. A week after the first email, a reminder was sent out with a second reminder sent a few days later. The same approach was used for all leavers in Sample B for whom an email address was held.

Two weeks after an initial email was sent, leavers in Sample A who did not respond to the questionnaire sent by email plus all other leavers (in Sample A) for whom a postal address was available were sent a postal questionnaire. A month after the initial mailing a second questionnaire was sent⁶⁶.

Postal survey respondents were not led or directed through questionnaires in the same way as those who responded to either the online or telephone surveys. This not only meant there was a greater degree of routing error but also that people were able to give multiple responses to questions which were intended to be single response. The postal data had to undergo a cleaning process so that these structural errors could be eliminated⁶⁷.

Contact attempts were then made by telephone for leavers in Sample A, who had not responded to the questionnaire online or by post and for whom a telephone number had been provided by their HEI. A maximum of seven calls were made to each respondent.

The survey instruments varied in length depending on the method that was used. The telephone questionnaire was 39 pages in length⁶⁸.

Weights

Given the similarities and differences between Sample A and Sample B, the decision was taken that it was appropriate to combine the samples and analyse them together. The weights for the two samples were calculated separately and together provide national level weighting for all 41,379 interviews completed. In order to ensure that the weighted survey findings were representative of the early DLHE population the samples were weighted firstly to correct for selection bias. These weights were computed by inverting the sampling fraction. The samples were then corrected for response bias. An additional weight was also developed to allow for analysis at individual HEI level⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ IFF (2009), op.cit.

⁶⁶ HESA (2009), op.cit.

⁶⁷ IFF (2009), op.cit.

⁶⁸ HESA (2009), op.cit.

⁶⁹ IFF (2009), op.cit.

3. National Student Survey (NSS)

Overview

The NSS is a national initiative, conducted annually since 2005, and is a census of final year students on a course leading to undergraduate credits/qualifications across the UK. Example qualifications would include Bachelors Degrees, Foundation Degrees, Higher Education Certificates and Diplomas. It is commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on behalf of the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the Department for Employment and Learning (DELNI), the Training and Development Agency (TDA) and Skills for Health.

The survey runs across all publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and participating HEIs in Scotland. One private institution, The University of Buckingham, also participate in the survey. From 2008 onwards, Further Education Colleges (FECs) with directly funded higher education students in England have also been eligible to participate.

The purpose of the survey is to provide students the opportunity to give their opinions on what they liked about their time at their institution as well as things that they felt could have been improved. Student feedback is used to compile year on year comparative data that is published online where prospective students and their advisors can use the results to help make informed choices of what they want to study and where they want to study it. The data are also useful for universities, students' unions or colleges in order that they can facilitate best practice and enhance the learning experience for their students⁷⁰.

Topics

Students are asked a number of questions in relation to their courses on a number of different topics including: teaching, course assessment, feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, personal development and overall satisfaction. In addition, students are also given the opportunity to give positive and/or negative comments on their student learning experience as a whole at their university/college. Participating institutions have the option of asking their students additional questions, though this does not include HEIs in Wales⁷¹.

Methodology & Data Collection

Once participating universities and colleges pass contact details for eligible students to Ipsos MORI, eligible students receive an email inviting them to complete the survey online. Ipsos MORI follow up non-respondents to the online survey by post (sending a postal questionnaire) and then telephone in order to boost response rates and ensure the survey results are robust.

⁷⁰ Ipsos MORI, HEFCE, NUS, IPSOS (2010), 'Frequently Asked Questions', HEFCE. Available at: <http://www.thestudentsurvey.com/faqs.asp>. Accessed: 20/05/2010.

⁷¹ Ipsos MORI (2010), 'National Student Survey 2010 Guidance for Institutions and Students' Unions', Ipsos MORI. Available at: http://www.planning.salford.ac.uk/surveys/NSS/nss_2010_guidance.pdf. Accessed: 20/05/2010.

Students are able to state that they wish not to take part at any stage when Ipsos MORI contacts them, and they are then not contacted again. Students are able to opt out of the survey, however they must actively opt out as not responding to either the email, postal questionnaire or the telephone interview does not constitute an opt-out. Data are also collected on the identities of students opting out. They are asked for the same identification information as those students that do respond to the survey.

The main survey is made up of 22 questions. In 2010, eligible students were able to complete the survey online between 11 January and the end of April 2010. Eligible students received an email inviting them to complete the survey before the end of February 2010. Students studying NHS subjects undertake practice placements and as a result their experience of higher education is not the same as students on other courses. Therefore students studying NHS subjects are asked extra questions about their practice placement in addition to the standard 22 questions that make up the main survey⁷².

Institutions that opted to ask additional questions in the survey only do so by students completing the questionnaire online. Students that participate in the survey by post or telephone are not asked additional questions. Students are not obligated to respond to these extra questions and can decline the invitation to complete them. Where these additional questions are not completed, the main NSS questions are still taken into account⁷³.

Sample & Response Rate

All final year students studying on courses leading to undergraduate credits or qualifications are surveyed, inclusive of all final year HE students at colleges in England. In addition students on more flexible part-time programmes (whose final year cannot be so easily predicted) are surveyed during their fourth year of study. Those who have withdrawn from study during their final year also have valuable feedback and so are also included in the survey. Students repeating their penultimate year are surveyed but not when they eventually progress to their final year of study. Students surveyed in 2009 are not surveyed again in 2010.

The survey is carried out across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Scottish universities that also participate in the survey are as follows: Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow School of Art, Heriot-Watt University, Napier University, Robert Gordon University, University of Aberdeen, University of Dundee, University of Edinburgh, University of Glasgow, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling and the University of Strathclyde⁷⁴.

In terms of generating a sample, institutions are given an NSS target list of students that are eligible to participate in the survey. For HEIs, NSS target lists are generated from HESA data, and for Further Education Colleges (FECs) target lists are generated from ILR

⁷² Ipsos MORI, HEFCE, NUS, IPSOS (2010), op.cit.

⁷³ Ipsos MORI (2010), op.cit.

⁷⁴ Ipsos MORI, HEFCE, NUS, IPSOS (2010), op.cit.

data. Participating institutions are requested not to remove students from the target list. They may, however, exclude students from the survey if they fit into one of the three following categories: 1) Deceased students, 2) Students with serious health difficulties, where seeking a response may be distressing for the students and 3) Students who request that they do not wish to be contacted. Institutions are asked not to provide contact details for these students but to still include these students on the sample⁷⁵.

Participating institutions pass contact details for eligible students on to Ipsos MORI under the authority of HEFCE. As a member of the Market Research Society Ipsos MORI handle all details and responses in full accordance with data protection legislation⁷⁶.

For the purposes of raising awareness of the survey and boosting response rates, there is a strong promotional campaign for the NSS amongst final year undergraduate students. Institutions and students' unions are encouraged to promote the survey locally while ensuring all students are given ample opportunity to give honest feedback on their experience.

A number of different types of promotional materials are utilised by institutions and students' unions to promote the National Student Survey. They are detailed in Table A2 below.

Table A2: NSS Promotional Methods⁷⁷

Method	Summary
Design Competition	Run a competition amongst students to develop and produce a design for the survey promotional materials.
Flyers	Distribute flyers and make them available in reception areas, communal areas (e.g. libraries and cafeterias), in lectures and seminars.
Pens & Post-it Notes	Distribute pens and post-it notes to students in lectures and seminars. Make them available in communal areas and distribute with flyers.
Newspaper Articles	Ipsos MORI prepare template newspaper articles that can be used in institution and students' union papers and magazines.
Circular Letters	Ipsos MORI prepare template circular letters aimed at both academic staff and students.
Presentation Slides	A set of PowerPoint slides aimed at students are made available to institutions for the purposes of raising awareness about the survey and encouraging online completion of the survey. They are tools for communicating the purpose of the NSS that can be used at the beginning or end of lectures with final year students.
Prize Draws and/or other incentives	There is no evidence to suggest that the prize draws and incentives on their own have increased response rates. However, there is evidence to suggest that institutions and students' unions which organised a prize draw/incentive

⁷⁵ Ipsos MORI (2010), op.cit.

⁷⁶ Ipsos MORI, HEFCE, NUS, IPSOS (2010), op.cit.

⁷⁷ Ipsos MORI (2010), op.cit.

Table A2: NSS Promotional Methods⁷⁷

	benefited from a marketing momentum which in turn contributed to raising awareness about the survey. In order to encourage completion of the survey online, it is recommended that eligibility is narrowed to those students completing the survey online.
Senior Support	Support from senior staff can be integral to the success of the survey at an institution. Senior staff can write to students and departmental staff to explain the nature and purpose of the survey. They can also remind staff and students that survey responses are treated anonymously, and emphasise that the NSS is an opportunity for students to express their honest opinions.
Students' Union Support	Students' union support can give the NSS an approachable, student-friendly face. Support might involve co-ordinating an institution's promotional campaign with the SU. The SU could also convey to students how feedback from previous years of the survey has had an impact. Another way to give support is by reminding students about the survey throughout the survey period.
Academic Staff	Academic staff have a great deal of contact with students and so are often well placed to communicate to them the benefits and importance of the survey. They can communicate directly with current students about how prospective students use the results and also how the results can more generally be used to improve the overall student learning experience.

Response rates in each JACS (Joint Academic Coding System)-based subject in each institution are monitored by Ipsos MORI. There is a target of a minimum 50 per cent response rate in each subject⁷⁸. The overall 2009 response rate was 62 per cent where 223,363 students participated in the survey. The total number of students who responded to the survey increased from 2008 by 3,000 students. 2009 was the first time when students were able to respond to the survey by phone and post, in addition to the online survey used in previous years. This change has meant an increase in the overall response rate. For example, students studying NHS subjects had an increase in response rate from 37 per cent in 2008 to 65 per cent in 2010⁷⁹.

4. NUS/HSBC Student Experience Research

Overview

This is a programme of research commissioned by the NUS and HSBC bank in order to investigate students' expectations and experiences of university. It was carried out

⁷⁸ Ipsos MORI (2010), op.cit.

⁷⁹ HEFCE (2009), 'National Student Survey shows increased participation and continued high levels of satisfaction among higher education students', HEFCE. Available at: <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/news/hefce/2009/nss.htm>. Accessed: 20/05/2010.

between May and November 2008. GfK NOP are the market research company that were responsible for conducting the research.

Topics

A variety of areas were covered in the survey including accommodation, finances, assessment, quality of teaching and availability of resources.

Methodology & Data Collection

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in this research in order to ensure both depth and breadth of understanding within the findings. The quantitative phase had two phases. The first was an online questionnaire. Sector agencies were consulted to shape the original survey instrument. The survey ran between 2 and 24 June 2008. The second phase was a small-scale survey of 250 school leavers who had been offered a place at a higher education institution. This survey ran between 17 and 28 July 2008.

Similarly, the qualitative phase consisted of two phases. The first consisted of six focus groups. These were conducted in June 2008 in four universities. The universities were selected to represent the differing types of institution within the British HE system and included Winchester, Reading, Leeds and Coventry. Focus group participants included students from all years of study on a range of course types. The second phase involved carrying out 12 depth interviews utilising an ethnographic approach. These were conducted in November 2008. As with the first stage of the qualitative research element, students from a range of years of study and course types were included.

Sample & Response Rate

In 2008, a total of 3,135 full-time undergraduate home students took part in the survey, fulfilling a variety of interlocking quotas to ensure the results were representative. These quotas included year of study, institution type and gender. The sample size for the small-scale survey of school leavers was 250⁸⁰.

5. The UNITE 'Student Experience Report'

Overview

The 'Student Experience Report', is commissioned by UNITE, a private company that provide student accommodation to over 30,000 students. The survey is carried out on an annual basis, and the first wave was conducted in October/November 2000. The study looks at a wide range of issues affecting the student population. UNITE use it as a market research tool to evolve their products and services to reflect the demands and aspirations of their customers.

⁸⁰ HSBC, GfK and NUS (2008), 'NUS Student Experience Report', NUS. Available at: http://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/4017/NUS_StudentExperienceReport.pdf. Accessed: 20/05/2010.

Topics

Questions are asked on a number of topics including: choice of university, overall student satisfaction, accommodation, parental influence, bursaries and fees, working and fees, finances and expenditure and personal values.

Methodology & Data Collection

The first six waves of the study were conducted by Ipsos MORI and the latest wave, Wave 7 has been conducted by TNS. It was undertaken during October/November 2006. The survey was conducted online and face-to-face. On average the face-to-face interviews were approximately 40 minutes in duration and online interviews took approximately 35 minutes to complete. When combined, the face-to-face and online results were attributed with the ratio 3:1.

Sample & Response Rate

As far as possible, the sample profile is monitored and matched to previous waves to ensure consistency and compatibility. To ensure that the profile of students in the sample is representative, quotas are set and data are weighted by gender, year of study, subject of study and ethnic minority. In total, 1,600 interviews were conducted with full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students at 20 universities across the UK. Of the total number of interviews, 580 were conducted face-to-face and 1,020 were completed online⁸¹.

6. The Impact of Institutional Financial Support in England: Higher Education Students' awareness, knowledge and take-up of Bursaries and Scholarships Overview

This is a survey of full-time Higher Education students in England, commissioned by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), and undertaken by Professor Claire Callender of Birkbeck University of London, and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research. The survey was conducted as part of a wider programme of research carried out for OFFA, which aimed to investigate Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) strategies for improving the awareness and take-up of institutional bursaries and scholarships in England. This programme of research was also aimed at exploring the awareness, knowledge, and take-up of institutional bursaries and scholarships amongst undergraduate students studying full-time, their parents and HE advisors in both schools and colleges.

Topics

The survey sought to explore students' awareness and knowledge of institutional bursaries and scholarships, and how they influenced student behaviour.

⁸¹ TNS Consumer (2007), 'UNITE Student Experience Report 2007', UNITE. Available at: [http://www.unite-group.co.uk/Attachments/000171/Student%20Experience%20Report %202007.pdf](http://www.unite-group.co.uk/Attachments/000171/Student%20Experience%20Report%202007.pdf). Accessed: 20/05/2010.

Methodology & Data Collection

Data were collected via a web-based online survey conducted in October 2008. Only students that had a non-blank email address on the Student Loans Company (SLC) records were included. Demographic data on students collected by SLC were linked to the survey responses, and this reduced the overall length of the questionnaire. It is assumed that this will have undoubtedly improved the response rate to the survey.

Sample & Response Rate

A sample of applicants for full-time study in 2008/09 was generated from the Student Loans Company (SLC). This made it possible to target a population of low and middle-income students using applicant household income data. Full-time students in receipt of full and partial government-funded maintenance grants who were the key beneficiaries of mandatory and non-mandatory bursaries were identified. Two-thirds of the sample were students with household incomes of £25,000 or below and so were in receipt of a full grant. The remaining one-third of students had household incomes of £25,001-£60,005 and so were in receipt of a partial grant.

The following students were not included in the survey:

- EU and International students
- Initial Teacher Training and PGCE students are excluded
- Students attending HEIs where tuition fees were lower than the maximum £3,145
- HE students registered at FE colleges
- Students in receipt of an NHS bursary (e.g. nurses, midwives)

A web-based online survey was conducted in October 2008 with an initial randomly selected sample of 20,000 students. Responses were received from 5,152 students at a response rate of 25.8 per cent. This is considered to be a good response rate for a web-based survey. Since 304 respondents were not attending Higher Education institutions, these were removed from the sample. This left 4,848 respondents in total.

There was little variation in survey response rates by student characteristics. There were clear biases in the sample in relation to gender, whether the student received a tuition fee loan and the date their student record was created. The majority of students surveyed had the following characteristics: female, aged 24 years or younger at the start of their course, White ethnicity, from households with a residual income of £5,000 or over but less than or equal to £25,000 and from a family where at least one parent held an Higher Education (HE) qualification.

Weights were created in order that the sample of survey respondents reflected the student population of interest⁸².

7. Higher and Further Education Students' Income, Expenditure and Debt in Scotland 2007/08 (SIED) (see also Appendix A)

Overview

This study was commissioned by the Scottish Government and conducted by the Scottish Centre for Employment Research at the University of Strathclyde Business School along with colleagues from the Business School and Department of Economics of the University of Glasgow.

This is a study of the income, expenditure and debt of students studying HE and FE in Scotland. The aim of the study is to examine the finances (particularly income), expenditure, debt and savings of Scottish-domiciled higher and further education students' and their attitudes to the financing of study in Scotland.

Topics

The main topics of the survey were: student background including key demographic information, education-related income, paid work, other income, student choices in relation to both studying and finances, financial well-being, expenditure, commercial credit, behaviour and attitudes and future aspirations and expectations.

Methodology & Data Collection

The 2007/08 study comprised both desk-based and empirical research and, in contrast to when the survey was conducted previously, employed a mixed methodology in which quantitative data was complemented by qualitative data. In addition, three surveys were conducted including one of a control group of non-students.

The three stages of the research were as follows:

Desk-based research involved three reviews: a) a review of previous surveys of student income, expenditure and debt, b) a review of academic literature related to student finances and c) a review of relevant government policy documents related to student finances and the funding of HE and FE.

Quantitative data collection via three surveys: a) a web-based screening survey, b) a web-based main survey and c) a postal survey.

Qualitative data collection via semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews.

⁸² Callender, C, Wilkinson, D and Hopkin, R (2009), 'The Impact of Institutional Financial Support in England: Higher Education Students' awareness, knowledge and take-up of bursaries and scholarships', OFFA. Available at: <http://www.offa.org.uk/publications>. Accessed: 20/05/2010.

Focusing on the quantitative data collection (stage 2) in 2007/08, a web-based approach was chosen to replace the face-to-face method used in the 2004/05 Scottish study in order to improve overall accessibility and rate of response to the main survey. Online surveys are increasingly popular, especially among younger age groups with greater access to the web, both on campus and at home.

a) Screening Survey

The sample type and size were drawn from responses to a screening survey that was disseminated by participating universities and colleges. It allowed students to actively opt-in to the study. Participation in the study and permission to access the students needed involved a long process of negotiation with all Scottish universities and colleges. An email containing a web-based screening survey was disseminated to all enrolled students at 48 institutions; 19 of these were HEIs and 29 were FE colleges.

This survey needed to screen out students not of the target group (e.g. post-graduate, allied health and foreign students). Extensive advertising was used on university and college campuses across Scotland to generate interest in the project. Students were also sent an email notification, through their host institutions, outlining the project and encouraging participation. Financial incentives, in the form of prize draws, were also used.

b) Main Survey

The final questionnaire required half an hour to complete. The research team issued financial incentives in the form of prize draws. A target of 14,000 eligible students had been set for the screening survey and this was not met. As a result it was decided to send the main survey to all students eligible and agreeing to participate.

Suggestions for improvement

It is thought that the response rate for the 2007/08 Scottish study could have been larger and more representative had potential respondents to the main survey been better incentivised to participate. In addition, the study had competition from other student surveys that were being carried out in Scotland around the same time.

One of these was the National Student Satisfaction Survey which had a strong incentive to encourage student participation whilst participating institutions offered no such incentive to participate in the student finance survey.

Furthermore, this National Student Satisfaction Survey was re-branded as the National Student Survey. There was potential for confusion amongst the target population between these surveys. Recommendations for the future include greater co-ordination amongst government departments to insure against overlaps in schedules of key student surveys.

In terms of the control survey, potential respondents were 'cold-called' without an offer of incentives. It is thought that this method will have had an adverse effect on the response rate achieved.

Not having direct access to students caused problems. For example, the research team had to negotiate with institutions so that they could access students. These negotiations

were carried out with multiple contacts within over 60 institutions simultaneously. Negotiations were time-consuming and generally resource-intensive. Even once access had been negotiated, communication with students for the screening survey was established by host institutions only. The success of the project relied heavily on the goodwill of host institutions to disseminate the email, the screening survey and follow-up reminder messages. As a result the initial scheduling of the project was jeopardised and delays were then inevitable. The survey was disseminated later than anticipated at a time that fell into the vacation period.

In terms of gaining access to students at FE colleges, using email as the main method of contact is problematic. This is because not all participating FE colleges in Scotland communicate directly and regularly with its students via email. There are implications that result from this. Trying to conduct a web-based survey with FE students is rendered unfeasible. The limited capacity of some FE colleges to make contact with their students limits their scope to participate. Furthermore, the nature of enrolment at FE and types of education provision makes calculating the size of the target population difficult.

Recommendations for future studies that incorporate the study of FE students' finances should include only exploring students at colleges that have regular direct email communication with their students. A better scenario might be to have a research design that features a sample of FE college participants rather than aim to include all FE college students as participants.

Questionnaire Design

Incorporating FE students into the study was problematic in other ways. The questionnaire for FE students was slightly longer as further questions and answers that were appropriate to that group were added. This resulted in a myriad of routing options and so the time required to complete the questionnaire also increased. It is possible that the increase in time that students had to sacrifice in order to complete the study had a negative impact on the completion rate of the main survey questionnaire.

It is clear then that there are many potential issues that can be faced when surveying FE students. This may be why many English, Welsh and European studies do not extend to FE students.

c) Postal Survey

For comparison purposes, there was a desire to survey non-students and gather data on their financial details. This comparison was achieved through a separate control survey with a focus on the 19-21 age group. The control survey had similar questions on income, expenditure and debt.

Sample & Response Rate

Data were collected on three groups of students:

- those in full-time higher education in HEIs and FE colleges

- those in part-time higher education studying at HEIs and FE colleges including the Open University
- those studying further education in FE colleges.

Allied health students such as nursing and midwifery have their own, different funding arrangements, and so were not included in the project.

Within the three groups of students from which data were collected, sub-groups were identified as 'key reporting categories' for separate analysis. These were as follows: sex, age group, level of study (first degree, sub-degree), parental socio-economic group, whether students' parents had HE experience, students' accommodation, family circumstances of student household (presence of partner and/or children), first year students, final year students, students studying medicine, students who have taken out a student loan and students who work during term-time.

a) Screening Survey

Working alongside the Scottish Government, it was estimated that around 160,000 eligible students would be contactable. Students were sent through their institutions an introductory, explanatory email followed by an email with the screening survey. Students were then sent several email reminders about the screening survey. Just under 22,000 students accessed the survey; 4,000 of these were ineligible and another 8,600 quit the survey before completing it. In total 9,265 eligible students completed the survey of which 9,181 were useable in that they agreed to be re-contacted in order that they can participate in the main survey.

b) Main Survey

In total, 9,181 students were sent the survey along with several reminders. Of the 6,409 who accessed the survey, 5,314 completed it achieving a good response rate of 58 per cent. However this 58 per cent applies to students that responded to the opt-in, were eligible and had agreed to be re-contacted. There was considerable attrition between institutions emailing students and those responding to the opt-in, and there was then further attrition between responding to the opt-in and being contacted for the survey. The 5,314 responses that were received were then cleaned leaving a total number of 4,965 final useable responses. Of these 4,331 were full-time HE students, 520 were part-time HE students and 114 were full-time FE students.

c) Postal Survey

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) were asked to create a random sample of young Scots with two or more Highers (or equivalent) in 2004. These young persons would have been eligible to attend university. Altogether, 6,000 young people were contacted in order to achieve a planned 1,000 non-student responses.

The target sample was reduced down to 5,697 due to a total of 303 questionnaires being returned as undeliverable. The final response rate was 10.2 per cent whereby 581 useable questionnaires were returned. Questionnaires were returned by non-students, young Scots currently studying as well as graduates. Students varied in terms of the courses that they

were doing. Some were at undergraduate level and below while others were studying towards post-graduate qualifications.

Responses were weighted by age and sex, and the final useable sub-samples were 277 first degree students and 90 non-students. The control group survey was used in two ways:

- student responses were used to provide data triangulation with the main survey, and so a method through which the main survey data could be validated
- non-student responses provided a comparable indication of the income, expenditure and debt of non-student young Scots.

Weights

Main Survey

Data were broken down by level of study into the groups which were of primary interest. These included full-time HE students, part-time HE students (including those studying courses at the Open University), part-time HE HEI, part-time HE Open University and full-time and part-time FE students. It became apparent at an early stage that an insufficient volume of responses had been received from PT FE students to enable any valid conclusions to be drawn.

All of the other groups of students were weighted in relation to population totals for full-time HE, part-time HE and full-time FE. The totals for full-time students were further broken down for weighting by degree/sub-degree students. This resulted in four different sub-populations that were weighted separately, giving in effect four different surveys. This separation was done because of variation in participation by institution and student. For example, the response rates for full-time degrees were reasonable where as participation by sub-degree HE students was less representative as most came from a small number of participating FE colleges.

With regards to the analysis a weighted mean was taken of the degree and sub-degree means where necessary in order to allow for the discussion of figures for the FT HE sector as a whole. Weights were based on population totals found in HESA and FES data for the year 2006/07 (the most recent available data for both sectors).

A check was carried out to see whether the so weighted survey was biased by social class. This was done by checking the proportion of students that were in receipt of the Young Students Bursary. Results showed that the proportion in the survey was less than that found in the student population. Therefore, the survey results did not necessarily reflect the financial circumstances of students from lower income backgrounds as accurately as possible⁸³.

⁸³ Warhurst, C, Commander, J, Nickson, D, Symeonides, A, Furlong, A, Findley, J, Wilson, F and Hurrell, S (2009), 'Higher and Further Education Students' Income, Expenditure and Debt in Scotland 2007-08',

8. NatCen Study of Muslim Students

Overview

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills commissioned this study. They partnered up with the National Union of Students and the Federation of Student Islamic Societies. The overall aim of the study was to assess and examine issues that affect Muslim students in HE, in particular their needs, views on important issues, experiences of discrimination and cohesion with other students on campus. The National Union of Students and Federation of Student Islamic Societies hoped to use the survey results to promote the interests and welfare of Muslim students. The survey is currently at the stage of data collection. The government wished to use the study to promote equality and diversity in the Higher Education sector and encourage campuses to be cohesive and tolerant learning places. The survey was closed in May 2010.

Topics

A broad range of topics were covered in the study and include experience of university life, finances, aspirations for the future, mixing on campus, religion, experience of discrimination, views on government policies and views on extremism and political issues.

Methodology & Data Collection

Focus groups with Muslim students were used to develop an online questionnaire. Along with this an internet survey was being used to gather data for purposes of comparison on students of all faiths or no faith for comparison. Workshops with Muslim students will be set up in order to discuss the findings of both surveys. A literature review was also carried out to find out what is currently known about Muslim students in Higher Education.

Sample & Response Rate

The questionnaire was hoped to be completed by approximately 1,500 Muslim students from 30 English universities. A sample of universities in England has been selected at random. An attempt was made for the sample of universities to have a geographical spread and include some universities who are likely to have higher numbers of Muslim students and others who are likely to have far lower numbers of Muslim students.

Universities were asked to provide some information about their student population to work out how many students at each university should be invited to participate in the survey. They were then provided with instructions on how to select students for the survey. Universities were asked to select a sample of students to take part in the survey and forward letters in sealed envelopes to the selected students. These invitation letters contained a URL to type in to an Internet browser and unique login details for each selected student. One reminder email was sent in most universities, which included a link to the survey website.

The aim was to include a representative sample of Muslim students. For this reason, UK home students from different ethnic groups as well as overseas students from different countries were sent letters about the survey. As universities do not consistently hold data on the religious affiliation of their students, ethnic group and country of domicile information was used to select students. As a result, some of the students contacted about the survey would not be Muslim, however the letter explained why they have been contacted and that they need not take any further action.

For the comparative survey of students from all backgrounds, universities were asked to select a number of UK and overseas students from all ethnic groups and countries of domicile. A number of students from all backgrounds at participating universities were invited to take part in this study⁸⁴.

The response rate for both parts of the survey was very low, although it is not possible to know the exact figure due to the unknown level of eligibility among selected students. A review study is currently being conducted by NatCen to identify the main reasons for this low response rate.

9. Family Resources Survey Overview

The Family Resources Survey collects information on the incomes and circumstances of private households in the United Kingdom. The Family Resources Survey (FRS) was launched in October 1992 to meet the information requirements of analysts in the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). The survey is sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions.

Topics

The data gathered are related to the following topics: income (including receipt of social security benefits), housing costs and circumstances of household members e.g. childcare costs.

Methodology & Data Collection

Since 1992, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) have been conducting fieldwork for the FRS. Interviews are conducted jointly by interviewers from ONS and NatCen. A letter explaining to the occupier that they have been chosen for the survey and that an interviewer will call is sent before interviewers visit the selected addresses. Interviewers are asked to call at the address and if contact is not made on the first attempt they are asked to make a minimum of four calls. These calls have to be made at different times of the day and on different days of the week. In 2008/09, an average of six calls were made per address before interviews

⁸⁴ NatCen (2010), 'Study of Muslim Students', NUS. Available at: <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/study/study-of-muslim-students>. Accessed 18/05/2010.

recorded them as non-contacts. Interview durations varied according to household size and circumstance. The average interview length was just under an hour and a half.

Sample & Response Rate

The population was private households in the United Kingdom. The Great Britain FRS sample is drawn from the Royal Mail's small user's Postcode Address File (PAF) and a stratified clustered probability sampling procedure is used. The small user's PAF is a record of all addresses where less than 50 items of mail are received daily. The survey samples 1,848 postcode sectors where each sector is known as a Primary Sampling Unit (PSU). The original sample chosen for 2008/09 consisted of 48,306 addresses. Of these, 5,347 were empty or did not contain any private households and so were ineligible. After removing households with uncertain eligibility as well as known ineligibility, the effective sample includes 42,959 households. In total, the number of households that fully co-operated was 25,093 (58 per cent) and the number that partially co-operated was 766 (2 per cent), 13,996 (33 per cent) refused to be interviewed and interviewers were unable to make contact with 1,904 households (4 per cent).

A maximum of three reasons for refusal are recorded. The most common reasons given for non-participation in the survey in Great Britain were 'invasion of privacy' (17 per cent) and 'couldn't be bothered' (15 per cent). Around 9 per cent of households raised concerns about confidentiality, 11 per cent reported that they were 'genuinely too busy' and 11 per cent said they 'don't believe in surveys'. Response rates for the survey varied by area and the highest response rate was in Wales where 64 per cent of all households that were selected responded fully. The area with the lowest response rate of 47 per cent was in London. These response rates reflect what is found in many other major surveys such as the Census of Population where response rates are generally lower in large city areas. As well as variations in response rates by area, there were a number of household characteristics that were associated with differential response rates. For example, households with dependent children had higher response rates. In contrast, single-parent households and couples with non-dependent children had lower response rates⁸⁵.

10. Futuretrack

Overview

Futuretrack is an independent longitudinal study funded by the education research charity HECSU (Higher Education Careers Service Unit). It was developed to study the relationship between higher education and employment and clarify the social, economic and educational factors that career choices are based on. A team at the University of Warwick Institute for Employment Research (IER) are responsible for conducting the report. The Warwick Research team contracted Snapsurveys who are a specialist research company to assist with the design, hosting and collection of the Futuretrack survey data.

⁸⁵ Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), 'Family Resources Survey, United Kingdom, 2008-09', Crown Copyright, 2010. Available from: http://statistics.dwp.gov.uk/asd/frs/2008_09/frs_2008_09_report.pdf. Accessed: 14/09/2010.

Topics

Key demographic information is collected on variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic group and domicile region. It includes questions on attitudes to higher education, career planning, choice making and funding and debt. Students are also asked to rate their written, verbal, numerical and computer skills and evaluate their overall self-confidence.

Methodology & Data Collection

The survey is a four stage longitudinal study. Stage 1 was conducted in 2005/06 when respondents were entering higher education. They were then asked to respond again a year later in 2007 (Stage 2) and then again after three years of study in 2009 (Stage 3). Stage 4 is due to be carried out in the winter of 2011/12 when the majority of respondents will have started work.

Data are collected via an online questionnaire that takes approximately 20 minutes to complete. Respondents have the option of stopping the survey half-way through, saving their progress at any time and returning to the questionnaire later. The survey can only be completed once and duplicate responses are removed.

With the latter stages of the study, the research team may contact respondents by telephone. They are prompted in the survey to give permission to the research team to contact them in this way. However, researchers aim to continue using email to contact respondents. They are asked to update the researchers with changes to their email address as well as provide a mobile phone number.

The Futuretrack survey does not conflict with the DLHE and colleagues working on the two surveys work closely together to ensure that this does not happen. Respondents are expected to be asked to contribute to DLHE in the January following the summer in which they graduate while Stage 4 of the Futuretrack survey is carried out around 18 months after that.

Eligible students completing the NSS are invited to participate in the Futuretrack survey if they so wish.

Sample & Response Rate

The survey applies to the cohort of 2006 UCAS applicants and is a single cohort study. This is inclusive of Overseas and UK applicants. Stage 1 of the survey drew responses from 130,000 applicants. Students that applied to go to university in 2006, or deferred their entry until 2007 are eligible for Futuretrack. Follow-up interviews are conducted with a small sample of respondents.

Incentives are offered to respondents if they complete the survey. If they do they are eligible to win a share of £26,000 with the top prize being £1,000. Where respondents

invite friends that are eligible to complete the survey, they are included in another prize draw where they have a chance of winning an iPod touch⁸⁶.

11. Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)

Overview

PRES was designed by the Higher Education Academy and began in 2007. Since then it has been conducted annually. The overall aim of the survey is to find out what research students' views are about their experiences and use them as a benchmark against the national aggregate.

Topics

The aim of the survey is to understand how postgraduate students feel about core elements of their higher degree programmes. The questionnaire asks students to think about particular aspects of their study such as: supervision, intellectual climate, skills development, professional career development and goals.

Methodology & Data Collection

An online survey tool is used to gather feedback from current postgraduate research students. In 2009, PRES was open between 2 March and 31 May. The online survey is sent via email and is five pages in length. A gateway webpage was set up where students were requested to log in to the survey explaining that results could not be attached to their identity. It was also possible for students to go through to the survey via a direct link if they wished to complete it entirely anonymously.

Sample & Response Rate

In 2009, 82 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) from across the UK with postgraduate provision participated in the survey. The online survey was sent via email to over 65,000 postgraduate research students i.e. postgraduate students registered for research awards. In total, 18,644 replies were received at a response rate of 28.6 per cent. The sample was broadly representative of the postgraduate research population in the UK. Part-time students are slightly under-represented in the sample, mainly because HESA categorise writing-up students as part-time, even though these students may consider themselves to be full-time⁸⁷.

⁸⁶ HECSU (2010), 'FutureTrack'. Available at: <http://www.futuretrack.ac.uk/public/getinvolvedfaqs.php>. Accessed: 17/05/2010.

⁸⁷ Park, C (2009), 'The research student experience', The Higher Education Academy. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/supportingresearch/alldisplay?type=resources&newid=ourwork/postgraduate/Lessons_from_PRES&site=york. Accessed: 17/05/2010.

Case study: University of Newcastle

A great effort was made to promote the PRES 2007 survey, however only a 29 per cent response rate was achieved. While the rate was above average, it was still not considered to be fully representative and so a means by which the survey could be marketed more directly was sought. As a result, a directed marketing mechanism was employed for later surveys conducted in 2008 and 2009.

A gateway webpage with a university identity was created for PRES 2008 with the use of Shibboleth software. Students were requested to log in to the survey and information was given explaining that survey results could not be attached to their identity. In addition, a direct link to the survey was also supplied as an anonymous alternative and an explanation was given that anyone who accessed the survey directly would receive reminder emails. The gateway allowed for the identification of those who had accessed the survey to be collected and so only students who had not accessed the survey could then be reminded.

For the PRES 2009, a new automated customised system was developed with the use of Python/Zope and MySQL because the previous system used in 2008 required a considerable amount of manual manipulation. The new system allowed for the targeting of students at a faculty, school or departmental/institute level by way of a personalised email and prize draw incentive without compromising anonymity.

The system had an immediate impact in 2008 to increase the response rate by 14 percentage points from 29 per cent to 43 per cent. This increase was maintained in 2009 which is an indication of the success of the system. It is possible that sending further reminders could have achieved an even better increase in response rate.

The main concern with using this method was that students would feel their anonymity may have been compromised as it was possible to identify who had not completed the survey. Providing an option to respond in complete anonymity was important but the numbers showed that very few students used this option and none raised an issue of anonymity⁸⁸.

Case study: University of East London (UEL)

For PRES 2007, the survey was advertised via email only and obtained a poor response rate. As a result, UEL attempted to exploit a number of avenues to ensure students were aware of and responded to PRES 2009. A paper-based version of PRES 2009 was adopted because it was believed that many students might not have access to computers off-campus. A majority of UEL's postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are returners to HE that are striving to achieve a fine balance between their family, professional and study commitments. They come from specific socio-economic backgrounds where many are

⁸⁸ Hetherington, R (2010), 'Electronically maintained directed marketing to improve PRES response rates', The Higher Education Academy. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/postgraduate/pres_case_study_newcastle.pdf. Accessed: 18/05/2010.

from lower income families and immigrant groups, for example. The paper version had the potential of being more accessible and gave the option of off-line completion. It could also be completed in several sittings rather than a single session. Finally, a number of PGRs prefer to use their personal email addresses and not the official institutional ones they are given. Not all students that do this keep the university informed when they change their email addresses. As a result they may not read the emails they receive about the survey.

The survey was advertised by way of a number of methods including email and follow-up messages. The decision was taken to distribute paper copies of the questionnaire as well as administer it electronically. Freepost envelopes were not provided to students so they had to cover the cost of postage if they wished to return the paper version. Links to the online version of the questionnaire were emphasised. Students that were domiciled outside the UK did not receive paper copies. Instead, they were emailed and offered a hard copy if they required it. No students chose to take this option.

The mailshot included a covering letter and a paper questionnaire. The process of preparing the latter was time-consuming but not complicated. After receiving completed paper questionnaires, an administrator accessed PRES online in the same manner as a respondent and keyed in the responses. This process was a laborious one as it took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

The result was that 202 of the 750 students completed the survey with a response rate of 27 per cent. Altogether, 45 of the 202 responses were received in the form of a hard copy indicating that the paper-based method was preferable to some students. The only other time in which UEL took part in the survey was PRES 2007 when the achieved response rate was 16 per cent. It is important to mention that there was also a prize draw incentive in PRES 2009 which makes it difficult to attribute the higher response rate solely to the paper questionnaire. However 25 per cent of respondents did not choose to enter and so it is reasonable to conclude that the paper questionnaire had a positive impact⁸⁹.

12. Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)

Overview

Like the PRES, PTES is also designed by the Higher Education Academy. The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) ran for the first time in 2009. The survey was developed by the Higher Education Academy to collect feedback on the experiences of current taught postgraduate students.

Topics

The questionnaire included questions on a number of topics including learning resources, skills and personal development, career and professional development, assessment, feedback and organisation and management of their programme.

⁸⁹ Brooks, T (2010), 'Using a paper-based questionnaire to enhance responses to PRES', The Higher Education Academy. Available at: http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/postgraduate/Pres_case_study_uel.pdf. Accessed: 16/05/2010.

Methodology & Data Collection

The same methods used for the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) are used for the PTES. Both use online questionnaires. An electronic template of the PTES questionnaire is given to each participating institution before the survey goes live. This is so that they can alter them and include questions specific to their institutions e.g. what school/department the student belongs to. Each institution is responsible for inviting their students by email to participate in the study. The Higher Education Academy do not have access to student details.

Sample & Response Rate

The survey achieved an overall response rate of 17.7 per cent, with 14,421 students from 30 HEIs in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland taking part. Having compared the profile of respondents in the sample with HESA statistics on the population, it is evident that the demographic characteristics of the sample are not markedly different from that of the population of such students in the three UK nations⁹⁰.

13. The Learner Views Survey

Overview

The Learner Views Survey applies to all colleges and providers within the scope of the Framework for Excellence. The purpose of the survey is to capture learner's perceptions of their learning providers. The Learning and Skills Council uses the survey results to inform future learners about different colleges in the sector.

Topics

The survey asks respondents for their name, date of birth, the code number for their college or learning provider and their personal learner number as well as the type of learning they are currently undertaking whether this be a course (in a college), a learning programme (as an Apprentice or on a Train to Gain programme) or a training programme (being trained by an employer). Learners are then asked for their perceptions on the following:

- the information, advice and guidance they received from their learning providers
- the quality of teaching and learning on their programme
- their overall satisfaction with their learning experience; their satisfaction with the level of support available to them from their provider and
- whether they are treated with respect.

⁹⁰ Park, C and Kulej, G (2010), 'PTES 2009 REPORT', The Higher Education Academy. Available at: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/postgraduate/PTES2009Report.pdf>.

Respondents also give feedback on whether their provider is responsive to their views⁹¹.

Methodology & Data Collection

The survey is available for completion online or via paper copy. Learners complete the online survey by following a link to the dedicated survey webpage. Colleges and providers can decide themselves how to distribute the link, whether this be in emails, via an intranet site or on posters etc⁹².

The survey is relatively short and respondents are advised from the beginning that they will be asked no more than 17 questions. Answers to the survey are sent directly to Ipsos MORI and RCU who then collate responses and send results to the Learning and Skills Council⁹³.

Sample & Response Rate

The survey is applicable to all learners on LSC-funded priority programmes, except those on Learn Direct programmes and offender learners on custodial sentences. All providers within the scope of the Framework for Excellence must participate and undertake the survey in the period 2 January to 13 February 2009. Colleges and learning providers can confirm their eligibility by referring to the Framework for Excellence Provider Guide 2009/10⁹⁴.

There is a clause in the criteria for completion that states that if a learning provider or college undertook a voluntary learner views survey and returned statistically robust results, they are not required to undertake the survey. However, those who did return robust results to the voluntary survey could opt in to take part if they wished to do so and in which case their voluntary survey result was discounted⁹⁵.

Response rates to the survey were available 24 hours a day during the survey period. The responses included breakdowns by age, gender and highest level of study. Learning providers were advised to make use of this information in order to monitor response levels and to ensure that they obtain at least the minimum numbers of respondents required to attain a reliable measure of Learner Views⁹⁶.

⁹¹ Ipsos (2009/10) 'Learner Views Survey' Available at: <http://surveys.ipsosinteractive.com/wix/p384385385.aspx?v=1>

⁹² LSC (2009), 'The Learner Views Survey: Guide for Colleges and Providers (2 January-13 February 2009)' Available at: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/Learner_Views_Survey-Guide_for_Colleges_and_Providers.pdf

⁹³ Ipsos (2009/10), op.cit.

⁹⁴ LSC (2009), op.cit.

⁹⁵ LSC (2009), op.cit.

⁹⁶ LSC (2009), op.cit.

14. Learner Destinations Survey

Overview

The Learner Destinations Survey is one of the Performance Indicators reported in the Framework for Excellence. The aim is not to find out how satisfied learners are with their college or training provider, but to establish what impact their learning, funded by the Government, has had on them. The Learning Skills Council (LSC) uses the results to assist in improving courses for future learners and to provide information on the choices learners have upon completion of their courses. Participants' details and responses are kept confidential to the research teams at Ipsos MORI, RCU, the LSC and BIS⁹⁷.

Topics

The research questions explore learners' progression into employment, further education and training. Some respondents are asked questions about their current pay and hours. This is in order to establish their economic situation following their learning⁹⁸.

Methodology & Data Collection

The most recent Learner Destinations survey related to the 2008/09 destinations of those learners completing in 2007/08 and was undertaken centrally by Ipsos MORI. No action was required by providers. Ipsos MORI attempted to contact all learners who completed LSC-funded learning programmes in 2007/08 to find out what they did during 2008/09. However learners who declined permission (opting out) on their enrolment form were not contacted⁹⁹.

There are two phases to the survey, a data-matching phase and a telephone survey phase. The data-matching phase uses Individualised Learner Record (ILR) records and data was supplied from LSC, HEFCE and DCSF. During the telephone survey phase, a telephone survey of former learners was undertaken centrally by LSC's contractors. Survey data was matched to the learner record on the ILR, which means that the LSC do not have to ask learners a lot of background information about themselves and their learning.

The telephone survey phase finished in October 2009. The survey data was then matched with information about learners who have progressed into further learning. The final performance figures were passed to LSC in spring 2010.

Sample & Response Rate

⁹⁷ LSC (2009), 'Framework for Excellence 2009/10 Learner Destinations Survey Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)' Available at: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/National/Learner_Destinations_FAQs.pdf

⁹⁸ LSC (2009), op.cit.

⁹⁹ LSC (2009), op.cit.

All learners on a priority programme who achieved at least one relevant qualification are included in the Learner Destinations performance indicator¹⁰⁰. It does not apply to employers who deliver training to their own staff only or to fewer than 10 learners from other employers¹⁰¹.

15. Prior Qualifications Survey

Overview

The Prior Qualifications Survey (PQS) is a survey of adult learners who are studying at full level 2 or full level 3 in further education. The survey is conducted on behalf of the LSC¹⁰².

Topics

The survey seeks to determine whether learners have achieved any qualifications through any other sources i.e. school, college, university or apprenticeships etc. and are asked to provide details of these including the number and level attained¹⁰³.

Methodology & Data Collection

The five-minute survey consists of a telephone interview and the methodology is very similar to the LFS. The survey asks respondents to firstly indicate whether they have achieved any qualifications through any other sources. Those who had were then read a list of qualifications and were asked to confirm whether or not they had achieved each of these and whether they had achieved any qualification not on the list. As a result of responses to these questions and other supplementary questions asking for details on the number and level attained, a highest level qualification was assigned to each learner¹⁰⁴.

Sample & Response Rate

The survey uses a representative sample of adult learners, whose details are gathered from the ILR. Sample sizes for the 2008/09 PQS are shown in the table overleaf.

¹⁰⁰ Skills Funding Agency (2010), 'Learner Destinations' Available at:
<http://ffe.skillsfundingagency.bis.gov.uk/pi/learnerdestinations/learnerdestination/>

¹⁰¹ LSC (2009), op.cit.

¹⁰² The Data Service (2010), 'Firstness Rates for Full Level 2 and Full Level 3 Achievements' Available at:
<http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/9B41EF2C-4270-4C8B-8318-E0D0E76A6556/0/FirstnessRatesforSFRVersion2.pdf>

¹⁰³ The Data Service (2010), op.cit.

¹⁰⁴ The Data Service (2010), op.cit.

Table A3: Sample sizes from the 2008/09 PQS

Learning route	Level	Sample size
Further Education	Full Level 2	1,403
Further Education	Full Level 3	1,471
Train to Gain	Full Level 2	740
Train to Gain	Full Level 3	260
Apprenticeships	Full Level 2	475
Apprenticeships	Full Level 3	525

Source: The Data Service (2010) 'Firstness Rates for Full Level 2 and Full Level 3 Achievements'

16. EuroStudent

Overview

Comparative research is a means through which policy makers can place the experiences, successes and achievements in their own country within the context of what trends are emerging in other countries. The EUROSTUDENT project is an important contribution to this comparative research agenda. The most recent round of data collection involved 23 countries. Understanding the social and economic conditions of student life in Europe is the key focus of the study. The data allows for monitoring changes over time within individual countries as well as between countries.

Hochschul Informations System Gmbh, Hanover, Germany, are responsible for the central coordination of the project. They are assisted by an International Steering Board that includes members of the EUROSTUDENT Network, representing participating countries. Each participating country is responsible for its own national survey. Country participation is dependent on their agreement to the adoption of core questions, central data conventions and agreed time lines in delivering data. It is hoped that high quality results are obtained through a harmonised list of variables and indicators.

Topics

Students are asked questions on a wide range of topics including student body characteristics, access to higher education, accommodation, funding (state assistance, living expenses and student spending), student employment and internationalisation and mobility¹⁰⁵.

Methodology & Data Collection

Guidance on the target population, sampling frames, sampling design and survey instruments as well as other methodological issues are provided to participating nations. These guidelines are in place to help countries to improve and align their national survey

¹⁰⁵ Orr, D, Schnitzer, K and Frackmann, E (2009), 'Social and Economic Conditions of Student Life in Europe', Higher Education Information System (HIS).

methodologies. The current methodology allows for variation in data collection. A majority of 12 countries use online surveys, seven countries use face-to-face interviews, three use paper and pencil questionnaires and one uses telephone interviews. It is hoped that this variety in data collection stimulates discussion of the relative effectiveness of the different methods.

Sample & Response Rate

The statistical unit in this study is a single individual working towards an International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level 5A qualification. That is students who are on first stage tertiary programmes that are largely theoretically based and are intended to provide sufficient qualifications for entry into advanced research programmes and professions that require a high level of skills. The focus is on publicly funded higher education (in accordance with Eurostat definitions) and public or government-dependent private institutions. These are HE institutions which obtain over 50 per cent of their funding from public sources. Private HE institutions are not included. Both students studying towards their first degree and those studying their second degree or continuing programmes are included in the target population.

The global population of students is divided into national and foreign population. Only students with national or permanent residency are included in the target population of national surveys in each country. Resident students who are not citizens of their respective countries are only included in the target population on the basis that they have obtained their higher education entrance certificate in that country and study in that country.

There are instances where the student sample used by EUROSTUDENT countries are not a perfect representation of the general student body in the respective countries. Countries vary slightly in terms of which students they decide to include in their samples. For example, part-time students that dedicate less than 50 per cent of their time to their studies are not covered by the national survey in Norway. However, in Ireland the survey includes information on full-time students only.

Response rates vary according to methods used for administering surveys. For example, the rate for the online survey is lower than for the paper-pencil survey where there is a difference of seven percentage points.

The survey documentation highlights the advantages to using an online survey rather than a paper-based survey. Online surveys have lower costs because printed questionnaires are usually sent by traditional post. The field phase is shorter with online surveys because they are less time consuming than traditional postal methods. Online survey responses are expected immediately after sending out invitations to participate in the survey. Online surveys are time-saving because it is not necessary for data to be entered into a database. There are many technical possibilities to avoid errors made by respondents. These include filter guidance and valid ranges, for example. Based on recommendations from relevant methodological literature, an online survey should not take much longer than 20 minutes to complete.

A test has been conducted to examine whether the make-up of samples achieved in terms of respondent characteristics (e.g. gender, age, subject, HEI and social background) realised through an online survey and paper-pencil questionnaire are the same. Every

27th student at each HEI was chosen as part of a random sampling method, 20 per cent of which would participate in the online survey. These students did not receive a questionnaire but a letter that invited him or her to take part in the online survey and that contained the account for the login into the online survey. Therefore, in contrast to the majority of online surveys the test was conducted on the basis of a real random sample. In addition, an attempt was made to keep the layout of the questionnaires as consistent as possible. However, as the mediums for both were completely different from each other, there were of course limitations to this. Not all the technical possibilities that are on offer when using online survey software were used in case these might influence respondents.

The online survey seemed to have an advantage during the first two weeks. However, this was mainly due to the fact that online surveys reach respondents much quicker than those sent by post. Once all online dropouts were included, the online survey response rate was 26 per cent. This figure means that only one-quarter of all invited students overcame the 'break of media', i.e. the break between a postal invitation letter and an online survey.

The median time to complete the survey was about 30 minutes. However, students who only needed a short time to complete the survey had a lot of item-nonresponse compared to those, who spent some more time for their answers. It is not possible to know if this is also the case with the paper-based questionnaire. It is however possible to compare the amount of item-non response overall, and when this is done it is evident that the difference between the two methods is not significant.

Disabled students were over-represented in the paper-based survey and this was felt to be linked to the presentation of the question and the answer categories relating to disability and ill-health in the paper version of the survey. Other differences in response profile were noticed relating to level of study, length of study and period of study abroad. In addition, students that were questioned online gave less information about their expenses, did not name expenses paid by parents and/or relatives and named higher amounts for cash expenses. Students questioned online were also more satisfied in general with their accommodation and stated less hours/week spent on courses¹⁰⁶.

17. Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Surveys

Overview

CIRP has engaged in a longitudinal study of the American Higher Education System for over 35 years. The CIRP was established in 1966 at the American Council on Education and is now administered by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). The CIRP survey run three surveys:

- Freshman survey
- Your First College Year (YFCY)

¹⁰⁶ Middendorff, E (2009), HIS Hochschul-Informationen-System GmbH, 'Test of Survey Methods within the 18. Social Survey - Comparison of paper/pencil survey and online test-survey', Presentation on the E IV Intensive Seminar 'National' online surveys for EUROSTUDENT, 16 September 2009, Berlin.

- College Senior Survey (CSS)

HERI provides aggregate results that compare respondents between institutions. The Office of Institutional Research & Analysis use the raw response data to create detailed descriptive and inferential analyses.

Topics

Students are asked a variety of questions on the following topics: key demographic characteristics, activities during secondary school, college academic preparation, college choice, college financing, activities and goals for the future and political views.

Methodology & Data Collection

Freshman Survey

The questionnaire should be completed by entering students before the start of the academic year during the freshman orientation/registration period. If this is not possible, they should be completed before the end of the first full week of classes.

The survey can be administered in several different ways:

1. Proctored setting with paper questionnaires

This is where all first year students are physically present in one place to complete the questionnaire. This administration method is highly recommended as it results in the highest response rate. It is the method used by most universities.

2. Mail-out survey with paper questionnaire

This is a popular method for when a proctored setting is not logistically possible and typically results in lower response rates. It is effective if multiple reminder mailings are used.

3. Email notification of the web-survey option

This method often results in a response rate comparable to, and in some cases higher than the mail-out survey with paper questionnaire option. This administration method allows institutions to use the CIRP system to deliver the email requests to students to complete a web-based questionnaire. They also have the option of contacting students on their own.

4. A combination of paper and web-based questionnaires

This method can lead to the second highest response rate after method one.

YFCY

The YFCY is especially useful when it is used as a follow-up to the CIRP Freshman Survey. However, there is an option of using it as a stand-alone instrument. Surveys can be administered in a proctored on-campus setting, or via electronic/postal mail. Response rates to surveys received via postal mail have declined in recent years, so it is recommended that where possible surveys are administered in a proctored setting to maximise student participation.

CSS

The CSS can be used as a stand-alone instrument as it was designed as a follow-up instrument to the Freshman and YFCY Surveys. CSS data can be linked to relevant pre-test data from the CIRP Freshman Survey or other local baseline data. The CSS is a voluntary survey. There are four ways in which CSS can be administered including a proctored on-campus setting (e.g. in classes), as part of a graduation pack distributed to all seniors, via campus mail or postal mail and via a secure website.

Sample & Response Rate

Freshman Survey

All first-time full-time freshmen should be surveyed. Their enrolment status (e.g. transfer and part-time students) is separated during survey processing.

YFCY

The CIRP Your First College Year Survey (YFCY) is administered to first year students at the completion of the first year of college. Institutions have the option of sampling all first year students, a random sample of first year students or a targeted sample of first year students.

CSS

The CIRP College Senior Survey (CSS) is administered to graduating seniors. Institutions have the option of sampling all graduating seniors, a random sample of graduating seniors or a targeted sample of graduating students. As with the YFCY survey it is recommended that wherever possible, surveys should be administered in a proctored setting to increase student participation.

Recommended strategies for boosting response rates for all three surveys include:

- Checking the accuracy of postal and email addresses
- Sending out a pre-notification announcement
- Conducting a two-wave administration as sending a second survey can increase the response rate

- Remind students about the survey during the administration period through e.g. advertisements in the student newspaper
- Personalise correspondence related to the survey administration when possible
- Correspondence should be signed by a recognised and respected campus official such as a university or the student body president
- Make participation personally meaningful and relevant to students by letting them know how their responses will directly affect the campus experience for the greater student population
- Provide assurances of confidentiality
- Use incentives¹⁰⁷

18. The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) (2004)

Overview

The US Department of Education's National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES) commissioned the BPS in response to a need for a comprehensive nationwide database concerning significant issues in access, choice, enrolment, progression and attainment in postsecondary education.

Topics

Data collected via the BPS focuses on: completion of postsecondary education programs; the relationship between work and efforts in education; the effect of postsecondary education on the lives of individuals; experiences during their postsecondary education; and transitions into the labour force.

Methodology & Data Collection

The three methods used for data collection were web-based student interview (self-administered survey), computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI), and computer-assisted in-person interviewing (CAPI) for sample members who refused to participate or could not be located through telephone tracing. The survey instruments were consistent across modes and there was no variation in question wording, item order, and range/consistency checks.

¹⁰⁷ Cooperative Institutional Research Program (2009), 'CIRP The Freshman Survey (TFS) Administration Checklist', Available at: <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/>. Accessed: 21/05/2010; Cooperative Institutional Research Program (2009), 'CIRP Your First College Year Survey (YFCY) Administration Checklist', Available at: <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/>. Accessed: 21/05/2010; Cooperative Institutional Research Program (2009), 'CIRP College Senior Survey Guidelines (CSS) Administration Checklist', Available at: <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/>. Accessed: 21/05/2010.

Data were collected in three phases. The first phase was a four-week early response period. During this time sample members were able to complete a self-administered interview through the Internet. To encourage participation in the first four weeks, sample members were offered a \$30 incentive.

This was followed by CATI for non-respondents where sample members were contacted by telephone interviewers to encourage completion of the telephone interview and they were offered \$20 for their participation. Once the interviewer had made 20 call attempts, the incentive amount was raised from \$20 to \$30. Where a sample member told an interviewer that he/she would prefer to complete the self-administered interview, a call-back appointment was set within two weeks to again follow up in the event of non-completion of a self-administered interview.

The third phase of data collection was field interviewing (CAPI) with sample members who had still not completed either a self-administered or a CATI interview. The interviews were either conducted in person or by telephone. On average, the interviews were 20 minutes in duration.

Sample & Response Rate

Students selected for BPS had been initially selected to participate in the 2004 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NSPAS 2004) base-year study. The NPSAS study included 1,670 postsecondary institutions throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. The sample population of the study was all students who were eligible for the 2004 NSPAS who began their postsecondary education at any postsecondary institution in the United States or Puerto Rico for the first time during the 2003/04 academic year. Both NPSAS respondents and non-respondents who were identified as potential or actual First-Time Beginners were included in the BPS sample of 23,090 students. Around 81 per cent (18,640) of the 23,090 sample members were eligible for inclusion in the 2004 cohort. Of those, 16,580 were located and an overall (unweighted) response rate of 80 per cent was achieved¹⁰⁸.

19. Canadian College Student Finances

Overview

This survey was commissioned by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation for the purposes of gathering national-level data on the income, expenditures, levels of debt/perceptions of debt and time use of college students.

Topics

Students were surveyed on a number of issues including their financial situations, funding sources, time use and perceptions of debt.

¹⁰⁸ Cominole, M, Wheelless, S, Dudley, K, Franklin, J, and Wine, J (2007), '2004/06 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:04/06) Methodology Report (NCES 2008-184)', National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, US Department of Education.

Methodology & Data Collection

The survey instrument was administered in class, and was available in English and French. Both were piloted on a small group of students, and some small changes were made on the basis of feedback received. Responsibility for administering surveys was left to individual institutions. A field guide recommending procedures for survey administration were given to all participating institutions for purposes of consistency. The time taken to complete the survey was estimated at 15 to 20 minutes.

Sample & Response Rate

College students at 16 post-secondary institutions across the country were surveyed. All full- and part-time college students made up the sample universe, with the exception of students in apprenticeship courses, non-credit courses and courses delivered on contract to specific employers. Core classes meeting the selection criteria for the given program strata were included in the survey if they had been randomly selected.

Samples were sought that reflected the demographics of the whole student population at each institution. A stratified sampling approach was used, and each institution was provided with recommended sample sizes by strata. The strata were based on program/courses students were working towards: Access programs, Career/Technical program, University Preparation/Transfer program, Post Diploma/Advanced Diploma program and Degree program. Institutions were given minimum response targets and recommended sample sizes based on their population data. Most institutions were able to exceed the target sample sizes they were set and only five institutions were unable to meet their targets. The total number of survey completions obtained was 6,370¹⁰⁹.

20. Australian University Student Finances 2006

Overview

The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee commissioned the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) to undertake a national survey in August 2006. The survey was set up in order to investigate the financial situation of Australian students. Data were collected on sources of income and support and relevant expenditure items to determine whether there was a variation between different categories of students. It was hoped that findings could be compared with previous surveys to monitor trends over time. Additional survey aims were to increase the university sector's understanding of student populations and consequently assist universities' planning and policy.

Topics

The survey included questions on a number of key topics including: key demographics (e.g. sex and age) as well as language spoken at home, award student is studying for (e.g. bachelor's degree, diploma, etc.), field of study, receipt of government and university

¹⁰⁹ Malatest, R A et al. (2003), 'Canadian College Student Finances', The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

income support and supplementary, family socio-economic status, all expenses incurred including study-related items.

Methodology & Data Collection

Data were collected by postal survey. A nationally representative stratified sample of students was chosen from all 37 public universities and 19 of these universities had participated in a previous study in 2000. Both indigenous and non-indigenous students were surveyed and the instrument used for both groups was identical.

A few weeks after the first mailout, a second mailout was sent in an attempt to boost response rate. Questionnaires completed by students were returned voluntarily and anonymously to a commercial mailhouse. The entry of data was carried out by a commercial organisation.

Sample & Response Rate

Samples were designed on the basis of an estimated national population of 705,000 (530,000 undergraduate and 175,000 postgraduate) students. All Indigenous students were surveyed due to the relatively small number of higher education students (n=7,338) from this group. For non-Indigenous students a sample was selected. A sample size and sampling methodology were designed by the CSHE along with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Sample sizes at each of the institutions were calculated on the basis of their student populations. In order to ensure representativeness, proportionally larger samples were sought from the smaller institutions and also for postgraduate students. Samples were prepared on the basis of national sampling formulas and with the aid of a randomised sampling tool. This was designed to produce stratification across the key demographic variables including sex, year level, field of study and award level. In terms of postgraduate students, they were sampled across coursework and research higher degree programs.

Questionnaires were sent to a stratified sample of 90,000 undergraduate (54,000) and postgraduate (36,000) students. An estimated response rate of 19.8 per cent was achieved with a total of 17,747 responses. In terms of Indigenous students, of the 7,338 students that were sent questionnaires, 1,207 responded at an estimated response rate of 16.4 per cent. Overall, the total number of 18,954 responses were received after responses with obvious errors were sifted out and excluded. The achieved sample represented 2.7 per cent of Australia's domestic higher education students¹¹⁰.

¹¹⁰ James, R, Bexley, E, Devlin, M and Marginson, S (2007), 'Australian University Student Finances 2006', Universities Australia. Available at: www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au.

Appendix D: Institutional Feedback

Discussions with staff across nine institutions (HEIs and FECs) involved in administering SIES 2007/08 explored a number of themes including: providing aggregate data on their student body; identifying and sampling students (with different characteristics) from their student record systems; securing access to student contact details; efforts to maximise response rates (including incentives, advanced publicity and promotion); internal resources required to support the survey; and timing of surveys. In addition feedback was sought on:

- the experience of participating in SIES – administering the sampling and opt-in survey: benefits, challenges, time taken and resources involved, and comparison with other survey participation
- and the use made of SIES outputs: how SIES is regarded, how (if at all) it is used, and what might encourage greater use.

Feedback on participating in SIES (administering opt-in)

Generally those consulted appeared to be supportive of SIES and recognised its importance, but raised a few issues in relation to the specifics of participating:

Timing: for HEIs SIES tasks coincided with a number of other critical tasks in the academic calendar such as enrolment and getting together their HESA return; and so for some it was tight getting the information required by the research team and the opt-in mail-out itself completed in time (to schedule).

Clarity of instructions: although staff in some HEIs commented that they would have liked more advanced notice about the survey and what it would involve ('the more notice the better'), generally the communication with and instructions from the research team were viewed positively – instructions were clear, concise and they worked well.

Ease of sampling: all institutions felt that identifying eligible students, and selecting against specific criteria was not too difficult, providing the criteria/variables were those used in data routinely collected for their HESA return.

Survey administration: all those consulted resourced the survey administration internally and some felt it had not been overly time-consuming. But there was some feeling that operating a postal survey was onerous ('printing out labels and sticking them to envelopes is a waste of time') and that it would be easier and more efficient to contact students via email. Almost all HEIs consulted were moving from post to email as a means of communication with students. Staff in one institution felt strongly that if the process was the same (opt-in postal survey) then they would not take part in the survey. Whereas staff in another felt they were simply acting as a 'mailing agent', and that they didn't really know what the point of their involvement in the administration of the survey was.

Reducing institution/student burden: Some suggested that it would be easier if the approach was more like NSS where institutions supply the survey contractor with the

contact details for students (listed by HUSID number). The NSS approach was felt to work fairly well and was not too difficult. However, they would have to be confident that this approach was covered by their Fair Processing Notice (FPN). It was also suggested that sharing data (beyond contact details) might be a way of reducing the burden on students by asking fewer background questions in the survey and improving data quality by reducing recall error. This indicates a positive attitude to data linkage amongst institutions.

Feedback on use of SIES reports/outputs

Extent of use: There were mixed reports on the use of SIES outputs – with some reporting no use of the survey outputs, others using SIES reports occasionally and some using the findings more regularly and strategically. Staff in a number of HEIs said the reports had been seen by the senior management team, or that they had used the report to get one or two figures from, but that on the whole it was not used widely on a day-to-day basis nor had any great impact on university policy: ‘We use it a bit, but it’s not particularly influential’. However, there were also examples of HEIs using SIES figures to help with bursary planning.

Likes and dislikes: The SIES reports were felt to provide good contextual data about the general financial situation of students which was appreciated, particularly information on income (parental contributions and earnings from paid work) and debt rather than expenditure. However, it was felt to provide little specific information about their own students and not reflect the profile of their own student body (as only a few of their students were involved in the survey): *‘we are not getting any direct benefit or immediate feedback from the survey’*. HEIs tended to feel their student body had a particular profile that differed from the overall student profile in England and Wales. For example, staff in one HEI consulted, noted how they actively discourage term-time working so learning that the average student earns £X from work was not considered to be particularly helpful and would highlight the differences between their students and students studying elsewhere. SIES reports do provide a wide range of breakdowns, showing the income and expenditure patterns of students with different background and study characteristics but comments from staff in institutions would suggest this information perhaps needs better signposting in the main report or would benefit from being presented in smaller focused reports.

Encouraging greater use: Feedback suggests there is an appetite for SIES data but findings need to be tailored for institutions. Staff commented how it would be useful to get a picture for their own students (e.g. a set of tables for their own students, or by mission group) which they get from participating in other surveys (NSS and DLHE). This data would be helpful to institutions not least in demonstrating the importance to students of participating in the survey: *‘we can turn round to our students and say “we took part in this survey and this is what it found about our students, this is what it tells us, and this is what difference your taking part in the survey makes”*. In one institution staff reported how they are thinking of only agreeing to take part in surveys if they can receive data on their own students (setting a condition for their support). In the absence of getting feedback/tables for their own students, staff across the institutions consulted felt that having some guidance on how to use the data contained in the report (in internal planning, etc.) might be useful.

There was some support for moving towards an annual survey. Although this would require greater buy-in and more work (for some this was too much), it was felt to be potentially more useful and interesting, and would make it easier to administer (as it could be built into the annual work plan of the institution). Staff had numerous suggestions for aspects to include in the survey and/or directions for analysis, including: qualitative case studies to add detail to the statistics, being able to compare results to Scotland as well as Wales, and looking at the impact of income-related issues on actual academic performance.

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